

# 1996 BRF Family Holiday Conference Report

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As we approached Gatwick Airport in London, England, I was filled with curiosity as to what this land full of rich history would be like. I looked out the window of the plane and saw beautiful rolling hills covered with fields defined by hedges of green that made the land appear as a hodgepodge of geometric shapes. Out in the distance I saw a narrow road winding through the countryside, making its way past the farmhouses that dotted the landscape. In a town below, I noticed that the roads didn't intersect by simply crossing other roads, but circular intersections were used. To add to the differences, I saw that the cars were driving on the wrong side of the road!

Before my curiosity was totally satisfied, our plane rumbled onto the runway and finally reached the gate. After departing the aircraft I passed through numerous checkpoints until I finally spotted my friends who generously took the time to pick me up. Proceeding on through still more red tape, we finally made our way out of the airport. On our way to the conference grounds I noticed that those same green hedges I enjoyed viewing from the air greatly obstructed my view of the land. I found that cruising around a circular intersection was interesting and an efficient way of traffic control, but because of the long plane ride, I discovered that the circular intersections and the winding roads gave me motion sickness. Despite this problem, we at last made it to Ashburnham Place, the site of the 1996 British Reformed Fellowship (BRF) Family Holiday Conference,

The conference ran from Saturday, July 27 until Saturday, August 3. The purpose of the conference was described by Tony Horne, the secretary of the BRF, in this excerpt from a letter to the conference attendees:

The week is a FAMILY occasion, so that parents can spend time in relaxation and enjoyment with their children in the family circle; it is also a HOLIDAY, so that we can experience physical, mental and spiritual refreshment; and it is especially a CONFERENCE, so that we can listen to what God has to teach us, feed upon His Word and seek to grow in grace and in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ.

As was stated in the letter, the meetings for the week were especially a conference where we could grow spiritually. As to this purpose, we were not disappointed in the least. The fellowship with God's people from a different land was very refreshing, and the conference speeches were full of instruction on a very pertinent doctrine, especially for the BRF. The theme of the conference was "The Doctrine of the Church." This theme was fitting in light of the present organization of the Covenant PRC of Northern Ireland. It was also relevant because it gave added encouragement to the goal of the BRF: to establish Reformed churches in the British Isles. If there is one thing that we Americans learned in England, it was definitely that we should thank God for the blessings He has given us. In the British Isles there are many saints of God who live in isolation, far away from where the true Word is preached. This conference served as a spiritual oasis for these "scattered sheep of the house of Israel."

The conference began on Saturday evening with the first of many pleasurable dining experiences made possible by the diligent work of the Ashburnham staff. Each meal was served in the Oak Room, a large beautiful dining room with tall windows that afforded a colorful view of the flower garden to the west. The room was all oak from the hidden window shutters to the wide doors that were so thick you would be in deep trouble if you caught your finger between the door and the doorjamb!

After dinner followed a welcome to the conference and an introduction to Ashburnham Place. Next, we all gathered to hear David Blunt, a pastor in the Free Church of Scotland, give the ministry of the Word. He spoke from Song of Solomon 6:10 where the church is described as a fair moon because

she reflects the light of Christ, a fitting text to begin the treatment of the doctrine of the church and to prepare us for the Lord's Day.

Following the service we all gathered for devotions, a practice which we followed at the beginning and ending of each day. In devotions one of the men led us in our meditation upon God's Word and prayer. The singing of the Psalms then followed out of the Scottish Metrical. Singing was a different experience for us Americans because it was without accompaniment. Each time a presenter would sing a Psalm to a particular tune and after a few notes all the people would gather in. It was different at first, but we gradually got used to it after much practice at devotions, speeches, and worship services.

Early Sunday morning some of our number rose to attend a prayer service before breakfast and morning devotions. After these activities, we went to morning worship where we heard Prof. Hanko preach from Romans 8:33-34 about our justification before God through Jesus Christ. One of the men attending the conference was so delighted with the sermon that there were tears in his eyes. He couldn't believe that we in the PRC have similar preaching twice each Lord's Day!

On the Sabbath afternoon we young people and other interested individuals were led by Prof. Hanko in a discussion of the doctrine of the catholicity of the church, a truth that was definitely manifested at the conference. This was made clear to me when I found out that my roommates were from Northern Ireland. Although we spoke the same language, our dialects made conversing a bit difficult at first. Nevertheless, after a week with them I found that although we are people of God from different walks of life, we are united in our confession of the truth.

For the evening service Prof. Engelsma preached on Matthew 23:37, a frequently used proof text by the opponents of irresistible grace. He pointed out that Christ will gather every one of His children and that Christ's gracious work cannot be frustrated by any creature.

Rising on Monday morning, we began the normal routine of the conference. Every day of the week we ate breakfast at 8:30 am, lunch at 1 pm, and dinner at 6:30 pm. On Monday, Wednesday, and Thursday we heard conference speeches at 10 am and 7:45 pm. After each speech there always was an interesting question period. Between the speeches on these days there was plenty of free time to see the sites of the surrounding cities.

On Monday Prof. Engelsma spoke to us from Ephesians 1 on the topic: "The Church: Elected in Christ." In the course of the speech he brought out the truth that the heart of the church is her election in Jesus Christ. Her origin is in God's work of election before the foundation of the world. That evening we again gathered together to hear an interesting speech by Prof. Hanko based on the vision in Zechariah 4 where the Lord of Hosts declares to Zechariah that He will gather His church not by might, nor by power, but by His Spirit. That is, God will gather and save His church not by the extravagant inventions of modern man but by His Spirit only in the preaching of the Word in the instituted church.

But, what are the characteristics of the church? This is the question that was answered by Prof. Engelsma in his Wednesday morning speech titled "The Church: Its Nature." Taking his text from Ephesians 2, he stated that when considering the "attributes" of the church we should rather think of the "glories" of the church because she is the wonderwork of God. He proceeded to explain that these glories included her spirituality, unity, holiness, universality, and apostolicity. What awesome glories the church has! We should be thankful to God for the church of which we are a living member and forever shall remain!

This church of which we are a part also manifests itself on this earth as the church institute. Prof. Hanko took up this subject in his speech on Wednesday evening. He spoke from I Timothy 3:15 and brought out that the church, although visible on this earth, is heavenly. Therefore, she is like no other organization on this earth. In the instituted church, Christ is present as Head in the offices of the church, as the one Officebearer serving as Prophet, Priest, and King. But this is only the case in the true church on earth, the instituted church that upholds the truth of the gospel as written in the Holy Scriptures. It is this church that we as Christians are bound to attend.

The question that arises from this demand is: “Where do we find such a church?” Prof. Hanks answered this question with his speech on Thursday morning entitled “The Church: Its Marks.” In this speech based on Revelation 3 he laid out the truth that the true church can be found by the marks of the pure preaching of the gospel, the proper administration of the sacraments, and the right exercise of Christian discipline. After the speech, some difficult questions ensued from the audience, serious questions from people in the BRF who are isolated from the true Word preached. Some asked whether they should stay in an apostate church, and if so, how long? Others lamented the fact that the true church was geographically so far away! To these questions Prof. Hanks answered that the members of the BRF should be patient with God for He always gathers His church. Visibly moved by these questions, he reminded us in the PRC to be thankful for what we have!

That evening we gathered to hear the last speech by Prof. Engelsma on the sacraments of the church. Using Ephesians 4 as his passage, he spoke about the place of the sacraments as a means of grace only when administered with the preaching. He also gave a defense of infant baptism by stating that God usually saves His people in the line of continued generations. His covenant is the same to all generations, therefore even as He commanded the children of believers to be circumcised in the Old Testament we must also do the same in the New by baptizing our infant children.

This speech as well as the others generated some spirited discussion, a common occurrence throughout the whole week. It was a welcome thing to be able to talk about spiritual things with saints of our own churches as well as saints from the British Isles. Many discussions lasting until early morning took place at the Carpenter’s Lodge on the north side of the conference grounds, making it very difficult to rise up the next day for breakfast!

Our other free time, was spent at places such as Battle, the town where the battle of Hastings was fought, and Pevensey Castle, a Norman castle where you can find ancient Roman walls dating to about 300 AD. On Tuesday and Friday the BRF planned tours of the Sussex countryside and London respectively. London was especially exciting for me. I have always wanted to see the great Westminster Abbey, the Tower of London, and the Houses of Parliament. Although I didn’t see them in great detail, I enjoyed the experience immensely as I did the entire conference.

This satisfaction with the conference I believe was shared by all. The work of the planning committee and the speakers was excellent and should be commended. The conference was especially a time when all of us could grow in the truth of God’s Word about the doctrine of His church which He saves by the blood of His Son Jesus Christ. The conference was also very relaxing. Being able to see the sites of London, and the beautiful countryside of Sussex was well worth the cost. But the fellowship with the saints of God from the British Isles made the trip very special. I urge you to consider going to the next conference in Northern Ireland at Castlewella Castle Christian Conference Center. The saints from the British Isles will be glad to see you.

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