Life with The Spirit: A Path to Renewal at Sonrise Christian Reformed Church

William Johan Delleman
dminfacultyassistant@fuller.edu

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LIFE WITH THE SPIRIT:
A PATH TO RENEWAL AT SONRISE CHRISTIAN REFORMED CHURCH

Written by

WILLIAM DELLEMAN

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upon the recommendation of the undersigned readers:

Randy Rowland
Kurt Fredrickson

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LIFE WITH THE SPIRIT:
A PATH TO RENEWAL AT SONRISE CHRISTIAN REFORMED CHURCH

A MINISTRY FOCUS PAPER
SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY OF THE
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IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT
OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE
DOCTOR OF MINISTRY

BY
WILLIAM DELLEMAN
AUGUST 2017
ABSTRACT

Life with The Spirit:
A Path to Renewal at Sonrise Christian Reformed Church
William Delleman
Doctor of Ministry
School of Theology, Fuller Theological Seminary
2017

The purpose of this project is to reimagine the Reformed theology of Sonrise Christian Reformed Church and to encourage members to embrace a more integrated faith and life perspective. Reclaiming a covenantal community identity, they will be better equipped to love neighbor and self as they represent Christ in the twenty-first century world. The project was developed and implemented in 2016-2017 with the congregation in Ponoka, Alberta.

The project began out of pastoral concerns. The edges of Reformed theology and practice have changed. Traditional structures that helped shape identity have collapsed or been subverted by competing Protestant theologies. The context for ministry has also changed in conjunction with the demise of Christendom. This congregation, like many others, needs a renewed faith-formation theology and focus to resist the pressures it faces.

The first stage of the project was to accurately evaluate the current theological and sociological ethos of the congregation. A discernment process ensued, summarizing common themes, traits, and doctrinal understandings that still have traction in the congregation. Corporate worship and covenant community are identified as the twin focus of the project. In order to address these themes, a home group program is initiated. A year later, a series of messages on the two themes is closely followed by matching home-group material that augments the sermon topics and instigates follow-up discussion.

The project concludes that congregation members recognize the need for change and accept the twin focus of the project. Change, however, is a difficult and slow process. Therefore, although the preliminary results are promising, more time will be needed to realize the goal of the project, which was to inspire a desire for change in these areas.

Content Reader: Randy Rowland

Word Count: 277
To Norma, my family,
and the people of Sonrise Christian Reformed Church in Ponoka, Alberta
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PART ONE

MINISTRY CONTEXT
INTRODUCTION

The Reformed tradition has a long history and continues to survive, even thrive in various forms. However, the cultural context of its inception has shifted dramatically. Born in the sixteenth century, the tradition has been modified through continual interaction with Evangelicalism, other Catholic traditions, the Enlightenment and now, postmodernity. Change is undeniable, so it is time to reevaluate historic Reformed theological formulations and to reimagine participating in the life of the Spirit today.

For that purpose, this project focuses on Sonrise Christian Reformed Church. It is a unique, rural congregation found in the Canadian prairies, poised for renewal through worship and covenant community. The community is eclectic, with many members recently arriving from the Netherlands and bringing their own concerns for the future of the church with them. They have seen the decline and dissipation of the Dutch Reformed churches and fear a similar fate awaits those in North America. They also have, along with many Canadian-born members, living memories of Reformed worship styles and community life that they dislike. There is a desire to stay, however, and find fresh meaning either in old forms or new. Despite differences and tensions, the language and values of the Reformed tradition remain familiar, which will help as concepts are reintroduced.

Next, the congregation is young and mobile. Many live hurried and fragmented lives, often unaware of how this is affecting their children’s or their own faith formation. There is growing isolation and loneliness, due in part to the Evangelical notion of personal faith commitments to Christ that do not necessarily involve a worshipping
community. As with many other churches, Sonrise’s members have drifted into a functional dualism. Increasingly, cultural influences rather than Scripture shape their piety and practice. Their understanding of the mission of God seems anemic; something in the basic structure of church life and worship has failed.

Rodney Clapp says that this is a common phenomenon. Distracted Christians are feeling that their churches are ineffective and wonder why they should stay in them or attend worship services any more.¹ Thus many are opting out, which is speeding the disintegration of their lives and the church. It causes this pastor to wonder at times what is the point. If the gospel is so compelling and grace so amazing, why has the vitality of the church sunk so low? What is the point of preaching through a series of messages when half of the people are present only half of the time? How is there any possibility of continuity or for the worshipper actual assimilation of the scriptural meta-narrative? Can the story of God shape people who hear it so irregularly?

Clapp’s observation describes the great unravelling taking place in churches, families, and individual lives. It seems that when the gospel story of grace is unfamiliar, then embracing the gifts of repentance, confession, forgiveness, and reconciliation is unlikely. Believers need the reminder that salvation is much more than a momentary event that yields a future-oriented result. It is also the long journey of sanctification that intends to form the disciple into one who is more fully human, who bears the “mind of Christ” (1 Cor 2.6),² and who discovers that this life is best experienced in community.


² All Scripture quoted is from the New International Version (2011 edition), unless otherwise noted.
Because ““there is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to one hope when you were called; 5 one Lord, one faith, one baptism; 6 one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all” (Eph. 4:3-5). Despite denominationalism and individualism, all believers belong to the same family of faith.

This project asks those questions and suggests answers with practical means of implementing them. Given the evidence of six years in this context and significant study, it seems clear that the first and simplest possibility is that the Church has forgotten what God has done in history. The Body of Christ is no longer familiar with the story of God because of the contemporary preoccupation with individual’s story. The old sin damage of the Garden remains, with self-interest and shame battling for supremacy. The Church must return to its Head and remember how far Christ has lifted and continues to lift his people out of slavery to sin.

In her book, Calvin’s Ladder, Julie Canlis offers hope. “The purpose of this book is to consider what koinonia might mean for us in a century fractured by individualism, reductionism, and fundamentalism, and to consider what it might signify for a comprehensive, embodied, repersonalizing Christian spirituality.”3 Her sentiments, along with Clapp’s and others, form the backbone of this project. There is a way forward for the church; decline and dissipation are not inevitable as some predict. Hence, the hopeful intent and purpose for this project is to reimagine the Reformed theology of Sonrise Christian Reformed Church and to encourage members to embrace a more integrated faith and life perspective through reclaiming a covenantal community identity. Then they

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will be better equipped to love neighbor and self as they represent Christ in the twenty-first century world.

It is also important to note that the denomination to which Sonrise belongs is also in transition, seeking to engage the world as it is, while keeping a distinct Reformed character.\(^4\) It has endured wars over worship and women holding ecclesial office; it is currently entering the LGBTQ debate. These shared challenges will help Sonrise as it faces the future congregationally and communally with other member churches. In the geographical region (classis), of which Sonrise is a part, there are twenty-nine other member congregations. Peer relationships are strong, as is the belief that unity grants mutual strength and accountability.

This paper takes the following approach and method: Chapter one provides a comprehensive overview of the demographic and theological makeup of Sonrise CRC. This includes a discussion on church dynamics as they affect ministries within the congregation and in the community at large. The chapter concludes with an assessment of current strengths in the congregation. Chapter two features the literature review. There are seven resources that have particularly helped shape the project; each is evaluated in terms of its usefulness. Chapter three uses these resources along with others to articulate a cogent theology of worship and community life that has a distinctly Reformed character. This chapter examines critical issues including the place of Scripture, the use

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\(^4\) The Christian Reformed Church in North America (CRCNA) is a bi-national assembly of 1100 member churches and ministries with a formal membership of about 250,000 adults plus covenant children.
of the Law, Sabbath observance, overall piety, and practice as faith forming elements in a believer’s life.

Chapter four outlines the form and content of the project. Key features include a comprehensive presentation of the Christian life through the lens of Sabbath. Drawing from all of Scripture but focusing on Jesus’ teaching and the book of Hebrews, the project presents the doctrine of salvation as entering God’s rest. The primary mode for presenting the content is through preaching, which is then supplemented through home-group material. Chapter four also includes the development of a home-group network that is essential to facilitate the project’s anticipated outcomes and goals.

Chapter five has a review of the implementation process and assessment. The first step is to train key leaders to introduce the curriculum and develop home groups to maximize coverage in the congregation. Other means for dissemination are proposed in response to these initial methods. The assessment process is primarily done through a variety of surveys, which are available online and in print. This is augmented with group discussion with the church council. Finally, the summary section gives the overall results in light of the thesis and goals to facilitate a greater desire for an integrated life among the people of Sonrise CRC.
CHAPTER 1
THE CHURCH CONTEXT

Demographic Makeup of the Congregation

Sonrise Christian Reformed Church is located on the Canadian prairies, approximately one hour south of the city of Edmonton, Alberta. It is on the outskirts of a rural town surrounded by farmland. In town, there are provincial health facilities, the second largest cattle auction in Alberta, and provincial law courts, making Ponoka a regional centre. As such, the general population is quite diverse. Longtime residents are of European or American descent with deep ties to the West; the town boasts the world’s largest bronze bucking bronco statue. A significant number of oil-field workers who claim no strong ties to the community also live in town. Added to this are many temporary residents, outpatients from the provincial hospital that specializes in brain injury and dementia, and their families. Finally, Ponoka includes First Nations transients or part-time residents, in town because they’re dissatisfied with life on the reserve twenty kilometers north of the town.

By contrast, the membership at Sonrise is young, wealthy, and overwhelmingly Dutch. Forty percent of the adult members are second- and third-generation Dutch-
Canadians. An added 40 percent were born in the Netherlands and immigrated over the past twenty years. Ten percent recently immigrated from South Africa or the United States. The remaining 10 percent are Canadians of other ethnic backgrounds.

Currently, there are 160 adult members plus 170 children and youth. There are also roughly thirty adults, plus their children, who have not pursued formal membership. This brings the total to about 400 people who consider Sonrise their church home with about 300 in attendance at weekly services. The age breakdown is as follows: 15 percent are twenty to thirty years old; 50 percent are thirty-one to fifty years old; 25 percent are fifty-one to sixty-five years old; 10 percent are sixty-six and older. For those twenty years and older, 90 percent are married and have on average three children.

Vocationally, the church is quite diverse. Half of the families represented in the congregation work in agriculture; the majority on dairy farms, but there are also poultry, beef and swine, and grain-growing operations. About a quarter of the families own and operate medium- to large-scale independent businesses, working in the trades and manufacturing sectors. The remaining members work in professional fields as doctors, nurses, pharmacists, teachers, and administrators. Very few members work in the service and hospitality industry or are unemployed. Generally speaking, it is a well-educated and highly motivated group of people. Consequently, many families have sufficient income or incentive for spouses to work at home, help with the family farm or business, and to raise children.

Of further note is the historic motivation for immigration to Canada. As in earlier waves of migration, current émigrés sought greater personal safety and opportunity for wealth and success. For many, the vast amount of available land and reduced government
regulations, as compared to their homelands, have fostered a seemingly unquenchable thirst for more and better. This has resulted in a different mindset than in prior generations. In the current setting, only some have truly immigrated and embraced Canadian culture, while others have moved their households. Some are concerned about adapting and assimilating, while others are not. Many keep their Dutch citizenship, which makes Sonrise an ESL community. This has clearly impeded healthy conversations and comprehension of sermons, and other important communications for a significant number. The outlook for future improvement is in doubt as families continue to speak Dutch, Frisian or Afrikaans in their homes rather than English.

**Theological Makeup of the Congregation**

Sonrise is a Christian Reformed congregation, but its membership does not share that heritage. Not even within the native Canadian segment is there uniformity. They, along with those who have immigrated, come from a broad spectrum of Reformed denominations. Some of these are very conservative groups that do not permit women to hold ecclesial office and whose theological training focuses heavily on law. Others have a much more liberal background and wonder why Sonrise is “behind” on issues regarding the use of women’s gifts or those identifying with the LGBTQ community.

Another tension at work in the Reformed spectrum can be traced back to two of its founding theologians: Ulrich Zwingli’s theology has marked differences with John Calvin’s. While both speak about Covenant theology and the Sovereignty of God, it is in the sacraments that they part ways. Calvin focuses on “being raised with Christ” and the impartation of special grace in the sacraments. His perspective and passion caused him to
recommend weekly celebration of the Lord’s Supper. Zwingli does not agree. In his
desire to leave Catholicism behind, he treats the Supper as a memorial meal that need not
be celebrated often. This difference helps explain some of the conflict in the church.

Additionally, North American Evangelicalism, Fundamentalism and Christian
Zionism theologies have made inroads. Each of these are in some ways in tension with
traditional Reformed theology and, as might be expected, some members want Sonrise to
move in those directions. Key issues include: biblical inerrancy, Creationism, the value of
science in the life of faith, supporting the State of Israel, and gender roles. At times
proof-texting trumps the integrity of the biblical metanarrative flowing from Genesis
through Revelation. The traditional Reformed hermeneutic of Scripture interpreting
Scripture is often ignored.

Another tension involves an over-emphasis on personal faith at the expense of
covenant community and accountability. This plays out in consumeristic tendencies in
worship-style preferences, resistance to accountability, and pluralism. The congregation
is slipping into a form of moralistic, therapeutic deism that is becoming common in North
America. The Zionist movement appears to be unaware that the emphasis on two distinct
peoples of God, Jew and Christian, conflicts with much of the New Testament and a
Reformed understanding of the Covenant in Christ.

Historically, these tensions have resulted in groups leaving the congregation. In
the early 1990s a sizeable group left to join the United Reformed Churches. In the early
2000s another group left over baptismal issues. Since then, the congregation is willing to
be theologically diverse either for the sake of community life, or as a better response to
theological tensions. Today, the membership of Sonrise fits somewhat centrally on the
Reformed continuum, with people having migrated to this Christian Reformed Church, often as a “best fit” concession. The congregation is a theological melting pot.

**Church Dynamics**

Sonrise is firmly embedded in the Christendom model of church. Primary leadership is carried out by the elders and deacons drawn from the general membership. Each serves a three-year term with one-third of the council retiring each year. Under their direction, with the assistance of the pastor, lay volunteers lead the various ministries. The pastor serves as Minister of the Word and Sacrament, responsible for the preaching and right administration of the sacraments, which are central to the congregation’s expectations for a good pastor. Less important but vital is the work of pastoral visitation and leadership. In this context, leadership development is difficult to carry out. Leadership transitions and the temptation to rely too heavily on the pastor inhibits personal investment by some council members and lay leaders.

As a Reformation-born church, the emphasis is on education. Faith formation is expected to be, as commonly said, “taught rather than caught.” The sermon is central to the worship service followed by, in order of decreasing importance, the reading of the Law, singing, prayer, and the sacraments. Denominational and congregational loyalty is naively expected. Success is based more on statistical markers such as baptisms, professions of faith, membership transfers, and member retention rather than authentic expressions of faith in action, both within and outside of the church building. Denominational involvement is expected and frequently misunderstood or underappreciated, which makes it easily ignored unless the pastor insists on it.
It is only recently that the congregation has begun thinking seriously about the imminent failure of the Christendom model. Many recent migrants from Europe witnessed the decline of the church there. Paralyzed by a fear of the same happening in North America, they believe a return to traditional methods will prevent that decline. They interpret youth leaving the church and declining worship frequency as a lack of commitment to the institution rather than issues of faulty faith-formation theologies. Others in the congregation are willing to see their children migrate to other denominations, with the hope that they “find it there.” On the surface, this seems a reasonable position, but in fact undercuts foundational belief in covenant community and faith formation within the community. Some seem to urge their children out of the congregation, fearful rather than trusting in the Spirit’s work at Sonrise. Many, however, are committed to Sonrise as it is, even willing to explore a different church model, if the steps are clear and within an essentially Reformed framework.

Moving to social dynamics, as it appears to be in the broader culture, the membership of Sonrise is distracted and overstimulated. There are just too many options for personal enjoyment, entertainment, and self-improvement. Most members of the church have the necessary resources to explore the lifestyle aggressively. They organize vacations or trips to their country of origin, often with their children, with little apparent regard for church or school commitments. Their children increasingly take part in minor sports, dance, and other arts activities at the expense of regular worship and community life. With this mood of self-fulfillment, the congregation has an anemic understanding and interest in becoming a more authentic expression of being God’s people or new humanity existing in and for the world.
Nationalism is another important social dynamic. Many immigrants have kept their Dutch citizenship while others still evidence primary loyalty to their birth nation. There is a tendency to form social groups around common language and national origin. Dutch and Afrikaans join English as spoken languages in the fellowship hall, creating invisible barriers that some refuse to acknowledge. Paradoxically, it is also an important factor in the faith formation of some members. Drawn to Sonrise through common language, many have found Christ through fellowship and worship in their native tongue.

Workaholism, however, may be the primary social dynamic affecting the congregation. The pace of almost constant work and limited downtime seems responsible for some of the coping methods used by many members. For many, because family time is limited for much of the year, an effort is made to compensate through time away. While this is fruitful for some, the day-to-day rhythm of family life and devotions is impossible. Others cope by finding release from the pressure through excessive alcohol consumption, pornography, or sexual misconduct. For both the adults and youth, European standards seem to account for relaxed morals and ethics.

The pace and focus of this lifestyle affects the spiritual growth for many members. Too few keep the traditional practices of regular Bible reading, prayer, spiritual conversations, and worship. Those willing to be candid about this cite fatigue, ignorance, lack of training, or time to pursue spiritual practices. The overall effect is a weak faith-formation process, particularly for youth and adults. Sunday school functions for eight months of the year, but is reluctantly staffed. There are too few spiritually mature mentors available and too few initiatives that can aid formation. Spiritually, this is a young congregation.
The relationship of the congregation with popular culture has been difficult to discern. To accumulate some reliable data, a media survey was offered and yielded fifty responses. They revealed a strong interest in a wide variety of music genres, children’s movies, documentaries and drama based on true events, recreational sports and news broadcasting. Interest appeared low in speculative fiction, professional sports, or social media beyond Facebook. Fashion sense is distinctly European, which seems more a sign of background than intention. Overall, they have a practical, facts-based approach to life. Celebrity is only interesting in passing because work occupies their focus. Popular culture is background noise for the most part; yet members are deeply affected by contemporary attitudes and values. This becomes a significant area of tension, as the cultural values adopted by some conflict with the fundamentalist values held by others in the congregation.

Of course, none of these internal tensions are unique to this congregation, but they do present certain problems for effective leadership. First, the congregation is still essentially Word-based and expects sermons to be the primary teaching tool, with mid-week youth classes and home groups as supplemental discussion forums. As previously stated, without a common language or shared heritage, the preaching and teaching have been carefully respectful of this diversity. In preaching, the vocabulary is simplified without becoming simplistic, while film clips, songs, and still images are used to help build collective understanding. Some members find this an essential aid to preaching, while others find it unpleasantly distracting.

Taken together, these factors hinder spiritual transformation and genuine community formation. While it is true that some newcomers have found faith through the
ministry of Sonrise, these significant issues hinder ongoing spiritual growth. The congregation is not following a compelling vision of the Kingdom together.

This is not simply willfulness. It is a complex combination of traditionalism, fear, and fallen human nature. It is the same resistance to trusting God as Adam and Eve did in the beginning. Since then, there have been a choir of voices calling out “come follow me” and, while many lead to a facsimile of life, only one is authentic. Yet it is also naive to think that God’s voice only comes through the church or the Bible and this may be the largest barrier of all. It seems that Christendom-style churches like Sonrise are deaf to the world and God’s presence in it beyond their walls. Therefore, the best work leaders can do is to teach people how to discern the voice of God in all of life, learning to listen as the Spirit speaks.

**Potential Areas of Strength and Catalysts for Change**

The greatest strength this congregation is likely its willingness to allow for diversity in worship, theology, and community life. The same dynamics that threaten community, as noted above, also work to reinforce them. The tension seems quite healthy. Due to past separations and arguments, long-standing members have learned to weigh differences against a better standard than personal taste. Those who have joined Sonrise in the past five years have done so cautiously. They are aware of our ethnic makeup and our theological place in the Reformed spectrum, yet chose Sonrise anyway; maybe because of it.

The blended worship style works. Praise teams, solo pianists, and an organist lead the music on a rotational basis. The weekly repertoire ranges from contemporary songs to
traditional hymns. As a rule, the entire service is built closely around a single theme and the music director, who grew up in the congregation, has an incredible gift for designing the liturgy. Holiday services deviate from the standard liturgy, with Thanksgiving, Christmas, Good Friday, and Easter services usually employing a choir, brass band, drama, and other elements that the congregation joyfully embraces.

In preaching, the congregation is willing to hear and consider different points of view on familiar texts. As with many North American Christians, relevance in preaching is vital, but rather than this devolving into a “what is in it for me” consumerism, the congregation is gaining an appetite for “so how can I respond to the world as it is?” Difficult topics such as women serving in ecclesiastical offices and responding to the LGBTQ community are being discussed more openly as the congregation develops a language for conversation around differences. The key has been to keep distinctly and authentically Reformed terminology that is easily identified with traditional doctrinal standards. Given the diversity of the congregation, this approach has helped them to stay on the same page, even as traditional doctrines are being redefined for the present.

Another tremendous strength is the congregation’s commitment to support projects. Their work ethic, as noted above, can be a liability but when the conditions are right, the congregation supports ministry quite well. Volunteerism is high, as about 70 percent of adult members are involved in one ministry or another. Many youth join the ranks as worship leaders, nursery, and Sunday school attendants. Mission trips are well supported, as is the youth ministry in general. During a recent building program, many members supported the project financially as well as through volunteering on the building committee and with manual labour. The congregation did not use a general contractor or
project manager; all of the significant leadership was carried out by members willing to work together for the common good. Fifty percent of the budget was raised through pledges; no members chose to leave in anger or resentment over the course of the project.

The final strength is that leadership has permission to lead. The membership believes that the congregation is growing and healthy, which it is. The relationship between the pastor and congregation is healthy because it has developed around mutual trust and shared ministry. In this context, the people want much of their pastor, particularly in crisis care. By grace, that was established in the first year of service here. While the greatest peril of complacency to the greater missio dei remains, the congregation is poised to mature further, as it continues to discover life together in the world as it is.
PART TWO

THEOLOGICAL REFLECTION
CHAPTER 2
A REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

During study and research for this project, several books helped in developing the thesis. The following volumes hold critical insights for the theological foundations and the practical application that will facilitate hoped-for renewal. In this chapter, each are summarized with an evaluation of their usefulness and limitations.

*A Peculiar People: The Church as Culture in a Post-Christian Culture*

by Rodney Clapp

Rodney Clapp is a Baby Boomer who identifies closely with Generation X; he understands society is experiencing a time of profound cultural change. By his own admission, he has abandoned the certainties of modernity and embraced the postmodern ethos, content to navigate the changes brought about by the end of Christendom.¹ He is glad for it because, in his view, through the legacy of Constantinianism, “Christians [now] feel useless because the church feels useless. And the church feels useless because

it keeps on trying to perform Constantinian duties in a world that is no longer Constantinian.”

The unifying force that once dominated Western culture has unravelled.

Clapp spends the first part of the book explaining, defining, and exposing the legacy of Constantinianism. First, the Church has become a private club and therefore irrelevant to the culture. Through a modern form of Gnosticism, there are now insiders and outsiders who neither understand each other, nor have an interest in the effort. Second, the church has become over-identified with the nation state, to the extent that it has become the de facto church for many North Americans. Third, the Church should welcome culture wars as a sign of life. For too long the culture has shaped the church rather than the other way around. In summary, Clapp states that the Church has been domesticated, depoliticized, and irrelevant, where individualism and autonomy now dominate what was once a communal and counter-cultural faith.

It is at this point that he moves into presenting a vision for the Church in a post-Constantinian world. Like many current authors, he looks back to the Apostolic and Patristic periods, to the politics of Jesus, as the way forward. He describes this time as marked by a church that was “about creating and sustaining a unique culture — a way of life that would shape character in the image of their God . . . a quite public and political

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2 Ibid., 23.
3 Ibid., 34.
4 Ibid., 45.
5 Ibid., 63.
6 Ibid., 76.
culture even if it killed them and their children.”

It is to such a strategy that the church ought to return. The scandal of particularity, which hobbled the church during the late modern period, has been removed so there is no longer any reason to hold back. Rather it is time to embrace and boldly tell our own story. Following that encouragement, Clapp describes what a twenty-first-century version of this might look like. He imagines a church that is a worshipping community, guided by liturgy and the Word; a culture that neither retreats from or capitulates to other cultures. It is a culture of friends who live the gospel message.

Clapp offers little that is new in his critique but says it so provocatively. By defining the church as a culture, he is inviting believers to rethink the call to first be citizens of the Kingdom. That, of course, is work enough for many who have seldom considered the effects or extent of Constantinianism. He wisely recognizes that change is always resisted and incremental.

Clapp also holds worship and community bonds in high esteem, and urges Christians to reject the consumerism that dominates North American culture. He stresses that worship is essential to see the world as it really is, “To rehearse what it means to be Christian,” through hearing the story of God, through praise, and the sacraments. His insistence on the transformative power of Scripture reading sounds familiar, but goes

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7 Ibid., 82.

8 Ibid., 173. By culture Clapp means a “signifying system,” the collection of language, etc. that helps us make sense of our lives.

9 Ibid., 199.

10 Ibid., 99.
further than expected. He calls the private time reading of Scripture an anomaly that encourages the “illusion of private interpretation that leads to much mischief.”\textsuperscript{11} Instead, Scripture reading and its interpretation ought to be communal. Taken together, Clapp recommends placing a refreshingly high value on regular worship that focuses on God’s story and not felt needs.

The other helpful emphasis is on the communal nature of fellowship. For this, he advocates for the practice of friendship, rather than program-dominated community, where there is space for individuality, but not individualism.\textsuperscript{12} Moving from this stance is an equally helpful call to be good neighbors, those who form and maintain relationships that embody the gospel, and are attractive enough to prompt conversation and questions.\textsuperscript{13}

Less helpful comments include Clapp’s view of the sacraments. He exalts both the biological family and the family of Christ, but defends the sole practice of adult baptism without discussion of the family baptismal texts in the New Testament. In fact, he gives no ground to any other baptismal theology. Likewise, he has nothing to say about how communion transforms, other than it does through sharing a meal as we remember Christ’s death. He either overlooks or is not interested in the other emphases Scripture places on communion or how divisions are overcome at the table. He does not mention the Spirit’s power or presence in the sacraments, but instead chooses to keep the

\textsuperscript{11} Ibid., 129.
\textsuperscript{12} Ibid., 210.
\textsuperscript{13} Ibid., 171.
focus on sinful humanity’s obligations to a gracious God. If the Church is to change, however, then the Spirit must lead the way. Restating and urging more human effort will not solve the problems begun in Constantine.

Creator Spirit: The Holy Spirit and the Art of Becoming Human by Steven R. Guthrie

In his work, Steven Guthrie develops an inspiring addition to classic pneumatology. More than the enlivening spirit in creation, the Spirit is the author of glory who works “to make and remake our humanity.” The evidence of this activity is in inspired artistic expression of all kinds, from the fine arts to household chores, all of which conform to the goodness and diversity of God’s own creating.

His thesis is developed through a careful examination of the Spirit’s work in creation, particularly as the animating force in humanity. With that foundation, Guthrie moves through the Fall into current reality. The Spirit created and is now recreating physical being and community on a variety of levels. As one outcome of this, he discusses the Spirit’s role in culture-making. He explains, “God’s Spirit also invites and enables us to share in his work of re-creation.” Thus our spirit is restored in the process along with our volition, voice, and vocation. Guthrie concludes his thesis with the eschatological promise that this process is for the redemption of all things.


15 Ibid.

16 Ibid.

17 Ibid.

18 Ibid.
One key point in his argument is that the Spirit’s work is not purely ethereal. Comparing the biblical text to Platonic philosophies, Guthrie stresses the embodiment principle as shown in Jesus’ incarnation.\textsuperscript{19} For transformation to be authentic it happens simultaneously in the spirit and the body, as the whole person interacts with the physical world.\textsuperscript{20} He is also determined to move beyond traditional categories of the Spirit’s activity. The Spirit is the “Boundary breaker ... that drives the Church along like a skiff out ahead of a gale, scuttling across geographical, social, and racial boundaries, out into uncharted waters.”\textsuperscript{21} The Spirit is the “plan-disruptor,” blowing down social fences and cultural boundary markers.\textsuperscript{22} Finally, the Spirit is the “surprise-bringer,” disrupting plans already in place, and all of this is because the Spirit blows where and as it will (Jn 3:8).\textsuperscript{23}

There is much in this book that is helpful. With defining artistic expression as forms of culture making, Guthrie demonstrates that the Spirit of God works powerfully in and through his people. No effort is wasted when inspired by the Spirit. Rather, every effort expands the Spirit’s work to recreate humanity into the likeness of the Incarnate One and for the Christian to become a more fully human, image bearer.\textsuperscript{24}

\textsuperscript{19} Ibid., chapter 3.
\textsuperscript{20} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{21} Ibid., chapter 1.
\textsuperscript{22} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{23} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{24} Ibid., chapter 6.
He also answers the claim that artistic expression is entirely emotional. This may help restore trust in the arts as a meaningful part of worship. In traditional Reformed settings, the arts are held in suspicion, feared for emotionalism, and the risk of idolatry. Art in worship can remind us of the glory of God’s promised in-breaking future. In the same vein, Guthrie also provides the means of discernment for recreative artistic expression. These include, “Prayer and listening, looking to the community, to Jesus, and to Scripture,” which are all places where the Spirit is acknowledged to be present and active. Paying attention to this, “We then begin to discern a pattern, to know what sorts of things are ‘in character’ or ‘out of character,’ and as we become familiar with this pattern and this path we learn, as Paul says, to keep in step with the Spirit (Gal 5:25).” He notes that the Church has often done this poorly or not at all.

The third notable and helpful claim is that the Spirit-inspired creativity on display now is based on the resurrection and part of God’s eschatological transformation rather than eschatological annihilation. What is done in this world matters and will continue to matter into the eschatological Kingdom, when the fullness of Sabbath life is known fully. This connection is critical in developing a Sabbath theology for the present time.

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25 Ibid., chapter 2.
26 Ibid., chapter 3.
27 Ibid., chapter 8.
28 Ibid.
29 Ibid.
30 Ibid., chapter 9.
31 Ibid., introduction.
For the believer, beyond worship services or a single day in the week, all of life exists in the context of God’s Sabbath rest. The Spirit’s work in recreating humanity culminates in the embrace of this transformational reality.

Steven Guthrie concludes his work with two powerful reminders. The first: “If God were to withdraw his Spirit, all of creation would return to dust, but instead when the dust of the earth is filled with the breath of God, it becomes a place of glory.”32 The second: “The Spirit is no impersonal force adding goose bumps to our various experiences.” The Spirit is the fulfilment of God’s promise to be present with and through his people, and to be revealed in glory-filled culture making.33

*From Sabbath to Lord's Day: A Biblical, Historical, and Theological Investigation*

**Edited by D. A. Carson**

In this volume, Don Carson assembles the work of a community of authors whose purpose is to investigate the concept of a Christian Sabbath. Their work refutes the idea and claims it only appears in recent history through a reworking of Patristic sources, “transfer theology,” and theonomic tendencies intended to aid in sanctification.34 The work is unified and unambiguous “That although Sunday worship arose in New Testament times, it was not perceived as a Christian Sabbath.” 35

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32 Ibid., epilogue.

33 Ibid.


35 Ibid.
The work is comprehensive and exhaustive, with various authors working within their specific fields investigating the text of Scripture and historical data. They begin by questioning whether the Sabbath is a creation ordinance, by comparing the idea to the first mention of the Sabbath commandment in Exodus 20. They discuss later Old Testament developments and the intertestamental period leading into the New Testament texts where special attention is given to each Gospel, the letters of Paul, and eschatology. They conclude the investigation through the post-apostolic period, medieval church, and protestant period. A.T. Lincoln is the final contributor who provides the biblical and theological summary. He states that the Mosaic Sabbath pointed to both God’s created pattern and God’s redemptive work in the Exodus. Ultimately, Jesus fulfills this two-fold purpose of God, thereby releasing believers to enter the already-but-not-yet eschatological Sabbath. The goal in this was to readmit humanity into God’s triumphal rest. So, the seventh day of creation is related to the other six but is different because it has no boundaries. It is open-ended, as the Genesis text shows and Christ promises. Thus, the Sabbath is not grounded in creation, but in the eschatological rest where humanity can enjoy life with the Creator. The Mosaic Sabbath with its moral code was established as a tutor, guiding God’s people toward the eschatological rest. Its time has


37 Ibid., 346.

38 Ibid., 348.

39 Ibid., 351.

40 Ibid., 357.
passed and, for those who are in Christ, the moral code remains but is now facilitated by the Spirit.41

Moving to the question of transference, Lincoln summarizes that the Lord’s Day gained prominence over the seventh day in the Apostolic period, but nowhere in either the New Testament or in second-century literature is the Sabbath mentioned in connection with it.42 Nor is there evidence that after Constantine’s legislation to provide a day free from work that this was connected to the Mosaic Sabbath either.43 The connection came later in attempts to help believers mature and to be reminded of spiritual things.44 Lincoln concludes that much was lost when the transference was accomplished. Instead of being a day with an agreed-upon time for the community to worship, it became a day burdened with restrictions.45

These observations come to the heart of this project. The concern is that the Reformed tradition has embraced transference theology, with two detrimental results. One, members either use Sabbath observance as the proof for orthodoxy and spiritual maturity or they have abandoned regular worship out of a reaction to the same assumptions. Sabbatarians also tend toward hypocritical behavior, allowing that Sabbath observance and conduct are of a kind, but behavior on other six days are of another. This

41 Ibid., 370.
42 Ibid., 385.
43 Ibid., 386.
44 Ibid., 390.
45 Ibid., 393.
often results in a divided life. In Christ, there is to be a greater integration of faith and life; Sabbatarianism seems to prevent or retard the process.

Equally harmful is the rejection of public worship. The Lord’s Day was established as the day to remember the resurrection in history and the new life Christ offers. Without regular corporate worship, believers are bereft of the shaping story of God, spoken in the context of a mixed and messy community. Both Augustine and Calvin hoped that “rehearsing the eschatological Sabbath” on the Lord’s Day would form faith for the rest of the week. However, imposing a Mosaic Sabbath on the believing community has only served to prevent it.

The one area where Carson and associates provide conflicting counsel is in relation to the Lord’s Day and rest. While the creational norm is to rest periodically, recommending a day of rest directly connected to the Lord’s Day remains problematic. Not that the connection is not valid in some sense, but given the cultural situation, this will be met with continued resistance or distain. Perhaps this is where reliance on the Spirit takes precedence. It may be enough to enjoin people to worship and allow the Spirit to convict them of need for rest.

Making Room: Recovering Hospitality as a Christian Tradition by Christine D. Pohl

Christine Pohl writes, “A mystery of hospitality is how often one senses God's presence in the midst of very ordinary activities.” Describing the height, depth, breadth,

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46 Ibid., 395.
and length of Christian hospitality, Pohl argues that it is an essential part of a believer’s identity and “a framework [that] provides a bridge which connects our theology with daily life and concerns.” She is convinced that in the act of hospitality, “The stranger is welcomed into a safe, personal and comfortable place, a place of respect, acceptance and friendship that anticipates and confirms the hospitality of God.”

Using the biblical text, Pohl argues the case by naming the specific purposes of hospitality. First, it is remedial by counteracting social stratification, as guests are welcomed without concern for wealth or status. Second, it is an act of defiance as in the case of Lot who would not conform to the community’s standards, which also means that hospitality defines a community’s standards and values. Third, hospitality goes beyond physical needs, to include the value of the stranger as an image bearer. Pohl notes that Jesus affirms this in his teaching through the parable of the Samaritan and in Matthew 25. Pohl’s summary is that hospitality is not optional for Christians, nor limited to those specially gifted. It is “a necessary practice in the community of faith.”

48 Ibid.
49 Ibid., chapter 2.
50 Ibid.
51 Ibid.
52 Ibid.
53 Ibid.
54 Ibid.

Pohl then continues her survey through the patristic period, the middle ages, and reformation. She states that prior to Constantine, hospitality to the stranger distinguished the Church from the surrounding culture.\textsuperscript{55} This continued to develop through the establishment of hostels and hospitals. After Constantine, however, hospitality started to be associated with power and patronage.\textsuperscript{56} The erosion of hospitality continued unabated, such that John Calvin mourned the demise of the ancient form and practice.\textsuperscript{57} By the eighteenth century, Pohl notes, the term hospitality had been thoroughly emptied of its original meaning and reduced to institutionalized aid.\textsuperscript{58} Given the current state of social welfare programs, the situation has changed little today. The need for true hospitality has increased in a fragmented and multicultural society that yearns for relationships, identity, and meaning. Pohl summarises that, “Our mobile and self-oriented society is characterized by disturbing levels of loneliness, alienation, and estrangement. In a culture that appears at times to be overtly hostile to life itself, those who reject violence and embrace life bear powerful witness.”\textsuperscript{59}

Christine Pohl’s argument is hard to critique because she leaves no out. In her discussion, she deftly handles concerns regarding, limited resources, boundaries, risks, and abuses. She reminds the reader that hospitality begins in public spaces where many

\textsuperscript{55} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{56} Ibid., chapter 3.

\textsuperscript{57} Ibid., chapter 2.

\textsuperscript{58} Ibid., chapter 3.

\textsuperscript{59} Ibid., chapter 2.
of these concerns can be mitigated.\footnote{Ibid., chapter 5.} Moreover she is determined to have the Church reconsider and re-engage the practice of hospitality, rather than leave it in the state’s care.\footnote{Ibid., chapter 3.} The key to this is in the belief that all humanity bears the Divine image, and that everyone is due respect and welcome despite cultural, social, or theological differences.\footnote{Ibid., chapter 4.}

The practical value of her work is in how she supports her argument through ongoing conversation with John Chrysostom, John Wesley, and John Calvin as commentators on their respective periods. The latter’s testimony helps those in the Reformed tradition hear the appeal in language they are familiar with. Another value is her ability to contemporize the issue graciously and directly. She focuses on familial or communal gatherings as primary meeting places, where the stranger is welcomed, the community formed and strengthened.\footnote{Ibid., chapter 7.} Everything from coffee time to Communion are elevated as meals of the Kingdom, where healing and reconciliation are much more likely to happen.\footnote{Ibid., chapter 4.} Today’s fragmented world and faith communities need this.

The difficulty in her argument is also obvious. Hospitality must be sincere for it to be authentic. As Calvin said, it is pointless “To perform acts of kindness towards men, if our disposition towards them were not warm and affectionate.”\footnote{John Calvin, \textit{Commentary on the Prophet Book of Isaiah}, (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1948), 4:237, quoted in Christine Pohl, \textit{Making Room: Recovering Hospitality as a Christian Tradition}, Kindle: Chapter 4.} His point is that
hospitality calls for humility blended with self-confidence.\textsuperscript{66} It can be hard to be a host and the Protestant mindset is often one of work and duty to provide, yet reluctant to receive due to pride. The remedy, Pohl suggests, is to remember that we have the Host who welcomes all who are weak and weary. Likewise, “Those who offer hospitality are not so much providing a service as they are sharing their lives with the people who come to them,” and that requires the will to do it without any other agenda.\textsuperscript{67} This is an act of freedom. So, hesitation and excuses aside, the message is clear: just do it and do it together.

\textit{Making the Best of It: Following Christ in the Real World by John G. Stackhouse, Jr.}

In his work on theology and culture and how they interact, John Stackhouse asks, “Who are we, for Jesus Christ, today?”\textsuperscript{68} Equally important is his followup question: “What is it to be Christian in the world?”\textsuperscript{69} In the pages that follow, he assembles an answer filled with potential. Drawing from four notable theologians of the past century, Stackhouse claims we can and must make the best of it in the world, as it is.

Stackhouse begins with H. Richard Niebuhr and his typology, explaining how it is still useful today. It illustrates how diverse cultures will elicit different responses from different Christians. The same happens as Christians in the same culture react differently.

\textsuperscript{66} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{67} Ibid.


\textsuperscript{69} Ibid.
to distinct aspects of what they share.\textsuperscript{70} This basic premise helps explain divisions in the Christian tradition over such things as morality, ethical issues, the meaning of vocation, the world, and the church. He concludes that the typology is a limited yet useful tool.

He then explores the theologies of C. S. Lewis, Reinhold Niebuhr, and Dietrich Bonhoeffer to “recover a Christian realism.”\textsuperscript{71} Lewis’ contribution focuses on the movement of the individual believer from immaturity to maturity. One does this by “Faithfully making his way along the path of sanctification, looking for the world to come, taking pleasure as he finds it and contributing to the common good as he can.”\textsuperscript{72} Reinhold Niebuhr’s Christian realism explains how Christianity helps us see the world as it really is, both morally and metaphysically.\textsuperscript{73} He concludes that pragmatism is the way to be in the world. The individual ought to get results from their actions inspired by prayer and insight.\textsuperscript{74} Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s focus on the community balances this emphasis for the individual. He writes, “Life has been ordered by God through the institutions that give it shape, that give it guidance toward the good and protection against evil.”\textsuperscript{75} Yet he shares R. Niebuhr’s view of pragmatism and Lewis’ call to serve the common good in whatever means possible.\textsuperscript{76}

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\item \textsuperscript{70} Ibid., 41.
\item \textsuperscript{71} Ibid., 44.
\item \textsuperscript{72} Ibid., 60.
\item \textsuperscript{73} Ibid., 93.
\item \textsuperscript{74} Ibid., 104.
\item \textsuperscript{75} Ibid., 135.
\item \textsuperscript{76} Ibid., 157.
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Working with this foundation, Stackhouse proposes that believers will experience and respond to the world as it is. The important issue is how. To preserve an authentic witness, they ought to engage with the world on every level. Christian vocation includes everything from washing the dishes to helping a neighbor, writing a poem, working a job, or preaching a sermon. Moreover, while the world is the Lord’s, it is also a messy place marred by sin, waste, and ambiguity. Believers should expect this, rather than be horrified by it. Stackhouse concludes that the way for Christians to be “for Jesus Christ in the world today,” will involve mixed motives and methods. Believers will need to become patient and persistent, as their work and witness carries out God’s purposes, even if they make mistakes or unintended results arise. Culture is as malleable as time is fluid; neither fatalism, despair, nor desperation have place in the mission dei.

Stackhouse’s work does produce some unanswered questions and difficult conclusions. He speaks about life by a gospel standard but does not define that standard, which leaves many historic arguments between believers unresolved. In like manner, he calls for embracing diversity within the Christian tradition, but this plea seems overstated and naive. All he offers is the advice that when believers are living in the Spirit, then all will be well or at least as well as can be expected. It may have been better at this point

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77 Ibid., 259.
78 Ibid., 263.
79 Ibid., 270.
80 Ibid., 295.
81 Ibid., 320.
82 Ibid., 321.
to simply acknowledge the fractured church and give realistic encouragement for
reunification, or at least advice for achieving greater tolerance.

He also suggests a course of compromise with worldly powers and other faith
traditions when necessary to achieve the greater good.\textsuperscript{83} One wonders to what extent and
what end? Without a distinctively Christian work ethic and witness, all that is left is a
form of humanism. For example, while he advocates pluralism without relativism and
conviction without hubris, he errs by assuming all believers will have enough maturity to
achieve the stance.\textsuperscript{84} This seems unrealistic; more work needs to be done in defining how
to get from here to there. The principles in the book are sound, but the process of faith
formation is incomplete. Stackhouse would have more impact by addressing the apparent
reality that not all believers are even interested in maturity.

\textit{Recovering the Reformed Confession: Our Theology, Piety, and Practice}

\textbf{by R. Scott Clark}

R. Scott Clark is passionate about the Reformed tradition and distressed that the
modern expression of it bears little resemblance to the original. He fears that those in the
tradition are experiencing an identity crisis that is undermining their faith.\textsuperscript{85} His goal in
writing is to establish the historic Reformed confession as “the only reasonable basis for a

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\textsuperscript{83} Ibid., 327.

\textsuperscript{84} Ibid., 355.

\textsuperscript{85} R. Scott Clark, \textit{Recovering the Reformed Confession: Our Theology, Piety, and Practice}
stable definition of the Reformed theology, piety, and practice.” From there, he goes on to present a thorough discussion on the decline of the confession’s influence, the rise of evangelical theology and practice within Reformed tradition churches, and what steps are necessary to correct the situation.

Clark begins by defining the Reformed confession in three ways: first, by naming the six forms of unity common to the tradition; second, by limiting their understanding as articulated by sixteenth- and seventeenth-century theologians; and third, by the resulting theology, piety and practice as defined in the same period. Following that, Clark describes the drift away from his imagined ideal. He describes it as two quests: first, the quest for illegitimate religious experience (QIRE) and second, the quest for illegitimate religious certainty (QIRC). In his mind, both are “diseases” and enemies of the church that arose out of the Enlightenment.

QIRE is the “pursuit of the immediate experience of God without the means of grace.” He develops his critique by referring to Pentecostal and Evangelical worship styles and Anabaptist piety. He concludes their revivalism is at odds with the confession due to their subjective nature and private faith focus. Instead, Clark argues “We do not have immediate access to God’s being. We have mediated access through God the Son

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86 Ibid.
87 Ibid. Clark does not imply that all Reformed churches hold to all six documents, (The Belgic Confession, Canons of Dort, Heidelberg Catechism, Western Confession of Faith, Westminster Larger Catechism, and Westminster Shorter Catechism.), only that they are commonly esteemed.
88 Ibid.
89 Ibid.
90 Ibid., chapter 3.
Incarnate and through the preaching of the Gospel and the administration of the sacraments.””91 QIRC, on the other hand, is “the attempt to find certainty on issues that are not of the interest of the Reformed confession.”92 He suggests a good example of this is in the debate over a literal reading of Genesis 1.93 He concludes that certainty on the issue is not the concern of the confession, nor should it disrupt the Church, because God has not chosen to reveal this clearly and directly in Scripture.94

Clark then argues that these quests are connected to a blurred understanding of the doctrine of justification. Again, citing Anabaptist, Lutheran, and Roman Catholic theologians, he decries their theonomic tendencies.95 His remedy, of course, is to first restore the Reformed confession to its place of guiding theology, piety, and practice where the two “quests” are disallowed.96 Clark insists, “What this means for Calvinists is that first, they must acknowledge God’s freedom to work extraordinarily, but, in theology, piety, and practice, submitting to the ordinary means of grace and consider shut-up the revealed will of God (Isa. 55:8-9).”97 The second step is to reinstate a

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91 Ibid., chapter 4.
92 Ibid., chapter 1.
93 Ibid., chapter 2.
94 Ibid.
95 Ibid., chapter 3.
96 Ibid., chapter 5.
97 Ibid., chapter 3.
sixteenth-century form of worship, including the second service, a ban on musical instruments, and Calvin’s liturgy.\textsuperscript{98}

Clark’s work is valuable in exposing the two quests. Covenant theology and Calvinism put the emphasis on God’s proactive stance toward humanity and creation. As Clark says, God reveals and meets with his people in Christ through the means of grace. While this may be contentious, he is calling Reformed people back to their roots and a coherent theological system.\textsuperscript{99}

His discussion on theonomy is also helpful. Clark makes a strong point that the confession did not insist on the moral code as the means for justification, and yet, he does recommend that the Law be read weekly.\textsuperscript{100} Thus his counsel is a mixed message that finds its source in Calvin’s teaching on the third use of the Law, and raises an old issue. Clark’s comments offer a new opportunity to explore whether the Church can avoid the legalism that is common in many Reformed churches or the libertinism in others.

Where the work is less than helpful lies in Clark’s insistence on restoring the second service and older worship forms.\textsuperscript{101} The second service, while historically helpful, is not biblically mandated as he suggests.\textsuperscript{102} In contemporary times, it fell into disuse for

\textsuperscript{98} Ibid., chapter 7.

\textsuperscript{99} Ibid., chapter 4.

\textsuperscript{100} Ibid., chapter 2.

\textsuperscript{101} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{102} Ibid., chapter 8.
a variety of reasons, not least of which is a changing world, demands on time, and other means available that accomplish the original goals.

For worship services, an intentional liturgy is useful. Limiting the song repertoire to those containing themes consistent with the Reformed confession is in keeping with the goal of shaping the congregation through a coherent theological system. His argument against the introduction of musical instruments is weak and pejorative, as is his advice to remove them as unnecessarily disruptive and provocative.\(^\text{103}\)

Finally, by arguing for the reinstatement of the “Christian Sabbath,” Clark is offering a form of theonomy that he has already rejected.\(^\text{104}\) Sunday is the Lord’s Day. While the confession may require Sabbath-like observance, that path leads away from the Sabbath teaching found in the book of Hebrews and Jesus’ own teaching of new life in his name. If “breaking away from sinful patterns” is a good thing, then daily discernment should be the goal — not just observance on a single day.\(^\text{105}\) Worship services ought to teach these truths, but implementation is for the whole week. In much of this section, Clark is following an inevitable course dictated by his own program to restore the Reformed confession and the methods that originally came with them. He might have served the church better by reimagining the confession for the world believers live in now.

\(^\text{103}\) Ibid., chapter 7.

\(^\text{104}\) Ibid., epilogue.

\(^\text{105}\) Ibid.
When the Church Was a Family: Recapturing Jesus’ Vision for Authentic Christian Community by Joseph H. Hellerman

Joseph H. Hellerman believes “Spiritual formation occurs primarily in the context of community.”¹⁰⁶ This is the thesis in his work, where he explores the relationship between life together in Christian community and the possibility of spiritual maturity in all facets of life. Evaluating the spiritual poverty of contemporary culture with its drive for independence, Hellerman measures it against living for the common good in a strong-group surrogate family.¹⁰⁷ From the Reformed perspective, Hellerman’s work restates the values and value of covenant community.

Hellerman develops his thesis by describing the family customs and values of the first-century world before moving to a distinctly Christian form of the strong-group surrogate family.¹⁰⁸ He asserts that people simply did not make major life decisions on their own. Marriage, vocation, and place of residence were group decisions that allowed for two important dynamics. Individuals received the benefit of the group’s wisdom and secondly, the group’s own security was enhanced.¹⁰⁹

In the coming of Jesus, these same dynamics were kept and expanded. Now strong-group families were also surrogate families as Jesus redefined the bonds of brother

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¹⁰⁶ Joseph H. Hellerman, When the Church was a Family: Recapturing Jesus’ Vision for Authentic Christian Community (Nashville: B&H Academic, 2009), Kindle: Introduction.
¹⁰⁷ Ibid.
¹⁰⁸ Ibid., chapter 2.
¹⁰⁹ Ibid., chapter 1.
and sister to mean those who are within the community of faith.\textsuperscript{110} This change made community life available for those who were otherwise isolated, as in the case of orphans, or to those whose faith excluded them from the broader culture. In Christ and in the communities gathered in his name, people experienced a redeemed form of group life. It was a place where material, social, and spiritual needs were met, as people transitioned away from pagan culture into the life of discipleship. From the time of Jesus into the fourth century, the church kept a strong-group family ethos.\textsuperscript{111} Ultimately, “People did not convert to Christianity solely because of what the early Christians believed. They converted because of the way in which the early Christians behaved.”\textsuperscript{112}

Moving on to the contemporary situation, Hellerman does not trace the roots to it so much as describe the fruit from it. Chapter six, “Salvation as a Community Creating Event,” discusses modern values and the impossibility of a vibrant faith life apart from the community of faith.\textsuperscript{113} The chapter contains his strongest warnings that spiritual growth requires the presence of other believers in a strong-group setting.\textsuperscript{114} He questions the modern doctrine of salvation as a purely personal event,\textsuperscript{115} insisting instead that salvation is always into the community of God’s people.\textsuperscript{116} He urges a restored balance

\textsuperscript{110} Ibid., chapter 3.
\textsuperscript{111} Ibid., chapter 5.
\textsuperscript{112} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{113} Ibid., chapter 6.
\textsuperscript{114} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{115} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{116} Ibid.
between being justified and familified\textsuperscript{117} and agrees with John Calvin who said God’s fatherly favor and the special witness of spiritual life are limited to his flock, so that it is always disastrous to leave the church (Institutes 4.1.4).\textsuperscript{118} He concludes that without a commitment to a group, growth is improbable because “To leave God’s family is to leave the very arena in which God manifests His life-giving power.”\textsuperscript{119}

This is where Hellerman’s work is so valuable and also so difficult to implement. The value lies in his support of covenant community as the location for spiritual growth. The difficulty is in breaching the current context of individualism and personal salvation. He suggests four useful practices, drawn from the New Testament: first, “We share our stuff with one another, second, we share our hearts with one another, third, we stay, embrace the pain, and grow up with one another, and fourth, family is about more than me, the wife, and the kids.”\textsuperscript{120} Each suggestion can be implemented gradually, understanding that acceptance of these principles will result in a very different kind of church experience.

Where Hellerman is less practical is in his two overarching themes for success in the endeavor. The first is to have robust boundaries, as the early church did, where Christian behavior and belief are widely known and agreed upon. The second theme is to embrace relational solidarity, wherein first loyalty is to the community of faith, rather

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\item\textsuperscript{117} Ibid.
\item\textsuperscript{118} Ibid.
\item\textsuperscript{119} Ibid.
\item\textsuperscript{120} Ibid., chapter 7.
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than the biological family or the state. Neither assertion is helpful. There are no robust boundaries today and the ones Hellerman cites from the early church are open to interpretation — the cause of present divisions. Likewise, the solidarity problem cannot be solved through an appeal to the ancient church. Efforts by the small group and Emergent movements have both been unsuccessful in restoring the values of strong-group community.  

The other concern involves convincing the Christian subculture, devoted to the nuclear family, to change for their own good and the good of the current generation who are looking for deeper community bonds. In response, Hellerman acknowledges that “The challenge in Jesus’ radical call to discipleship is not simply a challenge to prioritize loyalty to Jesus as an individual over loyalty to one’s family. Rather, a disciple must choose between two families: the disciple’s natural family and Jesus’ newly formed surrogate family of believers.” Despite being biblically true and the key to his entire proposal, however, it is questionable whether people today will accept the extent and depth to which these ideas will redirect their lives. It seems that the essential problem is in convincing believing people, immersed in a culture devoted to self-interest and freedom of expression, to take part in something different. For that, Hellerman has no

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121 Ibid.
122 Ibid., introduction.
123 Ibid., conclusion.
answer save cautious optimism that those congregations who blaze a trail back to his two themes will regain a prophetic voice and the power of the early church.\textsuperscript{124}

\textsuperscript{124} Ibid.
CHAPTER 3
A THEOLOGY OF DISCIPLESHIP

Introduction

John Stackhouse asks, “Who are we, for Jesus Christ, today?” at the beginning of his work, *Making the Best of it, Following Christ in the Real World*. It is a good question, one that is becoming a prophetic cry shared by many others. A disheartened Rodney Clapp says that the church has become useless; it is a private club, ineffective and misdirected, that needs to find its way back to being a way of life. Miroslav Volf adds that the Christian faith involves “being an instrument of God for the sake of human flourishing, in this life and the next.” For too many Christians, however, faith has become a matter concerned with private morality, the soul, family, and the church, with the result that faith is either idle, a crutch, or an arrogant voice in the public sphere. On

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4 Ibid., chapter 1.
the last, David Fitch bluntly adds, “Evangelicalism has become an ‘empty politic’ driven by what we are against instead of what we are for.”

Leonard Hjalmarson identifies another symptom when he describes the growing “disconnect between people and place [that] erodes human community by eroding humanity itself: we are reduced to ‘consumers’ and our behavior is reduced to self-interest.” His explanation is that Christians tend to see the world as a dark and unholy place with a sharp sacred/secular divide. For many, the obvious solution is to make the best of it by negotiating each half on its own terms. However, for these authors, that is no solution at all because it is the antithesis of the Master’s approach.

The situation in Reformed circles is no different. The tradition is failing in its witness. It once sought to be an agent of transformation that helped bring a visible expression of the Kingdom. Instead, dualism is on the rise; there is a decreased expectation of God’s presence in the world at large. Sabbatarianism is common, and the Word has become spiritualized. This is ironic considering how the dominant culture is moving toward integrating spirituality with nature.

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7 Ibid., chapter 1.

8 Stackhouse, *Making the Best of It*, 166.


10 Ibid., chapter 7.

11 Ibid., preface.
Miroslav Volf asks, “What makes for a life worthy of being called good?”\textsuperscript{12} Certainly, it cannot be a self-centered avoidance of God’s call on the disciple’s entire life. It must be whole-hearted participation in the \textit{missio dei}. The questions Volf and Stackhouse ask inspire this conclusion and the discussion below. In it, key Reformed doctrines will be re-examined and restated for the twenty-first century. First, a review of the Reformed tradition’s understanding of Law and grace as they apply to Sabbatarianism. Second, a reimagining of covenant community that involves Spirit-guided discernment of the Word, worship, and hospitality. Third, a description of how discipleship flows from “entering God’s rest” (Heb. 4:3), which has transformational implications that far exceed a “personal assurance of heaven.”\textsuperscript{13}

\textbf{The Reformed Tradition: Law and Gospel}

The discussion begins by examining the relationship between law and gospel in the Reformed tradition. During the Reformation, John Calvin, with the other reformers, assessed the church’s tradition and applied it for his time. He argued that there are three uses for the law: first, it reveals human sinfulness against the righteousness of God; second, it restrains evil and those who do not yet believe; third, it admonishes believers and urges them to better behavior.\textsuperscript{14} He says,

\begin{footnotesize}
\textsuperscript{12} Volf, \textit{A Public Faith}, chapter 7.
\textsuperscript{13} Fitch, \textit{The End of Evangelicalism}, chapter 4.
\end{footnotesize}
The third and principal use . . . is the best instrument for [disciples] to learn more thoroughly each day the nature of the Lord’s will to which they aspire, and to confirm them in the understanding of it. [And] by frequent meditation upon it to be aroused to obedience, be strengthened in it, and be drawn back from the slippery path of transgression.\textsuperscript{15}

He goes on to defend the practice of reading the Law weekly.

But if no one can deny that a perfect pattern of righteousness stands forth in the law, either we need no rule to live rightly and justly, or it is forbidden to depart from the law. There are not many rules, but one everlasting and unchangeable rule to live by. For this reason we are not to refer solely to one age David’s statement that the life of a righteous man is a continual meditation upon the law [Ps. 1:2], for it is just as applicable to every age, even to the end of the world.\textsuperscript{16}

Thus, for Calvin the Mosaic Law is the perfect pattern and starting point for right living. He will say later that the Great Commandment is the final summation of the Law, but wants to define its application through use of the moral law.\textsuperscript{17}

Luther by comparison also affirmed three uses of the Law, but focused more on the second as a guard against works-righteousness than the third. He believed that those who felt convicted of sin would be driven back to the gospel by it.\textsuperscript{18} He concludes that a believer’s primary allegiance should be to the “Law of Christ” rather than the Law of Moses.\textsuperscript{19}

\textsuperscript{15} Ibid., 2.7.12.
\textsuperscript{16} Ibid., 2.7.13.
\textsuperscript{17} Ibid., 2.8.12.
\textsuperscript{19} Ibid.
Contemporary theologians continue to debate the issue. Some consider the Mosaic Law entirely abrogated for believers, while others have nuanced Calvin or Luther’s positions. Some agree with Calvin, claiming that believers live by the Decalogue as a way of worshipping the true God, thereby showing the world what kind of people God can produce. Meanwhile others say that “The Mosaic Law is antithetical to the gospel.” For example, Willem A. VanGemeren, a self-described non-theonomic Reformed theologian, agrees that submission to the Mosaic Law, “May well create a deeper longing for God, develop a greater zeal for the interpretation of God’s Word, kindle the flame of a renewed commitment to personal and societal ethics, rebuild relationships, and reconstitute vibrant Christian communities.” He says it is an important means of sanctification, a useful tool of the Spirit when interpreted through Christ.


24 Ibid.

25 Ibid.

26 Ibid.

27 Ibid., cf. Calvin, Institutes, 2.8.51.
While Greg L. Bahnsen’s theonomic Reformed view represents the other approach. He states that “God’s revealed standing laws are a reflection of his immutable moral character and are absolute in the sense of being non-arbitrary, objective, universal, and established in advance of particular circumstances.” So, unless specific moral laws have been explicitly abolished or altered in a New Testament text, they remain in force. He identifies those abrogated as either fading shadows (Heb. 9:9), or weak and miserable principles (Gal. 4:9). His position has far less stress on viewing the Law through the lens of Christ than does VanGemeren’s, but both affirm Calvin’s legacy.

The common theme across the Reformed spectrum is to properly train believers to see how the law and gospel function in unison. In Calvin’s context of two Sunday worship services, with one devoted to catechism, people were taught the nuances of the commandments as revealed in Christ. They had opportunity to understand what Jesus meant when he summarized the Law into the Great Commandment. They would have the background material, as it were, so that texts like 1 John 4:8 or Philippians 4:13 did not become an adages or sentimental platitudes bereft of their intended meaning. People were trained to keep the testaments together and to discover the depth of redemptive history culminating in Christ’s ascension and promised return.


29 Ibid.

30 Ibid.

31 Calvin, Institutes, 2.8.8.

32 VanGemeren in Five Views on Law and Gospel, chapter 1.
Apart from worship services, tools like the Heidelberg Catechism were used to support Calvin’s method.\textsuperscript{33} In small group and classroom settings, studying the Law provided for the kinds of discussions that could lead to healthy discernment for life in the world.\textsuperscript{34} There is little doubt that Calvin’s method worked and fit well within Christendom culture, but is it still helpful for the Law to be read regularly at worship services as he recommended?\textsuperscript{35} Scott Clark believes it is and laments all who have abandoned the practice.\textsuperscript{36} In his view, they have become borderline Reformed churches because they no longer properly profess the tradition.\textsuperscript{37}

His criticism is harsh and out of step with our changing cultural ethos. Calvin taught daily and twice on Sunday; today, a “twicer” attends a worship service two times per month. Reformation Europe was the height of Christendom; contemporary North America is secular, tolerant, and pluralistic. In the twenty-first century, many believers reject the Law because they have not been trained to see the gospel in it. They either view it as punitive, the source of self-righteousness, or perceive immoral behavior as an illness.

\textsuperscript{33} Lyle Bierma and Charles Gunnoe Jr., \textit{An Introduction to the Heidelberg Catechism: Sources, History, and Theology, Columbia Series in Reformed Theology} (Louisville: Baker Publishing Group, 2005), Kindle: Chapter 3.


\textsuperscript{36} Ibid., chapter 1.

\textsuperscript{37} Ibid., Clark includes the Christian Reformed Church in his list.
rather than sin. Consequently, many contemporary Reformed Christians do not have a consistent theological template.\textsuperscript{38}

In this context, reading the Law regularly without significant explanation is a hazardous practice. In our age of expediency, the listener hears an emphasis on sin and punishment, with two detrimental results. First is the risk of playing down to the minimum, just as it was in Jesus’ time. For example, in Matthew 5:21-26, he reinterprets the sixth commandment so that people understand the depth of murderous intent; likewise, his treatment of the seventh commandment and a variety of other Mosaic laws. Jesus models how ineffective it is to discuss ethics in a binary way. His method exposes the lie that knowing what is right or wrong does not automatically lead to change. Therefore, reading the Law without proper exposition seems to produce the same conditions Jesus addressed.

The second detriment is to inadvertently revert to an Old Testament-style religion, where the primary concern is sin avoidance rather than the pursuit of loving God and neighbor. This tendency has dogged the Reformed tradition continually, resulting in legalism, moralism, and inward piety.\textsuperscript{39} In certain times and places, this is a toxic mix that prevents proper church discipline, forgiveness, and reconciliation. Jason Meyer


concludes, “It is indeed a sad reality when the church of Jesus Christ under the new
covenant looks and lives too much like the people of Israel under the old covenant.”

All of this leaves the church in a quandary. The old approach no longer produces
a favorable context for discipleship. Clearly the Law still has authority, but it is time to
change the didactic strategy. Meyer suggests the church simply reverse the order and lead
with grace to “show the indissoluble link between the ‘Gospel of Christ’ and the ‘Law of
Christ.’” This would demonstrate “a seamless link between the indicative of what Christ
has done and the imperative of what the believer lives out as a result.” Gospel and law
remain paired but the emphasis is shifted to gratitude that produces fruit. Thus, reversing
the order may help us cast a better gospel vision: “It is not that we will be punished for
our sin, but rather our sin itself is punishment in that it is painful not to be who we were
created to be.”

Finally, there is one more aspect of teaching the Mosaic Law Calvin’s way that
contributes to the problems discussed above. The concern is that Calvin treats all of the
commandments as expressions of natural law, equally and eternally authoritative,
including the Sabbath commandment. For him and many others, the Sabbath is a
creation ordinance. This designation makes it a compulsory day of rest “hardwired” into

Academic, 2009), Kindle: Conclusion.

41 Ibid.


43 Calvin, Institutes, 4.20.16.

44 Gordon J. Spykman, Reformational Theology: A New Paradigm for Reformed Dogmaitcs
the rhythm of creation, but this has also opened the way for Sabbatarianism, which supports an Old Covenant-style religion. Worse, reading the Sabbath command as tied to the Exodus event in the context of the New Covenant obscures its meaning. The authors of Genesis 1 and 2 and Hebrews cast a far greater vision of God’s work in creation and the human heart than participation in a single day of worship once every seven days. In the following section, we will discuss the Sabbath Day, Sunday, and the eschatological Sabbath.

The Reformed Tradition: Recovering Sabbath

There is more than a passing connection between how the Mosaic Law is used in traditional Reformed settings and Sabbatarianism. As noted above, the one has produced the other by underestimating the original purpose of God in Genesis 1 and 2 and how this finds fulfilment in Jesus’ ministry. The issue is important because allowing any form of Sabbatarianism to continue will further encourage an Old Covenant approach to faith and a dualistic approach to life.

Genesis 1 opens with the account of creation. On six consecutive days, there was evening and morning; then a seventh day is listed, but without the usual demarcations. Gordon Spykman refers to this as the transition between the initial creating work of God to his unending creational care.45 The same point is made by others who add that God’s rest and not humanity’s is the final act in the story. God’s intention is to create a “Sabbath world,” made for fellowship between the Creator and his people, and this never

changes.46 When sin enters, God’s rest is simply no longer available to humanity; however, Scripture reveals God’s intention to restore what was lost.

The first clear indication of this set in Sabbath language is in Exodus 16. There and in subsequent chapters, provisions for the Sabbath with its rules and penalties are specified. God’s intention is to emancipate slaves from more than physical bondage. The long-term goal is to restore Sabbath rest to his people.47 Therefore, as they waited they had a weekly reminder of God’s faithfulness in creation and redemption.48 During the balance of the Old Covenant period, however, the prophets lament the people’s inability to keep Sabbath and their unwillingness to seek God, trust God, or spend time with God in prayer and worship (cf. Ez 20:12-13; 22:8; 23:38; Jer. 17:21, 22, 27; Is 56:2).49 Unsurprisingly, the people are unable to live up to the demands of the Law. They needed a savior who can provide what the Law never could: a right relationship with the Father or, as some put it, entry into God’s rest.50

The author of Hebrews argues that God’s “resting-place” remains available through Jesus Christ (Heb. 4), and that this is not just a future situation. He argues that


God’s rest is available in the present during the period known as “today” (Heb. 4:7), thereby equating God’s rest with salvation. The transition from death to life through Christ is also movement from not knowing to knowing God’s rest. The author of Hebrews draws a straight line from Gen. 2:2-3 to Rev. 21:1-2, through Heb. 4:3-4. He is grounding the Sabbath in God’s eschatological salvation rest and not creation as such.\(^{51}\) Thereby, he follows other biblical authors in presenting the already-not-yet paradox of life in Christ.\(^{52}\)

Sabbath is therefore a constant reality the believer enters.\(^{53}\) Arguments that insist on weekly observance of a Mosaic Sabbath miss the point that the seventh day of creation is not demarcated by evening and morning, as were the first six. If it had been, then the point would be moot. Instead, the seventh day of Genesis 2 is open-ended, indicating a state of being more than a period of time.\(^{54}\) Don Carson argues, “The institution of the Sabbath for the people of Israel was based on the creation account and became a sign of God’s redemptive goal for mankind.”\(^{55}\) It was a sign and temporary provision, a day set

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\(^{51}\) Lincoln, in *From Sabbath to Lord’s Day: A Biblical, Historical, & Theological Investigation*, chapter 12.


\(^{55}\) Carson, "Introduction," in *From Sabbath to Lord’s Day: A Biblical, Historical, & Theological Investigation*, introduction.
aside as a type in anticipation of the eschatological Sabbath, which no longer applies to believers (cf. Gal. 4:10; Col. 2:16).\textsuperscript{56}

Not all agree with this assessment, however. Many, Calvin included, continue to believe the Sabbath is a creation ordinance, which requires a day set aside for worship and rest. Yet paradoxically, Calvin also saw the eschatological fulfilment by advising against the “superstitious observance of days.”\textsuperscript{57} This leaves a confused doctrine that advocates a near sacramental Mosaic Sabbath, despite texts like Colossians 2:16-17 that call it a shadow.\textsuperscript{58} The central issue for Calvin is that only with a day of complete abstinence from regular activities when one is “wholly at rest, that God may work in us; we must yield our will; we must resign our heart; we must give up all our fleshly desires.”\textsuperscript{59} By saying this, however, he casts human work as inevitably sinful and implies that it is not a forum for sanctification.\textsuperscript{60} In sum, Calvin’s Reformed Sabbath theology is firmly rooted in Law because he believed that Christians are incapable of keeping Sabbath.\textsuperscript{61}

On balance, it is important to remember that John Calvin was a man of his time. Sabbath-transfer theology was common during the Reformation and he simply adapted


\textsuperscript{57} Calvin, Institutes, 2.8.30-31.

\textsuperscript{58} Rice, Reformed Spirituality, 195.

\textsuperscript{59} Calvin, Institutes, 2.8.29.

\textsuperscript{60} Richard Gaffin, Calvin and the Sabbath: The Controversy of Applying the Fourth Commandment (Feam Ross-shire: Mentor Books, 2008), 146.

\textsuperscript{61} Ibid., 148.
his work to it. It cannot be overstated, however, that in the New Testament period “Judaism as a whole considered the Sabbath to be binding on Israel alone.” Further, a review of the Gospels and the book of Acts shows that there is no hint anywhere in the ministry of Jesus that the first day of the week is to take on the character of the Sabbath or replace it. What we do know is that the early Christians regularly worshipped on the first day of the week as a celebration of Sabbath-rest salvation brought through Jesus’ resurrection and then they went off to their day jobs.

Nevertheless, there is evidence that the debate had begun by the second century. Some communities were copying Jewish Sabbath practices, while others spiritualized them. Others yet simply stopped reading the fourth commandment in worship services, thereby excluding it from the moral law required of believers. In the second century, theologians had one attitude about the Decalogue and a different one about the Sabbath. It was not until the fourth century and Constantine’s edict of 321 CE, that Sunday became

62 Calvin, Institutes, 2.8.34.


64 Carson, "Jesus and the Sabbath in the Four Gospels," in From Sabbath to Lord's Day: A Biblical, Historical, & Theological Investigation, introduction.


67 Ibid.

68 Lincoln, "From Sabbath to Lord’s Day: A Biblical and Theological Perspective," in From Sabbath to Lord's Day: A Biblical, Historical, & Theological Investigation, chapter 12.
a sanctioned day of rest. Following that, Eusebius was the first to connect it with the Jewish Sabbath while Augustine encouraged the practice of spiritualizing it. The combination turned the tide and Sabbatarianism, in some form or other, became accepted practice. The Second Council of Mâcon enshrined it in church canon, while the Protestant contribution made it more strict. In spite of Scripture and confessional documents that point toward lifelong, daily sanctification, Sabbatarianism continues to dominate much of the Church. Certainly, corporate worship is a vital practice and there must be an agreed-upon day and time to facilitate it. That day cannot, however, take the place of daily rest and ceasing from sin. In Calvin’s own words, those are daily disciplines. Therefore, recommending one day above others risks assigning religious duty to Sunday, while the rest of the week is open to pragmatism. Scripture is clear: “God’s rest” is a continual state of being.

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69 Bauckham, in From Sabbath to Lord’s Day: A Biblical, Historical, & Theological Investigation, chapter 9.

70 Ibid.

71 Bauckham, "Sabbath and Sunday in the Medieval Church in the West," in From Sabbath to Lord’s Day: A Biblical, Historical, & Theological Investigation, chapter 10.

72 Bauckham, "Sabbath and Sunday in the Post-Apostolic Church," in From Sabbath to Lord’s Day: A Biblical, Historical, & Theological Investigation, chapter 9.

73 Bauckham, "Sabbath and Sunday in the Medieval Church in the West," in From Sabbath to Lord’s Day: A Biblical, Historical, & Theological Investigation, chapter 10.

74 Ibid.


76 Calvin, Institutes, 2.8.31.
Reimagined Reformed Covenant Community Identity

In a Sabbath context as described above, theology is practical and available to the community of faith. Encounters with the Word, worship, and hospitality are three key communal practices that can transform individuals, congregations and those who are “afar off.” This section explores each in turn.

Spirit Guided Word Encounter: Formative Practice One

The Reformed tradition has always valued encounters with the Word, for faith formation. Scripture is the way people come to know who God is and how to respond to what God has done. However, there are patterns in the tradition that have limited the potential for faith formation. Personal piety has a place, but encounters with the Word should primarily be communal, balanced with the Spirit, focused on the central truth of the faith, and mindful of the contemporary cultural context.

Communal

It is important to note that Calvin and the other reformers employed Scripture as a means of satisfying presuppositions rather than approaching it with an open posture. They affirmed that Scripture was available to all, but best understood by the experts. In worship, the sermon was held on par with Scripture itself, so good rhetoricians could

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77 Ibid., 1.1.1.


79 Clark, Recovering The Reformed Confession, chapter 6.
shape opinion, if not belief. Not everyone accepted this arrangement and tensions grew. Conflicting personal interpretation, literalism, and battles over words at the expense of the Word caused divisions. Calvin tried to avoid these debates, even allowed for varied interpretations of a single text, but that did not stop the problem.

A communal approach to Spirit guided Word encounter, would minimize the bifurcation between expert and amateur by moving away from monologue into dialogue. The sermon has value, but immediate interaction would help believers better understand what they are hearing, rather than later conversations. A communal approach would emphasize that Scripture was ordinarily proclaimed to communities and not individuals. Last, a communal approach would help prevent dangerous misreadings of the text. Private devotional reading has ongoing value, but reading and discussing the Word together should be primary. Currently, practical tools exist to help congregations and groups to study the Word together thoughtfully, prayerfully, and comprehensively.

**Balanced with Word and Spirit**

Although Calvin talks frequently of the Spirit inspiring the reader and the text, the tradition has generally been suspicious of religious experience. The conflict began with

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81 Ibid., 101.

82 Clark, *Recovering the Reformed Confession*, chapter 4.


Calvin, who was convinced that God’s goal for humanity is union with Christ,\textsuperscript{85} and Ulrich Zwingli, who rejected any form of mystical experience.\textsuperscript{86} Their respective legacies continue and at times Zwingli’s critique has been valid. Some have listened for the “still small voice of God,” and acted in error because they did not test it with Scripture. In sincere efforts to make Scripture relevant, they have moved the center away from Christ to the self.\textsuperscript{87} Others have embraced rationalism to the extent that faith to follow Christ is no longer required.\textsuperscript{88} In this approach, the story of Scripture is scientifically reduced to abstract information that can be used against others, or for personal gain, rather than draw the worshipper deeper into union with Christ.\textsuperscript{89}

The Unified Counsel

Irenaeus said, “For man does not see God by his own powers; but when He pleases He is seen by men, by whom He wills, and when He wills, and as He wills.”\textsuperscript{90} His point is clear, words alone cannot convict the human heart and neither can mystical experience.\textsuperscript{91} Communal, Spirit-led encounters with the Word would embrace this

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{87} Billings, \textit{The Word of God for the People of God}, chapter 6.
\item \textsuperscript{88} Clark, \textit{Recovering The Reformed Confession}, chapter 6.
\item \textsuperscript{89} Billings, \textit{The Word of God for the People of God}, chapter 6.
\item \textsuperscript{91} Billings, \textit{The Word of God for the People of God}, chapter 1.
\end{itemize}
tension and produce greater humility in handling the Word, which is needed because Calvin’s posture of proof-texting secondary issues produced a legacy of judgmentalism that still plagues the church.92

The method is still applied too broadly on primary issues like salvation. Some base judgments purely on behavior. Calvin said we have no idea, really, who is saved or not. The uncomfortable truth is that “the Spirit could make today's hardened sinner into tomorrow's repentant believer.” Therefore “It is our duty to pray for all who trouble us; to desire the salvation of all; and even to care for the welfare of every individual.”93 Billings continues the theme by saying that we are to “be a people who witness with our lives that we are not our own but belong to Jesus Christ and his way, by the Spirit's power.”94 The Church should be a people who explore Scripture expectantly, sometimes delighted and at other times confused by what God is doing.

**Discernment of Contemporary Culture**

The final element of Spirit-led Word encounter is to intentionally analyze the current cultural against Scripture.95 Recovering Calvin’s pneumatology is essential for this process. He taught that believers are united with Christ by the Spirit, lifted up to where Christ is, and by the Spirit are able to discern life in the world.96 Because this

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92 Clark, *Recovering the Reformed Confession*, chapter 3.


94 Ibid., chapter 6.

95 Ibid., introduction.

96 Calvin, *Institutes*, 4.17.33.
teaching is overshadowed by Calvin’s Christology and heavily underplayed by those who favor a rational form of Reformed theology, many Reformed believers are unaware of it. Calvin teaches there is no sanctification without the Spirit’s presence. It is the Spirit’s role to “fulfill, complete, create, and recreate our humanity, remaking us after the perfect humanity of Jesus Christ.”

Reformed believers need a renewed, contemporary, and distinctly Calvinistic vocabulary of the Spirit to help the discernment process. Steven Guthrie works from this perspective. He calls the Spirit Boundary-Breaker, one who drives the church across geographical, social, and racial boundaries; he is the Plan-Disruptor who disrupts status quo thinking; he is the Surprise-Bringer, who creates the unexpected. He concludes that the Spirit leads the way, making God’s presence visible in the arts, human labor and culture — all of which are gifts.

The sense one gets is that Calvin’s Christendom Europe was more homogenous than contemporary North America. Current challenges include globalism, pluralism, and multiculturalism. These did not exist in the sixteenth century; that culture had religion based issues, but they were essentially arguments between Christian factions.

\begin{footnotes}
\item[97] Hageman, in Exploring Christian Spirituality, 155.
\item[98] Calvin, Institutes, 3.2.8.
\item[99] Steven R. Guthrie, Creator Spirit: The Holy Spirit and the Art of becoming Human (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Publishing Group, 2011), chapter 2.
\item[100] Ibid.
\item[101] Ibid., chapter 7.
\item[102] Stewart, Ten Myths about Calvinism, 194.
\end{footnotes}
The debates and pressures the contemporary Church faces require a different level of discernment and decision-making. For some, this may look like situational ethics or compromise. The Bible, however, tells the stories of Jesus deconstructing Israel’s identity to include the Gentiles in God’s people. Consider Jesus’ treatment of the Sabbath, speaking with the woman at the well or the Syrophoenician woman. In each case, Jesus broke lesser traditions in the interests of fulfilling the greater commandment.

Discerning the culture will also involve accepting that “God reveals himself not only through Scripture and in the believing community but also through creation, conscience, and culture.”¹⁰³ People outside the Church are experiencing the Spirit and yet have no frame of reference save the witness of the Church. This requires a new, open, and expectant posture that discerns God’s presence in the world., one that listens and watches for the Spirit, in whatever cultural form the Spirit is employing, to speak of it redemptively.¹⁰⁴ If the Church is sincere about the gospel, then those conversations will be paramount and proof of our devotion to Christ. Wishing, as some do, that believers belonged to a “Christian nation,” is naïve and an abdication of responsibility to discern what is best (Phil. 1:9-11). Instead, Reformed believers live confidently that the Spirit is at work to bring eschatological transformation, not annihilation.¹⁰⁵

Rice is correct in saying “Without a studious and well-informed use of the Bible, the individual Christian cannot be kept from idolatry, superstition or following the

¹⁰³ Johnston, God’s Wider Presence, chapter 1.
¹⁰⁴ Guthrie, Creator Spirit, chapter 7.
¹⁰⁵ Ibid., chapter 9.
current cultural trends.\textsuperscript{106} It is also true that without the Spirit inspiring our reading, observing, participating, and discerning, the same perils remain. A greater appreciation for the Spirit’s freedom and creativity (Jn. 3:8) would help believers discern God’s movement and presence in all of life.

Hospitality: Formative Practice Two

Hospitality is at the heart of a Sabbath context because it is the dominant theme of Scripture. Repeatedly, biblical stories and events illustrate the actions of God to reconcile all things to himself and to draw people into covenant embrace. The Reformed tradition has hospitality “built-in,” through the focus on covenant theology.\textsuperscript{107} It should be expanded to meet the demands of a fragmented society in search of relationships, meaning, and identity.\textsuperscript{108} This core practice will define the health of a congregation and its place in the broader community. This section describes how biblical hospitality and covenant community can further the Gospel.

Christine Pohl notes, “A life of hospitality begins in worship, with a recognition of God's grace and generosity. Hospitality is not first a duty and responsibility; it is first a response of love and gratitude for God's love and welcome to us.”\textsuperscript{109} Her statement reflects the theme. In Christ, God has come to reconcile creation to himself (Col. 1:22).


\textsuperscript{107} Calvin, \textit{Institutes}, 3.20.45.


\textsuperscript{109} Ibid., chapter 9.
According to Calvin, our ascent with Christ into the life of the Triune God defines the goal of human existence and the Christian life. It is not salvation, moralism, or even ministry; it is transformation “wrought through deepened koinonia with God and others.”

While admittedly slow, it is a complete conforming of motives, attitudes, thoughts, and actions to the image of Christ (Rom. 12:1-2). Those who follow Christ begin to accept others as Christ has accepted them (Rom. 15:7); to forgive as Christ forgave them (Ep. 4:32; Col. 3:13); and to be reconciled to one another (2 Cor. 5:18-20).

Biblical hospitality cannot be underestimated. It is the bridge that links theology and daily life. A key biblical example is in Genesis 18, when the three strangers visit Abraham and Sarah. This encounter connects hospitality to God’s presence, promise, and blessing. It is not only Abraham and Sarah who are blessed by their actions; there is a blessing for the world. Throughout Scripture, hospitality involves a generous, even underserved welcome, given without concern for advantage or benefit to the host. God consistently “sets a table” of welcome and asks his people to do the same.

Importantly, Scripture never allows for hospitality to be spiritualized; it is always concerned about real needs (1 Jn. 3:16-18). Neither is hospitality optional for Christians or restricted to those specially gifted for it. In the early church, hospitality to needy

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112 Ibid., chapter 2.

113 Ibid.
strangers distinguished the church as a place of welcome and generosity.\textsuperscript{114} This continued into the second century. After Constantine, however, things began to change. Hospitality became associated with client-patron relational dynamics rather than a response of gratitude.\textsuperscript{115} By the Reformation, John Calvin lamented this development. He warned that the increasing dependence on inns rather than on personal hospitality was an expression of human depravity.\textsuperscript{116} However, while he did urge a return to biblical hospitality, he gave it over to civil institutions to manage, rather than to the church community.\textsuperscript{117} This arrangement has remained intact until the present, with the common assumption that people in need should find help in public institutions.\textsuperscript{118}

Reimagining Christian hospitality should be a concern of the contemporary church. In the Sabbath context under discussion, God’s rest should manifest in the ordinary events of life. Offering hospitality is, as mentioned above, a response to God’s own hospitality. As such, it is not as much about providing a service as sharing life together.\textsuperscript{119} It is not about evaluating another person’s worthiness to receive grace, as a free offering of unmerited grace.\textsuperscript{120} Hospitality is concerned with finding a place in our

\textsuperscript{114} Ibid., chapter 3.
\textsuperscript{115} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{116} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{117} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{118} Ibid., chapter 5.
\textsuperscript{119} Ibid., chapter 4.
\textsuperscript{120} Ibid., chapter 7.
hearts for the stranger\textsuperscript{121} because it is not enough to extend an act of kindness unless it is also an act of genuine warmth.\textsuperscript{122} All of this makes Christian hospitality difficult because it addresses pride, self-righteousness, and the difficulty many have in receiving hospitality themselves.\textsuperscript{123}

Covenant Community: Formative Practice 3

Covenant community is the result of God reconciling people to himself and bringing them into Triune koinonia. Biblically, this is pictured in the call of Israel and the Church.\textsuperscript{124} The Reformed tradition has always taught that as God kept his promise to bring the Messiah out of Israel, God will keep his promise to bring his people into the recreated heaven and earth. In that sense, salvation has always been communal; it is the covenant between God and his people.\textsuperscript{125}

Familial

The early church understood this relationship. They lived in an era when large group loyalty was the norm. Hellerman summarizes this by explaining how in the New Testament world the group took priority over the individual. A person’s most important group was his blood family and the closest bond was not marriage, it was the bond

\textsuperscript{121} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{122} Ibid., chapter 4.

\textsuperscript{123} Ibid., chapter 6.

\textsuperscript{124} Spykman, \textit{Reformational Theology}, 422.

\textsuperscript{125} Ibid., 372.
between siblings.\textsuperscript{126} He goes on to explain how Jesus takes these principles and applies them to the Church, teaching that those who follow him are now brothers and sisters with shifted loyalties.\textsuperscript{127} As early believers saw it, they were responsible to the Church for their behavior, career, development, and social relationships — not their biological families or themselves. It seems counterintuitive in contemporary North America, but this arrangement was attractive, giving the church social strength.\textsuperscript{128} Hellerman concludes by reworking Cyprian’s dictum, “He who does not have the church for his mother cannot have God for his Father,” saying instead, “He who does not have God’s children as his brothers and sisters does not have God for his Father.”\textsuperscript{129}

Hellerman’s passion is understandable because, under the influence of the enlightenment and modernity, many Christians have been socialized to believe that personal rights, goals, and fulfilment take priority over group concerns. Increasingly, people are asked to make life-impacting decisions without the benefit of group wisdom. The result is a mix of anxiety, self-destructive decisions, a lack of maturity, therapy, or medication.\textsuperscript{130}

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{126} Joseph H. Hellerman, \textit{When the Church was a Family: Recapturing Jesus' Vision for authentic Christian Community} (Nashville: B&H Academic, 2009), Kindle: Chapter 2.
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\textsuperscript{127} Ibid., chapter 3.
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\textsuperscript{128} Ibid.
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\textsuperscript{129} Ibid.
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\textsuperscript{130} Ibid., chapter 1.
\end{flushright}
Given the current cultural shift, participation in a Christian community has declined; along with it, mature Christian witness. Many people are no longer staying to work out their differences in a church community. Instead, they choose to move to another church and take their unresolved conflict with them. Others refuse any form of Christian community and believe that they can mature as disciples independently or according to their own standards. In either case, they remove themselves from God’s chosen crucible for transformation and maturity.

**Hospitable**

Hospitality is the partner of authentic Christian community; shared meals are the central feature of the partnership. It is time to reclaim these rich biblical foundations and courageously, even subversively, put them into practice. By doing so, the Church will be strengthened internally and in its witness.

Hospitality in worship is primarily represented through celebrations of the Lord’s Supper. In home groups, it is whatever is set before the guest because, if the meal is shared in Jesus’ name, then many of the same benefits occur. Eating together is a profoundly important context for conversations, increased intimacy, and a deepening

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131 Ibid., chapter 9.
132 Ibid., chapter 6.
133 Ibid.
understanding of the Kingdom.\textsuperscript{136} Shared meals, whether at church potlucks, meals at home,\textsuperscript{137} in a café or on a park bench, give method, means, and opportunity for establishing common ground.\textsuperscript{138}

Allan Street observes, “Rather than being a place of exclusion, Jesus defines the table as a place of transformation.”\textsuperscript{139} It is the place where the empires of this world are compared with the Kingdom of God and where allegiances for Christ are adopted and strengthened.\textsuperscript{140} It has this power because the Lord’s Supper is the greatest act of hospitality in history and the sacramental fuel for maintaining community.\textsuperscript{141} Therefore, Reformed believers should embrace Calvin’s sacramental theology of communion.\textsuperscript{142} His perspective describes how the Lord’s Supper is proof of human participation in the life of God.\textsuperscript{143} It is the prototype for all genuine koinonia\textsuperscript{144} that is never tied to an instant of time, but functions as a sign announcing grace, preceding or following participation.\textsuperscript{145}

\begin{footnotes}
\footnote{136}{Norman Wirzba, \textit{Living the Sabbath: Discovering the Rhythms of Rest and Delight, the Christian Practice of everyday Life} (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2006), Kindle: Chapter 2.}
\footnote{137}{Pohl, \textit{Hospitality}, chapter 8.}
\footnote{138}{Ibid., chapter 5.}
\footnote{139}{R. Alan Streett, \textit{Subversive Meals: An Analysis of the Lord's Super under Roman Domination during the First Century} (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publishing, 2013), Kindle: Chapter 5.}
\footnote{140}{Ibid., chapter 4.}
\footnote{141}{Ibid., introduction.}
\footnote{142}{Martha L. Moore-Keish, \textit{Do This in Remembrance of Me: A Ritual approach to Reformed Eucharistic Theology}, (Grand Rapids, MI.: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2008), Kindle: Chapter 4.}
\footnote{143}{Calvin, \textit{Institutes}, 4.17.2.}
\footnote{144}{Canlis, \textit{Calvin's Ladder}, chapter 4.}
\footnote{145}{Keith A. Mathison, \textit{Given for You: Reclaiming Calvin's Doctrine of the Lord's Supper} (Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R Publications, 2002), Kindle: Chapter 1.}
\end{footnotes}
Adopting this doctrine will be challenging because much of the Reformed tradition has gravitated toward Zwingli and his view that Communion is only an ordinance of remembrance.\textsuperscript{146} Moore-Keish laments that in this perspective it has devolved into “an idolatry of reason.”\textsuperscript{147} Pohl agrees and adds that the communal aspect of the meal has been abandoned in favor of the personal and private, which interferes with true \textit{koinonia}.\textsuperscript{148} The issue is pressing, making it time to reconsider Calvin’s theology and his desire that communion be celebrated weekly.\textsuperscript{149} This could be an important step toward renewal in worship, and in congregational and community life.\textsuperscript{150} The Church is called to welcome the poor, the exhausted, the enemy, and friend, for in attending to these people we may be attending to Christ himself.\textsuperscript{151}

\textbf{Conclusion}

The chapter began with two questions: who are we for Christ today and what is a good life? John Stackhouse answers the first by reminding believers that they are a city on the hill, shining forth the glory of God. They boldly, persistently, enterprisingly, uncompromisingly, and humbly serve the Father by the Spirit’s power, assured of the

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{enumerate}
\item Ibid., chapter 7.
\item Moore-Keish, \textit{Do This in Remembrance of Me}, introduction.
\item Pohl, \textit{Hospitality}, chapter 4.
\item Calvin, \textit{Institutes}, 4.17.46.
\item Mathison, \textit{Given for You}, chapter 8.
\item Wirzba, \textit{Living the Sabbath}, chapter 8.
\end{enumerate}
\end{footnotesize}
The other question finds its answer in carrying that out according to the reimagined theology described above.

In many expressions, the Reformed included, the church has become overly focused on self-help and doctrinal purity, often indifferent to the call of Christ to be a city on the hill. Norman Wirzba writes, “One of the great misconceptions about the Sabbath is that church membership exhausts our Sabbath responsibilities, that regular church attendance suffices to establish us as a Sabbath people.” His words summarize the situation. For it to change, church leaders must model the practices of community, hospitality, and Spirit-led Word encounters that show a Sabbath life. Timidity and conflict-avoidance cannot continue; Christ has called pastors, not managers, to journey with communities of friends, nourished by Word and sacrament through the Spirit.

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152 Stackhouse, *Making the Best of It*, 356.


PART THREE

MINISTRY PRACTICE
CHAPTER 4
MINISTRY PLAN

Chapter four describes the theological implications outlined in chapter three, and the strategy to implement them. The goal is to foster a deeper hunger for faith formation in a Reformed context of covenant community through a renewed emphasis on corporate worship and home-group membership. It is important to note that measuring the success of this project is more by perceiving a trajectory than achieving a benchmark. The key metric is an increasing desire for members to participate in corporate worship and a home group.

Summary of Theological Conclusions

There is no doubt that Western culture needs Sabbath renewal. Robert Muthiah notes that our cynical and despairing culture strains and fragments relationships.1 Walter Brueggemann calls the world a “ratrace of anxiety.2 Howard Rice says we’re “exhausted

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This short survey covers the last 25 years of Christian publishing and each author has the same solution: reinvest in Sabbatarianism. They insist that in a post-Christendom era, believers must restore the Christian Sabbath. It is not an option; rather, a commandment to obey, even if it is prone to legalism. In their view, Sabbath day observance is a sign of trust in God’s sovereignty; it is the doorway to human creativity. Without it there can only be “soiled work,” adds Dan Allender, reiterating Calvin’s dictum. Brueggemann calls the result of Sabbath-breaking “The fruit of wrath and violence and envy and, finally, death.”

This call to renewal seems unreasonable, however, and unlikely. Given contemporary pluralism, the movement to shift-work and the very strong reaction many believers have against Sabbatarianism, it is doubtful these pleas will work. Some North Americans have the material resources to experiment with a Sabbath Day ritual, but many

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9 Allender, *Sabbath*, 76.


more are pressured to survive without the stability of a family, regular work hours, or adequate income. It seems twenty-first century conditions are more akin to the first century than realized. So, the approach to Sabbath renewal must respect cultural shifts and adapt to them. Additionally, as discussed in chapter three, Sabbatarianism is not a biblical commandment.

The Church must acknowledge these facts and change, so that her people grow in faith as they deal with the world as it is. Worship attendance patterns and community involvement are both a function of traditional church structures and personal choice. The demise of “blue laws” reflects these trends. Therefore, Sabbath observance will be of a kind with the one that fuelled the church in the first century. Believers must rediscover daily Sabbath in the company of God and his people as they go about working, loving, creating, playing, and everything else a person might do. Choosing to live as pilgrims who are sure of their destination yet open to learning as they go, believers will take time to worship and engage the Word in community, all while practicing hospitality.

These essentials are familiar to the membership of Sonrise CRC. It means, rather than introducing new concepts, the old ones need redefinition. Members must learn to separate Sabbatarian practices from the Lord’s Day, because the current ethos forces members to choose all or nothing. If a member wants to work, attend an event, or go shopping on Sunday afternoon, community censure prevents worship attendance. Many decide that if they “break Sabbath” in the afternoon, then they may as well make a day of

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13 Ibid., chapter 8.
it. Redefining the Lord’s Day will give members freedom to worship regularly without fear of judgment.

More frequent attendance will help them to remember their identity in Christ. In a time of increasing biblical ignorance and theism, corporate worship is an essential practice. Through sharing Scripture and the sacraments, worship becomes one of the rare places where truth is spoken and confronted hearts hear the Spirit’s call to holiness. In that setting, a diverse and seldom-unified body gathers to admit that in Christ there is a level playing field (Gal. 3:28), which strips away self-righteousness and shame.

Cornelius Plantinga Jr. urges the same rededication to truth-telling in worship. He writes that the church is in dire need of restating the doctrine of sin.\textsuperscript{14} Contemporary church service are more entertaining than convicting, and without a proper disclosure of sin in Word encounters, “The gospel of grace becomes impertinent, unnecessary, and finally uninteresting.”\textsuperscript{15} Worse, without honest disclosure about sin, shalom is violated and the Sabbath rest Christ died to provide is sullied along with it.\textsuperscript{16} The forum of Sunday worship is an incredible opportunity to shed self-deception.\textsuperscript{17} It also provides for the discernment needed to empathize with others who share the journey.\textsuperscript{18}


\textsuperscript{15} Ibid., epilogue.

\textsuperscript{16} Ibid., chapter 1.

\textsuperscript{17} Ibid., chapter 6.

\textsuperscript{18} Ibid., chapter 7.
Sunday worship is just one such place. Home groups are another where much of the same activity can happen, albeit at a deeper level.\textsuperscript{19} They can be the forum where questions are answered and personal stories find their place in the greater story of Scripture. Home groups have the potential to be places where relationships are formed and deepened through honest conversation, confession, and encouragement.\textsuperscript{20} Here members can offer mutual vocational discernment.\textsuperscript{21} Additionally, the smaller group acts as an extension of the larger body so that members can discover the importance of belonging to the body of Christ. When the family of faith becomes one’s own, loyalties shift to produce maturity through self-sacrifice in Christ’s name.\textsuperscript{22}

Home groups also have the potential to be places of reconciliation. Learning to deal with disappointment in the Body is vital, because it can be so devastating.\textsuperscript{23} Thus practising confession, repentance, and forgiveness in a smaller group provides the tools needed for dealing with brokenness in the broader community.\textsuperscript{24} When disciples mature sufficiently to forgive or confess in the company of those they know and trust, the possibility of forgiving and accepting others they don’t know well increases. The key is


\textsuperscript{20} Ibid., conclusion.

\textsuperscript{21} Wirzba, \textit{Living the Sabbath}, chapter 7.

\textsuperscript{22} Hellerman, \textit{When the Church was a Family}, chapter 3.


\textsuperscript{24} Hellerman, \textit{When the Church was a Family}, chapter 6.
humility. Maturing disciples know that everyone is a work in progress; everyone needs shepherding and the benefit of grace.\textsuperscript{25}

Finally, home groups and worship gatherings carry the promise of hospitality, by working in tandem to honor God by welcoming the stranger and telling the story of God’s grace. A sincere welcome and genuine hospitality that allows for “uncertainty, contingency and human tragedy” are a powerful combination that demonstrates the kingdom.\textsuperscript{26} Therefore, participation in both types of gatherings is vital and potentially effective, providing members embrace the reimagined theology of community and hospitality.\textsuperscript{27}

\textbf{Ministry Strategy: Teaching}

With the genesis of this project in Fall 2012, through course work at Fuller Theological Seminary and ministry at Sonrise CRC, a renewed vision for ministry slowly developed. By the time the project formally began in Fall 2016, many small refinements had already been initiated. Thus, much of the strategy outlined below is built on this prior work. The content is a distillation of the entire Fuller program.

Designed for dynamic reinforcement, the teaching strategy is in two parts: a topical sermon series delivered in corporate worship and home-group interaction. The congregation expects their primary teaching through monologue-style preaching, so it makes sense to begin here, with followup discussions encouraged after the service in

\textsuperscript{25} Ibid., chapter 5.

\textsuperscript{26} Pohl, \textit{Hospitality}, chapter 9.

\textsuperscript{27} Hellerman, \textit{When the Church was a Family}, chapter 8.
fellowship hall or later at home. To expand this traditional model, however, the strategy recognizes a significant need to hold further structured conversations in home groups. This half of the strategy gives individuals a chance to interact with the sermon topics and it also accommodates those who miss a sermon. The coverage of each topic is broader and the concepts are reinforced to increase personal and corporate ownership of them.

Sermon Topics

The seven sermon topics are listed below with a text and theme statement. Each one includes an essential truth and practice that can foster a desire for worship and covenant community. Sonrise CRC has a diverse membership and, in this context, some of the topics were unfamiliar, even counter-intuitive for many of the members. Therefore, each message used visual aids through projected slides, physical objects and, in two instances, the sacraments. Particular care was given to vocabulary and biblical context. Much of the content of Hebrews was unfamiliar to the congregation. Mindful of this, the Fall 2016 sermon series in Exodus, with several messages based on the Tabernacle, provided an opportunity to introduce important Old Testament foundations that reappear in Hebrews.

Series Title: Christian Life in a Sabbath World

The Bible tells the story of God. Outlined, explained, and retold throughout the Old and New Testaments, this story reveals a God who moves to call, restore, and redeem people. When the story moves to the time of Jesus, everything shifts from promise to fulfilment. In our time, the Law and Sabbath take on new meaning in the worshipping community of faith. In the coming weeks, we will explore what it means to follow Christ,
who is our Covenant-keeping God in the world today. Throughout the series, sermon transcripts are available at www.sonriseponoka.com.

Jan. 1, 2017; *Raised*

Traditionally, New Year’s is a moment to pause and imagine a new year, a new start, a new set of priorities or goals. What is often assumed is that change will happen through hard work, willpower or luck. The Good News is that God’s people have been “raised with Christ,” so that they can see the way ahead and walk in it gratefully. The text for the message is Heb. 1:1-3.

Jan. 8, 2017; *Follow*

Leaving home to enter the far country is one way to describe the life of faith. Moving from death to life is another. In either case the old is gone for good and a new, but unknown, reality begins. Being a Christian is more than taking on a name; being a disciple is about following Jesus into a new life’s journey and the surprising destination is called God’s Sabbath rest. This service includes the celebration of baptism. The text for the message is Heb. 3:7-15.

Jan. 22, 2017; *Live*

The Old Testament describes the tutor of faith otherwise known as the Law. What role if any does it still have in the disciple’s life? For example, the Sabbath has changed from pointing back to the “Seventh Day,” to something else. Why does God give the Sabbath and how does a disciple observe it today? This service includes the celebration of the Lord’s Supper. The text for the message is Heb. 10:1-18.
Feb. 5, 2017; *Accept*

In a Sabbath world, there is only one family. Jesus calls his disciples sisters and brothers, breaking the “focus on the family” wide open to include the stranger and outsider. It is in this family that disciples learn to embrace the discomfort of diversity, because spiritual growth happens through conflict. The text for the message is Heb. 2:10-18.

Feb. 12, 2017; *Worship*

Worship forms the core of the Sabbath world. What is worship and why does God call his people into it? The practice of giving time, tithes, and offerings is essential to the disciple’s life. Worship is a weekly reminder of a new and different reality that forms and confirms faith. The text for the message is Heb. 10:19-25.

Feb. 19, 2017; *Participate*

In a Sabbath world, disciples participate in community life as another form of worship. All the “one anothers” of Jesus are for today and for the benefit of the family of faith. When they are practised through commitment, creativity, and love, faith is formed in all. The text for the message is Heb. 12:1-3.

Feb. 26, 2017; *Share*

In a Sabbath world, disciples share their journey. Apart from Sunday and the fellowship hall, disciples dare to live a seven-day spirituality, with their values, goals, and priorities shaped by the mission of God. God’s claim is on all of life and God’s joy is made complete as his people walk together. The text for the message is Heb. 13:1-6.
Home Group Material

The second half of the strategy is to create home-group study materials that match the sermon topics. Groups will have the opportunity to dialogue over each topic in an informal setting. Sharing personal reflections, concerns, and challenges can help group members engage the desired outcomes as they meet. The goal is to foster faith formation in community. By conversing on these topics prior to agreeing with or understanding them, group members will experience the reality of it. The goal is a deeper desire for faith formation in all of life. The home-group study materials are in Appendix A.

Ministry Strategy: Leadership and Participation

The strategy to grow participation in the project involves leadership structures already in place. The pastor’s influence is primarily through teaching and visitation where vision casting is expected. The high regard congregation members have for this is an important part of the strategy. The council of elders and deacons also provides key leadership to the congregation. They are elected to three-year terms, which means that every year one-third of the leadership is new. This benefits the strategy; first, because council and elder meetings are natural training opportunities and second, rotation ensures the church’s leadership base grows annually. Ministry-area leadership works in the same way. Therefore, a top-down approach makes the most sense for teaching the goals of the project.

The materials used in teaching and training included directed reading, review of prior ministry papers written in support of the Fuller Doctor of Ministry program, and structured discussions at council and elder meetings. There are also applicable
denominational training opportunities and regional training events available. These materials were used in regular meetings, at retreats, and during extended travel to other training events. A schedule of events and resources is provided in Appendix B.

The target audience is the entire congregation. Members are encouraged to join a home group and to attend worship services regularly. Progress is tracked through group membership growth and worship attendance. During communion services, the elders track members’ participation. This data will help with the evaluation. To counter legalism and obligation, teachable moments during services or visits are used to discuss and explain the freedom to attend worship or join a group. The overarching strategy is to intentionally cast vision and model a different ethos for worship and community life for the congregation, whether they are formal members, regular attendees or their children.

**Timeline**

The timeline for the project was as follows. Reading and literature review took place between September 2015 and December 2016. The initial home-group launch took place in September 2015. Approval for the doctrinal project was in April 2016. Compiling and writing the theological foundations took place between October and December 2016. Development and writing of the sermon series began in October 2016 and was completed in February 2017. Development of the study material began in November 2016 and was completed in January 2017. The sermon series took place in January and February 2017. Introduction of the study-group material took place January 2017. Council training began in the summer of 2015 and is ongoing. Formal evaluation of the sermon series and study material took place from January to March 2017.
Chapter five describes the implementation plan, which relies on paying close attention to the character of this congregation, its leadership structures, and the preaching moment. The chapter will also discuss how once they were equipped, these leaders formed and now participate in home groups. The chapter concludes by outlining the tools of evaluation, which include individual sermon, sermon series, and home-group study material evaluations.

**Leadership and Training**

Sonrise is a traditional congregation that expects leadership from ordained elders and deacons. One of the benefits of the polity is that terms of office are three years, with one third of the council replaced each year. Another is that every member, while not necessarily qualified, is eligible for office. Combined, this means that a broad representation of the congregation sits in key leadership roles for limited periods of time. Whereupon they resume their regular lives without the added duties of their former office, but still exercising influence. While it is time-consuming to constantly train new
leaders, it is also a blessing. As office bearers come and go, there is an ever-increasing number of congregants who have the same knowledge and experience.

Accordingly, over the course of study leading up to the project, the council has been exposed to the underlying theologies and habits that influence worship and community life at the church. This was an involved process that included but was not limited to directed reading, review of ministry papers written in support of the Fuller Doctor of Ministry program, and structured discussions at council and elder meetings. Other opportunities to train elders were spontaneous, happening outside of meetings or en route to family visits and other regional meetings. Elders and deacons were encouraged to attend denominational training, which they did, when the topics converged with the goals of the project. The overall approach was to inundate the leadership with goals, values, and methods congruent with the project in as many forms as possible.

Since January 2016, training was focused directly on this project’s themes. Typically, this takes the form of one-hour guided discussions at monthly elders meetings and bi-monthly council meetings. The worship committee, given the nature of its task, has similar discussion built into its agenda. In these conversations, members have thoroughly discussed current trends in the broader culture as they affect congregational life; the need for intentional worship and deeper community ties. At present, this involves twenty individuals or 12 percent of the active adult membership.

Some key resources employed in these sessions included: *From Sabbath to Lord's Day*, by D. A Carson, *The End of Evangelicalism?* by David Fitch, *When Church Was a Family* by Joseph Hellerman, *No Home Like Place* by Leonard Hjalmarson, *Making the Best of It* by John Stackhouse, and *Subversive Meals* by R. Alan Street. The thesis of each
book was summarized and used as a discussion starter. In the conversations, many preconceived notions were challenged, defended, and even discredited. One conversation involved attitudes about communion and whether there is a “grace transaction” involved in it. The majority opinion was Zwinglian memorialism, but through the discussion Calvin’s sacramental view made gains. Many of the council members reported that the discussion helped them understand the sacrament as never before.

Over the same period, sermon and worship service evaluations became a regular agenda item in the monthly elders meetings. This gave more opportunities to integrate the theological foundations discussed at council meetings and the sermon topics into congregational life, through home visits and home group meetings. The elders reported greater effectiveness in their visitation ministry, due to their own ongoing faith formation.

**Home Group Network**

Over time, the greater emphasis on teaching and modelling a lived theology led the council begin a home-group ministry. The elders introduced this initiative and took responsibility to work with the congregation to catalyze the formation of the first groups. This was in Fall 2015 and prior to the official start of the project. By the end of the 2015-2016 ministry year, there were six groups comprised of seventy-five individuals or 44 percent of the adult membership.

It helped that elders and deacons rotate through the council every three years. By the time the project was underway, nine former council members continued to support the project from the congregation. The council, with guidance and through their discussions and creative imagining, took these learnings into other small group settings, such as
church committees and ministry leadership groups. Since the beginning of 2017, task-oriented groups have been integrating fellowship and hospitality into their meetings.

Most members who joined groups embraced the opportunity. Others misunderstood the nature and purpose of these groups, perceiving them to be another program rather than part of community life. This caused one group to disband in Winter 2016. Regardless, the home-group initiative has gained momentum with council members’ ongoing leadership and recruitment. Currently, there are eight groups with a total of ninety-seven individuals participating. One of the original groups divided in two before the current ministry year, and quickly grew their respective groups to fourteen members. Some groups are homogenous, while others are multi-generational, with children in attendance. Some groups have seen members leave, while adding new faces, but those who are involved appear to be more deeply invested the longer they participate in a group. This movement began well, but is still in its infancy. Therefore, leader training and vision casting will continue to play an important role in its growth.

**Teaching**

In Fall 2016, the theological foundations for the project were finalized. Following this, a sermon series was developed with a focus on the interaction of corporate worship and covenant community. The series has seven sermons in it, while the study material has an eighth, as listed in chapter four and Appendix A. The eighth study is a review and summary session. The overarching goal was to have the sermons prepare home-group members for in depth discussions on the same topics. Each topic kept the twin focus and the sequence of topics that helped reinforce the themes. During the series, both
sacraments were administered and that gave powerful visual reinforcement to the topics. The series, delivered Jan. 1 through Feb. 26, 2016, was well-received.

The home group material was also developed and released during this time. Initially, the goal was to release one lesson per week, but since the groups do not meet weekly, it seemed ineffective and administratively awkward. Instead, the entire study was compiled and published in a familiar study-booklet format. Groups can work through the material at their own pace, aware that online resources are available to them. The study guide does not depend on having heard the sermons, but members understand that it would be helpful to do so. The front matter and study one is included in Appendix A.

Currently, three groups are using the material and another two groups will begin using it before the end of the 2016-2017 ministry year. The initial feedback is promising. There will be a formal evaluation requested from each group at the end of the ministry year. The remaining groups will use the material during the 2017-2018 ministry year. In some respects, this is disappointing. Still, it remains possible that this staggered introduction of the material to the congregation could have greater impact.

**Evaluation**

Over the course of January and February 2017, several evaluation tools were implemented. First, in the January congregational meeting, there was a guided discussion about and an invitation to join a home group. Some discussion followed, with members asking for clarification and details. Many members expressed satisfaction and deepening commitment to their home group. They cited authentic fellowship, encouragement to persevere in challenging life situations, and greater understanding of God’s call to
covenant community. This was also an excellent opportunity for members to preview the study material.

Other members were exposed to the logic of the groups for the first time. Some expressed interest in joining and follow-up recruitment conversation is ongoing. Still others remain unconvinced and see home groups as an additional program that they do not have time for or are unwilling to engage. This serves to confirm the inner logic of the project. There is a dynamic relationship between attending public worship and participating in a home group. Each has the potential to reinforce the other, through learning principles of authentic worship and community life, hospitality, then experimenting in practical application. As more members of the congregation embrace this cycle, the impact of the project will increase.

Sermon Evaluation

Second, there was a weekly sermon evaluation and feedback survey administered. It was adapted from the denominational seminary’s student evaluation form.\(^1\) Listeners could respond online or on paper, with questions and insights regarding the message. This was open to anyone attending the services, whether they were members of the church or a home group, or not. The evaluation form is included in Appendix C; it was made available in hardcopy or online.

The evaluation yielded sixteen responses. The data, which is included in Appendix D, reveals that three of the seven sermons garnered one or two responses each.

while three others garnered three to five responses each. Overall, the responses affirmed the content and presentation of each message topic. The aggregate scores indicate very good to excellent on all the key metrics. The congregation responded that each message was timely, biblical, and inspired life change.

Most importantly, given the nature of the topics, the structure and delivery of each message made the material accessible. The keywords most often used included: caring, confident, motivational, and knowledgeable. This is very important because it indicates a trust relationship between the preacher, topic, and congregation. This was also affirmed more broadly through discussions at council and worship committee meetings, where other, anecdotal evidence confirmed what was submitted in writing. Thus, despite limited written evaluation, the topics were well-received and effectively presented.

**Sermon Series Evaluation**

Third, a congregation-wide, sermon-series survey was administered. The first part of this tool was adapted from the sermon evaluation form. In the first part of the survey, four key outcomes were chosen and measured. The second half of the form asked summary questions that attempted to measure the overall impact of the sermon topics and primary goals of the project. The evaluation form is included in Appendix C.

Once again, the response was limited but adequate. Twenty-three surveys were returned, with data provided on all seven messages. Once again, key metrics received high scores, between very good and excellent. Summary section one asked listeners to consider their stated beliefs and lifestyle to determine if they are integrated and, if so, by what standard. Summary section two asked for a response to the basic questions posed by
this project. Statistically, there is evidence that the goals of the project were presented clearly and effectively. In both sections, the data reveals positive results. The tabulated results are in the Appendix D.

**Home Group Study Evaluation**

Finally, there is a feedback survey provided in the home-group curriculum, developed with the project goals in mind. Council members will be required to complete the survey, whether they are in a home group or not. As leaders giving oversight to the teaching ministry, they are responsible to review study materials. Additionally, leaders of the home groups will administer the survey and report their group’s results. The combined data will contribute to the overall findings and effectiveness of the project. The evaluation form is included in Appendix C.

The initial response from the home-group study material is encouraging. Home-group leaders and council members submitted a total of nine evaluations. Respondents commented that the lessons were engaging, clearly laid out, and concise. They also liked the overall layout of the book, introduction, and study helps. Two respondents felt that a leader’s guide would be helpful. Their comments also indicated their presupposition that there are always right answers to study questions. As the introduction notes, the goal of the study is to foster conversation and group discernment that will help participants respond to the challenges in their particular context. It seems the goal was achieved for most of the participants. A second edition will be prepared, taking the first set of evaluations into consideration. This volume will be available for the fall season. The evaluation results are in Appendix D.
SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

The purpose of this project is to reimagine the Reformed theology of Sonrise Christian Reformed Church, to encourage members to embrace a more integrated faith and life perspective. Reclaiming a covenantal community identity, they will be better equipped to love neighbor and self as they represent Christ in the twenty-first century world. Now that the project has been started, it is time to evaluate these goals, the underlying theology, and implementation plan. This is also the place to summarize next steps for Sonrise CRC and discuss potential benefits for the Church.

Outcomes and Insights

The project, as described in this paper, has yielded some favorable, short-term results. The greater value of this project cannot be evaluated, however, until some point in the future. Sonrise is a traditional congregation and change happens gradually. Church life and discipleship are dynamic processes. This initiative needs time for the seeds to grow, for discernment, and for the Spirit to coax people into a new reality. Nevertheless, the initial results indicate an encouraging start.

Home Groups

The congregation embraced the introduction of home groups. Over the past two years, membership has grown and with it an understanding of the purpose of participation in one. One couple, with three small children, got involved but their group disbanded. Nevertheless, they are pursuing a new group while also preparing for their family of five to be baptized. Other members of the defunct group found new groups to join. Another group decided to divide and grow their respective groups through targeted recruitment of
people new to the congregation. Other groups have consistent attendance from members who attend worship services infrequently, but are in direct contact with the themes covered in the sermon series through the study materials. This proves that the two-pronged strategy is valuable and working in these varied settings to reinforce the concepts and goals of the project.

All of this illustrates a hunger for community and a healthy environment for faith formation. Formally, groups chose their own material. While this can foster group affinity, it can also impede congregational life by forming cliques. Some groups were isolated by ethnicity, background, or tradition, but through studying the same material, at least for a season, the congregation is talking about the same things. The delayed release of the material is going to keep those conversations current into the future. This is an unanticipated benefit.

The last note on home groups does not involve them directly at all. Through the discussions and recruitment efforts, it became clear that some members were not going to join a group. In some cases, however, they already had joined a ministry task group or committee that could give some of what the home groups offer. The leadership encouraged ministry group and committee leaders to incorporate hospitality, fellowship, and prayer in their meetings. Some groups have done so and again the results are promising. These members are experiencing the group as places for faith formation.

**Teaching**

The sermon series produced two significant outcomes. First, through the reading, study, and development of the theological foundations, I developed a refined focus for
ministry. Questions and frustrations about issues and trends in the church came together forcibly. It is difficult to discern the present situation against the Gospel, because it is so easy to overlook the impact of common culture on the faith and practice of a congregation. It is also easy to become conflict avoidant, even when the spiritual health of the congregation is at stake. Even worse is the risk to a pastor’s spiritual health, when he or she bows to the systemic pressures against change that exists in congregations. This project helped to develop a prophetic voice and clarity for future ministry.

Second, the series of topics was appropriate, timely, and necessary. Congregation members recognize the need for change and accept the twin focus of the project. As shown in the evaluations, they accept that faith and life ought to be integrated. One of the points in the message on Sabbath stressed “If it isn’t good enough for Sunday, it isn’t good enough.” This resonated with the congregation because it relied on a Sabbatarian understanding they have, while challenging it all the same. Similar encounters happened throughout the series; while change is a slow process, the seeds are sown. Preaching will continue to present the twin themes of the project, which are the need to worship daily and weekly, and to meaningfully take part in community life.

There was also a moment of discomfort during the series that proves to be telling. Over time, it has become standard practice to use visual aids, audio, or film clips during preaching. In two of the sermons, for assorted reasons, no aids were used. This caused confusion and distress for many members who insisted that the practice be resumed, while other members applauded the apparent end of it. Council’s decision was to affirm the practice and urge the development of more ways to communicate the Gospel creatively.
Next Steps

The ongoing nature of this project compels more of the same material, albeit delivered in diverse ways. New sermon series and study material should be developed around other New Testament letters including 1 Peter, Ephesians, and James. Complementary study material should also be produced for the youth ministry. Additional creative elements could be provided by a fine arts ministry that includes film, music, drama, and dance. The congregation also should develop a greater online presence through website development and live streaming. Some members are reluctant about this because they claim it would exacerbate infrequent attendance at services. Anecdotal and statistical evidence on the current website, however, suggest the opposite.

Another area of improvement would be to hold annual council retreats. The next one is scheduled for later in 2017, in keeping with the three-year rotation for council members. Annual retreats would boost training and faith formation opportunities. Home group and ministry leader training should be improved in similar ways. Last, the congregation should engage a vision-casting exercise and seriously consider its place in the broader community, at the present time.

The above calls for increased time and attention, while the main deficiency in the implementation process of this project was time. There was time to do basic training, recruitment and organizing for the home groups, but not enough to do it with excellence. Time pressures come from the job description, which has high demands for visiting, preaching, teaching, and crisis care. The scope is daunting in a church this size. The only way this initiative will gain momentum is through recruiting a lay member or hiring an associate pastor to assume primary responsibility in home- and ministry-group
development. This person and the pastor would have more time to model authentic community life, through group participation, including evangelism.

**Implications for the Church**

Communal worship is a basic Christian practice because it forms faith through confrontation with the Word. It prepares the faithful for life in community and the world. Life in the world and the believing community is the crucible for growth, all of which exposes the need for remembering Christian identity. At some point, the Church lost this twin focus and it needs it back.

The Gospels tell the stories and the gospel is clear. Christ calls people into his community; the best response to grace is worship. It is always about breaking down walls that divide and separate, restoring what was lost in the Fall, celebrating reconciliation that only Christ can provide. Churches must find their way back to these basic truths and practise them in the times and places they inhabit.

The institutional church that began in Constantine has run its course. A new institution is being formed and will replace the old. Just as Jesus taught, when things get old, lose focus, and break down, the Spirit intervenes and brings new life. The challenge will be to let go of the right things, while holding on to the central truths. Each congregation and denomination will have to sort through the issues and pressures, rightly discerning the times, to arrive at the renewed reality that Christ invites his people to explore. There may be less uniformity in the future, but the Church will always be the Church when the Great Commandment is the lived reality of its people.
APPENDIX A

Home Group Curriculum

Introduction, sample lesson and glossary
Introduction To This Study Guide

Purpose
The Bible tells the story of God. Outlined, explained and retold throughout the Old and New Testaments, this story reveals a God who moves to call, restore and redeem people into his worshipping community. When the story moves to the time of Jesus, everything begins shifting from promise to fulfillment. In our time, the People of God, the Law and the Sabbath take on new meaning. Still connected to, but distinct from the past. In this study, you’ll explore what it means to be in Christ, who is our Covenant keeping God, in the world today.

Goals
The specific goals of this study will be to:
- Gain a deeper understanding of Christian discipleship from a Reformed perspective
- Develop a biblical understanding of Sabbath, worship, the Law of Moses and Christian community in the New Testament period.
- Explore the implications of living in the Kingdom of God today.

Overview
This study is divided into 8 sessions. Sessions 1-7 are intended for small group study.
- Lesson 8 can be used in that format, but is intended to be used in a large group gathering, where multiple small groups can share their insights and experiences.
- Each session is tied to a message available on the website: www.sonriseponoka.com. These resources are available for background information, but not essential to the study.
- An online forum is available to post discussion questions and comments on each message topic.
- A feedback survey is also available at the end of the guide.

Maximize Your Experience
The study is largely based on the book of Hebrews. This letter compares the promises of the Old Testament to the fulfillment that has come in Christ. So, while it is not essential to read the entire letter, doing so will be helpful.

Read and pray over each lesson’s scripture passages ahead of time.
- The Word has a way of shaping perspectives; the more familiar a text is, the greater the power to transform.

Come prepared to listen and to share your own perspectives.
- Scripture reading and discernment were originally intended to be group activities. So, while private devotional reading has value, it is wise to remember that group discussion opens the text beyond pre-conceived ideas and traditional opinions.

Each session has four interactions. They are intended to take current views through the process of discerning God’s Word for today.

This study is written from the Reformed perspective. However, while this template is helpful, keep an open mind.
- Denominational traditions that arose in the Reformation (500 years ago) are valuable, but dated. God’s Word is unchanging and the application of it is fluid. The goal is not to undermine the Reformed perspective, but to restate it for today.

How to Use This Guide
1. Begin by reading the lesson background, main scripture passage and introduction together. Remember to check the glossary if necessary.
2. Additional texts are provided for those less familiar with scripture. It would be helpful to read these texts prior to the meeting.
3. The way I see it now—this opening question is intended to start discussion about the study topic. If they are willing, have each participant spend 2-3 minutes sharing personal reflections.
4. Interacting with the text—these questions are designed to look beneath the surface of the text.
5. Interacting with the tradition—These questions will raise issues typically associated with the Reformed tradition. Past experiences and teaching should foster good conversation.

6. Interacting with today—These questions are designed to move participants toward applying the text in the world as we have it. Please note: while most study guides have time limits on each section, this one does not. Move through the study at a pace appropriate for the group and conversation. So long as the conversation is focused on the topic, the discussion should be fruitful. Studies can be split over multiple evenings.

However, there is no requirement to “answer every question,” the goal is to get the point, not belabor it.

And above all enjoy the experience of listening to the Spirit in the text together.

Introduction to the Book of Hebrews

The Book of Hebrews is anonymous in that the name of the author is not mentioned in the book. The original readers knew who the writer was, but he remains unknown to us. Despite the difficulties in determining the author of Hebrews, its majestic picture of Christ commended its contents to the early church.

The writer of Hebrews presented Christ as superior to the Old Testament prophets, angels, Moses, Joshua, and Aaron. He faced magnificent discussions of Christ’s person and work into frightening passages warning against apostasy (1:1-2:4). The superiority of Christ led the writer to appeal for faith (chap. 11), stamina (12:3–11), and good works (13:16).

Authorship

The early church historian Eusebius quoted the biblical scholar Origen as saying, “Who it was that really wrote the Epistle [Hebrews], God only knows” (Eusebius, Church History 6.25). Despite this verdict, many varied opinions about the authorship have arisen.

Christians in the Eastern Roman Empire regarded Paul as the author. Hebrews contains statements similar to Paul’s view of the preexistence and lordship of Christ (compare Heb 1:1-8 with Col 1:15–17). Both Hebrews 8:5 and 2 Corinthians 3:4–11 discuss the new covenant. These factors led some observers to consider Paul as the author.

Christians in the Western Roman Empire originally questioned Paul’s authorship of Hebrews. They observed that the statement of 2:3 suggested that the author was not an apostle. Also the Old Testament quotations in Hebrews come from the Greek Septuagint, but Paul used both the Hebrew text and the Septuagint. Further, none of Paul’s other writings are anonymous; and the polished Greek style of Hebrews does not resemble the explosive, dynamic style of most of Paul’s writings. Shortly before A.D. 400, Christian leaders in the West extended acceptance to the Book of Hebrews. They absorbed it into the Pauline collection of writings without distinguishing it from the rest.

Tertullian advocated Barnabas as the author of Hebrews. Barnabas’s background as a Levite would qualify him to write the book, but support for his authorship is lacking in the early church. Martin Luther suggested Apollos as the author. In Apollos’s favor is his reputation for eloquence (Acts 18:24), but against him is the absence of early church tradition accepting him as author. Some have suggested Luke as the author. His knowledge of Greek would favor him, but Luke was a Gentile. The outlook of Hebrews is definitely Jewish. The nineteenth-century church historian Adolph Harnack mentioned Priscilla, the wife of Aquila, as the author. She and her husband would have known Pauline theology and Jewish practice, but the early church was silent about nominating her as author.

Modern Greek texts of Hebrews bear the title “To the Hebrews.” It is best to accept this title and recognize that we cannot know for sure who wrote Hebrews. Despite our ignorance of the author, we can use and understand what he wrote.

Date

The date of writing Hebrews is difficult to determine. We must date the book before A.D. 55, when Clement referred to it. The writer used present tense verbs in 10:11 (“perform” and “offers” to describe the ministry of the priests in the Jerusalem temple. This indicates that sacrifices were still being offered in the days of the writer. The Roman army destroyed the temple in A.D. 70. Persecution intensified as that day drew near (see 10:32–34). Timothy was still
alive (13:23). The best option for the date is the mid to late 60s before
the Romans destroyed the temple.

Recipients
The above title for Hebrews reflects the conviction that Jewish
Christians were the original readers of the writing. Frequent appeal to
the Old Testament, extensive knowledge of Jewish ritual, and the
warning not to return to Jewish ritual support this conviction.

One might feel that the Jewish Christians who read Hebrews lived in
Palestine. According to 2:3, however, the readers may not have seen
nor heard Jesus during His earthly ministry. The verse suggests that the
readers had been dependent on the first hearers of the Christian
message to share it with them. Doubtless, most Palestinian Christians
had heard Jesus' preaching and teaching. According to 8:10 the readers
of Hebrews had resources enough to assist other believers. Palestinian
Christians were poor and needed aid (Acts 11:27-30; Rom 15:26).

These facts indicate that the readers were not from Palestine.
The statement in 13:24, “Those from Italy send you their greetings,”
sounds as if Italians away from their home were returning greetings to
friends in Rome. If this is true, Rome is the probable destination of the
writing. A second fact favoring this view is that a knowledge of Hebrews
first appears in Clement's First Epistle, which was written in Rome.

Purpose
Wherever the recipients lived, they were well-known to the writer. He
described them as generous (6:10) but immature (5:11-14). He was
aware of their persecution (10:32-34; 12:4), and he planned to visit
them soon (13:19, 23).

The writer rebuked the readers for not meeting together often enough
(10:24-25). They were in danger of lapsing into sin (3:12-14). Perhaps
the readers were a Jewish-Christian group who had broken away from
the chief body of Christians in the area. They were considering
returning to Judaism to avoid persecution. The author wrote to warn
them against such apostasy (6:4-6; 10:26-31) and to help them return
to the mainstream of Christian fellowship.

Theme
The writer of Hebrews presented Jesus Christ as the High Priest who
offered himself as the perfect sacrifice for sins (8:1-2; 10:11-18). Christ
had superiority over every aspect of Old Testament religion.

Understanding this principle could prevent the readers from
abandoning Christ and returning to Judaism (10:26-29).

Literary form
The language of Hebrews is elegant and carefully constructed. Its
excellent Greek does not clearly show up in English translations that
strive for readability.

Was the writer penning a letter to a specific group of Christians, or was
the letter a summary of a sermon made available to several Christian
congregations? The reference to “I do not have time to tell” in 11:32
seems to indicate a sermon; however, the writer knew specific details
about the congregation (5:11-12; 6:9-10; 10:32-34; 12:4; 13:7). This
suggests a letter written to a specific location. The statement in 13:12
also requires that we view the writing as a letter penned in the style of
an earnest warning to a specific congregation.

Theology
The letter to the Hebrews emphasizes the person of Christ. It presents
a Jesus who is truly human (2:17), realistically tempted (4:15), and
obedient to death (5:2; 13:12). The suffering of Jesus taught Him the
value of obedience (5:8).

Hebrews also emphasizes the finality of Christ's work. The sacrifices
offered by Jewish priests in the temple reminded the worshippers of sin,
but the sacrifice of Christ removed sin (10:1-4). The priests of Judah
repeatedly offered sacrifices that did not take away sin (10:11).

Christ's single offering of Himself forever removed the sin that
hindered fellowship with God (10:12-14).

Outline
1. The Superiority of Christ over the Old Testament Prophets (1:1-3)
2. The Superiority of Christ over Angels (1:14-2:18)
3. The Superiority of Christ over Moses (3:1-19)
4. The Superiority of Christ over Joshua (4:4-5)
5. The Superiority of Christ over Aaron (4:14-16:18)
6. The Practice of Spiritual Endurance (10:19-12:29)

Introductory material: Credit: David S. Dockery et al., Holman Bible
Handbook (Nashville, TN: Holman Bible Publishers, 1992), 745-
750.
1—Raised

Lesson Background
The Letter to the Hebrews was written to encourage Christians under pressure to return to Judaism because of persecution. It interprets the Old Testament through the lens of Christ, particularly the Exodus story and the Tabernacle. All of which prepared the way for Jesus’ coming, life, death, resurrection and ascension.

Scripture: Hebrews 1:1-2.4
Additional passages related to this text: Num 12:6-8; 1Co 1:5; Heb 11

Introduction
Following this bold introduction, the author sets out numerous texts that explain how Christ is superior to angels, or anything else for that matter. As the letter unfolds, anything including Old Testament rituals, traditions and religious practices are put in the background as forerunner to Christ and life in the present time. Religious observance and practices are redefined because they have been fulfilled in Christ.

The way I see it now
The claim of Hebrews 1:1 is that the Son is superior to the angels, the only way of salvation. In the world we live in, this claim is disputed. Some say either there are many ways to reach “heaven” or there is no heaven to reach at all. How would you answer either (or both) of those alternatives?

Study Questions
Interacting With the Text
Hebrews 1:1-4
How has God spoken in the past, in which words and whose lives?

How are the two testaments related to each other?

What is the main point of these verses?

Hebrews 1:5-14
Why is the author so concerned about the relationship of Jesus to the angels?

The quotations come from either Deuteronomy, the Psalms or Isaiah. What is the significance of these books?

Many people hold that angels have a special role in human life. Based on this passage, what is it?
Hebrews 2:1-4

What is the concern and is there a precedent for it?

How has the "ministry of angels" changed since Christ ascended?

Does this passage support the Trinity, how or how not and does it matter?

Interacting With The Tradition

Verse 14 says something about receiving salvation. How does this support the Doctrine of Election? (see glossary)

Contemporary society is built around the individual and nuclear family. Whom or what does the author of Hebrews build around? How is this indicated in the text?

Interacting With Today

Faith and faithfulness play a large role in Hebrews. In our industrial and technological world, these terms have taken on different meanings.

Discuss the following:

How would you define faith?

What role is there for logic and proof in having faith?

What role does testimony play in having faith?

What role does Christ have regarding faith?
Glossary

Communion of The Saints
The essence of the Christian life—fellowship with God and fellowship with other believers in Christ. In the beginning, Adam and Eve were placed in the garden to enjoy friendship and communion with God. But through rebellion, that fellowship was broken. The gospel restores fellowship not only with God, but among believers as well. Jesus’ last supper with his disciples illustrates the relationship between the vertical and horizontal dimensions of fellowship (Mt 14:22–23). Scripture uses several images to describe the spirit of togetherness which characterized the early church. The first is “the household of God” (Eph 2:19, 1 Tim 3:15), or “the household of faith” (Gal 6:10). In God’s household, love and hospitality are to be the rule (Eph 3:12, 7). Further, the church is depicted as the family of God on earth (Eph 3:15). God is the Father and believers are his faithful sons and daughters. The life of God’s family is to be governed by love, tenderness, compassion, and humility (Phil 2:1–4). Finally, the Christian fellowship is represented as the “one new man” or the “one body” (Eph 2:15, 19). In spite of great natural diversity, the Holy Spirit binds believers together into a single organism (4:4–16). In this fellowship of love, no believer is insignificant. Each member has been endowed with gifts for the spiritual edification of the entire body.—Baker Encyclopedia of the Bible, “Fellowship” (Grace, Daniel, and Sagendorf, Howard Baker, 1989), p. 786.

Covenant
Arrangement between two parties involving mutual obligations; especially the arrangement that established the relationship between God and his people, expressed in grace first with Israel and then with the church. Through that covenant God has conveyed to humanity the meaning of human life and salvation. Covenant is one of the central themes of the Bible. Entry into such a relationship, today as in Abraham’s time, hinges upon faith (Gen 5:5–14).—Baker Encyclopedia of the Bible, “Covenant” (Coppinger, Carol), p. 710.

Deuteronomy
Fifth book of the OT, and last of the Pentateuch (the five books of the Law). It, with Genesis, Psalms, and Isaiah, is among the most frequently quoted books in the early Christian centuries. More than 800 OT quotations in the NT are references to Deuteronomy. Jesus focused attention on Deuteronomy when he summarized the essence of the entire OT Law and Prophets in two great commandments of love for God and neighbor (Mt 22:37, see Deut 6:5, 10:19). Jesus also quoted Deuteronomy (5:13, 8:3) in his temptation experience (Mt 4:4–10).—Baker Encyclopedia of the Bible, “Deuteronomy” (Shettle, Samuel), p. 617.

Doctrinal of Election or Predestination
It may be defined as that eternal act of God whereby He, in His sovereign good pleasure, and in account of no foreseen merit in them, chooses a certain number of people to be the recipients of special grace and of eternal salvation. More briefly it may be said to be God’s eternal purpose to save some of the human race in and by Jesus Christ. The purpose of election is (1) to save and (2) to inspire the saved into service of good works for the glory of God (Eph 2:10, 2 Tim 2:21) — Louis Berkhof, Systematic Theology, Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1955, p. 316.

Heidelberg Catechism

Lord’s Day 33
Q. 33. Why is it called God’s “only begotten Son” when we also are God’s children?
A. Because Christ alone is the eternal, natural Son of God. We, however, are adopted children of God—adopted by grace through Christ.
1 John 3:1, 2; 5:1, 2; Eph 1:5

Lord’s Day 34
Q. 34. Why do you call him “our Lord”?
A. Because—
not with gold or silver, but with his precious blood; he has set us free from sin and from the tyranny of the devil, and has bought us, and body and soul, to be his own.
1 Cor. 6:20; 1 Tim. 2:5-6.

Lord’s Day 21
Q. 21. What do you believe concerning “the holy catholic church”?
A. I believe that the Son of God through his Spirit and Word, out of the entire human race, from the beginning of the world to its end, gathers, protects, and preserves for himself a community chosen for eternal life and united in true faith.
This community is not and always will be a voting member.
1 John 5:4-5; Acts 2:38; Rom 11:1-33; Col. 1:24-25; 1 Pet. 2:9-10;
John 10:10-19; Acts 11:26-27; Rom 8:28-39; Eph 1:5-14

Q. A 34
Q. Why do you call him “our Lord”?
A. Because—
not with gold or silver, but with his precious blood; he has set us free from sin and from the tyranny of the devil, and has bought us, and body and soul, to be his own.
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John 10:10-19; Acts 11:26-27; Rom 8:28-39; Eph 1:5-14

Q. A 34
Q. Why do you call him “our Lord”?
A. Because—
not with gold or silver, but with his precious blood; he has set us free from sin and from the tyranny of the devil, and has bought us, and body and soul, to be his own.
1 Cor. 6:20; 1 Tim. 2:5-6.
Q & A 55
Q. What do you understand by the "communication of saints"?
A. First, that believers one and all, as members of this community, share in Christ and in all his treasures and gifts. Second, that each member should consider it a duty to use these gifts readily and joyfully for the service and enrichment of the other members.

Isaiah
Isaiah is to the OT as the Book of Romans is to the NT, a book filled with rich theological truth. Like Romans, Isaiah unveils the sinfulness of God's rebellious people and his gracious provision of salvation. The ultimate redemption is to be accomplished through the death of Christ, and Isaiah 53 describes our Lord's suffering and death in graphic terms. Looking ahead to the second coming, Isaiah predicts a messianic age of peace and righteousness. Baker Encyclopedia of the Bible, "Isaiah." Herbert H. Schrr, p. 1047.

Last Days
Expression used in Scripture to describe the final period of the world as we now know it. In the OT the last days are anticipated as the age of messianic fulfillment (see Is 2:2; Mi 4:1), and the NT writers regard themselves as living in the last days, in the era of the gospel. Thus, for example, Peter explains that the events of the day of Pentecost are the fulfillment of Joel 2:28.

Salvation
In the OT Israel's concept of salvation was rooted in the historical experience of the exodus (Ex 14:13). Following this event, the OT recounts many stories of God saving his people from national disasters and harm. Israel understood salvation to be God's work—they saw his deliverance, cited unto the Lord for help, trusted in him for it, and praised him in response (Is 12:2; Ps 118:14).

Psalms
Poems sung to musical accompaniment that describe the experience of faith in God. In both adversity and prosperity the psalms indicate a strong faith in God and a clear conception of his attributes. He is seen in personal relationships with individuals within the covenant community, originally the Canaan, the psalms never tried of celebrating God's absolute greatness, which nowhere appears as a barrier to the reality of fellowships which his worshippers might enjoy with him. Baker Encyclopedia of the Bible, "Psalms." Arthur S. Peirce, p. 1191.

Sabbath
Derivation of a Hebrew word which means "cease" or "rest." The sabbath was a day (from Friday evening until Saturday evening in Jesus' time) when all ordinary work stopped. The Scriptures relate that God gave his people the sabbath as an opportunity to serve him, and as a reminder of two great truths in the Bible—creation and redemption. The writer of the letter to the Hebrews explained how the third biblical Sabbath theme—rest—connected present and future rest that Christians can and do enjoy in the kingdom through continuing faith and complete obedience to Christ. Baker Encyclopedia of the Bible, "Sabbath." David Noel, p. 1197.

Love
Agape. Of Greek words available, agape (sexual love) does not occur in the NT; philadelphia, spontaneous natural affection, with more feeling than reason, occurs sometimes in OT; philadelphia (brotherly love) 5 times, and philadelphia (friendship) only in James 4:4. Agape, natural affection between close relatives, generally assumed to mean moral goodwill which comes from respect, principle, or duty, rather than attraction or charm. Agape means to love the undeserving, despite disappointment and rejection. Though agape has more to do with normal gratification than with love of an object, it never means that cold religious kindness shown from duty alone. Baker Encyclopedia of the Bible, "Love." L. E. O. White, p. 1397.
Tabernacle

The tabernacle was the precursor of the temple during most of the period between the formation of Israel at Sinai, and its final establishment in the Promised Land in the early period of the monarchy. A portable sanctuary in keeping with the demand for easy mobility, it was the symbol of God’s presence with his people, and, therefore, of his availability, as well as a place where his will was communicated.

The Letter to the Hebrews, addressed to Christian Jews who were in danger of reverting to Judaism, draws out the complete superiority of the new covenant in comparison with the obsolete old covenant (Heb. 8:6-9). Christ’s priesthood is seen as immeasurably superior to the Aaronic priesthood (Heb. 4:14–5:10; 7:1–8:4). In comparison with the new “Temple in Heaven,” the Mosaic tabernacle was “a mere earthly model” (Heb. 8:5). The description of the tabernacle furniture introduces a statement of the functions of the Aaronic priesthood, underlining its limited efficacy in contrast to Christ’s perfect mediation (9:1–18). The perfect access and complete confidence of the believer to enter the Holy of Holies, that is, the immediate presence of God, is valued above the tabernacle and temple, which are “copies of the heavenly things” (Heb. 10:19–22).

In Hebrews 10:10, the author refers to the sacred space in the Tabernacle/Temple where the ark of the covenant and atonement seat were placed. Once a year the high priest would sprinkle the sacrificial blood as a sign of God’s ongoing commitment to keep covenant with his people. At Jesus’ death the curtain that separated sinful humanity from our Holy God was torn signifying to approach the Throne of Grace (Heb. 4:14-16) without the need of a human priest—now Encyclopaedia of the Bible, “Tabernacle,” Arthur E. Spence, p. 203.

Feedback Survey

Your input will help evaluate and improve this study guide. Please take a moment to fill out and return it to your small group leader or the pastor. All comments are anonymous, unless you want to include your name and have the author follow up with your comments.

Scale: Poorly Adequate = 1 Good = 5 Excellent = 4

The overall layout of the guide
The introduction explained the goals and purpose.
The “how to use” section was clear.
The introduction to Hebrews was helpful.
Each session had a clear goal and purpose.
The background information was useful.
The additional reading was helpful.
“How I felt now” helped to focus on the topic.
I interacted with the text and helped explain the text.
I interacted with the Tradition and was informative.
I interacted with today and helped apply the lesson.
The flow of the session helped advance the discussion.
The glossary was useful.

What was the most beneficial thing about this study?

Which topic(s) was/were most challenging?
APPENDIX B

SCHEDULE OF TRAINING EVENTS AND RESOURCES

Council and Elder Training

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Group</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Council</td>
<td>Council Orientation: <em>Partnership, Participation, Privacy</em></td>
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<tr>
<td>May 5/2013</td>
<td>Elders</td>
<td>Leadership Best Practices: <em>Scripture, Prayer, Visitation</em></td>
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<tr>
<td>Jan 18/2014</td>
<td>Council</td>
<td>Spirituality Today: <em>Prayer, Scripture, Listening, Community</em></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td><em>Shaped by The Word</em> by M. Robert Mulholland</td>
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<td><em>Reformed Spirituality</em> by Howard Rice;</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td><em>Meditative Prayer</em> by Richard Peace;</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td><em>Seeking God Together</em> by Alice Fryling.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Mar 19/2014</td>
<td>Council</td>
<td>Responding to the LGBTQ Community</td>
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<tr>
<td>Apr 16/2014</td>
<td>Council</td>
<td><em>Spiritual Transformation</em> - Fuller paper review</td>
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<td>May 7/2014</td>
<td>Elders</td>
<td>Small Groups: <em>What Are They?</em></td>
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<td>Nov 6/2014</td>
<td>Elders</td>
<td>Cultivating a healthy Council Structure: <em>The Business of The Elders</em></td>
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<td>Jan 21/2015</td>
<td>Council</td>
<td>Vision Casting: <em>Clarity, Movement, Alignment, Focus</em></td>
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<td>Council</td>
<td><em>Meal of Community Transformation</em> - Fuller paper review</td>
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<td>Oct 21/2015</td>
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<td><em>Theology of Identity, Christ &amp; Culture</em> - Fuller paper review</td>
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<td>Elders</td>
<td>Sermon Review/Critique: Rob Bell</td>
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<td>Mar 2/2016</td>
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<td>Sermon Review/Critique: Andy Stanley</td>
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<tr>
<td>Apr 6/2016</td>
<td>Elders</td>
<td>Sermon review/Critique: Tim Keller</td>
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<td>Book review - <em>Making the Best of It</em>, by John Stackhouse</td>
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<td>Book review - <em>No Home Like Place</em> by Leonard Hjalmarson</td>
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<td>Oct 2016-</td>
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<td>Mar 2017</td>
<td>Elders</td>
<td>Women in Ecclesial Offices</td>
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<tr>
<td>Nov 30/2016</td>
<td>Elders</td>
<td>Book review - <em>When Church was a Family</em> by Joseph Hellerman</td>
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<td>Jan 18/2017</td>
<td>Council</td>
<td>Book review - <em>From Sabbath to Lord's Day</em>, by D. A Carson</td>
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<tr>
<td>Feb 1/2017</td>
<td>Elders</td>
<td>Marriage, Divorce &amp; Remarriage in Community</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mar 15/2017</td>
<td>Council</td>
<td>Women in Ecclesial Offices</td>
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## Regional and Denominational Training

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Classis</th>
<th>Topic</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mar 10/2015</td>
<td>Classis*</td>
<td>Plenary Session: Shared Regional Ministries</td>
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<td>Oct 14/2015</td>
<td>Classis</td>
<td>Plenary session: TRC (First Nations)</td>
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<td>Mar 9/2016</td>
<td>Classis</td>
<td>Congregational Renewal Lab Introduction</td>
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<td>Oct 12/2016</td>
<td>Classis</td>
<td>Plenary sessions: LGBTQ</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mar 1/2017</td>
<td>Classis</td>
<td>Plenary Session: Ministry of Visitation</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Annual Day of Encouragement  Elder, deacon skills workshops, Plenary session

*Classis is a regional gathering of Christian Reformed Churches in “Classis Alberta North” there are 30 member congregations.
APPENDIX C

Sermon Evaluation Form – 1

Adapted from *Sermon Evaluation Form*, Calvin Theological Seminary.

---

**SONRISE
CHRISTIAN REFORMED CHURCH**

Date of Sermon: ________________________________
Title or Theme: ________________________________

Thank you for taking the time to complete this evaluation. If you would like a response, please provide contact information at the end of the form. All comments will be held in confidence.

1. **BIBLICAL**
   Because God’s Word lies at the center of all preaching, sermons should demonstrate that the Scripture passage determined the main message of the sermon. And if Scripture truly is God’s revelation, then the sermon should reveal God’s active presence today.

   1=Excellent  2=Very Good  3=Good  4=Average  5=Poor
   • The sermon content was derived from Scripture: 1 2 3 4 5
   • The sermon helped you understand the text better: 1 2 3 4 5
   • The sermon revealed how God is at work in the text: 1 2 3 4 5
   • The sermon displayed the grace of God in Scripture: 1 2 3 4 5

   Other comments:

2. **AUTHENTIC**
   All Christians have, and so should display, union with Christ. But pastors in particular should exhibit their own commitment to the faith and to the Savior at that faith’s core. Pastors should show that they are convicted by the truths they preach, that they are committed to living out this message in their own lives, and that they are pastorally sensitive to and honest about the challenges that face believers in living out the Christian faith.

   1=Excellent  2=Very Good  3=Good  4=Average  5=Poor
   • The pastor displayed passion and enthusiasm for the message: 1 2 3 4 5
   • The pastor showed conviction: 1 2 3 4 5
   • The pastor showed honesty/integrity in applying the message: 1 2 3 4 5
   • The pastor showed pastoral sensitivity in the sermon: 1 2 3 4 5

   Other comments:

3. **CONTEXTUAL**
   The content of every sermon comes from God’s unchanging Word in Scripture. But the context in which that Word must be applied is always changing. Pastors must demonstrate an awareness of the culture, the issues of the day, and the particulars of a given congregation.

   1=Excellent  2=Very Good  3=Good  4=Average  5=Poor
   • The sermon made a connection between the biblical world and our own: 1 2 3 4 5
   • The sermon showed an awareness of contemporary issues: 1 2 3 4 5
   • The sermon was delivered in language that fits our times: 1 2 3 4 5
   • The sermon revealed God’s active presence in our world and situations: 1 2 3 4 5
   • The sermon had effective illustrations and examples: 1 2 3 4 5

   Other comments:

---

[111]
4. LIFE-CHANGING The result of presenting the gospel should be changed lives. Those outside of the faith should feel joyfully called to believe in Jesus as Lord. Longtime believers should feel energized for service and bolstered in their hope and joy.

   1=Excellent    2=Very Good   3=Good   4=Average   5=Poor

- Through the sermon God reminded you of grace:   1  2  3  4  5
- Through this sermon God created, or strengthened, the hope that God is actively at work in our lives:   1  2  3  4  5
- The sermon suggested specific ways to look for and see God’s work in our world and even in our struggles:   1  2  3  4  5
- The sermon provided practical examples/advice:   1  2  3  4  5
- The sermon communicated God’s grace in a way that could reach out to unbelievers or those unfamiliar with the Christian faith:   1  2  3  4  5

Other comments:

The Worship Service and Sermon Delivery

Please evaluate the pastor in the following areas related to the actual leading of the worship service and delivery of the sermon:

Please circle the words, which describe your impressions of this pastor’s manner:

Motivational       inspires trust       sincere    emotionally charged    quiet
knowledgeable     caring                 engaging    emotionally subdued    reflective
powerful/forceful  confident            gentle     responsive to audience    friendly
energetic          ____________________________    ____________________________

1=Excellent  2=Very Good  3=Good  4=Average  5=Poor

- The pastor led the service confidently and pastorally:   1  2  3  4  5
- The pastor was organized; the service flowed smoothly, without distractions:   1  2  3  4  5
- The worship service was unified with appropriate selection of songs/hymns, litanies, and other readings:   1  2  3  4  5
- The prayers demonstrated pastoral sensitivity and a good balance among thanksgiving, requests, lament, and praise:   1  2  3  4  5
- The pastor made good eye contact throughout the service and made use of appropriate facial expressions and gestures:   1  2  3  4  5
- The sermon was clear and organized:   1  2  3  4  5
- The sermon contained too many unfamiliar words:   1  2  3  4  5
- The visual aids (PowerPoint, etc.) used during the sermon were helpful:   1  2  3  4  5
- The sermon kept my attention:   1  2  3  4  5
- The sermon length was:   ___ too long   ___ too short   ___ about right

Other comments:

________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________

Name (Optional) __________________________ Phone/email: __________________________
**Congregational Series Survey Form**

**Christian: Life In A Sabbath World**  
**Congregational Response Survey**

Please take a moment to fill out this short survey and return it to Pastor William before you leave the church building today. Each sermon title and theme are listed, please respond to the ones you experienced.

**Jan 1 Raised**  
Theme: The weight of our hopes and dreams cannot be carried by anyone or anything, except for Christ who lifts believers up and transforms hearts so that Christ alone is worshipped.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>1=Excellent</th>
<th>2=Very Good</th>
<th>3=Good</th>
<th>4=Average</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The sermon helped you understand the text better:</td>
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<td>4</td>
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<tr>
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<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
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<tr>
<td>The sermon suggested specific ways to look for and see God’s work in our world and in our struggles:</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
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</table>

**Jan 8 Follow**  
Theme: It is not enough to know about Jesus or to believe Jesus; disciples are called to follow Jesus, believing in what he believed in and acting on it. Accepting persecution for his sake.

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<thead>
<tr>
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**Jan 22 Live**  
Theme: The Law served a purpose, it pointed to Christ who raised the standard. Believers explore the extent of those commandments and live the Sabbath commandment wholly every day.

<table>
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<tr>
<th>1=Excellent</th>
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**Feb 5 Accept**  
Theme: Covenant community provides strong family bonds that help members flourish, both through encouragement and correction.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>1=Excellent</th>
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<th>4=Average</th>
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</table>

**Feb 12 Worship**  
Theme: Weekly worship services are for remembering our identity in Christ; daily worship is the opportunity to put that identity into practice by giving glory to God in all we do.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>1=Excellent</th>
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</table>
Feb 19  Participate
Theme: participation in Christ with Christ’s people through volunteering, serving and caring for one another, even through conflict, is the road to maturity.

<table>
<thead>
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</table>

Feb 26  Share
Theme: believers share their journey through words and actions. They live counter to the culture and all they “say” points to their first loyalty: Jesus Christ.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>1=Excellent</th>
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</table>

Summary Questions

By the Spirit, this series helped me understand the importance of:

- having faith in Christ
- weekly and daily worship
- accountability in Christian community
- volunteering/participating in Christian community
- being challenged by scripture
- living a consistent Christian life seven days a week
- being a Christ-like example in and outside of the church

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>YES</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>x</td>
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By the spirit, this series helped create an increased desire to be transformed by Christ in the company of his people.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>YES</th>
<th>UNSURE</th>
<th>NO</th>
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</table>

Comments:

________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________

Sermon Topics You Would Like In The Future

________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
Feedback Survey

Your input will help evaluate and improve this study guide. Please take a moment to fill it out and return it to your small group leader or the pastor. All comments are anonymous, unless you want to include your name and have the author follow-up with your comments.

Scale: Poor = 1, Adequate = 2, Good = 3, Excellent = 4

The overall layout of the guide. 1 2 3 4
The introduction explained the goals and purpose. 1 2 3 4
The “how to use” section was clear. 1 2 3 4
The Introduction to Hebrews was helpful. 1 2 3 4
Each session had a clear goal and purpose. 1 2 3 4
The background information was useful. 1 2 3 4
The additional readings were helpful. 1 2 3 4
“How I see it now” helped focus on the topic. 1 2 3 4
“Interact with the text” helped explain the text. 1 2 3 4
“Interact with the Tradition” was informative. 1 2 3 4
“The flow of today” helped apply the lesson. 1 2 3 4
The glossary session helped advance the discussion. 1 2 3 4
The glossary was useful. 1 2 3 4

What was the most beneficial thing about this study?

__________________________________________________________________________

__________________________________________________________________________

Which topic(s) was/were most challenging?

__________________________________________________________________________
Which topic(s) was/were least challenging? Why?


What difference did it make to participate in this study?


Were there other glossary topics that should be included?


How could this guide be improved?


APPENDIX D

Evaluation Data

Sermon Evaluations

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>5</th>
<th>6</th>
<th>7</th>
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<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1.3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1.5</td>
<td>1.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The sermon helped you understand the text better</td>
<td>n/a</td>
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<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1.3</td>
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<td>1.5</td>
<td>1.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The sermon revealed how God is at work in the text</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1.5</td>
<td>1.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The sermon displayed the grace of God in Scripture</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1.5</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1.7</td>
<td>0.6</td>
<td>1.5</td>
<td>1.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The pastor displayed passion and enthusiasm for the message</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1.7</td>
<td>0.8</td>
<td>1.3</td>
<td>1.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The pastor showed conviction</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1.5</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0.4</td>
<td>1.3</td>
<td>1.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The pastor displayed honesty/integrity in applying the message</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0.6</td>
<td>1.3</td>
<td>1.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The pastor showed pastoral sensitivity in the sermon</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0.8</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The sermon made a connection between the biblical world and our own</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0.6</td>
<td>1.3</td>
<td>1.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The sermon showed an awareness of contemporary issues</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0.6</td>
<td>1.3</td>
<td>1.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The sermon was delivered in language that fits our times</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0.8</td>
<td>1.5</td>
<td>1.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The sermon revealed Gods active presence in our world and situations</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1.7</td>
<td>0.6</td>
<td>1.3</td>
<td>1.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The sermon had effective illustrations and examples</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1.5</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0.4</td>
<td>0.8</td>
<td>1.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Through the sermon, God reminded you of grace</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0.5</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1.3</td>
<td>1.2</td>
<td>1.3</td>
<td>1.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Through this sermon, God created or strengthened the hope that God is actively at work in our lives</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1.7</td>
<td>0.8</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The sermon suggested specific ways to look for and see God's work in our world and even in our struggles</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1.5</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0.4</td>
<td>0.3</td>
<td>0.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>---</td>
<td>---</td>
<td>---</td>
<td>---</td>
<td>---</td>
<td>---</td>
<td>---</td>
<td>---</td>
<td>---</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The sermon provided practical examples/advice</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1.7</td>
<td>0.2</td>
<td>0.8</td>
<td>0.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The sermon communicated God’s grace in a way that could reach out to unbelievers or those unfamiliar with the Christian faith</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0.4</td>
<td>0.5</td>
<td>0.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The pastor led the service confidently and pastorally</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The pastor was organized the service flowed smoothly without distractions</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>-1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1.8</td>
<td>1.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The worship service was unified with appropriate selection of songs hymns litanies and other readings</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>1.5</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0.6</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1.4</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The prayers demonstrated pastoral sensitivity and a good balance among thanksgiving requests lament and praise</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>1.5</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1.3</td>
<td>0.8</td>
<td>1.5</td>
<td>1.2</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The pastor made good eye contact throughout the service and made use of appropriate facial expressions and gestures</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0.8</td>
<td>1.3</td>
<td>1.4</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The sermon was clear and organized</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>1.5</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0.3</td>
<td>1.1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The sermon contained too many unfamiliar words</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>0.5</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0.4</td>
<td>0.3</td>
<td>0*</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The visual aids PowerPoint etc. used during the sermon were helpful</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1.3</td>
<td>0.2</td>
<td>1.7</td>
<td>0.9</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The sermon kept my attention</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0.3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1.3</td>
<td></td>
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</table>

Key: Excellent = 2; Very Good = 1; Good = 0; Average = -1; Poor = -2
* Key: Strongly Disagree = -2; Disagree = -1; Neutral = 0; Agree = 1; Strongly Agree = 2
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Demeanor</th>
<th>X used</th>
<th>X used</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Caring</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>Sincere</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Knowledgeable</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>Reflective</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Motivational</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>Energetic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Engaging</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>Powerful/forceful</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inspires trust</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>Gentle</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emotionally charged,</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>Friendly</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Confident</td>
<td>7</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Comments**

“Live”
- Did not realize how the Sabbath came about; would like to delve further; Risky, but presented well;
- After a week filled with doubt, worries, questions, discussions, prayers, family issues/choices, this was very helpful

“Participate”
- Would like to see more examples of participation; had some trouble seeing the connection; our church needs more acceptance and participation, including me; we need to encourage one another because we are definitely “me-istic.”
Sermon Series Evaluation

Sermon Specific Questions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>The sermon helped you understand the text better</th>
<th>The sermon helped you understand the theme better</th>
<th>The sermon showed awareness of contemporary issues</th>
<th>The sermon suggested specific ways to look for and see God’s work in our world/struggles</th>
<th>Number of Responses</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Raised</td>
<td>1.1</td>
<td>1.1</td>
<td>1.2</td>
<td>1.1</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Follow</td>
<td>1.1</td>
<td>1.1</td>
<td>1.2</td>
<td>1.4</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Live</td>
<td>1.1</td>
<td>1.3</td>
<td>1.2</td>
<td>1.1</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Accept</td>
<td>1.1</td>
<td>1.0</td>
<td>1.2</td>
<td>1.3</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Worship</td>
<td>1.2</td>
<td>1.2</td>
<td>1.1</td>
<td>1.3</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participate</td>
<td>1.4</td>
<td>1.3</td>
<td>1.3</td>
<td>1.3</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Share</td>
<td>1.1</td>
<td>1.1</td>
<td>1.2</td>
<td>1.1</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Key: Excellent = 2; Very Good = 1; Good = 0; Average = -1; Poor = -2

Summary Questions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>The Importance of:</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Having faith in Christ</td>
<td>2.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Weekly and daily worship</td>
<td>1.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Accountability in Christian community</td>
<td>1.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Volunteering/participating in Christian community</td>
<td>1.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Being challenged by Scripture</td>
<td>1.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Living a consistent Christian life seven days a week</td>
<td>1.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Being a Christ-like example in and outside of the church</td>
<td>1.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>By the spirit this series created an increased desire to be transformed by Christ in the company of his people</td>
<td>1.7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Key: Yes = 2; Unsure = 0; No = -2

Comments:

- Loved this series! Found it very easy to follow. You had my attention from the beginning to end every week that I was there.
- Series followed along well. From the introduction on Jan 1, through each sermon. Each sermon tied well to the overall theme, but each had its own unique focus. Well tied to the passage. For myself, the combined message that as we live by faith, loving my neighbour, is really a step up from living under the law.
Home Group Material Evaluation

Average

Overall layout of the guide  3.22
The introduction explained the goals and purpose  3.67
the how to use section was clear  3.78
The introduction to Hebrews was helpful  3.56
Each session had a clear goal and purpose  3.44
The background information was useful  3.22
The additional readings were helpful  3.44
"How I see it now" helped to focus on the topic  3.44
"Interact with the text" helped explain the text  3.44
"Interact with tradition" was informative  3.44
"Interact with today" helped apply the lesson  3.44
The flow of the session helped advance the discussion  3.11
The glossary was useful  3.56

Comments

What was the most beneficial thing about this study?

- To mature my daily walk with God and my neighbour and how to battle with god on our side against worldly temptations every day and find my personal rest in Jesus Christ and to understand what it requires to be a disciple.
- I found it a really good way really think about why . . . Interacting with tradition portion gave a good perspective at is most likely ingrained deep down. It makes you take a second look at why you have always thought a certain way and if that should still be the case.
- Good material for a bible study compared to a lot of other booklets.
- short and concise; focused on one topic at a time.
- the study of the word.
- introduction was educational as well as helped set us up for the topics.
- that we are all teachers to spread the gospel.
- Fostered lots of good discussion.
- that we are all teachers to spread the gospel.

Which topics were most challenging?

- Each topic has its own challenge on the perspective it gave after studying it more thoroughly and listen to each other's opinions.
- “Share” - Evangelism is always challenging. The questions were challenging throughout.
- “Live” - family because it's closer to our hearts.
- Not necessarily a topic . . . our group was unsure of some of the questions and what actually was being asked.
- “Raised”, as with most studies, even with the "How To" section, and Introduction, getting into new material and topic is often a challenge, but builds.
Which topics were least challenging?

- worshiping community is where we have the most common ground
- I think all scripture should and does challenge us
- Follow - once you've made the commitment, it's part of life
- there were moments in most where the answer was easy, but overall each lesson took some looking back and digging deeper to answer
- didn't find any

What difference did it make to participate in this study?

- Hard to say yes, but the design of the study created strong ties to life today
- Drove home that I am in the church universal; and my group only thinks about church being Sonrise
- strengthened and guided us by the interaction of others
- it covered a good balance between reading and discussion; good questions, always different, not back to the same point again
- It was a good was of being reminded of the (sermon) points, weeks later; often good sermons are heard and the points fade in time.
- to get a deeper understanding of my walk with Jesus Christ in today's society and ask the Holy Spirit who lives in me, to open my eyes and ears so I may grow in wisdom and understanding and that nothing can separate me from God's love
- Gave a deeper understanding of the topics; lots of good discussion and prompted new questions

Were there other glossary items that should be included?

- Glossary was complete
- not sure - looks good

How could this guide be improved?

- Not sure, seems good
- Give a statement regarding lesson titles; refine questions; Consider: is this for the church universal or the reformed church; Give the sermon material as well; The material is definitely worth the refining process
- Maybe a leader's guide that can supply the "right answers."
- It depends on how people participate in the discussion. I feel the guide is well prepared
- A leader's guide could be included
IBLIOGRAPHY


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