

A Report on the 2022 BRF Conference

Brian Harris

Imagine sitting in a large meeting room (a ballroom in a previous “life”) situated in a baronial castle built in 1856. Outside the moon is nearly full. Its silvery light reflects off a glassy lake. In the background are the majestic Mourne mountains. Within the crowded room there are many children and young people but also folk with greying hair. The gathered congregation stands to sing. Outside a person walking beside the lake stops and hears the melodious sound of a psalm sung by a multitude of voices drifting down from the castle. He wonders what this may mean. A few days later they are able to ask, what is this singing? This is, of course, the long-awaited 16th BRF conference, a conference twice postponed due to Covid restrictions. The voices of those gathered together are those of people from Australia, Brazil, Canada, Italy, the Philippines, Poland, Singapore, the United Kingdom and the United States.

Among those in the room is a certain Professor Engelsma who spoke at the first conference in North Wales 32 years previously and has spoken at every BRF conference following. Scattered through the congregation are some who were also at that first conference. Accompanying the older warrior is another of the conference speakers, Professor Huizinga, professor of Dogmatics and the Old Testament at Protestant Reformed Theological Seminary, taking his place for the first time at a BRF conference.

The family conference is not only a time of hearing sound teaching but of fellowship of the saints, a time when new friendships are forged and old ones renewed. How good it is to speak to Christians from other parts of the world! How refreshing! Yes, also occasionally distressing as stories are told of the trials and tribulations that some saints bear. Hearing the various accounts, we are reminded that there is “a time to weep, and a time to laugh; a time to mourn, and a time to dance” (Ecc. 3:4). These moments of fellowship are surely a vital part of the life of the conference. Not to speak of them is to omit a key “good” of the week.

What do you do at a family conference apart from hearing conference addresses and having fellowship around a hot drink? Castlewellan is surrounded by the beautiful and extensive Castlewellan Forest Park. Near to the castle is a walled garden and an arboretum. Parkland gives a place to relax, walk or even play football. The lake is also a place of entertainment with paddle board hire and kayak hire. There is a 2½ mile walk around the lake and this was presented as a challenge to the BRF delegates by Dr. Julian Kennedy: “Who can walk the route the fastest (taking into account age and sex)?” A short stroll away is the small town of Castlewellan which has its own charm and the all-important coffee shops.

Coach trips to Mount Stewart House and later through County Down added to the experience of the week. Who of those sitting in the coach guided by Rev. Angus Stewart will forget the entertaining history of important men who lived at Mount Stewart House and their impact upon world politics? The tour of County Down included a stop in the Mourne Mountains, a 100-foot-high granite monument to Major General Robert Ross, the officer who commanded British forces responsible for burning the White House (1814), and Rostrevor, a place C. S. Lewis said inspired his Narnia. There was even a tour of the Castlewellan castle, including a secret passageway, although, I think, it is not so secret.

The life of the conference was good but better was the faith-strengthening conference addresses. The theme of the conference was the good news of “Union with Christ.” Perhaps, before speaking to this, we should summarize the basic structure of the week (9-16 July).

We arrived on Saturday afternoon. On the first evening, Rev. Angus Stewart introduced the conference theme by speaking from Psalm 56 where we were reminded that we have a union in God, a sharing in the divine life by believing. This is a conscious union, a union by faith. This psalm was written when David was among the Philistines which should encourage us since we too can know this union while scattered in a pagan world.

The Lord’s day services, both morning and evening, were led by Prof. Huizinga with messages related to the theme of the week: “Our Changeless Jesus Christ” (Heb. 13:8) and then “The Lamb of God Come” (John 1:29). During

the afternoon was an informal Bible study ably led by the Rev. Angus Stewart on “Union with Christ and the Bond of Faith.”

The “conference proper” started on Monday evening with six addresses each alternatively led by Prof. Engelsma, then Prof. Huizinga. The final address was given on Friday evening. Rev. Angus Stewart gave a special lecture on Wednesday evening on the theme of “‘Christ Is Made Ours:’ Calvin on Union.” If you count these you will realize that this means there was not always two conference addresses each day. This allowed additional free time for the coach trips and also the BRF Biennial General Meeting.

Now for the part that I have struggled with: how do you summarize six conference addresses? What follows is a taste of the theme that came through from the week’s messages rather than a summary of each message. I hope that this account will give you the desire to go and listen to each conference address and learn from the source.¹

The title of the six conference addresses were:

1. Union and Covenant
2. Union and Election
3. Union With Christ’s Death
4. Union With Christ’s Resurrection
5. Union and Marriage
6. Union and the Antithesis

What follows are some key lessons I have taken away from the conference speeches. I have omitted many points that others may have preferred to include. For this reason, you are urged to listen to the addresses yourselves.

For our salvation Jesus Christ cannot remain outside us. To cite Calvin, “he must become ours and dwell in us.”² To know what union with Christ is, it is first important to know what it is not. Union with Christ is not physical

¹ These audios are available free on the BRF website (www.britishreformed.org/conference/category/union-with-jesus-christ-n-ireland-2022). Also they can be ordered as an attractive box set of 10 CDs from the CPRC Bookstore, 7 Lislunna Road, Kells, N. Ireland BT42 3NR (028 25891851; bookstore@cprc.co.uk).

² John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, trans. Henry Beveridge (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1994), 3.1.1; p. 463.

closeness. Judas was physically close to Christ but did not know this union with Christ. Our closeness to Christ is closer than an embrace. It is not a fusion of two persons into something new. We do not lose our being in Him. Head and body are closely connected, but are distinct. It is not simply communion with Christ and neither is it that Christ is merely our legal Head. Rather union with Christ is a spiritual union. Union with Christ is mysterious. Essentially the Holy Spirit is the union of the church and Christ. This union with Christ is indissoluble and unbreakable. It is anchored in God's eternal election, first of Jesus Christ and then our unconditional election in Him. Our union with Christ flows out of our being chosen in Him before the foundation of the world. God did not think of us apart from our connection to Christ. God is, therefore, the cause of our union to Christ. However, this union is only worked when the Spirit enters us and forms it. This union with Christ is the motive and standard of how we are to live.

It is important that we see ourselves with Him on the cross. Not in the sense that we were bearing our own sin. Rather we are beneficiaries of His death. On the cross, Christ died as the head of His body. The death of Christ makes us beneficiaries in four ways, with regard to justification, sanctification, persecution and physical death. What a striking conclusion this brings us to: Union with Christ gives us the power to overcome sin in our lives today. 2,000 years ago our old man was put to death! That is good news. It is true, our sinful nature seems quite alive but we have a new heart. This means we can overcome sin. God then uses exhortations of Scripture as a means to accomplish what the exhortations advocate.

II Corinthians 5:17 is an astonishing passage. We are a new creation in Christ! This does raise the question of what is new. The heart is renewed. Think of the heart as the "command centre." The heart is the throne. Christ sits on the throne of man in regeneration. However, this is not the end of sin in us. Our flesh is still totally depraved and is in rebellion against God, but at the core of our being we have been made good. This renewal is regeneration. This new creation in Christ means we are not to excuse our sins. Rather, each day we are to grieve over sin, repent and set our minds on Christ.

The relationship of Christ and the church is described in terms of marriage. This we must understand correctly. The original marriage is Christ and the

church. God made our marriages as earthly reflections of this original marriage. This should challenge those who are married. Do we live in a relationship that reflects Christ and the church? Our marriages should be a word of God to the world when they will not listen to our words. This makes spousal abuse so dreadful. Spousal abuse scandalizes the name of Jesus Christ and should not be tolerated in the church. Christian girls, if the young man you date treats you badly, get out of the relationship. Do not marry such a man!

Union with Christ must mean we live antithetically to the world. This is a big subject and only one aspect could be covered in one address. The aspect dealt with is affecting true churches today. It is the terrible sin of sexual abuse. This was a hard subject to listen to but we must be aware of it. It is a sin that must be rooted out of churches. Such people who perpetuate these sins can put on an appearance of being upright members of the church and use it for cover. God can bring repentance but the church must be watchful (as it can) to ensure that such repentance is genuine and not a sham.

Much more could be added to the summary: the relationship of the means of grace (preaching, baptism, the Lord's supper and discipline) to union with Christ, union and the bond of faith, Calvin's teaching, etc., but I leave these as matters you can learn by listening to the conference addresses. Please sit down, listen to the messages and profit.

Join us at the next BRF Family Conference!

Speakers: Prof. Brian Huizinga and Rev. Ron Hanko

Subject: Eschatology

A provisional booking has been made –

Venue: Cloverley Hall, Shropshire

Date: 3-10 August, 2024