

Ligonier 2013



We had the privilege to attend the 2013 Ligonier Conference in Orlando, Florida, from Thursday February 21 to Saturday February 23 – and a couple of days on either side to get settled and unsettled again. The concept of attending this conference and spending a few days in Florida came from the consistory, and herewith I want to express publicly our deep gratitude for this opportunity. A chance to be refreshed, encouraged, and fed in the wealth of the Scriptures by men very much in step with developments in our contemporary culture – yes, it was a privilege, and every moment worth it.

Speakers

[Ligonier Ministries](#) is run by R.C. Sproul Sr, a man well versed in theology and church history. He's a man of imposing personality, and he deliberately uses this strength of character to advance reformed theology throughout North America. He does not quibble on the authority and clarity of Scripture, and so unpacks and expounds what Scripture says in its honest and plain meaning – and that's to say that what he says from out of Scripture is distinctly reformed. Yes, he –like everybody else on this planet– has his weaknesses, so that he is certainly not above criticism. But there is no question that he pours his heart and his energy into the service of his Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. This is the man (together with his team) who cobbled together the topics intended for this conference and decided upon the speakers who should address the various topics. Men of big renown in America's neo-Calvinist resurgence joined Sproul Sr behind the lectern: Alistair Begg from Parkside Church in Cleveland (one can hear him on local radio); Steve Lawson from Christ Fellowship Baptist Church in Mobile, Alabama; Cal Thomas of Fox News fame; R.C. Sproul Jr; Sinclair Ferguson of First Presbyterian Church in Columbia, S.C. and professor of systematic theology at Westminster Theological Seminary; and even the famed apologist Ravi Zacharias. Some of these men are Presbyterian, others are (reformed) Baptists – and yes, from time to time their differences bubbled to the surface. But even with the odd unsavory element, the dishes served up by this smorgasbord of speakers were all very edifying and encouraging. We were treated to talks on justification (by faith alone, through grace alone, in Christ alone), the authority of Scripture, the need to preach the Word, what mercy looks like, how the Lord is building His church, why one can be confident of persevering in an age of apostasy, and more. Those who were interested in hearing what was said need but go to the Ligonier Ministries website and follow the links.

Theme

The theme of the conference was No Compromise. The speakers one after the other recognized that God's Word and service are being much marginalized in our present North American culture, and so the temptation is real to try to make the gospel less offensive. In that context we were repeatedly told that there is neither need nor place for compromise. Christ, after all, is Sovereign Lord over today's world –important ultimately is not who is 'in'

the White House, but who is 'over' the White House— and we need in no way to be ashamed of that reality. On the contrary, precisely because Christ is sovereign we can and must stand tall on the faith once revealed to us – even if we loose much in this life in the process. It is not for nothing, we were reminded, that early churches were built in the shape of a cross – and the reason was not simply that Christ crucified is the message proclaimed in church, but the reason is also that the life of those who enter the church is a constant suffering and crucifixion; the hatred of the world is a stark reality for those who love the Lord Jesus Christ. This, however, is no reason for discouragement (we were reminded), for Christ has overcome the world. Yes, very encouraging messages indeed.

Evaluation

As I said, we were taught and encouraged by men of big name in today's Christian North America. It is fitting that we recognize that each one of these men are tools the Lord God is currently using to bring His Word to bear on the lives of many across our continent (and beyond). The fact that some 5000 people (indeed!) came together to hear within a 50 hour span 11 one hour speeches plus two Question & Answer sessions (and four more 'optional' talks during lunch and dinner breaks!) testifies to the hunger there is for the Word and the confidence so many have in what these men of God have to say. Most of these men have written numerous books, and in the course of the conference thousands of their books were sold to eager buyers. Yes, these men are a blessing today. It is my prayer that the Lord will continue to use these men for the growth of His kingdom.

This gratitude does not take anything away from the deep appreciation I have for what the Lord has given us in the [Seminary in Hamilton](#), and for the work that is done on the pulpits of [Canadian Reformed Churches](#) across the country and those churches across the continent with whom we have Ecclesiastical Fellowship. In very large part I cannot quibble on what the luminaries at the Conference said, but there were distinctly times when I would have loved them to say *more* – and I mean by that that I would have loved them to dig deeper into the Scriptures in their exegesis and their way of tying Scripture together and drawing out their implications. My point with this comment is this: let no reader of this *Bit to Read* conclude that we ought to covet what these men offer over what the Lord has given us in our churches Sunday by Sunday. We certainly can and must learn from these men of talent and insight, but the simple fact is that the Lord by His grace has given us in our churches an exceedingly rich heritage that we may not trade for something lesser (you'll recall the sermon on Lord's Day 1, and yes, I want to come back to this matter in a later *Bit to Read*); more, the Lord teaches and encourages us not (as one speaker put it) through the preachers we *don't* have but through the preachers we *do* have. And so it's necessary to pray for and encourage them.

Some extras

5000 people in one building can make a lot of noise. Between speeches (or 'sermons', as they were sometimes called) we were asked to join in singing, accompanied by an enormous pipe organ of 118 ranks and 6,737 pipes as well as a small ensemble. Such favorite classics as Rejoice, the Lord is King (Hymn 44 in our current *Book of Praise*), A Mighty Fortress is our God (Hymn 53), Amazing Grace, Jesus Shall Reign (Hymn 45), Praise to the Lord, the Almighty (Hymn 78) brought out excellence of sound that thrilled one's spine. No, the singing was not fast – but was it ever majestic! The Conference ended with a spontaneous edition of Handel's *Hallelujah Chorus*; delightful!

In the course of the conference our attention was drawn to a couple of new efforts on the part of [Ligonier Ministries](#). The one is [RefNet](#), an internet facility whereby one may listen to Biblically faithful speeches and/or music around the clock. Worth checking out. The second

is [Reformation Bible College](#), an institution of learning where one can obtain a B.A. degree. Its courses can be followed online, for a mere \$9 per month. Again, check it out. Both [RefNet](#) as well as the [Reformation Bible College](#) appear to be worthy media through which one can grow in one's knowledge of Scripture, reformed doctrine, church history, and what it takes to live for God's glory in today's world. As always, one needs to listen and study with care as one "tests the spirits". But there is no doubting that the bias of these men lies with the Lord and His authority of His Word.

Conclusion

Attending the conference was distinctly worthwhile. It was good to be challenged and encouraged in the gospel, good too to see how others expound the Scriptures, present their material, address the needs of today's culture, and feed the hungry before them. To be part of the crowd taking in all this instruction – yes, I'm grateful for the opportunity received. And so there's catalyst to continue with the work given in my corner of the Lord's big world.

C Bouwman
February 28, 2013