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Dedicated to the Exposition and Defense of the Reformed Faith



# The Outlook

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"I Am the Gate for the Sheep"

Let Them Hear Them (5)

The Dangers of Neglecting the Assembly

Bible Study on Ezra

Luther: 499

Book Reviews

The Concerns of IRBC's Founding Elders  
Should Be Reflective of Our Own (3)

Archaeology: Friend or Foe of Biblical History?

The Unsung Benefits of a Cappella Worship

The Tongue Small, Yet Great (4)

RYS Convention Reports

SEPT | OCT

	Title	Author	Synopsis
3	"I Am the Gate for the Sheep"	Rev. Steve Swets	Rev. Swets illustrates how our Savior focuses on how He is the shepherd and gate for His sheep.
6	Let Them Hear Them (5)	Rev. Daniel Hyde	Listening to God speaking in the Scriptures.
8	The Dangers of Neglecting the Assembly (or, See You on Sunday!)	Rev. Shane Lems	"Why do we have to go to church today?"
12	Bible Study on Ezra	Dr. Norm DeJong	Lesson 5: The Remnant Responds Obediently; Ezra 3:1-7 Lesson 6: Restoring the Temple; Ezra 3:7-4:5
19	Luther: 499	Mr. David Vandermeer	499 years ago, Luther is about to make history, but he doesn't know it; he is literally going to turn the world upside down.
21 22	Book Reviews	Rev. William Boekestein Rev. Jerome Julien	<i>Michelangelo for Kids</i> <i>Gottshalk, Servant of God</i>
23	The Concerns of IRBC's Founding Elders Should Be Reflective of Our Own (3)	Dr. Jeff Doll	Spending a little time looking at hedonism, and how it affects the visible church in the United States today.
27	Archaeology: Friend or Foe of Biblical History?	Rev. R. Andrew Compton	Part 3: Israel's Sojourn in Egypt.
31	The Unsung Benefits of a Cappella Worship	Mr. Michael Kearney	Observations, some history and applications on non-accompanied singing in church worship.
34	The Tongue Small, Yet Great (4)	Rev. Brian G. Najapfour	While the tongue is a small part of our bodies, how we use it can greatly influence the direction of our entire lives!
37	RYS Annual Convention	Mr. Myron Rau	Reformed Youth Services twentieth anniversary 2016 introduction.
38	Convention 2016: Salt Life	Miss Cambrie Atsma	A brief report by a young lady attending the convention.
39	RYS Youth Convention	Mr. Kees Kiledjian	A brief report by a young man attending the convention.

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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:** In in the northern hemisphere, the third season of the year, crops and fruits are gathered, leaves turn to beautiful colors...all pictures of our Heavenly Father's faithfulness. Illustration and concept by Jeff Steenholdt.

# "I Am the Gate for the Sheep": A Devotional on John 10:7b

Rev. Steve  
Swets

We continue our study of the seven "I Am" statements of Christ. We have seen that He is the bread of life, the light of the world, and now the gate for the sheep. As we think about sheep, there are likely a number of different images that come to mind, but much of the way that modern sheep farming is done is foreign to the first-century mind. When a modern sheep farmer wants to round up his sheep, he jumps on a quad or a dirt bike and sets off. Oftentimes sheep farms are much bigger now than they were in Jesus' day, and often a large number of different animals make up the average farm. For these next two studies, let us put modern farming out of our minds.

As Jesus gives this allegory or figure of speech in our text, the average shepherd cared for twenty to eighty sheep. He walked with the sheep, spending all day and night with them. He didn't have much of a social life, so to speak. He named his sheep, and his sheep knew his voice. He was entrusted to care for the sheep, protect the sheep, lead the sheep, water and feed the sheep. John 10 contains two "I Am" statements of Jesus dealing with shepherds and sheep. In the next study we plan to see Jesus as the good shepherd; this month, that Jesus is the gate to the sheep. Our Lord Jesus proclaims Himself to be the way of salvation.

## The Meaning

God has always governed His people through the means He has appointed. What we see taking place in the Old Testament is a continual word picture of the leaders of the people being shepherds, and the people of

God as sheep. The shepherds were to serve the great Shepherd of the sheep, which was God: think of Psalm 23 or Isaiah 40:10. The problem was that so many of the shepherds of Israel were wicked (Jer. 23; 25; Isa. 56:9–12). If we look closely at Ezekiel 34 (it is best to turn there in your Bible) we see that after renouncing the wickedness of the shepherds in the first ten verses, in verse 11 God says that He Himself will be the one who will have to shepherd His sheep. Notice verse 12, "As a shepherd looks after his scattered flock when he is with them, so will I look after my sheep. I will rescue them from all the places where they were scattered." We will have to keep that in mind when later in John 10 Jesus says, "I am the good shepherd." He is the one God is ultimately speaking about in Ezekiel 34. In Ezekiel 34:23 it says, "I will establish one shepherd over them, and he shall feed them—My servant David. He shall feed them and be their shepherd." Jesus is the Son of David who would be greater than David. Most of this principle we will study in the next article, God willing, but keep it in your mind as we keep looking at our text.

The opening picture of our text is that of a sheep pen or a sheepfold. During the day, a shepherd would lead the sheep from pasture to pasture, from watering hole to watering hole, to ensure their nourishment and livelihood. At night it was unsafe to leave the sheep out on a hillside, so he would have to put the sheep in some type of pen. Depending on the size of his flock, sometimes a cave would be used and the shepherd would sleep by the entrance of the cave to ensure no one or nothing

went in or out. In a village, there would be an open roofed enclosure made of wood or likely stone, sometimes even connected to the back side of a house. In this type of closure, the sheep would be brought in and then the gate would be locked or closed to make sure none of the sheep wandered out. This is the picture we have of our text.

It was an enclosure which had more than one flock, so it had different shepherds sharing an enclosure for the evening. There would be a watchman, John 10:3 says, who would open the gate for the shepherd. He was not to open it for others, and therefore, if someone or some animal wanted to steal a sheep, he would climb over the wall. When these structures were out in the wilderness, the dangers would be bears, lions, or wolves; in town this was less of a danger. The danger then became someone rustling or stealing sheep. John 10:1 calls this person a thief or a robber. Those terms refer to mostly the same thing, but the difference is that the robber uses violence to accomplish his goal.

Jesus, in this allegory, compares Himself as the faithful shepherd with those others who are thieves and robbers. Sheep will follow the voice of their shepherd, and they will not follow the voice of a stranger. So, to go back to the sheep pen, if there are three shepherds who keep their sheep in the same pen, how do they divide them again the next morning? What happens is the watchman opens the gate for the shepherd, and he calls out to his sheep and they follow him; the other sheep ignore the stranger's voice and wait only for

the voice of their own shepherd. This is still done in many Eastern cultures where shepherds share watering holes and flocks come together and they all leave with their own flock by following the shepherd's voice. There is a closeness between a shepherd and his flock: he knows the name of the sheep and they are with him 24/7. It is like having a faithful dog: as soon as the owner comes home and the dog hears the voice, the ears perk up and the dog wags its tail. When a stranger comes, there isn't trust at first. This idea is the same with sheep.

The Pharisees and the others who are listening did not understand what Jesus was saying. John 10:6 says: "Jesus used this illustration, but they did not understand the things which He spoke to them." So, in verses 7–10 of John 10, he makes it more explicit. Some have said that this becomes a mixed metaphor. In the first five verses Jesus is a shepherd; now, in verses 7–10, he is a gate. How is this? The way we must understand this is that verses 7–10 amplify what Jesus was saying. Also, as with an allegory, we must be careful not to be too particular of every detail.

So, now the picture focuses upon Jesus as the gate for the sheep. Notice Jesus uses the "I Am" statement again. This is a divine claim! But now, Jesus is the gate. Jesus calls Himself that very thing that brings the sheep into the safety of the sheep pen and brings them back out into the place where they can be fed and nourished. Whoever enters through the gate, Jesus says in John 10:9, will be saved. So, coming in through the gate is a picture of salvation. Salvation here is pictured as a place of safety, going in and out of the sheepfold, and having an abundant life. This is what John 10:10 means when it says, "I have come that they may have life, and that they may have it more abundantly."

A full life or an abundant life is one of fellowship with God. It is a life that is so full that it cannot be destroyed

by death. It is a life of abundant grace in the Lord Jesus Christ. Is this the life you are living—a full life in the grace of God? Or are you living a life of fear? If you believe, if you have entered through the gate which is Christ, by faith, you can go in and out of the sheep pen without fear. The sheep pen can be the church—John 10:16 makes this clear. It is initially speaking about Israel, but for us today it speaks of the church. Are you afraid of what is out there? Are you afraid of your neighbors? Are you afraid of ISIS? Are you afraid of Satan? You need not be, because the shepherd gives abundant grace to the sheep. Be wise out there, be loving out there, be active out there, get involved in your community. Invite your neighbors over for supper and then invite them to church or just invite them into your lives. We will ask ourselves in the next article, but if we are afraid, then do we really trust that Jesus is the good shepherd who will not lose one of His sheep?

Brothers and sisters, there is only one way in. At some point, that shepherd is going to call the sheep in at night, and if you are not in the sheep pen, then you are in danger, eternal danger because one of these nights will be the last one. Do you hear the voice of the Savior? He says, "Come unto me and I will give you rest."

### **The Danger**

After explaining to you that you do not need to be afraid if you have entered the gate, now let me warn you of two obvious but serious dangers.

The first of these dangers is listening to the wrong voice. In John 10:3 Jesus says that the shepherd calls his sheep by name and leads them out. Notice that beautiful phrase, "He leads them." Most modern shepherds drive the sheep. They walk behind the sheep and have a dog or two to keep the sheep in line. Not Jesus; He leads the sheep. The way that He leads them is not by the fact that they see Him but rather that they hear

Him. The danger then is to follow the wrong voice.

The wrong voice is described by Jesus as that of a robber or thief or a stranger. What would the wrong voice sound like? In Jesus' day, it was the voice of unbelieving Pharisees. It was a voice of threatening. Just as they threw the man who was healed of blindness out of the temple, so a false shepherd threatens the sheep. Pastors (which is the Latin word for shepherd) must not threaten the sheep; they should lead the sheep and teach them to run away from strange voices. Like what? Who are the thieves of our day?

The thieves of our day are those who teach that there is another way to be saved; those who teach that all religions ultimately lead to the same place. A thief might also say that Muslims and Christians worship the same God. Thieves today who have a false voice are those who promote a false religion, whether it is naturalism and its daughter evolution. Namely, it is that which is contrary to God's Word. Another false voice is that of prosperity preachers who teach that God wants you to be wealthy and have all of your carnal desires met, and the reason you are sick or weak is your own fault. The first danger is listening to the wrong voice.

The second danger is seeking to enter by the wrong entrance. Jesus claims to be the exclusive gate. The only other way into the sheep pen is an illegitimate way: the way of thieves and robbers. We have already mentioned false religions and the like under the first danger. Likely the great danger of seeking the wrong entrance is seeking to enter the kingdom of God without the church.

This is the notion that someone can be a part of the universal church without being faithfully involved in a local church. This is the teaching that says that you can live a healthy Christian life without the communion of the saints, without accountability, without corporate



worship, and most dangerously, without the means of grace—the preaching and sacraments.

What has become obvious to those watching is the role of religion in American politics. How many of the candidates attended worship on Sunday? How many attended worship on this Sunday last year? It is a show, and it is a joke. An individualistic faith with an individualistic salvation isn't entering by the gate, which is Christ. It is sitting on the wall, it is straddling the fence. Cyprian, the early church father, said, "You cannot have God as your Father if the church is not your mother." These people are the opposites of the Pharisees. The Pharisees were members of the local church but were not members of the universal church. We need both, and it is local church where we express our membership in the universal church.

Beware of the dangers.

### **The Application**

As we take a step back from this "I Am" statement, what can you take home from the knowledge that Jesus is the gate for the sheep?

First (and we will build on this in the next article), be comforted in the fact that Christ will protect and feed us. John 10: 27–28 says, "My sheep hear My voice, and I know them, and they follow Me. And I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; neither shall anyone snatch them out of My hand." Jesus will not leave us out in the wilderness for the lions, bears, and wolves to devour. Rather the I Am is an iron gate of protection for the sheep. He feeds us as the bread of life, He nourishes us with streams of living water, and He does so in His Word and by grace through the Holy Spirit.

Second, it is the calling of the Christian pastor to teach the sheep to run away from a strange voice. An important part of preaching is the defense of the faith or apologetics and polemics. This is especially the case in catechism sermons. In the faithful preaching of the Word, the sheep ought to be able to hear the voice of the good shepherd. The shepherd at times has to keep sheep from cliffs, pitfalls, and predators.

Third, enter in at the gate and follow the voice of Jesus. Many of you were

welcomed into the sheep pen in a sense when you were baptized as members of the covenant. Praise God for that, but don't rest merely on that. The picture of our text is that of sheep going in and out. Sometimes when sheep go out, they get lost. The shepherd with the one hundred sheep left the ninety-nine to go and find the one that was lost. When he found that sheep, he picked it up, put it on his shoulders, and carried it back to the flock. How would that sheep have gotten lost? That sheep entered dangerous territory or didn't follow the shepherd. This is what our sin does. Flee from it. Repent and believe and experience abundant life.

There is only one gate, and that is Jesus. Come to Him. Enter through Him and have life, true, eternal, life.

### **Rev. Steve Swets**

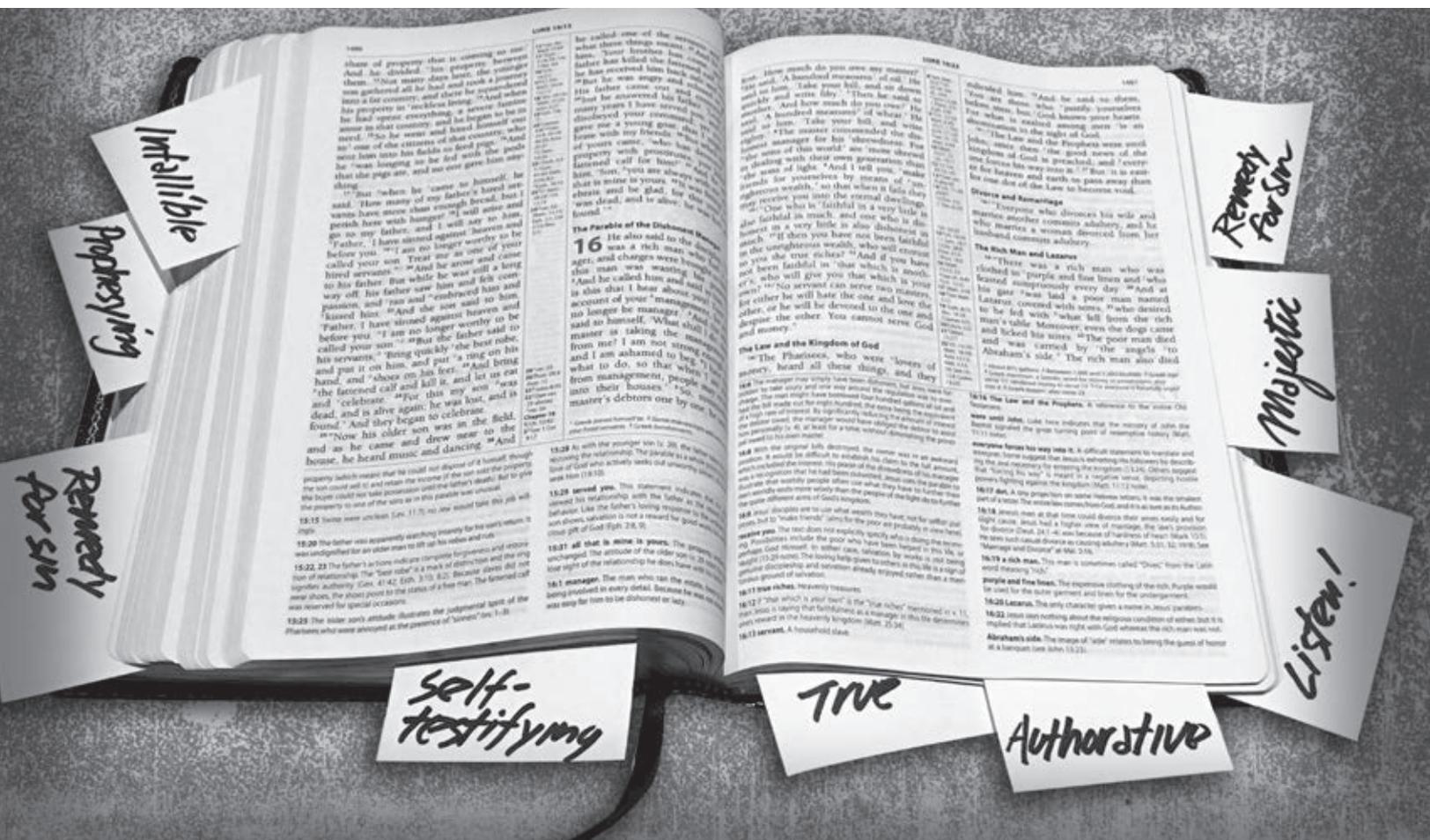
is the pastor of Rehoboth United Reformed Church in Hamilton, ON.

**J**esus' illustration of the rich man and Lazarus in the afterlife brings home the powerful point that the Word of God is authoritative (Luke 16:22–31). The rich man pleads with Abraham to send Lazarus to his family to warn them of hell (Luke 16:27–28). But Abraham responded in a provocative way: "They have Moses and the Prophets; let them hear them" (Luke 16:29). The Old Testament prophets constantly called the people of God back to the Law of God, the Word of God (Deut. 17:10; Isa. 8:20). Jesus constantly called His disciples and His opponents back to the Scriptures (Luke 16:29; Matt. 4:19:28; 22:29; John 5:39; 10:34–35; Acts 17:2, 11; 18:28; 26:22). The apostle Peter points us to the Word, not to himself as the supposed pope (2 Peter 1:19). We know the story of the Bereans (Acts 17:11), whom Paul described as noble because they searched the Scriptures to determine if Paul's words were true. The rich man in Luke 16 responded: "No, father Abraham, but if someone goes to them from the dead, they will repent" (Luke 16:30). Abraham's reply? "If they do

not hear Moses and the Prophets, neither will they be convinced if someone should rise from the dead" (Luke 16:31).

The Scriptures are authoritative. The authority of Scripture is the inherent right they possess that makes it necessary for us to believe every truth and to obey every command. This is why the Westminster Confession says, "The authority of the Holy Scripture, for which it ought to be believed, and obeyed, dependeth not upon the testimony of any man, or church; but wholly upon God (who is truth itself) the author thereof: and therefore it is to be received, because it is the Word of God" (1.4).

I want you to think about this question with me: How do we know the Scriptures are authoritative? The debate between Rome and the Reformation on this question was and continues to be: Do we come to this persuasion primarily through the church's testimony or through the testimony of the Scriptures themselves? We say the authority of the Word of God is demonstrated



primarily by God Himself and His Word and secondarily by the church. The Westminster Confession of Faith said it like this:

We may be moved and induced by the testimony of the church to an high and reverent esteem of the Holy Scripture. And the heavenliness of the matter, the efficacy of the doctrine, the majesty of the style, the consent of all the parts, the scope of the whole (which is, to give all glory to God), the full discovery it makes of the only way of man's salvation, the many other incomparable excellencies, and the entire perfection thereof, are arguments whereby it doth abundantly evidence itself to be the Word of God: yet notwithstanding, our full persuasion and assurance of the infallible truth and divine authority thereof, is from the inward work of the Holy Spirit bearing witness by and with the Word in our hearts. (WCF 1.5)

### **The Spirit's Witness**

The Word of God clearly evidences and testifies of its own authority. And the way we recognize this is the Spirit's witness. It is important to recognize the Spirit is behind the Word as the cause of its authority. The church's witness is important, too, but it is only the means by which the Word is proclaimed so that the Spirit can do His work.

We read of the Holy Spirit's internal testimony in our hearts that we are children of God (e.g., Rom. 8). And as He testifies to us that we belong to God, He does so in His Word. Jesus calls His words "spirit and life" (John 6:63). But what is the inner witness of the Spirit? Is it the same thing that Mormons teach when they say all we have to do is read and pray and we will have a burning in the bosom? No. This internal testimony of the Holy Spirit is not spiritual ecstasy or enthusiasm. It is a certainty that convinces our mind of the reasons implanted in the Word itself.

### **The Word's Own Witness**

The Spirit bears witness to us through the means of the Word of God. This is why we say that the Word is *autopistis*, that is, self-testifying. This means that the authority of Scripture is derived from its origin and source, which is God Himself. One illustration of this is to think about a jewel. Take a diamond, for example. Its refraction of light, its glowing brilliance in the sun, and its ability to cut glass all testify that it is a diamond. It has this ability to testify of itself.

In what ways do the Scriptures testify of their own authority, that they are from God? The Westminster Confession of Faith 1.5 mentions six. Let me just briefly list them for you to write.

Q. 4. How doth it appear that the Scriptures are the Word of God?

A. The Scriptures manifest themselves to be the Word of God, by their majesty and purity; by the consent of all the parts, and the scope of the whole, which is to give all glory to God; by their light and power to convince and convert sinners, to comfort and build up believers unto salvation: but the Spirit of God bearing witness by and with the Scriptures in the heart of man, is alone able fully to persuade it that they are the very Word of God.

First, the heavenliness of the matter. We are dealing here not with myths and old wives' tales but with a message from heaven to earth. In the Scriptures we read God's own address to us.

Second, the efficacy of the doctrine. This means that the doctrines have an effect upon us. When we learn of sin, we come to know why things are the way they are. When we learn of Jesus Christ, we come to put our trust in Him. When we hear of the law, we seek to obey.

Third, the majesty of the style. This doesn't mean that it is so incomprehensible that it has to be from God, but that there is something elevated in the poetry and prose that evidences its divinity. There is something about the doctrines, as well. Reason cannot produce the doctrines of the Trinity, incarnation, satisfaction, and resurrection of Christ, and fulfillment of prophecy. This must be a book from another source and not from man.

Fourth, the consent of all the parts. There is harmony in the one Bible between the two Testaments, which were written over several thousand years, by many authors, in multiple languages, and in different continents. We see this in the prophecies that are fulfilled.

Fifth, the scope of the whole (which is, to give all glory to God). This is not a self-help book or a means to an end. This is a book about God. This is why medieval Christians described the task of theology, saying, "Theology is taught by God, teaches of God, and leads to God."

Sixth, the full discovery it makes of the only way of man's salvation. No other book offers the like the Bible.

### **The Church's Witness**

Let's finally come to the church's witnesses. The Holy Spirit is the one who convinces us of the authority of the Word through the Word. As a secondary means, the church and other external witnesses help us to see this as well. But it has to be in this order: Spirit and Word and then church. Men like Francis Turretin said the church was an introductory and ministerial means of bringing us to believe the authority of the Word (*Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 1:87–88). This is why Ephesians 2:20 is so key to us as Christians. What we learn there is that the church is built upon the Scriptures and then gets any authority

it has from the Scriptures. This means that the Scriptures did not come to be because of the church.

### **Conclusion: One Main Application versus Rome**

Let me conclude with one main application versus Rome's understanding of this issue. What all this means is that the church discerns the Word of God and distinguishes it from other false books, but the church doesn't make these books the Word of God.

Rome bases its whole claim upon a circular argument: Why do we believe the Bible is divine? Because the church says so. Why do we believe what the church says? Because the Bible says it is authoritative. And how do we know that this teaching of the Word is true? Because the church says so. And the circle never ends. This is why John Calvin once wrote, "Against opposing arguments they will set up this brazen wall—who are you to question the interpretation of the Church?" (Acts of the Council of Trent with the Antidote, 69).

The Scriptures, therefore, are our supreme judge in all doctrinal controversies. At the great Council of Nicea, Emperor Constantine said, "Therefore laying aside warring strife, we may obtain a solution of difficulties from the words of inspiration" (Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers 2, 3:44). And while the church will always have error until Christ comes again (1 Cor. 11:19), we ultimately listen to God speaking in the Scriptures more than we listen to popes and even our own theologians.

### **Rev. Daniel Hyde**

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# **The Dangers of Neglecting the Assembly** (or, See You on Sunday!)

## **Rev. Shane Lems**

"Do we have to go to church today?"

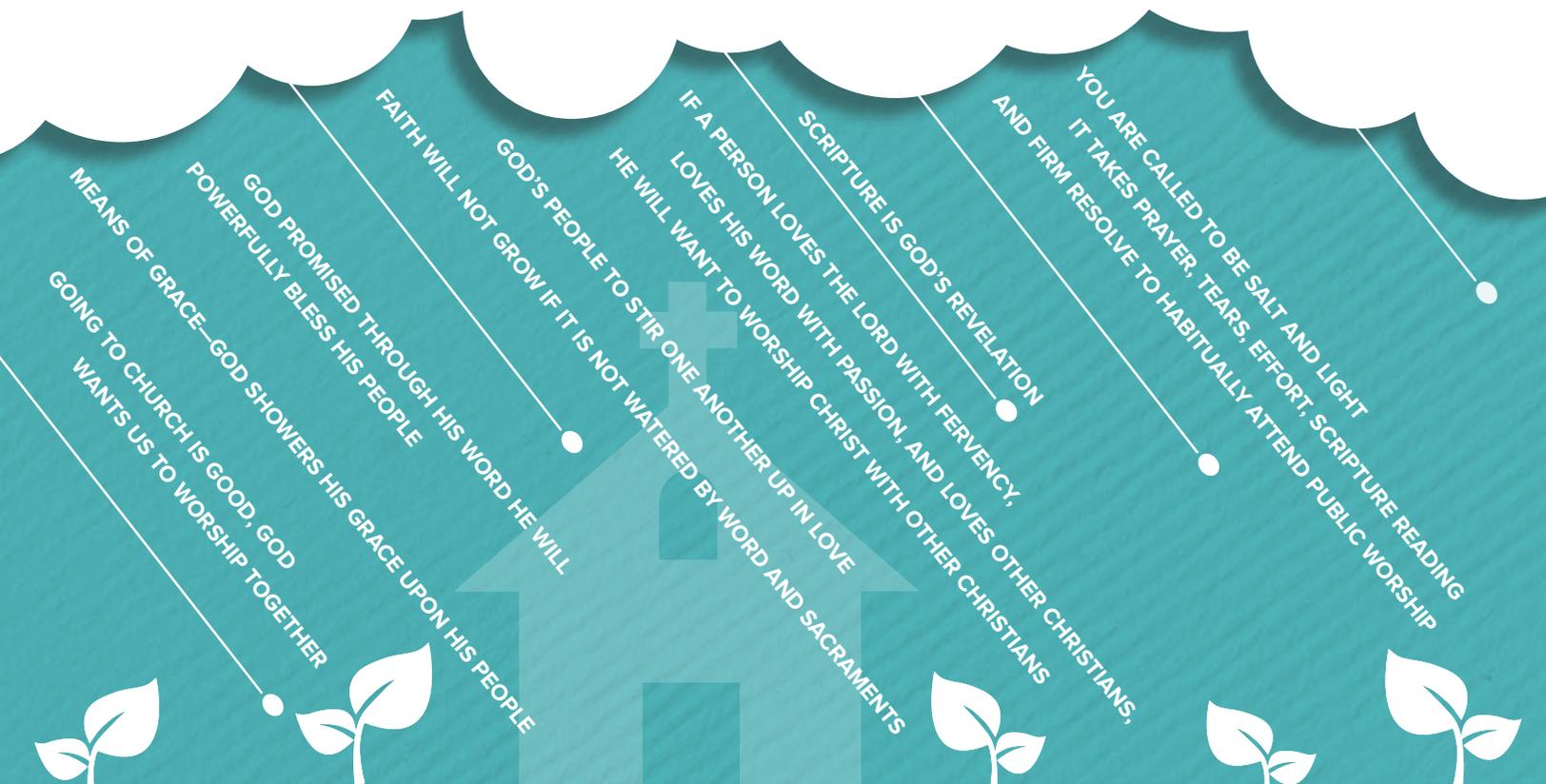
This is a question my parents remember me asking more than a few times when I was growing up. I'm sure other parents have heard their own children ask the same question. I certainly have! This request is somewhat understandable from a child's point of view. I admit that when I was eleven, there were times I would've rather stayed home to work on my Lego catapult than go to church on Sunday. I knew going to church was good; I would have agreed that God wanted us to worship Him together. But I might have argued that going to church once or twice a month was good enough. That was my logic as a child in a Christian home. It's not the best logic, but from a child's point of view, it is somewhat understandable.

One problem in the Christian life is when adults use this same logic: going to church is good, God wants us to worship together, and going once or twice a month is good enough. It's one thing for a child to reason this way; it's a very different thing for an adult to do it. So I'd like to spend a little time on this topic. There are legitimate reasons why some people can't meet for worship frequently (illness, emergencies, legitimate travel, etc.). However, I believe that most of our reasons for neglecting worship are not legitimate (ball game, boating, too tired, etc.). But that's the topic of a different article.

For now, I want to open the discussion by asking questions like these: What are the dangers of neglecting public worship? How does it hurt a Christian when he or she frequently misses worship? What does it hurt to skip church? Or, to repeat a child's question, "Why do we have to go to church today?"

The following answers to those questions are based on Scripture and biblical principles. I don't want to come at this topic from a legalistic point of view (you must worship in order for God to accept and save you), nor do I want to come at it from a traditionalistic point of view (we worship every week because that's the way we've always done it). Instead, I want to give reasonable, wise, and biblical answers to these questions. So again, what does it hurt the Christian to habitually skip public assembly?

**It is against God's will.** In Hebrews 10:25 Scripture clearly rebukes Christians who habitually neglect public worship. To paraphrase, the verse says, "Do not neglect to meet together, as is the habit of some people today." Without debating the number of worship services these people were missing, it is safe to say that the early church was regularly meeting together to worship Christ; for one example, Acts 2:42 says God's people were "continually devoting themselves" to meet (NASB). By the time and context of Hebrews, some in the church were very irregular in their



attendance, and they were clearly called out for skipping church. So our Larger Catechism says that sins forbidden in the fourth commandment include “all omissions of the duties required” in keeping the Sabbath and “all careless, negligent, and unprofitable performing of them” (WLC Q/A 119). It is displeasing to God when His people habitually neglect public worship services; it does not bring Him glory and honor because it is against His will.

**It is harmful to the Christian’s faith.** Missing public worship services hurts a person’s faith. God has promised that through His Word He will powerfully bless His people. Faith in Christ comes through hearing His Word (Rom. 10:17), and that faith is strengthened through the same Word. The Word of God’s grace is able to build you up in faith (Acts 20:32; see also Ps. 119). This is why we call preaching an ordinary means of grace—it is one of the primary ways God showers His grace upon His people (see WLC Q/A 154). If we habitually neglect preaching, we habitually neglect God’s showers of grace. And neglecting showers of grace makes the seed of faith wither rather than grow in our hearts. The same can be said of the sacraments, which are signs of Christ’s work for us—other means God uses to strengthen our faith. So think of habitual neglect of worship like habitual neglect of watering and fertilizing a garden in an arid climate. The plants will not grow. So our faith will not grow if it is not regularly watered by the Word and sacraments.

**It hinders Christian fellowship.** Hebrews 10:24–25 not only talks about attending worship services, it also talks

about Christian fellowship in the same sentence. Alongside the exhortation to stop missing worship services, the author of Hebrews tells God’s people to stir one another up in love and good works, and encourage one another in the faith as we await Christ’s return. Assembly, encouragement, love, and good works go hand in hand. This kills our self-centered, individualistic attitude and helps us think and live in a more covenantal, corporate way. We should regularly assemble with other Christians so we can encourage one another in the Christian faith and be encouraged by one another. One commentator put it this way, “The entire community must assume responsibility to watch that no one grows weary or becomes apostate. This is possible only when Christians continue to exercise care for one another personally.” After all, Christianity is not a solo endeavor, nor does it square with the individualism of our culture. Jesus said “by this all men will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another” (John 13:35 NASB). This is why the Westminster Confession says, “Saints by profession are bound to maintain a holy fellowship and communion in the worship of God” (WCF 26.2). A true Christian doesn’t say, “I love Jesus but not the church.” If a person frequently skips worship, he is casting his doubt on the importance of fellowship and love for God’s people.

**It diminishes God’s praise.** The Bible (especially the Psalms) is full of examples where God’s people publicly sing praises to His name and honor Him

together. For example, Psalm 34:3 says, "O magnify the Lord with me, and let us exalt his name together" (cf. Ps. 95:1–2, 6; Rev. 19:7). When we rarely sing praises to God with His people, it diminishes our praise of God—praise which we should want to give Him together with His people: "I was glad when they said to me, 'Let us go to the house of the Lord'" (Ps. 122:1). Habitually missing worship service means habitually neglecting to praise God with His people. This even sets a bad example before unbelievers; an unbeliever might begin to think (wrongly) that one can be a Christian without attending public worship services. Indeed, it is inconsistent if a person calls himself a Christian but does not care about praising the Lord with other Christians.

**It confuses other Christians.** To put it in common terms, Christians have historically been known as "church goers," and this is a biblical way to think (see the first point above). When a Christian frequently skips worship services, other Christians who notice begin to wonder why this person is skipping. Or, if a child in a Christian family notices that a certain other family never comes to worship, that child might wonder why that family is not worshipping. I myself have been confused by those who call themselves Christians but rarely worship publicly. The Bible teaches that if a person is truly a Christian, that person doesn't depart from the body but sticks with it (1 John 2:19). In other words, if a Christian frequently skips church, he is setting a poor example for other Christians and causing them confusion (rather than building them up as he should). Perhaps people who frequently skip church need to think more about how this might harm other Christians. Habitual neglect of public worship is a blemish on a Christian's profession of faith that can cause other Christians to stumble. Certainly no Christian should want

to be a stumbling block for another Christian!

**It obstructs true piety.** In the church's liturgy God's people learn the rhythm of the Christian life: praise, confession of sin, forgiveness of sin, prayer, hearing God's Word, and learning how to live for Him. These elements of worship help keep our Christian life oriented in the right direction; liturgy is like a Christian recalibration. God's law gives us moral clarity, a biblically informed conscience, and leads us to recognize and confess our sins. Hearing God's forgiveness helps us fight guilt and shame, and learning how to live a life of gratitude helps us live for His glory. Habitually avoiding worship services make us forget the right way to walk as disciples, casts confusion on morality, messes up our consciences, makes us prone to shame and guilt, and throws a fog on the realities of God and His grace. Someone who constantly skips worship is exposed to the world and often falls into the sin of worldliness. As a friend recently reminded me, the psalmist's confusion about reality was cleared up when he went into the sanctuary of God (Ps. 73). Neglecting worship services gets in the way of true Christian piety.

**It makes the pastor's and elders' task difficult.** God has called the pastor and elders of a local church to care for the flock, to pay attention to it, love it, set good examples for it, to pray for it, and so forth (see Acts 20:28–31; 1 Tim. 3:4; 1 Peter 5:1–3, etc.). In fact, church leaders are accountable to God for how they lead and care for the flock (Heb. 13:17). When a person habitually neglects public worship, the pastor cannot preach to that person and the elders begin to worry about that person's faith and life. Certainly pastors and elders should do their duty even outside the public worship service, but it is very difficult for pastors and elders to do their task of shepherding when someone constantly misses worship services. In fact, Hebrews

says that Christians should "obey" their leaders, "submit to them," and "imitate their faith" (Heb. 13:7, 13). The Bible even talks about Christians honoring elders (1 Tim. 5:17). When a Christian constantly dodges worship services the elders have called for, he is not obeying and submitting to his leaders, nor is he showing honor to them. One might even think of the fifth commandment here, which implies that God's people must obey those in authority over them. Despite the fact that most Americans don't like authority figures, the Bible is quite clear: we must obey elders and pastors that God has put in authority over us. Neglecting worship services is a failure to obey authority and makes pastors' and elders' jobs difficult.

**It is making light of membership vows.** Although some churches today care little about membership, historic Reformed churches have membership vows that are taken from various places in Scripture (cf. Deut. 6:13; Ezra 10:5; Ps. 50:14; 116:14, etc.). When a Christian joins one of Christ's churches, he makes certain covenantal (and public) promises: that he believes in the triune God, that Jesus saves him from sin, that he wants to live a godly life, and so forth. In the Orthodox Presbyterian Church, a person vows "to participate faithfully in this church's worship and service, to submit in the Lord to its government, and to heed its discipline." One of the vows in the URCNA is a promise to share "faithfully in the life of the church, honoring and submitting to its authority." If a person makes a vow in church and then bails on the church by habitually forsaking worship, that person is not keeping the vows he made. Here is where one might discuss a violation of the ninth commandment (see also WCF 22.5 on vows and oaths).

**It is a sign of apathy in the faith.** If a person loves the Lord with fervency, loves His Word with passion, and loves other Christians,

he will want to worship Christ with other Christians (cf. Ps. 122:1; Isa. 2:3). I don't know of any Christian who fervently loves Jesus but never sings to Him with His people and doesn't care to sit at His feet with His people to hear His Word. I do, however, know of Christians who grow lazy in the faith and would rather watch a football game or fire up the barbeque than sing to Jesus with other Christians. The Larger Catechism says one of the sins that the fourth commandment forbids is "being weary" of the duties required on the Sabbath (WLC Q/A 119). John Newton once wrote a letter to his congregation on this very topic. Among other things, he said, "Most of you agree with me that Scripture is God's revelation. But do not some of you act inconsistently with your acknowledged principles? Your business and entertainment indispose you for due observation of our church services. You have other things to do, so you miss many sermons. . . . Many people can give their attention to trivial entertainment for several hours without weariness, but their patience is quickly exhausted under a sermon where the principles of Scripture are applied to the conscience."

**It invites Satan's temptations.** I once saw a clip on a nature show on hyenas and how they hunt for food. They often look for and hunt the antelope that is a bit removed from the herd since there is protection in numbers. Similarly, Satan and his demons often attack Christians at a vulnerable point: when they are alone, not accountable to anyone, not hearing God's Word regularly, and not benefiting from Christian strength in Christian numbers. Satan is no idiot—he knows the best times to attack. It is no coincidence that Peter says Satan is like a hungry lion on the prowl (1 Peter 5:8). The church is Christ's flock, and straying from the flock is spiritually dangerous. To remove oneself from

the assembly is to expose oneself to Satan's attacks and invite his arrows of temptation.

**It is a step down the road of apostasy.** The track record of apostates is to go to church for a while, then less frequently, then not at all. Hebrews 10 (mentioned above) doesn't just give a command to habitually worship with the assembly; it also warns of the hellish punishment for those who forsake Christ. If someone is truly a Christian, he will not leave the flock. However, those that left "were not really of us; for if they had been of us, they would have remained with us; but they went out, so that it would be shown that they all are not of us" (1 John 2:19 NASB). One commentator wrote this of Hebrews 10:24–25: "The writer regarded the desertion of the communal meetings as utterly serious. It threatened the corporate life of the congregation and almost certainly was a prelude to apostasy on the part of those who were separating themselves from the assembly. The neglect of worship and fellowship was symptomatic of a catastrophic failure to appreciate the significance of Christ's priestly ministry and the access to God it provided."

I realize we live in a world of a thousand distractions and ten thousand entertaining things to do on the weekends. Our weekday schedules are overcrowded to the point where we're completely drained by Sunday. It is very hard to get our priorities right, manage our time well, and live for the glory of God without falling in love with the world. It takes prayer, tears, effort, Scripture reading, encouragement from Christian friends, and firm resolve to habitually attend public worship.

I plead with readers to ask God's forgiveness if they've failed in this—and to ask Him for grace, motivation, and desire to regularly worship Him with the saints. God is gracious, He

hears us when we ask for help, and He is patient with our weakness and lethargy. Rest in God's grace and (re)commit yourself to habitual worship! Remember this: I've never heard anyone say, "My faith has grown weak and feeble ever since I started going to church more often." Trust that God will bless you as you gather with His people to worship. Trust that the gospel of grace will encourage, refresh, comfort, and motivate you in the Christian faith.

My above list was a negative one, so I'd like to end on a positive note. Using the same points above, we can positively say that regularly attending public worship services 1) is God's will for you, 2) strengthens your fellowship with other saints, 3) helps you praise God better, 4) is beneficial for your faith, 5) builds up other Christians, 6) helps keep Satan's attacks at bay, 7) keeps you from straying off the path, 8) enflames true piety, 9) makes the pastor's and elders' jobs easier and more enjoyable, 10) helps you keep your church vows, and 11) is a sign of strong faith.

Dear Christian, you are called to be salt and light, to grow in the grace and knowledge of Jesus, to live a strong Christian life, and to enjoy, glorify, and praise God while on this journey. God has not left you on your own to do these things. He's given you His Word, His sacraments, and His church to help you on the way.

See you on Sunday!

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# Bible Studies on Ezra

## Lesson 5: The Remnant Responds Obediently

**Scripture Reading: Ezra 3:1–7**

**Background Reading: Numbers 20:12–40;**

**Leviticus 23:33–44**

### Discussion Starters

1. What was it that prompted all the children of Israel to leave their homes and gather in Jerusalem? (See note 5:1.1.)
2. What does it mean that they “gathered as one man”? Was this typical of the Israelites prior to the time spent in exile in Babylon? (See note 5:1.2.)
3. What are the respective offices of Jeshua and Zerubbabel? Would it be normal for two such office holders to work so closely together on a project of this sort? (See note 5:2.)
4. Whom did the Israelites fear more, their hostile neighbors or their God? How is their fear of the neighbors overcome? (See note 5:3.)
5. What did God require of His people at the Feast of Booths? Do those sound like simple and reasonable demands? How did the Israelites respond to them? (Do the background reading and see notes 5:4 and 5:5.)
6. How would you characterize the attitude and behavior of the Israelites on this occasion? To what would you ascribe that?
7. What were the priorities of the Israelites? What did they consider to be most important? Should those same priorities characterize our churches and our worship? (See note 5:6.)

### Text Notes on Discussion Starters

5:1.1. When the seventh month approached, they knew they had to go to Jerusalem and celebrate God’s goodness. The worship of God took precedence over everything else in their lives, as it is written in the Law of Moses. The Jews who came back to Jerusalem did not ask around the neighborhood as to how the neighbors were worshipping. They did not conduct any surveys. If they had, they would have found a lot of people who were worshipping the Lord but doing so in their own peculiar fashions, accompanied by strange practices and mixed with idolatry to strange gods. The Jews whose hearts have been moved by the Holy Spirit are committed to worshipping God in the manner and in the precise fashion that God Himself had prescribed. When God had led His people out of Egypt and brought them to His holy mountain, He had given the Torah, or the Law, to Moses and to Aaron. In it were precise instructions as to how they were to worship, right down to the days and the numbers of sacrifices. If the Jews had gone around the neighborhood and asked for suggestions, they would have done the wrong thing, for only God has the right to determine the way in which He is to be worshipped. Presbyterian churches have what is called “the regulative principle,” which is based on Deuteronomy 12:32: “Whatever I command you, be careful to observe it; you shall

not add to it nor take away from it.” Translated, that means for us today that the Bible has to be our only guide for determining the character and form of our worship. We do things the way we do, not because they are popular, not because they are clever, not because they are psychologically effective, but because we believe that God has ordered such in His Word. We recite the Law each week because the Law occupies such a central place in the Bible. We call people to repentance and give them the assurance of salvation because that is what God demonstrates for us throughout His Word.

5:1.2. “As one man.” What a pretty picture! One of the things that comes through the book of Ezra so often is a picture of unity and harmony. The world outside of the church is looking with disdain and possible threatenings, but inside the church of God there is a wonderful relationship between God and His people, and among the people themselves. “The people assembled as one man in Jerusalem” (3:1). After having “settled in their towns” (2:70), the people responded “as one man” by leaving their towns and villages and making the pilgrimage to the city of Jerusalem, in order that they might keep covenant with their God and worship Him according to the dictates of His Word. God had not only moved their hearts (1:5), but He had so filled their hearts and

minds so that they all came together without having to be called, without any warnings or threatening.

5.2. No church-state squabbles. Jeshua (i.e., Joshua = Jesus) and Zerubbabel stand together to build the altar of the Lord. Jeshua, the high priest, was the son of Jozadak, who was carried into captivity by Nebuchadnezzar (1 Chron. 6:15), and Zerubbabel (Hag. 1:14; 2:2), as the appointed governor, could have been envious of each other and try to assert their authority over each other, in which case we would have been confronted with a church-state controversy as ugly as those we see today, but they don't! Throughout the book of Ezra there is demonstrated a spirit of cooperation between the church and the state, since both are under the sovereign control of God and are called by Him to do His will. The separation of church and state is not a biblical concept and has no place in our thinking. Cyrus was called by God to be His servant and labeled as "His anointed one," as was King Nebuchadnezzar. Only in our Western, highly secularized countries, such as the United States, do we find the doctrine of separation of church and state being believed, but never with biblical warrant.

5.3.1. No excuses offered. The people did not grumble and complain the way that the Israelites did when they came out of Egypt. What a contrast! The Israelites of Moses' day did nothing but grumble and complain, accusing Moses and Aaron and even God Himself of all kinds of problems. They didn't like the food; they didn't have enough water; they had it so much better back in Egypt; they would probably die out here in the wilderness. They were such a discontented, untrusting, grumbling bunch of complainers and malcontents that God ended up killing all of the men over 20 years of age in the wilderness, except for Caleb and Joshua, who truly trusted God and knew that He would take care of

them. By contrast, the Israelites after the Babylonian captivity have no complaints and no excuses. They simply trust in God and do exactly what He wants them to do. They had just settled in their towns and cities. They could easily have argued that they should stay behind in their towns and cities, so that they could finish tiling the bathroom, or repairing the leaky roof, or planting a garden, or tending the sheep. There would have been dozens of excuses that they could have offered, but they gave none! There is no altar available. They could have complained because the temple was totally ruined, as was the city of Jerusalem. Where the temple had stood were only some scattered stones that had comprised the walls. All of the beautiful wood and the gold and silver overlay was gone. Where the altar had stood was simply a bare spot. They didn't complain and they didn't wait for someone else to do it for them, but they dug in and "began to build the altar of God" (v.2).

5.3.2. There are plenty of enemies around them. The text tells us that the Israelites had some "fear of the peoples around them" (v.3), for there were many of their neighbors who were not friends to God and who had little love for these people coming back into their towns and taking over the houses that were there. The Jews were somewhat afraid of them, but not nearly as fearful of them as they were of the holy God. Because the Israelites had fear of their neighbors, this fear led them to seek God. Like a child who is afraid of the bullies on the street and who out of fear runs home to the safety of father, so the children of God turned to Him and sought His favor, His protecting care. We need to remember that the neighbors around them are not Persians, who had been commanded by their king to help the Israelites and to contribute to their rebuilding of the temple. On the contrary, their neighbors are descendants of various idolatrous nations—Babylonians, Elamites, and

Hamathites—all bitterly opposed to a pure spiritual religion. These people are legitimate enemies of the people of God, as we will see in chapter 4, where we study the rebuilding of the temple. These neighbors are nominal subjects of Cyrus and would not passively agree to what they considered an invasion into their territory.

5.4. The Feast of (Tabernacles) Booths (v.4). Notice that the Israelites promptly proceeded to celebrate the Feast of Tabernacles "with the required number of burnt offerings prescribed for each day" (v.4): the descending number of young bulls, from thirteen on day 1, to twelve on the second day, eleven on the third day, ten on the fourth day, and finally seven bulls on the seventh day; the fourteen male lambs a year old, all without defect, to be offered each day of the feast; one male goat as a sin offering each day. Notice the pattern as described for us in Numbers 29:12–40 (see table on next page)

5.5. "The regular burnt offerings, the New Moon sacrifices and the sacrifices for all the appointed feasts of the Lord" (v.5). When we reflect on this ceremonial emphasis, we need to recognize that morning, evening, day by day the year around, and year after year, there is an almost unending succession of sacrifices. None of this is accidental, and none of these ceremonies are without purpose or meaning. By laying these commands on His people and requiring His people to follow them throughout the Old Testament, God is continually reminding them of their sin, of their need for forgiveness, and of the way to achieve that forgiveness. There is the repetitive remembrance of sin, but that is always offset by the offering of those precious lambs, "a year old, without defect," which served each day to point to the perfect Lamb of God who would come to save His people from their sins. Our worship is not one of ceremonies, of animal

## THE FEAST OF TABERNACLES

DAY	BULLS	RAMS	LAMBS	GOATS
1	13	2	14	1
2	12	2	14	1
3	11	2	14	1
4	10	2	14	1
5	9	2	14	1
6	8	2	14	1
7	7	2	14	1
8	1	1	7	1
<b>TOTALS</b>	<b>71</b>	<b>15</b>	<b>105</b>	<b>8 = 199</b>

sacrifices, of pouring blood over an altar. No, all of that is gone, finished, ever since the Great High Priest offered Himself as the perfect Lamb of God. When He offered Himself on the altar, all of the ceremonies were finished, done away with, because all of these pointed to Him. Our worship today still must adhere to the same principles, even though the ceremonies are gone. We need to base our worship on the clear instructions from God's Word. We still need to be reminded daily and weekly of our sins, but even more importantly, we need to see the sacrifice of Christ that makes us worthy of being made right with God. At the heart of our worship is recognition of our sins, an awareness of the fact that we are sinners and cannot by ourselves come into the presence of a holy, righteous God, unless we come there through the shed blood of

Jesus Christ.

5.6. First the altar. When the Jews come back to the Promised Land, they don't immediately begin to rebuild the 'temple, even though that is what Cyrus cited first in his royal proclamation. Cyrus said that "the Lord God of heaven . . . has commanded me to build Him a house at Jerusalem" (1:2) and said nothing at all about the altar. The Jews, however, knew exactly what God had commanded to Moses and now set out to keep covenant with God. "When the seventh month had come, the children of Israel . . . arose and built the altar of the God of Israel" (3:1-2). The altar was built first because it was of primary importance; because it was essential to their sacrificial offerings. The altar first: before the temple, before the city walls, before

their homes, before they resurrected all the articles of gold and silver that had come out of the temple and which had been stored in the pagan temples of Babylon. They could have had a scouring party first and made certain that all of the golden bowls and dishes and goblets were clean and shiny. If there had been some Dutch ladies in charge, it is quite possible that they would have first organized a cleaning bee, to make certain that there was not any dust or grime on the temple's service utensils. Then the temple. Our passage reminds us that "on the first day of the seventh month they began to offer burnt offerings to the Lord, though the foundation of the Lord's temple had not yet been laid" (v.6). Here is another evidence that God's people had their priorities straight. They were not preoccupied about having a building; they were not anxious to have a grand temple as were David and Solomon. The important thing for them was that they worshipped God according to His Word. They did not need a temple for that. All they needed for that was an altar on which they could bring their burnt offerings. The Israelites built the altar in order "to sacrifice burnt offerings on it." It is important to begin with the essential rather than with the incidental. They had to build the altar first because they knew that they needed "to sacrifice burnt offerings on it." First and foremost in their worship service was the offering "of burnt offerings," not grain offerings or peace offerings or the New Moon offerings. The burnt offering was the continuing basis on which a sinful people could live in the presence of a holy God, looking forward as it did to the sacrifice of Christ, as the final sacrifice that would bring sinners into the presence of God.

# Bible Studies on Ezra

## Lesson 6: Restoring the Temple

Dr. Norman  
De Jong

### Scripture Reading: Ezra 3:7–4:5

### Background Reading: 2 Chronicles 5; 7:1–6; 2 Kings 17:24–41

#### Discussion Starters

1. After the Feast of Tabernacles was finished, what did the Israelites immediately undertake? Did they confine their activities to the community of believers, or did they also work closely with nonbelievers? (See note 6:7.1.)
2. Was it wrong for the Israelites to sign cooperative work agreements with the people of Sidon and Tyre? (See note 6:7.2.)
3. In a cooperative agreement, the high priest (Jeshua) and the governor (Zerubbabel) appoint the Levites to oversee the work of rebuilding the temple. What lessons can be learned from this example that might guide our building of churches today? (See note 6.8.)
4. What principles governed the laying of the foundation of the temple? Why did they create so much fuss and celebrate so vigorously on this occasion? (See note 6.10.)
5. What are the reactions of God's people to the laying of the foundation? Why did some of the people weep "with a loud voice"? What saddened them? Why did others "shout aloud for joy"? (See note 6.12.)
6. What request did the "adversaries of Judah and Benjamin" present to Zerubbabel and the heads of the families? Was this an honest request? Should it have been granted? (Read the background passage from 2 Kings 17 and see note 6.1.)

7. Why did Zerubbabel and the Israelites refuse to grant the request? What argument did they use in defense of their decision? How would you justify their actions? (See note 6.3.)

8. How did the people of Samaria react to the rejection of their request? Were they justified in their frustrations? Does this incident help to explain the relationship between the Jews and the Samaritans during Jesus' time? (See note 6.4.)

#### Text Notes on Discussion Starters

6.7.1. After the people of God had finished celebrating the Feast of the Tabernacles, they next took up the work of building the temple. They immediately "gave money to the masons and carpenters, and gave food and drink and oil to the people of Sidon and Tyre." Those who had returned from exile knew why they had come home. In obedience to God's leading, they were eager to restore the worship of God in Jerusalem.

6.7.2. From all indications, the people of Sidon and Tyre are not God-worshippers but are pagans who have their own idols and false gods. This doesn't bother the Israelites, for they remembered that David and Solomon had worked out similar agreements with these same people at the construction of the first temple (cf. 1 Kings 5). They also knew the language of Cyrus's proclamation, and his declaration that "the people

of any place where survivors may now be living are to provide him with silver and gold, with goods and livestock, and with freewill offerings for the temple of God in Jerusalem" (1:4). God was not above accepting the gifts of money or animals or freewill offerings from those who did not know Him as Lord, but had so "moved the heart of Cyrus to make a proclamation throughout his realm and to put it into writing" (1:1). In response to that proclamation, the Israelites are willing to accept various gifts from the neighboring people and to subcontract with them for materials needed to build God's house. Buying lumber from nonbelievers was not an issue.

6.8. The Levites were God's appointed agents to oversee the construction of the tabernacle and the first temple in Jerusalem. They were schooled in the Law of God, including His specific demands for the temple furnishings and for the manner of worship required by God. While they were still captive in Babylon, the prophet Ezekiel had been instructed by God to "describe the temple to the house of Israel . . . and let them measure the pattern. . . . Make known to them the design of the temple and its arrangement, . . . its entire design and all its ordinances" (Ezek. 43:10–11). Earlier, God had given to David specific instructions and plans for building the temple, which he in turn passed on to his son Solomon (1 Chron. 29:11–13). The Levites were the keepers of these plans or

blueprints, so they were assigned to oversee the construction.

6.10. Following the instructions earlier given by King David (1 Chron. 6:31; 16:4–6; 25:1–8), Jeshua and Zerubbabel arranged for a dedication ceremony with the priests clothed in their colorful robes and vestments playing the trumpets, and the Levites playing the cymbals. The Old Testament church was known for its singing, for its music, and for its instruments of praise. David had made detailed provision for that, and Solomon had carried it forward. At the dedication of the first temple, there were 120 trumpeters leading the people in worship (2 Chron. 5:12–14). Their purpose was to “praise the Lord,” to give all the credit for their return and for this occasion to the Lord: “for He is good; His love to Israel endures forever,” singing the same song, the same words as were sung when Solomon dedicated the first temple (2 Chron. 5:13; 7:3).

6.12. Here is a blend of praise, thanksgiving, and weeping. We have here a dedication ceremony that is colorful, noisy, and appropriate. No more touching and pathetic picture can be found in the Bible than the scene recorded for us in the closing verses of this chapter. Here was an occasion to call forth the fullest joy and at the same time the most tender grief. Once more, on the ruins of the great temple which Solomon had built, the new temple was about to rise. This was the hour from which a new era in their nation’s history should date. But there are two reactions to this ceremony of laying the foundation for the temple. The first recorded for us is that of the older generation, the ones that we might call the senior citizens. When the aged fathers, the ancient men, remembered the perished glories of the temple on which the eyes of their youth once rested with such pride and joy, they wept with a loud voice.” Solomon’s temple was not destroyed by King Nebuchadnezzar until 588 B.C., some sixteen or seventeen years

after Daniel and his friends had been brought to Babylon. With the foundation of the temple being laid “in the second month of the second year” (Ezra 3:8), it is quite possible that the older people, especially the older Levites and priests, would have well remembered the glory and splendor of Solomon’s temple. According to the prophet Haggai, some of them were still living in the second year of Darius. Haggai the prophet asks them, “Who of you is left who saw this house in its former glory? How does it look to you now? Does it not seem to you like nothing?” (Hag. 2:3). The answer of the older people is loud weeping. The miserable circumstances under which the foundations of the new temple were laid produced such an overwhelmingly negative impression that they broke into loud weeping! But there were also shouts of joy. The overriding reaction, however, to this event of laying the foundation of the house of the Lord, this “laying of the cornerstone,” was one of tremendous joy. These people “gave a great shout of praise to the Lord” (v. 11), so great that the sounds of rejoicing and weeping could not be distinguished from each other. What excitement! What high, mixed emotion! There is probably not a dry eye around! Some are weeping with disappointment and sadness, while others are crying tears of joy and gladness! Truly a day to mark on the calendar of the church of Jesus Christ.

6.1. Already in 3:3 we are alerted to the fact that there were people living in the area around Jerusalem who were not cooperating with the return of God’s people to Judah and Jerusalem. We are told there that “fear had come upon them because of the people of those countries.” This fear was not so great as to deter the Israelites from rebuilding the altar and going forward with the worship that was required. The Israelites feared their neighbors, but they feared God even more. They had the courage to rebuild the altar and to lay the foundation of the temple, but



their courage was going to be sorely tested. We learn from 2 Kings 17 that it was the practice of the Assyrian kings, after they had captured the ten northern tribes (Israel), to take all of the Israelites captive into Assyria and to replace them with other peoples, whom they imported from distant parts of the Assyrian empire. These people who had been



transplanted into the northern part of Canaan, who live in what was then called Samaria, are deeply religious people. They know intuitively that there is some power in the universe that is greater than themselves. They know that there is a god or gods or God who is more powerful than all of them combined and that somehow that God has a standard for behavior which they cannot violate with impunity. They know that if they live and practice contrary to the standard of that God, that they will suffer the consequences. The God of Abraham, Isaac, and

Jacob is just such a God, who was angry with Israel because of their idolatry, because they insisted on worshipping golden calves at both Dan and Bethel, because they put anyone they wanted into the office of priest, because they opened the office of Levite to anyone who needed or wanted a job. God had sent all of His prophets to warn them of their sins, but they refused to listen. They tried to kill Jeremiah; they would not listen to Isaiah or any of the others. Then, true to His righteous character, God had finally run out of patience with His people and had sent them permanently into exile in the land of Assyria. When these "people from Babylon, Cuthah, Avva, Hamath and Sepharvaim . . . settled in the towns of Samaria to replace the Israelites" (2 Kings 17:24), they came with the innate knowledge that there is truly a God who had standards and expectations for their lives. But they had suppressed that truth in unrighteousness (Rom. 1:18) and had distorted their minds to such an extent that they believed that there were some unknown, multiple gods living in the hills of Samaria whom they would have to appease. When God in His anger sent "lions among them and killed some of the people" (2 Kings 17:25), they became very superstitious and admitted that they did "not know what the god of that country requires" (v. 26). All men, women, and children are religious. Every atheist is religious. There are no irreligious people. We are all incurably religious and have a deep-seated awareness in our souls that there is a God who rules our lives. Somehow we must appease Him.

6.3.1. These neighbors claim to be worshipping the Lord! To put it into contemporary language, these people are emphatic in their claim that they are Christians. Donald Trump, Barack Obama, Mitt Romney, and Bill Clinton would probably make the same kind of claim, but they have no use for "the religious right," the fanatical people who would not let a woman control her own body, who would not let consenting adults commit acts that are so despicable and unnatural as to incur the wrath of God. These people refused to obey the first commandment, because they refused to fear the Lord, the God of heaven and earth, who had revealed Himself so powerfully to Pharaoh, to Moses, to Joshua, and to David. Of them it is said repeatedly, "They worshipped the Lord, but they also served their own gods" (2 Kings 17:32, 33, 41). This type of worship is called syncretism, which means that they claim to worship the Lord and put on all the trappings of the Christian faith, but they have multiple gods besides and worship the false gods right alongside the true God. Ahab

and Jezebel were syncretists who incurred God's wrath because they wanted to worship both God and their idols. These religious folks whom we can now call Samaritans come with their request: "Let us help you build because, like you, we seek your God and have been sacrificing to him since the time of Esarhaddon." They had learned something of the sacrificial ceremonies that Moses had received from God on Mount Sinai and had been going through the rituals. They had high places throughout the land, just like the ten tribes had, and they had a caste of priests who were assigned to perform the sacrifices, just like Israel had. They brought sacrifices, but their hearts were not right. The difference between these Samaritans and the people of God is that the true Israelites did "according as it was written in the Word of God," while the Samaritans did as the former, rebellious Israelites had been doing. The Samaritans got their worship instructions from a sinful, rebellious priest rather than from the God who was to be worshipped. Instead of adopting the regulative principle, these Samaritans did a survey of neighboring churches.

6.3.2. The people of Israel wisely and correctly refuse the offer and insist, "You have no part with us in building a temple to our God. We

alone will build it for the Lord, the God of Israel." The leaders of God's people know that cooperation with the world has its limits, that there are times when you can cooperate with your non-Christian neighbors around you, but there are also times and occasions when you have to refuse their cooperation. They know full well that God had given the first commandment, that He was to be worshipped alone, that He was truly jealous for His people, and that He could not be put on a par with some piece of wood or stone. To worship God alongside of some stupid idol that could do nothing was an intolerable insult to God. They know that the friendship of the world is enmity against God. Their first line of defense is a religious one, because they know that God will not permit such desecration, such a sharing of His honor and His glory. They do not articulate that, though, in the text, and say nothing about that to the Samaritans. What they do appeal to publicly is a legal argument, citing the fact that "we alone will build it . . . as King Cyrus, the king of Persia, commanded us" (v. 3). The appeal to the decree of Cyrus forms a strong argument for the sole agency of Jews in building the temple, inasmuch as Cyrus had invited only those who were Jehovah's people (Ezra 1:3). Only those "of His people among you . . . may go up to Jerusalem . . .

and build the temple of the Lord." The people of God, therefore, are using a legal argument and relying on the protection of the state, knowing that Cyrus, like Barack Obama, is an agent in the hand of the sovereign God.

6.4. What Israel encountered on this occasion and what we encounter today is truly a spiritual war, a war with the powers of darkness and evil, disguised, though, as angels of light. Pretending to want to help the Israelites, the Samaritans are really trying to assert themselves so that their brand of religion will become the accepted one, the theology of choice. In this world, whenever a good work is begun, some kind of opposition is certain to show itself. Satan will not sit idly by while the church prospers. Satan will not ever become a cheerleader for the church but will always line up his henchmen to stop it. They may be of two types: those who are hypocrites and who feign cooperation, or those who openly oppose the church and seek to destroy it. These Samaritans are guilty of lying, of trying to delude the Israelites by shading the truth.

### Dr. Norman De Jong

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## Dear Reader

*The Outlook wants to hear from **YOU!***

Tell us about your thoughts about the contents and views expressed by our writers. We will publish them on a new page in *The Outlook* soon. *The Outlook* will try to be fair and judicious in selecting responses to be printed. We will print comments that are in agreement, show reservations, or point out different opinions or interpretations. We expect that all responses will be expressed in both a gracious and courteous manner. Because of limited space we may not be able to print all responses and ask that they be limited to a maximum of **150** words. Please note that all printed responses become the property of Reformed Fellowship. We truly hope to make this new page a vibrant part of future issues of *The Outlook* and **look forward to hearing from you.**

## Luther: 499

Or “The Man Who God Used to Turn the World Upside Down”

Mr. Dave  
Vandermeer

It is widely believed that when the British surrendered at Yorktown near the end of the American War of Independence, the British band played “The World Turned Upside Down.” A new form of republican government, with the philosophy of everyone being equal, was about to take shape on the world stage. Now, just imagine Luther in the year 1516 teaching in the quiet town of Wittenberg, Germany. He is about to make history, but he doesn’t know it; he is literally going to turn the world upside down.

Before Luther, there were attempts to point the people back to the truth of God’s Word, as it had been lost over time because of church council decisions and popish decrees. Many of those who promoted reform were killed over these attempted changes. These included people like Jon Hus, Jerome of Prague, and others who were known as precursors to the Reformation that Luther would eventually build on.



MARTIN LUTHER

When Martin Luther nailed the 95 theses to the Wittenberg Castle Church door 499 years ago, he was looking to make some reforms in the Catholic Church, primarily concerning indulgences, and the spiritual character of the Christian faith.



The best way to understand the totality of Luther's impact is to understand the times he lived in. The European landscape was one where the Roman Catholic Church and the royalty were closely tied together, and if anything, the popes dominated the rulers. There was a tension in this relationship, but the monarchs did not want to be excommunicated or have the ban pronounced on their kingdoms (a ban is a declaration by the pope that no sacraments were to be performed by the priests in a certain town or region, until the ban is lifted). It was the pope's way to control the monarchs. This hampered free thinking for all. Everything that was taught had to conform to the Catholic Church's teachings and the king's placards (decrees). Anyone who did not yield risked death.

There was a tiny merchant (middle) class. There were a few rich landholders and nobility, but the vast majority of the people were poor. It was a time of subsistence living where malnourishment, disease, and death lingered everywhere. Whatever class a person was born into was where that person was most likely going to stay. It was unlikely that someone would travel more than ten miles from where he or she born in their whole lifetime. Whatever one's father did for work was most likely going to be the son's vocation. Almost everyone was illiterate, including many priests, and the people were forbidden to read the Bible. There was not much hope for people, but whatever hope was offered by the church was probably going to be tainted by some sort of works righteousness. This was the time and culture in which Martin Luther was living in 1516.

Luther's conscience drove him to search for truth in the Scriptures. He knew he wasn't right with God following the teachings and ways of the Catholic Church. Peace and hope would finally come through study of the book of Romans. This is when he would come to a right understanding of grace and salvation in the work and person of Christ. When he understood this correctly, his mind was opened up to a whole new way of thinking and understanding Scripture.

When Martin Luther nailed the 95 theses to the Wittenberg Castle Church door 499 years ago, he was looking to make some reforms in the Catholic Church, primarily concerning indulgences, and the spiritual character of the Christian faith. These were to be some items for debate, almost an academic exercise. God directed that this small act was going to call His people back to Him but also change the world. Catholic monarchs would turn on their relatives who were sympathetic to Luther's teachings. They would even plan assassination attempts or go to war. Thousands upon thousands of people were burned at the stake or killed in some other manner for their beliefs in doctrines of the Reformation. Bibles were printed in the common language of the people, which caused a mass increase in the number of people who would start to learn how to read. People would question the current relationship between the church and the state. Nations would rise as distinct entities. Education for the masses would start to blossom. This would eventually lead to the rise of middle class. When God's Word was opened it changed how people thought about everything.

Many others followed Martin Luther and furthered developed biblical ideas that spoke to a whole host of subjects including doctrine, politics, nationalism, academics, economics, relationships, and practical life applications. The fall 1997 issue of *Life* magazine named Martin Luther as the third most important person of the last millennium. As Christians, we don't need to look to *Life* to validate our thoughts concerning Martin Luther, but it does give us perspective of how important he was to the whole world. It is arguable that this was the most significant event to change Western civilization from a medieval mindset to a modern one. When October 31, 2017 (the five hundredth anniversary of the nailing of the 95 theses), comes around and everyone is talking about Martin Luther and his theology, also remember that he turned the world upside down by the grace of God and as part of God's omnipotent plan.

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## Michelangelo for Kids

By: Simonetta Carr

*Michelangelo for Kids: His Life and Ideas with 21 Activities* (Chicago Review Press, 2016)

**Reviewed by:** Rev. William Boekestein

Chicago Review Press does not publish Christian books. Their publishing submission guidelines explicitly state that they do not publish books in the area of religion. But in *Michelangelo for Kids: His Life and Ideas with 21 Activities* (for readers nine and up), Chicago Review Press has published an excellent Christian book.

Let me clarify. *Michelangelo for Kids* is written by a Christian author, about a Christian person, exploring Christian themes, and produced with a thoroughly Christian insistence on truth and excellence, beauty and order. So in partnering to produce this book, the author hasn't hoodwinked the publisher and the publisher hasn't compromised its guidelines. Instead, they have teamed up to provide author Simonetta Carr the well-deserved opportunity to use her talents to tell part of God's story in a more nuanced way and to a more secular audience than her typical publishers ordinarily allow. The book preaches, but it doesn't sound at all like a Bible sermon. Instead it invites readers to experience the book of God's natural revelation, that "most elegant book wherein all creatures, great and small, are as so many characters leading us to contemplate the invisible things of God, namely His eternal power and divinity," to borrow language from the *Belgic Confession* (Art. 2), which



was written just a few years before Michelangelo's death. This book is Christian because it is the kind of product upon which Christ could stamp his *imprimatur*, his "well done, good and faithful servant" (Matt. 25:23).

A secular publisher publishing a truly Christian book is doubly ironic. Tragically, much of what passes as Christian literature is not worthy of the title; too often, despite a shell of religion, the product does nothing to advance the reader's understanding of God's magnificence. In other words, a fair test of the quality of Christian writing is whether it meets the expectation of a reputable but non-religious publishing company. *Michelangelo for Kids* passes with gusto, from its clear and lively writing, to its copious striking images, to its overall feel of facility. You don't have to be Christian to appreciate quality. A *School Library Review* raves, "This intelligently written, comprehensive, and fascinating account of the Renaissance icon's life, art, personal

and professional relationships, and prickly personality and the ways in which he navigated the religious and political upheavals of his time are handled smoothly and with sophisticated language." Not only does this praise aptly describe *Michelangelo for Kids*, but also it helps set a much-needed benchmark for any writing that Christians (or anyone else) should care to embrace: When given the choice, we should settle for nothing less than writing that is intelligent, thorough, and fascinating.

Anyone who has written or read historical books understands the tension between getting the story right and using the story to grab readers by the hand and heart and draw them into the narrative. Carr does both. As readers learn about Michelangelo's blossoming talents as a young man we can't help feeling a desire to create. As the artist wrestles with disappointment, mortality, and God's sovereignty, readers can easily join him in the strain.

Michelangelo (1475–1564) was a slightly older contemporary of Martin Luther—the artist was born almost ten years earlier and died almost twenty years later than the theologian. Like all of us they wrestled with the same questions. What is real beauty? How can a mortal experience immortality? They asked these questions in different contexts and did not answer them in exactly the same way. But we need to know both their stories. Both the artist and the

churchman can help us know God.

The best historical writing—regardless of the topic—leaves the reader not only with a pocket full of facts about the historical plot, and an experiential acquaintance with the subject, but also a bolder, more robust outlook on life. After finishing the 130-page book I (and my children who read with me) know Michelangelo—not nearly exhaustively—but truly. In a small way, through her interactions with Michelangelo’s works, the author has also given the gift of beauty.

*Michelangelo* has stretched our imaginations. The book has, if only in a small way, helped us to flourish. That is a testimony to good writing . . . no matter the subject guidelines of the publisher.

**Rev. William Boekestein** pastors Immanuel Fellowship Church in Kalamazoo, MI. His most recent book, *Shepherd Warrior* (Christian Focus 4 Kids, 2016), is a story of the exciting life of Ulrich Zwingli written for readers eight to fourteen years old.

## Gottshalk, Servant of God

**By:** Connie L. Meyer

*Gottshalk, Servant of God. A Story of Courage, Faith, and Love for the Truth.* (Reformed Free Publishing Association. 2015)

145 pages. \$17.95  
ISBN: 978-1-936054-88-6  
Ebook ISBN: 978-1-936054-89-3

**Reviewed by:** Rev. Jerome Julien

Gottshalk of Orbais [c.806–c.868] is an important but sadly little known character in church history. Very few books deal with him and his contribution to the doctrines of the Christian church. Mrs. Meyer has written this as a book for young people, yet it is very readable for any age. In fact, every child of God would benefit from reading it. The illustrations, the endnotes, and even the inclusion of some of Gottshalk’s writings are helpful.

Why ought Reformed people know about Gottshalk? He stood for the Reformed truth of God’s sovereignty in salvation. As a monk, priest, and missionary in the medieval church he would give his life as a sacrifice for the truth of double predestination (election and reprobation). As a student of Augustine’s works, he

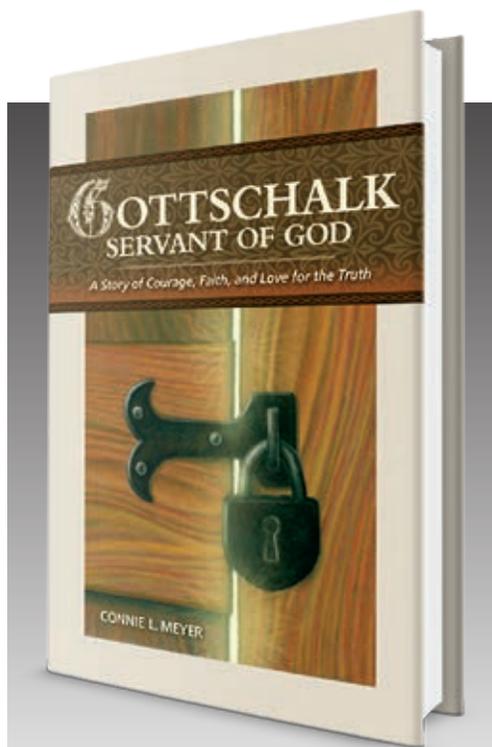
was convinced that Augustine was correct in his teaching on this basic biblical truth. Yet, the Roman Catholic Church was becoming humanistic/man-centered in its approach to many teachings. Leaders objected to his teachings and writings so much that they had him cast into prison. Though Gottshalk’s letter concerning his teaching to Pope Nicholas I (who seemed to have some agreement with Gottshalk) was smuggled out

of the monastery prison, we see no change in Catholicism of that day.

It can certainly be said that he was a man who was valiant for truth. Thus, this fine little book becomes a primer on predestination and it should be viewed that way. If there is any concern this reviewer has with this fine volume, it would be that more could have been made of Gottshalk’s missionary work and how that work fit right in with his views on double predestination. Many like to characterize those who believe in predestination as being against missions. Our ancient brother saw no contradiction.

Mrs. Meyer has done a great piece of work here, making Gottshalk’s role in church history much better known. Until this volume, as far as this reviewer knows, anything on him has been in scholarly volumes—many in a foreign language or in scholarly journals, with the exception being a fine chapter in Professor Herman Hanko’s *Portraits of Faithful Saints*.

**Rev. Jerome Julien** is a retired minister in the URCNA living in Hudsonville, MI, and serves on the Board of Reformed Fellowship. He and his wife, Reita, are members of Bethel URC, in Jenison, MI.



# The Concerns of IRBC's Founding Elders Should Be Reflective of Our Own

Dr. Jeff L.  
Doll

## As They Pertain to the Corrupted Elements of Culture

We've been thinking about several of the underlying corrupt elements within American society that led IRBC's founding elders to join their hearts in prayer before the face of the Lord in the sanctuary of the Cornerstone URC one afternoon. These and many of their, as well as our concerns, fall under three general categories: a lack of respect for God, His law, and the three institutions He established to maintain order in the lives of human beings. We have considered these categories under the broad heading of "The Concerns of IRBC's Founding Should Be Reflective of Our Own" and the subheading, "As They Pertain to the Corrupted Elements of Culture." As was stated in the opening article, the elders were concerned not only about various corrupted moral elements of culture affecting society at large but also and even more so that these elements are increasingly finding their way into the visible church.

## As They Pertain to Corrupted Elements of the Visible Church

Unfortunately all of the aforementioned broad strokes protruding from the contemporary cultural backdrop are being seen in increasing measure on the canvas of the visible church.

If one were to study the strokes of the intruding malevolent artists and boil down the elements of the moral paint that is currently being used to overshadow the work of Jesus Christ in both American society and the visible church, it seems that the data produced in the final report would be summarized under no fewer than three headings: hedonism, liberalism, and humanism.

Let's spend a little time looking at each of these terms and how they apply to the visible church in the United States today. For we must understand such in order that we might be used as Christ's instruments to counsel

effectively and thereby free those who have been taken captive in one or more of these prisons of the soul.

## Hedonism

Four words define the term *hedonism*: the pursuit of pleasure. Unfortunately, these words also define what has become the purpose for living for many Americans. Tragically, it also reflects what appears to be the purpose for life for many within the visible church of our day. The ultimate purpose for human life which once rang so loud and clear through the work of the framers of the Westminster Larger and Shorter Catechisms, as well as the authors of all of our wonderful historic Reformed creeds and confessions, is faintly if at all heard in broad evangelical circles, let alone among many of those which identify themselves as Reformed today. Many Christians do not have their hearts in tune with the biblical vision of the thrice-holy God who sits enthroned above the earth (Isa. 40:22) or the purpose for which they have

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# HEDONISM

the pursuit of pleasure

been created, which is to glorify and enjoy Him.

Worship lies at the core of glorifying God. Many communities of faith in the United States, including those that assemble under the banner of Reformed, do not possess a biblically sound understanding of either private or public worship. They do not understand what it means to worship God in spirit and in truth (John 4:24). And they do not really comprehend what it means to show proper respect for God via offering to Him reverent worship (Heb. 12:28).

Don Kistler recognized this fact back in the 1980s when he wrote the foreword for a republication of Richard Steele's (1629–1692) excellent short work, *A Remedy for Wandering Thoughts in the Worship of God*.<sup>1</sup> After sharing the first stanza of Johann Michael Haydn's famous hymn, "O Worship the King, All-glorious Above," he wrote: "Tragically, little of what passes for 'worship' in our day is worthy of a King Who is 'pavilioned in splendor,' or 'Whose chariots of wrath the deep thunderclouds form.' Rather, it is more the worship of a casual friend, a school chum, or a teammate. . . . Since the days of Jonathan Edwards, we are 250 years less reverent, 250 years less conscious of the majesty of God and His infinite right to our reverence."

If Kistler was troubled about the lack of reverence for God demonstrated in worship in the 1980s, how much more should we be concerned about the irreverent worship that occurs in our day. And what lies at the core of much of the irreverent worship that takes place in our era? Hedonism. Today many professing Christians do not go to church with the intention of gathering before the face of a thrice-holy God in the sanctuary of heaven to worship Him in the splendor of His holiness. They assemble to be entertained. Instead of being enthralled with a great God who is clothed with splendor and

majesty and covers Himself with light as a garment,<sup>2</sup> they are enthralled by the "lights, action, and camera" philosophy of Hollywood that has been imported into their local church. When this philosophy is adopted by a local congregation the vertical theocentric (God-centered) focus on God in the sanctuary of heaven is replaced with an anthropocentric (man-centered) horizontal focus. The veneration of God which occurs via a Spirit-guided focus in worship is a dimension of the fruit of "self-control" spoken about Galatians 5:23.<sup>3</sup> The other focus is produced by man, particularly performers (including pastors performing as storytellers and entertainers) and persons controlling lighting, projectors, and soundboards. The vertical is aimed at pleasing and honoring God by regulating what occurs in public worship<sup>4</sup> with the Word (i.e., truth)<sup>5</sup> as well as how it occurs in the hearts of the worshipers (in spirit).<sup>6</sup> The other aim is about making an experience meaningful and pleasing for an audience by orchestrating control over the environment wherein people have gathered. One of the ways of orchestrating control over a worship environment is by imposing upon it an order wherein the primary means of grace (i.e., the Word and sacraments)<sup>7</sup> are not of central importance.

Public worship wherein the worshipers are being led by the Holy Spirit to worship in spirit and in truth is worship that involves a living and active dialogue between God and the body of believers gathered.<sup>8</sup> God speaks to the congregation through the passage of Scripture selected for the call to worship; the congregation responds with prayer. God then greets the congregation with a scriptural word of blessing; the congregation responds in song. God speaks by reminding the congregation of His will for their lives via the Ten Commandments (or a passage representative of them); the congregation responds in confession

and repentance. God speaks to the congregation a scriptural assurance of His pardon; the congregation responds in prayer and by the giving of tithes and offerings. God speaks to the congregation through the preaching of the Word (and sacrament); the congregation responds with gratitude in song. God then sends the congregation out with a scriptural benediction. Throughout the entire worship service there is a dialogue between God and the congregation.

Worship orchestrated by men is usually imbalanced (i.e., out of proportion), which is in itself problematic when viewed in the light of 1 Corinthians 14:33, 40.<sup>9</sup> The "congregation side" in the dialogue in such worship usually dominates and is often filled with songs and practices that befit the environment of a theater or concert rather than that of the sanctuary of heaven wherein God is being worshiped in the splendor of His holiness. The countdown is one example of the trendy methods that effectively eclipse the "God side" of the dialogue at the beginning of many worship services in churches throughout America today. Public worship begins not by God personally calling His people to worship through the mouthpiece of Scripture but by an impersonal countdown on a big screen. After the countdown musicians start leading the congregation in praise songs which are oftentimes geared toward elevating people's emotions. The "theology" behind the elevation of emotion in many cases is to lift the congregation to God. This theology is completely backwards. Those leading in worship (musicians), and in particular the pastor, should instead be leading the congregation to humble itself in the in sight of the Lord (James 4:10). When we humble ourselves before God's throne and respond to His call to worship in reliance upon His condescending to meet with us and lead us through

the ministry of the Holy Spirit, He adjoins our worship to that which is occurring in the sanctuary of heaven. In such a scenario music rightfully functions as a meaningful response to the means of grace as opposed to wrongly functioning as a means of grace in itself.

God is dishonored not only by irreverent and disordered worship but also when His name is not held in high esteem. In the last article we highlighted the sad fact that within America there is a popular trend to demean the name of God. Just last week a flier was circulated in our community that disgraced the name of God. A well-known grocery chain announced in big letters “OM\_\_\_ We Finally Accept Credit Cards,” which prompted my drafting of a letter of complaint to their headquarters. The mishandling of God’s name in public is one thing, but in the church it is quite another. How many times do we hear professing Christians use His name in vain or refer to Him as “the man in the sky” or some other trivialized title? How many programs wherein God’s name is repeatedly used in vain regularly appear on the screens of televisions, iPads, iPhones, and radios of professing Christians? Furthermore, why do so many of us possess so many electronic devices and watch so many movies and programs anyway? Let’s be honest with ourselves, are we finding more pleasure in the things of the world than we are in God? Could it be that my soul and those of my family and/or congregation have begun to be bound in chains of excessive worldly pleasure within the prison of hedonism?

Mankind was created to glorify God and to enjoy Him. Glorifying God involves willingly revering His name and worshipping Him in the manner that He has commanded in Scripture. Enjoying God involves ultimately finding our pleasure in Him. When people fail to properly glorify and

enjoy God, counseling-related types of issues begin to surface in their lives.

Please pray that the Lord will free Christians who are in bondage to their sinful natures within the prison of hedonism. Pray also that the Lord will restore among His people of every background a proper reverence for His name, as well as worship that is more fully conformed to His Word. Pray specifically that the Lord will give His people across the face of the earth an understanding of the regulative and dialogical principles of worship. A proper understanding of these principles involves utilizing them as guidelines as opposed to a legalistic mold for worship. When properly understood and observed, these guidelines give God’s people a wonderful freedom to truly worship and enjoy Him. Finally, pray that those who have been blessed with a proper understanding of these important Scripture-based principles will look with compassion (not pride) upon those who have not yet encountered or embraced them.

### **Group Discussion**

Are you concerned about the lack of reverence for God and the general lack of concern over what passes for worship in our day? You may wish to discuss Hebrews 12:28 and see what the historic Reformed confessions say about appropriate worship in the following sections: Heidelberg Catechism (Q&A 96–98), Westminster Confession (Article 21), Westminster Larger Catechism (Q&A 108–10), Westminster Shorter Catechism (Q&A 50–52). Be sure to look up proof texts. You are also encouraged review the group discussion section of the last article in relation to properly revering God’s name.

Dialoging about applications of the regulative principle can become intense between Reformed Christians, so it is important that each participant

agrees to maintain a charitable disposition before continuing forward in this group discussion.

In the context of a discussion on the regulative principle, Dr. Derek Thomas rightfully asserts that for the Christian all of life should be regulated by Scripture. There is a sense in which everything we do is an act of worship. He wrote, “In everything we do, and in some form or another, we are to be obedient to Scripture.” He continues, “The Reformers (John Calvin especially) and the Westminster Divines (as representative of seventeenth-century puritanism) viewed the matter of corporate worship differently. In this instance, a general principle of obedience to Scripture is insufficient; there must be (and is) a specific prescription governing how God is to be worshiped corporately. In the public worship of God, specific requirements are made, and we are not free either to ignore them or to add to them. Typical by way of formulation are the words of Calvin: ‘God disapproves of all modes of worship not expressly sanctioned by his Word’ (“The Necessity of Reforming the Church”); and the Second London Baptist Confession of 1689: ‘The acceptable way of worshiping the true God, is instituted by himself, and so limited by his own revealed will, that he may not be worshiped according to the imagination and devices of men, nor the suggestions of Satan, under any visible representations, or any other way not prescribed in the Holy Scriptures’ (22.1).” (Note: LBC 22.1 is essentially the same as WCF 21.1.)

1. What types of counseling-related problems might you expect to encounter in the lives of those who do not properly revere and worship God in association with what He has commanded in His Word? In relation to the regulative principle? In relation to the dialogical principle? (You may wish to refer to footnote 9.)

2. What is the difference between reverential awe created in the hearts of worshippers by the Holy Spirit and an external appearance of reverence displayed by a person who is not truly worshipping God in spirit and in truth?

3. Give some examples of modern worship that is regulated by the “imagination and devices of men” and geared more toward fulfilling the pleasures of man than glorifying God.

A little later in the same discussion about the regulative principle Thomas wrote, “It is important to realize that the regulative principle as applied to public worship frees the church from acts of impropriety and idiocy—we are not free, for example, to advertise that performing clowns will mime the Bible lesson at next week’s Sunday service. Yet it does not commit the church to a ‘cookie-cutter,’ liturgical sameness. Within an adherence to the principle there is enormous room for variation—in matters that Scripture has not specifically addressed (adiaphora). Thus, the regulative principle as such may not be invoked to determine whether contemporary or traditional songs are employed, whether three verses or three chapters of Scripture are read, whether one long prayer or several short prayers are made, or whether a single cup or individual cups with real wine or grape juice are utilized at the Lord’s Supper. To all of these issues, the principle ‘all things should be done decently and in order’ (1 Cor. 14:40) must be applied.”

4. Charitably discuss Thomas’s comment wherein he says that the regulative principle may not be invoked to determine whether contemporary or traditional songs may be employed in worship.

a. What types of counseling-related issues might you encounter between those in a congregation who believe that only traditional hymns should be used and those who believe otherwise?

What are ways that you could practically serve as a peacemaker for those who sharply disagree with each other on this matter? What Scripture passages would you use?

b. Regardless of the period of time in which a particular song has been written, build a discussion around some of the non-negotiables to which Reformed Christians should hold themselves accountable in relation to

- 1) the song’s lyric.
- 2) the overall feeling or attitude of reverence with awe that is to undergird the singing
- 3) the rhythm or beat of the music undergirding the singing
- 4) the “singability” of the song in relation to the aspect of group dynamic for congregational singing
5. How does one discern when legalism<sup>10</sup> has been exchanged for a proper adherence to the Reformed principles of worship?

6. Why types of counseling-related issues might you expect to encounter by those who experience spiritual suppression by oppressive legalists in family or church worship?

7. Revering God and worshiping Him in accordance with His Word begins on the first day of the week in more of a formal fashion via public worship. Worship is to continue (informally) throughout the week as we engage in personal and family devotions and live our entire life. What are we telling God in our ongoing dialogue with Him when we do not respond in accordance with His Word as His (decretive or secret) will unfolds via providence?

8. Why is it important to tell those we counsel about the sovereignty of God when they are in the midst of a deep trial?

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1. The original version of this book can be obtained free online at <https://archive.org/details/remedyforwanderi00stee>.

2. “Bless the Lord, O my soul! O Lord my God, you are very great! You are clothed with splendor and majesty, covering yourself with light as with a garment, stretching out the heavens like a tent” (Ps. 104:1–2 ESV).

3. “Self-control” in Galatians 5:23 comes from the Greek term *egkráteia*, which conveys the idea of something proceeding out from within oneself but not by oneself. A believer’s spirit is dependent upon the Holy Spirit to posture and lead it in reverential worship.

4. The Reformed tradition holds to the regulative principle of worship based on John 4:24, which says, “God is spirit, and those who worship Him must worship in spirit and truth” (ESV).

5. Jesus defined truth in John 17:17 when He said, “Sanctify them in the truth; your word is truth” (ESV).

6. Worship in spirit flows from regenerated hearts which are submitted to the Holy Spirit and led by Him in the worship of God in cooperation with Jesus Christ who provides the way into the sanctuary of heaven. Thus, Jesus is called in Scripture the way, truth, and the life (John 14:6).

7. The Westminster Larger Catechism includes prayer along with the Word and sacraments as means of grace. While the Heidelberg Catechism does not call prayer a means of grace, it calls it “the most important part of the thankfulness that God requires from us.”

8. In Reformed circles this is typically called the dialogical principle of worship.

9. The dialogical principle presupposes properly ordered communication which involves observing a balance between listening and responding. “But all things should be done decently and in order [in a fitting and orderly way, NIV]” (1 Cor. 14:40 ESV). “For God is not the author of confusion [disorder, NIV], but of peace, as in all churches of the saints” (1 Cor. 14:33 KJV).

10. Legalism is defined as “strict, literal, or excessive conformity to the law or to a religious or moral code” (Merriam-Webster Dictionary).

## Dr. Jeff L. Doll

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In two previous articles, we looked at how archaeology can aid our understanding and interpretation of God's Word. The first article presented the topic methodologically. It sketched out big-picture questions related to archaeology and the Bible so that readers might have necessary categories. In the second article, we applied that methodology to some specific examples from the book of Genesis and witnessed how archaeology can illustrate, contextualize, and even support the biblical portrait of the past. In this next installment, we move forward in history to the time of Joseph, asking what archaeology can illuminate from his life and career. Afterwards, we consider the birth and education of Moses. Much like the previous article, archaeology will provide a context into which the stories of Joseph and Moses fit very naturally. Before we begin, we need to take note of the nature of the evidence archaeology provides for this time period.

### Types of Evidence: Direct and Indirect

Historical minimalists are quick to aver that there is no direct evidence for Israel's sojourn in Egypt or for the historicity of Joseph or Moses. This is, of course, true: we have uncovered no artifact or text that attests to either of these biblical figures by name. But this comes as no surprise. Though many Egyptian texts have survived, including king lists, wisdom literature, epics, treaties, and the like, far fewer run-of-the-mill administrative texts have been preserved. In a culture where scribes focused on passing along a set of cultural texts with an almost canonical status, it is to be expected that the great founding

stories of Egyptian civilization would be recopied and passed along through the ages. But Egypt's scribal culture was famous for ink writing on papyrus. (As a note, the Hebrew words for "ink," *dyw* and "papyrus," *gm'* are borrowed from the Egyptian language.) And unlike the clay tablets inscribed with cuneiform in Mesopotamia, or even the broken potsherds inscribed with ink at locations in ancient Israel (e.g., Lachish, Arad), papyrus letters and receipts are very perishable and have only in rare occasions been preserved for the past three thousand years.<sup>1</sup>

It is unlikely that Joseph or Moses would occur by name in anything other than an archival or administrative text; thus the fact that their names have not yet been attested outside of Scripture is of no concern. Furthermore, it is uncertain how Egyptian scribes would have even recorded their names. In the case of Moses, for example, there is debate about whether his name reflects the Egyptian root *msi* or the Hebrew root *mšh*. Thus, even if existing administrative texts do mention Joseph or Moses, we have not been able to recognize them by those particular names. In light of this, Kenneth Kitchen has wryly remarked: "We do not actually need firsthand namings of the patriarchs in ancient records; plenty of other historical characters are in the same case. The tombs of Early, Middle, and Late Bronze Canaan have yielded countless bodies of nameless citizens of Canaan; but their anonymity (no texts!) does not render them nonexistent."<sup>2</sup> Thus this article will (along with nearly all serious scholars of the ancient world) be content with—and take seriously—the indirect evidence for Israel's sojourn in Egypt.

### Semites in Egypt

A major piece of indirect evidence for the historicity of Israel's sojourn in Egypt is the well-attested existence of Semitic peoples, often referred to disparagingly as "vile Asiatics," living in the Nile delta. This negative reputation was born especially from the Second Intermediate Period in Egypt (ca. 1700–1550 b.c.) wherein a group of Semitic peoples called the Hyksos conquered Egypt and began reigning from a new capitol in Avaris, located at modern-day Tell el-Dab'a. There was a time when biblical scholars looked to the Hyksos dynasty as the historical period of Joseph, suggesting that his rise to power was in part due to his shared Semitic ancestry with the pharaoh. As Joseph's death is generally accepted as occurring a century prior to the Hyksos dynasty, however, this is an unlikely correlation. Instead, Joseph seems to fit earlier, in a time when Semitic peoples were regularly entering the Nile delta, sometimes due to the lush grazing land in Egypt, sometimes due to trade between the regions, and other times due to famine in Canaan which drove residents south into Egypt (as was the case with both Abraham [Gen. 12:10ff.] and Jacob ([Gen. 42ff.]).

A number of ancient Egyptian texts have been discovered that speak of this influx of Semitic peoples. *The Instructions for Merikare* describes conditions in the delta in the late third millennium B.C., depicting attacks against Semitic nomads wherein they were scattered and divested of their cattle. The text even describes the establishment of garrisons to ward off settling Semites. The early second millennium B.C. *Prophecy of Neferti*

likewise describes the presence of Semites as a threat and recounts an increase in Egyptian defenses.<sup>3</sup>

Archaeological excavations at a number of sites have revealed material evidence of Semites in Egypt. The ancient city of Avaris was established around the time of *Merikare* and gives evidence of the Egyptian response to the invading Canaanites. Even before the Hyksos pharaohs began reigning from Avaris, Semitic material culture was making its mark at the site. Equid burials (i.e., burying horses and/or donkeys alongside their owners), stylized bronze decorative pieces found in tombs, and idiosyncratic housing styles all attested to the presence of Canaanites. Excavations at a number of other sites have found similar connections to Semitic peoples.<sup>4</sup>

In sum, the early second millennium B.C., the time of Israel's sojourn in Egypt, was marked by the emigration of Semitic-speaking peoples. Indeed, some of them even rose to high office in Egypt and, in the case of the Hyksos

dynasty, even to the role of Pharaoh. And so the idea of Joseph, a Hebrew (and thus a Semite), being sold as a slave in Egypt and rising through the ranks to the role of a second-tier ruler in Egypt fits well within what we know of the period from archaeology.

### The Price of a Slave

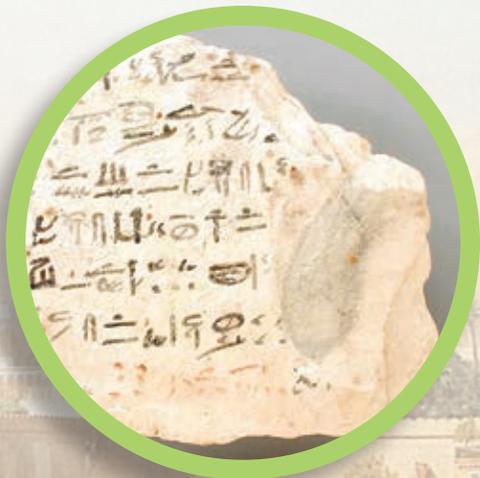
In Genesis 37:28, we learn that Joseph's brothers sold him to a group of Midianite/Ishmaelite merchantmen. This group, accustomed to Egyptian trade, offered a specific amount in exchange for Joseph: twenty shekels. Many critical scholars have dismissed the historicity of the Joseph story, claiming instead that the story originates from the early first millennium B.C., a time in Judah's royal court when it is claimed that the ideal of a wise vizier was especially popular. But it is at this very point (the price paid for Joseph) that critical claims stumble.

James Hoffmeier explains that twenty shekels "is the average price for slaves during the first half of the second millennium B.C. whereas in the second half of that millennium,

owing to inflation, the price was up to thirty shekels." The relevance to the Joseph story thus becomes evident: "By the first millennium, when many believe the Genesis stories originated, the price had risen to fifty or sixty shekels."<sup>5</sup> Kitchen notes that by the sixth century B.C., slave prices were up to 120 shekels.<sup>6</sup> Keep in mind that critics often claim that the Joseph story reflects only general ideas of Semites in Egypt but feel that details of the story have been anachronistically inserted from later times. But the twenty-shekel slave price needs to be explained. Is this mere coincidence? Perhaps a lucky guess by the supposed first-millennium-B.C. fiction writer? Or isn't it more convincing to view this as a genuine historical memory of Joseph's sale from the early second millennium when slaves did, in fact, cost twenty shekels? Again, while this evidence is indirect, it does lend credibility to the historicity of the Joseph story.

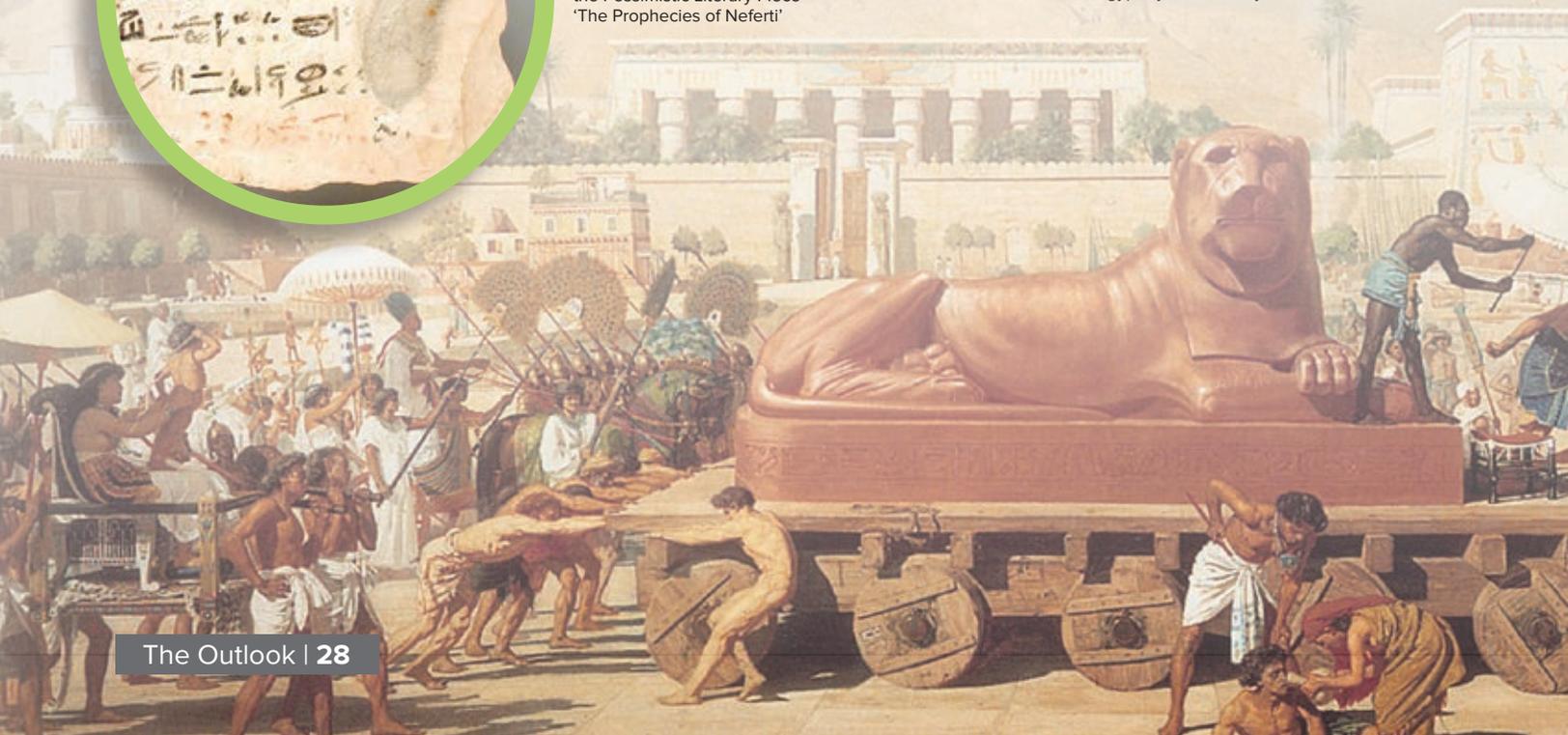
### The Search for the Historical Moses

The story of Moses' rescue from the Nile by Pharaoh's daughter at just the time when her father had ordered the killing of infant Hebrew boys strikes



Ostrakon with Fragment from the Pessimistic Literary Piece 'The Prophecies of Neferti'

Pictured below: Israel in Egypt by Edward Poynter, 1867



some as the stuff of legend. And yet this was a fairly common theme in ancient texts known as the “motif of the exposed child.”<sup>7</sup> A famous parallel has been invoked between the birth of Moses and the birth of King Sargon of Akkad. In both stories a mother placed her child in a basket and floated him downstream where he was subsequently plucked out by a nurturing figure and then rose to prominence and leadership later in life.<sup>8</sup> This motif, however, is not due to fictional literary conventions but due to a reality in the ancient world: the river was a likely place to find safety for an unwanted child (or in Moses’ case, a wanted but endangered child). Whereas some parents would expose children in hopes they would die from the elements, others “exposed” their children (i.e., placed them in a basket in the river) to save their

lives.<sup>9</sup> Hoffmeier explains: “A modern parallel would be leaving a baby on the steps of an orphanage or at the door of a church.”<sup>10</sup> For some ancients, entrusting their child to the river was due to belief in a river god; it was thus an act of divine trust. But for others, placing a child in the river was due simply to the reality that rivers were magnets for people who might have sympathy for the child and take him or her in. This was the case with Moses.

In addition to a birth story with historical precedent, Moses’s royal education is also attested in Egyptian history. Again, some critics feel that Moses’ upbringing in Pharaoh’s court is too convenient for his role throughout the Pentateuch as a leader, a negotiator permitted in Pharaoh’s presence, and a writer of biblical texts. This portion of Exodus is thereby viewed as suspect. But is this such a surprising situation?

In the late 1800s (A.D.), a cache of some four hundred letters was found in el-Amarna, Egypt, where

the famous King Akhenaten had his royal seat. These letters were written in Akkadian cuneiform and recorded correspondence between the king of Egypt and other great kings (e.g., Burra-Buriyash of Babylon, Ashur Ubalit of Assyria, Shuppiluliumash of Hatti). It also contained letters from various vassals in Syria and Palestine (of note is Abdi-Hepa, who was the Canaanite king of Jerusalem long before its conquest by David). These Amarna letters reflect language and customs of the late Bronze Age (ca. 1500–1200 B.C.), including the existence of a royal education system for non-Egyptian boys. These youth would be sent to Egypt and trained in Egyptian diplomacy and administration in order to serve as vassal kings when they grew older. For example, King Aziru



Statue of Akhenaten



An Akkadian inscription



Egyptian training



Specimen of the only certainly deciphered word in the Proto-Sinaitic script, b'it



of Amurru (an ancient Amorite city located in modern-day Syria), wrote to Pharaoh: “I herewith give my sons as 2 attendants, and they are to do what the king, my lord, orders.”<sup>11</sup> The same practice is attested in a thirteenth-century B.C. papyrus: “Useful is my Lord’s action in sending me people to be taught and trained to perform this important task. . . . For those here are grown-up children, people like those my Lord sent, able to act, able to receive my training. *They are foreigners* like those brought to us under Ramesses II your good [fore] father.”<sup>12</sup> These foreign youths were given a rigorous education and were well equipped for administration in the service of Egypt. Thus one can see that the situation of Moses is not surprising at all; there is nothing in his upbringing that is historically suspect.

Again, this is indirect evidence, but it presents us with a portrait of ancient Egypt quite in harmony with what we find in the book of Exodus.

### Could Moses Write? In Hebrew?

Critical biblical studies have long embraced the view that the books of the Pentateuch (Genesis–Deuteronomy) are not the work of Moses but are a late combination of several sources (J, E, D, and P), all of which stem from long after the time of Moses. The history of Pentateuchal criticism is a long and tortured journey that we will not rehearse here.<sup>13</sup> But one feature of the critical case against Moses is the claim that he could not have been literate or that if he was it was unlikely that he could have written in an alphabetic Hebrew similar to what we have in our most accurate manuscripts.

Archaeology has, however, uncovered the existence of alphabetic writing at Wadi el-Hol in Egypt dating to the

early second millennium (although the alphabet originates in Egypt even earlier than this). Famous finds at Serabit el-Khadem attest to a simplified alphabet called the Proto-Sinaitic script (which is related to the Wadi el-Hol alphabet) in use among common turquoise miners. This script was used to record standard Canaanite words like “mistress” (*b’lt*), leading some scholars to speculate that the alphabet may have even been invented by Canaanites.<sup>14</sup> (This is, however, a minority position.) What this demonstrates is that Moses was educated in Pharaoh’s court at a time when alphabetic writing had been well established. Thus the idea of him penning the books attributed to him in an early Hebrew dialect is not very difficult to imagine.

### Conclusion

In our next article, we will consider what light archaeology can shed on the exodus and wilderness wanderings. As we progress through Old Testament history, we continue to see archaeology providing an illuminating role. And again, though unbelievers will find such indirect evidence as we have considered above inconclusive at best, this is not because they have uncovered positive archaeological evidence that contradicts the Bible. As with the patriarchal period, in our consideration of Israel’s sojourn in Egypt, we find archaeology providing a context within which the biblical events comfortably fit.

1. This is persuasively described in James K. Hoffmeier, “‘These Things Happened’: Why a Historical Exodus is Essential for Theology,” in *Do Historical Matters Matter to Faith?: A Critical Appraisal of Modern and Postmodern Approaches to Scripture*, ed. James K. Hoffmeier and Dennis R. Magary (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2012), 108–9.

2. Kenneth A. Kitchen, *On the Reliability of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2003), 372.

3. English translations of these texts can be read in Miriam Lichtheim, *Ancient Egyptian Literature*, vol. 1, *The Old and Middle Kingdoms* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1975), 97–109, 139–45.

4. James K. Hoffmeier, *Israel in Egypt: The Evidence for the Authenticity of the Exodus Tradition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 63, 65–68.

5. Hoffmeier, *Israel in Egypt*, 83–84.

6. Kitchen, *Reliability of the Old Testament*, 345.

7. For a catalogue of examples, see Donald Redford, “The Literary Motif of the Exposed Child (cf. Exod. ii.1–10),” *Numen* 14, no. 3 (1967): 209–28.

8. See *The Context of Scripture*, vol. 1, *Canonical Compositions from the Biblical World*, ed. William W. Hallo and K. Lawson Younger (Leiden: Brill, 1997), 461.

9. Redford, “Literary Motif of the Exposed Child,” 217–18.

10. Hoffmeier, *Israel in Egypt*, 138.

11. EA156.9–14, cited in *The Amarna Letters*, ed. and trans. William L. Moran (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992), 242.

12. Cited in Kitchen, *Reliability of the Old Testament*, 297 (emphasis in original).

13. For a brief description see Mark S. Gignilliat, *A Brief History of Old Testament Criticism: From Benedict Spinoza to Brevard Childs* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2012), 57–77.

14. E.g., Orly Goldwasser, “How the Alphabet Was Born from Hieroglyphics,” *Biblical Archaeology Review* 36, no. 2 (2010): 36–50, 74.

## Rev. R. Andrew Compton

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**R**ecently a URC minister shared with me some fascinating comments on a *cappella* worship. On the way home from synod he had visited a congregation that sings psalms exclusively and without musical accompaniment. Comparing it with the norm of organ- or piano-accompanied singing across our own federation, he observed that the non-accompanied congregational singing at this church was surprisingly rich. "With a *cappella* singing," he said, "it can go either really well or really poorly." In this case, thanks to a song leader who carefully explained each psalm before it was sung and a congregation that responded joyfully, it was a wonderful and God-honoring experience.

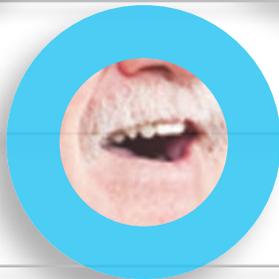
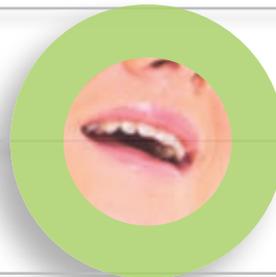
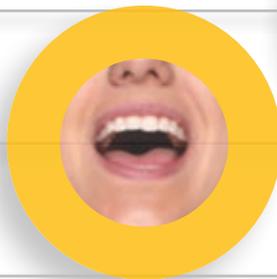
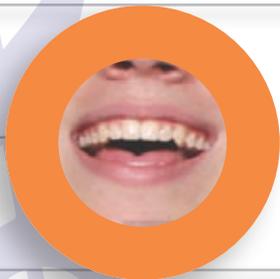
This pastor's reaction to a *cappella* worship echoes my own in several

ways. Growing up I was exposed to a variety of worship styles, but predominantly the simple piano or organ accompaniment used in West Sayville. As I prepared to go to a college where not only Sunday worship but even Wednesday morning chapel services are conducted without instruments, I wondered how the singing would sound. The potential for problems seemed high. An untrained congregation that struggled to stay on key might make singing unbearable. On the other hand, a church that viewed its *cappella* accomplishments as a source of pride and superiority would be even more troubling.

Thankfully, in the several a *cappella* churches I've worshiped in, I've experienced neither of these extremes. Geneva's unaccompanied chapel services draw a disdainful reaction from some of the freshmen each fall, and

most of us have been tempted to poke fun at the various presentors with their pitch pipes and quirky conducting patterns. But to my great surprise, I've never missed the presence of a piano or organ to bolster our singing—and as a pianist and organist, that's almost scandalous to admit!

In most of our United Reformed congregations, we seem to have a definite favoritism for the organ as our instrument of choice. At my home church we might occasionally go a *cappella* for a single verse in a familiar hymn like "When I Survey" or "It Is Well." Beyond that, we're reluctant to plunge into the deep end of singing with no instruments from beginning to end, even for just one song. Perhaps this is because we feel the discomfort of singing



in a small congregation, when our individual vocal blemishes and differences in musical skill can quickly become apparent. As a friend put it, the organ helps “paper over the cracks” of our shaky singing. Yet even at some of the youth conventions I’ve attended, with an assembly of six hundred or seven hundred young people eagerly singing, the *cappella* selections are slim and the presence of accompanying instruments seems to be almost taken for granted. I wonder if our churches’ singing might benefit from an occasional challenge to this instrumental assumption.

In the case of the Reformed Presbyterian Church of North America (RPCNA) and other denominations, there are specific theological grounds for a *cappella* worship which I won’t get into here. I’m not qualified to comment on Old Testament temple worship or the references to instruments in the Psalms, for instance. Nor do I think these arguments are particularly useful for the case I’d like to make here, which is simply to recognize a few of the various blessings and benefits that can come from unaccompanied singing. Even if we only sing a *cappella* occasionally, I believe it is not only a useful exercise but also a beautiful practice that will build us up as the body of Christ.

### **Singing a Cappella Has Historical Roots**

Whether complex or simple, the development of musical instruments has been one of the earliest human activities, dating right back to the time of Jubal and Tubal-cain (Gen. 4:21). And I think it could be fairly suggested that the pipe organ, “the king of

instruments,” is the most well-developed expression of these multiple millennia of musical craftsmanship. In the seventeenth century, Baroque pipe organs were “the most complex of all mechanical instruments developed before the Industrial Revolution,”<sup>1</sup> and many of these gorgeous instruments graced the sanctuaries of Protestant churches during the Reformation—especially in the Netherlands. The love of these beautiful products of human ingenuity and creativity has stuck with us through the centuries, and whether our churches have the budgets for acoustic models or merely electronic imitations, most of us appreciate the classic sound of a pipe organ played well.<sup>2</sup>

There’s only one kind of music that predates Jubal’s pipe and lyre, of course, and it’s singing. When man had not yet been created, the Lord told Job, “the morning stars sang together and all the sons of God shouted for joy” (Job 38:7). Readers of C. S. Lewis know that he describes the creation of the world with the picture of a Lion singing in *The Chronicles of Narnia*. While we can’t pin down the origin of music itself, surely we can attest that its source is God and that His entire creation sings in response—no instruments needed.

The point is not that vocal music is necessarily more worshipful than instrumental music, but that it penetrates closer to our fundamental nature as human creatures. And for varying reasons throughout history, the people of God have often opted to sing without the aid of instruments. In fact, the very term *a cappella* is Italian for “as is done in the chapel.”<sup>3</sup>

While we may be aware of traditions like Sacred Harp or the Plymouth Brethren that include a *cappella* worship as a distinctive, it’s less commonly known that our own Dutch Reformed ancestors tended to oppose organs in worship as well. Synod Dordrecht 1574 held that the use of organs even after the sermon “mostly causes the people to forget what was previously heard,” and Synod Dordrecht 1578 and Synod Middelburg 1581 both urged that church organs “be removed at the earliest and most suitable time.”<sup>4</sup> Indeed, many of the beautiful instruments that graced the sanctuaries of the Dutch Reformed churches were opposed by the elders of the churches, for various theological and practical reasons. While historical precedent alone is no reason to remove instruments from our worship, I cite these examples merely to show that unaccompanied singing is not an anomaly. Indeed, Christians from many traditions over the course of the church’s history have chosen to worship a *cappella*.

### **Singing a Cappella Teaches Us about Living in Harmony**

My second point requires a little bit of music theory, so forgive me; but I’ll try to keep it simple. All songs contain a single musical line which we can think of as the melody or tune. Even if you’re not a musician, you can probably hum the melody of “Amazing Grace” with no problem. But if you get a handful of people to sing the melody of “Amazing Grace,” you will probably notice that it sounds like something is missing. That’s because a song with only a melody is incomplete without additional musical lines beneath it that provide harmony, or musical context, for what’s being sung. Hymns like “Amazing Grace” are traditionally written in four

parts—soprano (melody), alto, tenor, and bass—which, when combined, create rich harmonies that are very satisfying to sing.

Unfortunately, singing “in four-part harmony,” as it’s called, has become less and less common in worship today. Many potential causes could be suggested: poorer musical education in the school system, less musical instruction within the church, or the rise of worship choruses that are designed for solo performance rather than congregational singing. But in addition to these possible factors, I think it’s easy to become lazy in our singing when an organ is present to fill in the missing notes and play the vocal lines that would otherwise be sung. Today, both in the URCNA and elsewhere, we tend to sing in unison. The result is that we only sing about one fourth of the printed notes for any given song—a waste of ink, if nothing else!

Here, with fear and trepidation, I must beg to differ with John Calvin’s view of church music. As Robert Godfrey notes, Calvin thought the congregation should sing the melody only, fearing that an excess of emotion in music would distract from the Word.<sup>5</sup> Yet whether or not music can be used to exploit the emotions of its participants, no song is complete without harmony. How we sing together should parallel how we live together in the church. In this case, we do not live in unison. We do not pursue identical vocations or possess identical preferences. Instead we live in harmony, supporting each other in the highs and lows of life as we all pursue the same goal of following Jesus. And what a beautiful picture of the church’s life when our different musical lines, high and low, weak and strong, combine to form a

unified offering of music directed to the praise of God!

Practicing unaccompanied worship will not instantly enable a congregation to sing in lush four-part harmony, but it may be an opportunity to recognize how we might improve. If combined with a commitment to learning how to sing, the discipline of a *cappella* worship can yield rich rewards. Here is one possible model for teaching psalm singing, from the Articles of Wesel (1568):

In those churches where there are schools with one or more teachers skilled in music, the teacher shall lead the children in the singing of psalms, after that the audience [i.e., congregation] itself shall join the children in singing. In those places, however, where there are no schools, or where the school teachers are unable to lead because of their inexperience, it will be useful to have at least one music director, especially when the minister of the Word is unskilled in music, who will lead the people in singing and give them guidance.

Nor will it be improper to hang signs in the churches on which the manner in which the psalms should be sung is precisely described and on which the regular manner of singing is briefly explained so that in this way the poor singing of the congregation is avoided and there will be no cause for offense or laughter on the part of unbelievers.<sup>6</sup>

## Conclusion

Singing without musical accompaniment is a skill that takes practice, dedication, and sometimes even multiple generations to develop. As the pastor I quoted earlier pointed out, some of our first attempts at a *cappella* worship might end disappointingly. Nevertheless, the facets of unaccompanied worship mentioned here, plus many others I omitted, should motivate us to at least give it a try now and then. Instruments are wonderful tools to be used in the service of God, but they are just that—tools. Whatever instrumentation a congregation uses, nothing should supplant the primary musical offering of worship enjoined throughout the Scriptures: to sing!

1. S. Sadie, “Organ,” in *The New Grove Dictionary of Musical Instruments* (London: Macmillan, 1984), 2:838–916.
2. See, for instance, Marian Van Til, “Praise Him with Organs,” *Christian Renewal* (June 15, 2016).
3. Norman Lloyd, “A Cappella,” in *The Golden Encyclopedia of Music* (New York: Golden Press, 1968), 9.
4. P. Biesterveld and H. H. Kuyper, *Ecclesiastical Manual: Including the Decisions of the Netherlands Synods and Other Significant Matters Relating to the Government of the Churches*, trans. R. R. DeRidder (Grand Rapids, MI: Calvin Theological Seminary, 1982), 68, 95, 124.
5. W. R. Godfrey, “Reforming the Church’s Singing,” *The Outlook* (February 1990).
6. Biesterveld and Kuyper, *Ecclesiastical Manual*, 28.

### Mr. Michael Kearney

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**F**or we all stumble in many ways. And if anyone does not stumble in what he says, he is a perfect man, able also to bridle his whole body. If we put bits into the mouths of horses so that they obey us, we guide their whole bodies as well. Look at the ships also: though they are so large and are driven by strong winds, they are guided by a very small rudder wherever the will of the pilot directs. So also the tongue is a small member, yet it boasts of great things.

—James 3:2–5a

According to researchers at the University of Arizona, “men talk just as much as women—on average, 16,000 words in a day.”<sup>1</sup> Imagine that . . . 16,000 words in a day! However, Proverbs 10:19 warns, “When words are many, transgression is not lacking.” Indeed, the more you talk, the more likely you sin. Aware of the teaching found in this verse, it’s really no wonder that James takes the time to write about taming the tongue! As we reflect on James 3:2–5a, there are at least three significant observations that we should make: (1) the inclusive truth about the tongue; (2) the importance of the tongue; and (3) the inclination of the tongue.

First, we must recognize **the inclusive (or universal) truth about the tongue, which is that we all make moral mistakes with it!** Verse 2 reminds us that “we all stumble . . .” In this context, “stumble” means to fall into sin and commit moral error. You and I—*all of us*—struggle and fall into sin at times with our tongues. The text adds that we do this “in many ways.” This can include such sinful behavior as lying, slander, gossip, vulgarity, insults, blasphemous comments and verbally abusing others. Indeed, one of the many ways in which we sin against

God is in our speech, and there are so many ways in which we are liable to do this!

James continues, “And if anyone does not stumble in what he says . . .”—that is to say, if anyone claims to have mastered the use of his tongue—“ . . . he is a perfect man.” In other words, to say that you never sin in your speech is to declare boldly that you never sin at all—that you are perfect! Anyone who fits this description is “ . . . able also to bridle his whole body.” Supposedly, this person is “perfect” in the sense that he is able to control all parts of his body . . . but the truth is that nobody is perfect!

To insist that you have fully mastered the use of your tongue is to imply that you are fully perfect—which means, also, that you have absolute control over your mind, your eyes, your heart, and so on—but the fact that you sometimes stumble in what you say shows that you also stumble at times in other ways. Without doubt, we all stumble in regard to our mind (what we think), our eyes (what we see), our ears (what we hear), our heart (what we feel), our hands (what we do), and our feet (where we go).

We all stumble—we are all vulnerable to temptation—and we all sin. Even

James acknowledges his own need to admit this. He intentionally uses the pronoun “we,” counting himself among those who fail in their moral behavior. Proverbs 20:9 asks, “Who can say, ‘I have made my heart pure; I am clean from my sin?’” Who among us no longer falls into temptation? Not one person! This truth is a universal one—we still struggle with sin—and this includes sin with regard to our tongue.

**Children**—have you spoken to your parents disrespectfully? Have you lied to them? If you know that you have done this, will you now come before the Lord and repent of your sin, and commit yourself to speaking to your parents with love and respect?

**Parents**—have you used overly harsh words when disciplining your children? Have you ever said things that you didn’t truly mean, such as, “You are always bad!” (knowing that your child is not always bad), or “You don’t do anything right!” (knowing that it isn’t true)? If you have, will you confess your error to your children, seek their forgiveness for this, and repent before God?

**Husbands and wives**—have you communicated with one another

## WORDS A DAY

lying, slandering,  
gossiping, vulgar, insulting,  
hasty, abusing, worthless,  
wounding, cursing,  
destroying, ruining, careless,  
insensitive, thoughtless,  
disrespectful, blasphemous,  
harsh, angry words

restrained, controlled,  
thoughtful, pure, restoring,  
confessing, happy, loving,  
soft, caring, reassuring,  
comforting, spiritual words

in anger when there have been disagreements between you? Have you used unnecessary yelling to communicate with one another? Worse yet—have you done this in front of your children? Do you need to confess sin of this sort to one another—and to God—in order to restore health, happiness, and love to your marriage? If so, then isn't it worth the effort to do this in order to see the joy and blessing increase in your home? (It is!)

Proverbs 12:18 says, "Thoughtless words can wound as deeply as any sword, but wisely spoken words can heal." Oh, friends—how often have we deeply wounded other people simply because we were not careful with our speech? Far too often, we are hasty, careless, insensitive, and thoughtless of the ways that we speak to others. In this passage, though, James offers us a sobering warning—we should take this matter

very seriously, for we all stumble in what we say—and this truth is inclusive, in that it includes you and me.

Second, we should acknowledge **the importance of the tongue, which is great!** James already addressed this subject in James 1:26, where he wrote the following: "If anyone thinks he is religious and does not bridle his tongue but deceives his heart, this person's religion is worthless." Now, in chapter 3, James delves more deeply into this problem, offering us twelve additional verses of instruction about our speech. The fact that he's teaching us about the tongue in multiple parts of his epistle should leave no doubt concerning the subject's importance to James—and, more especially, to God.

Clearly, the tongue is an important part of our bodies! We should note, though, that James sometimes

uses the word "tongue" in a literal sense to mean a physical part of our bodies, while in other verses he uses the word figuratively, in regard to our speech and our communication with one another. In regard to our physical bodies, though, the tongue is vital. There are certain parts of our bodies—such as our wisdom teeth, our tonsils and our appendix—which can be removed with little consequence. However, without a tongue, we would have great difficulty communicating with other people!

James is drawing the conclusion that the tongue, though small, can greatly affect the outcome of our lives. He offers two illustrations to help us see this. First, he likens the tongue to the bit in the mouth of a horse (v. 3). That small metal mouthpiece, when put on a horse, is what enables riders

to steer the direction of the horse. Without the bit, a rider can have great difficulty controlling where the horse goes. In the same way, each of us must control our tongue, which in turn helps determine the direction in which our life goes.

The popular commentator Albert Barnes once wrote, “A man always has complete government over himself if he has the entire control of his tongue. It is that by which he gives expression to his thoughts and passions; and if that is kept under proper restraint, all the rest of his members are as easily controlled as the horse is by having the control of the bit.”<sup>3</sup> This, of course, is true!

As a second illustration, James compares the tongue to the rudder of a ship (v. 4). What a powerful illustration this is! In fact, James made excellent use of illustrations throughout this epistle—a skill which he, no doubt, acquired from listening to his half-brother, Jesus, when he taught! Illustrations are intended to help us learn profound truths about God, and that’s precisely what James is aiming to do here. He’s explaining that even ships, which are large and are constantly being blown to and fro by the wind, are actually guided by the small rudder—and by the will of the captain, who controls the rudder and determines the ship’s direction.

To control a ship’s rudder is to control the ship. Again, we see the same principle being taught. While the tongue is a small part of our bodies, how we use it can greatly influence the direction of our entire lives! None of us are perfect, and we will all continue to struggle with temptation regarding our speech, but the more control that each of us have over our tongue, the more control that we’ll have regarding the direction of our lives.

Throughout this book, James is concerned that there are some people who claim to be Christians, but demonstrate no good works. They give no signs or evidence that

they have experienced genuine spiritual conversion.

If we are in Christ, we have the grace of God in our lives—and we can use that grace to direct our tongue, so that we may bring honor and glory to God. If, however, we continuously live with an uncontrolled tongue, it’s indicative of the fact that we are not truly in Christ. In other words, we can’t truly be in Christ if we consistently slander others and tell lies. We should be alarmed if we don’t sense an overwhelming conviction about such sinful behavior in our lives—conviction which the Holy Spirit promises to bring in the lives of all true believers.

Finally, in this passage from James, we should also see **the inclination of the tongue, which is sinful!** In verse 5, James warns, “So also the tongue is a small member, yet it boasts of great things.” In our speech—as in all areas of our lives—we are naturally inclined to sin. We have a tendency to curse God, and to sin against other people, by the things that we say. The tongue is small, but it is powerfully dangerous—like a poisonous snake that can bite!

With our tongues, we can destroy churches; we can ruin families; we can divide brother against brother and sister against sister. Evil words can emotionally wound a spouse or provoke our children to anger. A person’s character can be publicly shattered by what he says, or by what others might say about him.

So much of the evil and suffering in the world begins with sinful talk! Truly, the tongue can destroy our lives if we aren’t careful to honor God with how we use it! Regarding our ongoing struggle to guard our speech in this way, Matthew Henry wisely noted, “No man can tame the tongue without Divine grace and assistance. The apostle does not represent it as impossible, but as extremely difficult.”<sup>4</sup> How true this is! Why don’t we humbly pray to God to help us tame our tongues?

## Questions

1. Why is it foolish to deny the universal truth about the tongue? Explain James’ line of reasoning to answer this question.

In what area or sphere of your life are you most tempted to sin with your tongue? What steps of confession and repentance need to be taken?

2. In what way is your tongue important to the direction of your life? Explain the illustrations James uses to emphasize the importance of the tongue.

3. What are some practical and specific ways you can use your tongue to direct your life for God’s glory?

4. Do you experience the Holy Spirit’s conviction when you sin with your tongue? Why is your answer to this question so critical?

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1. Ashley Phillips, “Study: Women Don’t Talk More Than Men,” *ABC News*, July 5, 2007, <http://abcnews.go.com/Technology/story?id=3348076&page=1> (accessed June 6, 2016).

2. Good News Translation.

3. Albert Barnes, *Notes, Explanatory and Practical, on the General Epistles of James, Peter, John and Jude* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1850), 65.

4. Matthew Henry, *Short Comments on Every Chapter of the Holy Bible* (London: Religious Tract Society, 1839), 972.

## Rev. Brian G. Najapfour

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# Reformed Youth Services 2016 Annual Convention



In this twentieth anniversary year of Reformed Youth Services (RYS), the fifteenth annual convention was held at Evangel University in Springfield, Missouri. The week of July 25–29 brought just short of seven hundred youth, sponsors, speakers, and workshop leaders together for an exciting time of spiritual growth and fellowship. Over the years many lives have been touched and changed from participating in these annual conventions. The following are reports from two of the young people who attended the 2016 convention.

Mr. Myron Rau is the chairman of the board of Reformed Fellowship. He is a member of the Covenant United Reformed Church in Kalamazoo, MI.





“A word fitly spoken  
is like apples of  
gold in settings of  
silver”

—Prov. 25:11

Miss Cambrie  
Atsma



## Convention 2016: Salt Life



This year at convention we learned how to live the salt life. Our main sessions taught about being at peace with one another. As Christians, “we are broken to bless, to bless the broken.” “We are a rock that needs to be broken of our pride.” As the youth of the church we were encouraged to apply Colossians 4:5–6, “Walk in wisdom towards those who are outside, redeeming the time. Let your speech always be with grace, seasoned with salt, that you may know how you ought to answer each one.” We learned that salt needs to be “poured out into the world” and that “we need to sow salt of destruction on our sin.” The biblical picture of salt was clearly seen through the speakers in our main sessions. From preservation to destruction, salt can affect many things, just as our speech and actions can affect those around us and our light in the world.



In addition to our main sessions we started every day with our Sunrise Group. My group had eight people who lived in my dorm. We had devotions and shared what we were learning and how we were growing as Christians that week. It was such a blessing getting to know more believers on a personal level. I also got to know more people through free time. We had some time each day to walk around, play cards, or play various sports. I constantly had the chance to meet like-minded Christians.



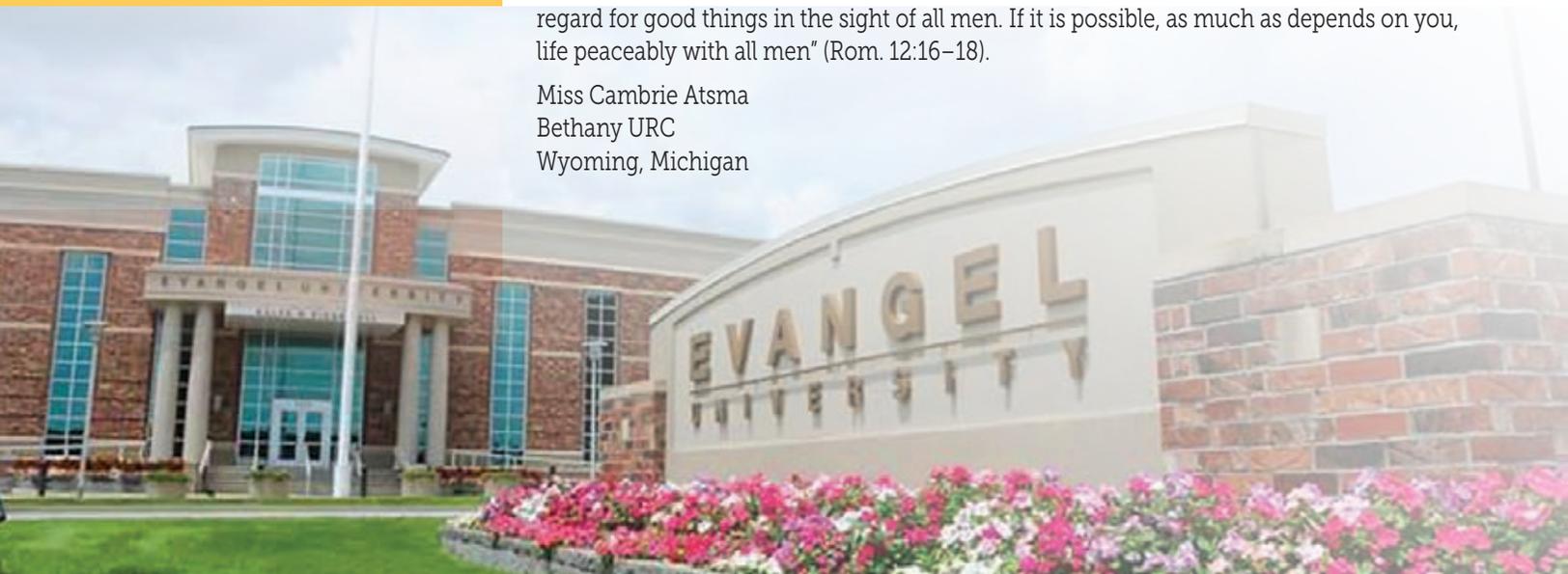
We had the privilege to pick the workshops that we wanted to attend. I enjoyed them all, but my favorite was “Who Do You Need to Forgive?” by Pastor Bob of Little Farms Chapel. He taught that we need to accept our forgiveness before we can forgive others. “God sees us as washed; we need to accept God’s view of us” (see 1 Cor. 6:9–11).

As always, the music was fantastic. It was such a blessing to be able to sing praises with so many fellow believers. I was also part of the Convention Choir. We sang at the Thursday night talent show. This also gave many youth the opportunity to share their gift and talents with the convention crowd.

Over all, my favorite part of convention was the Sunset Group. We would meet each evening with our own church’s youth group. We would talk about our day, what we learned, and share stories from the day. We were able to bond with each other and grow closer as a church family.

“Be of the same mind towards one another. Do not set your mind on things, but associate with the humble. Do not be wise in your own opinion. Repay no one evil for evil. Have regard for good things in the sight of all men. If it is possible, as much as depends on you, life peaceably with all men” (Rom. 12:16–18).

Miss Cambrie Atsma  
Bethany URC  
Wyoming, Michigan



// Salt is good, but if salt has lost its saltiness, how will you make it salty again? Have salt in yourselves, and be at peace with one another. //

—Mark 9:50



Mr. Kees  
Kiledjian



This is my third year at the RYS Youth Convention. I can undoubtedly say that it is a tremendous blessing as a young Christian to be able to attend and experience the wonderful thing convention is. This year the theme was the "Salt Life," where we were educated first on the secular world view on the "Salt Life," which was then contrasted with the biblical view on the "Salt Life." During the main sessions Rev. Nymeyer and Rev. Tuinstra spoke on how we as followers of Christ are salt, and that we can have a positive effect in the midst of the corrupted world we live in. We were taught that just as salt must be broken to bless, so we must be broken spiritually because of our sin, and realize the grace we've been given, so that we may then go and bless the broken. Following the blessing salt can be, we learned of the destructive quality of salt, being instructed to get rid of the salt of destruction in our own lives, putting to death the old self, and being renewed. "But that is not the way you learned Christ!—assuming that you have heard about him and were taught in him, as the truth is in Jesus, to put off your old self, which belongs to your former manner of life and is corrupt through deceitful desires, and to be renewed in the spirit of your minds, and to put on the new self, created after the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness" (Eph. 4:20–24).

The blessing of RYS Youth Convention goes further than what we learn through the main sessions. Throughout the week we attend workshops, participate in athletic events and games, sing glorious praise to God, and experience fellowship with fellow Reformed youth, as well as the leaders and sponsors. Not only do we get the opportunity to go and grow in our faith, but also we learn to establish deep roots planted by streams of water so that our faith doesn't wither easily (Ps. 1:3). The youth leave with an intense feeling of joy and a confidence in our faith, as we are reminded of our awesome God. We also walk away with new enduring friendships that help keep us accountable for who we are in Christ.

The week consisted of a lot of learning, fellowship, worship, free time, fun at amusement parks, a talent show, sports tournaments, enjoying time in the cafeteria, and playing games in the lounge. It is an event that has had a huge effect in the lives of many Christian youth, in addition to the leaders and sponsors. I turned to my pastor on the plane home and said that looking at my life, seeing my shortcomings, seeing how God has worked to grow my faith as a believer, and seeing how great God is through convention, there is nothing more I desire than to serve God for the rest of my life. The days spent at convention, the things learned, the friendships formed, the memories made, are things that will be taken with us through the rest of our lives.

"Let love be genuine. Abhor what is evil; hold fast to what is good. Love one another with brotherly affection. Outdo one another in showing honor. Do not be slothful in zeal, be fervent in spirit, serve the Lord. Rejoice in hope, be patient in tribulation, be constant in prayer. Contribute to the needs of the saints and seek to show hospitality" (Rom. 12:9–13).

Mr. Kees Kiledjian  
First Chino URC  
Chino, California

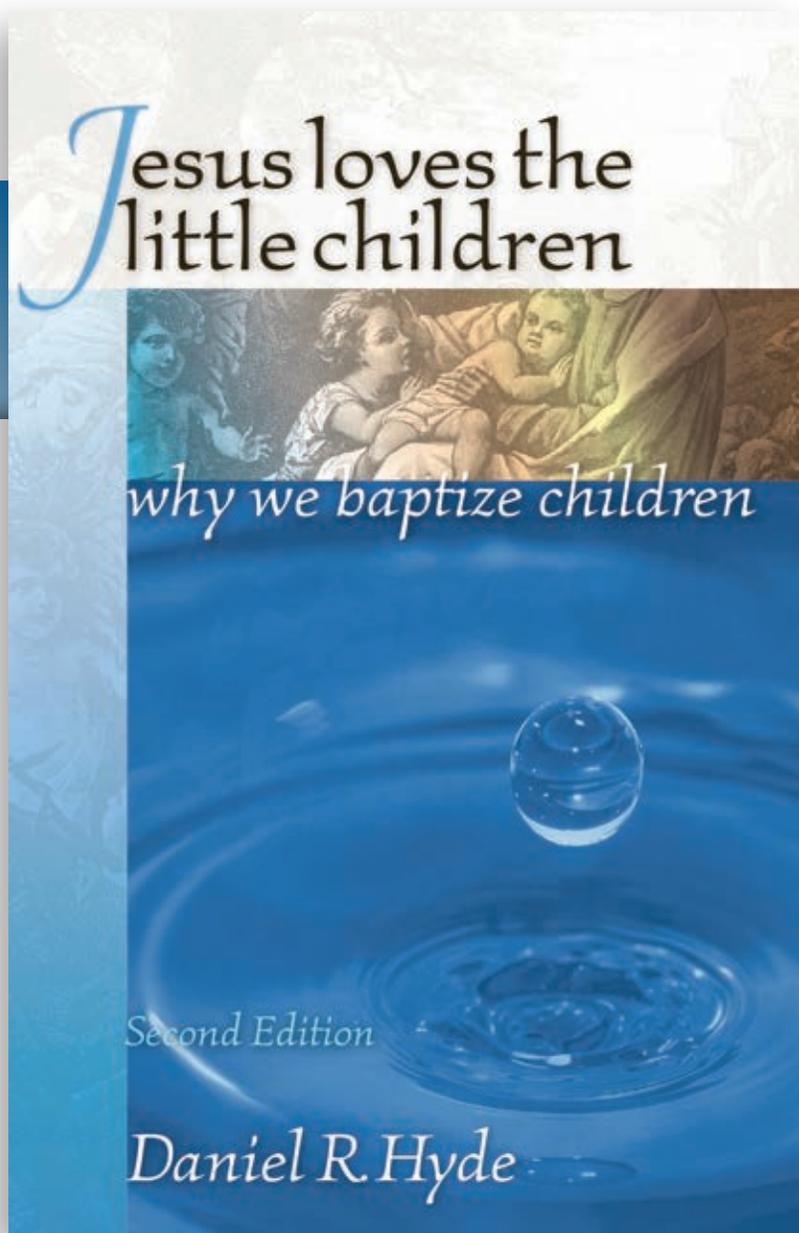


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