

A REPORT ON THE 2012 BRF FAMILY CONFERENCE

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... and ye shall be witnesses unto me both in Jerusalem, and in all Judaea, and in Samaria, and unto the uttermost part of the earth (Acts 1:8).

The verse above was chosen at the British Reformed Fellowship Family Conference 2010 as the theme for the conference of 2012. Various subjects were proposed but “and ye shall be witnesses unto me” received the highest vote. Professors Hanko and Engelsma agreed to deliver six lectures on this subject. We are grateful that for so many years they have been able and willing to speak on a variety of biblical topics for the edification of the saints in the British Isles, Europe and other parts of the globe. It is always a joy to see so many Reformed people from the USA, Canada, and across the world attending the conference. We greatly appreciate their support and fellowship.

Undoubtedly, six lectures on the topic of witnessing must have been a challenge for the Professors. Some of us were quite apprehensive at the time and wondered how the two men could fill six lectures on the subject of witnessing. Surely one or two sessions would have exhausted the subject? Perhaps the Professors themselves may have preferred another topic. We do not know. But what we do know *now* is that they gave us six outstanding lectures on the various aspects of witnessing. There was indeed much more to witnessing than most, if not all of us, could ever have imagined.

The apostles were told to go out into the world as witnesses of everything that they had seen and heard. They were promised the Comforter, the Holy Spirit whom the Father would send in Christ’s name. He would teach them all things and bring all things to their remembrance, whatever Christ had said to them (John 14:26).

The witness of the apostles we find recorded in the Scriptures. But did we know exactly the extent of this divine calling to the church of all ages? And with regard to the content of witnessing, the official witness of the church and

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our personal witness, were we sure that our understanding was truly biblical? What do the Scriptures teach us regarding the manner of witnessing? What are the effects of witnessing for us personally and for the kingdom of God?

Indeed, witnessing entails much more than we could have imagined. But before reflecting on some of these lectures it may be good to call to mind the purpose of the conference. Apart from the lectures, the fellowship of the saints formed an important element of the conference. It is contained in the name of the conference: the British Reformed *Fellowship Family* Conference. It is the *fellowship* of spiritually like-minded believers, the *family* of God, young and old, from various parts of the world. The comments below will give the reader a taste of “how good and how pleasant it is for brethren to dwell together in unity” (Ps. 133:1), and how much the lectures were appreciated.

Comments from the Attendees of the 2012 BRF Family Conference

A sweet foretaste of heaven, fellowship with God and His people. The hard part is applying what we have learned, sharing, caring, worshipping—strengthening the ligaments that bind us together and we trust eventually seeing additions to the great body of Christ, His church.

Great lectures in addition to being with saints from many places.

This was my first time at the BRF Conference and I was so impressed by the people. It is always so neat to see how fast such a diverse group of people becomes united when there is the common ground of faith ... So thankful to the Professors for all their preparation!

I have grown in my understanding of what it means to witness, and I have grown in my zeal for God’s Word and kingdom. I often take God’s Word and my childhood of being raised in the Reformed faith for granted.

An eastern European fellow believer had this to say: “The 2012 BRF Conference in Northern Ireland was a combination of nothing but the very best:

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excellent teaching, amazing Christian fellowship and beautiful Northern Irish countryside."

Apart from appreciating the tasty spiritual morsels during the conference, the same person had this to say about the delicious food for the body. "I cannot imagine that lords and earls have richer breakfasts, lunches and dinners than we had." The brother also commented, "Dozens of true, deep-thinking people from different parts of the world. Thoughtful and moving biblical lectures on the Word of God. Changeable weather but the truth remains the same."

Another gave this interesting comment about being members of one *family*:

I found myself able to witness to those outside our group. From day one I was asked by the staff at Lorne House, at the Titanic museum and members of the public if we were members of one family. It never crossed their minds that we could be anything else. What other way could I answer but, "Yes, after all don't we have the same Father?"

There are two features which stand out concerning the conference. It is a means of learning and growing spiritually, as biblical truth is expounded by our speakers. There are sometimes glimpses into eternal things which cause our hearts to burn within us. The other outstanding feature is the Christian fellowship which we enjoy with believers of like faith. We are able to discuss some of the difficulties, concerns and needs which we each face in our own place; and, in sharing our burden, our load is lightened and we are able to learn how to pray for one another.

This was a week of wonderful fellowship and spiritually enlightening speeches. The food at the conference centre was excellent, as was the location for day trips or free time to see historical sites. It was heart-warming to meet and fellowship with like-minded believers from Ireland and other parts of Europe, as well as the USA and Canada.

The comments above sum up what all of us experienced. Thus, the main components of the conference were the Word of God expounded ("a means of

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learning and growing spiritually”) and the fellowship of the saints (“sharing, caring, worshipping—strengthening the ligaments that bind us together”).

Reflection on the Conference Lectures

The themes of the six lectures were as follows:

- The Divine Calling to Witness
- The Content of the Witness
- The Official Witness of the Church
- The Personal Witness by the Word
- The Personal Witness of a Godly Life
- The Manner of a Christian Witness

From “ye shall be witnesses,” it follows that the church *shall* witness. It is “a divine calling.” The theme of the opening lecture appropriately started with God and His command. Out of these six edifying and instructive lectures, the *manner* and the *effect* of Christian witness are chosen here, not because they were more important than the other themes, but they contained the more practical elements. The divine command is to be obeyed by God’s people in the right manner, with the right content, having the right effects.

Manner of Witness

And unto the Jews I became as a Jew, that I might gain the Jews; to them that are under the law, as under the law, that I might gain them that are under the law; To them that are without law, as without law, (being not without law to God, but under the law to Christ,) that I might gain them that are without law. To the weak became I as weak, that I might gain the weak: I am made all things to all men that I might by all means save some. And this I do for the gospel’s sake, that I might be partaker thereof with you. Know ye not that they which run in a race run all, but one receiveth the prize? So run, that ye may obtain. And every man that striveth for the mastery is temperate in all things. Now they do it to obtain a

corruptible crown; but we an incorruptible. I therefore so run, not as uncertainly; so fight I, not as one that beateth the air: But I keep under my body, and bring it into subjection: lest that by any means, when I have preached to others, I myself should be a castaway (I Cor. 9:20-27).

But sanctify the Lord God in your hearts: and be ready always to give an answer to every man that asketh you a reason of the hope that is in you with meekness and fear (I Pet. 3:15).

What does with “meekness and fear” mean? We may have read these words many times, but have we considered their real meaning? The idea that engaging in “hard-hitting controversy” is unloving and sinful was strongly refuted: “It is a misunderstanding that is contradicted by Scripture. There are various proof texts confirming that the prophets, the apostles and the Lord himself reacted with hard-hitting condemnation of heresy.”¹

Whereas angels, which are greater in power and might, bring not railing accusation against them before the Lord. But these, as natural brute beasts, made to be taken and destroyed, speak evil of the things that they understand not; and shall utterly perish in their own corruption; And shall receive the reward of unrighteousness, as they that count it pleasure to riot in the day time. Spots they are and blemishes, sporting themselves with their own deceivings while they feast with you (II Pet. 2:11-13).

We were reminded that engaging in “hard-hitting” controversy for the sake of the truth was not in conflict with “meekness and fear.” References were made to Elijah with regard to the condemnation of the prophets of Baal (I Kings 18) and to God’s severe judgment of Israel as they condoned false teaching (Amos 4-5). There are many cases in the New Testament where the apostles and Jesus Himself delivered some “hard-hitting” punches.

In Galatians 1:8, Paul says, “But though we, or an angel from heaven, preach any other gospel unto you than that which we have preached unto

¹ The quotations in this section are from the lectures of Professors Hanko and Engelsma.

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you, let him be accursed.” James also was uncompromisingly direct when he said, “Ye adulterers and adulteresses, know ye not that the friendship of the world is enmity with God?” (James 4:4).

It is a misunderstanding never to use severe condemnation. It takes away huge sections of Scripture. We also find severe condemnation in the church’s confessions. The *Heidelberg Catechism* calls the mass of the Roman Catholic Church “an accursed idolatry” (Q. & A. 80). The *Canons of Dordt* firmly condemned the Arminians: “bringing Pelagius out of hell.” Luther and Calvin used severe language in condemning heresy.

We should note that in our day we have errors and heresies which must be strongly refuted as unbiblical. The following errors were mentioned as examples: conditional election, universal atonement, acceptance of the well-meant offer, the salvation of all baptized children depending on conditions and the theology of the Federal Vision.

On the subject of intolerance, we were reminded that “God saves by the pure preaching of the gospel,” and that “tolerance is not a Christian virtue.”

Our godless society is seduced by the teaching of the great virtue of tolerance as it is tolerant of every error. This is ruinous to human society. It is not biblical to tolerate error or even to water down the truth.

Another misunderstanding was expressed: the erroneous notion that the manner of witnessing is not important.

The “how” [of witnessing] is important. Scripture teaches us the manner:

1. To our fellow believers as “a father does his children” (I Thess. 2:11).
2. To persons outside the church with “meekness and fear,” with “grace seasoned with salt” (I Pet. 3:15; Col. 4:6).
3. From one member to another: “Let all bitterness, and wrath, and anger, and clamour, and evil speaking, be put

away from you, with all malice: And be ye kind one to another, tender-hearted, forgiving one another, even as God for Christ's sake hath forgiven you" (Eph. 4:29-31).

It was pointed out that,

Meekness is not *weakness*. We witness in the consciousness that all that we are, we are by the grace of God. Paul says in I Corinthians 4:7, "For who maketh thee to differ from another? and what hast thou that thou didst not receive? now if thou didst receive it, why dost thou glory, as if thou hadst not received it." By nature we are hopeless. God has given us hope in the atoning death of Jesus Christ.

Fear—this refers to our awe of God. We speak of holy and eternal things and have reverence for the truth of God. When God is in our heart it will produce the right manner of witnessing. "But sanctify the Lord God in your hearts: and be ready always to give an answer to every man that asketh you a reason of the hope that is in you with meekness and fear" (I Pet. 3:15).

Effects of Christian Witness

God uses His people to witness to the world. With the love of God in our hearts and in the manner Peter tells us ("with meekness and fear"), God will save His own. No one will ask us questions if we live in this world as the world lives. Witnessing begins with the life of the pilgrim on earth—with a godly life.

As pilgrims, we will suffer for Christ's sake. But God is glorified by our suffering. As we witness to a hostile world, we will meet with persecution in one way or another.

We are strangers in the world. We find classic passages on witnessing in I Peter, where Peter writes to strangers, pilgrims, saints, elect, dearly beloved, etc. We are strangers in this world as the world has no understanding of spiritual things.

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These “strangers” speak a different language. They do not fit in the world’s culture. But these strangers in the world live by hope. Hope is the governing principle that directs them in everything they do. They have faith in the certainty of God’s promise. The world is not their home. They are on a journey to their heavenly home. A home that is more attractive than the barren wilderness of the world in which we live but for a short time.

But, “This does not mean that we separate from the world as Anabaptists. We must attract the attention of the world by our life.”

We were encouraged to take note of some verses in the first chapter of I Corinthians and the first three verses of the next chapter.

For the preaching of the cross is to them that perish foolishness; but unto us which are saved it is the power of God ... For after that in the wisdom of God the world by wisdom knew not God, it pleased God by the foolishness of preaching to save them that believe. For the Jews require a sign, and the Greeks seek after wisdom: But we preach Christ crucified, unto the Jews a stumblingblock, and unto the Greeks foolishness; But unto them which are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God, and the wisdom of God. Because the foolishness of God is wiser than men; and the weakness of God is stronger than men. For ye see your calling, brethren, how that not many wise men after the flesh, not many mighty, not many noble, are called: But God hath chosen the foolish things of the world to confound the wise; and God hath chosen the weak things of the world to confound the things which are mighty; And base things of the world, and things which are despised, hath God chosen, yea, and things which are not, to bring to nought things that are: That no flesh should glory in his presence. But of him are ye in Christ Jesus, who of God is made unto us wisdom, and righteousness, and sanctification, and redemption: That, according as it is written, He that glorieth, let him glory in the Lord. And I, brethren, when I

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came to you, came not with excellency of speech or of wisdom, declaring unto you the testimony of God. For I determined not to know any thing among you, save Jesus Christ, and him crucified. And I was with you in weakness, and in fear, and in much trembling (I Cor. 1:18, 21-2:3).

These verses deserve our full attention and reflection. We were furthermore encouraged to read I Peter in its entirety and then ask the questions: Am I a true stranger? Am I in a position to witness? Is my life a testimony?

After seven days of fellowship, two sermons on the Lord's Day and a special lecture given by Rev. McGeown on his missionary work in Limerick, we parted, being encouraged and edified, and having had, as someone commented, "a sweet foretaste of heaven." This "sweetness" David experienced in his song of degrees:

Behold, how good and how pleasant it is for brethren to dwell together in unity! It is like the precious ointment upon the head, that ran down upon the beard, even Aaron's beard: that went down to the skirts of his garments; As the dew of Hermon, and as the dew that descended upon the mountains of Zion: for there the LORD commanded the blessing, even life for evermore (Ps. 133:1-3).

We know that such conferences take much time and planning. We therefore thank Rev. Angus and Mary Stewart again for all their efforts before and during the conference to make everything run smoothly and pleasantly. We also thank those "behind the scenes," whom we may not have noticed, but who in their quiet ways contributed to the physical and spiritual welfare of their fellow believers.

May the Lord give us grace to lead godly lives, to further His kingdom, to make us bold when the opportunity arises, to have patience in witnessing and to testify in meekness and in fear, for Christ's sake and for God's glory.

We look forward to the 2014 BRF Family Conference in Scotland (DV)!