

Family Conference - 2002

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Approximately fifty people attended the biennial British Reformed Fellowship (BRF) Family Conference at the Castlewellan Christian Conference Centre in County Down, Northern Ireland, from 20-27 July of last summer. Many of you are no doubt surprised to hear the conference even happened with the rumours of cancellation and a possible end to the BRF. For those of you who are regular readers of the *British Reformed Journal* and supporters of the BRF and its stand on historic, Reformed orthodoxy as expressed in the *Three Forms of Unity* and the *Westminster Confession of Faith*, this article should be an encouragement. The conference theme was "Assurance of Salvation," and the primary speakers, Professor David Engelsma, Professor of Dogmatics and Old Testament at the Protestant Reformed Theological Seminary, and the Reverend Barry Gritters, pastor of Hudsonville Protestant Reformed Church in Hudsonville, Michigan, provided stirring lectures.

Even for dyed-in-the-wool Calvinists who can defend the five points against the most ardent follower of Arminius, the topic of Assurance is one that would appear to be somewhat neglected within the Reformed community outside of academic circles. When we told a friend about the conference (a licentiate in a denomination to remain unnamed), his response was (and I quote loosely), "I cannot think of a less interesting topic for a discussion, let alone for an entire conference." For those of us who attended, we found quite the opposite to be true. Knowing that at least a quarter of the attendees belonged to churches that subscribe to the *Westminster Confession of Faith*, Prof. Engelsma and Rev. Gritters did an outstanding job of harmonizing the *Westminster Standards* with the *Three Forms of Unity* while always appealing to Scripture as the ultimate authority. The minor points of difference between the English Puritans and the Dutch divines made for lively question and answer sessions and debates that often carried well into the night. The six theme-based conference lectures were: Assurance: God's Will for All His Children, Assurance and Election, Assurance and the Holy Spirit,

Assurance and the Holy Life, Assurance and the Believer's Struggle with Doubt, and Assurance and its Benefits. Tapes of the lectures are available from the Covenant Protestant Reformed Fellowship bookstore by contacting Sean at cprfbbookstore@hotmail.com. As has been the tradition, the BRF also invited a local minister to give a lecture. Rev. David Silversides, pastor of Loughbrickland Reformed Presbyterian Church, spoke on the guidance of the Holy Spirit. Rev. Silversides and several members of his congregation added to our numbers and the post-lecture fellowship the evening of his address.

It was easy to see why the BRF was so named after the week in Castlewellan. People from such varied backgrounds and ages came together and found common ground in their desire earnestly to know God's teaching on the assurance of salvation. For those familiar with the fickle climate of Northern Ireland, you may be surprised to hear we had wonderful weather. With the exception of one drizzly morning, the weather certainly provided an amenable backdrop for the extracurricular activities that were pre-planned or organized at the last minute for the attendees. After a fascinating lecture on St. Patrick given by Rev. Stewart, all those interested were invited to take a trip to St. Patrick's historic gravesite and the St. Patrick Museum. Most conference attendees took daily trips to the nearby seaside village of Newcastle, where a local Christian bookstore, Beulah Book Shop, enjoyed our enthusiastic patronage. The more adventurous among us traveled out to hike to the top of the local mountains, and thankfully, all the brave souls returned safely. Several of us took advantage of an offer from a local stable providing a trail ride through the grounds of Castlewellan, which was a relaxing way to spend a morning or afternoon. The conference schedule was specifically designed to allow ample free time to poke around the local villages, rest, converse, or read (note to self and future conference attendees bring plenty of money to purchase one of every book on the book table at the next conference!). The grounds at Castlewellan provided many opportunities for exploration as well. The arboretum located near the castle was magnificent, as were the gardens. Strolling around the lake was also a popular pastime for many attendees. Our

family attempted to navigate the soon- to-be-famous hedge maze, and we were successful—with a little help from two boys who had memorized the maze during their holiday at the campgrounds. For those of us visiting Northern Ireland for the first time, the whole week was a wonderful introduction to the beautiful, varied landscape and a fitting setting for a relaxed, family conference.

Not only was fellowship abundant, but this was also a conference for families. We were one of the several families with small children, and we certainly had our concerns about how to avoid disrupting the conference with energetic little ones. The other attendees could not have been more understanding or welcoming, even as running, squealing children jostled them about. We certainly saw and felt the strongly held convictions of a covenant community as our children participated in worship, meals, devotions, and attended the lectures with the encouragement of all present. We even enjoyed the summer camp atmosphere as we shared our floor of the castle with the two other families from our home church in Cambridge—eight children under the age of six not counting one in the womb! As parents of young children, we valued the informal advice and guidance given in late night talks as we shared our struggles with parents and grandparents who brought up their children in the nurture and admonition of the Lord. Although such fellowship does not replace the church, it was such an encouragement to see and hear how fellow believers lived out the covenant while raising their own children. The teenagers in attendance also participated fully in the conference, and apparently took part in “extra-curricular” bonding activities that had Rev. Stewart scratching his head in consternation and Rev. Gritters checking his shoes each morning.

No one in attendance could bear to part one another’s company so quickly, and as a result, a good number of attendees travelled to Ballymena on Saturday before returning to America or to other parts of the British Isles. There we worshipped together again at Covenant Protestant Reformed Fellowship (CPRF) where Prof. Engelsma and Rev. Gritters preached at the morning and evening services respectively, and many guests invaded the manse of the Rev. Angus and Mary Stewart for an afternoon

of food and fellowship. The intrepid chefs braved the rain to grill hot dogs and hamburgers while the rest of us stayed cosy and dry. Mary Stewart was cajoled into playing her dulcimer, and the afternoon passed much too quickly for those of us who had to say farewell following the evening service. We were greeted with a surprise following the service, however, as the members of CPRF had prepared an abundant tea for us to enjoy together. We cannot speak highly enough about the effort the members of CPRF put into making this conference a memorable experience.

In the midst of the numerous activities, lectures, and the development of enduring friendships, the BRF held its biennial members meeting. In response to the outstanding effort undertaken to provide an unforgettable conference, new members (one co-author included) joined the fellowship. All in attendance agreed on the clear need to maintain the BRF's distinctive, Reformed witness in the British Isles. As one attendee, Mr. Pete Adams of Grand Rapids, Michigan, wrote in the September edition of *The Standard Bearer*, "the biggest news regarding the conference [was] the positive hope for the future that was evident. One would initially, perhaps, attribute this to a whistling-in-the-dark, wishful optimism; yet, the members speak of contentment with the Lord's way in the distressing, disruptive events they have experienced, and they look to Him to bless their labors to grow and rebuild." In addition to electing a new Council, the membership suggested Cambridge (or its vicinity) as the site of the next conference with the topic not yet finalised. With the majority of this year's non-US residents living in that area, it was a logical location. Much can change in the next year and a half, but those in attendance remain encouraged that just as we who have faith in Jesus Christ have a firm assurance of our salvation, so too do we have a firm assurance that the Lord shall bring to pass whatsoever pleases Him for His glory and the expansion of His kingdom!

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