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The Outlook

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"Exhorting you to contend earnestly for the faith which was once for all delivered to the saints."
—Jude 3

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About the cover: Note the subtle opening shape and tones of Spring. The buds and blossoms open to reveal their beauty. The Living Word is open, to reveal the Glory of its author, the mighty God. May the seeds of its message take hold and grow in our hearts!

Awake, O sword, against my shepherd, and against the man that is my fellow, saith Jehovah of hosts.

—Zechariah 13:7a (KJV)

In this Lenten season we are called to give particular attention to the passion and death of our Savior. The above text is one of the clearest of those prophetic testimonies which declared to the church beforehand the sufferings of Christ. That the passage applies to Christ very specifically is plainly indicated in Matthew 26:31 and Mark 14:27. In view of the authoritative interpretation supplied by both of these New Testament references, there is no warrant for seeking a substitute application.

The Lord's Shepherd

Our Savior is called "shepherd." One is reminded of Isaiah 40:11, "He will feed his flock like a shepherd, he will gather the lambs in his arm, and carry them in his bosom, and will gently lead those that have their young." Jesus applies the title to Himself in John 10:11, "I am the good shepherd: the good shepherd layeth down his life for the sheep." And the author of Hebrews writes, "Now the God of peace, who brought again from the dead the great shepherd of the sheep with the blood of an eternal covenant, even our Lord Jesus, make you perfect in every good thing to do his will" (Heb. 13:20–21).

The word *shepherd* points to our Lord's mediatorial character and work. It teaches us that a people—His sheep—have been committed to Him and that in the matter of their salvation He is their head, their representative, and their surety. It is not in an individual capacity that He is here revealed to us, but in a public relation as the "shepherd and bishop of our souls."

As our shepherd He knows us—"I am the good shepherd; and I know mine own, and mine own know me" (John 10:14). As our shepherd He seeks us, feeds us, leads us—"As a shepherd seeketh out his flock in the day that he is among his sheep that are scattered abroad, so will I seek out my sheep" (Ezek. 34:12). "He calleth his own sheep by name, and leadeth them out" (John 10:3). He feeds His flock, imparts to them the Holy Spirit, causes His Word to dwell in them richly, and thus awakens in the believer the testimony, "The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want."

Observe that it is Jehovah who speaks in the text of this meditation and that He calls the shepherd "my shepherd." Why is our Savior so designated? Because He is an appointed and commissioned Savior. In the divine counsel of eternity this office was given to God's Son that He should be "the great shepherd of the sheep." Behold

what manner of love was this which prompted Jehovah God to choose His beloved Son as our surety, and which prompted the Son to drink for our sakes the cup of God's wrath.

The Lord's Man

The text speaks of a man. The sword is awakened against the shepherd who is called "the man." In our zealous regard for the divine nature of our Savior we must not lose the comfort which is afforded by faithful contemplation of the *man* Christ Jesus. Isaiah writes, "And a man shall be as a hiding-place from the wind, and a covert from the tempest" (Isa. 32:2). It was the Son of *Man* who came to seek and to save that which was lost (Luke 19:10). The apostle Paul writes of Him that He "made himself of no reputation, and took upon him the form of a servant, and was made in the likeness of men" (Phil. 2:7).

How essential is this doctrine of our Savior's humanity to the truth of His fitness and qualifications for the work assigned Him by the Father? No better answer to that question can be given than in the words of Hebrews 2:14, 17: "Since then the children are sharers in flesh and blood, he also himself in like manner partook of the same; that through death he might bring to nought him

What else can this mean but that God Himself inflicted His divine wrath upon the Shepherd of the sheep?

that had the power of death, that is, the devil; . . . Wherefore it behooved him in all things to be made like unto his brethren, that he might become a merciful and faithful high priest in things pertaining to God, to make propitiation for the sins of the people."

This is a precious and comforting doctrine. Our Savior is our brother, bone of our bone, flesh of our flesh, though free from sin. Wherefore, He is not ashamed to call us brethren (see Heb. 2:11). The righteousness He wrought as our surety and mediator was wrought *in our nature* so that it is suited to our circumstances, fitted to be a robe for us. With that robe covering us we are accepted in the Beloved. With that robe we shall enter the palace of heaven's King. Moreover, because He knows our frame and remembers that we are dust, we can cast our cares upon Him. He can personally sympathize with us in every trial, for He is not a high priest who cannot be touched with the feeling of our infirmities.

In that nature He now dwells and reigns in heaven. What animating hope! Our nature is in heaven through the person of the Son of God! Can He not bring us there too? Indeed! He has so prayed and so promised! The forerunner will have His own with Him. "Father, I desire that they also whom thou hast given me be with me where I am, that they may behold my glory, which thou hast given me" (John 17:24). His promise is that He will "fashion anew the body of our humiliation, that it may be conformed to the body of his glory" (Phil. 3:21).

The Lord's Fellow

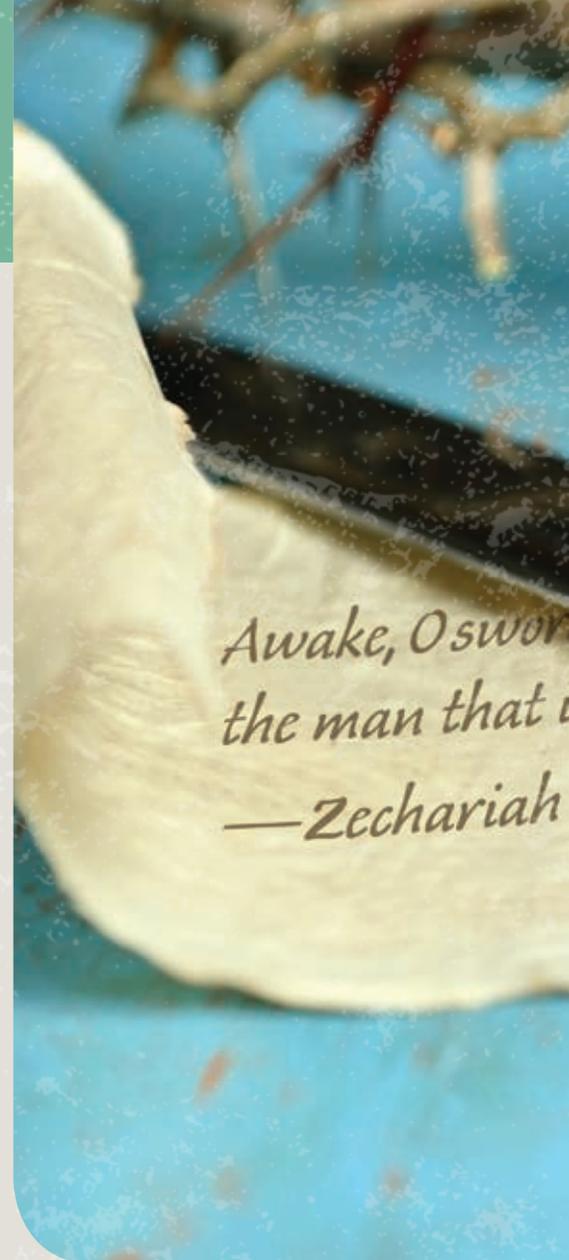
Observe, further, that our Savior is called the "fellow" of Jehovah—

"the man that is my fellow, saith Jehovah of hosts." H. C. Leupold translates it "my close associate." The Lord's shepherd in this text is one who stands close to the Lord and occupies, as it were, a position similar to that of the Lord Himself. Can this be a mere man? Can the one whom God designates as His fellow, His close associate, be no more than a creature? Surely not! This unusual expression speaks of equality. It implies participation in the same nature, which in this instance is divine nature. One immediately thinks of such a text as John 10:30, "I and the Father are one." Similarly, John 1:18, "the only begotten Son who is in the bosom of the Father." The Shepherd of the sheep—the man Christ Jesus—is also the fellow, the equal, of Jehovah, very God as well as very man.

That is the crowning truth! Without it we have no salvation. The child who is born to us, the Son who is given us, is the "Mighty God" (Isa. 9:6). He existed in the form of God and counted not the being on an equality with God a thing to be grasped (see Phil. 2:6). Hence there can be nothing too hard for this Savior to accomplish. His arm of redemption cannot fail us. It will protect us to the end; it will raise us one day from the dust.

The Lord's Sword

"Awake, O sword, against my shepherd, and against the man that is my fellow, saith Jehovah of hosts." It is God who speaks to the sword and who bids it smite the shepherd. What else can this mean but that God Himself inflicted His divine wrath upon the Shepherd of the sheep? True, the Savior suffered at the hands of men. He suffered also



the rage and malice of the powers of darkness. But that was not all, nor was it the most important circumstance in His passion. It pleased *Jehovah* to bruise Him; He hath put Him to grief (see Isa. 53:10). In the dreadful climax the cry is not, "My sheep, my sheep, why have ye forsaken me," but, "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?"

Here, then, is the utmost wonder of divine grace. The great and good Shepherd of the sheep took upon Himself their guilt and condemnation. Only thus might the door of mercy be opened and God's own righteousness declared in the remission of their sins. It was so declared already to the Old



Testament church—"All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned everyone to his own way; and the Lord hath laid upon him the iniquity of us all" (Isa. 53:6). The sword was awakened against Him that these sufferings might be endured for the objects of God's electing love. "He was wounded for our transgressions, he was bruised for our iniquities."

It was against "the man" that the sword of justice was summoned. Offended justice must be vindicated in the same nature that had sinned. By His humanity He was capable of suffering. And because that human nature was joined to the divine

Person, infinite merit attaches to His obedience and sacrifice. Not only that, but in virtue of His divine Person He was enabled to endure the agony even to the uttermost.

The sword smote Him by God's command that He might thoroughly exhaust the curse of the broken law. Being thus smitten He bore our griefs and carried our sorrows. *But He does not remain smitten.* He must be conqueror in the end so that He may divide the spoil with the strong and that the children of Zion may be joyful in their King. Therefore, cry out and shout, thou inhabitant of Zion; for great is the Holy One of Israel in the midst of thee.

Torch and Trumpet, March 1960

Dr. Leonard Greenway

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Introduction

A few years ago a young woman named Sarah wanted to become a member of the congregation I pastored. She grew up in a Roman Catholic family. We sat down together with a couple of others and studied the Heidelberg Catechism as part of a new members' class. When we got to the section dealing with the sacraments, she asked if she would have to be baptized again to become a member of a United Reformed Church. After further inquiry, I told her no, she did not have to be rebaptized. But why that conclusion? The question we must answer as we think about this subject is this: Is a Roman Catholic baptism a true, Christian baptism? The answer is yes.

A Definition

What constitutes a Christian baptism? In summarizing the Scriptures, Article 34 of the Belgic Confession of Faith mentions three things which must be present: the recipient is to be baptized with "pure water," "in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost," and by a minister (WCF XXVIII; WLC Q&A 165–67; HC Q&A 71). Theologically, the three elements which make up baptism involve its matter (must be water), form (using the trinitarian formula), and design (it is a sacrament which signifies and seals and is done by a minister of Christ). That all seems simple enough, but there is a problem.

The Problem

There have been some objections to the validity of Roman Catholic baptisms. In the middle of the nineteenth century, American Presbyterians were having this discussion. The prominent figures

were J. H. Thornwell (d. 1862) and Charles Hodge (d. 1878). Thornwell, and those who sided with him, argued against the validity of Roman Catholic baptism. Hodge, and those who walked in his theological footsteps, argued the opposing side. Though a number of arguments were offered by Thornwell (including the impurity of the water used by Roman Catholics, and other wrong views they had of the sacrament), the main hinge of the argument was centered on the question of whether a priest is a minister of Christ. After all, if the Roman Catholic Church is a synagogue of Satan, how can its ministers be true ministers of Christ? The Westminster Confession of Faith (1647) in Chapter 28.2 says, "The outward element to be used in this sacrament is water . . . by a minister of the gospel, lawfully called thereunto."

In more recent history, the Presbyterian Church in America wrote a study report on the subject. The majority sided with Thornwell, and the minority sided with Hodge. Historically, the Reformed have accepted Roman Catholic baptisms. What we must ask at this point is, "Should we continue to accept their baptisms?"

An Answer

Yes, we should continue our practice of accepting Roman Catholic baptisms. This is not in any way an endorsement of their unbiblical views of baptism. For example, they believe baptism is necessary for salvation, that it has an efficacy unto salvation, that holy water must be used, and so on. The reason we should accept their baptisms is because the three necessary elements to a proper baptism are present: the matter, the form, and the design.

As to the matter, water is used. It might be water blessed by the pope and sanctioned by the Roman Catholic Church, but it is water. It is not oil, wine, sawdust, or ash; it is water. The matter is correct.

As to the form, the trinitarian formula is used. In Matthew 28, Jesus sent out the disciples to go and make disciples. Part of that work of disciple making was to baptize them into the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. The Roman Catholic Church uses the same formula in its baptisms as Reformed churches use.

As to the design, the Roman Catholic Church does view baptism as a sacrament. They also view it, in a similar way, as a sign and seal applying the benefits of salvation. Their view of the efficacy of baptism (that grace is automatically given, and the recipient is placed into a state of grace because of the baptism) is the real issue. Closely connected with this is the person administering the sacrament. Does baptism depend upon the merit of the one performing it?

Those who followed Thornwell argued that a Catholic priest is not a lawfully called minister of God. Hodge argued that priests are true ministers. It is the hierarchical structure, and ultimately the papacy, that shows the Roman Catholic Church to be a synagogue of Satan, Hodge argued. However, locally, the priest is called by a particular community of those professing faith in Christ. What this means is that a Catholic priest performing a baptism is different from your older brother baptizing you in a bathtub when you were children. Something official is taking place.

John Calvin deals with this question in chapter 15 of the third book of the *Institutes*. There is a reason why Calvin was not rebaptized after the Reformation took place, and the reason is our defense as well today. In baptism, it is the Lord who places His seal upon the baptism, regardless in that sense whose hand performs it.

Calvin gives the illustration of reformation under King Josiah and King Hezekiah (2 Kings 18; 22; 23). Though wicked hands performed the circumcision of thousands, these faithful kings did not call for a second circumcision. The same is true for us. Whether it is a priest or a female pastor performing the baptism, the beauty of the sacrament is in the person speaking. That person is God.

The nature of the sacrament itself keeps us from seeking to rebaptize those who become Reformed after having come from the Roman Catholic Church. In baptism, it is God who makes a promise to the child. The promise given in the sacraments is “to forgive our sins and give us eternal life by grace alone because of Christ’s one sacrifice finished on the cross” (HC A 66). That promise is the same whether someone was baptized by the pope or by your pastor. Baptism is a covenantal claim of a child to be identified with God and to be a member of His church and people.

Conclusion

The acceptance of Roman Catholic baptisms has been less of a debate for those from the Three Forms of Unity tradition than it has for the Presbyterian (WCF) tradition. Nevertheless, it is important to know where we stand on the issue because it ought to be our prayer that



we will be faced with this scenario very often. When Sarah, the young woman who was baptized Roman Catholic, became a member of our congregation, she made profession of faith. She was not rebaptized, and the reason why is because she had already received a water baptism, in the name of the Trinity and performed by a priest. The promise of God was given to her in her baptism, and when she confessed her love for the Lord, that promise was publicly realized by the congregation. As a congregation, we rejoiced with her and praised God for His gracious sacramental promise, which was given to her and to us all in our baptisms.

For Further Reading

<http://www.hornes.org/theologia/charles-hodge/do-rc-clergy-count-as-gospel-ministers>.

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The Certainty of Scripture

Rev. Daniel R. Hyde

I remember the first time I sprained my ankle playing basketball. I had been free of injury and flying high until it happened. Initially the pain of a first ankle sprain was excruciating. But what was worse was the aftereffect. Not knowing what I was supposed to do, I tried to put weight on it, only to feel even worse pain. Without my feet under me I was left with a feeling of uncertainty.

In a similar way, without a foundation for our faith we will have nothing more than uncertainty. And the Scriptures are that foundation. Not only do we find in Scripture beautiful literature and glorious descriptions of God, but also we find them to be the foundation that gives our faith, hope, and love certainty in this life. You need to know why you believe the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments are the Word of God to the world, as I showed in our last article; you need to know why they are authoritative for doctrine and living.

To demonstrate how the biblical authors themselves saw their message and writings as the foundation for certainty, I'd like to explore 2 Peter 1:16–21 with you. In these verses we learn this fact: The most certain thing we have in this life is the Word of God. This is in direct contradiction to the claim of Pope Paul VI, who decreed at the Second Vatican Council in 1965:

... it is not from Sacred Scripture alone that the Church draws her certainty about everything which has been revealed. Therefore both sacred tradition and Sacred Scripture are to be accepted and venerated with the same sense of loyalty and reverence.¹

Note the context of 2 Peter 1 that leads to the conclusion that Scripture alone is our foundation. Peter opens by saying that God's power has granted to us all we need for life and godliness (v. 3). He has granted what we need for life and godliness through the knowledge of Jesus Christ, who calls us to His own glory and excellence (v. 3). By this glory and excellence He grants to us His precious and very great promises (v. 4). Through these promises we become partakers of God's divine nature (v. 4), which



means becoming creaturely partakers of the Creator's holiness. We see this as Peter goes on to say that we have escaped from the corruption of the world (v. 4). This is why he exhorts us to all the godly virtues (vv. 5–9), saying if we do not grow in them, we have forgotten that we were cleansed from our former sins (v. 9). And this is why we must make our calling and election sure (vv. 10–11). Verses 12–15 bring this all to a summary: as his time on earth draws to a close, Peter says he writes to give the assurance that we have received the truth. Second Peter 1:3–15, then, is Peter's final assurance that those who read his final letter have been established in the truth of God's precious and great promises. He then goes on to prove that having been established in the truth, we can be certain of God's promised truth (vv. 16–21).

The Certainty of Peter's Eyewitness

Peter first describes the certainty of his eyewitness to Jesus Christ: "For we did not follow cleverly devised myths when we made

known to you the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but we were eyewitnesses of his majesty" (v. 16). The certainty that he can offer is the certainty of one who lived with Jesus for the three years of His public ministry. Peter was chosen by Jesus. Peter walked with Jesus. Peter ate with Jesus. Peter heard Jesus teach as one with authority. Peter was there for Jesus' astonishing signs and wonders. Peter was there when Jesus was betrayed. Peter sadly was there denying the Lord even as the Lord was on trial. Peter saw the Lord risen from the dead (1 Cor. 15). Peter saw the wounds in His hands, feet, and side. Peter ate with the Lord after the resurrection. Peter was taught by Jesus for forty days before the ascension. In verse 16, Peter particularly points out that he was there at the Mount of Transfiguration, when Jesus' glory was revealed and Moses and Elijah appeared (Matt. 17): "he received honor and glory from God the Father, and the voice was borne to him by the Majestic Glory" (v. 17a).

Peter could not have been any more certain for himself that he was not following "cleverly devised myths" but was established in the truth of God's precious and great promises because he saw the "majesty" of Jesus Christ revealed before his very eyes. And he wants us to have that same assurance.

The Certainty of Peter's Ear Witness

We don't doubt that those who saw Julius Caesar or George Washington and then wrote down what they saw were telling the truth. But Peter goes on to write of another source of his certainty: his ear witness. He not only saw Jesus from a distance but also heard Him as a close friend. And not only did he see Jesus transfigured in glory, but also he heard the voice of God the Father from heaven, testifying about the truth of who Jesus was: "'This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased.' We ourselves heard this very voice borne from heaven, for we were with him on the holy mountain" (vv. 17b–18). Peter's fellow disciple,

John, described the firsthand knowledge of Jesus in similar terms: "That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked upon and have touched with our hands, concerning the word of life" (1 John 1:1).

Peter heard God. He heard a distinct voice. He heard distinct words. He heard a distinct testimony about the Jesus he was following, listening to, and believing in. And he wanted his hearers—us—to know this certain sound of the voice of our heavenly Father.

The Supracertainty of the Prophets' Fulfilled Witness

The objection to this could obviously be, "But that's what Peter experienced or thought he experienced." And if that was all there was, we would be left uncertain and wondering how we could distinguish Peter's experience from Siddhartha Gautama's (the Buddha), Muhammad's, or Joseph Smith's. Why should I trust what Peter experienced?

And so Peter adds a climactic reason for certainty that is not subjective but objective. After all that Peter says so certainly about his certain experience and peculiar experience as an apostle, there was something "more sure" (v. 19) that gives us total confidence that we have been established in the truth of God's promises: the fulfillment of the Old Testament prophets.

This term, "more fully confirmed" or "more sure" (*bebaioteron*), is vivid. The New International Version and the New American Standard Bible translate it as "made more sure," but "made" is not in the Greek text. The point Peter is making is that the Old Testament Scriptures

are more certain, more sure; they are not made so.² This word is used in several places in the New Testament. In Hebrews 6:19 it is used of an anchor for our souls. In 2 Corinthians 1:7 it is used of our hope. In Romans 4:16 it is used of the promise to Abraham that he was justified by faith. In Hebrews 3:6 and Hebrews 3:14 it is used of our confidence. And here in 2 Peter 1:10 it is used of making our calling and election sure.

Notice what Peter is saying. The prophetic Scriptures of the Old Testament that pointed forward to Jesus Christ hundreds and thousands of years before His birth are more certain than the "cleverly devised myths," Peter's apostolic eyewitness, and even the testimony of God Himself on the Mount of Transfiguration. What Peter is saying is that in comparison with the prophetic word in the Old Testament as it was promised, we now have the total certainty and confidence that those prophecies have been fulfilled in the person and work of the Lord Jesus Christ.

Let me give an example of the narrative of how these promises have come true in Jesus Christ. In the midst of humanity's sin and the Lord's pronounced curse, the Lord promised the advent of a coming Savior who would be born of woman and would crush the head of the serpent who introduced sin and death (Gen. 3:8–15). Then, after subsequent generations the Lord was then pleased to choose one of Shem's descendants—Abram—through whom to bring this one promised seed of the woman, who would bless the families of the all the peoples on the face of the earth (Gen. 22:15–18). Hundreds of years later a promise was given that this son would be born of a virgin and called Immanuel, "God with us" (Isa. 7:10–14). The offspring of Eve, of

Sarah, and of the virgin would be a king (Isa. 9:2–7). This promised king would be born in Bethlehem (Micah 5:2–5a). And the list goes on and on!

We have "something more sure"—the prophetic word in its fulfillment and confirmation. This is why Martin Luther said of this passage: "A prophet eminently should be he who preaches Jesus Christ. Therefore, although many prophets in the Old Testament have foretold things to come, yet they came and were sent by God for this reason especially: that they should foretell of Christ."³

What is said of the prophets in particular is true of the Word of God in general, as a part of the whole. The Old Testament prophesied the coming of the Lord, and the New Testament is the chronicle of the coming of the Lord. This is why one writer said, "The written Word, believed to be the Lord's mind, is the surest ground for faith to rest upon of any that ever has been or can be given to sinners who are subject to forgetfulness, jealousies and mistakes."⁴

What certainty! What confidence! What assurance we have that God has spoken! God has spoken in the prophecies, poems, and epistles of our Old and New Testaments. Put this in the context of the aforementioned quote from the Roman pope. Rome says that Peter was the first pope. And popes have said Scripture plus tradition are equal sources of authority for believers. If so, why does Peter say that the Scriptures are the surest foundation that we have been established in the truth? Why does he not say we should believe his personal eyewitness to Jesus' transfiguration is all that is needed? Why does he not say his word as pope is all that we need?

Because of certainty of the Word taught here, Peter tells us to “pay attention” to these words “as to a lamp shining in a dark place” (v. 19). For how long? Until the coming of Jesus Christ again: “until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts” (v. 19). As John Calvin said, “All are immersed in darkness who do not look to the light of the Word. Therefore unless you want to cast yourself of your own accord into a labyrinth, you must take the utmost care not to deviate even a hair’s breadth from the direction of the Word.”⁵

Conclusion

Are you feeling confident as a believer at this moment? There is obviously a lot of uncertainty politically, morally, economically, and in every other way in the world. Yet in the midst of it all we can know for certain that God has spoken. And the Word He has spoken through prophets and apostles is sure. Since this Word is sure, your faith should and must continue to be sure.

1. *Dei Verbum*, 2.9, found at http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19651118_dei-verbum_en.html.

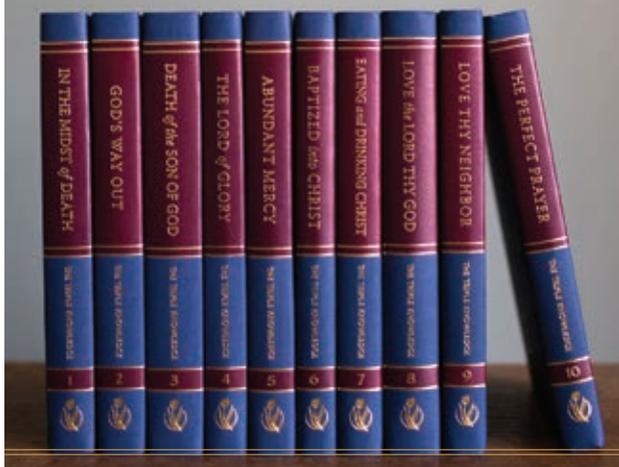
2. See Simon J. Kistemaker, *Peter and Jude*, New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1987), 269.
3. Martin Luther, *Commentary on Peter and Jude*, ed. John N. Lenker (1904; repr., Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1990), 247.
4. Alexander Nisbet, *1 and 2 Peter* (1982; repr., Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth, 1995), 239.
5. John Calvin, *Hebrews and the First and Second Epistles of St Peter*, Calvin’s New Testament Commentaries, 12 vols. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), 12:342.

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CORRECTION: The anniversary feature in the Jan/Feb issue of *The Outlook* stated that the publication of Calvin Theological Seminary was called *The Outlook*. The name of that publication was *Reformed Journal*. *The Outlook* began about the same time that the *Reformed Journal* began, and it was discontinued in 1990.

Introduction

Pastor and author Kevin De Young has compared the danger of familiarity within worship to watching a flight attendant give the pre-flight instructions. You know the routine: how to properly buckle your seatbelt and what to do in the slim chance that something goes terribly wrong in flight.

I clearly remember the first time I flew. When the attendant started doing her pre-flight routine, I was all ears. Of course, it helped that these were the days before iPhones and earbuds. If I wanted to listen to music, it meant taking out the portable CD player and remembering to take headphones that didn't fit neatly into my pocket.

Regardless, I listened to her every word as if my life depended on it (because it might). In case the plane goes down, take the oxygen mask and secure it over my own mouth before helping someone else. Got it. No problem, I thought. Except that I knew, deep down inside, that if the plane really were to take a nose dive, I was quite certain it wouldn't matter whether I helped myself first or not.

That was many years ago. Now, whenever I fly, my electronic device is up and running long before the flight attendant gets around to her routine. And unless I'm sitting in one of the first few rows, I flat-out ignore her.

Why? Because of familiarity. I've heard it all before.

Identifying the Log

It's not that different when it comes to church. Most of you who are

reading this article have been there, done that. Sunday morning and Sunday evening. Week in, week out. Month after month, year after year, decade after decade.

But could it be that we're so familiar with attending church and gathering for worship that we tune it out, like I tend to do with the flight attendant?

One of the beautiful things about Reformed worship is the biblical liturgy. There is a reason we do what we do. Yet there is where the danger lies. Its predictable nature makes it easy to check out.

For example, how often don't we let the call to worship go in one ear and out the other? Trust me, I see it every week. God is kindly and graciously gathering us into His holy presence by His Word as His covenant people, yet all we can think about is where the lady in front of us got her coat, or what a rotten morning we had just to get to church, or how we're going to get anything out of the service sitting in front of that family.

Or take the greeting. How often are we left unfazed that the creator of the universe meets with us sinners in a stance of mercy, peace, and grace? Ho-hum. On to the next.

And we've all been there when it comes to singing. The same words that may have led us to tears years ago now leave us unmoved. All we can think about is how slowly the pianist is playing or how loudly the organist is pounding.

We are so familiar with Exodus 20 that we could literally say it in our sleep. We know the pastor's cadence. We could mimic his every

pause and intonation. We check our watch. Then he says something about Jesus, reads a Bible verse that is supposed to be assuring, and we're on to the prayer.

And we Reformed pastors love to pray long prayers! We're all encouraged to listen, but it's hard not to daydream. Occasionally we're jolted when we hear our name mentioned, but usually we're hearing words without listening.

We haven't even got to the sermon yet. But if we're being totally honest, even a great sermon sometimes leaves us uninspired. In part, because we think we've heard it all before. Or at least most of it.

Element by element, with each new passing week, we drift away (some of you literally) into our little semi-comatose kingdoms of self. While God is speaking directly to us, all we hear is white noise. Like Charlie Brown, blah-blah-blah.

Getting to the Root

We have to honestly assess ourselves. Why are we often numb to that which is familiar? Is it a case of been there, done that, heard it all before?

Speaking as a pastor, some of the blame rests squarely on us. If we rush through the elements of worship without challenging people as to why we do what we do, no wonder they have a tendency to be distracted. If our preaching lacks passion, how can we expect our people to be passionate?

Part of the reason I've given up listening to the flight attendants is that the vast majority of them go through their routine with about



as much passion as a stump. I can understand how this happens. Maybe at first they were young and optimistic. "I'm going to be different. I'm going to be funny. Whatever happens, they can't blame me for not trying!"

But then reality sets in. People aren't looking. Some are even sleeping. No one seems to care. After a while, you lose the passion. Is it even worth trying? What's the point? So the flight attendant does what she does because she has to. And some pastors are there. All duty, no delight. If he's not amazed, why would I be?

But there is a deeper problem that

affects both speaker and listener alike, and it is this: we are bored with God.

Bored with God? How is that even possible? God is a lot of things, but boring isn't one of them!

But it's true. Think of your reaction to seeing new Christians show up at your church. They're excited, on fire, full of questions. Their enthusiasm exposes the darkness of our boredom. Or worse yet, we quietly congregate and criticize their newfound joy as either emotionalism or naive.

Simon the Pharisee in Luke 7:36–50 was like that. He invited Jesus to his house (because he thought he was pretty important). Everybody who

was anybody was there. And then she walked in.

A notorious sinner (probably a prostitute). How embarrassing. She obviously wasn't invited, but then it got even worse. She started making a scene. Talk about inappropriate! She was weeping and pouring perfume on Jesus' feet, wiping them with her hair. And oh, how she carried on!

Yet her love for Jesus contrasted sharply with Simon's lackluster pride. "Whoever is forgiven much, loves much. And whoever is forgiven little, loves little." The point was clear.

Could it be that we in the Reformed community love God and others poorly because we aren't all that amazed (at least anymore) that God has sent Jesus to forgive us?

And so the grace that used to amaze us bores us now. We still sing the song. We still talk the talk. But deep down in the recesses of our hearts, we've lost our sense of wonder, our sense of awe, our sense of surprise in the gospel of grace.

I wonder if that's what happened to the older generation mentioned in Judges 2. We're told these sober words: "And all that generation also were gathered to their fathers. And there arose another generation after them who did not know the Lord or the work that he had done for Israel" (Judg. 2:10).

Kids, these days. Will they ever grow up? But wait. The question

that begs to be answered is this: How did the younger generation suddenly not know the Lord or the work that He had performed? Were they not listening?

Or could it be that their parents lost the wonder of the exodus, just like some of us have lost the wonder of the cross?

How the Gospel Addresses Familiarism

Familiarity is not the problem. We are. The answer is not to abandon the same old story and catechisms and liturgies and traditions and forms but to see that the doctrine, to use a line from the English playwright Dorothy Sayers, is the drama.

The gospel story that runs through the pages of the Bible is the most exciting, exhilarating, passion-producing story ever written. The problem is not God. He is amazing.

His story of redemption is stunning. No, the problem is us.

Not only do we tend to take familiar things for granted, but also our hearts are prone to wander, prone to leave the God we love.

It hardly ever happens overnight. We usually don't wake up one day and decide that we're now unfazed by Jesus.

It's more like the proverbial frog in the kettle. Slowly, over time, the temperature rises, and we don't realize that we're being lulled to sleep.

What's the answer? How do we keep ourselves amazed? Not by turning to a different story or to different methods or to different means. The solution is found in being amazed again and again by the same old story—of Jesus and His love.

To be touched by the flames of the gospel, we have to get close to the blazing center. We must go to the cross daily. We must expect and long for preaching that brings Christ to us and us to Him. We must let the gospel be good news to these sinners' ears.

And we must tell the next generation. Not merely out of duty, as if this is part of our job description. But out of the glorious duty of delight!

Great is the Lord, and greatly to be praised,

and his greatness is unsearchable!

One generation shall commend your works to another,

and shall declare your mighty acts.

On the glorious splendor of your majesty,

and on your wondrous works, I will meditate.

They shall speak of the might of your awesome deeds,

and I will declare your greatness.

They shall pour forth the fame of your abundant goodness

and shall sing aloud of your righteousness.

The Lord is gracious and merciful,

slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love.

—Ps. 145: 3–8

Man of sorrows! what a name

For the Son of God, who came

Ruined sinners to reclaim

Hallelujah! What a Savior!

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Know this, my beloved brothers: let every person be quick to hear, slow to speak . . . (James 1:19)

Have you ever wondered why God gave us two ears but only one tongue? “Some people say that’s because He wanted us to spend twice as much time listening as talking. Others claim it’s because He knew listening was twice as hard as talking.”¹ Indeed, if we are honest with ourselves, we must admit that listening is not an easy task.

Wives will often ask their husbands, “Will you please just *listen* to me?” Our wives ask this of us men because, when they come to us to share their problem, we immediately speak back to them and try to offer them solutions. In truth, our wives would rather we first take the time to listen to them, giving their concern the serious consideration that it deserves, before formulating a response. Of course, like men, women also struggle at times with their ability to listen well.

James was fully aware of our struggle to listen to others when he wrote, “Know this, my beloved brothers: let every person be quick to hear, slow to speak” (James 1:19). As we explore the meaning of this passage in the paragraphs below, we will consider the following three points: the message to which we listen; the motive for which we listen; and the manner by which we listen.

The Message to Which We Listen

In this passage, James specifically addresses his fellow believers in Christ, addressing them as “my beloved brothers.” To them, he issues not merely a request but a command—“know this”—which makes it clear that

what James is telling them to do is both urgent and crucial. What exactly is it that he wants them to know? Before answering this question, it’s helpful to notice a distinction that’s made by the King James Version translation of this passage.

In the King James Version, this verse is translated, “Wherefore, my beloved brethren, let every man be swift to hear, slow to speak.” The English Standard Version reading begins with the word *know*, and the New International Version expresses this as “take note of this.” Therefore, which reading is best?

I favor the King James Version, because the expression “wherefore” seems to offer the most appropriate transition from the preceding verses. In verses 17–18 (in the New International Version), James writes, “Every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of the heavenly lights, who does not change like shifting shadows. He chose to give us birth through the word of truth, that we might be a kind of firstfruits of all he created.”

In verse 17, God is presented as the source of all blessings—the giver of every good and perfect gift. In verse 18, James informs us that one of these gifts which God has given to us is the gift of birth—spiritual birth. Sin gave us death, but God gave us new life in Christ (Eph. 2:1, 4–5), and He chose to accomplish this “through the word of truth.” First Peter 1:23 states it this way (in the English Standard Version): “you have been born again, not of perishable seed but of imperishable, through the living and abiding word of God.”

In the two previous verses, we have

been taught that spiritual birth or regeneration is a gift of God and that God gives this gift through the Word of God. Given these truths, everyone should therefore be quick to listen to the Word of truth. Because Scripture is the primary instrument through which God gives His marvelous gift of salvation, everyone should be listening to this “word of truth,” which is the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ.

What is the object of our listening? It is the very written Word of God—the Bible. Abraham Lincoln once said, “I believe the Bible is the best gift God has ever given to man. All the good from the Savior of the world is communicated to us through this book.”² It could never be stated strongly enough: we must listen to the living Word of God.

The Motive for Which We Listen to God’s Word

Why must we listen to God’s Word? Here are five reasons which are given to us in this passage.

1. We must listen to God’s Word because this is the ordinary means through which God saves sinners (James 1:18, 21). Paul confirms this in Romans 10:17: “So faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ.” Faith comes from hearing the message, and the message comes to us through the Word of Christ.

If you are not yet saved, there is good news for you. As you listen to God’s Word, God can save you using that Word. Acts 16:31 makes the exhortation plain: “Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved.” Of course, we’re always tempted to ask, “Is that really all that I must do to

be saved from my sins?” but James is speaking to us through our text, saying, “Psst! Before you speak . . . LISTEN! Hear what God’s Word says to us, and let this truth sink deeply into your heart!”

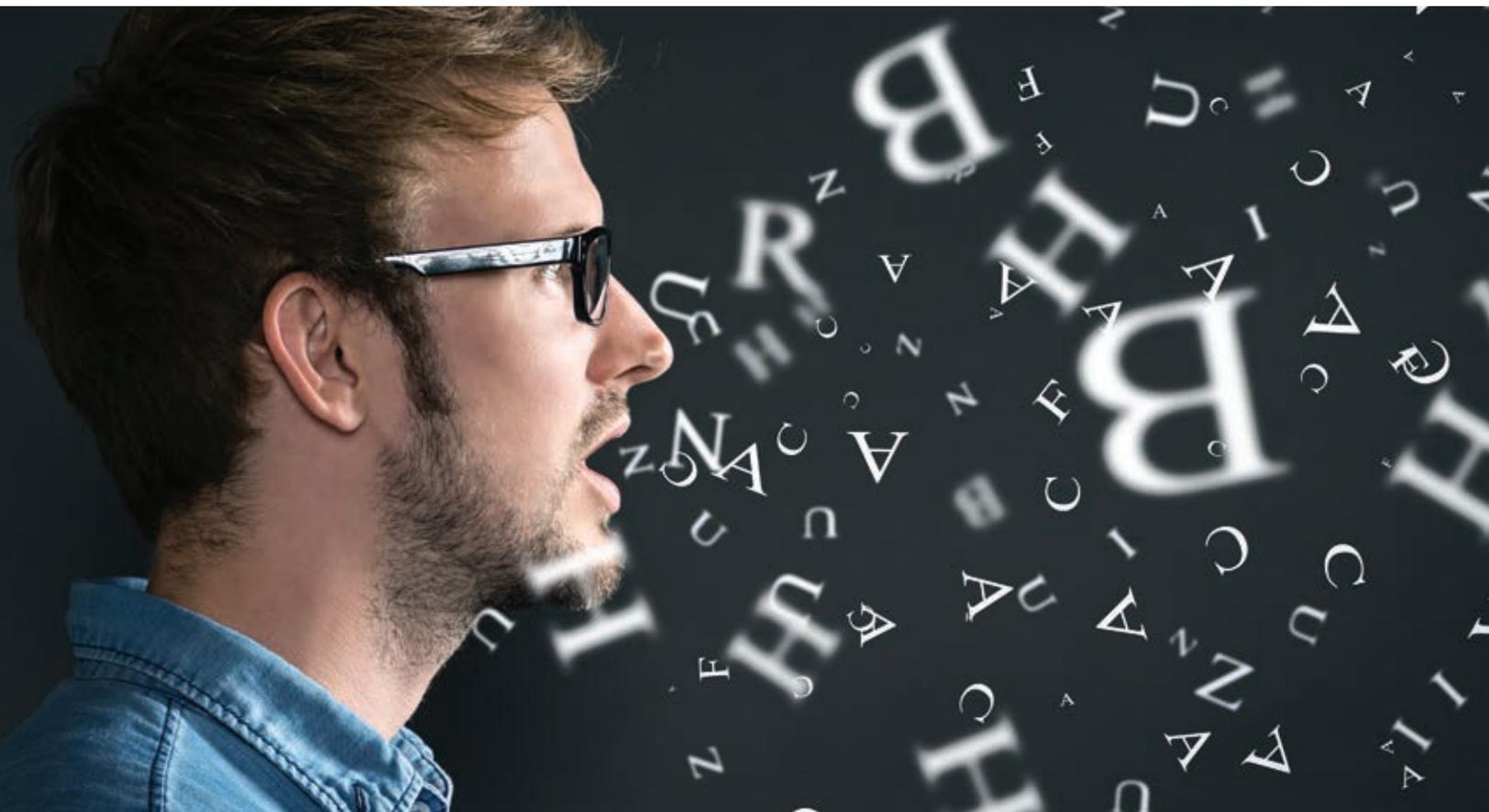
Nonetheless, we may want to speak again, asking, “But my sins are too

which He sanctifies His people. Why do you think James wrote his book? One of the reasons was to help his fellow believers grow in their faith, even in the midst of trials (James 1:2).

One thing is for sure. We will never mature spiritually if we disregard what the Bible teaches. Instead, we

be continually sanctified by this life-changing gospel.

Of course, our goal is not only to listen to the Bible but to understand and apply it to our lives, as well. A popular children’s song expresses this well: “Read your Bible, pray every day. . . . And you’ll grow, grow, grow. . . .



many . . . how can God save me?” Again, we should hear the command, “Listen!” and heed biblical teachings such as Isaiah 1:18: “though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow.” John Newton, writer of the classic hymn “Amazing Grace,” when he was old and about to die, said, “My memory is nearly gone, but I remember two things: That I am a great sinner and that Christ is a great Savior.”³ Like Newton, we are great sinners, but we must never forget that Jesus Christ is a great Savior. God’s grace is greater than all our sins.

2. We also must listen to God’s Word because it is the ordinary means by

which we must heed the words of 1 Peter 2:2: “Like newborn infants, long for the pure spiritual milk, that by it you may grow up into salvation.” Practically, this means that the gospel must be central in our daily lives.

Some Christians believe that the gospel is only for non-believers. They’ll say things like, “I no longer need to hear the gospel, because I’m already saved.” However, this is the wrong way for believers to think. For example, instructing his fellow believers, Paul says, “Let your manner of life be worthy of the gospel of Christ” (Phil. 1:27). This should remind all of us who follow Jesus to keep the gospel ever before us, striving to

Don’t read your Bible, forget to pray. . . . And you’ll shrink, shrink, shrink!” It goes without saying that we should aim for growth in our walk with God, and we can do this only as we spend time feasting upon the rich teaching of God’s Word.

3. Another reason for listening to God’s Word (and perhaps the most significant reason) is because God commands us to do so. The expression “every person” certainly includes you and me, and the command here is for all of us to be quick to listen to God. When we disregard God’s Word, we are both disobeying Him and rejecting anything that He might want to say to us. By neglecting to

listen to Him speak through His Word, we are sinning against God just as surely as if we had disobeyed any other command that He gives to us in Scripture.

There is a growing trend in our churches for young people to bring their smartphones into the worship service and send text messages to friends or play games during the sermon. How offensive this sight must be to our holy God, who desires for every person to hear Him speaking to us through His life-changing Word! We must pray against this sinful practice, and do all that we can to encourage every person—meaning every child, every teenager, every adult, and even every church leader—to listen to God speak through His Word, just as He has instructed us to do.

4. We must also listen to God's Word—the word of truth—because it is literally God's love letter to us. How can we possibly fail to read the loving words which are given to us by the almighty God of the universe? There is no more important person whom we could ever hope to hear from, and there is no excuse that is sufficient for failing to hear God speak to us through His Word.

When I receive a love letter from my wife, I read it with great joy and excitement, because I love her deeply, and I read it multiple times—not out of duty but with delight. After all, who am I, that the woman I love should go to

such great lengths to demonstrate her love for me? I feel unworthy of such affection, and thrilled beyond words to receive such a gift from her.

If the loving words of a spouse can bless us in such a way, how much more blessed should we be by God's love letter to us—His holy Word? Remember that James is addressing this book to those who have already received the gift of spiritual birth in their lives. For these born-again people, the voice of their heavenly Father must be so sweet to their ears. This same joy is expressed well in Psalm 119:103: "How sweet are your words to my taste, sweeter than honey to my mouth!"

If you are able to read these same words from James and still not be stirred in your heart toward a deeper knowledge and understanding of God's Word, could it be that perhaps you have not yet experienced God's regenerating grace in your life? If, however, you're confident that you have been born again into God's eternal family, do you desire to hear God speak to you through His Word more than you desire to hear from anyone else in the world? If not, then consider asking God to put such a love for His Word within your heart.

5. Finally, we must listen to God's Word because whenever the Bible is read, taught, or preached, it is God, the eternal ruler of heaven and earth, who is ultimately speaking to us.

There is no higher authority than God, and we are expected to submit our entire lives to Him. We do this, first, by hearing what He says to us through His Word.

The gospel which is proclaimed to us in Scripture is the gospel of Jesus Christ, the King of kings and the Lord of lords. He is our glorious Savior and Lord, and we must give Him our full attention as we listen to Him teaching us through His Word—the Word which the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit have given to us so that we might know our triune God more fully.

Ironically, we all want God to listen to us when we pray, but we rarely want to listen to Him when He speaks to us through His Word. As we remember that it is God who speaks to us through the Bible, it should motivate us to listen far more attentively to what it says.

The Manner by Which We Listen

Given the importance of our listening to God's Word, in what manner should we do this? There are many things that we could say about this, of course, but a helpful guide for us at this point is the Westminster Larger Catechism, which asks: "What is required of those that hear the word preached?" (Q 160). Answer: "It is required of those that hear the word preached, that they attend upon it with diligence (Prov. 8:34), preparation (1 Peter 2:1–2; Luke 8:18), and prayer (Ps. 119:18;



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Eph. 6:18–19).⁴ To express this wise counsel in a slightly different way, we must strive to be diligent, disciplined, and dependent upon God as we grow in our submission to His Word.

1. We must be diligent in listening to God’s Word. By nature we do not want to listen to God. In our natural condition, we are like our first parents, Adam and Eve, who did not pay attention to God’s commandment. However, God calls us to listen to His Word with all diligence. As our passage instructs, we should “be quick” to hear God speaking to us—making every effort to become good listeners in our churches and eager students of the Word in our homes. Let us, therefore, pray and ask God to put a hunger for His Word within us, and to help us grow in the ability to listen well to the preaching and teaching of His Word.

2. We must also be disciplined in preparing ourselves to meet with God regularly, both in public worship, with our brothers and sisters in Christ, and in our own daily quiet times with the Lord. We must realize that the devil will do all that he can to distract us from God’s Word, and we must make every effort to stay faithful in the time that we spend with God and His Word. Spending time with God must be the top priority of our lives. Every opportunity to meet with God in prayer, in the reading of His Word, or in corporate worship with His people must be treated as sacred. A half-hearted effort will never be enough to keep us growing in our walk with God. We must keep God first in our lives and refuse to let the enemy keep us from meeting with Him.

3. In the end, though, we must also recognize that we are still completely dependent upon God, even in our quest to grow closer to Him. No matter how hard we try to keep God first in our lives, the sin with which we still struggle will always prevent us from being perfect Christians. Oh, how dependent we are upon God’s grace and mercy in every area of our lives!

Despite our greatest efforts, we will never be as diligent as we should in our reading of Scripture, in our prayer life, in our church attendance, or in any other area of spiritual growth. We should always continue to work toward increased growth in our walk with the Lord, but there will never be a time when we don’t continue to need His divine help.

Recognizing our dependence upon God, let us be in the habit of praying before, during, and after our times of Bible study, asking the Lord to speak to us through the text, to open our minds to what it’s saying to us, to show us how to meditate on it properly and to apply it effectively to our lives. As we come to worship with our church family, we should also ask God to help us listen well to what is preached, to bless the preacher as well as all who will hear him preach, and to remove any distractions that might hinder someone from hearing God speak to them through His Word.

There once was a man who traveled to different places selling individual books from the Bible. One night, as he was passing through a forest in Sicily, he was stopped by a robber who demanded that he burn all the books that he had—the books of the Bible. After starting the fire, the traveling salesman asked if he might be allowed to read a small portion from each book before surrendering them to the flames. The thief agreed to the request.

The man began to read passages such as Psalm 23, the Sermon on the Mount, the parable of the Good Samaritan, and 1 Corinthians 13. After each excerpt was read, the outlaw exclaimed, “That’s a good book! We won’t burn that. Give it to me.” None of the books were burned, but all were taken by the thief. Some years later, the robber appeared again, but now as an ordained Christian minister. God used the Bible to transform this robber into a servant of the Lord Jesus Christ.⁵

I’m fully convinced that God’s Word is living, active, and powerful. Through His Word, God transforms lives and accomplishes eternal salvation. What all of us must do, therefore, is listen to God’s Word, and hear God speaking to us through it.

Study Questions

1. Why should people be expected to listen to the message of the Bible?
2. What are some things that might hinder us from hearing God speak to us through His Word?
3. In what ways do we still need the gospel if we’re already Christians?
4. Why is it sinful to disregard God’s Word?
5. What are some ways that we can continue to grow in our love and devotion to God’s Word?

1. Roy B. Zuck, *The Speaker’s Quote Book* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1997), 231.

2. Paul Lee Tan, *Encyclopedia of 7700 Illustrations* (Rockville: Assurance Publishers, 1982), 192.

3. Kenneth W. Osbeck, *Amazing Grace* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2002), 164.

4. Westminster Larger Catechism (1647) in *Reformed Confessions of the 16th and 17th Centuries in English Translation: Volume 4, 1600–1693*, compiled with introductions by James T. Dennison (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 2010), 341.

5. Zuck, *The Speaker’s Quote Book*, 26.

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Regarding Tepic, Tacos, and Time: The Gospel in Tepic, Mexico

Rev. Matthew
Van Dyken

[Some of you may remember the first third of this article, as it was written for a recent edition of the URCNA *Trumpet*.]

¡Saludos en el Nombre del Señor Jesucristo! Greetings in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ! We are a small mission church of the URCNA in the city of Tepic, Nayarit, Mexico. My name is Matthew Van Dyken, and my dear wife's name is Anne-Marie. The Lord has blessed us with two small children, Naomi and Steven. For four years now, I have been serving as a missionary called by Hope Reformed Church in Brampton, Ontario, Canada. Perhaps some history of the work would be appropriate.

The work was started in 1996, when Rev. Harry Bout and his wife, Joanne, first arrived in Tepic. The city was chosen for the work because there was no Reformed presence in the entire region, not to mention the lack of almost any Christian presence. Starting from nothing, the church has grown over the years to a healthy though still relatively small size. We now have ten families as members, with four more families in membership classes. A good number of other families are just visiting for now, which means our weekly attendance is about sixty to eighty people. The majority come from Roman Catholic backgrounds, some come from different cults, and several families from other Christian churches. Most of our families are on the younger side, such that we have many children running around after the service. Visitors often remark on the warmth of our church fellowship. The Lord is good and has blessed us with a church that loves to be together.

Most of my activities as a missionary

pastor are the ministry of the Word within the congregation. I say "most," because as anyone knows who has been in a church plant, the missionary is not just the one who brings the Word but also (with the help of my dear wife) the ones who play the piano, bring out the garbage, fix the not-working fan, and such things. Thankfully with the growth of the church, more and more of these tasks are being done by the church, which is as it should be. But the biggest challenge we find now is not so much the bringing of people to the church—we have plenty of visitors—but rather is a matter of discipleship. Calling those whose lives are so broken to faith and repentance in Christ, working through the webs of a sinful past with new and old believers—that describes a good number of my visits. Yet I would say that the majority of what we do as a church together is simply the study of the Word. We have several weekly Bible studies, as our church is quite spread out. We have two overnight church retreats per year. These activities are natural ways for neighbors and friends to come hear the Word. But just as important, they are ways for the congregation to grow in the knowledge of Christ and in love for one another. And of course, there is center of everything we do—Sunday, the Lord's Day!

About half a year ago, a young man, Daniel, who had visited our congregation from time to time became very sick and went to the local hospital. There it was discovered that he was HIV-positive, as a result of his life of sin. In addition, he was

diagnosed with tuberculosis because of his low resistance to infection. I visited with him many times in the hospital (taking all necessary precautions, of course) and later in his house. As you can imagine, it was very difficult news for him to swallow. Twenty-two years old, from a very poor family, and with mediocre public health care. But he showed a great desire to leave his life of sin, to serve the Lord for the rest of his life, and to know the Lord's forgiveness. We were working through the book of John together. In the Lord's providence, the night before he passed away we were studying John 3:14–15, together with its Old Testament context. "And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in Him may have eternal life."

Early in the morning, Daniel died on the way to the hospital. It was quite a shock. No one knew he was that sick. His mother had just left for the weekend to go to an island prison to visit her husband. The family



asked me to do the funeral. The only problem was that Daniel was from Xalisco, a driving distance of half an hour from the graveyard. Having the funeral in our church building was not an option. So we decided to have



Retreat speeches



The church and team in 2015



Our church kids!



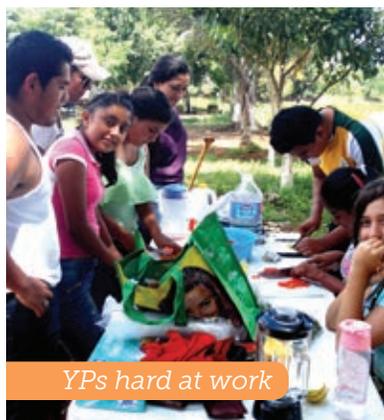
Worship service



Retreat



The Van Dykens



YPs hard at work



Church retreat games



Christmas Dinner

a graveside funeral, and we set up chairs and shade. What an opportunity it was from the Lord to preach in such a setting, surrounded by the dead, preaching to the living. And what a text to preach (John 3:14–15)! We trust that the Lord will in His time use the Word to bring His people to Himself. Many people afterward expressed their appreciation for the funeral. As one person said, “It was so beautiful! I have never seen anything like it. Can I have a Bible?”

A lot of people ask what life is like on the mission field. We always feel a little sheepish with such a question, as we aren’t missionaries like those in Papua New Guinea, for example.

A lot of things are the same. You can buy most everything at the local supermarket. And yet there are things that are different. For one, the food is different. The missionary mantra most definitely applies: “Where you lead me I will follow; what they feed me I will swallow.” We have eaten boar, cold jiggly pig skin cured in vinegar, fried pig skin (sort of like chips), and cow tongue (a delicacy). But I must hasten to admit that we love Mexican food. We have gotten quite used to our tortillas, *cola de rata chiles* (super spicy “rat’s tail” chili peppers), and beans. There’s nothing like a good Mexican taco.

In general, we enjoy our life here very

much. At the beginning, there were a lot of differences, but gradually it becomes normal. Some things continue to bother you, but it is good to have a sense of humor. The following are some of our favorites from the “Only in Mexico” files.

Only in Mexico does your furniture get lighter over the years. (Termites!)

Only in Mexico do twenty-five people get into two cars for a Bible study.

Only in Mexico do you open a granola bar package and bite into the bar, only to discover your hand is covered with ants.

Only in Mexico do you dust your car instead of wash your car.

Only in Mexico can you arrive both late and early for an event. To the tune of an hour either way. (If the people say to be there at 3:00 p.m. for a party, they DON'T mean 3:00 p.m.)

Only in Mexico do you search the city over for a thermometer—a simple, analog one—without success. Ten stores and counting!

Only in Mexico can you walk one minute to the corner hardware store to buy three screws.

Only in Mexico do you go into the right lane to turn left and into the left lane to turn right. (The first is completely legal and makes a lot of sense due to the ingenious Mexican system of lateral lanes. The second, however, is completely illegal but often happens at a red traffic light when people want to get past a line of stopped cars.)

Only in Mexico you need to keep one eye peeled for traffic, one eye looking for street signs that don't exist, and your third eye looking down for those ever-treacherous *topes* (speed bumps) waiting to jump out and slam into your car wheels.

Only in Mexico can you find oranges sweeter than sugar, bananas that

taste best fried, and people who love to spend hours chatting with you. (People always have time for you. What a blessing!)

Just in the short time I have been here, I have received a lot of interest with regard to mission teams. In the past, we had about one team a year. From the beginning, the work started with a yearly vacation Bible day school team. That was how the first missionaries (Rev. Harry and Joanna Bout, Rev. Richard and Angela Bout) made the first contacts in the city. These teams have been a great blessing over the years. Now, however, our needs and focus as a church are a little different. It is possible that we might do another team in 2017, but the greatest need we have here is to train up the local church itself for leadership and for outreach. Indeed, that is the greatest need of our churches everywhere. And so, if you are reading this article and thinking that it would be a great place to send a team, let me encourage you to look elsewhere.

This coming Friday we are meeting as a church to consider and pray about starting an AWANA-style children's outreach in another part of the city.

On Sunday, the young people's group will be handing out sandwiches and tracts at the hospital, as they do every month. We also have several men in our congregation who are interested in studying God's Word in greater depth (i.e., at a seminary level). For these things we praise the Lord, as they are not to be taken for granted. How can you join us in prayer? You can pray that the Lord would raise up His church here, young and old, to love and serve Him first. You can pray for me that I would be faithful in my calling to be a husband and a father, to minister the Word, to continue in prayer, and not to spread myself too thin. And you can give thanks, for the Lord is good! It is a delight to see Him working, in the church, in our little family, in all of our lives.

Rev. Matthew Van Dyken

is a URCNA missionary in Tepic, Mexico, and is married to Anne-Marie. They have two children, Naomi and Steven, with one more on the way. Matt and Anne-Marie have been on the field for four years.

The Board of Reformed Heritage Christian School is accepting resumes for a full-time high school & junior high math/science teacher and a full-time upper elementary multi-grade teacher for the 2016-17 school year. Reformed Heritage is committed to teaching covenant students from a distinctively Reformed perspective. Our goal is to train our young people to grow academically, think Biblically, and be servants of Christ in all endeavors of life. If you would like more information about our school visit the website: www.refhcs.org

A cover letter and resume can be mailed to:
Reformed Heritage Christian School,
700 N. Fletcher Ave., Kalamazoo, MI. 49006

Attn: Mr. Dave Vander Meer
or email: dnjvm5@att.net



Bible Study on Mark

Lesson 21: From the Grave to the Sky

Mark 16:1–20

Rev. William
Boekestein



When was the last time your plans were frustrated? It can be discouraging when intentions don't materialize. But sometimes it's a good thing. Three women had intended to enter Jesus' tomb and soak His body with fragrant herbs and oils. But their plans were frustrated; this was the day of Christ's resurrection.

Theirs wasn't the only plan that went awry. When Christ rose from the grave and issued the Great Commission, He also defeated the devil's plan to crush the Son of God and the spread of His gospel.

Jesus' Resurrection (16:1–8)

For two dark nights, Jesus' body rested in the tomb. But the time of His humiliation was nearly over.

On the Cusp of the Resurrection (vv. 1–3)

Mark sets the stage for Jesus' resurrection by giving two important details. The first detail has to do with the love labor of three women; an unusual emphasis considering that female testimony was not admissible in the law courts of Jesus' day. If the resurrection, the crux of Christianity, was a fabricated tale its inventors would not have been so foolish as to use female testimony. As it is, God freely exalts the status of women in this critical event.

The three women were Mary Magdalene,¹ Salome,² and Mary the mother of James. These women had followed Jesus for some time and supported Him by their own means (Luke 8:3). Compelled by a courageous love for Jesus, they hoped to apply additional spices and ointments to Jesus' body. Not

surprisingly, their love was assaulted by fear as they traveled to the tomb. Their concern about moving the stone from the tomb's entrance betrays their doubts about Christ's promise to rise on the third day (Mark 10:34). Little faith sees problems where they don't exist. Indeed, the stone had already been rolled away (v. 4).

A second important detail concerns the timing of the women's approach; it was very early on the first day of the week. Christ's resurrection forever changed the Christian calendar. The highest day of the week is now the first day. In the Old Testament the pattern was work before rest (Exod. 20:11). In the New Testament, because of Christ's work, the pattern is rest before work. Therefore, we begin our week by resting in Christ that we might be strengthened to work for His glory. In submission to God's will (Isa. 58:13) and displaying a careful piety often lacking among believers today, these women bought their spices after having rested on the Sabbath (Luke 23:56). Admitting the complexity of the issues pertaining to God's Holy Day, we should wonder if we have lost something of their reverence.

Presence of Angels (vv. 4–7)

When the women arrived at the tomb they were surprised to see it open. They were still more astonished to see angels³ before whom they bowed their faces to the ground (Luke 24:5). These hearty women weren't scared because they were girls. When the seasoned Roman guards had seen the angels—their appearance was like lightning (Matt. 28:3) and their apparel shone like the sun reflecting off fresh snow (Luke 24:4)—they had trembled and

became like dead men (Matt. 28:4).

The first thing the angels did upon the arrival of the three visitors was to pronounce words of comfort: "Do not be alarmed" (v. 6). How gracious the Lord is to encourage those who fear due to little faith. Second, the angels demonstrated the reality of the resurrection by pointing to where the now-risen Christ had lain. Jesus' body rose right through the grave clothes still in plain sight (John 20:6–7). The stone was rolled away not to let Jesus out but to let witnesses in. Third, the angels give instructions for faithfulness. The women were to tell the disciples exactly what Jesus had already told them (Luke 24:6–8; Mark 14:27–28). "Tell His disciples—and Peter—that He is going before you into Galilee; there you will see him as he said to you" (v. 7). Jesus approached the grave as a suffering Servant. He rose again as a victorious King. Yet he remains the same "thoughtful, kind, and loving Lord."⁴ Jesus' reference to Peter is especially touching considering his recent lapse of faith and courage (14:66–72). Perhaps this is why Peter (with John) was the first to run to the tomb (Luke 24:12; John 20:2–4).

Pursuant Action by the Women (v. 8)

The women left the tomb amazed. The Greek word (*ekstasis*) describes the state of someone who is thrown into a state of blended fear and wonderment.⁵ It is on this note of bewilderment that the book of Mark ends—at least according to many scholars, both liberal and conservative. Citing both external and internal evidence, scholars contend that verses 9–20 are a later

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addition to the Gospel appended to tie up loose ends. In terms of external evidence, these verses are absent from several early manuscripts viewed by some as the most reliable. Concerning internal evidence, the grammar, style, and contents of the longer ending seem to some to be incongruous with the rest of the book.

In wrestling through this difficult issue we need to see this as one of the truly rare cases in which manuscript questions concern a considerable number of verses,⁶ though notably, no Christian doctrine rests on these verses; nearly all the concepts are summaries of other portions of Scripture. To be brief, given that these verses have been preserved in the church's Bibles for nearly two thousand years in a preponderance of manuscripts, it seems wise for us to receive them as authoritative.

But what if verses 9–20 were not authentic? The alternate ending, verse 8, is striking. Christ's resurrection filled these women with the kind of fear that is greatly needed today. In the words of one social commentator:

A healthy fear of God is totally lost on contemporary Christianity, which sees him as more of a “buddy/friend/therapist/guru” than the creator and sustainer of the universe. More and more young people are growing dubious of God-lite and prefer thinking of him as a commanding, dominating, dangerous God who deserves our deferential fear.

He then adds this quote from J. I. Packer:

The pitiable Savior and the pathetic God of modern pulpits are unknown to the old gospel. The old gospel tells men that they need God, but not that God needs them (a modern falsehood); it does not exhort them to pity Christ but announces that Christ has pitied them, though pity was the last thing they deserved. It never loses sight of the divine majesty and sovereign power of the Christ whom it proclaims but rejects flatly all representations of him that would obscure his free omnipotence.⁷

Have we lost the fear of God? Test yourself. When you think about the resurrection, do you only think about yourself and those you love who will be raised some day? Or, like these women, do you tremble in reverent admiration before the God who has soundly defeated the great enemy death, and who will similarly defeat everyone who refuses to submit to Him?

In spite of their fear, the women were not distracted from their mission. Unbelieving fear is crippling. Godly fear is energizing. One of the saddest attributes describing modern Christians is lethargy, the state of being sluggish or indifferent. Those plagued by lethargy need to go the tomb, believe that Christ is raised, tremble in amazement, and be energized for faithfulness.

Jesus' Final Words and Deeds (16:9-20)

Following Jesus' resurrection, in



obedience to His instructions (Matt. 26:32), Jesus' disciples should have proceeded immediately to Galilee. But knowing their little faith, Jesus lingered in Jerusalem for another week making a number of appearances to His frightened followers.

Christ's Appearances (vv. 9-14)

While the women prepared to leave the tomb garden to locate the other disciples (cf. John 20:11-18) Jesus appeared first to Mary, comforting her grieving heart and steeling her to face a doubting audience (vv. 10-11). Later, Jesus appeared to two disciples who also met with disbelief upon giving their report. Like the disciples, we might resist the testimony of others because we think so highly of ourselves. How many times have we shrugged off a Christian messenger because we didn't like the message (or the messenger)? Jesus rebuked His disciples for failing to heed His heralds (v. 14). But Mark's record of the disciples' doubt also sounds a note of comfort. Doubt is not praiseworthy, but it is a reality for believers. God continually blesses us with the Word and sacraments "because of our weakness and because of our failures, in order to increase our faith by feeding us with the body and blood of Jesus Christ."⁸

As the disciples grappled with their little faith and the wonderful but fearful reality of the resurrection, Christ issued His Great Commission.

Christ's Assignment (vv. 15-18)

While the disciples huddled around a table in a secret room the risen Lord entered through shut doors and gave His marching orders. It's fair to say that He had captured his disciples' attention! A healthy fear of the risen Christ is essential to a faithful response to His evangelistic imperative. If we don't have the fear of God we will view the Great Commission as a good suggestion.

Jesus' commission contains two parts.

The first is a commandment to preach the gospel, not morality or integrity. Our message is the offer of free grace for sinners on the basis of Christ's perfect righteousness. This gospel is a two-edged sword. He who believes, and confirms his faith with baptism, will be saved. But he who does not believe will be condemned. The eleven disciples could not possibly go into all the world and speak this message to every creature (v. 15). That's our job. There are people in your life who might never meet an ordained minister or sit under the formal preaching of God's Word. You are their evangelist.

The second part of Jesus' commission is a promise. Like Elisha receiving the mantle of Elijah (1 Kings 19:9-14), as Jesus' apostles would discharge their evangelistic duty, He would confirm His blessing through signs (vv. 17-18). While these verses probably speak to what would happen when Jesus' authority was transferred to His original disciples,⁹ just as in the commission itself, God speaks here to the modern church. Faith in the gospel is self-authenticating. The remarkable fruit of faithful living will testify to God's miraculous working in believers' lives. Christ calls us to live courageously, trusting God for protection. This does not authorize us to throw caution to the wind. But it does assure us that God supports His troops.

Mark's last verses summarize Jesus' ascension and the outworking of His commission.

Christ's Ascension (vv. 19-20)

Forty days after His resurrection Christ physically departed from His disciples. Christ was received up into heaven as a visible affirmation that His redeeming work had been accomplished. Jesus passed through the heavens (Heb. 4:14) to sit at God's right hand (Heb. 9:24) to fulfill His eternal ministry of intercession for those who come to God through Him (Heb. 7:25).

But true to His promise to never forsake His disciples Christ remains spiritually. No mention of Pentecost is made in the last two verses. But Mark's claim that the previously tremulous disciples went out and preached everywhere (v. 20) can be explained only by the coming of the Holy Spirit, the other counselor whom Christ had promised (John 14:16; Acts 1:7-8). Believers today have Christ's same spiritual presence that made the disciples braver than ever.

Jesus walked this earth as one of us, having taken on a human nature; a real human body and soul. When He returned to heaven He did not shed this humanity. The disciples saw a real person go up to heaven. What an encouragement this is for us who rightly crave both remade bodies and souls. Christ ascended into heaven as a pledge that He will take us to Himself. Of this promise the Holy Spirit stands as earnest.

Conclusion: Applying Mark's Gospel

Mark's aim was to demonstrate "the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God" (Mark 1:1). The gospel is the good news that despite alienation because of our sin, we can become children of God through faith in His Son. In the "action Gospel" Mark unfolds his theme with straightforward recounting and reflection on Jesus' entire life and ministry. Jesus not only taught the gospel; He also brought it to bear in people's lives through deeds. He served His disciples. He healed the sick. He fed the hungry. He drove away the wicked and unrepentant. He bled, thirsted, and died.

John was thinking of Christ when he said, "My little children, let us not love in word or in tongue, but in deed and in truth" (1 John 3:18). Such love is always costly. Mark was a very close follower of Peter. For this reason some have called Mark's Gospel "The Gospel According to Peter." Peter said, "Beloved, do not think it strange

Mark focuses on the suffering and death of Christ. This fact helps us to remember that the substitutionary atonement of Christ is the heartbeat of our religion. Our hope rests not on what we do but what Christ has done.

concerning the fiery trial which is to try you, as though some strange thing happened to you; but rejoice to the extent that you partake of Christ's sufferings, that when His glory is revealed, you may also be glad with exceeding joy" (1 Pet. 4:12–13). More than any other Gospel, Mark focuses on the suffering and death of Christ. This fact helps us to remember that the substitutionary atonement of Christ is the heartbeat of our religion. Our hope rests not on what we do but what Christ has done.

What He has done is described by Mark in kingdom terms. Jesus didn't come merely preaching a message of personal salvation. He came preaching a message of the kingdom. Today it's fashionable to divide spiritual matters into the categories of "salvation issues" and "non-salvation issues." But such compartmentalizing is rarely helpful. Every issue we face is a kingdom issue worthy of our clear-headed, warm-hearted attention.

Mark's Gospel is filled with examples of righteousness and wickedness and the blessing and judgment that result. For this reason we too must humbly submit to the Teacher. He hasn't stopped teaching. He's still bringing His word which we hear as often as we open the Bible with believing hearts. But the grand message that we learn from Mark's Gospel is that the life that God blesses most is the life of Christ Himself. Mark's story ends with Christ's glory; He is received into heaven to sit at God's right hand. The glory of the gospel is that your life can be so intimately connected with His so as to receive the same benefits that He has earned through His sacrificial service. That is the Christian hope that Mark holds out to us. God says to us today: grab that hope by believing His good news.

1. Mary Magdalene, who had been healed of demon possession (Luke 8:2), is not to be confused with the sinful woman of Luke 7.

2. Zebedee's wife (Matt. 27:56; Mark 15:40–41). John 19:25 suggests she was Jesus' aunt on his mother's side.

3. It is clear from Matthew (28:2) and Luke (24:4) that the man they saw was one of two angels sent from God to meet these women.

4. William Hendriksen, *Exposition of the Gospel According to Mark*, New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1976), 682.

5. The word is used elsewhere at the raising of Jairus's daughter (Mark 5:42), the healing of a paralytic (Luke 5:26), and the healing of a lame man (Acts 3:10; cf. Acts 10:10; 11:5; 22:17).

6. Most textual issues concern a few words or even a single word or spelling.

7. Accessed on May 26, 2015 from <http://stillsearching.wordpress.com/2009/03/22/calvinism-so-hot-right-now/>.

8. From the "Form for Communion (for those congregations who celebrate the Supper frequently)" found in the *Acts of Synod London 2010: Seventh Synod of the United Reformed Churches in North America*, 496.

9. As an example, Paul cast out demons and did not die when bitten by a poisonous snake (Acts 28:3–6).

Rev. William Boekestein

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Points to Ponder and Discuss

1. How can we sanctify the first day of the week, demonstrating that we rejoice in Christ's resurrection?
2. In light of the women's needless concern about the stone covering the grave, how much of your anxiety might be due to fear and not to the realities of life?
3. What does Jesus' reference to Peter in verse 7 tell us about communicating with those who are brought low through sin and repentance?
4. How does Jesus minister to those who demonstrate unbelief and hardness of heart (Mark 16:14)?
5. Reflect on the issue of lethargy in the church today, as well as its cure.
6. How might Mary's meeting with Jesus (v. 9; cf. John 19:11–18) speak to our need to commune with Christ if we hope to succeed in our respective callings?
7. How hard is it to believe when we are overwhelmed by sadness and fear (cf. Mark 16:11)? How can we discipline ourselves to believe even in such a condition?
8. What signs follow them that believe today (cf. Mark 16:17)?

Why Your Church Needs a New Psalter Hymnal

Mr. Michael
Kearney

What do you think of the OPC and URCNA's proposed Psalter Hymnal? As the URCNA synod faces the final vote on a nearly twenty-year-long project, across our federation it seems as though the jury is still out. Many ministers, musicians, and members are optimistic that a new book will bring new life to singing in the URCNA. Equally forceful are the opinions of others who fear that the project will wreak havoc on the musical heritage of our churches. How can the debate move forward?

I'd like to provide five reasons why I believe the new Psalter Hymnal should receive a favorable vote. Readers may be skeptical of my perspective as a young lay member of the URCNA. They may be even more skeptical when I admit that there are things about the new Psalter Hymnal I don't like. Nevertheless, I hope the following arguments will adequately explain my position.

It Will Help Our Federation Establish Its Identity

In order to explain this point I need to back up—behind the Psalter Hymnal, behind the Reformed tradition, behind even Christianity—to the fundamental nature of singing.

Music, in general, is an art. But singing is more than art; it is also speech. Do you ever stop to marvel that the human voice can produce both music and words simultaneously—and in such a way as to be understood? Good singing appeals to the ear, communicates rational ideas, and stirs our deepest emotions. As such it is a powerful means of persuasion.

There is another dimension too. Jesus said, "Out of the abundance of the heart [the] mouth speaks" (Luke 6:45 ESV). The words that

issue from our mouths, both spoken and sung, reveal who we are and what we value. Do we sing often or rarely? Willingly or hesitantly? Joyfully or indifferently? Do we sing pure words or foul ones? The answers to these questions provide observers—believers and unbelievers alike—with clues about the orientation of our hearts.

Here is a third observation: Our Sunday singing proclaims our identity as God's redeemed people. This gains expression as we sing together to glorify God and build up one another. We gather freely and joyfully in His name, eager to praise Him, confess our sins, offer thanksgiving, and present our requests. For the Christian, singing should be a natural, even irrepressible activity. A redeemed soul is a singing soul.

Finally, it is worth noting that congregational singing bears



Our Sunday singing proclaims our identity as God's redeemed people.

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substantial similarities to prayer, Scripture reading, and even preaching, particularly when we sing psalms or other Bible passages. Not only does singing fill its own divinely ordained role in Christian worship, it reinforces other elements of the service as well.

Congregational singing is a rhetorical tool, a window into the human heart, a response to redemption, and a means of glorifying God and edifying the saints. As such it should be an integral part of what defines us as Christians and, more specifically, as the URCNA. The tradition of combining the Psalter Hymnal with the denominational doctrinal standards and liturgy was based on more than practicality. Rather, it testified that what we sing is part and parcel with who we are and what we believe.

It Will Correct Several Problems with the Current Blue Psalter Hymnal

Having grown up with the “old blue,” I make this claim reluctantly. Nevertheless, I can identify at least three significant deficiencies in our *de facto* songbook.

The psalter section is incomplete. The 1959/1976 blue Psalter Hymnal published by the Christian Reformed Church (CRC) and

generally used in the URCNA inherited a tradition of psalm singing that preferred “lite” hymn-like versions of the psalms to denser, more literal renditions. In most cases this merely meant the verses of a psalm were slightly telescoped and sanitized of particularly vehement expressions (see Ps. 88; 137). A more glaring example is the book’s only setting of Psalm 9 (#14), which omits verses 3–8 and 15–20 of the Scripture text, yet adds a refrain strangely reminiscent of a Fanny Crosby hymn. Can this really be called psalm singing?

The hymnal section is inadequate. Granted, the “old blue” includes a decent number of songs, both common and hard to find, that have endeared themselves to multiple generations and are still sung frequently today. But hymns many would call standards, like “Immortal, Invisible, God Only Wise” and “How Great Thou Art,” are conspicuously absent. As to the hymns it does contain, how useful are songs like “Majestic Sweetness Sits Enthroned” and “From Greenland’s Icy Mountains”? Given the limited hymn repertoire of the blue Psalter Hymnal, it should be no surprise that so many United Reformed congregations have purchased or compiled supplemental songbooks.

The language is inaccessible. Let me be clear: I am firmly opposed to altering the original wording of hymns, which is an insult to the poetic efforts of centuries of hymn writers. But when considering psalm settings, I believe it is

appropriate to ask whether the lyrics clearly communicate the content of the passage being versified. When the text under consideration is “Ride out in full regalia, and richest panoply” (#82), I believe this is not only a fair question but a necessary one. If our churches have adopted contemporary English translations of the Bible for reading, why are we so reluctant to apply the same principle to singing?

Space does not permit me to demonstrate that the proposed Psalter Hymnal adequately addresses these problems. Nevertheless, I trust that anyone who thoroughly examines the psalm and hymn sections online (available at psalterhymnal.org) will be satisfied with what they find.

It Will Help Our Young Churches

Right now, musical practices across the URCNA are a hodge-podge. Most churches that emerged from the CRC in the 1990s and 2000s sing from the 1959/1976 edition of the Psalter Hymnal, as mentioned above. A few of these have held onto the gray 1987 edition, despite its dubious reputation (even in the CRC). Meanwhile, congregations that join the URCNA from other backgrounds often keep their own particular hymnals.

semper
reformanda
means a calling
back to God’s
Word...



A Psalter
Hymnal is
tangible proof
that we love
each other
enough to come
to a common
agreement.

What are our church plants to do in this situation? Should they save up for the steep cost of purchasing new blue books for their congregations (which means paying for the shortcomings mentioned above)? Do they pursue the ever-shortening supply of used copies in circulation, many of which should have been laid to rest forty years ago (and smell like it, too)? Or do they resort to photocopying psalms and hymns directly into each week's bulletin, making it impossible for members to familiarize themselves with the songbook they sing from?

Having no Psalter Hymnal of our own is a liability to our whole federation, but the URCNA's start-up congregations suffer the most. In addition to their frequent geographical isolation from the rest of the federation, these young churches find themselves isolated with respect to their worship as well. I suspect that many of these congregations would willingly save up and sacrifice toward the cost of a new songbook if they knew it would serve them for many years to come and unite them with the rest of the federation.

It Will Put the Motto *semper reformanda* into Action

I despise the motto *semper reformanda* ("always reforming") when it is twisted to justify socially motivated agendas and attacks on the inerrancy of Scripture. In the sense in which it was originally coined, however, *semper reformanda* means a calling back to God's Word, along with a return to a biblical model for life, faith, and worship. It means progress, but progress in the direction of Christlikeness.

The new Psalter Hymnal exemplifies this kind of reforming progress. It is no wholesale desertion of the old in favor of the new; the Songbook Committees

have made that clear by including such an array of "classic" hymns, many with unaltered language. Nor does it manifest the gender neutralization and politically correct obsessiveness of today's liberal hymnals. But it is a step forward from the blue book, one that recognizes the full scope of the psalms, incorporates a broad range of Christian hymnody, and takes the role of congregational singing in worship seriously. The process of adapting to a new songbook will be a long and difficult one, for me as much as anyone. But it is a process that will prove whether or not we really mean it when we claim to be "always reforming."

It Will Proclaim Our Unity as the Body of Christ

One of the most frequent objections to a new Psalter Hymnal is that it will rob older church members of the songs of their youth. It will hinder their worship (so the argument goes) by forcing them to learn different words and music in their old age. I can sympathize with this argument, and with the saints and pillars of the church who raise it. But I would respectfully pose this question: Why do you say the blue Psalter Hymnal is better? Is it because of a conviction embedded in your mind and heart that its psalm settings are more faithful to Scripture and its hymns are a superior expression of praise to God? Or might it be that you love it for its significance to you, for the emotions and memories it conjures up in your own mind?

Hear me out: If the answer is the latter, we will have already lost every battle about church music we could face. If the issue boils down to personal preference, we will have no grounds to argue for or against anything that might go into a new songbook, from J. S. Bach to Chris Tomlin to Lecrae. Church will be nothing more than a group of individuals who happen

to like the same things, and if a denominational songbook exists at all, it will exist because (by some miracle) an entire denomination of individuals happen to like the same songs. But why bother? Indeed, why not ditch the hymnal idea and let the pastor pick which songs to print in the bulletin?

"Have it your way" may be the (former) motto of Burger King and the rest of our culture, but it is not—and must not be—the motto of the church. More and more the culture rejects the idea of a common sphere that requires the sacrifice of personal preference. In so doing it creates a world where common causes are impossible.

In direct defiance to this worldview, the church exists as a community of believers united in Christ—believers who deny themselves and look to the interests of others for the sake of the kingdom of Jesus. A Psalter Hymnal is tangible proof that we love each other enough to come to a common agreement about what music glorifies God most and serves the church best, even at the cost of our personal favorites. That is how I can say that I wholeheartedly support this project whether or not I like every song it contains.

What concerns me most, then, is not what I think of the new songbook. It is this: If the United Reformed Churches in North America cannot agree on a Psalter Hymnal, in what sense of the word are we united?

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The church order of any denomination or federation is only as beneficial as the integrity of the churches that have covenanted to abide by the articles they have mutually adopted. The Christian Reformed church order recognized this commitment in Article 96, “This Church Order, having been adopted by common consent, shall be faithfully observed, and any revision thereof shall be made only by synod.”¹ Yet, the Christian Reformed Church (CRC) had a history of undermining and ignoring its church order. The CRC’s Church Order Article 3 is a prime example. This article stated, “Confessing male members of the church who meet the Biblical requirement for office-bearers are eligible for office.”² This article’s authority was undermined in several stages.

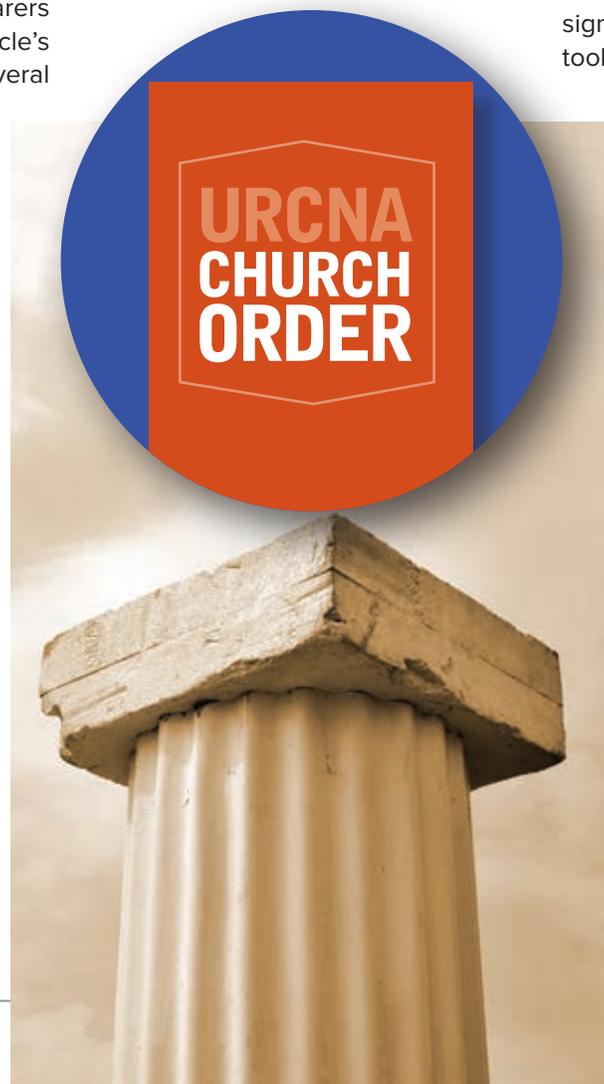
First, the synod of the CRC changed this article by allowing women deacons to be ordained. Second, the CRC changed the translation of Belgic Confession Article 30 to be gender inclusive. Third, numerous local congregations ignored this article and started ordaining women into the office of elder. These local churches lived as if this article did not apply to them. There were attempts made at the synodical level to have these churches honor the church order, but these attempts failed. Fourth, after repeated attempts to change this church order article failed, the synod of 1995 ignored the normal process of changing the church order by declaring Church Order Article 3 to be “inoperable.”

The CRC’s official website summarized these years of turmoil in the CRC, which ignored biblical truth and practiced ecclesiastical manipulation, with these words: “Synod 1995 recognized that there are two different perspectives and convictions on this issue, both of which honor the Scriptures as the infallible Word of God, and decided to give classes the option of declaring the word male in Church Order Article 3 inoperative, thereby allowing their churches to ordain women to all the offices.”³ This synod declared not only this church order article inoperative; it also made inoperative the church order article explaining how to change the church order. It

was more ten years later that the Christian Reformed Church changed its church order: “Synod 2006 proposed and Synod 2007 decided to delete the word male from Church Order Article 3.”⁴

A number of CRC local congregations left in 1995 and 1996 and joined the United Reformed Churches of North America (URCNA). One reason for many was the failure of the Christian Reformed Church to “faithfully observe” the church order. Those leaving believed that the historic Christian Reformed Church’s church order had faithfully reflected the truth of God’s Word. Certainly failure to honor the Word of God and the confessions were in many ways more significant. But covenant breaking took place on many levels. Breaking covenant by breaking the church order was just one of the ways that unfaithfulness expressed itself.

The repercussions of any group of churches ignoring their own church order are significant. So, is the URCNA faithful to its church order? Do we as local churches declare inoperative by word or deed the covenant we have made together in our church order? Given the facts that many local churches in URCNA left in frustration a denomination that ignored the church order and that we are less than twenty years old, one would think that we would not even need to ask such a question. However, I believe the question needs to be asked. The URCNA church order states, “These articles, relating to the lawful order of



the church, have been so drafted and adopted by common consent, that they ought to be observed diligently.”⁵ The original local congregations adopted the church order by common consent; all local churches joining the URCNA added their voices and agreed to observe diligently the church order. It is a covenant reflecting the fellowship, common practices, and doctrinal unity of the churches. Some articles are rooted in doctrinal truth that cannot be compromised. Other articles apply biblical principles for good order enhancing fellowship and justice.

There are a number of individuals and churches that I believe have undermined the authority of the church order in the life of the URCNA. Some local churches declare one article or another inconvenient or irrelevant to their particular situation and ignore the church order. This will harm the churches because the church order is the wisdom of the past expressed in our unity and life in Christ summarized within the context of our confessions.

Confessions postulate our unity in doctrine. The church order promotes our unity in action. We submit one to another as we share a common church order.

I have observed and heard about several articles moving to the inoperative stage in the young life of the URCNA. Church order articles are being skirted, ignored, and changed with actions that are inconsistent with a common commitment to practices that we have affirmed. All consistories are called to encourage godly Christian education. Is every church practicing two worship services each Lord’s Day? Are we practicing terms for the office of elder and deacons? Are we practicing lifelong calling for the ministry of the Word? Do we make proper distinctions regarding ministerial separations from a local congregation? According to the church order, a minister and consistory have promised to work together until the minister accepts and the consistory approves a call, an “article 11” that recognizes an intolerable situation is ratified by classis, the minister dies,

or the minister retires. A consistory cannot inform a minister he is fired. A minister cannot inform a consistory that he quits. Principles of office and good order demand that we closely examine these situations and ask ourselves, “Are we diligently following the church order?”

1. Church Order of the Christian Reformed Church in North America, Psalter Hymnal (Grand Rapids, MI: Board of Publications of the Christian Reformed Church), 208.

2. Ibid., 192.

3. <http://www.crcna.org/welcome/beliefs/position-statements/women-ecclesiastical-office>.

4. Ibid.

5. https://www.urchna.org/sysfiles/member/custom/file_retrieve.cfm?memberid=1651&customid=23868.

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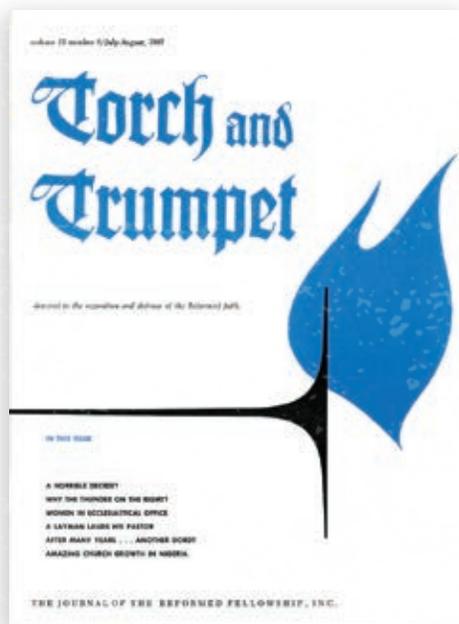
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We laymen have many obligations to our pastors. We must pray for them, and most of us do. We must check up on their preaching and teaching after the manner of the Bereans, who, having heard the apostle Paul, searched the Scriptures daily to make sure he was right (Acts 17:11). Most of us are too lazy to do that. Occasionally it may become one's duty to criticize one's pastor. Then one must take pains to speak the truth in love (Eph. 4:15). And, although we should always beware of flattery, it is no sin, but rather a duty, to praise a faithful minister. In what follows I want to do that.

Preaching Christ

In the shop where I work, I have close contact with a member of another church. On Monday mornings we usually swap Sabbath experiences. He is not just a pew warmer. Last Monday I asked him how he had fared the previous day. He answered, "Not at all well." Said I, "How so? You went to church, didn't you?" "To be honest," said he, "I did not; I attended a synagogue instead." Puzzled, I queried, "What made you do that?" "My pastor," he replied, "and I'll tell you how. You see, he preached on the eighth commandment, 'Thou shalt not steal.' He warned against a number of practices that this commandment condemns and exhorted to certain virtues that it requires. He upheld the right of private property. This, I thought, was very timely in an age of socialism, communism, and state totalitarianism. Well and good. But never once in the entire sermon did he name Christ or even allude to him. In other words, that sermon might as well have been preached in a Jewish



place of worship, and, as far as the sermon was concerned, it might be said that I attended a synagogue."

To say that I was shocked is to put it mildly. But at once there came to my mind the conclusion of a sermon preached a few months ago on that very text by my pastor. Of course, I don't recall all he said, but it amounted to this: "It has become evident that we are all of us thieves. And we all need to be saved just as was the thief at the Savior's right hand on Calvary—by faith in the crucified One, by being washed in His blood. Or is there someone here who more closely resembles the haughty thief to the left, who felt no need for a savior of his soul?" I told my partner in the shop about this, and I also told him that, no matter what his text may be, my pastor never fails to preach Christ. I could honestly say that. And I didn't mean that Christ is named in every sermon. I meant that Christ is central to each sermon.

The Infallible Bible

Our daughter Jane is a confessing member of church and a college student. She attends a college with a Christian tradition.

The other evening we were reading for our family devotions, the story in John 5 of the healing by Jesus of a paralytic at the pool of Bethesda. When we had finished, Jane said, "You don't believe, do you, Dad, what is said there about an angel coming down and troubling the water?" Naturally I answered, "Why shouldn't I? It's in the Bible, isn't it?" "Well," said Jane, "our professor of Bible tells us that likely it isn't true at all and almost certainly it wasn't always in the Bible. In fact, he says there are several passages in our Bible that were added to the original or altered from it." Jane drew her own conclusion: "If the professor is right, had we not better dismiss as outdated the notion of an infallible or inerrant Bible? We just don't have such a Bible."

That I was taken aback is the understatement of the year. I practically ordered Jane to see the pastor about this matter and to do so without delay. When she seemed hesitant, I suggested that after the next Sunday's evening service we discuss the matter with the minister over a cup of coffee. Jane consented. My wife got busy on the telephone. Things worked out as I had hoped. The preacher and his wife would be glad to visit with us the coming Sunday night. Sunday night came. After some casual conversation and a little coaxing by me, Jane stated her problem. In answer the minister gave us a talk on scriptural inerrancy and what he called "textual criticism." Very little of it, if indeed any, went over my

head. He has a way of making things clear. Following are some of the things he said.

"The Bible itself, for instance in 2 Timothy 3:16 and 2 Peter 1:21, tells us that the human authors of the Bible, although by no means mere robots, were so controlled by the Holy Spirit that what they wrote was the very Word of God. The original manuscripts, sometimes called *autographa*, then, were inerrant. The Christian church has so confessed throughout the centuries, and that organization of scholars from numerous denominations known as the Evangelical Theological Society does so today. To deny the inerrancy of the *autographa* is to undermine the Christian religion. Yet that is often done by men who would be known as Christian scholars. For one example, in *Christian Beginnings*, a book, believe it or not, used in some self-styled Christian colleges, Morton Scott Enslin denies that Jesus was born in Bethlehem and was baptized by John in Jordan. The same book is a blatant rejection of Christian supernaturalism.

"However, the original manuscripts of Holy Scripture have disappeared. We have copies of them or copies of copies. And, although the copyists were not inspired so as to do perfect work, it is evident that all the time God kept watching over His Word with a very special providence. The inaccuracies that crept into the text are few and minor. And how much safer it is to cross a river on a bridge that is covered at a few points with a millimeter or two of water than to attempt to walk across that river with no bridge at all! In the meantime the perfectly legitimate, and even necessary, science of textual criticism is striving right along to establish the authentic text of Scripture. Let it be remembered, the authentic text is the real Bible; and it is inerrant. Even of our Bibles as we have them today it holds what Edward J. Young has said so well in *Thy Word Is Truth*, 'In his mysterious providence God has

preserved his Word. We do not have a Bible which is unreliable and glutted with error, but one that in most wondrous fashion presents the Word of God and the text of the original."

Jane is a smart girl, and when his talk was finished, she put what I thought was a pretty sharp question to the minister. She asked him, "If God is concerned about an infallible Bible, why did He not in His providence see to it that the original manuscripts were preserved?" He answered, "To think God's thoughts after Him at that point, as at any point, may be difficult, even impossible. But the great Dutch theologian Abraham Kuyper has ventured a plausible opinion. He has suggested that, if we had a wholly perfect book, we would more than likely worship that book much as the Israelites worshiped the brazen serpent that Moses had made at God's command; and certainly God doesn't want us to worship anybody or anything but Himself." The minister concluded, "As it is, don't forget that the Christian faith is based on the firm foundation of God's infallible revelation."

When the preacher and his wife departed, Jane was happier than I had seen her for some time. Evidently her mind had been set at ease. And this layman had learned something. In the course of the week I wrote a note to Jane's Bible professor reminding him of his duty to confirm his students in the faith and not to jolt them out of the faith by adroitly dispensing half-truths about the Bible. I hope he won't think me brazen. I also hope he won't look down on me from an ivory tower.

Conviction of Sin

This spring our son John graduated from Christian high school. I confess to being prejudiced in his favor, but, honestly, he is an exceptionally fine boy. His mother and I sometimes tell each other that he is just about all a covenant child

could be expected to be. It goes without saying that he attends church twice a Sunday. He attends catechism classes without fail, and don't think he doesn't prepare his lessons. He is an active member of the Young Men's Society. Often he serves as usher in the church. I'm sure he has never seen the inside of a dance hall. When recently he and a chum were going to see *Ben Hur*, he told his mother beforehand. The general run of pictures shown in the movies he utterly despises. The very advertisements disgust him. He is going to take the pre-seminary course when he enters college. Due largely to the influence of our pastor, he is thinking seriously of becoming a missionary. All in all, I didn't quite understand why he had not already made profession of his faith.

The following piece was authored by a minister who has learned, admittedly not mastered, a lesson on which every minister may well concentrate—to put himself in the place of the man in the pew, the so-called layman.

Throughout this article Rev. Professor R. B. Kuiper impersonates a layman who admires his pastor. The reasons for his admiration add up to a number of things that every church member may expect, not to say require, of his pastor.

The minister and an elder came to pay our family an official visit. *Huisbezoek*, my parents used to call it. I know that the rules of the church assign that work to the elders, but I was glad to see the minister participate. After all, if I am not mistaken, he also is an elder, and he surely needs to know his people if he is going to preach to their needs. Well, in this instance the preacher conversed a bit on spiritual matters

with each member of the family in turn. John's turn came. "John," said the pastor, "let's take a look at the second question of the Heidelberg Catechism. As you know, it names three things that we must know in order to live and die happily. So let me ask you three questions related to those three things. First, do you abhor yourself because of your sins?" Frankly, I didn't like that question. Was the pastor forgetting that John is an exemplary child of the covenant? Wasn't he virtually insulting the boy? But evidently John didn't feel that way at all. He stared at the floor and said softly, "I surely do." Came the second question: "John, realizing that you are a hell-deserving sinner and that you cannot possibly save yourself, have you abandoned yourself to the crucified Christ?" John looked up and with a tremor in his voice replied, "Yes, I have." "And now, John," inquired the pastor, "do you with all the love of your heart serve the Christ who died for you and now lives for you?" With tears sparkling in his eyes John stammered, "I wish I did."

Last night John told me that the next time the consistory meets he is going to make confession of his faith in Christ. He added, "Don't think, Dad, that I'm doing it because I think I'm good enough." I had received food for thought. Only he who knows from experience what it is to be under conviction of sin will truly commit himself to Christ for salvation and service. That holds of covenant children too. Evidently the pastor knows that.

The Comfort of Scripture

Recently I was hospitalized for ten days. On alternate days the pastor called on me. For several reasons I appreciated his calls immensely. Without being in a hurry he made them brief. He showed a deep interest in my physical condition but never gave me any medical advice. He left that strictly to the doctors. Most important of all, instead of wearying

me with such vapid talk as "Keep smiling" and "Worrying never did anybody any good yet," he comforted me from the Word of God. For instance, he reminded me that all things work together for the good of those who love God (Rom. 8:28) and, making a sharp distinction between punishment and chastisement, he stressed the truths that, God having laid on Him the iniquity of His people, Christ was wounded for their transgressions and bruised for their iniquities (Isa. 53:5-6), and that the Lord chastens those whom He loves and scourges every son whom He receives (Heb. 12:6). On his final visit he gave me in no more than five minutes a most helpful insight into the meaning of the book of Job.

My pastor is indeed a good undershepherd, for he kept pointing me to the divine Shepherd. He made the shepherd psalm, numbered 23, and the shepherd allegory, recorded in John 10, very real to me. I love him for it.

Theological Terminology

I have heard it said repeatedly, and have read it too, that our children and young people don't understand the theological jargon to which we adult church members are accustomed and that therefore we should, in teaching them, make use of a new, an up-to-date, vocabulary. Often that advice is accompanied with a warning against indoctrination. We ought to put questions to the young, we are told, and let them find their own answers.

I confess that that kind of talk irks me more than a little. Is not Christian doctrine derived from the Bible, and is not the Bible the book of all ages as well as all nations? To be sure, the confessions and catechisms of Christianity are not to be equated with the infallible Bible, but were they not derived from the Bible and are they not the products of the guidance of Christ's church in its study of the

Bible by the Spirit of Truth? I am told that the Apostles' Creed goes back all the way to the fourth or fifth century of this era. Of course, there is a difference of opinion as to the meaning of "descended into hell," but who can deny that as a whole this creed excels in simplicity? The statement drawn up by the Council of Chalcedon concerning the person and natures of Christ is admittedly more complicated, but it has served the Christian church well for more than fifteen centuries. I have known men and women who could neither read nor write but had a good understanding of the five points of Calvinism. Am I to believe that our teenagers, who are getting a highly touted education, are stumped by the language of the Canons of Dort? Or are they lacking in interest?

Besides the children to whom I have already referred we have two others: Mary, who is fourteen, and Jimmie, who is twelve. Both are taught by our pastor in catechism classes. Jimmie has had just a smattering of doctrine, Mary some more. The other evening I sprang this question on Jimmie: "What is the difference between justification and sanctification?" Without hesitation he answered, "Justification is something on the outside of you; sanctification is something on the inside of you." "Not too bad," I thought. When I put the same question to Mary, she said, "Justification saves from the guilt and punishment of sin; sanctification saves from the pollution and power of sin." I thanked God for the teacher our pastor is.

Declaring All the Counsel of God

Preaching is often said to be the chief task of the minister. So far as I am concerned, that statement can stand. For that reason I began this article with a commendation of my pastor's preaching, and for the same reason I shall now conclude it with another commendation of his preaching. His preaching is

well-balanced. Maybe it would be better to say that his preaching is full-orbed. He doesn't just stress certain teachings of the Bible that he likes a lot and neglect others that don't suit him so well because they don't fit so well into his philosophy. Contrariwise, to use Paul's words, he strives to declare "all the counsel of God" (Acts 20:27). Let me give a few examples.

How often one hears it said that the Bible teaches both divine sovereignty and human responsibility and that we human beings with our finite and sin-darkened minds cannot harmonize them with each other. No doubt, that is true, and it follows that we must uphold both these truths without compromise. That our pastor aims to do. Some time ago he preached one sermon on two verses from John's Gospel: "No man can come to me except the Father which hath sent me draw him" (6:44) and "Ye will not come to me that ye might have life" (5:40). He told us that, if a man is saved, God gets *all* the credit and, if a man is lost, man gets *all* the blame. That surely was putting it bluntly and boldly, but, I dare say, not too much so.

Any number of preachers nowadays emphasize the love of God at the expense of His justice. At least one preacher in our town tells his audiences that a God of love would never demand the bloody sacrifice of His Son for sin, nor would He send anybody to eternal hell. Other preachers, who would not think of going to those extremes, seldom, if ever, warn their hearers "to flee from the wrath to come" (Matt. 3:7), and in their preaching the call to repentance is far less prominent than it was in the preaching of the Old Testament prophets, John the Baptist, the Lord Jesus, Peter and Paul. Not so our pastor. On Good Friday he preached on John 3:36, "He that believeth on the Son hath everlasting life; and he that believeth not the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God abideth on him." Speaking of the

cross of Christ, he described it as "the supreme revelation of the infinite love of God and at once the supreme revelation of the absolute justice of God."

Our pastor likes to preach series of sermons on Sunday evenings. Not long ago he preached a series on the theme "The Five Points of Calvinism and As Many Reasons for Christian Missions." I thought it an arresting subject. It had many people guessing. But the preacher came through wonderfully. Among other things he told us that those who think the doctrine of election is a hindrance to missions are as wrong as wrong can be. "God has His elect," he declared, "in every kindred and tongue and people and nation. All the elect must be brought into the kingdom, and the one God-appointed means to that end is the gospel. So election demands missions." He went on to state the equally obvious fact that election guarantees results for missions: "By the preaching of the gospel the elect not only *must* be brought in but also most certainly *will* be." As for the atonement, he pointed out that many say it made possible the salvation of all men, but what those who so teach really mean is that the atonement made it possible for each man to save himself by of his own free will accepting Christ in faith, and that is a way of saying that the death of Christ made salvation possible for no one. He went on to proclaim the blessed truth that the atonement not only made possible the salvation of all who are ordained to eternal life, but actually saves them, the very faith wrought in their hearts by the Holy Spirit being a fruit of the atonement. "That definite, effective, saving atonement must," he affirmed, "lie at the heart of the missionary's message, and only because of that atonement will his preaching bear fruit unto salvation."

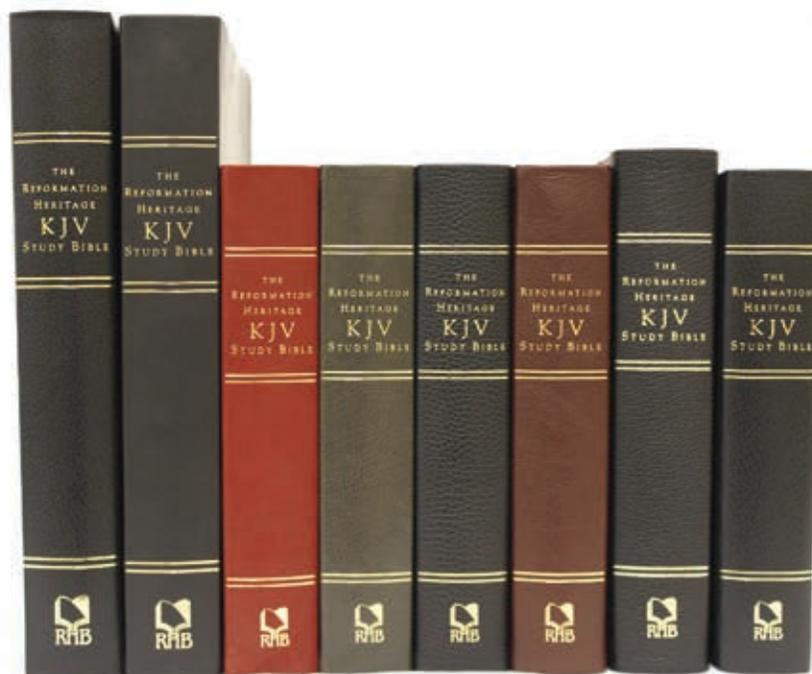
I must confess that one series of sermons announced by our pastor had me puzzled for a while. He told us in the church bulletin that he was

going to preach a series on "Biblical Solutions of Social Problems." Among the problems he listed were "the Race Problem," "the Liquor Problem," "the Sex Problem," "the War Problem," and so on. "What!" thought I. "Are we actually going to hear the social gospel from our pulpit?" The one thing that kept me from blowing up was the promise that we would be given biblical solutions. Came the Sunday evening for which the first sermon of the series was scheduled. The sermon had an exceptionally long introduction. I got the impression that the preacher was attempting to justify his preaching on social problems. Likely he was trying to do just that. He told us that as long ago as 1913 Professor Berkhof of Calvin Seminary delivered a public lecture titled "The Church and Social Problems," in which he argued that, while the gospel is primarily a message for the individual, it does have social implications that must be recognized in preaching; that the November 1939 issue of the conservative *Westminster Theological Journal* contained an article on "The Christian Pulpit and Social Problems," which made a plea for preaching on social problems on the basis of the universal kingship of Christ; and that only a few years ago Carl F. H. Henry, at present editor of *Christianity Today*, wrote a book in which he took fundamentalist preaching to task for its neglect of social problems. I was not much impressed by those facts. They left me rather cold. Was the preacher appealing to men? However, he went on to tell us, and to prove, that the Bible has a good deal to say on social problems. For example, the prophet Amos rebuked the rich of his day for selling the poor for a pair of shoes (Amos 2:6), the Lord Jesus discoursed more than once on the perennial problem of divorce (Matt. 5:31-32; 19:3-12), the apostle Paul in more than one of his epistles dealt with the relation to each other of employers and employees (Eph. 6:5-9; Col. 3:22-4:1), and both Paul

continued on page 39

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Christ's Kingship in All of Life: Butchers, Bakers, and Candlestickmakers in the Service of Christ (3)



In two previous articles on the topic of “Christ’s Kingship in All of Life,” I offered a summary of what is known today as the “two kingdom/natural law” view. According to this view, Christians live in two kingdoms, the kingdom of the church where Christ reigns by His Word and Spirit, and the “common kingdom” of non-churchly life in God’s world where Christ reigns by means of the natural law. Advocates of this perspective are wary of the idea that Christians are called to acknowledge Christ’s redemptive rule in their common vocations or in the non-ecclesiastical realm. After summarizing this two kingdom/natural law perspective, I began my

evaluation of it by arguing that it fails to acknowledge that Christ’s work of redemption involves nothing less than the renewal and restoration of human life in the presence of God, and that this work of renewal has implications for all of life. As the Dutch theologian Herman Bavinck often put it, “grace perfects nature.” The new beginning God makes in His work of redemption is one that aims to restore His elect people to fellowship with Himself and to new obedience by the Holy Spirit. In Jesus Christ, a new humanity is brought back into communion with God and is being renewed in true knowledge, righteousness, and holiness. The

destiny of human life in union and communion with God is realized in and through the redemptive work of Jesus Christ. In Christ, God is making all things new.

In this article, I would like to continue my evaluation of the two kingdoms/natural law position by considering the well-known Reformed understanding of the threefold office of believers. The doctrine of the threefold office of believers illustrates the life-embracing significance of Christ’s saving work as our Mediator. In union with Christ, the radical effects of the fall into sin are reversed, and those who belong to Christ begin, even if only in a small

way (cf. Heidelberg Catechism, Q&A 114), to live before God in the way God intended us to live.

The Threefold Office of Believers

In Lord's Day 12 of the Heidelberg Catechism, we find a classic statement of the biblical and Reformed doctrine of the threefold office of Christ and the believer's participation in that office.

Q&A 31: Why is He called Christ, that is, Anointed? Because He is ordained of God the Father, and anointed with the Holy Spirit, to be our chief Prophet and Teacher, who has fully revealed to us the secret counsel and will of God concerning our redemption; and our only High Priest, who by the one sacrifice of His body has redeemed us, and makes continual intercession for us with the Father; and our eternal King, who governs us by His Word and Spirit, and defends and preserves us in the salvation obtained for us.

Q&A 32: But why are you called a Christian? Because I am a member of Christ by faith, and thus a partaker of His anointing, that I may confess His Name, present myself a living sacrifice of thankfulness to Him, and with a free and good conscience fight against sin and the devil in this life, and hereafter reign with him eternally over all creatures.

In the Catechism's description, several features of the Christian's participation in Christ's threefold office as prophet, priest, and king are emphasized.

First, the threefold office of Christians, which is sometimes called the "office of believer," should not be viewed in a way that detracts from the uniqueness and sufficiency of Christ's work as Mediator. There is an important difference between the way

Christ fulfills His threefold office and the way believers participate in this threefold office. Christ is our "chief" Prophet and Teacher, and therefore the original source and authoritative norm for whatever Christians are able to know and profess concerning Him. The knowledge and speech of Christians are true only insofar as they are conformed to the Word of Christ. Christ is the "only" High Priest, whose sacrifice upon the cross is altogether unique, perfect, and sufficient to cleanse His people of their sins. Upon the basis of Christ's priestly sacrifice and continual intercession, believers are able to enjoy restored communion with God. Consequently, the priestly service of Christians is not a redemptive sacrifice for their sins but a sacrifice of thanksgiving for God's grace in Christ (Rom. 12:1-3). Christ is also an "eternal" king who governs His people by His Word and Spirit and ensures their victory over His and their enemies. Thus, Christians struggle with sin and every power arrayed against Christ's kingship, not in their own strength but in the strength that is Christ's and that He shares with them by the Spirit. However we understand the threefold office of believer, we may not view it as a kind of supplement to, or completion of, Christ's threefold office.

Second, the threefold office of Christians is nonetheless a genuine participation in Christ's threefold office. As those who are united to Christ and participate in His anointing by the Spirit, believers share in Christ's threefold calling as prophets, priests, and kings. In their prophetic office, they know and profess the truth concerning Christ, in whom are hid all the treasures of knowledge and wisdom (Col. 2:3). Believers are summoned to bring their every thought captive to Christ (2 Cor. 10:4-5) and to be thoroughly conversant with all that He teaches them by His Spirit and Word. In their

priestly office, believers are called to offer their bodies as a living sacrifice of thanksgiving to God, which is their spiritual service (Rom. 12:1). And in their kingly office, believers are called to fight with a good and free conscience against sin and the devil in this life, knowing that in the life to come they will share in His eternal reign over all creatures. In the fulfillment of their threefold office and calling, believers participate directly in Christ's anointing and are furnished by the Holy Spirit for the comprehensive, life-embracing task that it entails. In the most profound sense, Christ Himself works by His Spirit through His people as His instruments to execute His threefold office in the world.

Third, although the catechism does not deny the unique calling of believers who are set apart within the church for the special offices of minister of the Word, ruling elder, and deacon, the office of believer is the most basic expression of the Christian's participation in Christ's threefold office. The ecclesiastical offices are Christ-appointed offices, which participate in Christ's threefold office in their own peculiar manner, but they do not displace or render insignificant the primary way in which all believers share in Christ's anointing.

And fourth, it is not possible to separate the threefold office of believer from the original calling of all human beings who bear God's image. While the threefold office of believers is a participation in Christ's threefold office as redeemer, this threefold office finds its roots in the doctrine of the creation of human beings in God's image. When believers participate in Christ's threefold office, they are restored to the fullness of human life in the presence of God and furnished for the work to which all God's image-bearers were summoned at creation. As Herman Bavinck remarks in his treatment of Christ's threefold office,

[t]o be a mediator, to be a complete savior, he [Christ] had to be appointed by the Father to all three and equipped by the Spirit for all three offices. The truth is that the idea of humanness already encompasses within itself this threefold dignity and activity. Human beings have a head to know, a heart to give themselves, a hand to govern and to lead; correspondingly, they were in the beginning equipped by God with knowledge and understanding, with righteousness and holiness, with dominion and glory (blessedness). The sin that corrupted human beings infected all their capacities and consisted not only in ignorance, folly, error, lies, blindness, darkness but also in unrighteousness, guilt, moral degradation, and further in misery, death, and ruin. Therefore Christ, both as the Son and as the image of God, for himself and also as our mediator and savior, had to bear all three offices.¹

Just as human beings were created in God's image with a threefold mandate—to exercise a kingly dominion over the creation under God's authority, to serve as priests in offering themselves and all their work in praise to God, and to know and speak the truth in conformity to God's Word (Gen. 1:26ff.)—so Christ's threefold office, and the believer's participation in it, is a restoration to the fullness of what it means to be human before God. Christ, by means of His threefold office, restores and perfects His people for their renewed service to God.

Some Practical Implications

The traditional doctrine of the Christian's participation in Christ's threefold office has far-reaching implications for the calling of Christians in the world. From the standpoint of the doctrine of the

threefold office of believer, it seems most appropriate to view the kingly rule of Christ as Redeemer in a way that includes all aspects of the believer's life and calling in the world. If believers are the purchased property of Christ, the Lord, then surely they need to act accordingly in all of their endeavors and in every sphere of life. Furthermore, if believers in union with Christ are called to participate in His kingly rule, they are obliged to resist all the works of the evil one and every work that fails to honor Christ's lordship over any aspect of human conduct. It is impossible to carve out certain dimensions of human life in society and culture where believers are not called to exercise their threefold calling as prophets, priests, and kings under the lordship of Jesus Christ.

In the estimation of some proponents of the two kingdoms paradigm, any emphasis upon the redemptive transformation of all of life endangers the biblical doctrine of the sufficiency of Christ's obedience to secure the inheritance of eternal life for His people in the world to come. If Christians are obliged to engage the world in a transformative way, they are allegedly encouraged to believe that their works contribute in some way to their salvation. While it is certainly true that the obedience of Christians in the world contributes nothing to their justification before God, this objection of the two kingdoms paradigm does not do justice to the legitimate sense in which Christian believers, as members of Christ, participate in His threefold office.

Admittedly, the language of redeeming the world or culture can easily suggest that believers are completing the work of redemption that Christ alone accomplished. Perhaps for this reason it should not ordinarily be used as a descriptor of Christian obedience in the world.² But there is no biblical reason to avoid terms like "renew" or

even "transform" when speaking of a Christian's engagement with the world in his or her daily callings.³ To say that Christian believers are called to be "transformed" or "renewed" after the image of Christ in true knowledge, righteousness, and holiness is to speak in an eminently biblical fashion (Rom. 12:2; Eph. 4:24; Col. 3:10). Or to say that believers ought to "take every thought captive to obey Christ" is likewise to echo the language of Scripture (2 Cor. 10:5). The work of the Holy Spirit in the sanctification of believers is variously described in the Scriptures as a work of redemption, regeneration, re-creation, renewal, and restoration. In one passage in the New Testament, believers are even summoned to "redeem the times, for the days are evil" (Eph. 5:16). In all these descriptions, the fundamental idea of the renewal and transformation of human life in grateful obedience to God is expressed. When believers participate in Christ's anointing and threefold office, they are renewed and enabled to discharge the prophetic, priestly, and kingly service for which they were originally created.

The practical implications of the believer's participation in Christ's threefold office are life-embracing. In every area of life, Christians are called to a prophetic, priestly, and kingly service. This holds true, for example, within the institutions of marriage and family, and as well in the daily vocations of believers.

In a Christian home, parents have a prophetic calling to teach and nurture their children in the covenant. Whether they provide for the education of their children in a Christian school or in a home school, they are called to do their utmost to instruct their children in the Word of God. They must impress upon their children that they belong to the Lord, that they are sanctified to new obedience in Christ, and that the world and all that belongs to the

created order display God's glory and handiwork. The perspective upon life in God's world that parents have the privilege to teach their children is part of their prophetic calling. But parents also have a priestly calling to present their children to the Lord, to pray for their well-being and maturation in faith, to place them under the means of grace, and to give themselves up in serving their material and spiritual needs. Because their children are their nearest neighbors, parents are called to love their children sacrificially and lovingly. In addition to their prophetic and priestly responsibilities toward their children, parents are also called to govern and discipline them in the fear of the Lord. They have a responsibility to guide and direct them in the pathway that is pleasing to the Lord and to impress upon them the obligations that stem from their covenant relationship. A Christian home is, to use an expression of Calvin, a "little church," and it is the "nursery" of a Christian society and culture.

No doubt some of my readers have read, or even displayed on the walls of their homes, the saying: "Christ is the head of this home, the unseen guest at every meal, and the silent

listener to every conversation." While this saying may be viewed as rather quaint and sentimental, it testifies to a profound truth: Christ is the source and center of the life of every believer, and this has profound implications for our daily speech and conduct in our homes or wherever we find ourselves.

But the same can be said of the various callings of believers. The daily work of Christians may not be divorced from their union with Christ and participation in His threefold office. By word and deed, Christians bear witness to the truth as it is in Christ, and to the renewal of their lives by His Spirit. The "spiritual service" of believers entails nothing less than giving themselves over to the service of God and to those who bear His image (Rom. 12:1). In every aspect of life, the antithesis between the lie and the truth as it is in Christ must be confronted. The dominion of Christ does not end at the doorway of the church. The brokenness of human life in God's world tears at the fabric of all of life and requires vigilance on the part of believers as they seek first God's kingdom and its righteousness (Matt. 6:33).

Therefore, it is the duty of all believers to seek self-consciously to view their specific vocation in relation to their calling as members of Christ and partakers of His anointing. The prophetic, priestly, and kingdom aspects of their calling in fellowship with Christ will come to expression in all that believers do. It may be difficult at times to identify all of the ways in which this will become evident in the various vocations that Christians fulfill. But it may not be denied that the believer's life is wholly defined by his or her identity as a member of a Christ and a participant in His anointing.

1. *Reformed Dogmatics*, gen. ed. John Bolt, trans. John Vriend (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2006), 3:367.

2. See D. A. Carson, *Christ and Culture Revisited* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008), 216–17.

3. See Albert M. Wolters, *Creation Regained* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), 69–70.

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and Peter instructed Christians as to their proper relationship to civil rulers (Rom. 13:1–7; 1 Pet. 2:13–17). The truth was stressed that God has given Christ to be Head of the church not only, but Head over all things (Eph. 1:22). I had begun to melt. The first sermon of the series was on the race problem. The preacher expounded the text: "Where there is neither Greek nor Jew, circumcision nor uncircumcision, Barbarian, Scythian, bond nor free: but Christ is all and in all" (Col. 3:11). Christ proved to be the solution of the problem. And the

pastor assured us that throughout the entire series to come Christ would be the answer.

That night, before retiring, I thanked God on my knees for a pastor who was earnestly striving to declare the whole counsel of God and withal was determined to know nothing save Jesus Christ and him crucified (1 Cor. 2:2).

A Layman

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