

NEW HORIZONS

MAY 2025

IN THE ORTHODOX PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH



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Betty and
Robert Atwell
in the 1950s



75 YEARS OF THE FRENCH CREEK BIBLE CONFERENCE



DANNY E. OLINGER

In September 1949, Robert Atwell, pastor of Calvary OPC in Middletown, Pennsylvania, approached the Calvary Church session about holding a summer Bible conference for the covenant youth at French Creek State Park, located fourteen miles southeast of Reading. That summer, as he had done the previous two summers, Atwell had led a delegation of covenant youth from Calvary Church to participate in the Presbytery of Philadelphia–led Seneca Hills Bible Conference near Franklin in Western Pennsylvania. Although Atwell drove the Calvary youth across the state speedily—one rider called him the Jehu of OPC drivers—he felt the need for a Bible conference sympathetic to the aims of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church that was geographically accessible for congregations in Eastern Pennsylvania and New Jersey.

The session approved holding the conference at French Creek State Park, which led Atwell to inquire of other OPC pastors and congregations if they would be interested in sending their young people the next summer if a Bible conference was held there. The response was so overwhelmingly positive—135 interested campers was the estimate—that Atwell reached out to fellow OPC pastors Lewis Grotenhuis in Harmony, New Jersey, and Glenn Coie in Silver Spring, Maryland, to help organize the conference. The three pastors were agreed that the purpose of the conference should be “that our young people may learn to glorify God and to enjoy him forever.” They also agreed to divide the labor so that Atwell would serve as the conference director, Coie as the head counselor for the boys, and Grotenhuis as the director for group competition and athletics. They then recruited Charlotte Milling (soon to become Mrs. Arthur Kuschke) to serve as music director, Audrey Crafts as girls’ counselor, Betty Atwell as dining room supervisor, and Louise Hess as camp nurse.

Monday, August 28, 1950, was chosen as the day that the conference would begin and Monday, September 4, as the day that the conference would close. Young people entering the eighth grade or older were eligible to attend. The hard part, with a limited budget, was figuring out how to feed over one hundred young people without dining service, much less kitchen equipment and utensils, and then what the young people were going to sleep on at night in the rustic cabins since there were no mattresses. The bedding solution was to give campers mattress ticking that would be filled with straw and then set on a metal-framed cot.



Calvary Glenside at FC in 1954: (back row) Dr. and Mrs. Stonehouse, Don Duff, Elizabeth Thompson, Francis Sloat, Don and Jeannette Taws, George Knight, Peter Steen, Robert Winterbottom, Chip Stonehouse, James Atwell, Robert Atwell, Richard Gaffin Jr.; (front row) Susan Zebley, Dorothy Duff, Jean Gaffin, David Steen, Margie Atwell, David Clowney, Davis Young, Hal Gaffin

A SUCCESSFUL FIRST YEAR

From Tuesday to Saturday, the rhythm of the conference was classes in the morning, followed by activities and fellowship, and a worship service at the end of the day. For the morning classes, Edmund Clowney (of Westminster OPC in Hamden, Connecticut) spoke on the missionary journeys of Paul. Pastors Atwell, Coie, Grotenhuis, John Clelland (of Eastlake OPC in Wilmington, Delaware) and Edward Kellogg (of Immanuel OPC in West Collingswood, New Jersey) took a day each teaching on the Christian life. Arthur Kuschke taught a class on the Bible and nature that included hikes to illustrate the truths presented in his talks. Each of the three morning classes were taught in two sections according to age groups. In the afternoon, recreation included everything from softball to swimming in a goose-less Hopewell Lake to hiking. After the camp meal for the evening, Clelland supervised Bible quizzes, Milling led the music period, and Kellogg preached.

A "Mission Fest," held Labor Day, September 4, ended the conference. Over two hundred people were in attendance to hear Missions General Secretary John Galbraith and OP missionary Clarence Duff. That evening those who had participated as directors, counselors, and teachers gathered to give their feedback on how they felt the week had gone. They deemed the first conference a success and determined to establish a Conference Association comprised of ordained OP officers who would report annually to the Presbytery of Philadelphia and the Presbytery of New Jersey.



Singing at French Creek in the 1970s

GROWTH IN THE 1950S

The template from the first conference would be repeated throughout the decade. The 1952 conference included Ralph Clough (of Calvary OPC in Bridgeton, New Jersey) teaching on the Gospel of John, Roy Oliver (of Grace OPC in Fair Lawn, New Jersey) teaching on Scripture, and Clelland on the origin and purpose of the OPC.

The excitement in 1953 during the recreation time was the addition of five canoes and row boats. The drama was a softball game between the youngsters and the "old men." The youngsters, led by Richard Gaffin Jr., pitching, Ron McCoy at first, John Jr. and Don Clelland at second and shortstop, Bernard "Chip" Stonehouse at third, Ed Urban catching, and George Marsden, Robert Coie, John Adair, and David Armour in the outfield, prevailed to the delight of the campers over the Buzz Walmer-led "old men." In between the campers and "old men" age-wise were young counselors like Donald Taws, who would play "Amazing Grace" on the bagpipes to close each night.

By 1955, the French Creek Bible Conference Association expanded to three Bible conferences. The Junior Young People's Conference held at the end of August had a total attendance of 168. It was followed by the Senior Young People's Conference, which totaled 160 people. Earlier in August in Connecticut, the French Creek Family Bible Conference that featured John Murray teaching had seventy people attend for the week. By 1958, the Family Bible Conference was brought to French Creek State Park with Meredith Kline speaking nightly on "Highlights from Old Testament Biblical Theology."



French Creek delegates in the 1980s



11th–12th grade campers in 2024: (front) Zach Holmlund, Anna Kate Sallade, Amelie Livingston, Josiah Nakhla, Havah Dolezal, Jack McDaniel; (back) Simeon Crowe, Micaiah Andrejczyk, Wil Gregg

COVENANTAL CONTINUITY

In the decade of the 1960s, children's conferences for younger grades continued to be added. The straw "ticks" were replaced by mattresses that were stored in a barn and transported to French Creek every summer. Robert Atwell and Lewis Grotenhuis were still mainstays. They could be found teaching, helping organize activities, or even joining Buzz Walmer in throwing the mattresses into the back of a truck. Other volunteers, like Rebecca Mullen and Mary Laubach serving kitchen duty, could be found at French Creek yearly.

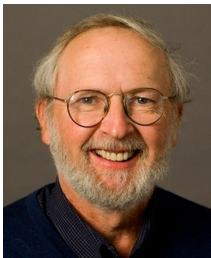
Many of the youth and counselors that attended French Creek in the 1950s and 1960s, by the 1970s and 1980s were now bringing their children. Among those who regularly attended the conference and became OPC pastors were Thomas Tyson, Donald Taws, Richard Gaffin Jr., Ed Urban, Chip Stonehouse, Donald Duff, Douglas Watson, Steven Miller, and Rick Nelson. Others who attended were future OPC ruling elders such as Chris Walmer, David Gregg, Stephen Hunter, Kevin Parks, Charles DeBoer, John Atwell, and OPC deacons David Porter and Ed Schnitzel.

This wonderful trend of covenantal continuity can be seen to the present day. Although membership in the Association is no longer limited to OPC officers, and it no longer reports to the presbyteries of Philadelphia and New Jersey, the culture of French Creek retains the biblical foundations that Orthodox Presbyterians embrace. OPC missionary Bruce Hunt in a letter to Ruth Grotenhuis after her husband Lewis's death spoke for many when he said:

I especially remember your and Lew's activity in connection with French Creek Bible Conference which I consider one of the strongest institutions in our area and for the whole denomination in tying our OPC churches as congregations, members, and young folks together in a Christian fellowship, including our home and foreign missionaries and our Christian educational outreach. Not only does it seem to me that Lew was responsible for asking me to be a missionary speaker there, but I enjoyed working with Lew . . . Rebecca and Grace Mullen and the many others in the happy informality of washing dishes, setting tables, watching ball games, going on hikes as well as services, Bible study, and worship. To me it's been a model of broad Christian unity and the fellowship that I believe Christ intended that the church should have. **NH**

The author is editor of New Horizons.

THE FRENCH CREEK EXPERIENCE



GEORGE M. MARSDEN

French Creek, usually the last week of summer ending with Labor Day, was a high point of the year for me when I was growing up in the Middletown, Pennsylvania OPC. I am sure it was a favorite time for many other OPCers as well.

The very first day of the French Creek Bible Conference in August 1950 was, however, a long, hot one. That morning someone discovered that there were no mattresses for the beds in the cabins. Our pastor, Robert Atwell, the leading organizer of the conference (along with Rev. Lewis Grotenhuis), was not exactly a happy camp director. But, as he often told the story, he saw the outcome as providential. Someone knew of where to buy bed ticks, another knew of a farmer with enough straw, and someone else had a truck. By the late afternoon we campers were filling the ticks with straw and helping to get them to the cabins. The only remaining problem was that straw ticks are only marginally suited for sleeping.

Otherwise everything was impressive. The spacious wooded setting, with buildings that appear almost unchanged today, proved to be a delight, and the camp was expertly run.

The directors and other pastors who organized the camp had lots of familiarity with Bible conferences.

Already in my own experience, I had attended a children's conference at the Quarryville conference grounds. And for two years after the Quarryville directors left the OPC, we from the Philadelphia Presbytery journeyed to the Seneca Hills conference grounds in Western Pennsylvania.

One feature of these OPC conferences that might have been striking to newcomers was how much teaching there was. Three weighty lectures to sit through and take notes on in the mornings and then to be quizzed about later on. In the evening was a more evangelically oriented service with a Wheaton-style song leader and a solid full-length sermon. Later in the cabins, counselors led nightly Bible-study devotions. But even all that seriousness was just part of days that were high-spirited and immense fun, including lots of humor with camp songs and skits and lots of friendly competition among the four clans, or tribes, or whatever they were called each year. During the early decades the most memorable figure for both humor and competition was the camp cook, Buzz Walmer. Buzz was always ready with a comical remark and could occasionally be persuaded to put on a loud cackle laugh that was rumored to have been the one heard recorded at the Fun House at Hershey Park. Buzz was also a smart, serious Christian, with many down-to-earth theological observations that he could put in homey ways with his Pennsylvania Dutch accent. He also loved softball, for which he was a skilled pitcher and infectious enthusiastic competitor, helping to make those games a highlight of the days.

Even more important than humor and competition were new friendships among kindred spirits from the variety of churches from the whole mid-Atlantic region. Such friendships, of course, often had romantic potentials, and that could add wonderful drama to a week or in looking forward to who might be around the next year. Some of these camp romances eventually led to marriages. In my own case, it took awhile. I came back after college as a perennial counselor, and eventually I finally struck gold in meeting my future wife, Lucie Commeret.

Whether or not French Creekers found romance, a great many have testified, as I do, to the spiritual benefits of these weeks. The camp featured some great teachers and preachers, and the communal spirit in the activity-filled week in the woods could be spiritually infectious. The closing Sunday night testimony campfire was always a high point. And I can think of many, including some later leaders in the church, whose faith was deeply nourished by the French Creek experience. **NH**

The author is professor emeritus of history at the University of Notre Dame.

A TASTE OF GLORY



CHARLES DEBOER

I believe the first time I went to camp was in 1968. My family was part of the congregation of Harmony OPC in Harmony, New Jersey, where French Creek cofounder Lewis Grotenhuis pastored and my father, Peter, was a ruling elder. I was going into fourth grade, and my mother, Flora, counseled that week. I remember OPC pastor John Mitchell preaching one Sunday afternoon from John 15 at a very challenging time in my life, and that day was very memorable for me in the working of the Holy Spirit in my own life.

Maybe one of the most memorable years was 1976, when Margie Schnitzel, along with some of her family from Calvary OPC, Glenside, Pennsylvania, came to visit on a Sunday afternoon. A year and a half later we were married.

I volunteered in many areas of the ministry and was a director for eleven years before getting cancer. One of my greatest mentors was Marian Stevenson, wife of Boardwalk Chapel director Jon Stevenson, who was camp nurse during the week that I directed. There were four units in the camp and each unit held twenty-eight campers. After lights out, Marian and I would walk through camp, and stop at each unit to pray.

One of the fun things that took place after lights were out and campers went to their cabins was the dictionary



(Top) Charles and Margie DeBoer in front of the staff cabin at French Creek; (bottom) the DeBoers in 1984 with children Elizabeth, Luke, and Seth

game played around the table in the kitchen with head cook Grace Mullen, kitchen helpers Dick and Jean Gaffin, Betty and Doug Watson, and other pastors and staff. Someone would pick a word out of the dictionary, and that person would ask everybody sitting at the table if they knew the word. If no one knew it, then that was the word that everyone had to come up with a definition for. The person who picked the word wrote the correct definition. Once they were all compiled, we would go around the room and guess.

My son, Seth, and his wife, Amy, met at French Creek. Together, they have returned many years to serve at French Creek, Seth as a director and Amy in charge of the activities. Their children Josh and Emma have served as campers, counselors, and kitchen staff; Amelia and Moriah have come as campers; and Jonah and Luca are campers-in-waiting.

I have served as the president of the French Creek Bible Conference Board for around ten years, and it's been an honor. God has used this ministry as a taste of glory. **NH**

The author is president of the board of the French Creek Bible Conference and an elder at Trinity OPC in Easton, Pennsylvania.

THE LEGACY OF FCBC



JUDITH M. DINSMORE

For seventy-five years, OP campers, staff, and friends have driven to the “Pennsylvania rain forest”—as one dubbed it—to live in rustic cabins, sleep on thin mattresses, and eat three hot meals a day family style in an un-air-conditioned mess hall at the French Creek Bible Conference (FCBC).

Nobody comes for the park itself. The word “rustic” kept appearing as veteran campers described French Creek to me, but never alongside “charm.” And yet when they learned that I’d never been, many suggested sympathetically that a drive to group site number 1 may be in order. It is obvious that something about French Creek has had a lasting, binding effect on generations of campers.

LIFE IN THE WOODS

The conference began in 1950 with a single week. Park officials looked the other way for a few years as the number of delegates—as they were called to differentiate the seriousness of the week’s OPC instruction from a run-of-the-mill summer camp—was greater than the facility’s



The French Creek cabins have housed generations of campers

153-person limit, but soon the conference’s board decided to add a second week; then a third; then a fourth. By 1998, there were six weeks of camp, divided by age, and five weekends for families and post-high school campers. This summer, staff are preparing for four weeks and two weekends of camp.

Mary Laubach was twelve when she attended French Creek Bible Conference’s inaugural year. She remembers an actual trumpeter playing taps and reveille, the dresses or skirts that were required for dinner, and stuffing the straw tick mattresses upon arrival. “The mattresses were nice and puffy the first night, but by the third night they were flat!” she chuckled. She came back every year she could as a camper, met her husband, Larry, at camp, and returned as an adult to serve for fifty consecutive years as its head cook before retiring in 2018. “I enjoyed it, frankly,” Laubach said, and seemed a little nonplussed that any further commentary on the French Creek Bible Conference was needed.

The state park itself opened in 1946, just three years before Robert Atwell came looking for a summer conference location. The mess hall, which includes the kitchen, and the four-bunk cabins were built by the Civilian Conservation Corps in the 1930s. In the years before the washhouse was built, staff shared the single shower in the staff cabin—and campers had the lake, where they also at least once competed to bring a greased watermelon to shore.

That wasn’t the only competition. The cabins were divided into clans, and points accumulated from cabin inspection or Bible memory work or quizzes on the three morning teaching sessions were tallied on the last day. One camper remembered a girls’ cabin hunting for scraps of cloth to make curtains that might secure extra points during inspection, while a boys’ cabin stuffed their beds into the rafters for a more minimalist look.

Cabins also took turns helping at mealtime, bringing



Mary Laubach, cook at French Creek Bible Conference for fifty years

the food from the kitchen to the table and going back for refills as needed. As head cook, Mary Laubach managed the kids on kitchen duty as well as a team of four to five cooks and the dish crew. (There's no dishwasher at French Creek—except the kind with two hands and two feet.) “I don’t know anybody at camp who didn’t work hard,” Laubach remembered. “Things were rustic.”

Laubach learned the ropes from head cook Rebecca Mullen. The famed handwritten Mullen recipe book—whose typed descendant still shows up at camp each year—instructed one to “add leftover chicken” to recipes, with no quantity specified, and incorporated government commodities like cheese, butter, rice, and Spam.

“I love Spam because I ate it at French Creek,” Doug Watson said. Both he and his wife, Betty, came to French Creek as delegates, beginning in the early 1950s. Betty didn’t care for the Spam, or the “rusticness,” but she was a good sport: “I figured if everyone else could sleep when bats were flying around the rafters, I could too,” she said. Doug’s church paid the cost for him to attend, around twelve dollars, but Betty’s church in Queens, New York, had a precondition: “I had to do memory work so that I could get the extra money from my church to go to French Creek,” she recalled.

The Watsons met at camp, married, and through the years Doug served as counselor, dean, director, on the board, and as president of the board. He knows how little remuneration the speakers or directors or head cooks receive. “To survive seventy-five years with the staffing set up as it is, is a clear sign that God has used the camp. That to me is the big deal,” Doug said. It has been an “ongoing, continual blessing to so many of us.”

FROM GENERATION TO GENERATION

For the Laubachs and others, French Creek became a generational tradition. While in high school, Mary’s daughter,

Becky (Laubach) Fillebrown, would help her mom shop for the groceries for camp; now, Becky is the one doing the shopping. And just as she was brought to camp as a kid while Mary worked in the kitchen, Becky brought her own children. “They had to dry dishes, even when they were little,” she said.

The affectionate term for kids of staff who aren’t old enough to be campers is “staff brat.” The term never bothered Nathan Fillebrown, Becky’s son and former dish-dryer. “To me, French Creek was everything,” he remembered. “It was as much a home to me as my home was. I would spend four to five weeks there straight in the summer, but it would be on my mind the whole rest of the year.” In their garage through the fall, winter, and spring would be stored the giant army-acquired pots and pans used at camp, along with the rest of the kitchen paraphernalia, including utensil hooks fashioned by Larry Laubach from old wire clothes hangers.

People still remember Nathan as a staff brat in the 1990s who would solemnly introduce himself by first, middle, and last name, but Nathan now serves as director for the 4th-, 5th-, and 6th-grade camp. As such, it’s his job to recruit staff and speakers. When he began directing in 2021, he immediately called on the friends who had been going to camp with him for years, including Dana Schnitzel and Stephen Hayes.

“I was at French Creek when my mom was pregnant with me, and I think I’ve missed one summer since then,” Dana Schnitzel said. French Creek is a family affair for the Schnitzels; her dad and his four siblings all grew up at camp, and many of their children are still involved. “I’ve been working in the kitchen in some capacity since I was thirteen,” she said. When Dana and Nate were kids, they enthusiastically expected to help in the kitchen forever—although, with Mary Laubach as his grandma, they figured Nate would be head cook. But in the mid-2010s, it

From staff brats (Nate Fillebrown in front, Dana Schnitzel in green) to staff (Katie Palmer, Dana Schnitzel, Julia and Nate Fillebrown, Stephen Hayes, and Grant Cuomo in 2022)



was Dana who began to step into Mary's shoes, becoming kitchen coordinator, as it's called now, in 2019.

"French Creek has had a huge impact on my life and my faith and my family," Schnitzel said. She loves that she can now be a part of giving that same experience to today's campers—and she gets to do it with the friends "who have stuck closest with me the longest," including Fillebrown and Hayes.

In fact, Stephen Hayes, who serves as a counselor, gets a little bothered if anyone suggests that volunteering at French Creek is super sacrificial—daddy longlegs in every sink notwithstanding: "Everyone who's working there loves to be there. To me, it's not a sacrifice. If I'm going to take a week, I'm going to take a week at camp. That's where I want to be. French Creek people are my people."

GOD'S WORD, GOD'S CREATION, GOD'S PEOPLE

Hayes didn't always enjoy camp. Once in grade nine or ten, he was having, as he put it mildly, a "stupendously horrible time." He wasn't getting along with his cabin, he was shy, and he was miserable. Then came the evening service. "One night, listening to a sermon—it's the closest thing to a miracle I've seen—because everything just changed." Whatever was said in that sermon, clicked. His week changed as his heart did, and some of the friendships that resulted last until today. These experiences at French Creek, he said, made Christianity real to him, instead of just "these are the dos and don'ts of how to behave as a Christian."

Before the first week of camp, along with the pots and pans and mattresses and boxes of hymnals, the opening crew also unpacks a giant wooden logo that they hang in the mess hall. It reads: "French Creek Bible Conference: God's Word, God's Creation, God's People."

For better or for worse, during a week at French Creek, campers experience those three with an immediacy and an intensity that, as Hayes said, makes things real. There are two sessions of morning instruction, plus worship at night and cabin devotions. There are bugs, bats, thunderstorms, and sunrises. And there are cabinmates and counselors in close, quite close, proximity.

Add to that the few distractions French Creek Bible Conference has to offer. No phones are allowed, not even for most counselors. And there's even less to "do" than when he was a kid, Hayes said. The small lake is now unswimmable, and the one-mile hike to the pool is typically prohibitive. There is tetherball, box hockey, pickup basketball, and round-robin ping-pong.

Yet many of the campers thrive, and keep coming back. "The fact that French Creek is such a pared-down

David Porter (left) has directed the 11th–12th grade camp for twenty-five years. Three of his former campers now serve as directors: (left to right) Andrew Reith, Seth DeBoer, and Fillebrown.

Camp isn't open until the logo is hung in the mess hall.



experience emphasizes relational development," Schnitzel said. "I think it really provides an opportunity for kids to wrestle through the things of faith and life. French Creek has been a really big encouragement for people's faith for a long time."

Chris Walmer, son of Buzz Walmer, who came each year he could as a camper, remembers late night discussions in the kitchen. "I think I learned my theology listening in the kitchen to guys like Tom Tyson and Dick Gaffin and David Clowney and George Marsden."

Two generations later, the theological discussions seem to happen during porch time at 6:30 a.m. instead of late night in the kitchen. But the sentiment is the same.

"Kids who are thoroughly church-ed get to be themselves for a week, out amongst kids who are also being themselves," is how Fillebrown put it.

"It's a place in which what you're supposed to do seems to be what you want to do," Doug Watson remembered from his years of service. "When it's time for meeting, we didn't have to drag kids into meeting. They're there."

Schnitzel is aware that they are continuing something precious that others had the foresight to begin, and to foster: "I want to say thank you to all the people who donated their time and energy to create this experience for me, and what a blessing it is to do that for the kids who are coming up," she said. "We get to continue the work of our parents, we get to continue the work of our mentors, and it's the Lord's work." **NH**

The author is managing editor of New Horizons.

NEW TRACT: *LIFE WITHOUT PRETENDING*

JEREMIAH W. MONTGOMERY

Editor's note: This article contains the complete text of a new evangelistic tract from the Committee on Home Missions and Church Extension: Life Without Pretending: Why I Am Still a Christian.

I am not a Christian because it's easy. Following Jesus has jagged edges as well as joy. In fact, Jesus said that following him involves pain before pleasure: "If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me. For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will save it."

I am not a Christian because I understand everything in the Bible. There are things in the Bible that I find difficult, even disturbing. Serious Christians often struggle with Scripture.

I am not a Christian because the church or other Christians have never hurt me. Some of the most painful things in my life have come from other Christians. I don't always feel like going to church. Why then am I still a Christian?

I follow Jesus because I'm convinced he tells the truth. When I read the Bible, it explains life in a way that feels real. It confirms things that I've always known deep down: God is real, he has every right to tell me how to live, and yet every day I live as though I can ignore God whenever I choose. The Bible confronts my amazing capacity for selfishness and calls it what it is: "sin." This makes me uncomfortable . . . but I can't say it isn't true.

Jesus doesn't just tell the truth. He is truth. As I read the gospels, Jesus captivates me. He always says and does just the right thing. He's never selfish. He's always pouring himself out for others—not just at the cross, but his whole life. The greatest writer in history could not invent a character so perfect in so much detail. Jesus is too wonderful to be fiction.

I love Jesus because he reveals God's astonishing goodness. Because I break God's laws and try to take his job, hell is what I honestly deserve. And hell is what I choose every time I sin: Since God is the giver of life and every good thing, to reject him is to choose unending death. But



instead of giving me punishment and death forever, God offers me forgiveness and life that never ends. He did this not by ignoring my sin, but by dying for it.

This is the heart of the story of Jesus: Though I have substituted myself for God and deserve to die, God substituted himself for me so that I could live. "For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life" (John 3:16).

I haven't done anything to earn this substitution. God has done everything. Jesus earned my heaven and paid my hell, then he rose from the dead and promised me forgiveness. He sent his Holy Spirit, who opened my heart to believe his promises. I love Jesus because he changed me forever. And he's still changing me—every day.

I follow Jesus because God has given me a new life—life without pretending. I can face myself with honesty, I can face death with hope, and I can face every hard thing in between with the help of the presence, power, and promises of Jesus in my life. I love Jesus because I can give everything, every day, into his hands. You can too. The prayer he quoted at the cross can be our prayer to him today: "Jesus, into your hands I commit my spirit" (Ps.31:5; Luke 23:46; Acts 7:59).

The author is general secretary for CHMCE. Copies of Life Without Pretending are available for order via store.opc.org.

2025 CAMPS AND CONFERENCES



Reformed Youth Conference in 2024 in Brooksville, FL

CALIFORNIA—BLUE RIDGE BIBLE CONFERENCE

(Presbytery of Southern California)

PineCrest Christian Conference Center, Twin Peaks, CA

Family / all ages, June 16–20

www.brbcfamilycamp.org

CALIFORNIA—SIERRA CHRISTIAN CONFERENCE

(OP churches in Northern California)

Sierra Christian Conference Association,
Groveland, CA

Memorial Weekend Family Camp, May 23–26

For information, contact Brad DeBoer at 209-604-2940
or bradandjanetdeboer@yahoo.com

CALIFORNIA—SUMMER BIBLE CAMP

(Presbytery of Northern California and Nevada)

Redwood Christian Park, Boulder Creek, CA

Family / all ages, July 7–11

<https://pncnopc.org/summer-camp/>

FLORIDA—REFORMED YOUTH CONFERENCE

(Presbytery of the South)

RYC High / Middle School Youth Camp,
June 16–21

Youth entering 6th grade (or age 11 by August 31)
through completing 12th grade

Lakewood Retreat Center, Brooksville, FL

www.reformedyouthconference.com

MAINE-NEW HAMPSHIRE—DEERWANDER BIBLE CONFERENCE

(Presbytery of New York and New England)

Junior High (entering 6th–8th grades), August 5–9

Camp Berea, Lyman, ME

Senior High (entering 9th–12th grades), August 16–23

Chop Point Camp, Woolwich, ME

www.deerwander.org

NORTH CAROLINA—FAMILY CAMP

(Presbytery of the Southeast)

Camp Caraway, Sophia, NC

Family / all ages, July 1–5

www.psefamilycamp.org

At the Blue Ridge Bible Conference in 2024





Campers at Stronghold Foam Sword Camp in McDowell, VA

OHIO—YOUTH CAMP

(Presbytery of Ohio)

Slippery Rock Baptist Camp, Slippery Rock, PA

Junior Camp (ages 9–12), June 23–28

Senior Camp (grades 7–12), June 23–28

www.pohopc.org/youth

OREGON—FAMILY CAMP

(First OPC, Portland, OR)

Camp Morrow, Wamic, OR

Family / all ages, August 13–16

For information, contact office@firstopcportland.org
or call 503-253-0695

www.firstopcportland.org/camp

Campers at Deerwander Bible Conference in 2024



PENNSYLVANIA—FRENCH CREEK BIBLE CONFERENCE

(OPC affiliated)

French Creek State Park, Elverson, PA

Grades 4–6, August 4–9

Grades 7–8, July 28–August 4

Grades 9–10, July 21–28

Grades 11–12, July 14–21

Post-High, July 11–13

Labor Day Family Conference, August 30–September 1

www.frenchcreek.org

SOUTH DAKOTA—OPC-PCA BIBLE CAMP

(Presbytery of the Dakotas)

Camp Judson, Keystone, SD

Grades 4–12 (completed), June 21–27

www.opc-pca-biblecamp.com

VIRGINIA—MACHEN RETREAT AND CONFERENCE CENTER

(Presbytery of the Mid-Atlantic)

Machen Retreat and Conference Center, McDowell, VA

Science Camp (ages 10–17), July 14–19

Stronghold Foam Sword Camp (grades 5–12), July 27–August 2

Family / Labor Day Conference (all ages), August 29–September 1

www.machen.org

WISCONSIN—CAMP WESTMINSTER

(Presbytery of Wisconsin & Minnesota and Presbytery of the Midwest)

Green Lake Conference Center, Green Lake, WI

Family camp (all ages): June 23–27

www.pwmopc.org/family-in-the-word/

OTHER RETREATS

Retreats for women, men, singles, and youth are sponsored by presbyteries and local congregations and are held at various times during the year—not just in the summer! Check out the listing at opc.org/cce/camps.html.

CONGRATULATIONS

The **Children's Catechism** has been recited by:

- Jack Doleys, *Living Water OPC, Springfield, Ohio*

HAITI: A PERSEVERING CHURCH IN A NATION IN CRISIS

OCTAVIUS DELFILS

For several years, Haiti has been experiencing a deep crisis marked by political instability, gang violence, and a dire humanitarian situation. Armed gangs are terrorizing the population and taking control of large portions of the territory. Despite these challenges, the Reformed churches in Haiti, particularly the churches in the Delmas neighborhood of Port-au-Prince and on the island of La Gonâve, continue to faithfully witness to the sovereignty of God in the lives of his people.

INCREASED VIOLENCE

For the past four years, gangs have gradually been taking control of territory. However, since March 2024, violence has reached alarming levels. Political instability led to the dismissal of the prime minister, and a presidential council was put in place. In November, the council dismissed the new prime minister, triggering intensified gang attacks. The airport in Port-au-Prince, Haiti's capital, was shut down after gunfire targeted three planes, and many streets have become battlegrounds. Gangs now control most of the main roads, making travel dangerous and the delivery of food and medicine challenging. They loot and burn schools, hospitals, businesses, government offices, and private homes daily.

Eighty-five percent of Port-au-Prince is controlled by gangs. According to the latest estimates, over one million Haitians are internally displaced, with more than half being children in urgent need of humanitarian assistance. The number of people fleeing their homes has tripled in the past year. The human toll is tragic: more than 5,600 people lost their lives in 2024 due to gang violence, a 20 percent increase from 2023. UN forces, now numbering around one thousand soldiers, are attempting to restore stability, but progress remains limited. The Haitian police are making efforts, but their small numbers and internal corruption hinder their effectiveness—some officers are reportedly involved with the gangs.



Sunday school in Port-au-Prince

HOW ARE OUR CHURCHES?

The streets in the area where our church is located are still barricaded by people in the neighborhood due to fear of gang invasions. Five families of the church in Delmas have been displaced, and their houses looted. Hundreds of people are fleeing the capital every week to take refuge in less dangerous cities, but even leaving the city is difficult because all roads leading out of the capital remain under gang control. Tragically, a member of the church recently lost his uncle, who was killed and burned by gangs.

Yet, in the midst of these hardships, the Lord continues to provide spiritual encouragement to his people. Over the past few months, we have received more visitors than when the security situation was relatively better. Some young people have visited and continue to attend services. In March, a youth conference gathered about thirty attendees under the theme, “Glorifying God in Our Bodies.” It was a time of teaching, singing, sharing, and spiritual strengthening amid daily challenges.

In these troubling times, we take refuge in the promises of God. Psalm 125:1–3 reminds us:

Those who trust in the LORD are like Mount Zion, which cannot be moved, but abides forever. As the mountains surround Jerusalem, so the LORD surrounds his people, from this time forth and forevermore. For the scepter of wickedness shall not rest on the land

allotted to the righteous, lest the righteous stretch out their hands to do wrong.

We trust that God is greater than these difficulties and that, in his faithfulness, he will care for his people.

Despite the chaos, the Reformed church in Haiti continues to preach the gospel, the only true light and refuge in the storm. We praise the Lord that worship and preaching continue every week. Sunday services proceed with faithful preaching through the book of Exodus. This study has been particularly timely, reminding the church of how God delivered his people from their afflictions in Egypt. Just as the Israelites cried out under Pharaoh's oppression and God heard their cries, the church in Haiti is encouraged to trust in God's faithfulness amid our hardship. Exodus 2:23–24 tells us: "The people of Israel groaned because of their slavery and cried out for help. Their cry for rescue from slavery came up to God. And God heard their groaning, and God remembered his covenant with Abraham, with Isaac, and with Jacob."

In Sunday school, we are studying the Westminster Confession and Catechisms, and in our Bible study on Wednesdays we are studying the book of Romans. In a nation where fear and uncertainty dominate, the doctrine of God's sovereignty brings great comfort. Romans 8:28 reassures believers that "for those who love God all things work together for good." This means that even in suffering, God is at work for the good of his people. We can know that "the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us" (Rom. 8:18).

Furthermore, Haiti's crisis exposes to the believers the need for a strong foundation in biblical truth. False teachings of the cults, prosperity gospel messages, and superstition plague this country. They mislead people, promising quick fixes. However, sound doctrine guards believers from these deceptions. John 8:32 reminds us: "You will know the truth, and the truth will set you free."

New members class in Port-au-Prince



The Reformed church in Doglace on the island of La Gonâve

LA GONÂVE

Although less affected by direct gang violence, the island of La Gonâve is facing a growing food crisis. The lack of rain has resulted in failed crops, increasing hunger and hardship. However, the church remains faithful. Churches in Nan Mangot and Doglace continue to gather faithfully every Sunday to worship the Lord, though the population is suffering. A recent food distribution was a blessing, though the needs far exceed available resources. The island depends mainly on the mainland for its provisions. When Port-au-Prince is so affected by violence and the roads are blocked, the people on the island suffer greatly.

PRAYER REQUESTS

Please be in prayer for Haiti during this difficult situation. Pray for:

1. spiritual perseverance—that believers would remain steadfast in faith despite adversity.
2. a strong gospel witness—that the Haitian church would continue to shine the light of the gospel and bring hope in these dark times.
3. peace and stability—that God would intervene to stop the violence and restore order in the country.
4. protection for Christians—that church members would be kept safe despite ongoing threats.
5. daily provision—that God would provide for the needs of those facing hunger, health difficulties, and other hardships.

Haiti is a nation in suffering, but we praise the Lord that the church continues to worship the Lord amidst darkness. Even in a deep crisis like this, our hope remains in the Lord. "Therefore we will not fear though the earth gives way, though the mountains be moved into the heart of the sea" (Ps. 46:2). May the Lord strengthen his church and manifest his glory in this troubled nation.

The author is an associate missionary in Haiti.

CUSTOM-MADE STEEL PLATES AND OUR GREAT INHERITANCE

DAVID W. LANDOW

The thin, jagged crack running across the sanctuary ceiling had been there for years. No one really noticed it, and few could remember when it first appeared. Before repainting, we decided to investigate to ensure the crack wouldn't reappear and mar the fresh coat. To our shock, the structural engineer discovered that the crack resulted from a design flaw dating back to the building's construction in the 1950s. The roof's weight was causing the trusses in the attic to crack and snap as the sanctuary walls slowly bowed outward.

While there was no immediate risk of collapse, preserving the building's future required reinforcing all the joists with sixty custom-made steel plates and running two steel beams and eleven steel tension rods across the ceiling to pull the walls together. The estimated cost was in the tens of thousands of dollars. This was precisely what every pastor dreads announcing: "We need to raise a lot of money to literally keep the roof over our heads and make the sanctuary . . . less beautiful." In God's gracious providence, the congregation responded generously to the need, and we successfully raised the funds to complete the repairs.

As the people of God, we've received an inheritance from previous generations, whether the gospel itself, our particular denomination, our local congregation, or even the church building. While the church building should never be confused with the church as the body of Christ, the Apostle Paul uses the metaphor of a building to describe the church (for example, Eph. 2:19–20). We are called to be good stewards, preserving what we've received. Much of this work is often unseen and unglamorous, like metal plates in the attic or metal bars across the ceiling—fixing what has cracked and, sometimes, simply holding things together. But caring for what we have been given is a vital way we respond to our Savior's work in building his church. As Paul says, "For I received from the Lord what I also delivered to you" (1 Cor. 11:23). It's also how we honor our spiritual forebearers who passed down



(Top) Emmanuel OPC in Wilmington, DE; (bottom) under construction

such a great inheritance, and express our love for future generations should the Lord tarry.

Thankfully, the metal bars proved less aesthetically displeasing than initially feared. Now, every time I look up at them, I give thanks for the joyful giving of God's people and am reminded of the glorious task of stewarding what God has given us.

Walk about Zion, go around her, number her towers, consider well her ramparts, go through her citadels, that you may tell the next generation that this is God, our God forever and ever. He will guide us forever. (Ps. 48:12–14)

The author is pastor of Emmanuel OPC in Wilmington, Delaware.

MAY 2025 PRAYER CALENDAR



The Hacquebords (day 6)



The Millsaps (day 7)

1

Pray for retired missionaries **Cal & Edie Cummings**, **Mary Lou Son**, and **Brian & Dorothy Wingard**. / **Lacy (Debbie) Andrews**, regional home missionary for the Presbytery of the Southeast.

2

Home Missions general secretary **Jeremiah Montgomery**. / Pray for Stated Clerk **Hank Belfield** as he finishes preparation for the 91st General Assembly in June.

3

Pray for the **persecuted church** in East Africa and the daily needs of families whose husbands and fathers are in prison for the gospel. / Pray for the work of the **Presbyterian and Reformed Commission on Chaplains and Military Personnel**.

4

Paul & Rachel Johnson, Laveen, AZ. Pray the Lord would provide a larger meeting space for Laveen OPC. / **Stephen & Catalina Payson**, Montevideo, Uruguay. Pray for elder Matías Blanco, who is beginning the Mission's new pastoral residency training program.

5

Charles (Margaret) Biggs, regional home missionary for the Presbytery of the Mid-Atlantic. / Pray for **MTIOPC** as they meet for intensive training sessions in Charlotte, NC, on May 13–15.

6

Heero & Anya Hacquebord, L'viv, Ukraine. Pray for the families of three young men in the church who are currently serving at the front lines of the war. / Pray for **Danny Olinger**, editor of *New Horizons*.

7

Ben & Heather Hopp, Africa & Haiti. Pray that Ben's trips to churches in Kenya, Rwanda, Ethiopia, and South Sudan may be mutually encouraging and fruitful. / **AJ & Chelsea Millsaps**, Athens, TN. Pray the Lord would bless Zion OPC's new education programs.

8

Jefferson & Ellen de Oliveira, Springfield, OH. Pray that the Lord would raise up future church leaders and bless the ongoing officer training. / Yearlong intern **Isaiah (Cali) English** at Grace OPC in Sewickley, PA.

9

Pray that the Lord will raise up men to become Reformed pastors in the **Reformed Church of Quebec (ERQ)**. / Yearlong intern **William (Mayra) Devenney** at First Church of Merrimack in Merrimack, NH.

10

Home Missions associate general secretary **Al Tricarico**. / Pray for tentmaking missionary **Tina DeJong**, Nakaale, Uganda (on furlough), as she shares about her work and fellowships with OP congregations.

11

Chris (Megan) Hartshorn, regional home missionary for the Presbytery of Southern California. / Pray that the Lord would bless the **OPC Disaster Response** efforts to build homes for those in NC who lost so much from Hurricane Helene.

12

Associate missionaries **Christopher & Chloe Verdick**, Nakaale, Uganda. Pray for Pastor Julius and his wife to faithfully serve the Nakaale Presbyterian Church with love and zeal. / Yearlong intern **Luke (Laura) Walkup** at Reformation OPC in Morgantown, WV.

13

Travis & Bonnie Emmett, Nakaale, Uganda. Pray for Pastor Joseph Kakule and All Nations Presbyterian Church in Mbale as they seek to add new members. / **Corey & Andrea Paige**, Kyle, TX. Pray that people from Texas State University and the San Marcos community would visit Hays County OPC.

14

John Paul & Corinne Holloway, Manassas, VA. Pray for the Lord to bless Acacia Reformed Church as it works toward particularization. / Yearlong intern **Brian (Kelsey)**

Bowen at Providence OPC in Rockford, IL.

15 Associate missionary **Leah Hopp**, Nakaale, Uganda. Pray for the Uganda Mission team as they seek to grow in love and unity amidst many transitions. / Pray for the *Ruling Elder Podcast* to be an edifying, challenging, and encouraging means of caring for the body of Christ.

16 **Brad (Cinnamon) Peppo**, regional home missionary for the Presbytery of Ohio. / Pray for missionary associate **Beatrix Taverne**, Nakaale, Uganda, to have renewed joy and stamina in her work even as she misses her US home.

17 Home Missions administrative coordinator **Lauren LaRocca**. / Yearlong intern **Mitchell (Cali) Watson** at Knox OPC in Silver Spring, MD.

18 Associate missionaries **Octavius & Marie Delfils**, Haiti. Pray for members and visitors coming to church regularly in spite of danger from gang violence. / Yearlong intern **Vince (Eri) Lam** at South Austin OPC in Austin, TX.

19 **Mr. & Mrs. F.**, Asia. Pray for a man and his family being sent out of the region to help a group seeking to become Reformed. / **Micah & Eileen Bickford**, Farmington, ME. Pray that the Lord would bless the ministry of Grace Reformed OPC.



The Paiges (day 13)

20 **Andrew & Abby Wann**, Bluffton, SC. Pray that the Lord would bless Covenant OPC's outreach efforts. / Pray for assistant website administrator **Christopher Drew** as he helps facilitate the smooth operations of OPC.org.

21 Pray for **Mr. & Mrs. M.**, Asia, as they seek to connect with international students through weekly Bible studies. / **OPC Short-Term Missions** asks prayer for those participating in the URCNA's Cross-Cultural Missions Training program in Mexico this month.

22 **David & Leah Vogel**, Kannapolis, NC. Pray the Lord would bless Kannapolis OPC's ongoing officer training and fellowship with returning visitors. / Pray for Foreign Missions general secretary **Douglas Clawson** traveling to Uganda and also preparing to report to general assembly next month.

23 **Matt & Hyojung Walker**, Yorktown, VA. Pray that Peninsula Reformed Presbyterian Church would recognize and address needs with God's Word and love. / **John Fikkert**, director for the Committee on Ministerial Care.

24 **Mike & Jenn Kearney**, Mbale, Uganda. Pray for Mike, Jenn, and Joanna as they depart for Uganda and settle in Mbale. / Pray for **Melisa McGinnis**, financial controller.

25 **Fred & Ka-Ling Lo**, Mbale, Uganda. Praise God and pray for Knox School of Theology's first graduation this month. / **Esther Parks**, office administrator and CCE administrative assistant.

26 Pray for **Andrew (Rebekah) Miller**, regional home missionary for the Presbytery of Central Pennsylvania. / Pray for **Rachel Kinney**, social media coordinator.

27 Affiliated missionaries **Jerry & Marilyn Farnik**, Czech Republic. Pray for the planning of summer



The Repps (day 29)

outreach events for children, young people, and families. / **Greg Reynolds**, editor of *Ordained Servant*.

28 **Christopher & Sara Drew**, Grand Forks, ND. Pray that the Lord would bless the ministry of Faith Presbyterian. / Affiliated missionaries **Dr. Mark & Laura Ambrose**, Cambodia. Give thanks for their new home and pray that they would be a light in their neighborhood.

29 **Christian & Hanna Repp**, Doylestown, PA. Pray for the congregation of Park Presbyterian Church to be strong in the Lord. / Pray for **Trish Duggan** as she produces episodes of *The Reformed Deacon* for the encouragement of deacons across the denomination.

30 Pray for the **Ethiopian Mercy Reformed Church**, Ethiopia, as they seek opportunities to purchase a building for worship. / **Judith Dinsmore**, managing editor of *New Horizons*.

31 Pray for Foreign Missions administrative coordinators **Joanna Grove** and **Tin Ling Lee**. / **John & Katie Terrell**, Dorh, MI. Pray for the continued growth and spiritual development of Living Hope OPC.



Sixty women from Harvest OPC in Wyoming, MI, enjoyed a retreat March 7–8 at Maranatha Retreat Center with speaker Emily Van Dixhoorn.

NEWS

YOUTH EVENT IN SOUTHERN CA

Junior high and high school students from ten churches in the Presbytery of Southern California met for a one-day retreat in March, organized by Mike Dempsey and Elena Dorn of Faith OPC in Long Beach, California. The group did a service project for the Long Beach rescue mission; Shadi Abouseif from Faith OPC led a devotional, and the praise band from Living Hope OPC led the group in singing.

FIRST DIACONAL CONFERENCE FOR PRESBYTERY

John Paul Holloway

The Presbytery of the Mid-Atlantic was thrilled to host its first-ever diaconal conference in February. While elders regularly connect at presbytery meetings, we recognized that deacons often miss out on similar opportunities for fellowship and mutual encouragement. David Nakhla, administrator for the CDM, presented to around forty attendees, including deacons, deacons-in-training, pastors, and church members. This gathering was the fruit of a challenge given at the 2023 Presbytery Diaconal Summit for presbyteries to connect regional deacons. Pat Whitmore, chairman of our presbytery's diaconal committee, not only coordinated the event but also prepared all the food himself—fifteen hours of loving labor. The conference was a rich time of learning, encouragement, and growing together as servants of Christ, seeking to show mercy in light of the abundant mercy we've received.

UPDATE

CHURCHES

- On March 8, the Presbytery of New Jersey and Puerto Rico dissolved **Central Bible Church** in Cape May, NJ.
- On March 14, the Presbytery of Ohio dissolved **New Castle Reformed Community Church** in New Castle, IN.

MINISTERS

- On March 15, **David R. Holmlund**, formerly regional home missionary for the Presbytery of Philadelphia, was dismissed to the Philadelphia Presbytery (PCA).
- On April 5, **A. Boyd Miller IV**, formerly pastor of Covenant OPC in LaGrange, GA, demitted the ministry.

MILESTONES

- **Leo Amos Frailey**, 82, retired OP minister, died March 17.

LETTERS

THE OPC AND POLITICAL ENGAGEMENT

Editor:

Around 1997, some Covenant College students invited OPC Historian Charles Dennison to present a lecture on J. Gresham Machen. Being the college of the PCA, a student asked the following question during Q&A: "What would you say is the difference between the PCA and the OPC?" Dennison responded with a succinct answer that correctly portrayed the identity of the OPC: "The PCA has cultural aspirations and the OPC has none!" In view of Ethan

Around fifty youth from ten OP churches in Southern CA who came together in March



At the Presbytery of the Mid-Atlantic's first diaconal conference

Bolyard's comments in his review of Trueman's *To Change All Worlds* (March), he would do well to reflect on this thesis with respect to the identity of the OPC, that is, the OPC does not have cultural aspirations, including the possible call to "revolutionary political action" within the American socio-politico-economic scene. In contrast to Bolyard's understanding of Trueman's position that his "book seems allergic to any kind of revolutionary (or counterrevolutionary) political action," Bolyard counters: "That might be good advice in an orderly Protestant commonwealth, but when a secular revolution has occurred marked by anarcho-tyranny, conservative Christians find themselves in the position of counterrevolutionaries. In this situation, the shrewd use of political power against public enemies to disrupt the status quo is often warranted (cf. Jehoiada's counter coup in 2 Kings 11)." Bolyard would do well to seriously contemplate the penetrating words of Geerhardus Vos's understanding of OT revelation:

The chief end for which Israel had been created was not to teach the world lessons in political economy, but in the midst of a world of paganism to teach true religion, even at the sacrifice of much secular propaganda and advantage. . . . The significance of the unique organization of Israel can be rightly measured only by remembering that the theocracy typified nothing short of the perfected kingdom of God,

the consummate state of Heaven. In this ideal state there will be no longer any place for the distinction between church and state. (*Biblical Theology*, 141)
Herman Bavinck's observation is also appropriate:

The words of Christ do not contain a political or social agenda; they cannot be imposed by means of the authority or force of a government and be exacted with violence or under the threat of punishment. At the moment someone does this, the words of Jesus are robbed of their spiritual essence and their core. (*Essays on Religion, Science, and Society*, 133–134)

This understanding of the gospel, in the context of American culture, was at the heart of J. Gresham Machen's view of presenting the gospel, which placed its stamp upon the identity of the OPC after his death. In 1934, Machen declared that the church was in a "state of emergency" in his initial radio address on station WIP in Philadelphia. As Machen mapped out the context of the global and national cultural issues within this "state of emergency," those issues were not the real challenge. For Machen, the state of emergency was the immediate necessity of a true knowledge and understanding of the person of God and the "unseen world" (kingdom of heaven) in contrast to the visible empirical world of everyday culture (see Machen, *Things Unseen*, 5–12).

Machen understood that the identity and mission of the gospel was embodied in Christ's Great Commission and in the words of Paul's last will and testament to Timothy: "Preach the Word; be ready in season and out of season; reprove, rebuke, and exhort, with complete patience and teaching" (2 Tim. 4:2). Christ's church is to see her identity in the pattern of Christ's life on earth, that is, we are identified as a suffering body here in our pilgrim/wilderness journey unto our final exaltation. The pattern for the church is solidly in place in the life of Christ: suffering to exaltation (John 15:18–16:4)!

Christ had no interest in revolution or counterrevolution upon the political landscape.

In terms of understanding this identity of the OPC, it would be well for those who have become members of the OPC over the last thirty years to seriously reflect upon Charles Dennison's historical essays, *History for a Pilgrim People*. Any sympathy to a theonomic reconstructionist agenda, whether minor or major, has never found a dominant position as the identity of the OPC. May the Lord preserve the OPC from incorporating any form of cultural transformation and synthesis with both the liberal and conservative political agendas into our pulpits, and may we remain committed to Paul's declaration that we preach "Christ and him crucified" to edify the body of Christ and call the lost to the glorious benefits of eternal life in Christ (see 1 Cor. 2:1–5).

William D. Dennison
Kent, Washington

Ethan Bolyard responds:

As one who appreciates Dr. Dennison's work, I found myself in substantial agreement with most of his letter. This indicates that we may be writing past each other, which I believe happened for at least three reasons.

First, failure to make proper distinctions leads to category confusion. What I said about political power and social influence pertained to the temporal kingdom (not the spiritual kingdom), the actions of individual Christians (not the mission of the church), the application of God's moral law (not the proclamation of the gospel), and the dominion mandate (not the great commission). Certainly, the church is a pilgrim people with a heavenly homeland and a spiritual calling (as opposed to "cultural aspirations"), but that does not preclude her individual members from serving Christ in a variety of vocations, including the civil magistrate (WCF 23.2). Primary does not mean exhaustive. Grace is not against nature. If you confuse or conflate these



COVENANT
Presbyterian Church

30th
Anniversary
CELEBRATION

SATURDAY, MAY 31, 2025
SPECIAL DINNER AT 5:00 P.M.

SUNDAY, JUNE 1, 2025
SERVICE AT 9:30 A.M.

DINNER AND SUNDAY SERVICE LOCATION:
KENNEWICK SEVENTH DAY ADVENTIST CHURCH
7105 WEST 10TH AVENUE, KENNEWICK, WA 99336

Please RSVP for dinner by May 1st at
copctrices.org

categories, you may miss the whole point of the argument. The real question, left unanswered by Dr. Dennison's letter, is whether the adjective "Christian" may be applied to any institution other than the church (for example, the family or civil government). On this point, it is worth considering John Murray's 1942 essay "The Christian World Order."

Second, mistaken assumptions produce misleading associations. Although Greg Bahnsen was an OPC minister, I would not describe myself as a theonomist or cultural transformationalist. As I said in the review, I support "the retrieval of historic Protestant political theory, including a theology of civil resistance." This would include the teaching of John Witherspoon, the primary architect of the 1788 American revisions, who saw no conflict between the Westminster Confession and the American War for Independence.

Third, isolated quotations can create a skewed or incomplete picture. Not only are Dr. Dennison's citations drawn exclusively from the twentieth century (for example, not one magisterial Reformer or Westminster divine), they are also highly selective. J. Gresham Machen is a case in point. In 1926, Machen courageously testified before the House and Senate Committees on the Proposed Department of Education to publicly oppose that bill. Such political engagement was fully compatible with his view of the spirituality of the church, for he maintained,

The "otherworldliness" of Christianity involves no withdrawal from the battle of this world. . . . The Christian

man may not simplify his problem by withdrawing from the business of the world, but must learn to apply the principles of Jesus even to the complex problems of modern industrial life. . . . The whole of life, including business and all of social relations, must be made obedient to the law of love. The Christian man certainly should display no lack of interest in "applied Christianity." (*Christianity & Liberalism*, 155)

This too is part of the legacy of the OPC and worthy of our respect and imitation. Although I agree with much of Dr. Dennison's letter, I am also convinced there is more to the story.

REVIEWS

Shaman and Sage: The Roots of "Spiritual but Not Religious" in Antiquity, by

Michael Horton. Eerdmans, 2024. Hardcover, 528 pages, \$64.99. Reviewed by OP pastor Shane P. Lems.

"What has been done will be done again; there is nothing new under the sun" (Eccl. 1:9 NIV). This well-known statement from Scripture has been oft quoted for good reason. As one sorts through the various modern religious ideas, beliefs, and practices, it is impossible to find something that is entirely novel. In various ways, all modern religious beliefs and spiritualities are recycled and repurposed from the past. Michael Horton argues this point well in *Shaman and Sage*. This is the first volume of Horton's upcoming three-part series that gives the background, description, and evaluation of the prevalent modern "spiritual but not religious" mindset.

In *Shaman and Sage*, Horton does a deep dive into ancient religious and philosophical beliefs and movements. He notes that the modern spiritual emphases on self, experience, autonomy, oneness, etc., are also found in ancient cultures. Horton

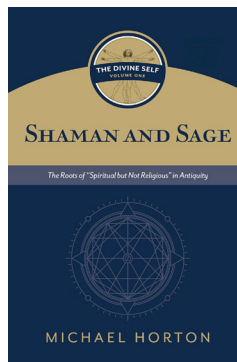
argues that around the sixth century BC, religions shifted from the public, external realm toward the private, personal, internal realm—the divine self, the religion of the One (9, 106, 123). Because of the massive religious and philosophical changes during this time, historians call this the "axial age." However, as Horton notes, the "axial age" was not just an event that happened and is now over. He believes "it is an ongoing process that is frequently identified with modernity" (388). In other words, the effects of this axial age are still felt today.

There are eleven chapters in *Shaman and Sage*. Each chapter focuses on different aspects of ancient religions and philosophies that also appear in modernity and post-modernity. For example, in chapter 2, Horton explains in detail how the Greek legend of Orpheus morphed and

greatly influenced later religious thought. For one more example, chapter 7 is a lengthy discussion of ancient Gnosticism, including the Sethian and Valentinian schools of gnostic thought. In this chapter, Horton gives six main beliefs of ancient Gnosticism as well as a summary of Plotinus's teaching. Other chapters cover

topics like Platonism, Dionysus, Proclus, Origen, Hermes Trismegistus, and so on.

Shaman and Sage is packed with detailed information about ancient religions, spiritualities, philosophies, rites, myths, and practices. This book is almost like a short encyclopedia of the religious history of the spiritual self. Horton discusses concepts like monism, Orphism, panentheism, Taoism, theogonies, reincarnation, and others. He also elaborates extensively on past teachers, their teachings, and the various views of their followers. There are three helpful indexes (subject, author, and bibliography) for readers who want to track down certain concepts that Horton covers in this book.



CORRECTIONS

The name of the reviewer of *Dinner with the King* in the April issue is Cheyenne Farr, not Protsman. In the February issue, OP pastor Peter Stazen incorrectly appeared as Peter Stazan.

Shaman and Sage is not meant for the average reader. Some of the discussions are extremely thorough and technical. If you want an introductory, easy-to-read book about the history of self-centered spirituality and religion, this is not that. But if you're up for an academic exercise to expand your understanding of this topic, you'll appreciate Horton's insights and evaluations. You'll also appreciate the comparisons and contrasts between Christianity and ancient religions/spiritualities. Indeed, there's nothing new under the sun. Horton is right: the prevailing modern spiritual focus on the self, the One, is also found in the annals of history.

***What Is Covenant Theology? Tracing God's Promises through the Son, the Seed, and the Sacraments*, by Ryan M. McGraw. Crossway, 2024. Paperback, 160 pages, \$14.99. Reviewed by OP pastor Matthew J. Ezzell.**

It's been said, "Reformed theology is covenant theology." That may be a slight overstatement, but nonetheless, it's easy to see why someone might make that comment. Without some grasp of covenant theology, it is impossible to understand the Reformed view of salvation, the church, or the sacraments. Therefore, given the significance of covenant theology within the Reformed system of doctrine, Reformed Christians should at least acquaint themselves with the basics of covenant theology.

Yet, delving into the depths of covenant theology can be a formidable undertaking. The reasons for this are manifold: the sheer breadth of the subject, the intricacy of the topics involved, and the internal disagreements among covenant theologians. For all these reasons and more, those who hold covenant theology dear will be deeply appreciative of Ryan McGraw's new book *What Is Covenant Theology?* This work endeavors to unpack covenant theology for the uninitiated by introducing them to its "basics and blessings."

In his introduction, McGraw enumerates three chief blessings of covenant

theology. First is the breathtaking unity of Scripture, second the glory of the triune God, and third the implications of covenant theology for Christian living. According to McGraw, these three blessings lead us to reflect on the basics of covenant theology. He argues that the basics of covenant theology revolve around Jesus Christ (the *Son*), his church (the *Seed*), and the sacraments (the *Signs*). The remainder of the book seeks to develop the themes introduced at the opening.

The first three chapters demonstrate how covenant theology illuminates the unity of Scripture for the believer by showing how the covenants of redemption, works, and grace provide us with a roadmap to navigate the Bible. McGraw then turns in chapter 4 to the second blessing of covenant theology, the glory of the triune God, explaining how covenant theology teaches us to treasure God.

In chapter 5, McGraw unfolds the last of the three "blessings," the implications of covenant theology for Christian living. One particularly compelling aspect of this chapter is its focus on viewing the church, rather than the individual Christian, as central. By stressing the corporate over the individual, covenant theology calls us to pursue self-denial in the church, considering others more valuable than ourselves.

In the last chapter, McGraw raises several common questions related to covenant theology and seeks to provide quick, readable responses. Some of the questions are very practical, such as "Can someone still hold the gospel without covenant theology?" (97), and some are more technical,

such as "Are the covenant of redemption and grace really distinct covenants?" (103) or "Did God 'republish' the covenant of works in the Mosaic covenant?" (117).

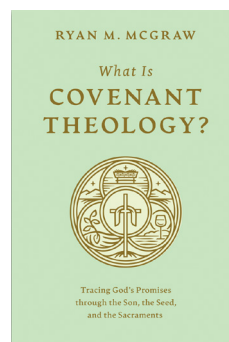
Throughout this section, McGraw provides helpful and gracious answers.

Several aspects of this work stand out as particularly helpful. First, this work is theoretical and practical, in keeping with the best of the Reformed tradition. Thus, it helpfully blends systematic and biblical theology with rich Trinitarian doxology and practical applications. Second, it is historically rooted and confessionally grounded, which is helpful because it allows McGraw to avoid many contemporary debates and to present the reader with the mainstream of historic covenant theology.

Third, it's accessible, making this the ideal book for pastors to give out to new members and inquirers unfamiliar with covenant theology. The book is an excellent resource for anyone who wants an accessible yet substantial introduction to classic confessional covenant theology.

***The Giver of Life: The Biblical Doctrine of the Holy Spirit and Salvation*, by J. V. Fesko. Lexham, 2024. Hardcover, 360 pages, \$36.99. Reviewed by OP pastor Nicholas J. Thompson.**

I vividly remember the first time I read John Murray's chapter on union with Christ in his classic *Redemption Accomplished and Applied*. My heart was so stirred that I literally shouted at the top of



my lungs, waking up my napping baby in the process! The application of our salvation through the Spirit's work of uniting us to the crucified and risen Christ is reason for our hearts to sing.

I found my heart similarly filled with joy at various points throughout my reading of J. V. Fesko's *The Giver of Life*.

Expounding upon the church's universal confession of the Holy Spirit as "the Lord, the giver of life" in the Nicene Creed, Fesko provides a comprehensive and concise guide to the doctrine of the Spirit in his person and work, with a particular eye to his role in applying the salvation accomplished by the Son and arranged by the Father.

Part 1 (chs. 1–3) traces key biblical-theological themes related to God's covenant and salvation from creation to consummation. Fesko shows how the heart of the covenant is God's intimate presence with his people by the Spirit (ch. 1), the promises of the covenant (post-fall) are his saving blessings applied by the Spirit (ch. 2), and the life of the covenant is one of Spirit-wrought faith, hope, and love that leads to the enjoyment and spread of God's saving blessings through Spirit-empowered worship, prayer, and witness (ch. 3). Particularly helpful is the way Fesko explains soteriology in relation

to protology and eschatology throughout.

Part 2 (chs. 4–11) develops the application of salvation in a systematic manner with careful attention given to exegetical,

biblical, and historical theology. Since "the first stone in the cathedral of soteriology is the doctrine of the Holy Spirit" (109), Fesko begins with a chapter on Trinitarian theology, explaining how the Spirit's eternal proceeding from the Father and the Son is reflected in the temporal sending of the Spirit from the Father

and the Son for us and our salvation (ch. 4). He then expounds the main contours of the *ordo salutis*, all of which are brought about through the Spirit's gracious work of uniting us to Christ. These blessings include effectual calling (ch. 5), justification (ch. 6), adoption (ch. 7), and sanctification (ch. 8). Each of these chapters traces the pertinent texts and words from Old to New Testament, develops the doctrine systematically and historically, and combats errors and aberrations (for example, a helpful refutation of the New Perspective on Paul in the chapter on justification). The final three chapters in this section (chs. 9–11) explain the nature of life in the Spirit, following a similar format.

Part 3 (chs. 12–14) focuses on the practical application of these doctrines, demonstrating how our theology ought to lead to a transformed life unto the glory of God. Fesko explains the nature of Spirit-wrought faith (ch. 12), spiritual maturity (ch. 13), and Spirit-empowered mission (ch. 14). He then offers a brief conclusion with "twelve theses on soteriology," which are worth the price of the book in themselves! Readers would do well to ponder these twelve points that serve as a fitting

summary of everything Fesko argues throughout.

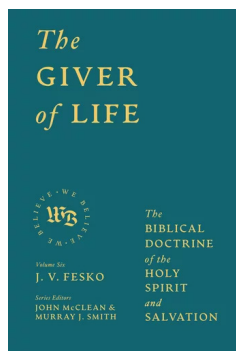
The Giver of Life is a faithful guide through the precious terrain of the Spirit's application of our salvation as it was progressively revealed throughout covenant history and progressively developed throughout church history. While the truths in this book are deep, Fesko has written with remarkable simplicity and clarity, so that the theological novice should be able to profit much from a careful reading of it, while also providing recommendations in each chapter for further reading if you wish to go deeper.

I warmly commend this book to you, but I do so with one warning—it just might make you shout at the top of your lungs. For what could be more soul-stirring and joy-inducing than the reality of God the Holy Spirit eternally wedding us to God the Son, clothed in all his saving benefits?

***Why Do Protestants Convert?* by Brad Littlejohn and Chris Castaldo (foreword by Carl Trueman). Davenant, 2023. Paperback, 100 pages, \$12.95. Reviewed by retired OPC minister Larry E. Wilson.**

In *Why Do Protestants Convert?* Brad Littlejohn and Chris Castaldo explore the growing trend of Protestants converting to Roman Catholicism or Eastern Orthodoxy. Such converts generally justify their conversions with theological arguments, but the authors point out that these conversions are normally driven by a complex set of motivations. This book focuses specifically on conversions to Rome. Chapter 1 introduces the nineteenth-century conversion of John Henry Newman, using his experience as a model to help understand the broader forces behind such conversions.

Chapter 2 delves into psychological motivations, such as a deep yearning for fatherly authority, for a feeling of spiritual transcendence, and for a sense of belonging to something "bigger, better, more influential, more sophisticated" (26).



POSITION AVAILABLE

Pastor: Harvest OPC in San Marcos, California, is actively seeking a full-time pastor to serve their one hundred plus member congregation in north San Diego County. Pastoral strengths would include preaching, leading worship, counseling, evangelism, and shepherding. Interested candidates should send a Ministerial Information Form (or similar statement of personal life and philosophy of ministry) to harvestpsc@hopc.org. To learn more about Harvest OPC, visit hopc.org.

Chapter 3 shifts to theological factors, such as a hunger for certainty, historical rootedness, and a sense of grace less restricted to internal thoughts/feelings and more tangible. Chapter 4 addresses sociological factors, noting that some Protestants are pushed by disappointment with their perception of Protestantism's divisiveness, shallowness, and "irrelevance." They're pulled by a desire to follow Christ in a way "that can more plausibly claim to offer unity in the midst of our divisions, cultural depth in the midst of our shallowness, and relevance in the midst of our marginalization" (52).

Throughout these chapters, the authors argue that Rome promises unity, depth, and relevance, but ultimately delivers a false sense of security, limits individual freedom, and obstructs true spiritual engagement with God. They caution that conversion to Rome cannot really satisfy these yearnings and propose Reformed Protestant responses instead. Chapter 5 casts a compelling, constructive vision for making progress in redressing weaknesses and providing a true and satisfying alternative to converting—a vision of our identity in Christ, of Christ himself, and of the church's mission in Christ:

The materialism and worldliness, the self-centered piety and individualistic worship, the subjectivism and superstition, the unaccountable church leadership and loss of basic biblical literacy that the Reformers deplored are now rampant within the churches of evan-

gelical Protestantism. If many of our best and brightest seem to be fleeing our churches in search of greener spiritual pastures, we can hardly be surprised.

But the solution . . . is to dig deeper into the Reformation, not to run from it. (92)

Finally, the afterword argues against converting to Rome on the grounds that it's spiritually dangerous. The issues at stake in the Reformation were never trivial, and they still aren't. Among other

things, "the convert, almost by definition, is in danger of idolatry, of seeing in their new church the end of all their spiritual hopes and fears, the answer to all their questions" (95–96). Rome's claims are a mirage; it can never really provide the certainty and stability many converts hunger for. Instead, the authors

encourage Protestants to seek spiritual revitalization by more deeply drinking in historically informed, biblically Reformed evangelical Protestantism. "So often, converts are so intent on running away from the Protestantism they grew up in that they don't pause to ask whether it was authentically Protestant at all" (98). Not only by drinking it in but also by fleshing it out—"We must not flee *to* the past and abandon the Lord's unique call to faithfulness in our current moment. Nor must we flee *from* the past in our eagerness to prove our solidarity with those who do not share it" (78).

At just a hundred pages, *Why Do Protestants Convert?* is a pithy, insightful introduction to the dynamics that push and pull Protestants to Rome. It may be just the thing to read together and discuss with someone who's contemplating such a conversion. It's helpful in challenging us to better understand and minister to those struggling with the temptation to convert, and in challenging us to head off such temptations by seeking to preemptively

address the deep spiritual needs of the sheep Christ entrusts to us. Pastors and elders may find it particularly useful to spur us to take a hard look at ourselves and our ministries. How can we better sustain and nourish our members as embodied souls? The authors suggest that if we won't even try to address

these needs, it shouldn't surprise us when individuals look elsewhere. "If we are to respond with truth to this crisis, we must also respond with love. The emotional needs of people living in a world adrift are no less important than their intellectual needs" (72–73). How might our own sins of omission be stumbling blocks, occasioning some of God's redeemed children to grow disillusioned and start looking elsewhere? In what ways might we need to humble ourselves, repent, and plead for forgiveness, revitalization, and reformation from our King by his Word and Spirit?

