

BRITISH REFORMED FELLOWSHIP

FAMILY CONFERENCE 2014

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On Saturday, 26th July, 2014, about one hundred and twenty people arrived, from various parts of the globe, at a large eighteenth-century mansion set in seventy acres of grounds, situated twenty-five miles north of Glasgow, near the small village of Gartmore, in beautiful Scotland. The date marked the start of the thirteenth biennial British Reformed Fellowship (BRF) Conference held at the magnificent Gartmore House. Those staying in the house enjoyed en-suite bathrooms and comfortable beds, with an adjacent gymnasium, which allowed games of football (soccer) and badminton. The venue was pleasantly situated on the southern edge of the Scottish Highlands, which allowed for day trips to Edinburgh and St. Andrews, where we soaked up Reformation history. A number took the opportunity of hiking up a nearby 2,000 feet mountain, which stood above the shores of Loch Aird. Others kayaked or took afternoon coach trips to Loch Lomond and Loch Katrine. After evening devotions, the young people (and some, not so young people) gathered to sing the “songs of Zion” and later to play games, all of which activities helped people get to know each other a lot better. Some may wonder about the food—it was good and plentiful.

As has been the case with all our conferences, many nations were represented, including people from all parts of the UK, the Republic of Ireland, Hungary, USA, Canada and—for the first time since 1994—Singapore. It was wonderful to experience the communion of the saints and enjoy the preaching of the Word of God. Also a rich blessing was the singing of the Spirit-inspired Psalms, in which God’s people encouraged one another to seek their glorious God, to love and obey Him with all their heart, mind, soul and strength.

In this brief report, I would like to give you an outline of the teaching we received in that week, to give you a taste of what we were privileged to hear.

On the evening of our arrival and after some much needed earthly food we were blessed with a speech by Rev. Martyn McGeown, the editor of the *British*

Reformed Journal (BRJ), on Titus 2:14. He spoke on “Zealous for Good Works.” God is a jealous God, passionate for His own glory. Jesus is zealous for God’s house. We, too, must be passionate to do good works. By God’s grace, we are.

On the following morning, on the Lord’s Day, Prof. Herman Hanko preached on Philippians 2:12-13 under the theme, “The Calling to Work Out Our Own Salvation.” God’s grace is shown through His people, as each one expresses His grace in different ways—like the many facets of a diamond reflecting the light.

Preaching from I Corinthians 6:9-11, Prof. David Engelsma impressed upon us the solemn truth that *only the holy* shall inherit the kingdom. Our own holiness never saves us, but, since justification and sanctification are never alone, it is impossible to have one without the other. The purpose of justification is sanctification. This passage reminds us that God uses warnings. Some churches will deceive their congregations: “It does not matter how you live,” but we are also able to deceive ourselves. These warnings stir us up, if we fall into an unholy life, that the only way to the kingdom is holiness.

On the Lord’s Day evening, Rev. Angus Stewart, BRF chairman, gave an informative and challenging presentation on the life of one Scotland’s most famous sons, John Knox. The Scottish Reformer was once a bodyguard able to wield a sword effectively. He suffered as a galley slave. Later, he ministered God’s Word on the European continent as well as in his beloved Scotland. In his role as Scotland’s notable Reformer, he skilfully wielded the sword of the Spirit.

Monday saw the start of the conference proper with the first formal lecture of the week given by Prof. Engelsma. The theme of the address was “The Divine Work of Sanctification.” Prof. reminded us that the purpose of the death of Christ and the glorious goal of salvation is our sanctification, which should be just as precious to us as Reformed believers as is justification. Every day when God sanctifies us, He glorifies us, and freedom from slavery to sin and Satan is priceless.

On Tuesday, we heard two speeches. In the morning, Prof. Hanko brought the relationship and differences between sanctification and justification to our attention. Justification is a legal matter. God before the foundation of the world chose a church, and through the work of the cross He declared that, from a legal point of view, we are without sin. This is truly an astounding doctrine.

God does not see any sin in us! An example was given of the time when Balaam attempted to curse Israel. God's response was "He hath not beheld iniquity in Jacob, neither hath he seen perverseness in Israel" (Num. 23:21). Balaam could only bless the people of God.

Since Adam is the organic head of the whole human race, as well as our federal (and legal) head, his fall had consequences for the whole human race. The guilt of Adam's sin is ours and his sin is sufficient to condemn us. However, God's redemptive work in Christ was not a "Plan B." Christ is always central, for He is the elect one. The fall into sin and our redemption in Christ had always been in the counsel of God.

Christ is the second head and Adam was a figure of Him who was to come. In our Saviour, we can say, "I was crucified in Christ on the cross," "I died at Calvary" and "I was raised with Him from the dead." In justification, God declares us righteous, whereas in sanctification God releases us from the prison of sin and death. God's work of sanctification has taken us higher than Adam.

In the evening, Prof. Engelsma explained "The Role of the Law in Sanctification." Antinomians deny that God's law has any role in this. Roman Catholics, on the other hand, make keeping the law part of our justification. Albeit in a different manner, the Federal Vision also makes our works part of our justification. By excluding the law from sanctification, lawlessness is introduced. Romans 7 addresses this fundamental issue.

The law of God, however, does not make us holy. It does not sanctify us. Where are we to look for holiness in our life? To Jesus Christ, who sanctifies us through the gospel (I Cor. 1:30-31). The indwelling Spirit works sanctification in us not by the law but by faith. The Holy Spirit sprinkles the blood of Christ on us. This takes place by means of the gospel. Sanctification occurs as one diligently attends a true church and through the week reads Scripture. It is Christ who sanctifies us by the Word (John 15:3).

On Wednesday evening, we had a special treat. Rev. Angus Stewart gave a talk on "A Scottish Classic on Sanctification: James Fraser of Alness' 'Explication' of Romans 6:1-8:4." James Fraser (1700-1769) wrote a masterful and detailed work on Romans 6 and 7. His wife played an important role in his sanctification, but perhaps not the role you may expect. Do you want to know her role? Take the opportunity of listening to the speech and you will find out!

On the following evening, the fourth conference speech was brought very powerfully to us by Prof. Hanko on the subject of “The Imperfection of Sanctification in This Life.” He recalled that he once heard of a preacher who announced, “It is one year since I last sinned!” The Bible knows nothing of this attitude. We are on a battlefield, engaged in a battle that rages every moment of our life and only ends when we go to be with Christ.

Man’s nature is depraved. Depravity means man cannot do anything good. But when a man is regenerated, he becomes a new man. When the Word of God is preached, we see the new man grow and the Holy Spirit abiding in our heart. Prof. Hanko told us of an occasion when he spoke with a saintly old gentleman who said, “The older I get, the more wicked I become.” This actually is evidence of progress in sanctification: growth in grace means that we *feel* the greatness of our sins more keenly.

Our lives are not constantly the same either. There are times when the Spirit dominates, prayer comes easier and we enjoy sweet times with the Lord. At other times, we feel the flesh dominating. Read the Psalms to know this! As a result of our sin, we experience God’s chastening hand upon us. From many respects, it is a difficult job to save us. Only omnipotence can do it. We are “scarcely saved.” At the end, the believer enters heaven a battle-scarred warrior.

“The Threat of Antinomianism” was the theme of Prof. Engelsma’s last speech to the conference. To this topic we could well devote an entire conference! Antinomianism has been a threat throughout the history of the church. This deadly teaching infected the early churches, as is evident from the letters to the seven churches in the book of Revelation. It has returned to plague the church many times. Both Luther and Calvin battled against it. Antinomianism has also been a particular concern to the professor in his ministry, after he was confronted with it in his first pastorate.

Essentially, antinomianism uses true Christian liberty as a pretext for lawless living. Antinomianism is the rejection of the law of God, the rejection of the Ten Commandments, for antinomianism opposes the law. Unlike the psalmist, the antinomian cannot say, “O, how love I thy law!” Instead, he rejects the law on the basis that salvation is by grace alone. Grace rids the church of the law!

The antinomian claims that he is defending the gospel of grace because he views any defence of the law as “legalism.” However, antinomianism leads

to a weakening and corrupting of the godly life. In its advanced form, this deadly heresy teaches that the Christian should sin that grace might abound, a suggestion that Paul vehemently rejects in Romans 6:1.

Does the gospel of grace abolish the law? Is the gospel of grace antinomian? No! Emphatically, no! The gospel does *not* lead to antinomianism. Indeed, Christ will bring great tribulation on those who teach and practice antinomianism. The Reformed faith repudiates antinomianism in all its forms. Sanctification is according to the law, for the law is the rule of a holy life. The church must not react by making the law a basis for justification. The gospel of grace will produce holy people. Only the gospel of grace makes a thankful people. The grace of God frees us from the condemnation and the power of sin. Sin no longer rules over us. It is not possible for us to live to sin.

Antinomianism is pernicious in its effects on the church and the people of God. It is destructive. It brings the chastisements of God, for God not only visits judgments on the antinomian, but He cuts off the antinomian in his generations. Antinomianism results in God being dishonoured. Our supreme purpose is to glorify God. The way of salvation is not “the faire and easie way” of the antinomian.

Prof. Hanko delivered the final conference speech to us on “The Victorious Christian Life.” It is important for us to know that the outcome of the spiritual battle is not in doubt. Our life is victorious. We can walk as sanctified children certain of victory. The fact that we are victorious gives us the incentive to fight. It really is impossible for us to lose. This victory is certain because Christ has gained the victory. Satan is completely defeated and Christ won the victory on the cross.

Christ directs the battle according to Romans 8. Psalm 2 tells us that God laughs at His enemies. God has set his King on high. None can defeat Him. Even God’s enemies serve His purpose, so that the church will be victorious. Since the church is the body of Christ, what is true of Christ is true of the church. No man can pluck us out of Christ’s hand.

Christ, our intercessor in heaven, is a sympathetic high priest who understands our temptations. We, therefore, can go boldly to the throne of grace. This is an encouragement for us. There are times when we have bad weeks.

We may even wonder why we go to church. We may even feel we should not be there. Then the minister announces, “Beloved in our Lord Jesus Christ.” Immediately, God reminds us that our sins are forgiven. When we fall and stumble we must not give up. The believer never quits after falling. He must go on.

The power of sanctification also works love for the brethren. Naturally we love ourselves. Now we desire the salvation of others. When you help a brother, here is evidence of your own sanctification. The result of victory is joy or a song of triumph. Let us keep our eyes on the prize.

There was a moment of sadness with the realization that this was the last conference at which Prof. Hanko will speak. After ministering the Word of God at so many BRF conferences and at different venues on these shores, this beloved servant of God will no longer be able to serve among us. Sadness, but thankfulness too. How good God was to allow this fellowship and friendship! How much we have profited from the labours of His servant. What joy at the thought that we belong together and one day will be reunited together!

Much more can be written of the conference. One memorable moment was the inquisitive question of a five-year-old boy, a boy so small that, at first, Prof. Hanko, who towered above him, did not see him. “Why did God allow sin to come into the world?” he asked, looking up into Prof.’s face. Tenderly, Prof. Hanko took him aside by the hand and gave him an answer. The exchange was captured on video.

Where do you stop? Perhaps it is with these thoughts: how much more will you benefit from hearing these messages as they were delivered by the professors and how good it would be for you to attend the next BRF conference to be held in Castlewellan Castle, Co. Down, N. Ireland, 16-23 July, 2016 (DV).¹ Prof. David Engelsma (USA) and Rev. Andrew Lanning (Singapore) will speak on “Behold I Come Quickly: The Reformed, Biblical Truth of the End.”

¹ An attractive box set of 12 CDs or DVDs (9 lectures and 2 sermons plus a bonus disk) of the 2014 BRF Family Conference on “Be Ye Holy: The Reformed Doctrine of Sanctification” is available for just £12/set (inc. P&P) in the UK or \$20/set (inc. P&P) in the US. Contact Mary Stewart, 7 Lislunna Road, Kells, Ballymena, Co. Antrim, Northern Ireland, BT42 3NR; e-mail: bookstore@cpcc.co.uk; tel. (028) 25 891851.