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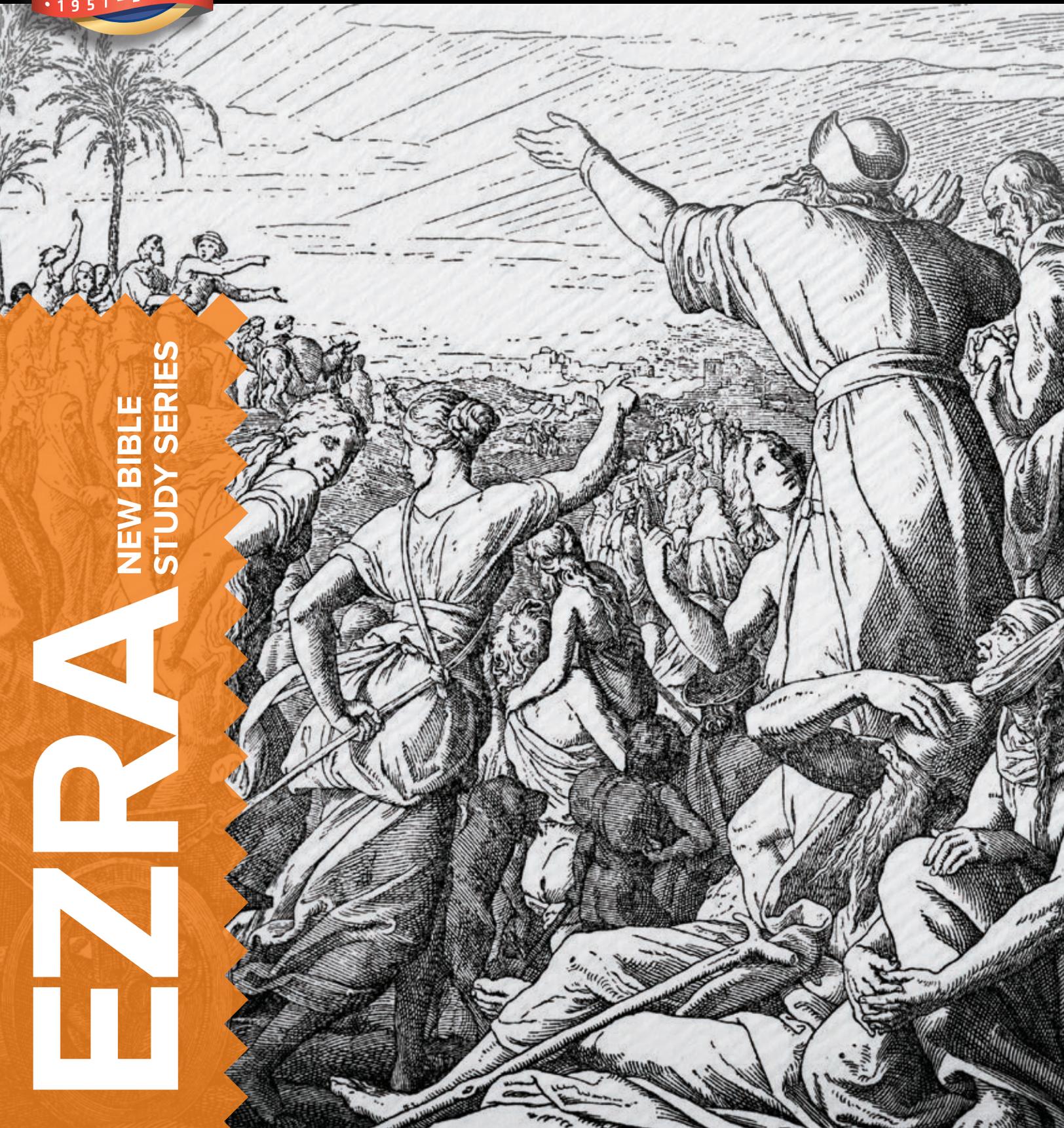
Dedicated to the Exposition and Defense of the Reformed Faith



The Outlook

VOL 66 ISSUE 3

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NEW BIBLE
STUDY SERIES

EZRA

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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: Vintage etching depicting exiles returning from Babylon, Ezra 1:1-5

*Jesus said to them, "I am the bread of life.
Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and
whoever believes in me will never be thirsty."*

—John 6:35

Our focus in this series will be on the seven "I Am" statements taken from the Gospel of John. In each of the statements, we learn about the person and work of Christ as it is emphasized in a metaphor. He calls Himself the "Bread of Life," the "Light of the World," "Gate for the Sheep," "Good Shepherd," "Resurrection and the Life," "The Way, the Truth, and the Life," and the "True Vine." Upon first hearing this, we might think those are vivid pictures to show us that Jesus is nice or kind, but there is something far deeper going on. Jesus is calling Himself the eternal God. Jesus is identifying Himself with the voice that came out of the burning bush when Moses was in the wilderness (Exod. 3). When God told Moses to go to Pharaoh, Moses asked God to tell him who he should tell Pharaoh is sending him. God's response is to give His name as "Yahweh," which is translated "I AM." This becomes the covenant identification of God, as the Creator who has redeemed for Himself a chosen people. This is why when Jesus calls Himself the "I Am," the Jews become angry. In John 6:41 they begin to grumble among themselves.

Statements like this ultimately will anger the Jews so much that they eventually cry out "crucify Him." Jesus was accused of blasphemy,

which would have been true if He was not the God-Man. Over these seven devotionals, I invite you to put yourself in the mind of a Jew two thousand years ago and seek to understand what Jesus meant. He is identifying Himself in a beautiful way. The Jews asked, "Who is this man?" Jesus asked the disciples, "Who do you say that I am?" What we must answer is a similar question, "Who do you say Jesus is?" This is a personal, subjective question which has eternal consequences. As you read ask yourself, "Is Jesus your bread of life?" If so, then ask yourself, "Why does that matter in my life?"

Being Hungry

Let's focus on John 6:35, although we could easily focus on verses 25–59. The point is that Jesus is identifying Himself as the bread of life. The first question we must answer is what is bread? Simple, we know what that is. If we go out to eat at a restaurant and order a nice steak, when they bring out our salad as a first course, they might also bring out a basket with bread in it. That is just preparation for the main course.

In the ancient world, bread played a far more prominent role in sustaining life. Bread and water were what you would have primarily lived on. If you could find a little

piece of meat or fish or some dates to eat with your bread and some wine, then you were eating well. What for us is a nice little appetizer, for the Jews was the main part of their diet. Bread made the eater go from hungry to full.

Those who followed Jesus were hungry. In the context, in the beginning of John 6, Jesus just fed the five thousand. Now, they find Jesus on the other side of the lake. Jesus knows their motives. In John 6:26–27, "Jesus answered them and said, 'Most assuredly, I say to you, you seek Me, not because you saw the signs, but because you ate of the loaves and were filled. Do not labor for the food which perishes, but for the food which endures to everlasting life, which the Son of Man will give you, because God the Father has set His seal on Him.'" Jesus calls them out. They are following him to get a free meal. What Jesus will point out is that their true need is not some more loaves and fish; it is to believe on the one the Father sent, to feed on Christ.

Another important point about the context deals with Jesus and manna. Every good Jewish boy or girl knows about Moses leading the people in the wilderness: when there was no food, God provided manna. The Jews now tell Jesus (wrongly) that

I AM

Moses provided manna; what is He going to provide? What will be His sign? Jesus corrects them and says that it wasn't Moses but the Father, the I AM, who provided true bread. When the people heard this, they then asked for that bread. In John 6:35, "Jesus said to them, 'I am the bread of life. He who comes to Me shall never hunger, and he who believes in Me shall never thirst.'" Further, in John 6:40, Jesus says, "And this is the will of Him who sent Me, that everyone who sees the Son and believes in Him may have everlasting life; and I will raise him up at the last day."

The people were hungry! They ate and they ate, but they were not satisfied. Their experience is the experience of the world today. They eat and eat, but they are never satisfied. They are like the crew of the *Black Pearl* with Captain Barbossa in *The Pirates of the Caribbean*. Part of the curse of the crew of the Black Pearl is that no matter how much they eat, they cannot be satisfied. They cannot taste, they cannot enjoy, they cannot be filled. The bread turns to ashes in their mouth. This is the plight of all who are sons and daughters of Adam. This is the description of the world. They eat, but they will not be satisfied; they seek happiness, but they will not find it. For a time they might be relatively content, but it will be fading. Augustine said, "Our hearts are restless until they rest in you, O Lord."

Even the manna in the wilderness left the people unsatisfied because so many of them ate without faith. They grumbled: "Manna again?" But

it was that manna which pointed ahead to Jesus Christ. Jesus was the water that came out of the rock in the wilderness, and now Jesus says that He is the bread of life: if they eat that bread, they will never be hungry, and if they believe, they will never be thirsty. The people responded rightly in John 6:34, "Sir, from now on give us this bread."

Being Fed

How would one go about receiving the benefits of this bread of life? Well, they must eat it. John 6:51 says, "I am the living bread which came down from heaven. If anyone eats of this bread, he will live forever; and the bread that I shall give is My flesh, which I shall give for the life of the world." This saying divided the Jews. Obviously, cannibalism was forbidden. But Jesus wasn't talking about cannibalism, was He? No, He wasn't. He was talking about eating His flesh. This is a graphic and vivid picture of believing. Some of the early Christians were accused of cannibalism when unbelievers heard about the Lord's Supper, eating Christ's flesh and drinking His blood. What they didn't realize was that what was eaten and drunk was done so by the mouth of faith.

So, to go back to the earlier question, how are the benefits received? By faith. Looking again at John 6:35, there are two important words used in that verse to describe faith. One is coming to Christ; the other is believing in Christ. These are active words describing faith. Our catechism makes clear that there are three main parts of faith: knowing, agreeing, and trusting. You can know a truth, such as God created

the world; you can agree with it or assent to it by saying yes, that happened; but then there is a trust in the object, namely, in God. It is that third one that Jesus emphasizes throughout this chapter.

To be sure, they must know that Jesus is the I Am, but then they and we must trust that this is the case. What this involves is a complete and utter surrender unto God. God's ways become our ways, God's love becomes our love, God's mission becomes our mission, God's people become our people, so to speak. Without that last part of faith, however, the whole point is missed. Wasn't this the problem with the Pharisees? They knew it all. They were the best catechism students. If there was a theological question, they would have been quick to give the answer, but the problem was that they didn't believe in their hearts. Their heads and their hearts were separated.

As we think a bit deeper about this, we notice John 6:44, for instance: "No one can come to Me unless the Father who sent Me draws him; and I will raise him up at the last day." Now it sounds like it is up to God. This is true. God knows those who are His; every person the Father has given to the Son will indeed eventually come to a saving knowledge of the Lord Jesus Christ. But this does not make us passive. Even babies eating baby food know to open their mouths when the spoon comes close to their mouths; so too we, babes in Christ, must come to the Savior and believe in Him. Christ accomplished salvation, the Holy Spirit applies salvation, but He does so through the means of an active, living, and true faith.

Those who eat of the bread of life by coming and believing in Jesus will never go hungry, and they will never be thirsty. We will see in a moment how this is in terms of being full, but for now, the implication is that God is continuing to feed us. God provides continual nourishment in

the preaching of the Word. There is nourishment to be found in the spiritual disciplines of the Christian life, such as reading the Bible, prayer, doing good, fasting, service, encouragement. But the primary food comes through the preaching of the Word. The preaching of the Word is not an appetizer. It is the meal itself. When preaching is faithfully done, the hearer is confronted with the risen and reigning Lord Jesus Christ.

In the preaching Jesus invites you to feed upon Him. Isaiah prophesied such in Isaiah 55:1-2, "Come, all you who are thirsty, come to the waters; and you who have no money, come, buy and eat! Come, buy wine and milk without money and without cost. Why spend money on what is not bread, and your labor on what does not satisfy? Listen, listen to me, and eat what is good, and your soul will delight in the richest of fare." Will you come to the waters? By nature, we have no money, we have nothing to bring, like the crowds coming to hear Jesus and being hungry but having no food. "Bread of Heaven, feed me till I want no more." Don't neglect the opportunity to come and feast upon Him twice every Lord's Day. However, don't just come; come ready to be fed. May we confess with Bernard of Clairvoux, who nearly a thousand years ago wrote:

*Jesus, Thou Joy of loving hearts,
Thou Fount of life, Thou Light
of men,
From fullest bliss that earth imparts,
We turn unfilled to Thee again.
We taste Thee, O Thou living Bread,
And long to feast upon Thee still;
We drink of Thee, the Fountain-
head,
And thirst our souls from Thee
to fill!*

We come to the Savior to feast upon Him who said, "I Am the Bread of Life."

Being Full

When humble sinners call upon Christ in faith, then they are filled. Jesus preached to the people, showing that God performed a miracle and gave the Israelites manna in the wilderness, but they ate it and died. The bread of life is of such a nature that one who eats of it will never die but will live. Looking at John 6:48-51, we see the cross in view, specifically in verse 51: "I am the living bread which came down from heaven. If anyone eats of this bread, he will live forever; and the bread that I shall give is My flesh, which I shall give for the life of the world." Jesus is the one who would take our sin upon Himself and give His flesh for our life. We see this in verse 56 as well: "He who eats My flesh and drinks My blood abides in Me, and I in him. As the living Father sent Me, and I live because of the Father, so he who feeds on Me will live because of Me."

What this means is that those who eat of the Bread of Life will live because He lives. Two senses are given: in verse 56 is a picture of remaining united, and then in verse 57 is a picture of Jesus being the source of life. Similar to a root and branches, so is the bread of life and those who partake of the bread of life. What happens is that they are filled; they live life forevermore. Though they may die, yet they will live. No one else can say that but one who has died to self and now lives unto Jesus Christ. Our life is hidden in Jesus Christ.

Is this true of your life? Have you found your life in Christ? Have you found a peace which surpasses all understanding? Have you found that rare jewel of Christian contentment? Do you possess that pearl of great price? If not, then turn in repentance and give up your self-

trust, self-reliance, and rebellion against God. Come to the one who said, "I Am the Bread of Life. He who comes to me will never go hungry, and he who believes in me will never be thirsty."

After Jesus preached this startling sermon about Himself, the Jews grumbled. The uninspired title of the next section is "Many Disciples Desert Jesus." The Jews wanted to be fed; they wanted some more bread and fish, maybe a glass of wine. They loved the things of this world.

The Jews listening to Jesus wanted physical blessings. They didn't care about spiritual blessings. Similarly, North Americans want more and more. Jesus said in John 6:27, "Do not work for food that spoils, but for food that endures to eternal life, which the Son of Man will give you." Dear friend, what are you working for? What are you living for? Give it over to the Lord.

There are many things in this life which promise nourishment. They are like a bag of candy bars in the hands of a child. The belly may become full, but the child will not be nourished. Even though children love the taste of a candy bar, they will long for meat and potatoes, that which nourishes. The world has many things that promise happiness, but there is only one source of true joy, and that comes from feeding on the Bread of Life. May it be our prayer that the Lord continues to feed us on Jesus. Let us pray that He feeds us until we want to no more, and that will take place, both now and in the life to come.

Rev. Steve Swets

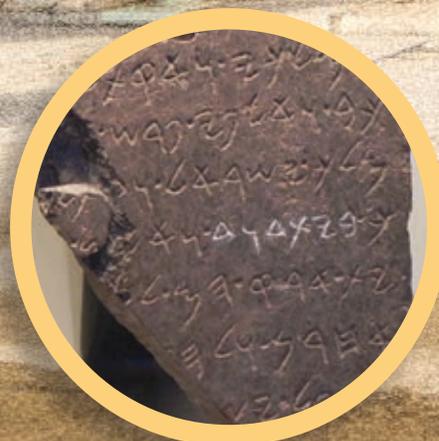
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Even before Indiana Jones wooed a generation of young people into pursuing careers in ancient history, archaeology was grabbing the world's attention. The drama-laden story of Lord Carnarvon's several-week journey to join Charles Carter in descending the steps of the newly discovered tomb of King Tut is nearly one hundred years old. In the 1800s, the quote attributed to Heinrich Schliemann, excavator of the ancient site of Troy, "I have gazed on the face of Agamemnon," excited people's imaginations: look what archaeology can do!

In reality, archaeology is—with some exceptions, of course—a bit less dramatic. For the most part, gone are the days when archaeologists excavated at a particular ruin with the primary aim of shedding light on biblical people, events, and places. Most excavations are funded by secular universities, so the objectives and goals usually reflect the diverse aims of a university curriculum. Indeed, archaeology in places like Israel and Jordan is treated as a subset of anthropology, and a dig site will employ a number of different specialists (e.g., seismologists, botanists, geologists, zoologists) and technologies (e.g., magnetometers, ground-permeating radar, satellite photography, carbon-14 dating).¹ Their motivation is to understand broader patterns of human civilization in the history of that region or site.

Why Is Archaeology Important for Christians?

Though archaeologists are now interested in a wider range of information, this does not mean that it is unrelated to the Bible. Indeed, the relationship between archaeology and the Bible is one that will not (and must not) go away. Since the Christian faith is a historical one, Christians ought to be interested in archaeology. It is, after all, a key tool in the historian's handbag. In spite of pious-sounding claims that "archaeology cannot prove or disprove faith," archaeology is indeed relevant (albeit not always decisive) if one holds the faith to be truly objective and not just a subjective inner feeling.²



Though archaeology is of great value for understanding the historical setting of God's Word, there are misconceptions about what archaeology can and cannot do. Skeptics, for example, often cite archaeological finds as disproving Scripture, claiming that they pose insurmountable challenges to the faith. They place a high degree of confidence on the ability of archaeology to determine "what really happened" and will not accept the historicity of the Bible unless it is corroborated by archaeological finds. (And sometimes not even then!) Ironically, some conservative Christians unwittingly agree with the skeptics and feel that unless the claims of the Bible are illustrated by archaeology, those claims are somehow less certain or deserving of our trust.

How then should Christians assess the finds of archaeology? How can study of archaeology be most beneficial to the Christian faith? It is to these questions that we now turn.

Scripture Is Self-Attesting

Before we even begin to relate archaeology to the historicity of Scripture, we must state an important presupposition up front: Christians believe the Bible to be the inspired, infallible, inerrant Word of God because it is trustworthy *in and of itself*. That is to say, the Bible is what theologians call a self-attesting "first principle" for Christians; it is not something that requires authentication from an outside source (whether the church, science, history, or archaeology). The Belgic Confession articulates it this way: "We believe without a doubt all things contained in [the Scriptures]—not so much because the church receives and approves them as such but above all because the Holy Spirit testifies in our hearts that they are from God, *and also because they prove themselves to be from God*" (art. 5; cf. Westminster Confession, art. 1.5; Westminster Larger Catechism, Q&A 4).

Of course it sounds circular to say we believe the Bible to be the authoritative Word of God because the Bible claims to be the authoritative Word of God. And yet a degree of circularity is inevitable, even for non-Christians. Herman Bavinck explained: "[I]n every scientific discipline, hence also in theology, first principles are certain of themselves. The truth of a fundamental principle (*principium*) cannot be proved; it can only be recognized. 'A first principle is believed on its own account, not on account of something else. Fundamental principles cannot have a first principle, neither ought they to be sought.'"³ If Scripture needs something else to stand as an authenticator, that other thing must be a self-attesting fundamental principle. Thus there is no escaping the fact that something is presupposed by every human being—believer or non-believer alike—to be a self-authenticating first principle against which all other beliefs and ideas must conform.



So in sum, when an archaeological find is touted as proving the Bible to be historically unreliable, we must remember that the person saying this has a different first principle, one that person has, incidentally, adopted by faith. And how did they come to adopt that first principle? This is where a presuppositional apologetic method provides a strong response.⁴ Christians confess that the Bible cannot be disproven since it is *itself* the only thing we have for proving or disproving anything. And while we do accept it by faith, we also have what other purported first principles do not: the attestation of the Holy Spirit. Though it may not be immediately clear how a given archaeological find harmonizes with God's Word, our assumption is that it does. Even when the answer escapes us, this does not mean that no answer exists.

Archaeology Is Not Self-Interpreting

It is often claimed that artifacts are more reliable than texts (especially the biblical text) since artifacts are unprejudiced and unbiased. Critical historian Lester Grabbe states it this way: “[A]rchaeological data actually existed in real life—the artifacts are realia. . . . Texts, on the other hand, are products of the imagination. The content of a text always contains human invention, and it is always possible that a text is entirely fantasy.” Thus Grabbe concludes: “Preference [in reconstructing Israel's past] should be given to primary sources, that is, those contemporary or nearly contemporary with the events being described. . . . *This means archaeology and inscriptions*” (emphasis added).⁵ But is this really the case? True, a pot, wall, figurine, or seal impression was touched by an ancient person, but it does not follow that an artifact is thereby more reliable than a narrative. In fact, in order to explain that artifact, one must have some narrative, some story that can give an account of the item in question. But where does this story come from? Here is where critics begin to stumble.

In their magisterial volume *A Biblical History of Israel*, Iain Provan, V. Philips Long, and Tremper Longman III examine the claims of critical archaeologists and historians. Unlike the critics, Provan et al. refuse to dismiss the claims of the biblical texts due to their supposedly unreliable nature (i.e., the Bible's belief in the miraculous) or their supposedly ideologically loaded content (i.e., the Bible says that God's sovereign will governs the events of history, not evolution and chance). They note that both the Bible and archaeological finds present testimony about the past, and that responsible historians will take into account all available testimony when telling the story of Israel's past. To disregard the Bible as an historical source is irresponsible even by critical standards.

Provan et al. go on to note that critical historians are often inconsistent in their use of archaeology. They cite the work of Keith Whitelam, who believes that archaeological finds are unbiased and reliable and the Bible is not. But when archaeological finds are clearly in harmony with the Bible, he pivots and claims that these finds have simply been misinterpreted. Thus while claiming that archaeology takes priority over the biblical texts, he regularly reinterprets archaeological data to match his belief that the Bible is wrong. Provan et al. conclude with an appropriate level of sarcasm: “Whitelam cannot have it both ways. Either archaeological data do or do not give us the kind of relatively objective picture of the Palestinian past that can be held up beside our ideologically compromised biblical texts to ‘show’ that the ancient Israel of the Bible and its scholars is an imagined entity.”⁶ Indeed, while critics accuse the Bible of being “ideologically loaded,” Provan et al. respond with the jarring reality: “In fact, *all* archaeologists tell us stories about that past that are just as ideologically loaded as any other historical narratives and are certainly not simply a neutral recounting of the facts.”⁷

And so in sum, whenever news flashes across one's Twitter or Facebook feed about a new archaeological discovery that has disproved the Bible, one must remember this important fact: archaeological finds do not interpret themselves. Thus we should ask: What would make the critical historian come to this conclusion? What storyline is the historian holding to? Why did he choose to embrace that storyline instead of the Bible's? Are there other ways of explaining the significance of this find? What we must not do is assume that the critical historian or archaeologist is working from a legitimate starting point and then try to answer him on that playing field.

The Role of Archaeology in Biblical Study

Detailing the ways in which archaeology supports the historicity of the Bible and explaining the finds that seem to contradict the Bible would take more space than this article will allow. In future issues of *The Outlook*, I hope to introduce readers to some different archaeological finds that are relevant to the Bible's narrative in order to help Christians gain confidence in the historical reliability of God's Word. For now, I will conclude this article by describing four ways, adapted from James Hoffmeier, in which archaeology can assist Bible reading.⁸

1. Providing a Context. Archaeology can help to illustrate the context of a given passage. The finds of archaeology help us to place the biblical stories into a concrete time and place. Hoffmeier says that ancient texts and artifacts “serve as a kind of time machine that moves us back to the world of the Bible.” Objects found in Scripture (gates, pots, houses, walls) are not always the same as what we have today. Archaeology helps us to better picture the objects used in the Bible's stories.

2. Complementing the Text. The finds of archaeology often give insights into the past that the Bible does not cover.

The Bible, after all, is selective in what it chooses to recount, not only in terms of particular historical events, but even in terms of details in a recorded event. Archaeology helps us learn about things that were assumed by the biblical writers even when they did not state them explicitly.

3. Responding to Challenges.

Hoffmeier writes: “[E]rroneous theories and interpretations of biblical passages have been offered by critics of the Bible over the centuries. Archaeology offers the best way of dealing objectively with such problems.” As an example, older scholars viewed the conquest of Canaan under Joshua as a blitzkrieg, scorched-earth campaign that would have left charred remains at nearly every major city in Canaan. When critics claimed that destruction layers were lacking at these sites, scholars gave a more careful reading of Scripture and noted that in fact the older scholars had been reading into the text. A close reading of Joshua indicates that only three cities were burned: Jericho (Josh. 6:24), Ai (Josh. 8:28), and Hazor (Josh. 11:11–14). What is more, Scripture explicitly says that most of the cities were left standing so that Israel could more easily settle into them without costly and time-consuming rebuilding: “I gave you a land on which you had not labored and cities that you had not built, and you dwell in them. You eat the fruit of vineyards and olive orchards that you did not plant” (Josh. 24:13). Moses had prepared them for this very thing (Deut. 6:10–11). Thus archaeological discoveries gave an opportunity to restudy the biblical text and come to a more accurate understanding of God’s Word.

4. Confirming the Text. There are many instances when archaeology uncovers objects that cannot be easily explained apart from the history presented in Scripture. When this happens, we can see that the events of the Bible are also attested

by external sources, exactly what we would expect for a Bible that claims to recount actual history. Of course critical scholars tend to disagree with this; they are often hesitant to agree that archaeology confirms the historicity of the biblical text. But as we noted above, this is not due to archaeological finds themselves; rather it is due to the non-biblical presuppositions and narratives embraced by critics as being authoritative by faith. Cornelius Van Til wrote that apart from Scripture, scientific and archaeological evidence cannot be adequately explained: “This is not . . . to disparage the usefulness of arguments for the corroboration of the Scripture that come from archaeology. It is only to say that such corroboration is not of independent power. . . . The facts of nature and history corroborate the Bible when it is made clear that they fit into no frame but that which Scripture offers.”⁹

Conclusion

And so as we conclude this introduction, let us keep in mind the true value of archaeology and not be shaken by the claims of unbelieving criticism. There are times when archaeological finds pose significant conundrums. And some of these conundrums will never be solved satisfactorily before Christ’s return. That does not mean, however, that Christians cannot offer alternative explanatory theories, provided we do so provisionally and with humility.¹⁰ Nevertheless, let us remember that even when critical historians interpret archaeological finds as the Bible’s foe, archaeology really is a friend of biblical history.

1. See John D. Currid, *Doing Archaeology in the Land of the Bible: A Basic Guide* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1999), 17; Eric H. Cline, *Biblical Archaeology: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 132. (Note: Cline’s book is useful but is written from a critical perspective.)

2. For an indispensable though more technical recent work refuting the claim that the Bible can be true without being historical, see James K. Hoffmeier and Dennis R. Magery, *Do Historical Matters Matter to Faith?: A Critical Appraisal of Modern and Postmodern Approaches to Scripture* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2012).

3. Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, vol. 1: *Prolegomena*, ed. John Bolt, trans. John Vriend (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2003), 458. Cf. Robert L. Reymond, *A New Systematic Theology of the Christian Faith*, 2d ed. (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1998), 79–82.

4. Two highly recommend books about defending the Christian faith presuppositionally are Richard L. Pratt, *Every Thought Captive: A Study Manual for Defense of Christian Truth* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 1979); Greg L. Bahnsen, *Always Ready: Directions for Defending the Faith*, ed. Robert R. Booth (Nacogdoches, TX: Covenant Media Press, 1996).

5. Lester L. Grabbe, *Ancient Israel: What Do We Know and How Do We Know It?* (New York: T&T Clark), 10, 35.

6. Iain Provan, V. Philips Long, and Tremper Longman III, *A Biblical History of Israel*, 2d ed. (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2015), 8.

7. Provan et al., *Biblical History of Israel*, 85.

8. These four items are adapted from James K. Hoffmeier, *The Archaeology of the Bible* (Oxford: Lion Hudson, 2008), 31.

9. Cornelius Van Til, introduction to *The Inspiration and Authority of the Bible*, by B. B. Warfield, ed. Samuel G. Craig (Philadelphia: P&R, 1948), 37. Contrary to what is often claimed, Van Til recognized the value of evidences in apologetics. He called this “historical apologetics.”

10. For an encyclopedic resource of such believing theories, see Kenneth A. Kitchen, *On the Reliability of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003).

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Have you ever had that experience of not seeing or knowing something, but then as we sometimes say, “the light goes on”? When our children were babies they could not process how their mom or dad were gone one moment but there the next during peek-a-boo. This was because their brains were still developing spatial recognition. But then one day they could comprehend. When I was a young Christian, Hebrews 1:1–2 was one of those texts that one day turned all the lights on for me. I read that “God spoke to our fathers,” but then the light turned on for me: “but in these last days he has spoken to us.”

God has spoken. This means Christianity is a religion of revelation. Revelation is an unveiling of something previously hidden. For example, in Ephesians 3 Paul speaks about “the mystery of Christ, which was not made known to the sons of men in other generations as it has now been revealed to his holy apostles and prophets by the Spirit” (Eph. 3:4–5). The great overarching wonder of our religion is that man does not find God, but that God finds us—and speaks to us.

We believe that the Scriptures are the revelation of God. In them God opens His own mind and heart and expresses Himself to us in spoken and written words. I want to ask three questions from Hebrews 1:1–2, which this text gives the answers.

Who Is the God Who Speaks?

We read, “Long ago, at many times and in many ways, *God spoke to our fathers* by the prophets, but in these last days *he has spoken to us* by his Son.” The first question is this: Who is the God who speaks?

Of course the text says He is “God,” but the fact that He “spoke” in the past through prophets and through the Son means that our God is a personal God. We have a God who speaks and who speaks in words we can understand. This is rooted in the fact that our God is tri-personal: He is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. And as a Holy Trinity they have communicated and conversed from all eternity. And now He has spoken to us!

If you look in Genesis 1 you’ll see this personalness of God. In the six days of creation we read of God speaking and then something comes into being. But with the creation of humanity, we read in Genesis 1:28 that God pauses and has a conversation as a tri-personal God. The very creation of man was a personal act. Then we read that after God made Adam, God then revealed His will to Adam (Gen. 2:16). The important truth to take away from this is that if revelation was necessary for humanity before the fall into sin, how much more so now after the fall into sin with all its effects upon our knowledge of God?

This truth is also taught to us in Romans 1, where Paul speaks of the revelation of God in the creation. In the creation God reveals His power, though not His redeeming grace; He reveals that He is the Creator but not that He is the Redeemer. This means that something more is needed for the knowledge of salvation. That something else is the revealed Word of God. One of our theological forefathers, Francis Turretin, once said this about Scripture: “Without it the Church could not now stand. So God indeed was not bound to the Scriptures, but he has bound us to them.”¹ Like a father or mother communicates to their children first in words and then in writing, so too God first spoke to His people and then had His words passed down in writing.

To Whom Does God Speak?

The second question is To whom does God speak? “God spoke to our fathers . . . he has spoken to us.” As we read in the Scriptures, He did so in various ways. He spoke in theophanies, that is, in revelations of Himself in the forms of humans (e.g., Gen. 18). He spoke through angels, delivering the message of salvation (e.g., Matt. 1). He spoke through a voice from heaven (e.g., Exod. 19). He spoke through visions to prophets like Isaiah (e.g., Isa. 6). He spoke through dreams (e.g., Num. 12). He spoke through supernatural handwriting (e.g., Exod. 31; Dan. 5).

And God has spoken to us in the New Covenant.



God Has Spoken to Us

Let me state the obvious: He speaks to us sinners. But let me state the stupendous: *He speaks to sinners!* Don't forget that because we are sinners our knowledge of God is not as it should be. The Canons of Dort say:

Man was originally formed after the image of God. His understanding was adorned with a true and saving knowledge of his Creator, and of spiritual things; his heart and will were upright, all his affections pure, and the whole man was holy. But, revolting from God by the instigation of the devil and by his own free will, he forfeited these excellent gifts; and in the place thereof became involved in *blindness of mind*, horrible darkness, vanity, and perverseness of judgment; became wicked, rebellious, and obdurate in heart and will, and impure in his affections. (3/4.1)

But when God accomplishes His good pleasure in His elect, or works in them true conversion, He not only causes the gospel to be externally preached to them, and *powerfully illuminates their minds by His Holy Spirit, that they may rightly understand and discern the things of the Spirit of God*; but by the efficacy of the same regenerating Spirit He pervades the inmost recesses of man; He opens the closed and softens the hardened heart, and circumcises that which was uncircumcised; infuses new qualities into the will, which, though heretofore dead, He quickens; from being evil, disobedient, and refractory, He renders it good, obedient, and pliable; actuates and strengthens it, that like a good tree, it may bring forth the fruits of good actions. (3/4/.11)

The Holy Spirit is the light to blind sinners. For us to understand the Word we need the Spirit of God to illumine our darkened understanding even as believers (1 Cor. 2).

Why Does God Speak?

Our final question is this: Why does God speak? When we read Hebrews 1:1–2 along with Hebrews 1:14, which speaks of inheriting salvation, and Hebrews 2:3, which speaks of our having a great salvation, it becomes clear why God spoke to our fathers and why He spoke to us in words and writing: to bring us into a saving relationship with Him. J. I. Packer said it like this: "He speaks to us simply to fulfill the purpose for which we were made; that is, to bring into being a relationship in which He is a friend to us, and we to Him, He finding His joy in giving us gifts and we finding ours in giving Him thanks."²

We see this expressed in another of our doctrinal statements, the Belgic Confession, which says of the Word of God: "afterwards [that is, after the prophets and apostles spoke] God, from a special care which He has for us and our salvation, commanded His servants, the prophets and apostles, to commit His revealed word to writing" (art. 3). God has come down to our level and spoken to us in our weakness in His immeasurable care and concern for us. Like parents making cooing sounds and eating some baby food before giving it to their children, God has accommodated Himself to us in language we can understand in the written Word. As John Calvin said, since the revelation of God in the creation is insufficient to bring us to God, "we need another and better assistance . . . the light of his word, to make himself known unto salvation, and hath honoured with this privilege those whom he intended to unite in a more close and familiar connection with himself."³

To be friends, there must be communication between two people. There must be conversation. With God and us, now the words

between Him to us are mediated through paper and ink, but one day the words will be communicated directly face to face (1 Cor. 13:12; Rev. 22:4). When I was a kid my favorite baseball player was Reggie Jackson when he was on the Angels. I knew everything about him I could find out from his baseball cards (there was no Google or Wikipedia!). I had a poster of him. I listened to him being interviewed on the radio as I listened to games. I even remember that one year our little league was allowed to walk on the field before a game. As we walked past the dugout, there he was. I tried to yell out, "Reggie," but he must not have heard me. Then during the pre-game warm-ups I crowded along the outfield wall yelling out to him for an autograph, for him to toss me a ball, anything. What did I get in return? Nothing.

Conclusion: "I have found the Book!"

Let me conclude by saying that God has revealed Himself to us in His written Word. When we realize this, the light should go on in our minds and hearts. Think about the story of the great and godly king of Judah,

Josiah. In 2 Kings 22–23 we read of his reforms in the life of the people of God. Why did he repent? Why did he change the church's course of action and affection? We read in 2 Kings 22:8 that when the temple was being repaired from its ruinous state, Hilkiah the high priest found a copy of the law of Moses in the temple. His exact words were this: "I have found the Book of the Law."

When we realize that what we have in what we call the Word of God are the very words of God, what our forefathers called *ipsissima verba Dei*, then everything begins to change for us. We begin to repent when we read His laws. We begin to rejoice when we read His gospel.

1. Turretin, *Institutes*, 57.
2. J. I. Packer, *God Has Spoken* (1965; rev. ed., London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1979), 28–50.
3. Calvin, *Institutes*, 1.6.1.

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Bible Studies on Ezra

Lesson 1: The Return from Exile

Dr. Norman
De Jong



As you and I peruse the pages of Holy Writ, there are four fundamental questions we should always keep in the forefront of our minds:

What is God doing in this passage?

What is God saying in this passage?

How are God's people responding to God's actions and words?

How should you and I respond today?

A simple, cursory reading may leave one cold and unconvinced or confused, but a daily, rigorous study of God's Word will yield amazing results. It is my prayer that you will have a rich, exhilarating experience as you study this book of Ezra over the next months.

Getting Acquainted

Scripture readings: Isaiah 44:24—45:13; Jeremiah 25:8–14; Daniel 6:24–28; 2 Chronicles 36:15–23; Isaiah 37:18–20

Introduction

In order to understand the book of Ezra we have to see it in the light of those Old Testament prophecies which predict its occurrence. In the words of Isaiah, we have some highly specific prophecies about the return of the exiles to Jerusalem, after the seventy years of captivity are completed. There are specific references to the coming of Cyrus, a Persian king (Isa. 44:28; 45:1; 45:13). God has sent His prophet Isaiah to call His people to repentance, to warn them of the consequences of their sins, to threaten them with impending punishment, but also to remind them of His great love for them. God has stated with utmost clarity that He has already, even before they have committed them, forgiven them their sins and wiped the slate clear: "O Israel, you will not be forgotten by Me! I have blotted out, like a thick cloud, your transgressions, and like a cloud, your sins. Return to Me, for I have redeemed you" (Isa. 44:21–22).

God can make such awesome claims because He is "the Lord, who makes all things, . . . who drives diviners mad, . . . who performs the counsel of His messengers, . . . who calls you [Cyrus] by your name, . . . who makes peace and creates

calamity” (Isa. 44:24–26; 45:3, 7). God powerfully reminds His readers, through Isaiah, that He is truly the Sovereign Lord of the universe, the One in whom all power and wisdom reside. He knows and controls everything, past, present, and future. Centuries before, while the people of Israel were still wandering in the wilderness, before they crossed the Jordan, God had warned them that all these events would happen, not because they were predetermined but because the inclination of man’s heart was always evil continually (see Deut. 28:36–63).

Discussion Starters

In Isaiah 44:24–26 and in Isaiah 45:2–12, what is God asserting about His own character and ability? On the basis of these claims, what promises is God making to the people of Israel through His prophet Isaiah?

Whom does God say will accomplish these things on His behalf? Who is the human agent that God will use in order to bring those promises to fulfillment? Is this the same person being mentioned in 2 Chronicles 36:15–23 and in Daniel 1:21 and Daniel 5:28?

What does God say about this Cyrus? What terms does God use to describe him? Does God describe him as a willing, devoted servant? Is Cyrus an Old Testament believer, in the tradition of Rahab, Nebuchadnezzar, and other aliens (see Isa. 44:28; 45:1–5)?

When were these words written? How much time would elapse before the events promised would occur (see the chronology)?

When, and under what circumstances, did Cyrus appear on the pages of history? Who was there to meet him and serve in his court (see Dan. 6:24–28 and the chronology)?

Did Daniel know the books of Isaiah, Ezekiel, and Jeremiah? Did the exiles in Babylon have these books with them? Do you think it plausible that they knew these prophecies? How would that affect their lives (see Dan. 9:1–19; Ezek. 14:14, 20)?

Is it reasonable to assume that Daniel might have shown Isaiah’s prophecies about Cyrus to Cyrus while Daniel was serving in his court? What kind of impact might that have had on Cyrus (see Isa. 45:1–5 again)?

The Chronology of Ezra [all dates are B.C., before Christ]

740–701

The prophet Isaiah foretells the destruction of Israel and the coming of Cyrus, king of Persia (see Isa. 44:24—45:13)

722

The ten northern tribes are captured and dispersed by the Assyrians (see Isa. 36:1–37; 2 Kings 17:5–6)

701

Sennacherib of Assyria destroys Judah’s army and confronts Jerusalem (Isa. 36:1; 2 Kings 18:13)

605

Nebuchadnezzar begins siege of Jerusalem; Daniel and friends carried into captivity (2 Kings 24:10–16; Jer. 52:4–11; Dan. 1:1–2)

586

Jerusalem and the temple are destroyed (2 Kings 25:8–10; Jer. 52:12–16)

559–530

Cyrus is king of Persia

539

The Medes and the Persians conquer Babylon and kill Belshazzar; Darius the Mede becomes king over the Medo-Persian Empire (Dan. 5:30; 6:28).

538

King Cyrus issues his edict, allowing the Jews to return to Jerusalem and Judah (Ezra 1:1; 6:3; 2 Chron. 36:22)

536

Work on the temple begins, is opposed, but continues (Ezra 1—4)

530–522

Cambyses [Ahasuerus] is king of Persia (Ezra 4:6)

530

Work on the temple is stopped by force of arms (Ezra 4:6, 23)

522–486

Darius I reigns over Persia (Ezra 5)

520

Work on the temple resumes (Ezra 5)

515

The temple is completed and dedicated (Ezra 6:15–18)

494–449

The Persians wage war against the Greeks and the Egyptians

486–465

Xerxes [Ahasuerus] reigns over the Persian Empire (Ezra 4:6; Esther 1:1)

464–423

Artaxerxes reigns over Persia (Ezra 4:7; 7:1–10)

458

Ezra is commissioned by Artaxerxes to go to Jerusalem and teach the Law of God (Ezra 7)

Text Notes on Discussion Starters

2. God identifies Cyrus (Isa. 44:28; 45:1, 13) as the person who will become His agent in bringing these promises to fulfillment, naming him on these pages of Scripture in order “that you may know that I, the Lord, Who call you by your name, am the God of Israel” (Isa. 45:3). God did not want Cyrus to be ignorant of His great plan for His people, promising to return them to Jerusalem after the seventy years had been finished, or of Cyrus’s role in that return. God thus leaves Cyrus without excuse, for God wants Cyrus to know by whose power and for whose glory these events will occur. Cyrus is to know, just as God’s people are to know, that the God of Israel is Lord of history.

3. God labels Cyrus as “My shepherd, and he shall perform all my pleasure” (Isa. 44:28), and then follows that by saying that he is God’s “anointed” (Isa. 45:1), a term reserved for God’s special agents and only for those who were part of Israel. Using this term to describe Cyrus must have been a shock to conservative Israelites, who would have considered that an inappropriate designation. Priests were to be anointed (Exod. 28:41), as was David, but no one would expect anointing to be assigned to a presumably pagan Persian. God also tells Cyrus that it would be His power holding his right hand so that nations might be subdued and the armor of kings be loosened, that it would be God who would “break in pieces the gates of bronze and cut the bars of iron” (Isa. 45:1–3). God also reminds Cyrus (and all of us) that he, Cyrus, had not known God (Isa. 45:4–5) and therefore was acting on the basis of God’s instigation. In a very real sense, then, Cyrus is a pawn in the hand of the great chess master, or, in God’s own analogy, the clay in the hand of the potter (Isa. 45:9). Cyrus cannot complain to God: “What are you doing with me? Why are you using me for such a noble purpose?”

The potter does not have to explain His actions to the clay, but this One graciously does.

4. Isaiah ministered for a period of more than forty years, from 740 until after 701 B.C. The opening sentence of Isaiah names the kings who ruled in Judah during that time: Uzziah (dies 740 B.C.), Jothan (750–731 B.C.), Ahaz (735–715 B.C.), and Hezekiah (729–686 B.C.). It was an era of great political turmoil due to Assyrian imperialism (*New Geneva Study Bible*, p. 1020). There would thus be approximately two centuries between the time of this writing and the arrival of Cyrus on the scene in Babylon.

5. We learn from Daniel 5 that God had sent the handwriting on the wall of the palace in Babylon to tell wicked King Belshazzar that God had “numbered his kingdom and finished it. . . . Your kingdom has been divided, and given to the Medes and Persians” (Dan. 5:26–27). We know from extrabiblical accounts that Cyrus and Darius had combined forces and conquered Babylon in 539 B.C. by diverting the waters of the Euphrates River so as to make the city susceptible to invasion. “The Greek historians Herodotus and Xenophon report that Babylon was taken in a surprise attack by the Persians while the Babylonians were engaged in reveling and dancing” (*New Geneva Study Bible*, p. 1341), thus confirming the text of Daniel 5. Josephus, the Jewish historian, gives us added detail, thus confirming the literal fulfillment of God’s promises made in Isaiah 41:2; 43:14; 44:27; 45:1–2, 13; 46:11. When Cyrus arrives as conquering king over Babylon, Daniel is there to meet him, just appointed to be the third highest ruler in all of the land (Dan. 5:29). Daniel is not killed by the invaders but is placed in a position of transitional authority, survives a plot against him, and then “prosper[s] . . . in the reign of Cyrus the Persian” (Dan. 6:28).

6. We know that Daniel “understood

by the books the number of the years specified by the word of the Lord through Jeremiah the prophet, that He would accomplish seventy years in the desolations of Jerusalem” (Dan. 9:1–2), thus assuring us that Daniel and the captives had in their possession at least the book of Jeremiah. We know, too, from Daniel’s prayer that he was well versed in the Law of God (Dan. 9:3–19) and must have had access to the books of Moses. Additionally, we know that the prophet Ezekiel, a contemporary of Daniel, was familiar with Daniel and considered him to be one of the three wisest, most righteous men who had ever lived (Ezek. 14:14, 20). Ezekiel was probably deported to Babylon with the second wave of captives in 597 B.C., when Nebuchadnezzar captured Jerusalem, thus placing him in the kingdom of Babylon at the same time as Daniel. Because the last date mentioned in the book of Ezekiel is April 26, 571 B.C. (see Ezek. 29:17), it is assumed by some Bible scholars that Ezekiel might not have lived to a ripe old age and probably preceded Daniel in death. Because the books of Jeremiah and Ezekiel, as well as the books of the Law, were available to the captives, it is also safe to assume that they had the book of Isaiah with them while in captivity and thus knew the prophecies about the coming of Cyrus. This must have been a source of great hope and excitement for all of them.

7. Because God had explicitly stated that He wanted Cyrus to know that it was He who had called him by name and said to Cyrus that God was holding his right hand to subdue nations, it is fair to assume that Daniel would have shared this information with Cyrus when he was privileged to serve in his court. What impact this information would have had on Cyrus can only be deduced from the text of Ezra, where we encounter the words of his proclamation. We will see that in the next lesson.

Bible Studies on Ezra

Lesson 2: Ezra (An Overview)

Dr. Norman
De Jong

Scripture Readings: Ezra 1; Jeremiah 25:1–14; 29:10–14

Introduction

In one sense, Ezra is a simple history. “Ezra is . . . so simple as scarcely to require an ‘Introduction.’ It is a plain and straightforward account of one of the most important events in Jewish history—the return of God’s people from the Babylonian captivity” (*Pulpit Commentary*, 7.i). That very simplicity, however, might be the cause for misreading the message. Since the Bible is God’s Word, we always need to begin by asking, “What is God doing?” Already in the opening lines, we notice that the one doing the action, the one bringing about the events, is none other God Himself. We do not meet Ezra, the secondary author, until we reach Ezra 7:1. We know, from Lesson 1, that Cyrus is a chosen servant, anointed by God, to bring to fruition the promises that God had made through Isaiah and Jeremiah.

As we progress through the book of Ezra, I want to encourage everyone to treat it like a diamond mine. On the surface a diamond mine looks like a field of dirt and stones and boulders. I’ve been at a diamond mine in South Africa and thought the place looked most uninviting. There was nothing attractive lying around to draw us to the place, except the evidence that people had found many diamonds there, enough to warrant years and years of intense labor. In the process of mining for diamonds, remember

that there are veins running through the earth that will be the concentration points of the diamonds that we are seeking. In the case of this book, there are dominant themes that ought to catch our eyes and guide us in our searches. One of those themes is God’s use of secular government and of pagan kings to carry out His will. God is intent on fulfilling His own promises to His people and of carrying on His special covenant relationship.

Discussion Starters

Based on the first verse of Ezra 1, who is the primary person or character about whom this book is written? Is it about Ezra? Is it about Cyrus? Or, is it about God? Why?

Now look at Ezra 2. Is this a chapter that you will probably want to skip? Is a book full of names of any interest to a Christian in the twenty-first century? Why would God, the primary author of Scripture, want to include long lists of names in a book that is primarily a revelation of Himself (see 2 Tim. 3:15–17)?

Should Christians, as they strive to build the kingdom of Jesus Christ, expect resistance and hostility? What forms does that opposition often take? Do those who oppose the kingdom take to themselves an aura of righteousness, pretending to be on the lookout for the general welfare (see Gen. 3:15; Matt. 7:15; Rev. 12)?

Look at Ezra 4, 5, and 6. It appears here that the pages of Holy Writ are filled with letters from the archives of Persian emperors. What might the good news of the kingdom have to do with pagan kings and emperors?

When we get to Ezra 7, we are finally introduced to Ezra. We also discover that we are now “in the reign of Artaxerxes king of Persia” (Ezra 7:1). A large segment of time has passed, with no reference to the decades that have elapsed since the end of Ezra 6. Is this little book a comprehensive history or a very selective history? Is not the historian supposed to include all the significant details?

What is the nature of history? How is history analogous to a road map? Are all of the important events of a given culture or society included in its history? Are all of the highways, streets, and roads included on a map of your state or region? Does the exclusion of some invalidate the map? Does the exclusion of some events from a historical record invalidate the history and cast aspersions of bias on the historian?

Do the purposes or intentions of the historian affect his selection of events? Does purpose or end always precede implementation? Does my intent alter my action? Does such prioritizing of intent or purpose invalidate my inclusion or exclusion of historical events?

Ezra is classified as a history book. God, as the primary author of the Bible, is the primary historian. What might be His purposes for including this little book in His canon? Why would God want us to know the history of His people as they return from exile in Babylon?

Look quickly at Ezra 9 and 10. The primary focus of these chapters is on intermarriage between believers and pagans. Those who were guilty of intermarriage experience strong censure and penalties. Why would God be so concerned about that? Is this a message that will play well in your church or your community?

Does our culture want to emphasize exclusion or inclusion?

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Introduction

In this series of articles, I am seeking to call our confessionally Reformed churches to humble self-examination, which is just another way of echoing Paul's exhortation to "test everything; hold fast what is good" (1 Thess. 5:21).

There is much that is good with our Reformed heritage. We are debtors both to God for His undeserved kindness and the theological richness we have inherited. In a day when many so-called Reformed churches are abandoning this treasure trove in the name of relevancy and pragmatism, we would do well to stand tall on the shoulders of our tradition without apology. What our world and communities need is not less Reformation doxology, theology, and piety—but more.

However, it is the giant log of a blind conservatism which is the subject of this article.

A conservatism which, if left unchecked, has the power to destroy us from the inside out.

Conservatism Defined

Renowned theologian J. I. Packer distinguishes between two types of conservatism. The first, which he calls "creative conservatism," is a "heroic resolve to preserve whatever in one's heritage one sees to be truly valuable: to hold on to it and defend it, come what may, and to call back to it those in the community who are drifting or have drifted from it and may indeed be actively undermining it."¹ As previously noted, it is this type of conservatism that is desperately needed in these ever-changing, increasingly turbulent times.

Yet the second type of conservatism is the subject under examination, which Packer calls "a nostalgic syndrome that buries its head with regard to the future and seeks only to hang on to the past." Under this view, change is bad no matter what (regardless of the fact that the esteemed tradition was contemporary when introduced). There is a blind allegiance to the way we've always done things. Traditions are never challenged. Those who ask questions are suspicious. Even the smell of change is the first move down the slippery slope.

We subtly fall into a kind of traditionalism that our Reformed fathers labored so hard to expose in Rome when we elevate our traditions and practices to the level of Scripture as if they were the Word of God.



It is safer and easier to leave our practices left unchallenged. Who wants to spend time examining why we do what we do? What if we find out we've been wrong all these years, or there's a better way to do it?

Blind conservatism is also a power move. Who can argue with a pastor who tells a newcomer to Reformed Christianity, "That's just the way we've always done it"?

But behind these answers often hide ignorance and pride. It is so much easier to tell an inquisitive person or child "we've always done this" than it is to provide biblical and practical reasons. But in the long run it will prove destructive when future generations challenge those sacred cows and no one can provide satisfactory answers.

Examples of this sort of conservatism abound. Ever meet a "King James Version only" Christian? How about a person who insists that his denomination is the only right one (suggesting all others are in serious jeopardy)? Or what about the well-intentioned sister who insists the 1976 blue Psalter Hymnal is the only song book that God accepts?

Conservatism is alive when tradition usurps Scripture. In the words of Packer, "Carnal

conservatism can and does emerge as soon as a Christian group comes to value something in its tradition as God's ideal, and treats its own embrace of that item as integral to its testimony and its faithfulness to the Lord." In other words, not only do we treasure our precious traditions; we make them the measuring stick of faithfulness. And, by the way, if you don't follow suit, you're less faithful than we are.

The Cure of Conservatism

The Bible is clear that God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble. We've got to see that it's not enough to say "we're conservative," or "that's the way we've always done it," and "if it was good enough for our fathers, it's good enough for me."

Writes Packer, "Constant, searching assessment of the things we have taken for granted, so far as we are now aware of them, with a willingness to discover that we have been wrong and need to change, is the life-activity with which creative conservatism begins."

That's not easy. Especially when there are pride and ignorance. But humility is the only way forward.

One of the great slogans of the Reformation was *ecclesia reformata semper reformanda* ("the church

that has been reformed has always to be reformed"). The Word of God must reform our traditions, not the other way around.

Are we willing to be cured of this subtle yet dangerous disease? Will we do the necessary work of asking hard and honest questions about why we do what we do and can we do it better? Or will we settle for a self-focused conservatism? Will we keep our heads in the sand?

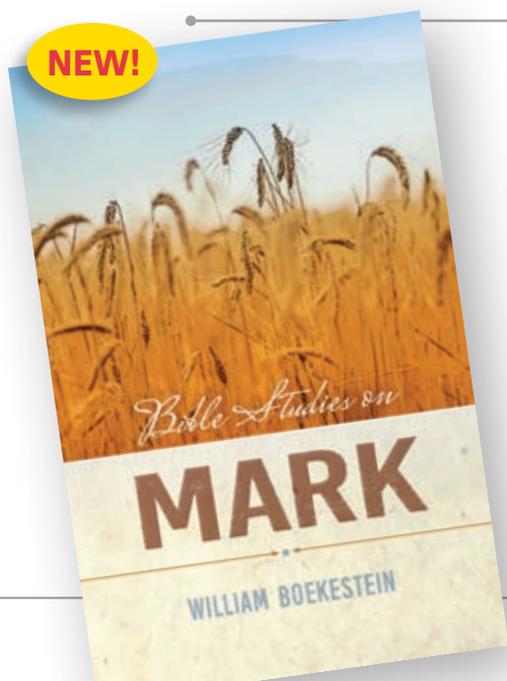
The gospel of Jesus Christ addresses our sinful conservatism by announcing that these corporate sins are covered in the blood of the cross. But grace also propels us into the future, reminding us that Christ, the changeless one, is the power of God unto salvation to everyone who believes.

May we be truly Reformed by always reforming ourselves to the Word of God.

1. J.I. Packer, "The Comfort of Conservatism" in *Power Religion*, ed. Michael Horton (Chicago: Moody Press, 1992), 284.

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What Is a Three-Year-Old Doing in Church?

Rev. Simon Lievaart

What is a three-year-old doing in a church service? Really, it can seem hard for a thirteen-year-old to gain something from the service, so why bring in a young child? Isn't there a better place for children? They might be disruptive, so maybe mom and dad should take turns staying home with them, each coming to one service. Or maybe the church should facilitate something for these young children to do. If they can have crafts and entertainment, at least they can take something home. Plus, that would make sitting in the pew easier for mom and dad. But when they do this, they miss out on so much.

I was thinking of the little children when I went to church during a trip to the Netherlands. The whole service was in Dutch. And like a child can grasp some basic concepts but loses it when things move too fast or the minister uses larger sentences, so was I quickly lost. I know very little Dutch. The minister preached on the sower and the seeds, and I recognized some of the words; he talked about seeds and birds and weeds, and he preached about Jesus and the Word of God. But it was impossible for me to say what he said about how it all related. As is true for children, I was thankful that my mom and dad could explain some of it to me afterwards.

When it was time to sing, I thought of someone who is six or seven. I could read the words, but I did not know what they all meant and I could not pronounce them either. I tried to sing with everyone else and some of the tunes were familiar, and though I am certain the songs were good, I



did not know what I was singing. And this is the way it is for our children in church. So is it worth it for them to be there? Absolutely!

What struck me about it and what brought us back to the evening service was that even though we did not comprehend everything, I knew that I belonged there just as much as the next guy who understood every word. I knew that I had gathered to worship the same God we worship every week in our home church. Because I too belong to the Lord, I belonged there in that gathering of God's people. I knew that the promises proclaimed were also for me and the calling to obedience was also for me.

Would I have been better served if I understood it all? Certainly. And if I moved there I would make a point to learn the language. If I came only to be present, that could be superstitious.

We must recognize we have come to be addressed by God's Word and show our love to God. This is why with our children, as they get older, they must learn to be more attentive and to grasp what it means that they are worshiping and what God's Word has for them on that particular Lord's Day. But while they are young, may they be content to grasp the things they can and be patient where it is over their head, and may they and their families rejoice that they belong there in the gathering of God's people.

Those who believe that there is no purpose to bringing children into church have forgotten why we come to church. We come not only to be fed by God's Word, not only to know our God and His blessings more, but we also come to give, to worship. The reason we come to church is because God invites us and so that we may give to our God the glory He is due.

If the three-year-olds or the thirteen-year-olds think time would be better spent doing an activity, craft, or being entertained, then they have missed the point. They have missed out on worshipping God. They have missed out on following the command to gather with God's people in His name, to together worship Him. Worship Him in song, prayer, offerings, and by giving our ears and hearts to receive His Word.

Rev. Simon Lievaart

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“What’s on
your mind?”



An average of 1.04 billion people see this question every day.¹ It’s the welcoming query of Facebook, a social media platform designed to help people around the world stay in touch. It’s an invitation to post something personal on your “wall” so that other people can “like” it (and recently, also react with “love,” “haha,” “wow,” “sad,” or “angry”). It’s the portal into a new global culture.

Don’t let your eyes glaze over at the statistic I just mentioned. An average of 1.04 billion people worldwide use Facebook every day. Not every year, not every month; every day. That’s 15 percent of the world’s population; that’s three times the population of the United States. Imagine a room big enough

to hold 1.04 billion people—you can’t. And now imagine all 1.04 billion of them talking at the same time. That’s Facebook.

Like its fellow platforms YouTube, Twitter, Instagram, Snapchat, and Yik Yak, Facebook lies at the heart of a strange dilemma. On the one hand, the idea of a global forum is thrilling. I love being able to interact with friends from Long Island, Grand Rapids, and the Philippines simultaneously. I love being able to easily stay in touch with my family or my home church, even amid a crazy college schedule. For these things, Facebook is wonderful.

But at the same time, social media is a little unnerving. Besides the torrent of overt immorality facilitated by these technologies,

much of Facebook’s content has a subtler undercurrent. It’s sarcastic, trivial, and insipid. It’s thoughtless, dishonorable, and narcissistic. The headlines say it all: “2 Seconds to Reshare Could Save a Life” . . . “Remove Wrinkles with This Gross Trick” . . . “I Got Snow White! What Disney Princess Are You?” A friend joked that there should be a Facebook link entitled, “Take This Quiz to Determine How Self-Obsessed You Are!”

My grandmother doesn’t own a computer, but she knows just enough about Facebook to hate it. And really, can I blame her? I think most of us, Facebookers and non-Facebookers alike, would admit that there’s a problem with social media. The hard part is diagnosing where that problem lies, and how we as Christians should respond to it.

Just a Tool?

Prior to some of my recent studies in communication theory, I would have argued that Facebook is just a tool to be used for good or ill. After all, it’s what comes out of a man, not what goes into him, that makes him unclean. From this vantage point, “What’s on your mind?” is just a question we have to answer sincerely and scripturally before proceeding with social media. Set your minds on things above; now you’re qualified to use Facebook. It’s that simple . . . but is it?

Over the past year I’ve interacted a lot with a school of communication thought known as “media ecology,” espoused by the likes of Marshall McLuhan, Neil Postman, and Jacques Ellul. Media ecology is just a fancy name for a simple

idea: We shape our tools, but our tools also shape us. This means I have freedom to choose my tools for interacting with the world, but I need to realize that the tools I choose will unavoidably shape me as a result.

The media ecology perspective often garners intense criticism as a deterministic, almost superstitious belief that grants technology more power than humans. This is a valid criticism, but it reveals a fundamental mistake: confusing how technology acts with how it affects us. To be sure, our tools can't follow moral codes or exercise free will; to use a familiar phrase, "Guns don't kill people, people kill people." But just because technology can't make moral decisions doesn't mean it's neutral. Our tools affect the way we live in the world, sometimes more deeply than we'd like to believe. As Don Ihde points out, the "guns don't kill people" argument (whether valid or invalid) seems to miss the fact that "the human-gun relation transforms the situation from any similar situation of a human without a gun."² I have the capacity to make a broader range of choices with a gun in my hand; to that extent, I am a different person.

To use a less extreme example, consider driving a car to get groceries instead of walking. At first glance, the effect of this switch seems simple. The car allows me to reach the store faster and with less fatigue than walking. But consider some of the other possibilities (or "affordances") the car offers. I am able to carry more groceries home than I would be able to with my own two hands. I am also able to drive to multiple stores in order to get the particular ingredients I want. As a result, I will probably buy more food. I might also be pickier about the food I get. I might even give in to wastefulness or

gluttony as a result. The car didn't *do* anything to change my lifestyle, but it *did* change my lifestyle nonetheless.

If this seems painfully obvious, ask yourself why we so easily apply this principle to our physical surroundings, yet shy away from applying it in cyberspace. We all know that walking around with a stick of dynamite in your back pocket is a bad idea, regardless of how much you might protest that you'll use it responsibly. So why are we so slow to recognize that Facebook—a network that has successfully overcome both space and time, a tool with the capacity to connect billions of people instantly—might have enough power to be even slightly dangerous? No, watching one funny cat video never killed anyone, but might the constantly-refreshing feed of social media be slowly draining our souls?

Now that I've explained the basic principle of media ecology, let me apply it to an aspect of Facebook that seems to have a particularly powerful impact on how we live our lives and communicate with other people.

Public Speaking in Digital Space

Have you ever felt that nervous rush of adrenaline just before speaking to a crowd of people? Public speaking is often cited as one of the most feared activities known to man. At the very least, we probably wouldn't describe it as fun.

As unpleasant as it may be, I tend to think this fear is a good thing. Public speaking reminds us that we have an obligation to make our audience's time and attention worthwhile, and that our hearers will judge our character based on our words from the podium. We feel the pressure of a few dozen or a few

hundred pairs of eyes. As a result, we feel accountable for saying something that's worth hearing.

But have you ever gotten this same adrenaline rush as you compose a Facebook status update? Do you feel nervous that people might not be interested in your views on the current political season or where you went for lunch? If you're like me, the answer is probably no. Sitting in front of a laptop screen feels nothing like standing in front of a crowd. As a result, we feel strangely comfortable broadcasting vapid details about our day to a potential audience of thousands. Granted, our Facebook "friends" may not care much—they're probably scrolling past our posts anyway. But if anything, doesn't this further indicate that Facebook might be degenerating into noncommunication?

The apostle James urged Christians to "be quick to hear, slow to speak, slow to anger" (James 1:19). Unfortunately, Facebook turns this heavenly wisdom on its head. With Facebook, it is easy to speak, easy to become angry, but exceedingly difficult to listen. It seems to me that if this tool tends to oppose James's model for Christian living, it will also hinder our ability to "receive with meekness the implanted word, which is able to save your souls" (v. 21).

Many other Facebook features could be analyzed in a similar way to evaluate their effect on the Christian life. I hope this brief exploration can point the way toward applying this principle to other aspects of our digital activity. But for now, I'd like to reflect a bit on trying to establish a biblical framework for understanding technology.

Technology and Idolatry

The debate over the nature of technology is ongoing and gargantuan, lending itself to multiple levels of misunderstanding and often placing its combatants in the pigeonholes of “technophiles” or “Luddites.” I can’t begin to treat the whole problem in a single article, but here is one biblical pattern that seems especially helpful in illuminating our understanding of social media.

Isaiah 44 describes the folly of those who bow down to idols: they take common materials like iron or wood, they make something with them, and they fall down and worship what they have made. “No one considers, nor is there knowledge or discernment to say, ‘Half of it I burned in the fire; I also baked bread on its coals; I roasted meat and have eaten. And shall I make the rest of it an abomination? Shall I fall down before a block of wood?’” (Isa. 44:19 ESV). This is the pattern of idolatry throughout Scripture: not only bowing down to a physical idol, which is certainly part of it, but more generally worshipping the work of our own hands rather than the One whose hands made us.

If one studies the Old Testament with this pattern in mind, one finds that many of the things we would call “technological advancements” are built in implicit or explicit rebellion against God. The tower of Babel is an obvious example, but consider also the city built by Cain (Gen. 4:17) and even the fig leaves sewed together by Adam and Eve after their sin (Gen. 3:7). Each of these technologies was built in fear by sinful men, in an attempt to find safety and protection outside the realm of God’s love. Jacques Ellul reflects on how man’s perception of reality changed after the Fall

in a beautiful passage in *The Humiliation of the Word*:

[Before the Fall,] human beings as limited creatures were fragile and weak, but placed in God’s love; this reality was seen within the context of eternal and perfect love. It was seen by God’s own sight. It was therefore a happy reality, and weakness was just one more joy, another perfection: that of the little child who buries himself in his father’s shoulder. He is glad to be weak, since his father is so strong. But now their eyes are opened. They see raw reality, with realism and accuracy: reality outside God’s love and therefore unpleasant, dangerous, and broken.³

According to Ellul’s interpretation, this same search for security was what drove Cain to settle east and establish the first city. This same search for security motivated the builders of Babel to seek to “make a name” for themselves with a massive tower.⁴ And this same search for security motivates even the most sophisticated technological advances of the twenty-first century. It is tempting to place our trust in our gadgets. It helps us feel like we are in control.

This does not make technology inherently evil. God told Noah to build an ark; he told Solomon to build a magnificent temple; he gave us his inspired Word in the form of a book. But before we can understand how to interact with a world of technology, we must understand the true strength of the urge to *idolize* technology.

Because of the victory accomplished for us by Christ, we are freed from bondage to the futile things of this world. But we must carefully and consistently ask ourselves questions like these: Is our devotion to technology hindering our devotion to Christ? Might our reliance on technologies like Facebook reveal that our priorities are out of alignment? Do we derive our sense of meaning and satisfaction from our tools, or from our Savior?

In short, the dilemma of Facebook is multifaceted. The question “What’s on your mind?” may, in fact, be a good place to start looking for a solution. But perhaps the answer to that question is far deeper and more convicting than our social networks would like to have us think.

1. newsroom.fb.com/company-info, retrieved February 23, 2016.

2. Don Ihde, *Bodies in Technology* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002), 93.

3. Jacques Ellul, *The Humiliation of the Word*, trans. J. M. Hanks (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1985), 98–99.

4. See Jacques Ellul, *The Meaning of the City*, trans. D. Pardee (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1970).



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An Introduction to the Ministry of IRBC: Our Founding Elders' Concern About the Corrupted Elements of Culture

Dr. Jeff
Doll

In upcoming issues, I hope to present to The Outlook's valued readership some introductory-level instruction in biblical counseling philosophy and methodology. The instruction that will be provided is based on the training model we use at The Institute for Reformed Biblical Counseling (IRBC). A great deal of the material that will be shared in upcoming articles is adapted from IRBC publications and is copyright. We trust that you will be faithful in observing the eighth commandment as it pertains to your handling of the content that will be published in this series of articles. Before we get into the meat of our counseling instruction, it is important that you are given some insight into the ministry of IRBC, for without it you will likely fail to grasp fully the significance of the instruction you will receive. You will, likewise, fail to see the need for a ministry such as IRBC in these spiritually deprived and dangerous days in which we live.

The goal of the introductory articles in this series is to provide you with some insights on how the ministry of IRBC began. We will then briefly touch upon what we do (our mission) and where we are going (our vision). Following the introduction we will give our attention to various biblical principles that will be effective in giving you a counseling framework that is distinctly Reformed in nature. We will close the series by exploring the process of biblical counseling. Practical, easy-to-employ steps that you can utilize as you informally counsel others will be presented as we round out our instruction on counseling via this series.

How IRBC Began

The Institute for Reformed Biblical Counseling was initiated as a result of two elders of our overseeing congregation expressing a concern that they were under-equipped when it came to dealing with issues they were encountering in their elder districts. This concern was magnified as they thought about how corrupted moral elements of American culture are increasingly finding their way into the visible church, and the accompanying need which exists today to bring Scripture to bear in the lives of congregants who have been influenced by these malignant elements. After much prayer and meeting with the Cornerstone United Reformed Church consistory (of Hudsonville, Michigan) on several occasions, a proposal for the ministry of IRBC was brought forth and approved unanimously. The consistory then enthusiastically recommended IRBC to the council, where it received unanimous approval. The congregation gave the proposal a strong affirmation via an overwhelming majority vote at one of its annual congregational meetings. And thus began the ministry of The Institute for Reformed Biblical Counseling.

The Concerns of IRBC's Founding Elders Should Be Reflective of Our Own as They Pertain to the Corrupt- ed Elements of Culture

The concerns of IRBC's founding fathers should be reflective of our own. There are many things in American culture that should warrant concern for Christians. The increasing lack

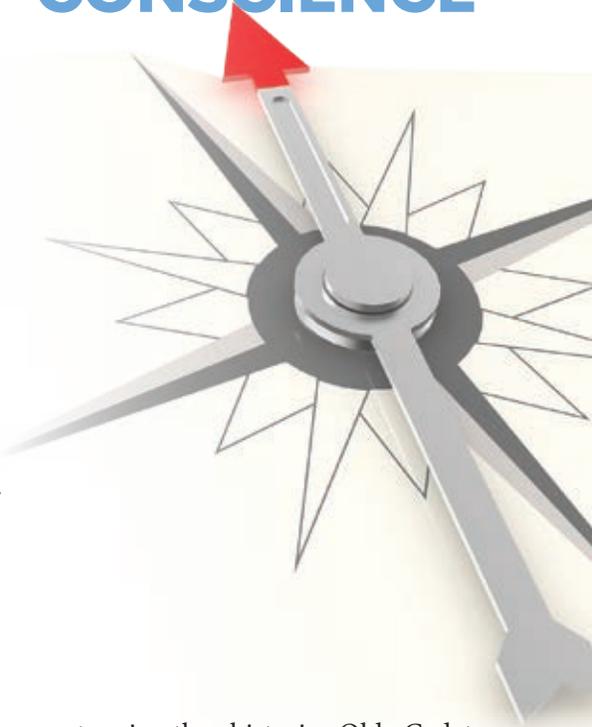
of respect for God's name, His moral standard, and the basic institutions He ordained for order in society (i.e., the family, church, and state) are among the broad strokes of a contemporary cultural backdrop that should disquiet our souls.

If this dark backdrop was represented pictorially via a work of art and one added to it various figures and symbols depicting the countless millions acts of blasphemy, slander, gossip, sexual immorality, and murder (to name a few) that occur daily in our society at large, the portrait would indeed be dark and hideous.

Lack of Respect for God's Name

This period in the overall history of America is the most overtly morally dark time we have ever known. One probe we can use to get an idea of our nation's deteriorating moral condition is by giving consideration to the manner in which God's name is used in American society at large.

God's name was held in high esteem in America in our earlier years. Gunning Bedford, a signer of the Constitution who served as a member of the Continental Congress, a military officer, and a federal judge, once pronounced the following benediction, "To the triune God—the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost—be ascribed all honor and dominion, forevermore—Amen."¹ James Knox Polk, our eleventh president, made the following statement in his inaugural address on March 4, 1845: "I fervently invoke the aid of that *Almighty Ruler of the universe* in whose hands are the destinies of nations and of men to guard this Heaven-favored land against the mischiefs which without



His guidance might arise from an unwise public policy” and “[w]ith a firm reliance upon *the wisdom of Omnipotence* to sustain and direct me.” He concluded by “again humbly supplicating *that Divine Being who has watched over and protected our beloved country* from its infancy to the present hour to continue *His gracious benedictions* upon us, that we may continue to be a prosperous and happy people.” It is hard to imagine a president in our time publicly expressing such reliance upon and respect for God. America’s respect for God has, indeed, plummeted since her earlier years. Now His name is openly and regularly misused by citizens who hold office and those who do not. His name is constantly blasphemed via television and radio programs that captivate the minds of countless millions of citizens of all ages in even some of our smallest and most remote communities. OM__ is now among the most popular Internet slang terms.

God is not neutral when it comes to the use of His name. Under the Old Covenant the misuse of God’s name provided grounds for death: “Whoever blasphemes the name of the Lord shall surely be put to death. . . . The sojourner as well as the native, when he blasphemes the Name, shall be put to death” (Lev. 24:16 ESV). Strangers, as well as native Israelites, were enjoined to revere the name of the Creator and Sustainer of the universe, and failing to do so resulted in the severest of penalties.

The Ten Commandments, which contain the most fundamental principles of moral life, bridge the Old Covenant with the New. Without these divinely inspired principles the very existence of human society becomes impossible. Unbelievers as well as believers possess a conscience which functions in connection with the Ten Commandments. Because God “has put eternity into man’s heart” (Eccles. 3:11) and has built within each person

the moral compass of the conscience, all people at all times know deep inside that there is a God. They also know that this high and exalted Being is entitled to receive from them the honor that is due His name.

When they fail to render Him this honor, they experience divinely prescribed guilt in connection with the third commandment, which says, “You shall not take the name of the Lord your God in vain, for the Lord will not hold him guiltless who takes His name in vain.” When countless thousands of people abuse God’s name in a nation which identifies itself as “one nation under God” and prints upon every piece of its currency “In God We Trust” without experiencing pangs of guilt, it says something about the state of its citizenry’s consciences.

Group Discussion

Are you concerned about the way God’s name is abused in America? If so, what are you doing about it?

Spend some time with your family or others discussing ways that you can be used by God to restore honor to His name within our country. You might wish to include the following historic Reformed confessions in your discussion: Heidelberg Catechism, Lord’s Day 36; Westminster Larger Catechism, Questions 103–106; Westminster Shorter Catechism, Questions 45–48. (Be sure to look up proof texts.) Be sure to discuss the importance of praying for a national revival. Share practical, non-intrusive ways you can communicate the gospel in the places wherein you regularly interact with others (i.e., the workplace, school campus, grocery stores, and your neighborhood).

A Lack of Respect for God’s Moral Standard

Righteousness exalteth a nation: but sin is a reproach to any people. (Prov. 14:34 KJV)

These words of Scripture are adorned in the work of art that lies front and

center in the historic Old Cadet Chapel at the United States Military Academy in West Point, New York, a place I visited on a number of occasions while living in that vicinity. The righteousness spoken about in this and other passages is behavior that is measured against God’s moral standard, and that standard is the Ten Commandments. Sound American leaders throughout history have recognized the importance of our country’s citizens living in accordance with God’s moral standard. Thomas Jefferson, the principal author of the Declaration of Independence, our second vice president, and our third president, once said, “The practice of morality being necessary for the well-being of society, He [God] has taken care to impress its precepts so indelibly on our hearts that they shall not be effaced by the subtleties of our brain.”²² John Adams, a signer of the Declaration of Independence and the Bill of Rights, and our second president, said, “Our Constitution was made only for a moral and religious people. It is wholly inadequate to the government of any other.”

These and similar words uttered by

leaders throughout the history of America gave rise to what appears on the carved stone frieze on the front of the U.S. Supreme Court Building: Moses seated with the two tablets of the Ten Commandments on either side of him. Even though a number of our nation's earlier key leaders may have been deists³ and there have been times throughout history when the light of the conscience has been severely eclipsed in different regions of our land, God's moral law has served as the foundation of public government and law. As little as twenty-five years ago, most people knew some if not all of the Ten Commandments and recognized them as the basis for our system of law.

Today, the majority of Americans (including many professing Christians) likely agree that the government should not legislate morality. What they fail to see is that ceasing to legislate morality makes immorality the standard. Why are murder, theft, and sexually deviant behavior such as child pornography against the law in the United States? Because America's law system is rooted in God's timeless moral code, the Ten Commandments. Throughout America's history, citizens from almost every religious stripe (including the religions of agnosticism and atheism) have recognized the essentiality of a moral code to govern public behavior. Why are an increasing number of Americans ignorant of the timeless moral code which functions in connection with the human conscience to restrain unlawful behavior? To be sure, there are a number of contributing factors. There are two, however, that have affected America's moral foundation more than any other. One occurred in the late 1960s and early 1970s, and the other in 1980. Both of the malignant factors of which I speak were directed to the young in society and continue to function as stones of antithesis usurping the Ten Commandments.

One of the stones was the introduction of values clarification into the America's public school system in the 1960s and 1970s. Values clarification teaches that (moral) behavior should be the result of free, uninfluenced, autonomous choice, based on each individual's analysis of a given situation. The stone which served as the capstone was laid by the Supreme Court in 1980 when it ruled that posting the Ten Commandments in a school classroom violated the Constitution of the United States. These two stones of antithesis have damaged and continue to damage the consciences of countless millions of our precious children and youth. We now have several generations of Americans who literally have no conception of what is right and wrong.

God's law is now openly neglected if not rejected in many of our local, state, and federal courtroom proceedings. It is treated similarly in meetings conducted by those occupying positions in the executive and legislative spheres of government. Across our country God's law is regularly being mocked, rejected, and/or neglected by American citizens at the grassroots as well as every level of government. The result: Lawlessness in every sector of society, which not only robs God of the glory due Him but also places every citizen in great danger. "For nothing is more dangerous than to live where the public license of crime prevails; yea, there is no pestilence so destructive, as that corruption of morals, which is opposed neither by laws nor judgments, nor any other remedies."⁴

Group Discussion

Are you concerned about the manner in which God's law is treated in our country today? Spend some time discussing God's law. You may wish to include the following historic Reformed confessions⁵ in your discussion: Heidelberg Catechism, Q&A 3, 4, 92, 93; Belgic Confession,

Art. 25; Canons of Dort, Heads 3, 4, Art. 5; Westminster Confession, Chap. 19; Westminster Larger Catechism, Q&A 91–122; Westminster Shorter Catechism Q&A 39–44. (Be sure to look up proof texts.)

1. What is the purpose of God's moral law (i.e., the Ten Commandments)?
2. Is God's law still important for purposes associated with national governance? If yes, what role is God's law to have in government?
3. You have probably encountered the statement, "You can't legislate morality." Is this statement accurate? If yes, why? If not, why not?
4. Should Christians or the federal government ever force American citizens to subscribe to Christianity as their religion? Why? Why not?
5. How does the gospel work in connection with God's law? How does public law rooted in divine law facilitate the proclamation of the gospel, an act which has a bearing on the eternal destiny of America's citizenry?
6. Although obeying the laws of the land which reflect God's law is important for the maintenance of an orderly society, does living in accordance with God's law save a person? Why? Why not?
7. What happens when the church makes the law its focus instead of proclaiming the gospel or obeying the Great Commission?

To be continued in next issue!

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Desideratum—A United Reformed Church

Rev. John
Vander Ploeg



Although adopted into our English language, the word **desideratum**, as used in the title above, is Latin and may be somewhat unfamiliar. Why use it then? Because I can think of no other single word that says it all — that is, all that I wish to try to say about the matter of a United Reformed Church.

As usual, Webster puts it in a nutshell: “desideratum — that which is not possessed, but which is desirable; something much wanted.” In that sense a United Reformed Church may indeed be said to be our *desideratum*.

An exciting prospect — Suppose that in God’s gracious providence the day would dawn when Reformed Church bodies — of course, I am thinking particularly of the CRC — would experience a drastic housecleaning. . . . Suppose that such denominations would some day purge themselves of the foe within the gate and of those bold innovations that now threaten to undermine the Reformed faith. . . . And suppose that out of the tensions, all in God’s gracious providence, a new denomination would emerge — a denomination that would not shilly-shally in its witness to the Reformed faith; but a church that would rather be unambiguous,

Article from *The Outlook*, July 1977

consistent, and enthusiastic in the profession of it. . . . Just suppose that some day God would be pleased to grant this . . . allow me then to suggest as a name, that it be called the **United Reformed Church**.

Consulting the *Yearbook of American and Canadian Churches*, I do not find among those who call themselves *Reformed* any denomination by this particular name. Please correct me if I am guilty of an oversight in this. If anyone knows of a better name, fine! let’s have it. At any rate the idea intrigues and excites me — the idea of belonging to a denomination that would be honestly, unambiguously, and enthusiastically committed to the Reformed faith in doctrine and life — and then also to have a name that says just that.

“Just dreams, fantasy,” some pragmatic reader may say. “No such church body will ever be achieved on this side of heaven. The best we can do in any denomination is settle for what in German is called **realpolitik** in statecraft — i.e., be realistic instead of insisting on that which is idealistic.” The idea is then that in ecclesiastical matters also, we must compromise when there seems to be nothing else to do and that we had better learn to live with the situation as best we can.

However, to be resigned to *realpolitik* in ecclesiastical and denominational matters would be a betrayal of the Reformed faith as a sacred trust. And the acid test for anyone who professes **this faith** is not whether he will *succeed in achieving* the ideal but whether he will remain *faithful* in pursuing it. As an unknown author once said:

Before God’s footstool to confess A poor soul knelt and bowed his head. “I failed,” he wailed. The Master said, “Thou didst thy best — that is success.”

The unifying principle — To be a Reformed church, not only in name but in fact, a church must be committed to the teaching of Scripture as this was rediscovered and proclaimed in the Protestant Reformation of the 16th century. Looking there for the unifying principle to make a church truly Reformed we come upon the basic teaching of *sola Scriptura* — a Latin expression meaning *the Bible*

alone. The Bible, the whole Bible, and nothing but the Bible is to be the church's supreme rule for faith and life. There we find the bedrock of what it means to be Reformed.

Many there are who have tried to unite the church — always in vain — on something other than the Word. The familiar slogan, "Doctrine divides; service unites," is false and ultimately always futile. One might just as well expect to pick fruit from a tree rooted only in thin air. Rene Pache says it so well in his excellent work, *The Inspiration and Authority of Scripture* (Moody Press) when he writes:

"Apart from revelation, as a standard by which to evaluate and correct our fallible human notions, sinners such as we are will be forever cast upon the shore of an ocean of doubts and speculations. And when modern theology tells us that we cannot trust the Bible or ourselves, it turns us over to an uncertain fate with no hope or respite" (p. 262).

Human reason, science, commonly-accepted mores, ethnic identity — however valuable these may prove to be — may never take the place of unconditional commitment to Scripture as the basic principle for ecclesiastical or denominational unity.

God said it long ago — a directive still as valid now as it once was for Israel of old: "To the law and to the testimony! if they speak not according to this word, surely there is no morning for them" (Isa. 8:20).

"Let this be a firm principle:" says John Calvin, "No other word is to be held as the Word of God, and given place as such in the church, than what is contained first in the Law and the Prophets, then in the writings of the apostles; and the only authorized way of teaching in the church is by the prescription and standard of his Word" (*Institutes*, IV, VIII, 13).

Note also from our Lord's highpriestly prayer in John 17 how He relates the unity of His people to the truth or the Word of God. This close relation lies right on the surface as He prays: "I have given them *thy word*. . . Sanctify them *in the truth; thy word is truth*. . . And for their sakes I sanctify myself, that they themselves also may be sanctified in truth. . . that they may all be one; even as thou, Father, art in me, and I in thee, that they also may be in us . . ." (John 17:14ff).

The ongoing challenge — Several years ago, the late Rev. R. B. Kuiper wrote the following in *To be or Not to Be Reformed*: "To take it for granted, as I fear some do, that the Christian Reformed Church will continue sound for, let us say, another century is to do it a vast disservice" (p. 7).

A lot of water has gone over the dam since that time, and meanwhile that complacency against which "R. B." warned so earnestly is obvious on every hand for anyone who still has eyes to see. As we rest comfortably in our affluence and freedom from persecution, the forces of evil are steadily chipping away at the Reformed faith we still profess, and they threaten to rob us of our heritage.

As I write these lines, the 1977 CRC Synod has not yet been convened and so I have no way of knowing what action will be taken on what has come to be known as "the Verhey case." The matter is so serious because the truth of the Bible is under attack. However, actually it is not the Bible that is on trial but rather the CRC that is on trial. Unless this matter is decided by Synod rightly, definitively, and unambiguously a wedge will be driven to divide the CRC even more tragically than is already the case. There are issues that agitate us that are simply not negotiable if we are sincere about really wanting to

remain Reformed, and this is such an issue.

Without any attempt at being needlessly alarmist or sensational, it is not too much to say that, if the ongoing attack upon Scripture among us, continues to be tolerated, the possibility of secession from the CRC can only be expected to become a growing prospect. Any attempt to play for time and tolerance when a clearcut and crucial issue is before the church must be vigorously resisted, because in such cases time and tolerance are almost invariably on the wrong side. You ask me: how are we to go about it to arrive at a United Reformed Church. My answer: *how I wish I knew!* There is so much at stake and we know that secession is a terribly serious business. We should be much in prayer at the throne of grace for a clear sense of direction. Meanwhile your suggestions are eagerly awaited.

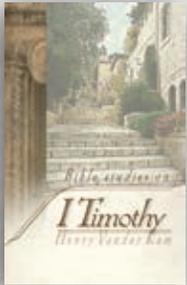
Someone writes me that no church has ever been reformed from within. Apart from checking the historical accuracy of this assertion, we do believe that our God is able, in answer to the fervent petitions of His people, even to do that which may have never been done before. Impetuous steps for drastic reformation may so easily lead to abortive results that impede rather than prosper the cause. Meanwhile, we are not to forget for a moment that we have a corporate responsibility as long as we remain as members of a church when she is no longer true to the sacred trust with which she has been endowed.

Although, admittedly I am unable to clearly chart the course to achieve a United Reformed Church, *I do wish to propose the following specific steps* toward meeting the ongoing challenge and ask you to consider them for whatever they are worth.

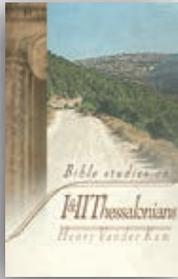
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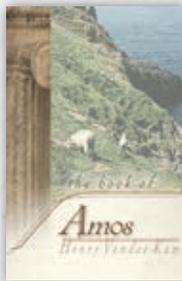
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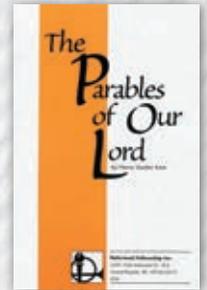
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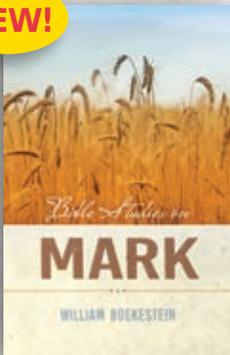


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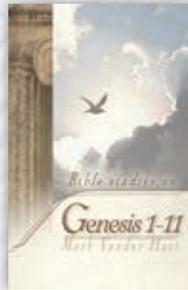
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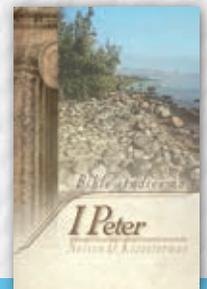


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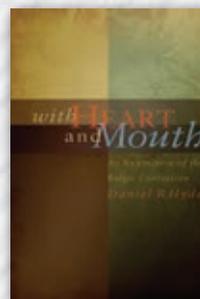
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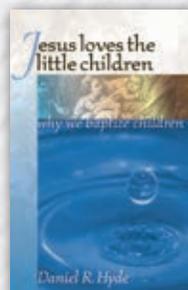
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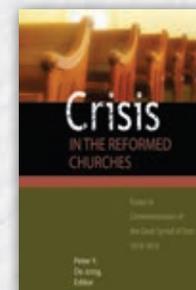
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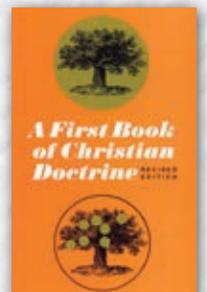
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agitating the church at large, and the CRC in particular. Read, investigate, and examine for yourself the issues that are agitating the church and disturbing the peace of Zion. Don't allow yourself to be confused or prejudiced by those who may make personal attacks on those who are speaking and writing to alert the church to the heretical thinking that is gaining ground among us. I sound this warning also because just today an instance of this kind of thing was reported to me. Even Calvin, Luther, and others who were leaders in the Protestant Reformation had their failings; but far be it from us to reject their great achievements because of personal frailties from which they also may have suffered. The plea is so urgent: read, study, think, judge for yourself what time it has gotten to be in the CRC. Woe be to anyone who simply refuses to be concerned as long as he knows that he is comfortably on the side of the majority without ever considering seriously whether or not he is on the side of the Lord!

And, when once you get to know the score, speak up or write and communicate your informed concerns and convictions to others. There is a silent majority also in the CRC that could become a potent force and determining factor in rejecting the evil innovations that threaten the future of the church if only such are willing to let themselves be heard. There is no room in the church for those who choose to be mere spectators and are unwilling to become involved when the Reformed faith is being assailed. Contributions from our readers as to how to bring into being a truly United Reformed Church are welcome, and these will be seriously considered for publication. Of course, no blanket promise can be made to publish anything and everything that is received. Discretion and good judgment will

have to be observed. However, to know what our readers are thinking about the state of the church and the remedy to be pursued may, under God, prove to be of real help in coming to our sorely needed sense of direction. The cause is of the utmost importance because it concerns the precious church of our Lord Jesus Christ which He purchased with His own precious blood. The generous financial support that continues to come from our loyal supporters means so much to us. If you are now willing also to share your thoughts, ideas, and suggestions about the course to be followed, that too may energize and activate developments that are so sorely needed.

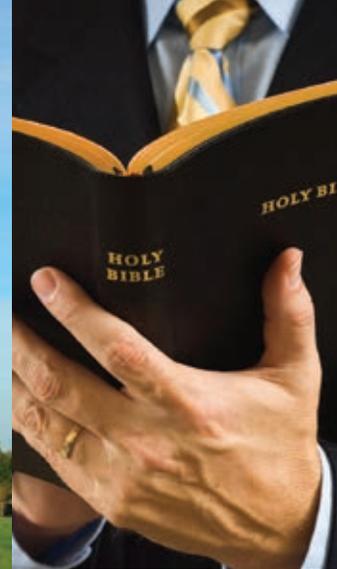
Moreover, please also give serious thought to the wisdom of formulating and circulating what might be called a *Reformed Faith Manifesto*. Consulting Webster once more, a manifesto is "a public declaration of intentions, motives, or views." A document of this kind should accentuate the positive in setting forth in unambiguous terms what we believe, for example, about the Bible as God's Word, the church and requirements for membership, ecclesiastical offices and the Scriptural teaching as to who are and who are not to serve, and other matters of special concern in our time. Of course, such a manifesto should also spell out in no uncertain terms a rejection of current evils that continue to be advocated among us; for example, the so-called "new hermeneutic," the toleration of lodge members in the church, women in Church offices, a growing denigration of preaching, the adherence to and teaching of evolution, and other innovations that threaten the downfall of the church. It may be objected that we already do have our creeds and doctrinal standards and that these should be sufficient. However, it should be obvious, as we realize what is being

tolerated today notwithstanding a profession of these creeds and doctrinal standards, that it has now become imperative to clearly and unequivocally cross all the *t's* and dot all the *i's* so that there may be no misunderstanding as to what is Reformed and what is not. With the Lord's blessing, such a Reformed Faith Manifesto might help us along on the way to what eventually might prove to be the United Reformed Church for which we long so eagerly. Will such a URC be realized before Jesus comes? Only God knows.

4. Finally, allow me once again to urge concerned members of the CRC and of other Reformed bodies to *organize Reformed Fellowship local chapters* in the pursuit of the goals we cherish. In union there is strength. If you are interested in promoting the organization of such a chapter in your area, feel free to write to Reformed Fellowship, Inc., P. O. Box 7383, Grand Rapids, Michigan 49510. Assistance and suggestions as how to go about this will gladly be sent upon request. Several areas throughout the church now have such chapters for regular meetings and mutual encouragement and inspiration. Although such beginnings may be small and the efforts may seem feeble, there is no limit to what our God is able and may be willing to do. Of course, you and I are not a John Calvin or a Martin Luther, but remember they were also mere men like us and they had no monopoly on God's grace and willingness to help.

Rev. John Vander Ploeg

(1902-1983) served as pastor in Christian Reformed Churches from 1930-1956. He served as editor of from 1956-1970. After he retired from *The Banner*, he became the editor of *The Outlook*.



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If anyone thinks he is religious and does not bridle his tongue but deceives his heart, this person's religion is worthless. (James 1:26)

In a previous article, I sought to show what it means to be “slow to speak” according to God's Word. Guarding our speech, though, requires that we learn how to control the use of our tongues for God's glory. In the following paragraphs, I will first offer three biblical reasons why we must control our tongues, followed by three practical suggestions regarding how we may do so.

Three Reasons Why We Must Control Our Tongues

1. If we do not control our tongues, we deceive ourselves.

Since the book of James was written specifically to Christians, it is worth noting that the word *anyone* at the start of James 1:26 does not exclude faithful, growing Christians. On the contrary, it suggests that every person who professes to follow Christ should receive and heed the warning which follows. However, James is specifically describing a person who has convinced himself that he is religious—someone who is not genuinely submitted to Christ but who outwardly performs most or all of the expected activities of the Christian life.

This sort of person is likely to be active in attending church, generous in giving, quick to volunteer to serve others, and involved in evangelism, missions, choir, or virtually any other aspect of a church's ministry. Someone fitting this description could conceivably be a deacon, an elder, a Bible teacher, a missionary, or even, in some cases, a pastor. Yet, to a person who is externally religious, James warns, “You may believe yourself to be a religious person, but if you do not bridle your tongue, you deceive your heart!”

As you may know, a bridle is a device that fits on a horse's head for the purpose of controlling and guiding the horse. The bridle enables riders to steer horses away from danger and toward the proper path. In this verse, James is using the term *bridle* as a verb, to strongly emphasize the need for every Christian to guide, guard, and restrain our speech. In fact, James warns readers that if we don't do this, we are deceiving ourselves concerning our relationship with Christ.

So, if there is a local church member who is active in the life of the church but who consistently slanders, backbites, and spreads gossip about others, then it's likely, according to James, that this person has deceived himself into thinking that he belongs to Christ when he does not. People in this situation need to stop flattering themselves and believing themselves to be better than they are, and instead examine their hearts sincerely before the Lord.

By the way, we always need to be extremely cautious of people who try to spread gossip to us, because the same person who is willing to gossip to us will also surely be willing to gossip about us. One of the implications of this verse is that we probably shouldn't even entertain a person who is known to behave this way.

It can be tricky, though, when the people who behave this way profess to be fellow Christians, because they will often share idle gossip about others disguised as prayer requests—sometimes even verbally attacking someone and then asking us to pray for them to change in some significant way. When this happens, we need to learn to say to the gossipers, “Thank you for your concern, but that's not the kind of information that I need to hear about from you.”

We should also recognize that this sin can be demonstrated in a variety of ways. It can be practiced by children who knowingly tell lies to their parents or to others, or by parents who regularly use abusive words when they discipline their children. Parents—we must always be careful to use words which will help and not hurt our children! The “anyone” in this passage may also refer to a wife or a husband who uses hateful words to respond to marital conflict. No marriage is perfect, but when there are problems and disagreements, we must be intentional about handling them in God-honoring ways.

James is reminding us, though, that while it's always good to do Christ-honoring things such as attending church regularly and actively serving others, such practices tell us little about what's truly in a person's heart. A person's speech, more than outward practices, can serve as a more accurate barometer of what's happening in a person's heart and of where that person stands in his relationship with God.

So, what should we learn from this? Here, James is calling us to examine ourselves sincerely. If people believe

Whenever we speak, people around us should be able to hear our “heavenly accent.” Do they? Are we ever asked, “Where are you really from?” Do we speak in a way that reflects our Lord and our true eternal home?

themselves to be righteous in Christ but do not bridle their tongue by speaking in ways that honor God, they deceive themselves and need to examine earnestly their own heart, ultimately acknowledging this sinful behavior that they practice and repenting of it before the Lord. The people who are currently in this situation are not being told by God that they are truly His, but rather they deceive themselves into believing that they do, though their assumptions about their own spiritual well-being are false. Search your hearts, my friends!

Paul writes in Galatians 6:3–4, “For if anyone thinks he is something, when he is nothing, he deceives himself. But let each one test his own work.” God expects us to test, or examine, our own behavior to see if it matches the behavior of a true child of God. In a similar way, Ephesians 5:4 exhorts us, “Let there be no filthiness nor foolish talk nor crude joking [among you].” If we belong to Christ, both our words and our actions must be notably different from those who remain outside of Christ.

To be more precise, James warns that the person who fails to bridle his tongue “deceives his heart”—as in, his own heart, even more so than the hearts of others. It’s bad enough to deceive people and to cause others



to be hurt by our speech, but this verse reminds us that by doing this, we are causing the greatest harm to ourselves, as we consistently offend God with our speech while pretending He’s pleased with us.

People who claim to belong to Christ but use their words to harm others prove themselves to be liars, cheaters, and hypocrites. They hear God’s Word being taught, and are likely familiar with the ninth commandment, which commands that “you shall not bear false witness against your neighbor” (Exod. 21:16). Yet, they still use their words to destroy the lives of others.

We should acknowledge that all of us have been guilty of sinning in this way at times. We have used our tongues to praise God on Sunday, but then used the same tongues to curse others at other times. We have

been worshipers on Sunday and then gossipers on Monday. However, God wants us to examine ourselves on this matter, to ask sincerely whether we have sinned with our speech, and to commit, by His grace, to change for the better.

2. If we do not control our tongue, we damage our religion, which is biblical Christianity.

When people fail to bridle their tongues and are deceived about their own devotion to Christ, James teaches, “this person’s religion is worthless.” By failing to guard our speech, we can permanently destroy our public witness for Christ. The people who hear our sinful speech will either believe that we don’t belong to God or else they’ll wrongfully accuse God of being responsible for our sinfulness. God-honoring speech reflects the “religion

that is pure and undefiled before God” (James 1:27), which God calls us to live out, but an unbridled tongue can publicly defile that very religion.

Lost sinners will certainly not be drawn nearer to Christ by our unholy speech but are more likely to be pushed further away from Him. Almost as tragic is the shame which we can bring upon our churches, as people who hear our conversations are left believing that we genuinely represent the churches we attend and then judge them for our sinful behavior.

Consider how easily ungodly speech can cause damage in the work environment. When an employee frequently curses, lies, argues, tells vulgar jokes, or speaks harshly to others, it’s common for the other employees to question his character. If it becomes known that the ungodly employee claims to be a Christian and attends a particular church, what will the other employees be left to believe about God and about the church that he attends? Many non-believers have been discouraged from following Christ because of situations like this, reasoning “If *that’s* what Christianity looks like, I want nothing to do with it!”

Even the name of Jesus can be damaged (in an earthly sense) by our sinful behavior, because when we claim to be Christians, we carry His name with us wherever we go. People who know us, and who know that we profess to be Christians, will hear our ungodly talk and believe that our speech must be typical of those who belong to Christ. Worse yet, they might even presume to blame Jesus for our ungodly speech and actions, believing our behavior to be a result of His teaching and authority in our lives. How can we possibly bring such shame upon our blessed Savior’s name?

Why is it that the sin of an uncontrolled tongue is singled out here as the one which could render a person’s religion “worthless”? James, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, highlights this sin because the Bible takes this kind of sin very seriously! It is a really big deal in Scripture, because, again, our speech is an indicator of our spirituality. What you say is reflection of what you think and what you feel. That’s why, in Matthew 12:34, Jesus says, “How can you speak good, when you are evil? For out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks.”

I remember talking to a lady who was born in the Netherlands but has lived in the United States for many years. She was a bit disappointed that whenever she speaks in English she still has a Dutch accent. I said to her, “Please don’t be disappointed with your accent, because it’s an indicator of your identity.” I asked, “Are you not proud of your Dutch heritage?” She replied, “You’re right. I should be proud of my heritage.”

When I speak in English, which is not my first language, people hear my accent and recognize that I’m not originally from the United States. As Christians, we have become citizens of heaven. Now, whenever we speak, people around us should be able to hear our “heavenly accent.” Do they? Are we ever asked, “Where are you *really* from?” Do we speak in a way that reflects our Lord and our true eternal home?

In Colossians 4:5–6, the apostle Paul admonishes us, “Walk in wisdom toward outsiders, making the best use of the time. Let your speech always be gracious, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how you ought to answer each person.” God expects us to bring this area of our lives under submission to Him—looking to Jesus Christ as the ultimate example of how we should speak and trusting in the Holy Spirit

to transform our hearts and lives increasingly into the likeness of Christ.

3. If we do not control our tongues, we destroy ourselves.

If we willfully and deliberately let our tongues go unguarded, it’s like riding a horse with no bridle or driving a car with no steering wheel. In either case, we’re sure to cause great harm to ourselves, as well as to others. Failing to bridle our tongues, though, is just as dangerous.

A number of Bible passages affirm this point, including the following:

The mouth of the righteous brings forth wisdom, but the perverse tongue will be cut off. (Prov. 10:31)

Whoever guards his mouth preserves his life; he who opens wide his lips comes to ruin. (Prov. 13:3)

Whoever desires to love life and see good days, let him keep his tongue from evil and his lips from speaking deceit. (1 Pet. 3:10)

Someone once said, “Gossip not only hurts others, it can also boomerang and hurt the one who starts it.”¹¹ If you are a gossip, do not think that you won’t be hurt by what you do, for by not controlling your tongue, you are destroying both yourself and your family.

Three Biblical Exhortations

So, what should we do in response to the warnings given in James 1:26? Here are three biblical exhortations which we should be especially careful to heed.

1. Get down on your knees and pray to God.

In this passage of Scripture, James isn’t only addressing other people; he’s speaking to you and to me, as well. We should all be deeply convicted by this passage of Scripture, because all of us have failed in this area at times. We are guilty before God of sinning with our

speech, and we should want to do all that we can to avoid sinning in this way again.

So, with that in mind, we should readily confess our sinful use of the tongue to God, not denying it, making excuses for it, or attempting to justify it in any way. Instead, we should be honest with God about the ways that we've failed Him and caused others to be hurt, and earnestly seek His forgiveness, asking the Spirit of God to help us guard our speech in the days to come.

We should pray with King David in Psalm 141:3: "Set a guard, O Lord, over my mouth; keep watch over the door of my lips!" In a similar manner, we can sing the lyrics of one of the great hymns:

Take my life, and let it be
consecrated, Lord, to Thee.

Take my voice, and let me sing
always, only, for my King.

Take my lips, and let them be filled
with messages from Thee.

2. Guard your tongue.

Of course, we must become increasingly intentional about doing precisely what this biblical text warns us to do—guarding our tongues. However, we must also remember that we can't do this in our own strength, but only with God's help will we be able to succeed in this challenging but crucial task.

Some additional Bible verses which can serve as helpful reminders to us include the following:

I will guard my ways, that I may not
sin with my tongue; I will guard my
mouth with a muzzle. (Ps. 39:1)

Keep your tongue from evil and
your lips from speaking deceit. (Ps.
34:13)

Let no corrupting talk come out
of your mouths, but only such as
is good for building up, as fits the
occasion, that it may give grace to
those who hear. (Eph. 4:29)

These verses, and others like them which remind us to guard our speech, should become increasingly familiar to us. Even a beloved children's song can help remind us to guard our words in a way that honors the Lord:

O, be careful little mouth what
you say;

O, be careful little mouth what
you say;

There's a Father up above

And He's looking down in love;

So, be careful little mouth what
you say.

Some people have even found the following acronym for THINK to be a helpful tool in this journey:

T—Is it *true*?

H—Is it *helpful*?

I—Is it *inspiring*?

N—Is it *necessary*?

K—Is it *kind*?

In any case, we should always strive to use our tongues for God's glory and for the edification of his church, and ask the Holy Spirit to assist us with this task.

3. Go to Jesus Christ.

As in every other area of our lives, we are to keep looking to Jesus as our ultimate example and working to imitate the way He lived during His earthly life. First Peter 2:21–23 serves as a strong reminder in this regard: "For to this you have been called, because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example, so that you might follow in his steps. He committed no sin, neither was deceit found in his mouth. When he was reviled, he did not revile in return; when he suffered, he did not threaten, but continued entrusting himself to him who judges justly."

So, again, we must determine to make guarding our speech a high priority in our lives, since by doing so we will demonstrate our genuine faithfulness to God and our true concern for the well-being of others as well as ourselves. God shows us, through the Spirit-inspired writings of James, that an unbridled tongue is a serious sin which should not be practiced by the people of God. Let's respond appropriately by receiving this instruction from God's Word and speaking only words of love and grace through which Christ will be glorified.

Study Questions

1. What does unguarded or sinful speech reveal about the true condition of our hearts?
2. How is Christ's reputation in the world affected by the words and actions of His followers?
3. How can sinful speech lead to our own destruction?
4. What does it mean to seek to have a "heavenly accent"?
5. According to James, what causes, and what results from, "worthless religion"?

1. Roy B. Zuck, *The Speaker's Quote Book* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1997), 176.

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Of late, more and more leaders in the Christian community are raising questions concerning the practice, in that community, of putting up beautiful, expensive church buildings which are generally used only a couple of hours a week, and for the remainder of the time stand empty. Specifically, the question is: Can the Christian community still afford that kind of “luxury”? Is it a responsible use of the Lord’s money, particularly in a day when millions in the world are starving and living without the gospel, and when many of the Lord’s causes go begging for funds (think of the rising cost of Christian education and the large deficits in many of our schools)?

I hear someone say: We are financially better off today than we ever were. If our parents could afford it, surely we can too. Perhaps. On the other hand, don’t forget that there are many more causes needing support today than there were even fifty years ago. World development and the church’s expanding witness in that world account for much of this. Moreover, it’s not just a matter of financial ability. The question is: Can we afford it in another way? Is it morally



responsible? In other words, is this an effective use of the Lord's money for the coming of His kingdom? That's the crucial question. Is the church's witness in the world, her impact on society, proportionate to the amount of real estate she owns? The church owns literally billions of dollars worth of real estate, a lot of it in buildings. Does this enhance her witness in the world, make it more effective? Or is the opposite true? Is it a symptom of the church's complacency, her isolation from and indifference to, the needs of the world in which she lives? Judging by the church's impotency on a large scale today and her lack of cultural impact, these are disturbing questions. Are we spending too much money on real estate and not enough on furthering God's kingdom by means of a dynamic, reformational witness? One writer expressed his view frankly by saying that "the construction of an expensive church building in a congregation which allows many Kingdom causes to suffer in 'poverty' is reminiscent of golden-calf-worship" (H. Hart, *The Challenge of Our Age*, p. 140). If this is putting it too strongly, it definitely is not too much to say that it is a matter of priorities. William White put it this way in the February 1970 issue of the *Christian Vanguard*:

We must consider our priorities with great and loving care. If churches are to be built, let them be constructed for worship and to serve the Christian community in other ways. It is a disuse of the Lord's money to build magnificent edifices used but two-and-a-half hours per week while other efforts go a begging. . . . More of our efforts must go to involvement in the areas of daily life. Less in buildings and grounds and the repetitious spending for numbers of officials all replicating each other's duties.

I believe Mr. White makes a valid point. We ought to move more in the direction of multi-purpose buildings—buildings in which God's people can worship on Sunday but which can also be used to the full extent for other purposes during the week. This should be done especially in places where other kingdom causes suffer, such as a Christian school, or where the erection of a church building would put a heavy financial burden on the congregation. God's people just cannot afford to throw around money in that way. Too much is at stake in our increasingly secular society.

I want to conclude by quoting from a recent article in *Christianity Today* by Wayne Grant, entitled "Rich Churches and Poor People." This article reminded me of the proverb: In the past when the churches were of wood, the people were of gold; today when the churches are of gold, the people are of wood. Mr. Grant worked for two weeks as a pediatrician in a mission clinic in Nicaragua, Central America. There, he writes, he "was overwhelmed by the needs of the people—pressing needs for food, shelter, soap." Then, taking note of the church in Diriamba and comparing it with the churches back home, Grant writes:

My own church, for example, is constructing a new educational building, a facility that is definitely needed. But included in the plans is a luxurious multi-thousand-dollar chapel. A thing of beauty? Yes. Of usefulness? Questionable. Oh, it might be just the place for an occasional wedding. But will such a chapel bring the message of Christ's love and forgiveness to the people of that corroding slum that lies within a few blocks of the church? I think not. They would feel out of place in it.

Is God pleased with the narcissistic building programs that have become so popular with many of our churches? Pale, sad faces of hungry children ran across my memory. Could wine-red carpets and crystal chandeliers fill their atrophied muscles, or tell them of God's love? I gazed at the lengthening shadow of the Diriamba church and doubted it.

The stark contrast of huge, beautifully appointed churches in the midst of poverty and hopelessness is typical of Central and South America. I witnessed this contrast in large cities and small pueblos, and I asked myself if the same sin was not infecting my own church. In the twilight of Diriamba, some of the arguments we frequently use to justify our extravagant buildings looked painfully weak.

I planned a stained glass window for our beautiful Sanctuary,

but a pastor in a far land murmured without rebuke,

"My church has no walls."

Rev. Jelle Tuininga

was the minister of the LaGlance CRC in Alberta when he wrote this article. He went on to serve the church in Lethbridge, Alberta from 1977-1999 when he retired. He is an emeritus pastor of the Trinity URC in Lethbridge, Alberta.

1 God demonstrates His sovereignty sometimes in unexpected ways in order to accomplish His purpose. He demonstrates that by using and directing secular governments and pagan kings as His agents. Second, God is going to show us through this book that His people are personally known to Him and that all of the people are important to building the kingdom, not just a few leaders. Third, through this book God is going to demonstrate to us that the printed Word is His primary tool for accomplishing His purpose, but also the primary means of grace. God works primarily through the printed word and not through miracles, or visions, or dreams.

2 One of the first things that you notice when you open the book of Ezra are the long lists of names:

Ezra 1

The inventory of temple utensils

Ezra 2

The names of the exiles who returned

Ezra 8

The family heads returning with Ezra

Ezra 10

Those guilty of intermarriage

Ezra is certainly not a popular book, or one that is well known, but of this we can be certain: It is part of the Word of God. Ezra is no accident; it was placed in the canon by none other than God Himself. It is His Word. He had a reason for commissioning its writing and a purpose for its inclusion. From Paul's letter to Timothy, we know that "all Scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for

instruction in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, thoroughly equipped for every good work" (2 Tim. 3:16–17). Although it may not be transparent at first reading, chapters of the Bible that contain long lists of hard-to-pronounce names, or letters from government officials, are truly part of God's revelation of Himself and His plans for the salvation of His people. We have previously seen the importance of chapters in Deuteronomy and Joshua which showed how God provided for His people and cared for the priests who served in the church. Paul reminds his spiritual son Timothy that "the Holy Scriptures . . . are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus" (2 Tim. 3:15), thus impressing on us the necessity of serious Bible study, and not being content with the mere milk of the gospel. Studying the entirety of Scripture will help us become complete, equipped for every good work. Discipline and diligence will help us see new, deep truths.

3 The Jews knew, from reading their own history, that there would always be opposition to the kingdom of God. Already in the Garden of Eden they were warned that there would be intense conflict between the seed of the woman and the seed of Satan (Gen. 3:15). That warfare would be present in all the pages of history. They themselves, as malcontents in the wilderness, had demanded that God bring them back to Egypt so that they might enjoy the delicacies of the Nile (Num. 11–14). Isaiah and Jeremiah had powerfully and pointedly reminded them that they had engaged in severe persecution

of the prophets that God had sent to warn them. While they were still in Babylon, Daniel had confessed on their behalf all the ways they had rebelled against God and condemned His prophets (Dan. 9:3–19). Jesus warned His disciples to "beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly they are ravenous wolves" (Matt. 7:15). Peter condemns the crowd at Pentecost for crucifying the very one who came to save them (Acts 2:23). Paul reminds the Thessalonians that they had suffered at the hands of "their countrymen, just as they did from the Judeans, who killed the Lord Jesus and their own prophets" (1 Thess. 2:14–15). The writer to the Hebrews reminds his readers that "they endured a great struggle with sufferings; partly while you were made a spectacle both by reproaches and tribulations" (Heb. 10:32–33). Paul warned the Ephesian elders that, after his departure, "savage wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock" (Acts 20:29). Persecution from non-Christians, even from those who masquerade within the church, should be expected.

4 A second thing you will notice is that the book of Ezra contains copies of letters and official documents. Much of the content of the book is material that comes from secular historical archives. To find a comparable situation, we would have to be reading a book about the formation of some denomination and find that it is only ten chapters long, with almost half of the book filled with letters from President Franklin Roosevelt, President Harry Truman, and President Dwight D. Eisenhower. Those letters would



have been dredged up from the presidential archives: some located in Hyde Park, New York, some in Kansas City, Missouri, and others from Washington, D.C. An unusual history, for certain. Again, a demonstration of God's sovereignty over kings and presidents.

5 The book of Ezra can easily and accurately be divided up into two parts, a division which seems to be beyond dispute. The first part includes chapters 1–6, which covers for us the first stage of the return of God's people, led by Zerubbabel in 538 B.C., during the first years of the reign of Cyrus the Great in Babylon. The second part of the book, chapters 7–10, focuses on the second stage of the return, under Ezra in the seventh year of Artaxerxes in the year 458 B.C. What we have, then, is a history book which is about two very closely related but chronologically distinct events, occurring some eighty years apart. Even the trips between Babylon and Jerusalem, involving thousands of people traveling through hostile territory, over long periods of time, are given no attention. The history book, in effect, ignores all of the events in between and is saying, effectively, that these are the only two things about which the author is going to concern himself. Instead of making a continuous chronological historical account, Ezra passes over, absolutely without notice, an interval of nearly sixty years, which is the space of time intervening between his sixth and seventh chapters. Instead of giving us exciting, detailed accounts of the trips, we are simply informed that they occurred. To draw a parallel, we might think of an American historian

who wrote a book focused exclusively on the Revolutionary War of 1776 and the Civil War of 1860, while ignoring everything in between. In writing such an account, the author would be ignoring the War of 1812, the French and Indian Wars, and the war with Mexico. Would that be a legitimate, valuable history?

6 Every historian has a purpose or motivation for writing. Every historian also has a bias or a perspective that pervades his or her writing. Sometimes that bias becomes obvious, but sometimes it is well hidden. Dr. Sidney Mead, dubbed by some as "the father of American religious history," was one of my professors. He disguised his bias very well but was secretly a Unitarian, one who rejected the divinity of Christ. In all his writings and lectures, he avoided giving any credit to orthodox Christianity and seldom even mentioned the name of Christ. That distorted the truth in myriads of ways, painting a false picture of America's early history. The motivation may be different and may even be suspect, for some write to achieve fame, while others write to achieve academic standing and rank. Others do it in efforts to correct the record, so they are called revisionist historians. Sometimes that is necessary.

7 The historical content of Ezra is accepted almost universally without controversy. The primary material is well supported by Jewish tradition, by secular historical records, and by the writings of Josephus. It is of recent enough origin so that the secular record corroborates the biblical account. The language of Ezra, like that of Daniel, is partly

Hebrew and partly Chaldee, because of the official Chaldean documents and the fact that the people of God were living in a Chaldean culture. The official correspondence was written in Aramaic, which was the language of international diplomacy at the time. Judah, after all, is a province of Persia during this time of history and is not a separate nation. As we read through the book of Ezra we will be amazed at the ways that God works, using His earthly agents to accomplish His purposes. Look at the way God uses King Cyrus to do such an unconventional thing as allow all these people to go back to their homeland and supply them with all they might need, especially the animals for sacrificing to Jehovah. Then, even greater, look at the way that King Artaxerxes provides for the needs of the second wave of migrants, including huge amounts of wealth. Clear evidence that God, the Holy Spirit, is directing their hearts and minds. Sovereignty demonstrated again.

8 Ezra 9 and 10 are about the intermarriage of Israelites with pagans who had been populating the land of Canaan during the absence of God's people. God had often warned His people about the dangers of such practices (see Deut. 7:1–12; Josh. 23:6–13; 1 Kings 11:1–11). God is a holy God who cannot tolerate or condone evil. In this instance, it is a listing of priests and Levites who are guilty. They, of all people, are supposed to be examples and be teachers of the Law. Their sins have to be exposed and corrected. God is a jealous God (Exod. 20:5; 34:14) who will not ignore such sinful behavior. Ezra now becomes God's agent for addressing and correcting the problem.

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