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I Am the Light of the World

¹² Again Jesus spoke to them, saying, "I am the light of the world. Who follows me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life." ¹³ So he said to him, "You are bearing witness about yourself; your testimony is true." ¹⁴ Jesus answered, "Even if I do bear witness about myself, my testimony is true, because I know where I came from and where I am going. You did not send me, but the Father sent me." ¹⁵ They said to him, "Where are you from?" He said to them, "I tell you the truth: We speak what we know, and we testify to what we have seen, but you do not listen to us. ¹⁶ If you did not believe me or my Father, believe the works themselves; for the works themselves testify about me, that I am not lying, but that as my Father has told me, so I say." ¹⁷ They said to him, "You are not yet fifty years old, and have you seen Abraham?" ¹⁸ Jesus said to them, "Truly, truly, I say to you, before Abraham was, I am." ¹⁹ Therefore they picked up stones to stone him; but Jesus hid himself, and went out of the temple, and went away to the Jordan to John.

²⁰ John saw it, and said, "Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!" ²¹ When he had baptized Jesus, John looked intently at him and said, "I see the Spirit descending like a dove from heaven upon him, and immediately a voice from heaven said, 'This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased.'"

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Breathed Out by God

Bible Study on Ezra

Seven Descriptions of the Tongue (3)

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An Introduction to the Ministry of IRBC (2)

Wonderfully Made

Archaeology: Friend or Foe of Biblical History

VBS

So Your Minister Took a Call

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Report on Synod Dunnville 2016

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Our "Famine of the Word"

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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: "I Am the Light of the World" illustration by Jeff Steenholdt.

"I Am the Light of the World": A Meditation on John 8:12–20

Rev. Steve
Swets

This is the second devotional on the "I am" series of statements of Christ found in John's Gospel. Read John 8:12–20 prayerfully and then keep your Bibles open.

The statement of our Savior focuses upon light. Light extinguishes darkness. As we come to our passage, we are reminded that by nature humans are in darkness. One way to describe the fall is that man fell from light. The world was plunged into darkness. (R. C. Sproul has written an excellent children's book dealing with this theme called *The Lightlings*. Read it to your children.) The darkness of the human heart is what Jesus addresses in John 8:12–20. As you read this devotional article, ask yourselves what it means that Jesus is the light of the world and what our calling is in reflecting that light to those around us.

A Divine Claim

Jesus said, "I am the light of the world." This statement was profound, prophetic, fulfilling, angering or comforting, and divine. To help us wrap our minds around this, we must understand what is taking place. The Feast of Tabernacles or Booths is about to come to an end. This was one of three national feasts the Jews celebrated. In John 7:37, it refers to the last and greatest day of the feast. What happened on the last day of the feast and the others was that in the temple the two golden menorahs were lit, the candelabra with seven lamps or candles. The court of the women would be lit, the city would be illuminated, and from the surrounding hills the temple could be seen lit up. Once

the candles are blown out, then darkness hangs over the city. It is in this context that Jesus says, "I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness but will have the light of life."

In the previous article, the significance of the use of the term "I am" by Christ was mentioned. In Greek, the two simple words *ego eimi* mean "I am." Not only is this a reference to the divine and God's revelation of the covenant name at the burning bush, but also, more specific to our text, is the fact that it was God who would be a light to the nations. There is a double reference to God as the light: He is light to the elect Jews and to the nations.

As we turn for a moment to the Old Testament, we can see that Jesus' statement is a fulfillment of Old Testament prophecy. Psalm 104:1–2 says, "Bless the Lord, O my soul! O Lord my God, You are very great: You are clothed with honor and majesty, Who cover Yourself with light as with a garment, Who stretch out the heavens like a curtain." God covers Himself in light. We must understand this to be the fact that God is adorned as light, Himself giving light its source. God is the light, and now Jesus is claiming to be the light.

Isaiah of all the prophets develops the messianic theme of light. Isaiah 9:2 says, "The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who dwelt in the land of the shadow of death, upon them a light has shined." That beautiful verse corresponds to John's prologue, where we read, "In Him was life, and the life was the

light of men. And the light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not comprehend it. There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. This man came for a witness, to bear witness of the Light, that all through him might believe. He was not that Light, but was sent to bear witness of that Light. That was the true Light which gives light to every man coming into the world" (John 1:4–9; for further reading, see Isa. 42:6–7a [John 9]; Isa. 49:6 [cf. Mal. 4:2]). When Jesus says that He is the light of the world, He is claiming to be the Messiah, the suffering servant of Isaiah, the one who would build His church by bringing light also to the Gentiles.

There is another Old Testament connection taking place in the earlier context of John. This connection is with the wilderness. The greatest miracles and blessings of the wilderness wandering culminate in Jesus Christ. In John 3, Jesus connects His death on the cross for the salvation of sinners with the serpent on a pole in the wilderness. As we get closer to John 8:12–20, we remember that previously Jesus said, "I am the bread of life." He referred to Himself in John 6:58 as that bread which is greater than manna. In John 7:37–38, Jesus connects Himself to the water in the wilderness. But, unlike temporary water from the rock, Jesus will give streams of living water by way of the Holy Spirit. Now, Jesus calls Himself the light of the world. What was Israel's light in the wilderness? Exodus 13:21–22 says, "And the Lord went before them

by day in a pillar of cloud to lead the way, and by night in a pillar of fire to give them light, so as to go by day and night. He did not take away the pillar of cloud by day or the pillar of fire by night from before the people." It was that pillar of cloud and fire that gave light and clarity to the Israelites and darkness and confusion to the Egyptians (Exod. 14). Now Jesus says, "I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness but will have the light of life." Following the light is what Israel was to do on their way to the Promised Land. Do you see the redemptive theme? We also are to follow the light as we make our journey to the Promised Land. Now it should be getting clearer why the Pharisees were so angry at Jesus.

He not only calls Himself the "I am" a second time, but also He connects His person and work to God's great work of redemption in history. As a light to the world, He expands the church outside of the walls of Israel. He is the light of the world. The bright candles in the temple which illuminate all around the temple are blown out. Jesus is the light that will pierce the darkness. His teaching here is directed at the hypocritical Pharisees, as we will see in a moment. In John 9:5 Jesus repeats this statement. This happens as He heals a man who was born blind. His whole life the man saw nothing but complete darkness, and Jesus miraculously restored the sight he never had. As this man's retinas are filled with light, Jesus said, "I am the light of the world." Jesus' statement comes to the spiritually blind Pharisees and to the man born blind, who because he was healed by Jesus will be excommunicated from the temple.

To put it in other words, Jesus is saying, "I am the light of the world" to the religious elite and to the religiously lost. What He is saying to the Pharisees and to us if we are not on guard is if we are not following

Jesus, if we are not looking to the light, if we are not walking in the light, if we seek light from elsewhere, we are like the Pharisees. As Paul tells the Corinthians, to do many amazing things without love is nothing. So too, to live an outwardly religious life without the inward renewal of the spirit is nothing. To surrender our time, money, energy, even prayer to the Lord without the surrendering of our hearts, what profit is it?

This is what Jesus means by following Him. It means to believe in Him and to trust Him. The famous book by Charles Sheldon, *In His Steps*, written nearly a century ago, gets at this. What if in every decision you made in life, you asked, "What would Jesus do in this situation?" Now, there are some problems with the question, partly because Jesus would never get Himself into compromising situations as we often do, but the main thrust is the same. The result of believing or of following Jesus is that the deeds of darkness or of the flesh are taken off and the fruit of the Spirit is put on (Gal. 5). The tree must be good before the fruit can be good.

Remember that when outsiders come to worship. Don't expect outward piety if there is not yet inward renewal. To expect people from the outside to act like Christians or talk like Christians before they have followed the light is a contradiction. It doesn't make sense, and even worse, it might encourage a negative form of Pharisaism.

What Jesus is saying to those still in darkness is that there is a light that had come into the world. He will provide the only solution to those things which flourish in darkness: sin, brokenness, frustration, spiritual depression, loneliness. What Jesus provided the man born blind is the same thing He gives to those who follow Him: He gives them eyes to see. So, when sin or temptation arises, they can see it; when

brokenness abounds, they can see through it and sail those waters. Following the light doesn't mean that everything in the rest of your life will be easy. The man born blind was insulted by the Pharisees and then excommunicated. "Since the world began it has been unheard of that anyone opened the eyes of one who was born blind. If this Man were not from God, He could do nothing.' They answered and said to him, 'You were completely born in sins, and are you teaching us?' And they cast him out" (John 9:32-34). They threw out the man born blind because they hated the one who healed him. In John 9:35-38, how did the man respond? In faith. He didn't cry because the religious elite had barred him from their legalistic blindness; rather, he worshipped Jesus.

A Necessary Response

There is always a response to the proclamation of the good news. Jesus said, "I am the light of the world." Jesus claimed to be God. The same is true with the preaching of the Word. "The flower fades, the grass withers, but the Word of the Lord stands forever." Jesus is that Word, which John said has come into the world: "He came to His own, and His own did not receive Him. But as many as received Him, to them He gave the right to become children of God, to those who believe in His name" (John 1:11-12). "His own" is a reference to the Jews. How did they respond?

They raised all kinds of weak counterarguments (John 8:12-20). First, they claimed that Jesus cannot say those things because He wasn't permitted to testify for Himself, so then Jesus' testimony is not valid. This could be true if it was not for the fact that Jesus was the omnipotent, omniscient, sinless one. He says that His Father can testify for Him.

Second, they object about His father as a witness. In verse 19, they ask, "Where is Your Father?" Jesus reply

I AM

was spot on: "You do not know Me or my Father." They were spiritually blind: the Light had come to shine in the world and they did not recognize it. The law and the prophets testified to it, and the Psalms and the Wisdom literature testified to it. The suffering servant of Isaiah had come as a light into the world, and the very thing that Isaiah said would take place is about to take place. God will lay on Him the transgression of us all.

The third objection was to the fact that where He was going they could not go. They thought He was going to commit suicide (John 8:22). Jesus said He is not of this world, but they are; they are from below. He is not about to commit suicide; they are about to commit homicide. They are about to crucify an innocent man, though verse 20 reminds us that His time hadn't yet come.

But they will commit homicide. They will seek to put out, to snuff out the light of the world, but they cannot. For this light is not a light from men. He is not the light of the candelabra which burns for a week and then everything goes out and all is dark again. No, this is the light sent from God. This is the one who said, "Whoever follows me will never walk in the darkness but will have the light of life."

The man who was born blind and was healed humbled himself and worshipped Jesus. He believed that indeed Jesus was the Son of Man, the light sent from God. The religious leaders, hardened and angry, sought to destroy Jesus. They said He was a liar and an imposter. Who do you say He is?

Are you following the light? Is Jesus your light among the darkness of this world? A couple of years ago I went camping, and there was a trail, a shortcut through the woods to the bathroom. I went with my wife, and we took one flashlight. The trail narrowed, and she went ahead with the flashlight and I followed right behind her. But something happened. I tripped and fell over a tree root. The problem was that the light wasn't bright enough, and I had not followed closely enough. Spiritually, sometimes we fall as we walk through the woods of life, don't we? We stumble in sin and discontent. When we do, repent, but also ask yourself, are you walking close to the light, or have you slowly fallen back a bit? When you think

about your life and your relationship with the Lord, isn't it true that when you are most often in prayer and in devotion, in Bible study and Bible reading and worship attendance, that things seem to go better? The fact is that things might not be going much differently; however, if we are walking close to the light of God's Word, our path is illuminated. We are reminded that we depend upon the Lord for guidance.

When the storms clouds come upon us, we are sheltered by God. In the darkness of a broken relationship, or a struggle with addiction, or a difficult child, or a difficult parent, it is Jesus who sheds light upon our path. Follow Him! He said, "I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness but will have the light of life." Follow Him, live in Him, trust in Him, and be comforted in the truth that you belong to Him. The light has come into the world, and it is Jesus. Hallelujah, what a Savior!

Rev. Steve Swets

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The “In Christ” Relationship

Dr. Harry G.
Arnold

When I was a first-year student at Calvin Theological Seminary one of the required courses was New Testament Introduction. In that course, taught by Dr. William Hendriksen, we were introduced to the Book of Ephesians. One of the first things that Dr. Hendriksen said was that the “in Christ” relationship was central in Paul’s epistles. He also stated that Dr. C. R. Erdman of Princeton regarded the “in Christ” relationship as the most important phrase in the epistle. In Dr. Erdman’s own comments on the phrase (Eph. 1:1), he writes:

Furthermore, the phrase “in Christ Jesus,” is to be understood as usually employed by Paul. It denotes a vital union and fellowship with Christ. Possibly it is the most significant and characteristic of all phrases used by the apostle. He conceives the whole Christian life as being lived “in Christ.” So here the spiritual constancy and fidelity of these readers is regarded as due to their relationship to their Lord. They not only believe in him and are faithful to him, but they are in him. He is the very sphere of their existence; he forms the sum and substance of their being. For them “to live is Christ.” (*Commentary of Paul to the Ephesians* [Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1931], 24–25)

A little study of the use of this phrase in Scripture will indicate that these professors were correct in their assessment of its importance. It is quite evident from Ephesians 1:3 that every spiritual blessing has its origin “in the heavenly realms.” And that, of course, is where the ascended Christ lives and from which He reigns. Therefore, believers receive every

spiritual blessing from Him. As Dr. Hendriksen notes in his commentary on Ephesians 1:1, “Those addressed are ‘in Christ Jesus.’ That is, they are what they are by virtue of union with him” (*Ephesians*, New Testament Commentary [Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1967], 70). Furthermore, he adds: “Had it not been for their connection with Christ, a connection infinitely close, these people would not now be saints and believers. Moreover, their present life of faith has its center in him. For them ‘to live is Christ’ (Phil. 1:21). They now love him because he first loved them” (*ibid.*, 71).

In complete agreement with the

assessment of both of these New Testament scholars, Dr. J. R. W. Stott has written:

The commonest description in the Scriptures of a follower of Jesus is that he or she is a person ‘in Christ.’ The expressions ‘in Christ,’ ‘in the Lord,’ and ‘in him’ occur 164 times in the letters of Paul alone, and are indispensable to an understanding of the New Testament. To be ‘in Christ’ does not mean to be inside Christ, as tools are in a box or our clothes in a closet, but to be organically united to Christ, as a limb in the body or a branch in a tree. It is this personal relationship with Christ that is the distinctive mark of his authentic followers. (“In Christ”: The Meaning and Implications of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, address, 1983, published in *Knowing and Doing: A Teaching Quarterly for Discipleship of Heart and Mind*, C. S. Lewis Institute, http://www.cslewisinstitute.org/In_Christ_FullArticle)

The abundant use of this phrase by the apostle Paul indicates how central it was to his thinking. Consequently, when Paul writes that believers are “blessed in the heavenly realms with every spiritual blessing in Christ” (Eph. 1:3), we must realize that this is a comprehensive statement. It, therefore, implies that every aspect of our salvation is connected to Christ. Let’s consider for a moment some important aspects of our salvation which are involved.

First, to be “in Christ” involves God’s work of election. He has chosen these believers to be in Christ. From eternity God determined that they would

hear the gospel and should believe in Jesus Christ unto salvation. The very foundation and certainty of their salvation is rooted and grounded in God's electing grace. As Paul reminds the Ephesian believers: "For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this not of yourselves, it is the gift of God—not of works, so that no one can boast" (Eph. 2:8–9). Their salvation is secure because the "good shepherd laid down his life for the sheep" (John 10:11). Moreover, they were "predestined to be adopted as his [God's] sons through Jesus Christ" (Eph. 1:5). In the words of an old song we can gratefully sing:

*'Twas sovereign mercy called
me And taught my opening
mind;*

*The world had else enthralled
me, To heavenly glories blind.*

*My heart owns none before
Thee, For Thy rich grace I thirst;*

*This knowing, if I love Thee,
Thou must have loved me first.*

*Josiah Conder, 1836
(Cent. Ps. Hymnal, 385:2)*

Another benefit of being "in Christ" is referred to as "redemption through his blood" (Eph. 1:7). That is, the atoning blood that was required to cover sins was given by Christ Jesus. Scripture informs us that "without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness" (Heb. 9:22). Jesus came into the world to save sinners; therefore, He shed His blood for forgiveness of our sins, "so that he was sacrificed once to take away the sins of many people" (Heb. 9:28). Thus, when one is in Christ "we have our redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins" (Eph. 1:7–8).

Furthermore, because believers are "in Christ" they are sealed with the Holy Spirit, "who is a deposit guaranteeing our inheritance unto the redemption of those who are God's possession—to the praise of his glory" (Eph. 1:14). Thus, in vital relationship with Christ, Paul could write to the Philippian believers, "to live is Christ"

(Phil. 1:21). By the Holy Spirit's working in them, believers can say with the apostle Paul: "I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me" (Gal. 2:20–21).

Moreover, since believers are united to Christ as members of a body to the head, they also become members of each other by virtue of their union with Christ. Thus, the whole idea of the unity of the church as one body is related to the connection to Christ. And believers being "in Christ" bring joy to others as they live in Him. Besides, while "to live is Christ," they also have hope for the eternal future because when they die they are going to be "present with the Lord" (2 Cor. 5:8). Besides, since Christ is "the first fruits of those who have fallen asleep" (1 Cor. 15:20), believers who are in Christ also die in the hope that they "will be made alive" (1 Cor. 15:22) at the resurrection of the dead in the Last Day.

No wonder then that the phrase "in Christ" may be considered perhaps the most significant in the New Testament. In short, to be in Christ is the status of all believers in Him. If one is not in Christ, he or she is among the rest of the multitude of the human race who "remain under the wrath of God" (John 3:36). Therefore, we can say that unbelievers are not in Christ and consequently lack the comfort of union with Christ in the present life. They also lack any hope of a resurrection to life in the Last Day. These blessings are reserved for God's chosen ones who profess to believe in Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord.

There are some who would question whether the Scripture teaches that only believers are "in Christ" since the apostle Paul writes to Timothy about having "our hope in the living God who is the Savior of all men, and especially of those who believe" (1 Tim. 4:10). Surely, however, the apostle cannot be teaching in this text that all are saved. He definitely makes a distinction between those of whom God is

"the Savior of all men" and those of whom God is the Savior of "especially those who believe." The simplest and plainest way to understand what Paul is saying here is to acknowledge that there is a sense in which God is the Savior of all. As Jesus taught: "Love your enemies, do good to them, and lend to them without expecting to get anything back. Then your reward will be great, and you will be sons of the Most High, because he is kind to the ungrateful and wicked. Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful" (Luke 6:35–36). God by His providential care and benevolence is the Savior, or Deliverer, Benefactor of all people, believers and unbelievers alike. The apostle Paul makes a similar affirmation regarding the activity of Christ when he writes: "He is before all things, and in him all things hold together" (Col. 1:17). That is all true in a general sense regarding all people. However, in the spiritual, redemptive sense, God is the Savior "especially of those who believe." Those who believe are the ones who are in Christ. They are the ones whom God "in love predestined to be adopted as his sons through Jesus Christ, in accordance with his pleasure and will—to the praise of his glorious grace, which he has freely given us in the One he loves" (Eph. 1:5). Thus, believers in Christ are the objects of God's electing grace, redemption, and forgiveness of sins, and of the Holy Spirit's seal of their inheritance. Believers alone are the ones of whom it can be said "to live is Christ" and who, therefore, live with confidence of an eternal future in His presence.

This not to say, though, that among the unsaved there may not be some who claim to be "in Christ" without it actually being so. After all, many throughout the centuries have made profession of being the Lord's people but in the judgment are rejected. As Jesus Himself teaches us: "Many will say to me on that day [of judgment], 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and in your name drive out demons and perform many miracles?' Then I will tell them plainly, 'I never

knew you. Away from me, you evil doers" (Matt. 7:22).

The apostle of our Lord also foresaw the appearance of such false professors and even contended against them. The apostle John, for example, wrote of those who once professed faith in Christ but then forsook His body, the church. In his first epistle he indicates that such apostasy is indicative of the presence of antichrists. Of such people he writes: "They went out from us, but they did not really belong to us. For if they had belonged to us, they would have remained with us; but their going showed that none of them belonged to us" (1 John 2:19). In a similar way, there are many nominal Christians today who profess to believe in Jesus but want nothing to do with His church. This dichotomy between professing Christ and ignoring His church surely will be exposed in the Last Day when the Lord says, "I never knew you." One cannot love Jesus and reject His body, yet still have a well-founded hope for the future! Rather, we believe with the Belgic Confession, regarding the obligation of church members, that all people are obliged to join and unite with it, "keeping the unity of the church by submitting to its instruction and discipline, by bending their necks under the yoke of Jesus Christ, and by serving to build up one another, according to the gifts God has given them as members of each other in the same body" (Article 28, par. 2).

It is obvious, therefore, that if one is "in Christ" he will profess Jesus as Savior and Lord not only, but also unite with the Lord's body, the church. To be in relation to Christ is to experience union with His body as well. That the church will have to contend continually with false professors is evident from the apostle Paul's warning to Timothy: "The Spirit clearly says that in later times, some will abandon the faith and follow deceiving spirits and things taught by demons" (1 Tim. 4:1). We must understand here that those who "will abandon the faith and follow deceiving spirits" are those who once professed to believe in Christ and

gathered in worship with His church. In other words, they were presumed to be in Christ. But in forsaking the faith, they reveal their true identity as being outside of Christ. Truly, their judgment will be severe!

Inasmuch as being "in Christ" is the source of one's salvation and of every spiritual blessing, we must ask the question: How then does a person get to be united to Christ?

The Scripture is very clear in teaching that the union between Christ and a believer is consummated by faith. We know, of course, that the elect are "in Christ" from eternity, and their salvation is, therefore, secure. However, from the temporal and experiential point of view, the following is also true, as Dr. Charles Hodge states it:

They [believers in Christ] are "by nature the children of wrath, even as others" (Eph. 2:3). They remain in this state of condemnation until they believe. Their union is consummated by faith. To be in Christ, and to believe in Christ, are, therefore, convertible forms of expression. They mean substantially the same thing and, therefore, the same effects are attributed to faith as are attributed to union with Christ. (*Systematic Theology*, 3:104)

Hearing the gospel and responding to it in penitence and faith is so essential to one's salvation that the Reformed churches confess the saving power of the gospel in these words: "What, therefore, neither the light of nature nor the law can do, God accomplishes by the power of the Holy Spirit, through the Word or the ministry of reconciliation. This is the gospel about the Messiah, through which it has pleased God to save believers, in both the Old and New Testament" (Canons of Dordt, III–IV, Art. 6).

The church must take seriously, therefore, the command of the Lord to "go and make disciples of all nations" (Matt. 28:18). This is so because the gospel is the means of calling "sinners

to repentance and faith in our Lord Jesus" (Acts 20:21). Only sinners who respond to the gospel in penitence and faith can experience being "in Christ." Where such response to the gospel occurs we can be sure that the Holy Spirit has been active and has wrought regeneration and saving faith in the believer. Thus, God alone receives the credit, praise, and glory even when one comes to believe unto salvation. "For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God" (Eph. 2:8). As believers are those who are in Christ, our relationship to Him is like a branch in a vine, as Jesus Himself declared to His apostles: "I am the vine; you are the branches. If a man remains in me and I in him, he will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing" (John 15:5).

We conclude, finally, that since the source of all spiritual blessing is "in Christ" which we experience by faith, we should be motivated to seek to know Christ better. Our heart's desire should be to be fruit-bearing branches in the vine, Christ Jesus, which will attest to our vital union with Christ Himself. Then we should be able to say with the apostle Paul that we want "to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the fellowship of sharing in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, and so, somehow, to attain to the resurrection from the dead" (Phil. 3:10–11). Those who are in Christ will gratefully sing forever the words of John Newton's hymn:

*Amazing grace, how sweet the sound
That saved a wretch like me!
I once was lost but now am found,
Was blind but now I see.*

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In 1957, E. J. Young, a professor of Old Testament at Westminster Theological Seminary in Philadelphia, wrote, "To say that Christianity is now at cross-roads is to engage in the trite and the commonplace."¹ If that was true then with Protestant liberalism, it is true now with so-called postmodernism's infection in the church—which is just liberalism all over again.

It seems every generation needs to have their own battle for the Bible against enemies outside as well as inside the church. The doctrine of the inspiration of Scripture is one of those basic truths about the Word of God we need to understand and fight for (Jude 3). Second Timothy 3:16 is one of the basic texts where this teaching is found.

What Inspiration Is Not

Sometimes it's helpful in learning something to learn what it is not first. So let me briefly explain what inspiration is not.

When we say the Scriptures are "inspired" we are not saying this merely because they move us religiously, spiritually, or emotionally. For example, the inspiration of Scripture does not mean the same thing as when we say we felt inspired after reading a poem or hearing a speech. This has sometimes been called the "dynamic view" of inspiration. What these people mean is that the Holy Spirit affected only the writers and not their writings. Therefore inspiration is understood to be a literary or religious inspiration.

When we say the Scriptures are inspired we are not saying that they become the Word of God as we encounter them. This is the neo-orthodox view of Karl Barth and his followers, the Barthians. For example, they say that in the "crisis" of encountering the Word of God, it comes alive and affects us in a certain way. This places inspiration, again, in us, and not in the words themselves.

Finally, when we say the Scriptures are inspired we are not saying that they contain the Word of God like corn in a husk. Some say that the Scriptures are inspired in their theological and ethical teaching but cannot be trusted on issues of historicity, archaeology, and chronology. For example, there is a novel view today that says we believe Genesis 1–2 teaches that God created everything. Of course we

would agree with this. The problem is that this is all some say the Scriptures teach. They say the rest we leave to science. Therefore, "Adam" was a product of evolutionary process since we all know evolution is fact. But the Scriptures never say to us, "Don't listen to this part"; instead, it speaks with authority in all its parts and assumes that all its parts come from God.

What Inspiration Is

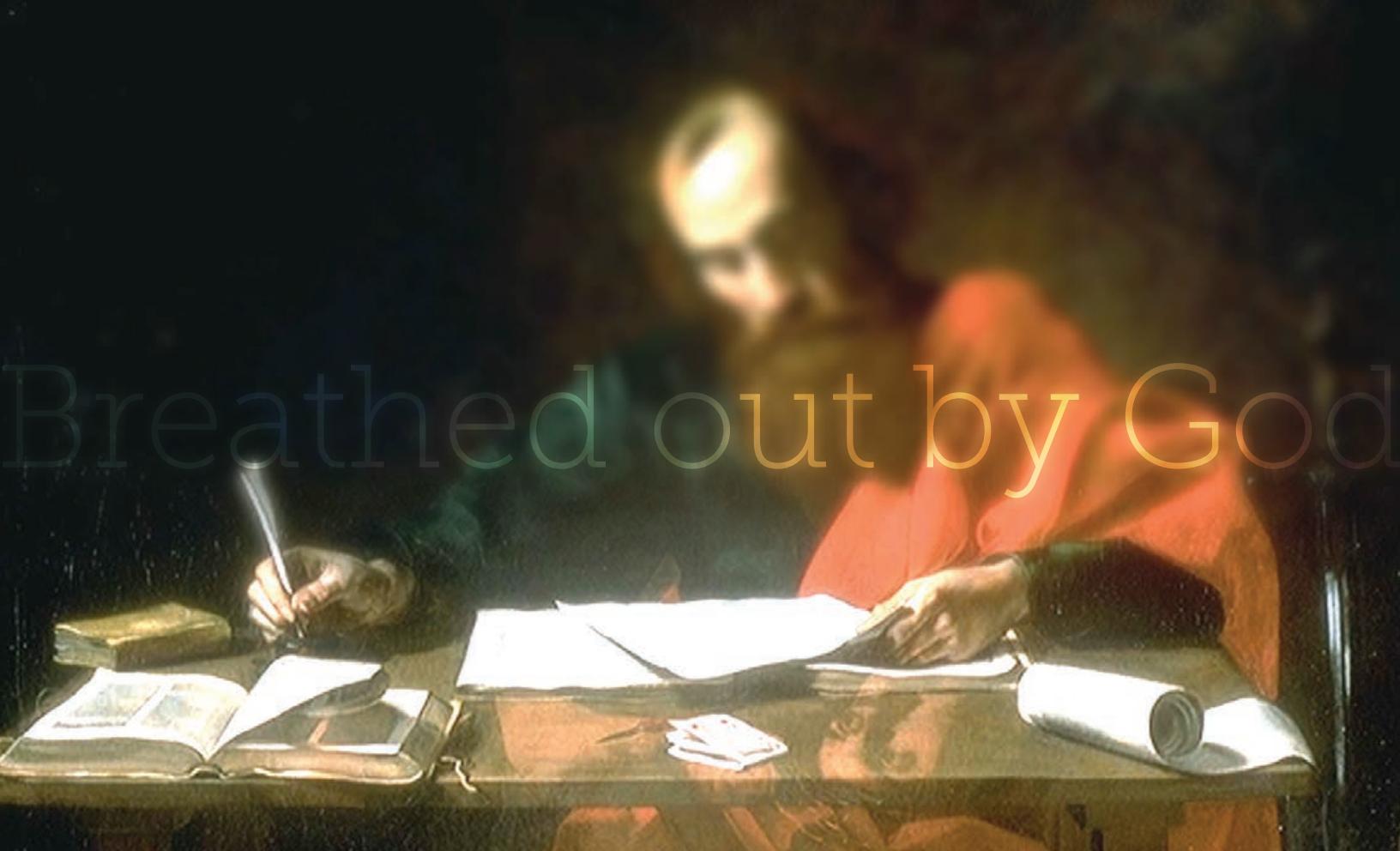
In contrast, we receive, believe, preach, read, and seek to live in obedience to the Word of God because its words are the very words of God to us. Why do we say this? In the words of the apostle, "All Scripture is breathed out by God" (2 Tim. 3:16). The Scriptures are "of God," as the King James Version translates the phrase. The word Paul uses is *theopneustos*, which is literally "breathed out by God."

The idea that Paul is communicating is that the Scriptures come directly from God. The imagery comes from the Old Testament:

The whole commandment that I command you today you shall be careful to do, that you may live and multiply, and go in and possess the land that the Lord swore to give to your fathers. And you shall remember the whole way that the Lord your God has led you these forty years in the wilderness, that he might humble you, testing you to know what was in your heart, whether you would keep his commandments or not. And he humbled you and let you hunger and fed you with manna, which you did not know, nor did your fathers know, that he might make you know that man does not live by bread alone, but man lives by every word that comes from the mouth of the Lord. (Deut. 8:1–3)

The commandments of God are described as coming forth out of the mouth of the Lord, that is, they are His very words. Psalm 33:6 also says this. The idea is that just as God breathed and the heavens and earth were created, so when God breathed out His word He was engaging in creative activity.

This means that we believe in a verbal inspiration, that is, the very words themselves are given by God. As Jesus says in Matthew 5, even the jots (the Hebrew letter *yod*) and the tittles (the serif part of a letter), are



inspired. In Matthew 22:43–45 and in Galatians 3:16 entire arguments are based on the tense of a verb and the number of a word. This also means that we believe in a plenary inspiration, that is, that the entire words are the very words of God.

I mentioned before that this is why our forefathers called Scripture ipsissima verba Dei, "the very words of God." And our Protestant forefathers said precisely what the holy catholic church has always said in saying this. For example, one of the earliest Christian apologists, that is, defenders of the faith, was Justin Martyr, who said, "When you hear the utterances of the prophets spoken as it were personally, you must not suppose that they are spoken by the inspired themselves, but by the Divine Word who moves them."² One of the great trinitarian theologians of the ancient church, Gregory of Nyssa, said, "All things the Divine Scripture says are utterances of the Holy Spirit."³ Finally, in his Confessions, Augustine wrote like he was having a dialogue with God, in which God says to him, "O man, to be sure I say what My Scripture says."⁴

Where Paul Learned It

We receive, believe, preach, read, and seek to live in obedience to the Word of God because its words are the very words of God to us. This is what Paul says in 2 Timothy 3:16. Let me further explain where Paul learned it.

First, Paul learned this from the Lord Jesus Christ. Our Lord over and over again affirms the Old Testament as the very words of God (e.g., Matt. 5:17; 26:53–56; Luke 18:3ff.; 22:37; 24:25ff.; 24:44ff.; John 5:39; 13:18; 15:25; 17:12). This is why He says in John 10:35 that the Scripture cannot be broken. This is why He says in Luke 16:17 that it is easier for heaven and earth to pass away than for a single stroke of one letter in the law to pass away. And as Lord

of the church, Jesus approved the coming New Testament writings since He chose as His apostles those who knew Him during His entire ministry, those who witnessed His resurrection, and those whom He promised to send His Spirit upon to lead into all truth (John 14:26; 16:12–14).

Second, Paul "learned" this from his fellow apostles. For example, Paul calls the Gospel of Luke "Scripture" (1 Tim. 6:18). Peter puts Paul's writings on the same level as the Old Testament in 2 Peter 3:15–16. Luke, in the Book of Acts, says the apostles spoke in the Spirit (Acts 2:4; 4:8; 6:10). The Book of Hebrews speaks of the Old Testament as the words of the Spirit (Heb. 3:7) and then tells us we need to pay attention to what we have heard from Christ, the apostles, and in his letter (Heb. 2:1–4).

Third, Paul learned this from his fellow countrymen, as a trained rabbi. This is why both Romans 3:2

and Acts 7:38 describe the Jews as keepers of the "oracles of God."

Fourth, Paul learned this from the Old Testament itself. The prophets' own witness is key here. They were conscious of bringing the word of the Lord: "Thus says the Lord" is used hundreds of times (e.g., Jer. 36:27).

Conclusion: So What?

Let me conclude by asking, So what? Why does this matter? In other words, what happens when we lose this doctrine of inspiration? In *God Has Spoken*, J. I. Packer offered five reasons why this is important in terms of what we lose if we reject the Bible's own doctrine of inspiration.⁵

First, if we lose the doctrine of inspiration preaching is undermined. If Scripture is not breathed out as we have seen it, then a preacher becomes something other than a proclaimer and herald of the words of God. He becomes an entertainer, a stand-up comic, or a therapist. He proclaims his own words, not the words of God.

Second, if we lose the doctrine of inspiration teaching is undermined. If Scripture is not breathed out as we have seen it, then what are we to teach our children around the dinner table? Why get together for a women's Bible study if the Bible is not the Word of God in everything it says? In the end, we will be led to ask Pilate's sad question, "What is truth?"

Third, if we lose the doctrine of inspiration faith is weakened. If Scripture is not breathed out as we have seen it, then there is nothing sure to cling to by faith in the struggles and temptations of life. How can I know God's comfort if I don't know if He's spoken and what He's spoken?

Fourth, if we lose the doctrine of inspiration Bible reading is discouraged. If Scripture is not breathed out as we have seen it, then why read it? Put your Bible reading plans away. Stop waking up early to read it. Why waste your breath in reading it to your children? It is no different than Aesop's Fables.

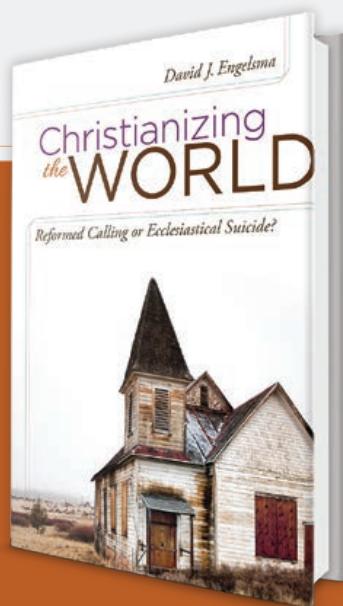
Fifth, if we lose the doctrine of inspiration Christ is hidden from view. If Scripture is not breathed out as we have seen it, then Jesus is not publicly placarded before His people. He is not the sum and substance of the various books, and He becomes a mere example to follow.

But we receive, believe, preach, read, and seek to live in obedience to the Word of God because its words are the very words of God to us.

1. E. J. Young, *Thy Word Is Truth* (1957; repr., Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1997), 13.
2. *First Apology*, 36.
3. *Against Eunomius*, 7.1.
4. *Confessions*, 13:29.
5. Packer, *God Has Spoken*, 28–30.

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CHRISTIANIZING THE WORLD

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REFORMED
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Bible Studies on Ezra

Lesson 3: God Fulfills His Promises

Dr. Norman
De Jong

Scripture Reading: Ezra 1

Background reading: Jeremiah 28; 29:1–14

Discussion Starters

1. In the opening verse of Ezra, what is the primary fact or detail that the author wants the reader to acknowledge? What is the significance of that detail? Why is that important? (See note 3:1.a and read Jeremiah 28.)
2. What is the primary activity that is being recorded for us in verse 1? What reason is given as to why that action had to occur? What motivated the mover? (See note 3:1.b.)
3. How does the action recorded in verse 1 compare with that recorded for us in verse 5? What is God, the primary actor? What are you and I, the secondary actors? How does God move us to act? (See note 3:5.)
4. In what language was the proclamation of Cyrus written? For whom was that proclamation intended? What was the purpose of that proclamation? (See note 3:2.a.)
5. Can we conclude from the above that the Book of Ezra was written in that same language, or was it written in Hebrew, the language of God's special people? What arguments can be advanced for that conclusion? (See note 3:2.b.)
6. What specific commands (or requests) did Cyrus make of the people in the Persian Empire via his proclamation? Was that request intended for all of the citizens, or just for those Jews who chose not to go back to Jerusalem? (See note 3:4.)
7. What was the nature of the

response to Cyrus's request? How would you explain such generosity? (See note 3:6.)

8. What explanation might be given for Cyrus's willingness to give away the tremendous wealth embodied in the large collection of gold and silver objects that he sent along to Jerusalem? Was Cyrus a true worshipper of God? (See note 3:7.)

Note: The numbering for the text notes corresponds to the number of the lesson. Thus, 3:1a corresponds to lesson 3, question 1, part a.

Text Notes on Discussion Starters

3:1.a. As we open the book of Ezra, the first thing we notice is that "In the first year of Cyrus, king of Persia, . . . the Lord moved the heart of Cyrus." By starting out in this fashion, Ezra is calling to the attention of his readers another of the promises that God had made to His people. God is faithful to His Word and to His prophet Jeremiah. We saw in previous lessons that God had made explicit promises to His people through the mouth of Jeremiah, the prophet, that they would have to remain in captivity in Babylon for seventy years. During the first year of the reign of Nebuchadnezzar (Jer. 25:1), Jeremiah had warned the people that they would be captured by Nebuchadnezzar and that the temple as well as the city of Jerusalem would be destroyed. But God had also assured them that "when the seventy years are

fulfilled, I will punish the king of Babylon and his nation" (Jer. 25:12). Hananiah, one of the false prophets operating within the church, insisted that the captivity would last only two years (Jer. 28:1–4). In order to counter the lies of Hananiah, God sent Jeremiah again to assure them, "When seventy years are completed . . . , I will come to you . . . and bring you back to this place" (Jer. 29:10). As a means of verifying His Word, God told Hananiah, "This year you shall die, because you have taught rebellion against the Lord" (Jer. 28:16). Hananiah died, but Jeremiah lived. Now, in order "that the word of the Lord by the mouth of Jeremiah might be fulfilled," God brings to fulfillment His promises and vindicates His prophet. The first and most obvious message we should get from the Book of Ezra is that God is faithful to His promises. When God says that He will do something, it will happen exactly as He says, on His schedule. God demonstrates that He can be trusted and that all of His promises will come true.

3:1.b. If we read the text of Ezra 1 carefully, we will note that Cyrus did not do anything by himself but acted on the instigation of the Lord. If you look at the opening verse in a grammatical fashion, you will notice that the subject of the sentence, the person performing all of the action, is "the Lord" (v. 1). "The Lord moved the heart of Cyrus king of Persia to make a proclamation." The Lord is the mover and the shaker, while Cyrus is the one being moved and



shaken. Just a reminder, but we always need to ask, "What is God doing in this chapter?"

3:2.a. The proclamation is "made . . . throughout all his kingdom," suggesting that it and the official correspondence contained in the book were written in Aramaic, the language of international diplomacy at the time. It is possible that the proclamation was written with the help of Jewish advisors, since it seems to be intended primarily for the Jewish people.

3:2.b. The combined books of Ezra and Nehemiah were included in the Hebrew Old Testament and then later translated out of that into the Greek Septuagint. Since Ezra was not written until after the second wave of returnees, at least eighty years after the original proclamation and the initial wave of migrants had gone back, it is probable that the book was written in the Hebrew language, with the official documents translated from the Aramaic into the Hebrew for

the Jewish audience. The primary audience for the book was the Jews who had resettled in Judah and Jerusalem.

3:4 The proclamation is made "throughout all his kingdom," but the language seems to suggest that it was intended primarily for those Jews who might consider going back to Jerusalem. "Who is among you of all His people?" suggests that the primary audience for whom the proclamation is intended is the Jewish exiles. The exiles had with them in Babylon the writings of the prophets and were allowed to read and study them, so they knew the promises that had been made. Jeremiah 29 also reminds us that God had made provision for His people to live in peace, to marry, to worship, and to serve Him while being held captive in Babylon. If the people of Israel truly repented of their sins, turned away from their idolatry, and turned back to God, then we can assume that they also read from the prophets and must have been familiar with the writings

of both Jeremiah and Isaiah. We know from the Book of Esther that many Jews chose not to return to Jerusalem but continued to live in the borders of the Persian Empire. We can assume, therefore, that many of these gifts to those choosing to return came from fellow Jews who had prospered and now chose to remain.

3:5 God moves in marvelous, mysterious ways His wonders to perform. Here, as in verse 1, we see God working in the hearts of His people so that they perform the exact work He has planned for them. God not only moved the heart of Cyrus but also moved the hearts of all the thousands of people who were willing to respond to Cyrus's proclamation and to return to Jerusalem and Judah. Some of that awesome power is also described for us in Exodus 31:3, where God filled Bezalel "with the Spirit of God, in wisdom, in understanding, in knowledge, and in all manner of workmanship." The same concept is expressed in Proverbs 21:1: "The

king's heart is in the hand of the Lord, like the rivers of water; He turns it wherever He wishes." In 2 Chronicles 36:22 and in Ezra 1:1 we are told that "the Lord moved the heart of Cyrus . . . to make a proclamation." When it came time for the people to be released, God simply, powerfully, and effectively "moved the heart of Cyrus" to do exactly what God wanted him to do. In Isaiah's prophecy, the language is that of "whose right hand I take hold of." Cyrus rules by divine authority and not by his own power. Nations and kings will bow before God and will do whatever God directs them to do. Cyrus will prosper in all his undertakings, for he shall carry on war under God's direction. For the sake of the church and for the sake of God's kingdom, Cyrus will enjoy tremendous success.

There is a strong probability that Daniel showed to Cyrus the prophecies from the Book of Isaiah and acquainted him with the fact that Cyrus's name was there, written down some 150 years before he came on the scene. Somehow, not magically or mystically, Cyrus came to know that the God of Israel "has appointed me to build a temple for Him at Jerusalem" (v. 2). There exists also, then, the possibility that Daniel may have influenced Cyrus's decision and even helped him to write the proclamation, since we are told that "Daniel prospered during the reign of Darius and the reign of Cyrus the Persian" (Dan. 6:28).

God is Spirit. We are made in His own image, so we, too, are spirit. While we are living on this earth, we think primarily in terms of our physical bodies and our genetic makeup, but that is not the picture portrayed for us in Scripture. God works with our spirits, His wonders to perform (cf. 1 Cor. 2:6–16). When we die, our bodies return to dust, while we, who are spiritual, go on to glory with God.

3:6 God has also been at work in the lives of family heads and priests and

Levites. God's sovereign control and direction are not limited to the heart of Cyrus but extend far beyond that. God is also working His sovereign will in the hearts of "the family heads of Judah and Benjamin, and the priests and Levites . . . to go up and build the house of the Lord in Jerusalem" (Ezra 1:5). God is going to restore His people to Jerusalem and to the towns of Judah, and He is going to rebuild the temple in His holy city, but He is not going to do it in the way that He made the world (Gen. 1). God is going to use responsible human agents to do His work for Him.

3:7 God promised Cyrus a rich reward for being the shepherd and anointed one who would release the captives and return the Israelites to their own land. God promised him: "I will go before you and will level the mountains; I will break down gates of bronze and cut through bars of iron. I will give you the treasures of darkness, riches stored in secret places" (Isa. 45:2–3). These promises came true for Cyrus in concrete form already in 546 b.c. when he plundered the fabulous wealth of Lydia and in 537 b.c. when he was able to enter the city of Babylon with his entire army and overthrow the Babylonian Empire in one night. From the testimony of Scripture itself there is reason to believe, though, that Cyrus was not a chosen child of God and did not become a saint. Isaiah had prophesied that even though God had called him by name and had named Cyrus to do His work for Him, "you have not known Me" (Isa. 45:4). The evidence seems to suggest that Cyrus remained an unbeliever, even though he made some wonderful, encouraging statements about God in his proclamation. Secular historical information from the cylinder of Cyrus suggests that Cyrus used the same kind of language to describe other religions and other gods. It seems as though he was being political and trying to enlist the gods of all his captured

people for his own political ends. He said wonderful-sounding statements about "the Lord, the God of heaven, . . . the God who is in Jerusalem" (Ezra 1:2–3), but he was trying to build his own empire and to get the newly conquered peoples on his side. Babylon and the newly formed Median-Persian Empires are still godless, pagan places. They have their own explanations for what is happening and attribute it to the planets and stars. They trusted in diviners and in astrologers, who looked to the stars and to their horoscopes for explanations of what would happen. The Chaldeans held that the lives of men are governed by the influence of the stars and the planets, and not by the power of God. Through the prophet Isaiah, we learn that God "foils the signs of false prophets and makes fools of diviners, overthrows the learning of the wise and turns it into nonsense" (Isa. 44:25).

John Calvin says that we all need to be reminded that sometimes the church of God is preserved in the midst of dangers by strange and unusual methods. This time at the end of the Babylonian activity was a troublesome time, with scarcely a corner of the earth at rest. But the Lord reminds us here that He is in control and that He will protect us even while nations are being destroyed around us. "The Lord moved the heart of Cyrus" is the simple expression of the dominant theme in the book, namely, that God works in sovereign ways through responsible human agents in order to accomplish His redemptive plan. God had said already in Isaiah that He would do what He planned, and that He would use Cyrus as "His shepherd" and "His anointed one," not only to bring about the restoration of His temple and the city of Jerusalem but also "so that you may know that I am the Lord, the God of Israel, who calls you by name" (Isa. 45:3).

Bible Studies on Ezra

Lesson 4: The God Who Restores

Dr. Norman
De Jong

Scripture Reading: Ezra 1:1–70

Background Reading: John 10:1–6, 22–30; Revelation 20:11–15

Discussion Starters

1. God lists the names of some but not all persons who made the return trip from Babylon. What role is attached to those whose names are given? Of what significance is that for today? (See note 4:1.)

2. In spite of the difficulties encountered in reading all these Israelite names, what comfort can be found in having God include this listing in His Word? (Do the background reading suggested above.)

3. The list of persons is not one homogeneous compilation but at least three sub-lists: verses 3–35 is made up of laity, while verses 36–58 could be classified as clergy, and verses 59–63 as those who could not identify their roots. Within the list of laity, verses 3–20 are classified by family names (i.e., by head of household), while verses 21–35 are listed by town. What theological significance might be ascribed to this?

4. What significance is there in the separate listing (vv. 36–58) of “the priests, . . . the Levites, . . . the singers, . . . and the sons of the gatekeepers”? Why should the clergy be singled out? (See note 4:40.)

5. Verses 59–63 list those who “could not identify their father’s house or genealogy.” Since they had obviously been moved by the Holy Spirit (1:5) to make the trip, why would their genealogy and home town still be important? From what

privileges were they excluded? (See note 4:59.)

6. Simple addition of all the numbers given in verses 3–61 does not result in the figure of 42,360 given in verse 64. It does, however, conform to the total cited in Nehemiah 7:66. How would you justify these figures to a skeptic who would cite this as another example of biblical error? (See note 4:64.3.)

7. How was the rebuilding of the temple financed? Did all of the people contribute? Is there an implied defense of freewill offering versus tithing? What did King Cyrus contribute? From what other source did contributions come? (See note 4:68.)

8. Of what significance is there in the fact that “all Israel . . . dwelt in their cities”? Would they have been sinning if they had settled in some place other than their home town? (See note 4:70.)

Text Notes on Discussion Starters

4:1.1 We need to ask once again the object or purpose for this particular, and even peculiar, history coming down to us as the canon of Scripture. What is the object and plan of the author? Is it to give us some fascinating historical information, or is it to introduce us to the one who controls history? Is this a history lesson, or is it a theology lesson given to us via selected historical data? I want to suggest to you once again that this book is primarily

about God, about who He is, the way He works, and the way He wants to be worshipped. Ezra is about the God who releases His people from captivity, the one who “proclaims freedom for the prisoners” and release from oppression (Luke 4:18–19). God is providing for the needs of His people as they go back to Jerusalem, but He is doing so by moving their hearts to do His will. This is quite different from the story of Israel wandering through the wilderness, where God directly made water come from a rock, where He sent manna and quail every day. God is not now using miracles but is using human agents whom He has appointed. Instead of miracles, we read now the story of providential guidance and of homely virtues winning the hearts of the captors. Instead of a pharaoh, whose heart was progressively hardened, we read of a Cyrus, who was surprised by prophecy and moved to compliance by grace and mercy.

4:1.2 This chapter is not about events! Notice that the story is about people and not about events, even though rather amazing events had to have taken place. According to the numbers given to us in Ezra 2:64–65, and corroborated by Nehemiah 7:66, there is a rather sizable migration of people and animals that are going to set out on this long journey. There are almost 50,000 people, counting the 7,337 servants and the 200 singers, a sharp contrast with more than 2,000,000 who came out of Egypt

and went into the Promised Land. It is, in terms of distance, considerably longer than the journey from Egypt to Canaan, but in terms of time, considerably shorter. The route taken by this first return group would have taken it upstream along the Euphrates River to the city of Aleppo and thence southward along the Mediterranean Sea coast down to Jerusalem. This would have been a trip of some one thousand miles, which took them four months of time. Obviously there were some interesting, noteworthy events that occurred to God's people on that trip. Events must have happened that were worthy of being reported and recorded for posterity, but they are not recorded for us by God in His holy Word. There probably were also some emotional reactions coming from the people as they entered Jerusalem for the first time and as they returned to their home villages. By telling us nothing about the trip or about their arrival, God is saying to us, in effect, that other things are His concern; other matters need to have our attention. This is not a travelogue.

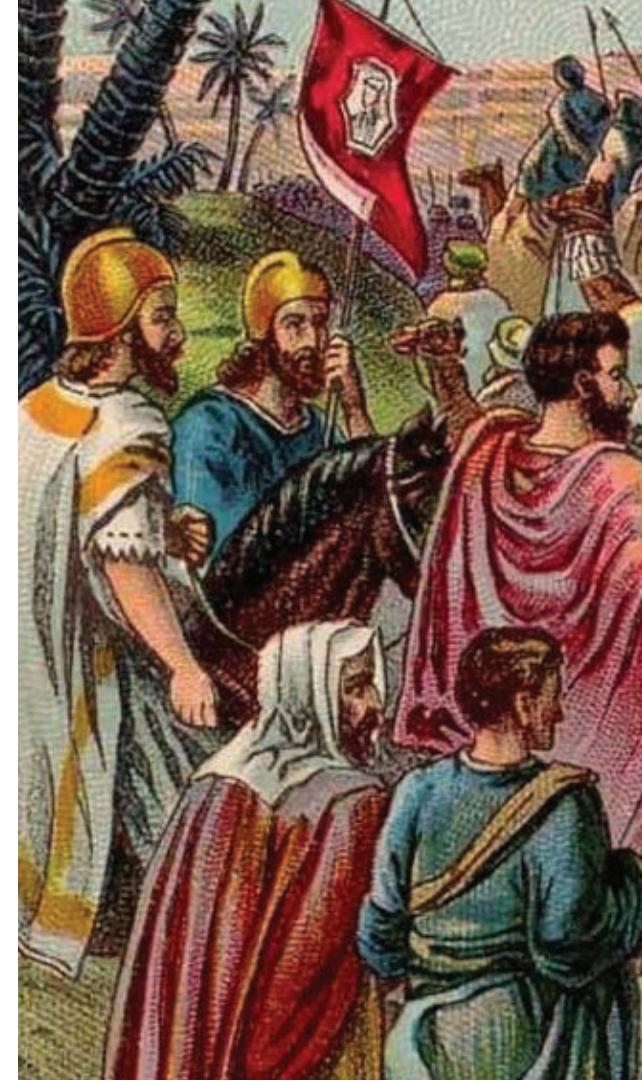
4:4 The returnees are listed by family name, or the "heads of the father's houses" (Ezra 1:5), referring to the patriarchs of extended families. God's people are not just nameless faces or numbers on a computer screen. The church is composed of people, with individual personalities, individual needs, and individual names. God gives us these names here in Ezra 2 and then again in Nehemiah 7 because He wants us to know that all of us are important to Him. Christ said to His disciples that the Good Shepherd knows all of His sheep by name, and that all of His sheep know His voice (John 10:4, 27). That is the way it was with Israel throughout the Old Testament.

4:40 The restoration is limited. "The family heads of Judah and Benjamin" (1:5) refers just to those two tribes that had been taken into exile by King Nebuchadnezzar and

does not refer to the ten tribes that had been taken captive and scattered by the Assyrians during the time of Isaiah. God is not restoring them but had limited His promises to those from Judah and Benjamin. Note, though, that God includes the "priests and the Levites," since there could not be worship in the restored temple without those who were called to lead it. The primary purpose for bringing people back to Jerusalem is to restore the worship of God and to rebuild the temple, so that God could again be worshipped according to His commands. The priests, Levites, singers, and gatekeepers are the ones assigned to oversee and lead the worship, so they have a special role to play.

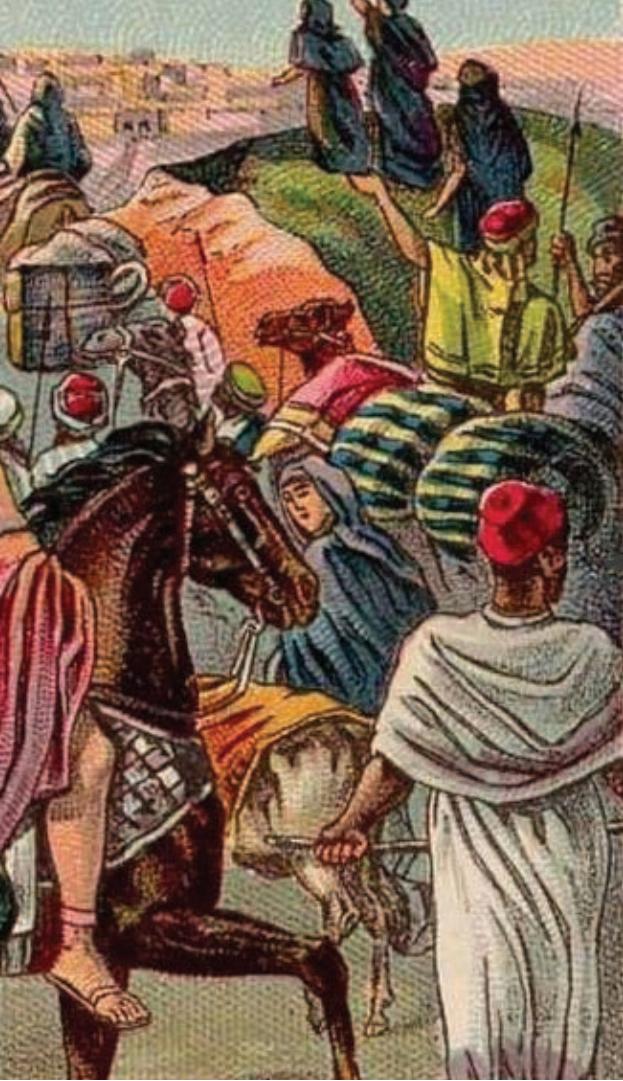
4:59 A man had to be able to trace his lineage to Aaron in order to serve in the priesthood (cf. Exod. 29:44; Num. 3:3).

4:64.1 "Everyone whose heart God had moved" is an indication that God is selecting some but not all of the people of Israel to go back to Jerusalem. Note that God is not making a law or a requirement for all to return but is working in the hearts of some, moving their hearts so that they would return when given the opportunity. There were many people who continued to live in Babylon, who stayed behind and did not come back. In the Book of Esther we read that there were many Jews who lived in the land of the Persians and that one of their number, the beautiful Queen Esther, lived in Susa, where the palace was now located. After Mordecai exposed the plan of Haman to kill all the Jews, the king issued an edict allowing the Jews to kill those who had conspired against them. The "Jews in Susa . . . put to death in Susa three hundred men, . . . while in the king's provinces . . . they killed seventy-five thousand of them" (Esther 9:15–16).



4: 64.2 In contrast with the trip out of Egypt, the numbers are very small. Does that mean that the kingdom of God, the one promised to Abraham, to Isaac, to Jacob, to Joshua, to David, and to Daniel has shrunken to a small body, unable to defend itself? Since the first census taken by Moses and the second taken by Joshua, the size of the kingdom seems to have shrunken from more than 2,000,000 people to some 50,000. What we have here is a demonstration of the gathering out of the people of God from among the heathen. The focus is not on the nation of Israel but on the people of God who belong to the original covenant community and who are now being restored to their rightful place.

4:64.3 The sum of the figures listed in this chapter is only 29,818, while the corresponding totals from Nehemiah 7 are 31,089. One probable



explanation for this difference is that the separate listings include only the men who were returning and not their family members. This is supported by the statement in verse 2, "the number of the men of the people of Israel." This practice also characterized the original censuses taken in the wilderness, where God commands Moses to "number every male from a month old and above" (Num. 3:15). Just before the Israelites entered the Promised Land, God commanded a second census, this time requiring the counting of "all the congregation . . . from twenty years old and above, . . . all who are able to go to war" (Num. 26:2). The apocryphal Esdras corroborates the total number but adds that in his reckoning only those twelve years and upward were counted (1 Esd. 5:41). The important factor is that everyone was known by name, not the precise criteria used for counting.

4:68 Note the reliance upon "freewill offerings" (cf. 1:4, 6). God does not direct Cyrus to levy a tax on everyone and compel them to pay it, but he relies on the good will of those only whom God had made willing to build the temple at Jerusalem. In contrast with the early Nebuchadnezzar, who punishes everyone who does not do his wishes and does not worship him, Cyrus is quick to proclaim the glories of "the God who is in Jerusalem" and to petition the people for their support. When the people arrived at Jerusalem, "some of the heads of the families gave freewill offerings" (2:68), implying that some did not. What we have is an indication that the important element is the religious cravings of their hearts and not some kind of assessment which is equally distributed. "The Lord loves a cheerful giver" (2 Cor. 9:7). Note the contrast with the first temple. When the people "arrived at the house of the Lord in Jerusalem, some of the heads of the families gave freewill offerings" (2:68). "According to their ability they gave . . . 61,000 drachmas of gold, 5000 minas of silver" (v. 69). This figure of roughly one thousand pounds of gold may seem like quite a lot when viewed separately, but when compared with the quantities brought for the construction of the original temple at the time of David, this is a mere pittance. At the time of David there were given 190 tons of gold and 375 tons of silver! The contrast is so substantial that one has to ask the significance of it.

4:70 Israel has its roots in a special, historic relationship to God, their Father. He called them out of darkness and gave them a special place in which to live, with each tribe having its own assigned territory (Josh. 13–22). God is hereby re-establishing that special pattern and place because He promised it. Yet, Israel is to be

a spiritual nation, not a biological or geographical one. God is hereby reclaiming the land that was His and returning it to those to whom it had been promised. Those who had settled on it during the time of exile would have to leave or be absorbed. From this time forward there are going to be sanctuaries known as synagogues throughout the Persian Empire. God is expanding His empire and using the Persian king Cyrus to announce the coming of His kingdom, just as he had done earlier with King Nebuchadnezzar and Darius the Mede. Already during the time of Abraham, God invited "aliens and strangers" into the house and let them become citizens of the kingdom. They were not biological children of Abraham, but they were spiritual children. Rahab was certainly one of those who was grafted into the family, as were such others as Ruth, the widow of Zarephath, and Naaman. We are told that "Solomon took a census of all the aliens who were in Israel, . . . and they were found to be 153,600" (2 Chron. 2:17). God did not intend to build a kingdom of this world or a church that was biological and ethnic in character, a body that all came from the same physical bloodlines, and because of those bloodlines, claimed superiority and exclusivity. The kingdom was a spiritual kingdom, united with the blood of Christ and not the blood of Abraham. The Jews of Jesus' day could not seem to grasp that message. When Jesus preached it, they became furious; "when they heard this" (i.e., when they began to understand what He was saying), they "drove Him out of the town" (Luke 4:28).

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How great a forest is set ablaze by such a small fire! And the tongue is a fire, a world of unrighteousness. The tongue is set among our members, staining the whole body, setting on fire the entire course of life, and set on fire by hell. For every kind of beast and bird, of reptile and sea creature, can be tamed and has been tamed by mankind, but no human being can tame the tongue. It is a restless evil, full of deadly poison.

—James 3:5b–8

There's no denying that the tongue is a crucial part of the human body. There are at least four important roles that it plays in our daily lives. First, it helps us taste the food that we eat, notifying us of whether our food is too sour, too salty, or too hot to be eaten. Second, it enables us to chew and swallow food, so that our body may benefit from the food and our hunger may be satisfied. Third, it helps form the words and sounds required for speech. Fourth, it can also be used to discern if we are in good physical health.

When visiting the doctor's office, it's not uncommon to be told to "stick out your tongue." By looking at our tongue, the doctor can begin to determine whether more might be wrong with us. Virtually the same is true in a spiritual sense: the things that we say and the ways that we say them can reveal a great deal pertaining to the true health of our soul.

None of us are in perfect health, though, for, as Karen Mains observed, "in the end our tongues always betray symptoms of soul sickness."¹

In this article, we're emphasizing the fact that God's Word has seven critical things to say about the tongue. So, let's consider these seven descriptions of the tongue.

The Tongue Is a Fire (vv. 5b–6)

Our text begins, "How great a forest is set ablaze by such a small fire! And the tongue is a fire." Figuratively speaking, our tongue is like a small fire which can set an entire forest

thousand people had to evacuate the area. As hard as it is to believe, that massive fire which caused so much destruction started with a single flame.

James compares our tongues with a small fire, just like the one in California, which has destructive potential and can quickly lead to devastating results. Proverbs 16:27 echoes this same warning by declaring that the speech of a



ablaze. This reminds me of a recent wildfire in Southern California that grew so large that several buildings were destroyed and around six

worthless man "is like a scorching fire." In fact, if even the people of God can't learn to control our tongues as Scripture calls us to

do, then entire congregations, communities, and even nations are sure to be burned by the spiritual wildfires that will ensue.

The Tongue Is “a World of Unrighteousness” (v. 6)

Our tongues are like small “worlds” where all kinds of evil and unrighteousness reside. In places like this, slander, blasphemy, falsehood, gossip, and arrogant boasting are all practiced regularly. When we knowingly lie, the deception comes from us and from our own tongues—not from anyone else whom we might wish to blame. In fact, there are at least three different ways that we’re prone to telling lies.

First (and perhaps most obvious), we lie to other people when we don’t tell the truth. Children lie to their parents. Employees lie to their employers. Some people lie to their government officials as they file their taxes each year, and in turn, we suspect that the government sometimes deceives us by not disclosing the full truth about certain things. In all of these ways, great damage is done, and the consequences can easily become devastating.

Second, we also lie to ourselves. If we fail to acknowledge who we really are before God—according to God’s Word—then we are deceiving ourselves. Scripture makes it plain that we are sinners who are in desperate, continual need for God’s grace. How foolish it is to attempt to deny this and to convince ourselves that we are good enough to enter heaven on our own merits. At the same time, we should be careful not to deceive ourselves into thinking that we are truly saved if, in fact, we are not, for as 1 John 2:4 warns, “Whoever says ‘I know him’ but does not keep his commandments is a liar, and the truth is not in him.”

Third, as we lie to others and to ourselves, we are also likely to lie to God. In doing this, we are disobeying

God’s law directly to His face. How foolish it is to say things that aren’t true to the one who knows all things far better than we do! This is the supreme demonstration of human arrogance.

Telling lies about God is just as wicked, and 1 John 2:22 makes this clear by asking, “Who is the liar but he who denies that Jesus is the Christ?” Anyone who denies Jesus Christ is a liar. As you might imagine, God takes this kind of sin most seriously. Consider the words of Proverbs 6:16–19: “There are six things that the Lord hates, seven that are an abomination to him: haughty eyes, a lying tongue, and hands that shed innocent blood, a heart that devises wicked plans, feet that make haste to run to evil, a false witness who breathes out lies, and one who sows discord among brothers.”

Truly, God hates a lying tongue!

Some may try to argue that the best way to keep from lying and offending God is to be quiet. However, in certain situations, we can lie with our tongue just as obviously by silencing it. Proverbs 10:18 has this in mind when it declares, “The one who conceals hatred has lying lips, and whoever utters slander is a fool.” We typically refer to this kind of sin as “silent abuse,” or as giving somebody “the silent treatment.” Examples of this include times when a husband and wife refuse to speak to one another because of an argument they had, or a parent is not talking to a troublesome child. In our churches, this can also be seen when members who are at odds with one another refuse to pursue reconciliation with one another.

Are there any of us who are abusively silencing our tongue in this way? If so, we must urgently repent and seek God’s forgiveness. God despises a lying tongue, and He declares that speech (or silence) of this sort is a “world of unrighteousness.”

The Tongue “Stain[s] the Whole Body” (v. 6)

Sinful speech can stain your personality in the eyes of others. It can defile your character—sometimes in permanent and irreversible ways. In some situations, “sorry” is not enough to undo the pain that you’ve already caused others, and the way that the injured person sees you may be forever changed as a result.

There is a story about a little girl who went to her mother and said, “Which is worse, Momma—to lie or to steal?,” to which the mother replied, “Both are sinful. I can’t tell you which is worse.”

The little girl sheepishly said, “Well, Momma, I’ve been thinking a good deal about it, and I think that lying is so much worse than stealing.”

“Why, my child?” came the mother’s reply.

“Well, because if you steal something, you can always take it back, unless you’ve eaten it—and if you’ve eaten it, you can pay for it—but a lie is forever.”²

There is some truth to the girl’s explanation. This kind of sin can stain us in significant ways and can make us desperately wish that we could retract some words that were spoken in the past. This is precisely why, earlier in the Book of James, we are told, “Religion that is pure and undefiled before God, the Father, is this: to visit orphans and widows in their affliction, and to keep oneself unstained from the world” (James 1:27).

We’re all likely to be familiar with the famous nursery rhyme, “Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will never hurt me.” However, these words aren’t true. Words can hurt us deeply. In fact, sometimes it hurts us so badly that it can take a significant period of time for our emotional wound to heal. Let’s seek to avoid being stained in such a way because of the words that we say.

The Tongue “Set[s] on Fire the Entire Course of Life” (v. 6)

This strong phrase can be difficult to understand, but I appreciate the way that Albert Barnes explains it, by saying, “The idea here is, that that which causes the tongue to do so much evil derives its origin from hell.”³ In a similar way, the Easy-to-Read Version of the Bible translates this passage as follows: “The tongue is like a fire. It is a world of evil among the parts of our body. It spreads its evil through our whole body and starts a fire that influences all of life. It gets this fire from hell.”

So, we should recognize that an ungodly tongue acts as a fire and that this fire comes from hell. In other words, the power that our tongue possesses to destroy lives, damage communities, and harm our churches and even ourselves comes from hell. It comes from Satan, because the word hell in this passage comes from the Greek word gehenna, which means “the place of the devil.” To state it another way, a lying tongue comes from the devil, who is both a liar and the father of lies.

The Tongue Is Untamable (vv. 7–8a)

Generally speaking, even wild animals such as lions, tigers, elephants, birds, and snakes can all be tamed by people who have the skills to do that. In fact, it can be amazing to visit the circus or a theme park and watch trainers perform with the animals that they’ve trained. The Bible declares that God has given us dominion over the animals (Gen. 1:26, 28). Yet, Scripture also reminds us that while we may train the animals, nobody is able to tame their own tongue. We have no natural power to control our tongue. In fact, this is our biggest problem with regard to our tongue—we can’t tame it!

There are at least three reasons why this is so. First, as we’ve already seen, our tongue is like a wildfire that

can burn out of control. The fire can burn so big that we can’t even begin to extinguish it ourselves.

Second, the fire comes from hell and from the devil himself. In our own strength, we are no match for Satan. Satan is powerful, but, praise be to God, “He who is in you is greater than he who is in the world” (1 John 4:4). James makes it clear that while we can’t defeat the devil ourselves, we can trust in God and in His Holy Spirit who dwells within every believer, and we can be confident that in Christ, we have eternal victory over sin and the consequences of sin.

Third, as both James 3:2 and Romans 3:23 remind us, none of us are perfect. In our sinful imperfection, we aren’t nearly capable of defeating the sin in our lives, but our perfect God is capable of overcoming sin, and we can trust in Him fully.

The Tongue Is a “Restless Evil” (v. 8b)

This same description is given to the devil himself in 1 Peter 5:8, which declares that “your adversary the devil prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour.” Satan is a restless evil. He is active. He’s not lazy but is always working, trying to deceive and confuse as many people as he possibly can. In the same way, sinful speech intends to deceive its listeners and to keep them away from the truth. The natural tendency of the tongue is toward sin, but God calls us to fight against this tendency by coming to Him and by allowing Him to redeem our speech for His glory in ways that we could never do apart from Him.

The Tongue Is “Full of Deadly Poison” (v. 8c)

Here, James portrays the tongue as that of a poisonous snake. Psalm 140:3 explains, “Their tongues are like deadly snakes; their words are like a cobra’s poison.” Also, Proverbs 11:9 warns us that “with his mouth the godless man would destroy his

neighbor.” Figuratively speaking, our tongues are filled with poison and have great potential to harm others. Ungodly speech is filled with venom and can poison those whom it seeks to harm as if it were a deadly snake.

After considering all of the ways that the tongue can harm others and ourselves, how should we respond? I have two helpful suggestions to offer. First, let us be more gracious to each other. We must be quick to forgive and to seek forgiveness from others. If your goal is to find mistakes, then you will easily find some, since we are all sinful and imperfect. However, before you condemn others for mistakes that they’ve made, it would be wise to remind yourself that you have similar tendencies in your own life.

In Ephesians 4:29, Paul instructs us to “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). Strive to speak to others in love, and to use words which will edify and bless rather than harm.

First Peter 4:8 exhorts, “Above all, keep loving one another earnestly, since love covers a multitude of sins.” Are you gracious to others, or do you seek to be critical of others? Peter reminds us, though, that if we truly love others, that love will cover a multitude of sins. This does not mean that we will be accepting of the sins of others, but rather that we grow in patience, understanding, and love as we increasingly seek to demonstrate God’s love (which He has so graciously shown to us) to others.

Second, let us learn more about our tongue. We must continue reflecting on what God’s Word says about our tongue, especially in regard to how we can tame it with God’s help. James explains to us that if we can’t control our tongues, we can’t control our bodies either. How wonderful it would be to increasingly be able to master both our tongues and our

bodies, and to live our lives in such a way that God is honored and people are blessed. We should desire to do this, and seek to live according to God's Word.

The Puritan Thomas Watson famously wrote, "God has given us two ears, but one tongue, to show that we should be swift to hear, but slow to speak. God has set a double fence before the tongue, the teeth, and the lips, to teach us to be wary that we offend not with our tongue."⁴ Oh, may God help us to use our tongues for His glory and for the good of others!

Questions

1. Can you think of practical examples in which the tongue has been like a fire? Has your tongue ever caused a wildfire?

2. What are the three ways in which we are prone to tell lies? Ask the Holy Spirit to show you in which area your tongue has been or is a "world of unrighteousness."

3. Where does the tongue's power to destroy come from? How can understanding the answer to this question help us resist the temptation to use our tongues for evil?

4. How did Christ resist Satan's temptation to use His tongue for evil? Take a moment to praise and thank Christ for His perfect obedience.

5. Why is it important to strive, by God's grace, to control our tongues? What steps, if any, have you taken to do this?

1. *The Complete Guide to Christian Quotations* (Uhrichsville, OH: Barbour, 2011), 446.
2. Spiros Zodhiates, comp., *Illustrations of Bible Truths* (Chattanooga, TN: AMG Publishers, 1991), 274.
3. Albert Barnes, *Notes, Explanatory and Practical on General Epistles of James, Peter, John and Jude* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1850), 67.
4. Thomas Watson, *A Body of Divinity* (1692; repr., London: Banner of Truth Trust, 1965), 115.

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When Democracy Comes to Church: The Intersection of Theology and Politics

By Norman De Jong

When Democracy Comes to Church. The Intersection of Theology and Politics. A Study Guide.

Produced by Redeemer Books, Caledonia, MI.

Reviewed by Rev. Jerome Julien
72 pages. \$10.00.

Available from Redeemer Books, 6527 Leisure Creek Dr., Caledonia, MI 49316. Phone: 616-541-7084

Also available on Amazon.com

In this U.S. election season this book of fourteen chapters would make an excellent study guide. The author writes, "I admit that I am truly radical, but not in any violent or irresponsible way. I am radical in that I try to get to the root (*radix*) of ideas and issues. Those roots are found in the Bible."

Dr. De Jong zeros in on the concept of democracy and the damage our understanding of this has brought in every area of life. He points out correctly that the United States is in reality a republic, and he reveals some often unknown information about our country's beginnings and what has happened to those early truths. After he lays out the biblical principles for government, he also points out the difference between the Democrat and Republican political platforms.

At this time, this book would be an excellent guide for study. Of course, these principles are always worth our study. We must always be learning what Scripture teaches. To aid in this study, at the end of each lesson there are study questions prepared by Rev. Robert Van Maanen.

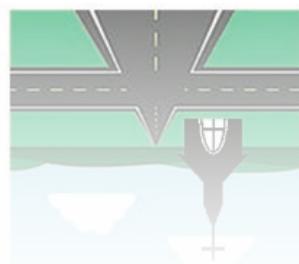
WHEN DEMOCRACY COMES TO CHURCH

THE INTERSECTION OF THEOLOGY AND POLITICS

A Study Guide



Norman De Jong



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

Dr. Jeff
Doll

A Lack of Respect for the Basic Institutions God Ordained for Order in Society

The Family

Along with a lack of respect for God and His moral law is a lack of respect for the three basic institutions God designed for His glory and the good of His image-bearers. All three of the institutions—family, church, and state—are under attack and are undergoing major reconstruction in the United States today.

The family has been under severe attack over the last several decades in America. A moral time bomb exploded upon it on June 26, 2015 (America's Black Friday), when the Supreme Court usurped the traditional definition of marriage that was based on God's law.⁶ This morally corrupt decision by individuals (5–4 vote) functions to usurp not only God's moral law but also the laws of nature. We are only beginning to experience the negative moral, social, and economic ramifications of a decision that will function to deteriorate further the overall moral foundation of America as well as the three basic divinely established institutions, especially the family which serves as the building block of the other two.

The Church/Religion⁷

Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof...

The framers of the Constitution never intended to bar the truth of religion (i.e., particularly Christianity, which is rooted in the Bible) from being

reflected in the various sectors of society. It was the farthest thing from their minds.

Their intent via the first half of the first clause of the First Amendment of the Constitution was to prevent the government from establishing or favoring one system of religion over another (i.e., the practices observed by any particular congregation or denomination). America's founders did not want one system of religion to dominate or rule over another; they especially did not wish to see any one system of religion being established or promoted by government.

Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof...

While the essence of the first half of the first clause of the First Amendment was to keep the government from establishing one system of religion over another, the second was designed to protect the religious practices of each system. It is interesting to note that some of the early colonies were made up primarily of one system of religion or another (e.g., Roman Catholics in Maryland, Quakers in Pennsylvania) and could exist as religious sub-societies under the protection of the Constitution.

They and others throughout the country have enjoyed the free expression of religion in varying forms of religious sub-societies under the First Amendment for years. They have also enjoyed the fundamental liberty of personal choice in relation to the (public) education of their children via the Fourteenth Amendment.⁸

That is, until a series of Supreme

Court landmark decisions over the last fifty years would increasingly rob them of that and other fundamental rights.

The most recent of these landmark decisions occurred in 1980, wherein the court declared that posting the Ten Commandments in a (public) school classroom violated the Constitution. This infamous decision was preceded by two decisions made by the Warren court in the early 1960s. In 1962 the court declared that prayer in school was unconstitutional, and in 1963 it stopped schools from allowing the Bible to be read in the classroom. Justice Potter Stewart (1958–1981), the only dissenter in the (1963) court's 8–1 ruling, said, "It [the decision] led not to true neutrality with respect to religion, but to the establishment of a religion of secularism." The system of religion known as secularism⁹ is now the religion that reigns in our nation's public school system. This system of religion imposed by the state has weakened the moral character of countless millions of Americans over the last four decades, thus negatively affecting all sectors of our society.

The State

The Ten Commandments, along with principles and concepts of Scripture, serve as the primary basis for our country's rule of law as well as our three branches of government. They also provide the moral framework for our system of economics and the labor sector. Many of these principles and concepts are also being uprooted or usurped in our country today. We have observed violation upon violation of the moral principles undergirding our Constitution by high-ranking

(This article is continued from May/June 2016)

government officials with little or no consequence. These and many other things typify the kinds of concerns related to our society which burdened IRBC's founding elders' hearts. We trust they burden your heart as well and you will be active in praying and seeking to be used of the Lord to address and restore America's moral foundation. Be praying that the Lord will use the training you receive in this series to further equip you to effectively minister the gospel to souls within and outside the walls of the visible church. In the next article we will give our attention to matters which typify some of the concerns our founding elders have for the visible church of our day.

Group Discussion

Are you concerned about the deterioration of the three basic institutions in the United States?

Spend some time briefly discussing the broad scope of each institution. You may wish to include the following historic Reformed confessions in your discussion: *Family* (marriage), Westminster Confession, Chap. 24, Art. 1–4; *Church*, Belgic Confession, Art. 30; *State* (civil government), Belgic Confession, Art. 36; Westminster Confession, Chap. 23. (Be sure to look up proof texts.)

1. What is God's definition of marriage?
2. What are some of problems our nation can expect to encounter in the wake of the 2015 Supreme Court ruling about same-sex marriage?
3. There is a sense in which the state should be secular in relation to the distinction of its role in comparison to the church. What is the primary role of the state? Of the church?
4. Read the following portion of the syllabus of the Supreme Court decision in association with its decision to legitimize homosexual marriage. Point out the errors of thinking in this communication.

1. Gunning Bedford, *Funeral Oration Upon the Death of General George Washington* (Wilmington: James Wilson, 1800), 18.

2. Thomas Jefferson, *The Writings of Thomas Jefferson*, ed. Albert Ellery Bergh (Washington, DC: The Thomas Jefferson Memorial Association, 1904), vol. XII, p. 315, to James Fishback, September 27, 1809.

3. Deism is a movement or system of thought advocating natural religion, emphasizing morality, and in the eighteenth century denying the interference of the Creator with the laws of the universe (*Merriam-Webster Dictionary*).

4. John Calvin, *Calvin's Complete Commentary on the Bible*, segment from Genesis 18:27 (Delmarva Publications, 2013).

5. The Three Forms of Unity can be accessed free of charge online at <https://www.urcna.org/1651/custom/24288>; the Westminster Confession and Catechisms can be accessed at <http://www.opc.org/confessions.html>.

6. This decision was made on the basis of an appeal made by fourteen same-sex couples and two men whose same-sex partners are deceased (see *Obergefell et al. v. Hodges, Director, Ohio Department of Health et al.*).

7. The First Amendment of the U.S. Constitution states that "Congress shall make no law respecting *an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof*; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the Government for a redress of grievances." The



improper application of this amendment has robbed local communities of their right to exercise freely their belief in God by teaching their children about Him and His ways (as revealed in Scripture) in public schools which are funded by their tax dollars.

8. Amendment XIV, Section 1. All persons born or naturalized in the United States, and subject to the jurisdiction thereof, are citizens of the United States and of the state wherein they reside. No state shall make or enforce any law which shall abridge the privileges or immunities of citizens of the United States;

nor shall any state deprive any person of life, liberty, or property, without due process of law; nor deny to any person within its jurisdiction the equal protection of the laws.

9. Secularism is defined as the belief that religion should not play a role in government, education, or other public parts of society (*Merriam-Webster Dictionary*). Note: Remember the difference between a system of religion and religion.

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Wonderfully Made

By Danika Cooley

Hardcover: 48 pages

Publisher: CF4Kids
(February 20, 2016)

Reviewed by Rev. William Boekestein

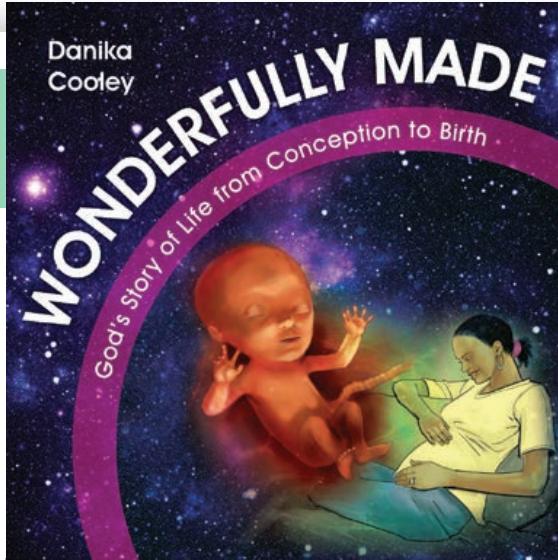
"Mommy, where do babies come from?"

If this question were asked by a sitcom child, the camera would likely pan from an innocent-looking kid to an awkward-faced adult sputtering halting attempts at an explanation, all to the sound of canned laughter.

Some of us have found ourselves in this situation in real life. If you haven't yet, you probably will. If you are a parent, your kids will ask this question. It is only a matter of time.

Of course, it is an entirely fair question. Some young children have visited a newborn sibling in the hospital. They realize that this new person used to live in her mother. But how did she get there? Good question!

The difficulty is coming up with an age-appropriate and honest answer. Danika Cooley offers a biblical, colorful, conversational, and tactful answer in her fully illustrated hardcover book,



Wonderfully Made: God's Story of Life from Conception to Birth (Christian Focus Publications, 2016). *Wonderfully Made* reads like a skillfully combined science book, daily devotional, and personal story.

The first page of the book tackles the most delicate part of the question: How does a new life begin? Taking cues from God's revealed will for procreation, Cooley frames the answer in the context of both a sovereign God and a loving union of a husband and wife. "When your dad and I joined together to show the special love we have as a husband and wife, a cell from your dad, called a sperm, was able to swim to a cell in me, called an egg." The illustrative sketch feels partly anatomical and partly astronomical, well-capturing both the intimacy and mind-blowing beauty of the start of a new life.

From cover to cover, Jeff Anderson's illustrations help to show the universal human experience of reproduction by featuring a host of characters from diverse walks of life exploring the wonder of conception, pregnancy, and birth.

The nearly two dozen quoted Scripture verses stress God's masterful role in the development of new life. With God's help, children will come away from *Wonderfully Made* with deep awe over

His creative power, profound admiration for His fatherly care, and a strong desire to praise their maker.

The book is recommended for ages 2 to 6 (read to me) and 8 to 11 (read myself). When we read the book my four kids spanned that age range and everyone liked it.

"Where do babies come from?" can be a challenging question for anyone to answer. But Danika Cooley provides readers not only with clear factual answers but also worshipful reflection. You might consider having *Wonderfully Made* in hand when you are next asked this question!

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Archaeology: Friend or Foe of Biblical History

Creation, Flood, Babel, and the Patriarchs

Rev. R. Andrew Compton

In a previous article, we were introduced to the field of archaeology and its relevance for studying and interpreting the Bible.¹ We noted that since archaeology is a tool of the historian, and since the Christian religion is a historical religion comprising God's revelatory work in history, archaeology is a field that should interest Christians. We did make two important caveats, however, that prevent us from missteps in our use of archaeology. First, since Scripture is self-attesting, it does not depend upon the approval of an outside source like archaeology for its authenticity and authority. Second, since archaeology is not self-interpreting, archaeological finds are always be interpreted according to a worldview. Though Christians interpret history and archaeology via a biblical worldview, many archaeologists embrace a modern, evolutionary, and anti-supernatural worldview, interpreting archaeological finds in light of that. Thus, when critical scholars claim that a given archaeological find "disproves the Bible," we suggested that such claims reveal more about the worldview of the critical scholar than about archaeology itself.

Following James Hoffmeier, we noted that archaeology can assist Bible reading in four primary ways:

1. Providing a context for the biblical accounts
2. Complementing the biblical accounts
3. Helping to respond to challenges to the biblical accounts
4. Confirming the biblical accounts²

Guided by these principles, this second article will consider some

specific examples from the Book of Genesis. Of course space does not allow us to be exhaustive, but we will consider a few archaeological issues of note.

Creation and the Flood

"In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth" (Gen. 1:1). There is a sense in which every single archaeological excavation in history supports the claim of Genesis 1:1. After all, to dig in the earth means that there is an earth in which to dig! And yet archaeologists have not found (and likely will not find) any artifacts directly tied to the creation account such as the remains of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil (Gen. 2:17) or the flaming sword wielded by the cherubim guarding the way to the tree of life (Gen. 3:24). This is not because these are unhistorical, but because of two main factors: first, such artifacts are unlikely to have survived this long, and second, uncertainty about the precise location of Eden makes it nearly impossible to know where even to look. But though archaeology has not found artifacts from creation or the flood accounts, it has uncovered ancient tablets containing stories about these events.

Though the wedge-shaped cuneiform writing system had been known for many centuries, it was not until the mid-1800s that scholars learned how to read it. Sir Henry Creswicke Rawlinson cracked the code through his work translating the famous Behistun inscription, a trilingual text carved into a mountainside by the Persian king Darius I. When scholars began to translate some of the most prominent cuneiform tablets that had been uncovered in archaeological excavations, they discovered stories

depicting creation and the flood differing drastically from the biblical versions.³

Because of some shared imagery and language, many scholars became convinced that the Bible was not unique but was a revision of purportedly earlier ancient Near Eastern (ANE) creation and flood stories. John Currid of Reformed Theological Seminary recounts bold assertions of critics in the early 1900s who claimed that Genesis contained "the Hebrew version of an originally Babylonian legend" or that Genesis 1–2 "was guilty of crass plagiarism."⁴ (Currid rightly notes that statements like these are opposed to a high view of Scripture.)

While there are certainly echoes between Genesis and the ANE accounts, only a naïve and simplistic reading of the ANE texts could lead one to conclude that the Old Testament has simply borrowed and baptized ANE myths. Though a case can be made that the biblical writers wrote down the true story of creation and the flood in ways that challenged and condemned the pagan versions, the very fact that ANE texts contain stories with similar imagery and language demonstrates something we know all too well from Romans 1: sinful humans distort God's truth. After the fall people sought independence from God and rewrote the revelation their fathers had taught them about creation and the flood according to their own whims and imaginations.⁵

Critical archaeologists will object at this point and claim that the tablets containing the creation and flood stories are older than the oldest Hebrew manuscripts; thus, they are more original. We would respond by



noting that though the clay tablets themselves are older than the excavated vellum and papyrus scrolls, this does not mean that the narratives recorded in those scrolls are later than the stories recorded on the tablets. After all, Moses himself drew upon older material when he originally penned his work, yet we believe this material had been faithfully preserved down to his time. Furthermore, we believe that the true stories of God's creating and judging work were preserved not simply to the time of Moses but to the time of our earliest Hebrew manuscripts (the Dead Sea Scrolls) and even down to today.

And so in sum, when archaeologists and scholars claim to discover a new tablet containing a more original version of the creation or flood narratives, we must remember that these data do not support their conclusions. Indeed, after the fall (and especially after the tower of Babel), we would expect to find other (pagan) versions of these world-shaping events. Just like today, our fathers in the faith, the patriarchs, lived among people who could not escape the knowledge of God but who had become futile in their thinking and darkened in their thoughts (Rom. 1:21). These texts give us a glimpse into how early men have perverted God's revelation.

Though space does not allow us to spend more time on this, there is a more positive import from these texts. Ancient tablet finds like these help to familiarize modern readers with the literary conventions that were used regularly in the ancient world. Though our modern age causes the images,

techniques, and themes found in Genesis 1–11 to feel somewhat strange and foreign, ANE stories remind us that they would not have caused surprise to any ancient readers. Ancient readers would have been very comfortable with those things in the Old Testament that modern readers feel are repetitive, redundant, and peculiar. Thus spending the time reading ANE stories—even their pagan myths—can do a great service in familiarizing us with the conventions of ancient writing.

The Tower of Babel

Though archaeologists have not uncovered the remains of the tower of Babel, they have discovered structures from the ancient world that give insight into the motives of those who built the tower. In the fifteenth century BC, the Kassite king Kurigalzu I engaged in an extensive building campaign, the highlight of which was construction of a new Babylonian capital, Dur Kurigalzu, located approximately 30 km west of Baghdad, Iraq. There the king constructed a ziggurat, a tall, stepped tower that loomed over the surrounding countryside. The base of the ziggurat's remains is 70 x 70 meters and reaches a height of more than 50 meters, although it would have been considerably higher in its heyday. For many centuries, local nomads believed that the ziggurat at Dur Kurigalzu was the remains of the tower of Babel. While Dur Kurigalzu is a prominent ziggurat, the remains of approximately thirty ziggurats

have been found by archaeologists.⁶ Ancient texts also describe these edifices as buildings with their "tops in the heavens" (cf. Gen. 11:4); thus, many years after that fateful day in the plains of Shinar, people continued to construct cities with towers of a similar kind.

Apart from the basics of construction out of mud bricks and the goal of "making a name" for the people so as to avoid being dispersed (Gen. 11:3–4), not much is said concerning the intended role of the tower of Babel. It is often thought that the tower was an attempt to "storm the gates of heaven" and replace God's rule with human rule. Though ascent may have been in the people's minds, the function of ziggurats in the ANE demonstrates that towers like these were primarily designed to encourage the gods to descend to earth.⁷ (Indeed, this is what God ends up doing in Genesis 11:5, 7, albeit not as the people had hoped!) At the base of ancient ziggurats, archaeologists find temples and religious precincts, indicating that the gods were thought to come down the steps of the tower and dwell with the people there.

While Genesis 11:1–9 does not make explicit that divine descent was the intended function of the tower of Babel, this view does explain the worry about being dispersed (Gen. 11:4). Building the tower was an attempt to constrain God, to anchor him to a particular locale, one chosen by the people themselves. Though Deuteronomy notes that God chooses where He will dwell (e.g., Deut. 12:5; 15:20; 16:2; 31:11), these people are dismissive of this fact. What is more,



it shows a people who have adopted a faulty view of God. John H. Walton explains: “[t]he ziggurat was the most powerful representation of the Babylonian religious system, a system in which the gods were recast with human natures.”⁸ Believing God to be fickle like humans, a “god” who can be enticed to bless fancy building projects and stairways from heaven, the people on the plains of Shinar envision God as more like humans than unlike them. And so archaeology of ziggurats helps to complement our understanding of the tower of Babel.

The Historicity of the Patriarchs: The Mari Letters

It has become a foregone conclusion among critical scholars that the stories of the patriarchs in Genesis are fictitious, perhaps containing some scattered historical memories but not historical in any meaningful sense. It is claimed that though the stories appear to take place in the early second millennium BC, they reflect concerns and customs from a much later time in Israel’s history (mid first millennium BC). Critics have asserted that no early second millennium BC texts reveal a world like that in which the patriarchs lived, that there is no archaeological corroboration for the stories, and that the only archaeological proof that exists demonstrates the stories to be anachronistic. What shall we make of such claims?

While it is admitted that archaeology has not found anything referring to Abraham, Isaac, or Jacob by name, an

honest consideration of the data does indeed provide sufficient evidence for the antiquity of the patriarchal stories. And so in these final sections, we consider the discovery of ancient texts illustrating names and activities in the patriarchal narratives that cannot be coincidental, and archaeological finds that shed light on references to camels in Genesis.

In the early 1900s, archaeologists uncovered some twenty thousand cuneiform tablets from the ruins of ancient Mari, a site just west of the border between modern-day Syria and Iraq. Mari was an important city on the Euphrates River, but it also evidences a close relationship between pastoral nomadism (i.e., animal herding), tribal organization, and the royal administration of a powerful early second millennium BC kingdom with Amorite ties. These texts thereby present us with a context for the patriarchal narratives as they share some of the same themes. Daniel Fleming explains: “If there is one archival source that could provide a context for understanding the patriarchs within a biblical chronology, it is Mari.”⁹ Though conservative scholars formerly sought patriarchal parallels among the Nuzi tablets discovered in the early 1900s in Yorghan Tepe, Iraq, further study of those texts has shown them to be less useful than those found at Mari.¹⁰

Close study of the Mari letters reveals a number of features in the Bible’s patriarchal narratives that can only be explained as originating in the early

second millennium. Fleming notes four:

Critical scholars have struggled to explain the role of Haran in the patriarchal stories according to traditional higher critical criteria. Haran does not play a prominent role in later Israelite history as either a religious site or a military ally. Since the Mari texts note that it was one of four capital cities of a group of pastoralist tribes called the *Binu Yamina* (more on them in a moment), patriarchal connections with both pastoral nomadism and Haran thus correspond perfectly with the portrait we find at Mari.

It is significant that the Mari tablets name a sizeable group of tribes living in western Syria *Binu Yamina*. This name has a direct linguistic relationship with the name Benjamin (in Hebrew = *bin yamin*), Jacob’s youngest son by Rachel. It is likely that the choice of the name Benjamin (Gen. 35:18) reflects Jacob’s family history and its connection with the *Binu Yamina* in and around Haran.

Though scholars have been puzzled to understand the linguistic background for the word Hebrews (in Hebrew = *‘ibri*), the name given to Jacob and his descendants in Genesis 39:14, this word is also linguistically related to the name given to pastoral nomads in the Mari letters, *‘ibrum* (notice the shared letters, ‘-b-r in both words).

Lot’s division from Abraham in terms of taking the “left hand” or the “right hand” (Gen. 13:9) reflects nearly identical Mari language which geographically distinguishes the *Binu Yamina* (sons of the right) from the *Binu Sim’al* (sons of the left).¹¹

Even these few examples show

that the Mari tablets paint a portrait of the early second millennium BC that fits well with what we find in the patriarchal narratives. Though this is still a far cry from extrabiblical proof for the existence of the patriarchs themselves, it does bolster our confidence in the historicity of the Genesis narratives.

The Historicity of the Patriarchs: Camel Domestication

For many years now, critics have claimed that the existence of domesticated camels in the patriarchal narratives contradict what we know about the dating of camel domestication in the ANE. Since archaeologists have typically tied conclusions about camel domestication to finding dateable collections of camel bones, they have generally claimed that there is no evidence for camel domestication before 1200 BC. Thus it is asserted that the camels in Genesis are anachronisms, evidence that the stories were invented after 1200 BC by writers who did not realize that camels had not been domesticated back then. How might we respond? Does archaeology truly support this picture?

First, one must always remember this important adage: *The absence of evidence is not evidence of absence.* Just because archaeologists have not yet found large assemblages of pre-1200 BC camel bones, this does not mean they are not out there. What is more, only in recent decades have archaeologists systematically begun cataloging and studying bones in excavations. One can only speculate about how many bones were discarded over the century that preceded this shift. And yet even before this methodical shift, some camel bones were found that do seem to suggest modest domestication: several sites in Palestine (dating from 2000 to 1200 BC) and an excavated house at Mari (dated to ca. 2400 BC) have yielded finds.¹²

But in addition to bones, archaeologists have uncovered art dating as far back as the fourth millennium BC that depicts camels. While some of these figurines and petroglyphs are ambiguous, others clearly depict camels being led by humans, a sure sign of domestication.¹³ In addition to this, Babylonian scribes from ca. 2000–1700 BC included camels in their lexical lists (like early dictionaries), listing them not with wild animals but alongside domesticated ones. Other lists even contain entries for camel milk, a sure sign of domestication.¹⁴

Though critics have objected that the use of camels became widespread only after 1200 BC, that does not challenge the Book of Genesis. The role of camels in Genesis is quite modest. The most camels mentioned in one place are described in Genesis 32:15, thirty camels. Other camel references in Genesis leave the number unspecified; thus, we have no need to look for evidence of widespread camel breeding and domestication. We happily agree that camels were not the primary beast of burden for the patriarchs. What archaeology has uncovered corroborates this very well.

Conclusion

Though we have surveyed only a few examples, many more could be described. Nevertheless, we have begun to see some concrete samples of the intersection of archaeology and biblical studies. Again, we must remember that Scripture is self-attesting and not dependent upon archaeological proof for its trustworthiness and authority, but when we do see archaeology illustrating, contextualizing, and even supporting passages of God's Word, it is inevitable that our confidence is boosted in a good way. In our next installment, we will move forward in history and consider how archaeology sheds light on Joseph, Moses, the exodus, and the wilderness period.

1. See R. Andrew Compton, "Archaeology: Friend or Foe of Biblical History?" *The Outlook* 66, no. 3 (2016): 6–9.

2. James K. Hoffmeier, *The Archaeology of the Bible* (Oxford: Lion Hudson, 2008), 31.

3. To read these stories in English, see *Myths from Mesopotamia: Creation, the Flood, Gilgamesh, and Others*, trans. Stephanie Dalley, rev ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).

4. John D. Currid, *Against the Gods: The Polemical Theology of the Old Testament* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2013), 33.

5. For several models of the relationship between ANE texts and the Bible, see G. K. Beale, *The Erosion of Inerrancy in Evangelicalism: Responding to New Challenges to Biblical Authority* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2008), 28–29.

6. For examples, see Michael Roaf, "Palaces and Temples in Ancient Mesopotamia," in *Civilizations of the Ancient Near East*, ed. Jack M. Sasson, 4 vols. (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2000), 1:429–31.

7. Meredith Kline merges the ideas of ascent and descent in *Kingdom Prologue: Genesis Foundations for a Covenantal Worldview* (Overland Park, KS: Two Age Press, 2000), 272–78.

8. John H. Walton, *Genesis*, New International Version Application Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2001), 376.

9. Daniel E. Fleming, "History in Genesis," *Westminster Theological Journal* 65, no. 2 (2003): 254.

10. Those wishing to read more about the usefulness and limits of the Nuzi texts should consult Martin J. Selman, "Comparative Customs and the Patriarchal Age," in *Essays on the Patriarchal Narratives* (Leicester, England: InterVarsity Press, 1980), 93–138. This chapter can be read online for free at <http://tinyurl.com/hswmwgg>.

11. Fleming, "History in Genesis," 255–58.

12. See Kenneth A. Kitchen, *Ancient Orient and Old Testament* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1966), 79–80, available online at <http://tinyurl.com/jj4grug>. See too Kitchen's more recent book, *On the Reliability of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2003), 338–39.

13. See Randall Younker, "Bronze Age Camel Petroglyphs in the Wadi Nasib, Sinai," Associates for Biblical Research, accessed Feb. 5, 2014, <http://tinyurl.com/gmnuc9j>.

14. Kitchen, *Ancient Orient*, 79; John J. Davis, "The Camel in Biblical Narratives," in *A Tribute to Gleason Archer*, ed. Walter C. Kaiser Jr. and Ronald F. Youngblood (Chicago: Moody Press, 1986), 145.

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VBS . . . Why Do We Do It?

Mrs. Shellie
Terpstra

G

od calls us to teach the little (and not so little) children, we all know that. But does VBS really make a difference? Is it worth all the work, stress, and hassle? We learn the theme a year in advance, pray and plan for months, ask for volunteers (some end up less voluntary than others), gather what amounts to several recycling bins of "fun craft" items. Later we'll bake dozens of cookies and pass out flyers. The list goes on and on.

Most of the children who come have some kind of Christian background—how many will hear of the love of Christ only at VBS? It does matter! Jesus would have died on the cross even if it was only my sins He was suffering for. The least we can do is hold VBS, praying that God will touch the heart of a child through VBS and the seeds of salvation will be planted in their lives there.

Our theme for the year was "Your mission, should you choose to accept it." I had been excited about this theme since I first heard it. Last year I had taught a class that had twenty-nine to thirty-three little, squirming bodies, and I have the same class again this year. I knew they would love the theme—especially since the class was almost three-quarters boys. Monday morning I came overflowing with enthusiasm—until we began the opening session in the sanctuary. There was a new boy in my class who didn't want to cooperate; he proclaimed everything was "stupid": the songs were "stupid," the skit was "stupid," the other boys and girls were "stupid." It wasn't twenty minutes into the first day and already I was thinking, "Your mission will self-destruct in 5, 4, 3, 2 . . ." Where did all my excitement go? How could I lose the focus of my calling so quickly? "Please, God, give me insight, patience, encouragement," I prayed.

Our next stop was the fellowship hall for cookies. A young boy who came to our VBS last year, whom I know to be unchurched except for the week(s) he spends at VBS, came up to me and energetically said, "If I could travel in time I would go to 'Odd and Even.'" Now, because my youngest is twenty and I'm not up on what the kids are into today, I asked if that was a TV show or movie. "No, you know—when they lived in the garden and there wasn't any weeds . . ." Now I get it: "You mean the garden of Eden?" I asked. "YEAH," he said, "and if I had a time machine, I would go back there and say, 'Dooooon't do it!!'" He not only heard what was taught last year, but he remembered it! And that, my friends, is why we do VBS.

Oh, yes, by the end of the week my "challenging" boy was saving a seat next to him for me. I do find VBS to be fun, challenging, and rewarding. I look forward to it every year. I ask you to pray about how God may want to use you next summer. If you can't be there physically during the week, you can still help prepare for VBS, and you can always be a prayer warrior, which is every bit as important.

Mrs. Shellie Terpstra

a member at Bethany URC, Wyoming, MI, has been involved with VBS for several years. She is the business manager for Reformed Fellowship.



Hi, I am a
Helper

YOUR
MISSION,
SHOULD YOU
CHOOSE TO
ACCEPT IT

In a morning worship service you have just heard your minister communicate to the congregation his acceptance of a call received from another congregation. As a serving elder you were aware of this situation and, with your fellow elders, you have to face a unique situation and decide what needs to be done and in what order of priority. The congregation is looking for your leadership and your direction.

Each vacancy is unique, and there are other reasons than a normal call and acceptance for it to occur. Among the causes are emeritization, a new church being organized, or the removal of a minister for cause. The aspects covered in this article are intended to be generally helpful but may even be harmful in some situations. The elders need to agree on what is needed and who is going to do what needs doing in your own situation. Pray early and often that the Lord will provide a new pastor quickly and that he will protect and nurture the flock under your care at this time.

Setting Priorities

Review the membership of the church and give some special care to those who come from outside of the Reformed tradition. Today the independent evangelical church is often defined by a cult of the leader. A man with gifts starts a church and draws large numbers, sets policy, conducts worship as he sees fit, hires staff, and, of course, remains with what he has made and often passes it on, just like a business, to his children. A woman in a church I served came to me distraught after hearing that the minister was leaving. What had he

done, did he no longer love us, what will we do? A time of teaching will need to happen.

A few guiding principles should factor into most situations of vacancy.

1. Vacancy should be short, and vacancy is always something to be solved quickly. The council should agree that this is not a time to sit back and weigh options, to get a long-term interim pastor to fill the pulpit, or to save some money. Vacancy is not good.
2. Assist in every way you can the process involved in your current pastor taking up his new charge as quickly and smoothly as possible. His call, his heart, and his thoughts are now there. Get him there. Work with his new council in this matter.
3. Get an ordained, experienced pastoral counselor to advise you on issues of vacancy and calling. This is a practice from the past that has fallen on hard times as we strive to do it alone and to make up our own mind on so many things. A minister will give invaluable advice. In this day of good long-distance communication, asking for advice presents little burden.
4. Meet as soon as possible to appoint a committee to search for a man. Even if the elders choose to delegate some of this function outside the council, you must set clear rules and steps to be followed.

Item number one should be the needs of the congregation and who is going to meet those needs. This takes an honest appraisal of the abilities and resources of the consistory (session), the council, and the congregation.

Who is going to preach the Word and lead worship? Who will lead the Bible studies and classes the former pastor taught? Who will visit the sick and shut-in? These issues are top priorities.

Is local pulpit supply available? If not, can the church handle the costs of obtaining men to fill the pulpit from a distance every Sunday? A stated supply situation could be sought immediately from an ordained man (less work for the elders) or a graduated candidate for the ministry (more work for the elders). The advantages of supply are many: some familiarity with the congregation and its needs can develop, an ordained man could also serve as a counselor in the calling process, and he could help with visiting, teaching, and special worship and family services. As mentioned above, a stated supply situation should never be allowed to reduce the urgency of the calling process.

If you are blessed to be in an area that offers seminary students, professors, emeriti, or churches of the denomination or federation that are near, please take a few additional steps to offer continuity and to show your leadership to the congregation. With a different man in the pulpit each week, appoint an elder by rotation to introduce the man with a few words of welcome and background along with a handshake of trust and confirmation. Whether it has been your normal practice or not, consider making any announcements via that elder as well. This practice is appreciated by all your guest pastors because, young or veteran, they have enough going on already. Another

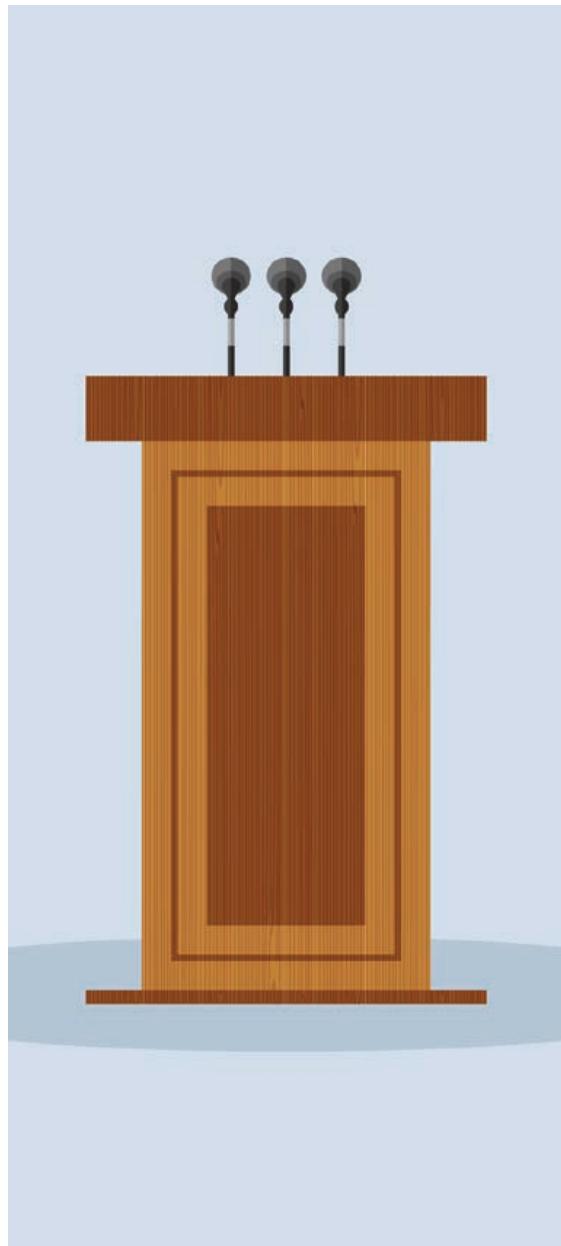
PASTOR NEEDED

step to consider would be an elder offering the congregational prayer. If the elders are shouldering the pastoral care of the members they know the needs, and they know those in need, far better than a guest. Consider the preference of your guest pastor, but most if not all will appreciate the efficacy of this practice.

The elders are called to be in prayer for the church in Scripture (1 Tim. 2; James 5) and in the URCNA Church Order. In these days many of the well-intentioned shepherding acts of the elders are labeled as meddling or attempts to clean up the books, the pastoral and family visits of the elders are even considered of lesser value than those of the pastor. If we are seen to be publicly praying for our people and their trials and illnesses, our love is clearly seen and our effectiveness will be enhanced. Consider this practice in your congregations, vacant or not.

Beginning the Search

If you have addressed the immediate needs of the church, begin the search for a new shepherd immediately. Do have special meeting(s) of the church leaders and discuss the current needs of the congregation. In this process, consider honestly your own capacity and skills in the offices to which you are called. Answer through consensus basic questions about experienced/fresh out of seminary, the need for polished pastoral skills, the need for teaching and leading



Bible studies, counseling experience, leadership skills, mentoring skills if you have men studying for the ministry, and so much more. The other aspect is honesty about the congregation and their expectations of a pastor; have they the patience for the period required for a young man to find his feet?

At times this can be the point where material and other concerns begin to cloud our judgment. A young man fresh out of seminary can be a bargain: fewer and younger children can spell a lower salary, lower-cost housing, Christian education, even insurance costs. In addition, he has not picked up his own way of doing things—we can mold him . . . Do not go there unless you have the abilities and the means to nurture and fill in the gaps while you teach a young man in his life's calling. Seminary does not make a finished product, and elders who think so do the man and their congregation harm if they throw him the keys and then sit back to judge performance. If you cannot provide this, find an experienced man.

The result of this process should be an agreement on what is needed. Asking the congregation for suggestions of suitable men, leaving it all to an appointed search committee, sending out a questionnaire, making "informal" individual enquiries and other common practices today create a search into which personal opinion can easily creep in. Elder or session control begins with agreement on what is needed.

It is also easy to make this a subjective employment search: a "help wanted" ad in the denominational paper, sending a questionnaire to all the possible persons, networking. It is not that for several vital reasons.

One aspect of a pastoral search undeniably makes an unordained candidate very appealing. He needs a call and needs only to consider whether this is the right one. The ordained pastor serving a congregation is considering much more, and so must you as you consider how to go about this. A useful perspective to keep in mind is that you are trying to have an affair with a married man. As outrageous as this seems, it is a useful metaphor. The minister in whom you have some interest has a call. His relationship with his current congregation has many aspects, but it is the most important relationship after his love for the Lord and, if married, his love for his wife. The relationship with his church is defined by his relationship to the church elders or session.

He can consider a call only if allowed to by these men. Start your enquiry with them. Let his elders know you have an interest and would like to visit to hear him and speak with him. If he is not free to consider a call, they will tell you, and it is over. If you go further, starting an e-mail dialogue, sending a questionnaire, making a visit, and then finding out he is not free to consider your call, you have wasted your time, none of which you have to waste. Your formal inquiry to the clerk will get it on the table in his current church. If you send him an e-mail and ask if he would consider a call *he* is free to choose. If you send an inquiry to the elders they are free to offer counsel to him, even to recommend that he proceed if it is best for him and the church. Yes, elders, at times a change is good for your man and for your church. Not all men are built for ten- or fifteen-year pastorates. If you cannot have these kinds of meaningful conversations about his ministry and the health of the church in open meeting with your pastor, you should.

If you receive approval, you go to

him. He is married and not free to date you for a weekend. To ask for a weekend off, arrange pulpit supply and someone to teach his class in order to go elsewhere is awkward. To learn about him, hear him on his own turf, in his own pulpit, and see how he deals with his situation and those under his care.

Suppose that he seems like a good possibility, you have a clear path from his current elders, and he meets the agreed-upon congregational needs. Why should you keep looking? Is a duo or trio desirable? I will go out on a limb again in this article and say yes, in almost all cases. Give the congregation a choice of qualified men given the need for careful and considered haste. The next steps toward a congregational meeting and letter of call can vary. One last thorny issue is always the letter of call and the “package.” After the congregation has voted to call, do all you can to avoid a negotiation process. The package is not a job offer and should not be a part of the congregational meeting. Ask him what he needs for his family: housing, down payment, schooling, insurance, pension, moving costs, and then offer it. If it varies from the annual budget, make the extra need known or handle it on the next budget.

This article is to a degree an opinion piece and is certainly anecdotal, but it goes to doing our work as elders decently and in good order. Your situation may have other factors that call for other measures, but always be guided by consideration and openness.

Mr. Martin Nuiver

is a member of Faith URC,
Beecher, IL, where he serves as
an elder and the clerk.

The URCNA Church Order

Rev. Casey Freswick

In this article I would like to examine the process of candidacy as it relates to the church order. There are several church order articles and appendices that relate to this matter.

Article 3 Competent men should be urged to study for the ministry of the Word. A man who is a member of a church of the federation and who aspires to the ministry must evidence genuine godliness to his Consistory, which shall assume supervision of all aspects of his training, including his licensure to exhort, and assure that he receives a thoroughly reformed theological education. The council of his church should help him ensure that his financial needs are met.

Appendix 2 Guidelines for a Licensure Exam

The prospective licentiate must apply to his Consistory for the exam, securing the required credentials. At least thirty days before the exam, the Consistory is to announce publicly its intention to examine the prospective licentiate, providing opportunity for other Consistories to render observation and/or objections.

The prospective licentiate must be examined by his Consistory, and the successful completion of the exam will

be certified to other Consistories within the federation.

An exhorting license is normally valid for one year, and extension may be requested annually in writing and may require another interview.

Article 4 At the conclusion of such training, a student must approach his Consistory to become a candidate for the ministry of the Word, which shall arrange for his examination at a meeting of the classis of which his Consistory is a participant. No one shall be declared a candidate for the ministry until he has sustained an examination at a meeting of this classis, in the presence of his Consistory, of his Christian faith and experience, of his call to the ministry, of his knowledge of the Holy Scriptures, both in the original languages and in English translations, of the Three Forms of Unity, of Christian doctrine, Christian ethics and church history; of the Church Order, and of his knowledge and aptitude with regard to the particular duties and responsibilities of the minister of the Word, especially the preparation and preaching of sermons. Upon sustaining this exam in the presence of his Consistory and with the concurring advice of the delegates to this meeting of classis, his Consistory shall declare him a candidate for the office of minister of the Word.

Article 5 A man who is not a member of a church of the federation who seeks candidacy shall place himself under the supervision of a Consistory, which shall make provision for his candidacy examination.

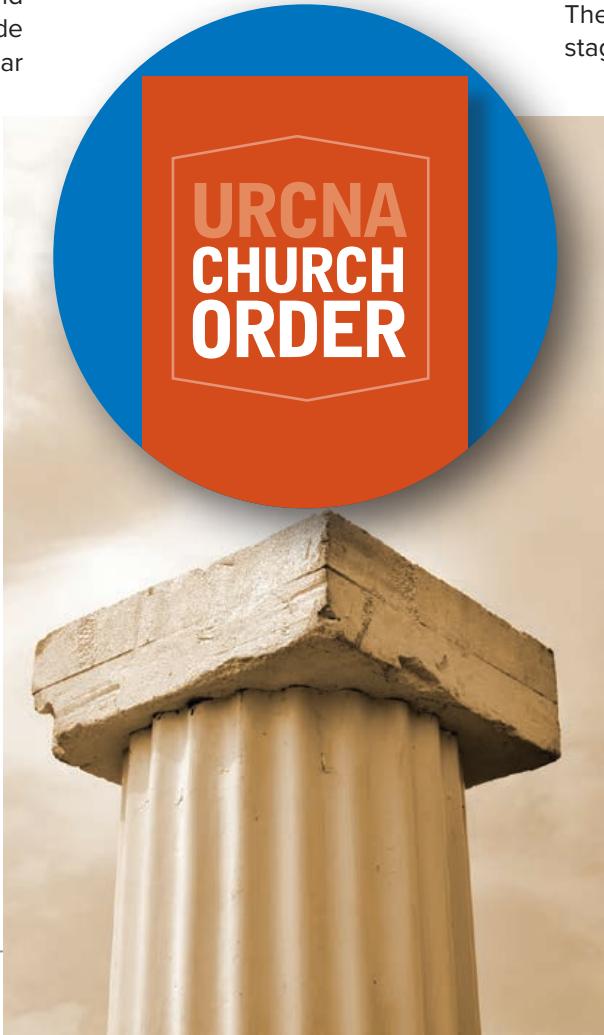
Article 6 The lawful calling to the office of minister of those who have not previously been in that office consists of: First, the election by the council of one who has been declared a candidate according to the regulations prescribed herein, after having prayed and received the advice of the congregation; Second, the examination of both doctrine and life, which shall be conducted to the satisfaction of the delegates to the classis of which the calling church is a participant, according to the regulations adopted by the federation (see Appendix 4 and 6);

Appendix 4

Guidelines for an Ordination Exam: PROCEDURE: Exceptional case: If the ordination exam would occur in the same classis in which the candidacy exam was sustained, then the ordination exam may be waived by the delegates conducting the candidacy exam.

Certainly there is room for some difference in application of these articles and appendices. Does the term "his financial needs are met" imply that all seminary students should graduate debt free? I understand that the church order does not demand this, but I would not find fault with a council of a local church that had this as the goal for a man aspiring to office. Exactly how much time is needed in order to evaluate a man for candidacy? The exact minimum is not stated, and there are some differences in practice. However, URCNA consistories have very different practices related to these articles and appendices governing how a man moves from "aspirant" to "ordained minister of the word and sacraments." This results in some churches having opportunities for calling a candidate while other churches never even have the opportunity to consider the same man for a call. It also results in some candidates being required to take two exams while others in the same situation are required to take only one.

The church order lays out the different stages a man needs to go through to attain ordination. First, consistories should encourage competent men to study for the ministry. Second, a man who aspires with or without such encouragement to the office of minister must demonstrate genuine godliness to his consistory. Third, his consistory commends him for training, oversees his training, and sees that his financial needs are met. "His consistory" is the overseeing consistory of his training, instruction, and ultimately commendation. Fourth, after the first year of seminary training a man can move from "aspirant" to "licentiate." He must be examined by his consistory to be allowed to exhort and lead in public worship in churches. Fifth, after a man completes his seminary training his consistory



must determine if it should commend him for candidacy. Sixth, if it decides to do this then the consistory must seek the concurring advice of its classis by means of a candidacy exam. Seventh, a classis meeting is held and an exam is given.

Eighth, if the licentiate sustains a candidacy exam, two things need to be addressed. First, the classis has the opportunity to declare that if the candidate is called to a local church in the classis then he does not need to take an ordination exam. Second, the licentiate's overseeing consistory, "his consistory," must approve him for candidacy and then declare him a candidate for the ministry to the churches of the URCNA. The licentiate now becomes a candidate. Any church seeking a pastor is now allowed to extend a call to this candidate.

Ninth, after the calling church extends a call to the candidate and if he accepts this call, the candidate must undergo and sustain an ordination exam by the calling church's classis. As noted earlier there is an exception to this common practice. If the calling church is in the classis in which the candidacy exam took place and the classis declared that the candidacy exams fulfills the ordination exam, then there does not need to be an ordination exam.

Tenth, after the candidate sustains the ordination exam, the calling consistory organizes an ordination and installation worship service. The service is held using the form for ordination and the candidate is ordained into office. He now moves from being a candidate to an office bearer, a minister of the Word and sacraments. At this point, as an ordained minister, he begins his work as an office bearer in a local church of Jesus Christ. The man has transitioned from aspirant to licentiate to candidate to ordained minister.

These steps recognize biblical principles of calling, ministerial office, eldership, corporate responsibility, and the authority of the local congregation. They also put into practice the important distinction between the inner

calling of a man seeking office and its confirmation by the visible church with a call and ordination. Certainly there are other models that also respect these biblical truths.

Sadly, these particular steps are not always followed in the URCNA. How could this happen? First, a church calls a licentiate before his consistory has set up a candidacy exam. Or a church gives a provisional call or indicates a strong desire to call a licentiate to ordained office. Then the licentiate asks to have his membership transferred from his consistory to the calling church and his consistory grants the transfer. The licentiate's new church now becomes his overseeing consistory of his doctrine and life. The new consistory now asks its classis for a candidacy exam, the man sustains the exam, the ordination exam is waived, and the ordination service is announced. The licentiate and his consistory skip the step of candidacy.

Why is this a problem? First, this and similar practices weaken the value of the church order in the context of a secular society. This or any practice that compromises church order leaves URCNA local consistories open to the charge that church order is not a legal covenant that could have legal status but only gives suggestions. It weakens in an age of litigation the church order's weight in legal matters. If some church order articles are ignored by some local consistories, then ultimately the church order will be no help in litigations regarding those articles giving direction to discipline or homosexual marriage. Albert Mohler in his "Briefing" on January 7, 2016, reported that Michelle Boorstein of the Washington Post wrote on the last day of 2015, "The fight over whether gay marriage should be legal ended in 2015. But the issue remains unresolved for conservative faith groups, leading to continuing battles between the thousands of schools, non-profits and houses of worship run by conservative faith groups and any gay and lesbian employees who may work for them." As our brother from

Southern Baptist Seminary develops this theme he concludes, "there really is an inevitable collision between LGBT rights and religious liberty. And then secondly, there really is a mandate for confessional accountability." Our confessional accountability is reflected in our church order. It is critical in our culture to be accountable to our authoritative documents. Better to change the church order than to compromise its legitimacy by ignoring it.

Second, it sets the stage for an unhealthy approach to church order for those just entering the ministry. If at the beginning of your ministry you fudge church order, why not compromise it in many other areas as well? If a minister enters the ministry not following church order, why should he think it is important to follow church order if he is leaving the church? A young minister or anyone might think he has the right to make up his own rules for resignation or accepting a call to another congregation. Or a local church may accept a resignation from a minister (which does not exist in church order), rather than an article 11 or a call or the necessity of exercising discipline.

Finally, this practice is unjust. First, it is unjust to licentiates. This is because some churches will follow church order and some will not. Therefore, some licentiates will be "forced" by their consistories to follow church order and others will not. One licentiate will say, "I can transfer my membership," while another will say, "I cannot." Or one local consistory will allow a licentiate to transfer while another consistory will refuse to transfer. I have already seen some friction between two graduates over this very issue. Two licentiates in the same circumstances will have two different paths to ordination. One licentiate will be required to have both a candidacy and an ordination exam while the other will need only a candidacy exam.

Second, it is unjust to the churches. One church scopes out, speaks to, votes to call, organizes a congregational meeting in which a licentiate is called, calls the man to the ministry, accepts a transfer of

membership, calls for a candidacy/ordination exam, and upon completion of the exam ordains and installs the man into office with no declaration of candidacy. Another church desires to call this same man. They have the man preach, know about him, and wait until he is declared a candidate to call him. But instead of an announcement from his consistory announcing the new candidate's candidacy, they receive an announcement from a consistory that is both his consistory and the calling consistory informing the federation that the man is an ordained minister. The churches that followed church order and waited until the man's candidacy is announced before they extend a call to the candidate never had an opportunity to extend a call to the man because the man is never a candidate. This is unjust. There is a reason why we share a church order. It promotes fairness to both licentiates and local churches hoping to call a new candidate to pastor their church.

I hope that this article illustrates the importance of following church order. It would be far better to change church order to have only one exam following seminary education than have half the churches practicing one path and the other half of the churches practicing another path to ordination even when both paths would faithfully fulfill biblical principles. Unless the church order of the URCNA is officially changed, we should all follow the common approved path for licensure, candidacy, and ordination in our current church order, submitting to one another out of love for one another and love for Christ.

Rev. Casey Freswick

is pastor of Bethany United Reformed Church in Wyoming, MI.

Report on Synod Dunnville 2016 of the Canadian Reformed Churches

Rev. Steve Swets

Synod Dunnville of the CanRC convened on Tuesday, May 10, 2016, in the Dunnville Canadian Reformed Church in southern Ontario. I, along with Revs. John Bouwers and William Van Hal, were fraternal delegates from the URCNA. We took turns, with some overlap of our time at synod. The evening before the convening of synod there was a prayer service held in the Dunnville church building and a message was brought from God's Word from Rev. Clarence Bouwman, who was the chairman of the last general synod in Carman, Manitoba, in 2013.

Canadian Reformed general synods have a very different feel than we are used to. They have twenty-four men delegated to the synod, twelve from the East and twelve from the West. It is an equal divide between elders and ministers. There also is no set end time of the meeting. The synod ends when all of the items of the agenda have been dealt with.

The first day, the synod began by electing officers. Rev. Richard Aasman was elected chairman, Rev. Rob Schouten was elected vice chairman, Rev. R. C. (Karlo) Janssen was elected first clerk, and Rev. E. Kampen was elected second clerk. After this took place, the synod took a two-hour break so that the officers could divide the agenda into five committees to be dealt with as committees of pre-advice, similar to what we practice at our synods.

As fraternal delegates, we may ask to sit in on these committee meetings; this request was granted, and we spent most of our time involved with the committee on contact and unity with churches in North America.

Most of the evenings were devoted to public plenary sessions which enabled members from local congregations to attend the meeting of synod. During these plenary sessions, opportunity was given for fraternal delegates to bring greetings. Delegates were present both from North America and abroad. Greetings were brought by Mr. Mark Bube (OPC), Rev. George Horner (RCUS), Rev. Bruce Backenstoo (RPCNA), Rev. Ben Westerveld (ERQ), Mr. Peter Witten (FRC of Australia), Rev. Kim Battreau (GKNv), and Rev. D. Boersma (FRC-South Africa).

Rev. John Bouwers brought greetings on behalf of the URC on Monday evening. In this speech he thanked the Lord for a fruitful relationship as churches working side by side in many places in Canada. He filled the brothers in on some of the agenda items to come up at Synod Wyoming 2016. In particular, he mentioned a few of the overtures (two from PNW and one from Classis Central) which deal in some way with our relationship with the Canadian Reformed Churches. Rev. Bouwers encouraged the churches to continue to work together in service to the Lord with the goal of unity for His praise.

Synod Dunnville made a number of decisions which might be a particular interest to us as they have a direct result in the life of their churches. Some of the decisions were:

1. To overturn the decision of Synod Carman 2013, which declared it impermissible for women to vote in the churches. This came by way of an appeal of the 2013 decision. This is the third time in the last three synods this issue has been discussed.

2. Synod decided not to enter into Ecclesiastical Fellowship with the RPCNA (Phase 2) due to the fact that they have concerns about the RPCNA. The two main issues of concern are the fact that the RPCNA has women deacons and that their "testimony" has confessional status in the RPCNA.

3. Synod decided to continue their same relationship with the GKNv, though in a limited fashion as they are concerned about liberalism coming out of the Netherlands. Of particular concern is with some of the professors at the theological seminary in Kampen (e.g., Drs. Paas and Burger).

4. This synod was the first synod with their newly revised Book of Praise. Rev. George Van Popta gave a history of their songbook and presented a copy to the chairman of synod.

Concerning the relationship between the URC and the CanRC, I sat in on the committee which dealt with this. It was clear from the reports that though their Coordinators for Church Unity (especially Rev. W. Den Hollander) have visited nearly all of the URC classes and preached in dozens of churches, there is an ambivalence from many of the churches, especially those in the United

States. They were deeply saddened by this. They were not sure whether it was necessary to reappoint their unity committees (church order, songbook, theological education). After some discussion on the floor of synod they decided to continue with these committees, even though the URC has ended the mandate for two-thirds of theirs. I will quote from their considerations on our relationship:

Love compels us to state honestly that these developments [from Synod 2010 and 2014 and overtures to Synod 2016] are disheartening in regards to future hopes of unification. Love, however, also compels us to continue to work towards merger. The teaching of scripture in passages such as Psalm 133; John 17; Ephesians 1:1–14, 2:19–22; 4:1–3; Philippians 1:27; 4:2; Colossians 2:18–19, 3:14–15 is clear regarding the mandate to seek unification in Christ. This means that the CanRC continue to feel a genuine longing for unification.

In order to continue this process they appointed two additional Coordinators for Church Unity from the Western churches.

This is what was decided. I must admit that at times as I sat in on the committee's work on our relationship, I felt slightly uncomfortable within myself. I felt so at odds at some of the sentiments from churches that I am representing. When I heard these CanRC men talk about what love compels them to continue to pursue, my heart became heavy. It became heavy because I don't think the love will be reciprocated, at least not in the way that promotes true unity. I don't know what the Lord has in store for us or our

relationship with the CanRC, but it remains my heartfelt conviction that we need each other in a very real way and the longer we are apart, the more difficult it is to remain optimistic and enthusiastic about unity with those who share like faith and practice.

As a fraternal delegate to this broadest of Canadian Reformed assemblies, I was greatly encouraged to see the synod work thoroughly through material until they reached as close of a consensus as possible. The advisory committees were in service to synod and took seriously synod's advice. This was also my first time seeing a synod with such a small delegation (twenty-four delegates). What it meant was that each time an agenda item came up, there were two rounds where each brother could speak. Some reports were sent back to committee three times, which meant that a delegate could speak to a proposal six times. Our synods don't permit this as our deliberations have a very different feel.

Synod ended eight work days after it began. It was a privilege to be there and to represent the URC as a member of CERCU. Nearly every time I have the opportunity to sit down and discuss issues of theology and practice with my CanRC brothers, I am often moved to a greater sense of love and appreciation for them. They plan to host their next synod in 2019 in Edmonton. Soli Deo Gloria.

Humbly submitted,

Rev. Steve Swets,
member of CERCU

Rev. Steve Swets

is the pastor of Rehoboth United Reformed Church in Hamilton, ON.

Pastor Paula

Dr. Peter DeJong

Pastor Paula Irik is a minister of the combined congregation of the Nassau and Prinsesse churches (Reformed, GKN and "state," HK) in Amsterdam. *Nederlands Dagblad*, a Dutch periodical, relayed from the Waarheidsvriend the report of an interview with the minister which appeared in her church's monthly bulletin, which we translate.

The occasion for the interview is the happy news that Paula is expecting a baby in September and because she wants to arrange her life somewhat differently than is perhaps expected, we asked her several questions.

Question: What do you plan for the future?

Paula: My friend Hans and I are going to live together in July; we have found an apartment on Watteaustreet.

Question: You are not getting married. Why not?

Paula: In my circle of friends are many who are not officially married and who would feel alienated if I were. It is a matter of feeling. The church can be very hard on people who choose another lifestyle than marriage. I hope for a church with more room for people who want to live differently, such as lesbians living together, or living singly.

Question: How can you solemnize a marriage if you yourself do not choose to be married?

Paula: That belongs to my job. I keenly enjoy it, and I am not against church marriage. It is good if people want to express their happiness over their covenant in the church, with their weal and woe. It grieves me that church marriage is played off against other lifestyles. The joy of homosexual relations, for example, I would also like to see celebrated in church. Now that can often not be done.

Question: Don't you think that the minister, as leader, must be an example to the congregation? What about the teenagers?

Paula: Are we on the way of the Messiah? Has our way anything to do with the way that Jesus took? To that I want to be held. The minister does not stand above the congregation, but with it. How do we live together as Christians? The shepherd must go the way of the good Shepherd; the Teacher is concerned with opening the Scriptures together. The congregation may not call me to account for the form, but only for the content of my relation. And that is going very well; I have full confidence in it. Parents of teenagers may be shocked—I can readily imagine that—thinking, "I hope that my child doesn't...." Children may freely choose the lifestyle that best suits them. Are they happy? Are they good to each other? Children are not an extension of ourselves; they are entrusted to us. In our congregation, there is, fortunately, room for various opinions and a readiness to talk about them.

Question: What kind of person is Hans? Many of us do not know him. And he is outside of the church. What about that?

Paula: We met each other shortly after I came to work in the Prinsesse church. All of the good things then occurred together. Hans is a political scientist, and he has an office at the Bureau of Economics in The Hague. He commutes each day by train and in September will be working three days a week. Just like Hans Mos and Rev. Hibma, we are choosing to take care of this child together, and both to continue working. When Hans was seventeen he left the Dutch Reformed Church after much thought. I see much Calvinism in him. We have good talks about my work and my faith; he supports me completely



in what I do. He listens critically to my sermons, especially the development of the theme. We can freely discuss the discoveries I make in a Bible text. He doesn't go to church because he doesn't want to appear to belong to a fellowship of which he is not a part. If Hans had been a church member I would gladly have celebrated my commitment and joy in the church. But Hans thinks that it is hypocrisy to bring something into a church in which he doesn't believe. No one must get the impression from me that I am opposed to marriage. I only oppose using fixed norms and values against people. Do people get their rights? That is what it is about. I ask the freedom to live in that way. We are very happy with that.

The interview demonstrates again what can and may be expected to happen when a church discards the norms of God's Word to replace it with mere personal opinions—as also our denomination is doing.

This editorial is from the February 1985 Outlook (p. 20).

Dr. Peter De Jong

was serving the Dutton Christian Reformed Church (Dutton, MI) in 1985. He was also the editor of The Outlook.

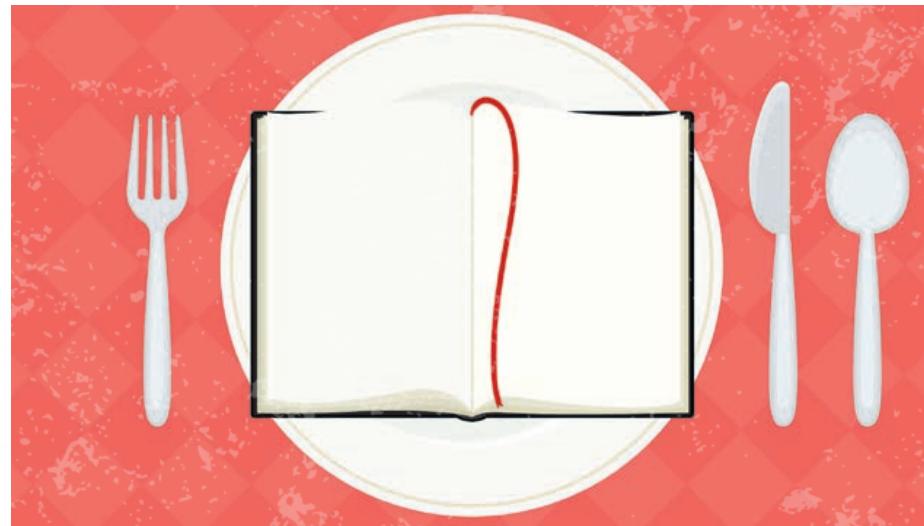
Our “Famine of the Word”

Rev. Arthur Besteman

Recently I had lunch with several friends. One of my colleagues had visited several days earlier with the pastor of a large evangelical church in an area where many Christian Reformed Churches are located.

The pastor mentioned that many Christian Reformed people were attending his church and that not a small number of them were joining. As we ate lunch that day we asked the question, "Why?" The suggestion was made that perhaps some of these people were hungry to hear the gospel: the church about which we were speaking is neither Reformed in its theology nor is it Pentecostal. It is known for its clear, forceful presentation of the gospel and the demands of the gospel upon daily life. Some members of the Christian Reformed Church seem to be finding there what they are not finding in their own churches.

As I have been reflecting upon our conversation I recalled a visitor in our own church several weeks ago who has been a leader in his own church, which is one of the larger congregations in our denomination and which is now without a pastor. As we chatted together following the service he said to me, "I can count on one hand the number of visiting pastors who have preached the gospel since we have been vacant." And he was greatly burdened. I recall those occasions when our own family has sat under the preaching of Christian Reformed pastors who neglected to include in



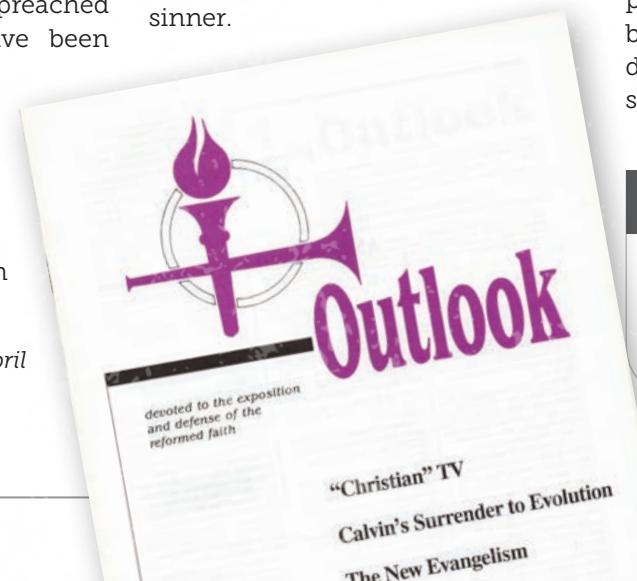
their sermons a call to repentance and to faith in Jesus Christ.

It is indeed very well possible that there are members of the Christian Reformed Church who are hungry for the gospel and who are looking elsewhere for what they cannot find in their own churches. As the authority of the Bible is increasingly coming under attack in our denomination and as some lose confidence in the power of the Word preached to attract sinners, we find some preachers becoming more and more enamored with innovations and novelties. This often takes place at the expense of the proclamation of the Word which alone can fulfill the need of the seeking sinner.

Recently while waiting in an airline terminal for a flight I met a pastor who had completed ten years of service in the Netherlands. He made the observation that where the gospel is proclaimed the churches in the Netherlands are well attended. This, he said, is in contrast to the poor attendance at the churches where the Word is no longer being preached. Do we note a similar situation in the United States and Canada?

Preachers and parishioners, what is being preached from your pulpit? Is it the word of man which leaves the hearers hungry and searching?

Or is it the gospel which is God's power unto salvation to all who believe and which alone satisfies the deepest and greatest need of man's soul?



This editorial is from the April 1988 Outlook (p. 5).

Rev. Arthur Besteman

was pastor of the Beverly Christian Reformed Church in Wyoming, MI in 1988. He retired in 1999.

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MINISTER OF THE WORD AT
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The true church is under vicious assault in these last days. Satan, having great wrath because he knows his time is short, is determined to destroy the divine truth that the church loves, believes, confesses and lives. False teachers with their damnable heresies are on every side. Pressures to sell the truth for the sake of unholy alliances mount. Iniquity of the vilest sort is sanctioned and celebrated in society. What shall the church do as she awaits the triumphant return of her head Christ Jesus?

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- The instituted church and its relationships?
- The believer and church membership?
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—Rev. Joel Beeke

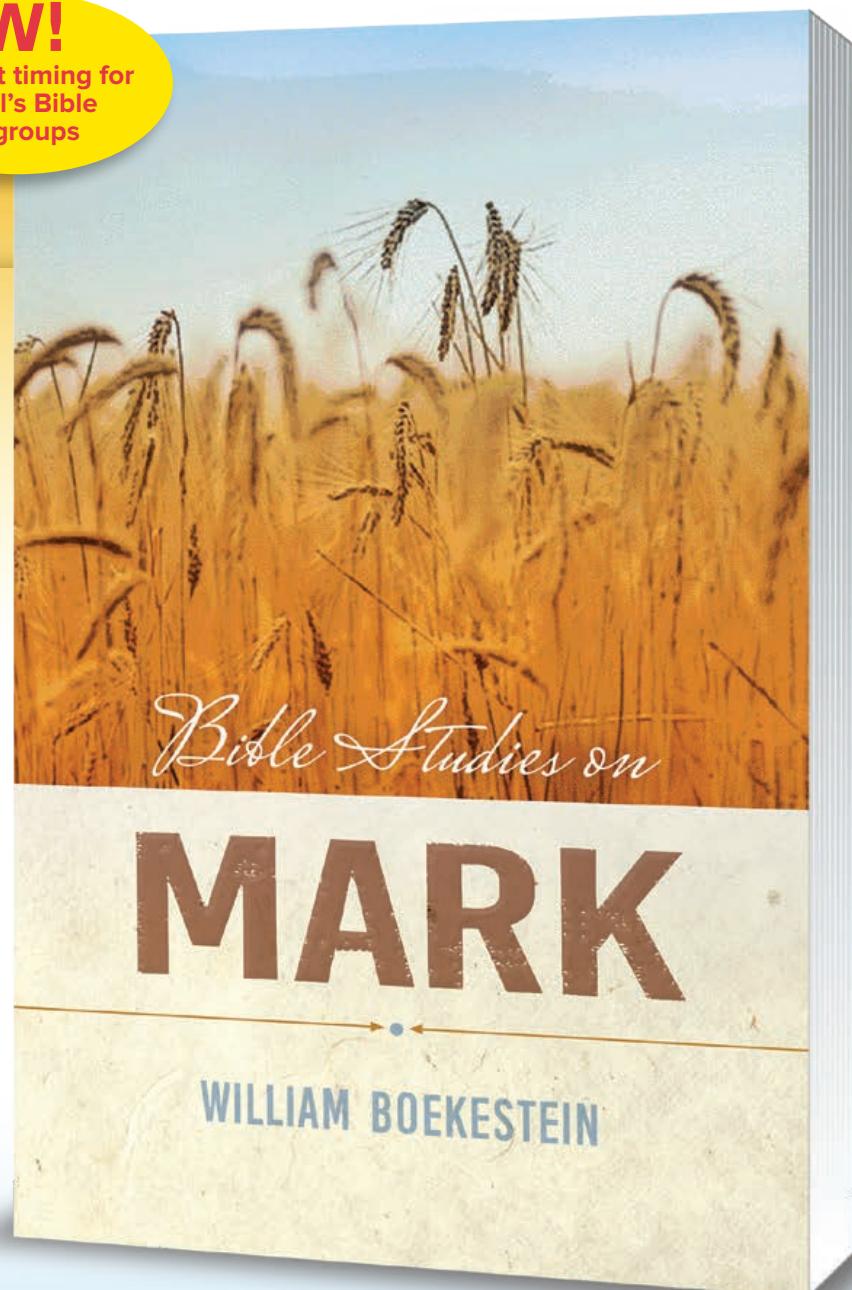
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