

Dedicated to the Exposition and Defense of the Reformed Faith



# The Outlook

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2017

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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:** Martin Luther, 1483 – 1546, German leader of the Reformation which led to the establishment of Protestant church denominations. Composition by Jeff Steenholdt

# “I Am the Resurrection and the Life”: A Meditation on John 11:25–26

Rev. Steve  
Swets

Jesus said to her, “I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me, though he die, yet he shall live, and everyone who lives and believes in me shall never die. Do you believe this?” –*John 11:25–26*

**S**ometimes it is the case that when a loved one passes away, the family calls together the entire family. It is common, if he is not already there, to call the pastor. What I do when I get there, whether the loved one is dying or is already dead, is to open up the Bible and read. I might read a number of different passages, but two I always read. One is Psalm 23, which reminds us of Jesus’ statement, “I am the Good Shepherd.” Psalm 23 speaks of the shepherd’s care for his sheep throughout their lives. Another passage I turn to is John 11. After I read this passage, if there are young grandchildren around, I explain to them what it means that Jesus is the resurrection and the life.

We are up to our fifth of seven meditations on the “I am” statements of Christ. This time we look to that great I AM who said, “I am the resurrection and the life.”

## What It Means

This passage begins with some of the most comforting words spoken by our Savior. “Jesus said to her, ‘I am the resurrection and the life.’” However, these words are comforting because of the context in which they are spoken. Jesus had three very close friends who were siblings. Lazarus was the brother and Mary and Martha were the sisters. They were a wealthy family who lived in Bethany, near Jerusalem. Mary and Martha sent word to Jesus that Lazarus was sick. In verse 3 the statement is, “Lord, the one you love is sick.” Jesus had a deep love for this family.

When Jesus received news of this serious illness, Jesus knew what was to take place. The glory of God will be revealed in the events of that week. Jesus decides to go to Bethany, even though the disciples warned him not to go, because the Jews tried to kill Jesus near there. Jesus was resolved to go because he was going to wake up Lazarus, who had fallen asleep. This phrase is used many times hereafter in the New Testament to refer to believers who die. The reason to use this phrase is because of what Jesus is going to reveal in this text.

When Jesus neared Bethany, he found out that Lazarus had been in the tomb dead for four days. When he got near, Martha went out to meet him (for context, read John 11:20–26). In response, Martha confessed her faith in Christ. Then Jesus sent for Mary, and when she arrived, she was weeping along with the other mourners. She fell at his feet and said, “Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.” Then something happened. In verse 33 it says Jesus was moved in spirit and troubled. The result is that he wept. We have a Savior who can sympathize with us in our weaknesses. It is a very emotional scene. Jesus comes to the tomb, and at first Martha objected because it would stink . . . the body would have already begun to decompose. Nevertheless, the stone is removed; Jesus prays to God and then tells Lazarus to come out. The one who would in a short time go the cross and the grave and also would be resurrected, performs here the greatest of miracles in his ministry up until this point. He raises Lazarus from the dead. In this context he says, “I am the resurrection and the life.”

Essentially there are two I am statements in our text: I am the

resurrection, and I am the life. Christ proclaims this and then explains what they mean (read the rest of verse 25). When the subject of the resurrection first was brought up by Jesus, Martha thought that Jesus was speaking of the resurrection at the last day. Though this is true, he is speaking primarily about the spiritual resurrection today. What Lazarus is about to become is the ultimate visual aid of the great teacher. We might die in order to live.

Humans are, by nature, dead. This is what Scripture clearly teaches. Remember Genesis 8. Before and after the flood, man's heart was only evil continually. In speaking of the new life in Christ, Ephesians 2 says that while we were dead in trespasses and sins, Christ made us alive. By nature we are dead. The first resurrection, the resurrection of which Jesus speaks, takes place when we believe. "He who believes in me will live, even though he dies." Jesus here is changing Martha's outlook on the situation.

In response to the question of why is Christ the resurrection, John Calvin says, "Because by His Spirit he regenerates the children of Adam, who had been alienated from God by sin, so that they begin to live a new life." In order to be resurrected, you must be dead, and contrary to what most Arminian churches teach, we are not born sick, we are born dead. For Christ to say, "I am the resurrection" was in light of Lazarus's death, not Lazarus's sickness.

Our Savior continues and explains what it means that he is the life. "And whoever lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?" When a Christian is spiritually brought to life, he will never die again. Oh, to be sure, his body might die, but it also will be raised again. His soul will live forevermore in fellowship with God. This second phrase confirms the first. What is

the best evidence you have been resurrected? You are alive.

When we die now in this life, our body goes to the ground and our soul goes to heaven. It is conscious, fully sanctified, and in the presence of God. This time is called the intermediate state. We are awaiting the final state, where body will be resurrected and united to soul and will be transformed like Christ's glorious body to inhabit the new earth. This is what Martha first had in mind in verse 24. But Jesus isn't talking about the final resurrection. He is saying that he himself is the resurrection and the life. To partake of what Christ is doing happens by faith. "Do you believe this?"

As we think about this, we might wonder why Jesus took so long to go to Bethany. After all, Mary and Martha, women he loved, and the other mourners had four days of utter grief and sorrow. Why did he delay so long? This is what Jesus was getting at in verse 4 and verse 15.

There would be no doubting that Lazarus was dead. Jesus was going to do something no one else could do. Why would he do it? To glorify God by testifying to the fact that he is the Christ, the Messiah, the Great I AM. This now is the third time Jesus spoke an I am statement in the presence of a miracle. He was the bread of life after he fed the five thousand. He was the light of the world after he healed the man born blind. Now he is the resurrection and the life as he raises Lazarus from the dead. The implications of the others was if you believe, you won't be hungry, you won't be in the dark, but now, you will not die.

### **Why It Is True**

For us to read John 11 two thousand years after the cross, we can understand it more fully. Jesus speaks with authority given by the Father, for what he has accomplished and what he will accomplish. He speaks as one who has died, he

raises Lazarus as one who was raised, and speaks of one who has eternal life while yet living on earth. This is how sure the redemption secured in Jesus was. With that said, we still must ask how it is that Jesus is the resurrection and the life.

For Jesus to be the resurrection, he must defeat death. This is precisely what he did. When Jesus breathed his last upon the cross, in the eyes of Satan, it must have been the great victory. But it wasn't a victory for Satan, because three days later something happened: the resurrection on Easter morning. This is why we worship on Sunday . . . it is resurrection day. When Christ was raised, he was raised victoriously over Satan. "Sin's bonds severed, we're delivered; Christ has bruised the serpent's head; death no longer is the stronger; Hell itself is captive led. Christ has risen from death's prison; O'er the tomb He light has shed" (Psalter Hymnal #361, verse 3). empty grave is guarantee of our resurrection, both in this life and in the life to come. Our catechism says that we are already now resurrected to a new life. This is because Christ defeated that ancient enemy: death!

Romans 5 says that we are raised up with Christ. First Peter 1:23 says that "we have been born again, not of perishable seed, but of imperishable." Christ is the firstfruits of our glorious resurrection. What this means is that since Christ was raised, through union with him, we are guaranteed to be raised.

This is what Colossians 3:1-4 is getting at. Colossians 3:3 says, "For you died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God." Focus your mind for a moment on the idea of our life being hidden with Christ. It is no longer we who live, but Christ who lives in us. I explained to my catechism students this week that we are dying. The outward body is slowly dying away, but the inward man is being renewed. We are like a cut flower. A cut flower flourishes for a week or two and then it is

thrown into the garbage. This is kind of depressing and sad, if it was not for the fact that Jesus said, "I am the resurrection and the life." Our natural life is being eclipsed by the spiritual life.

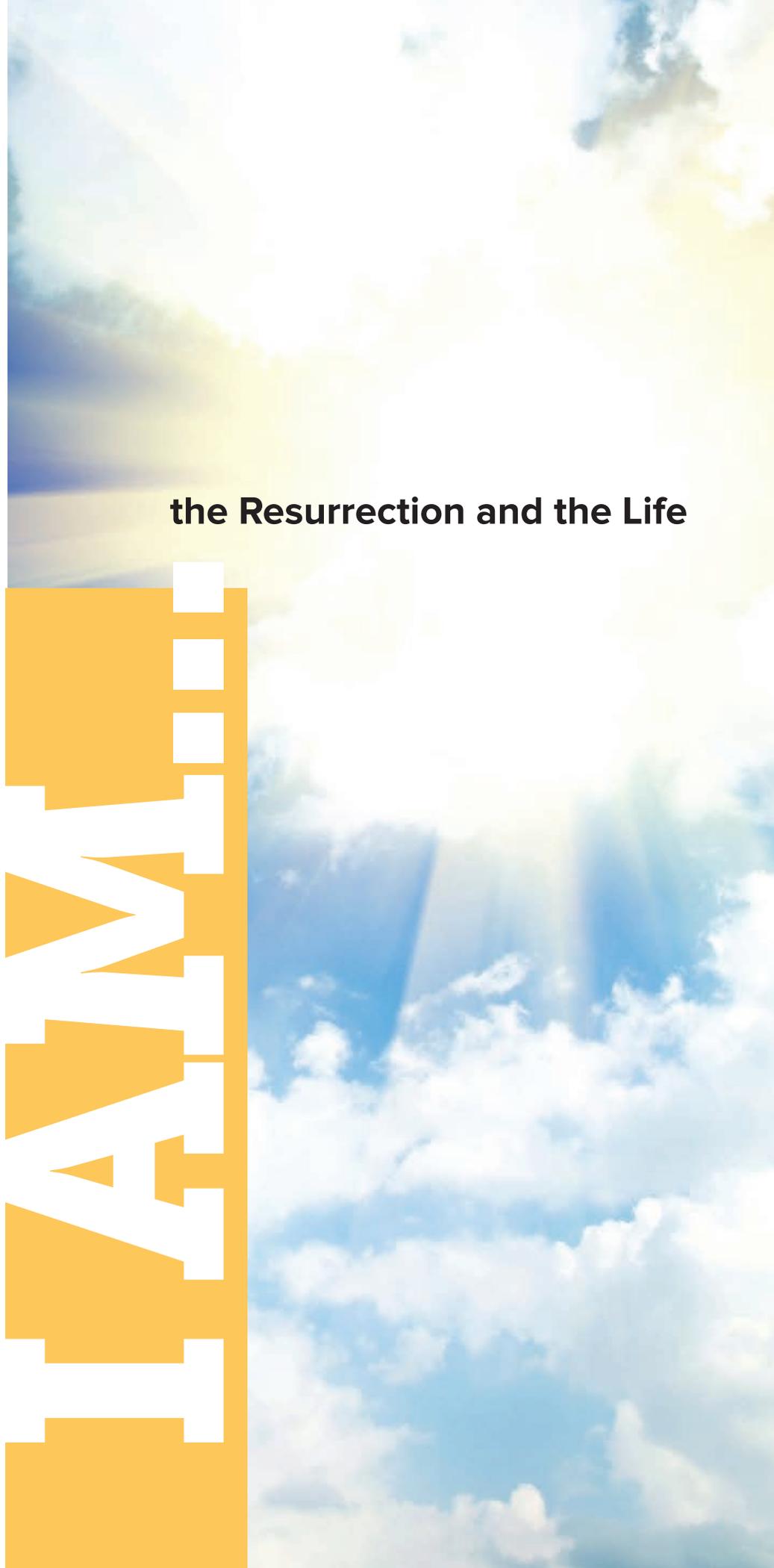
### **Why It Matters**

The glorious truth and comforting fact that Jesus is the great I Am, who makes a claim to divinity when he says, "I am," is also the resurrection and the life. If we don't see how this connects to our lives, there is a danger to leave it out there as just a nice teaching. It isn't just a nice teaching. It is a life-changing teaching. Let me give you four reasons why.

First, this matters because you will die. Today it might seem that you are full of life. Maybe you have your whole life ahead of you. Or maybe you are at midlife. But maybe you are not. Maybe your life is at its end and you don't realize it yet. Death can be scary, and it is no respecter of persons. If the Lord delays his return, we will die. What will happen to you when you die? This all depends how you answer Jesus' question to Martha. Do you believe this? Not just do you believe that this is true, but do you believe this is true for you? Is your life now hidden with Christ; is he your life?

Second, our loved ones will die. The older we get, the more this is the case. My great-grandma told me one time when she was in her mid-nineties that just about everyone she knew when she was a little girl is now dead. Those close to us, whom we love, will also die, and it will hurt. Certainly, there are many reading this who are hurting and grieving, sometimes in silence. It is okay to grieve, but remember, we can grieve as those who have hope, because Jesus said, "I am the resurrection and the life." That cemetery you may visit from time to time is not a final resting place. It is merely a waiting room, waiting for the Lord's return. The soul, the mind, the essence

## **the Resurrection and the Life**



of our loved ones, if they died as believers, are with the Lord. They are asleep in Jesus. Death has been defeated. That sting of death has been removed. Calvin says, "What is still more, death itself is a sort of emancipation from the bondage of death."

As Mary and Martha weep, we see Jesus also weep. Martha wanted Lazarus to be alive. Jesus speaks about a better life, a spiritual life, one in which, if you live it, you will never die. And yet, the pain of death is still real. This is what happens when we love people. The only consolation as we walk through the valley of the shadow of death is that Jesus is the resurrection and the life. Weeping is for a night, but joy comes in the morning.

To an unbeliever, this is nonsense. Death is the grim reaper. It is final. The idea of robbing death of its power is preposterous. It is by faith alone that these truths can be grasped. This is why Jesus asked Martha, "Do you believe this?" Because faith makes all the difference.

Third, this is important because of Christ's statement and the comfort it affords when death looks us in the face. We do not have to fear death or life. We can be those who live assured. Don't mix this up with cocksureness, arrogance, or fatalism (whatever will be will be). It has simply been called Calvinism in the past, but we can merely refer to this form of life as a trust in God in light of his providence. When you sing a song like "A Mighty Fortress Is Our God," you can do so almost with a clenched fist. "And though this world with devils filled, should threaten to undo us, we will not fear for God has willed, his truth to triumph through us. The prince of darkness, we tremble not for him, his rage we can endure, for lo his doom

is sure, one little word shall fell him." To overemphasize the triumphant life is not helpful. You have to fight in this life, because your enemies never stop attacking us. Live with fortitude, strength, courage in the Lord.

And last, the fact that Jesus called himself the resurrection and the life points us both to this life and the life to come. Let us not seek to escape this life and run off and hide in a corner with our Bibles until Jesus returns. Let us also remember there is something more than this. We are called here. After we die, we will be called out of this life, but we are not dead yet. As we live, serve the Lord. When you come before God in prayer at night, let it be found that you have been busy in the work of the Lord. Work out your salvation

with fear and trembling, awaiting the appearing of the Lord in glory. We will be resurrected when Christ returns, but also, already now, we are raised up to a new life.

In the midst of death, sorrow, and weeping, Jesus said, "I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in me will live even though he dies; and whoever lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?" Let us confess, "Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Christ, the Son of God."

### Rev. Steve Swets

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## CHURCHES ARE ENCOURAGED

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**H**ave you ever asked yourself when it comes to what you believe and how you live as a Christian, “Is the Bible enough?” I’m not asking whether the Bible says everything about every detail of life, but whether in what it says about faith and godliness, theology and piety, it says what you need. Take this statement, for example: “Gender identity is a matter of choice.” A recent survey by Ligonier Ministries revealed that among self-professed American evangelicals 49 percent either strongly agreed, somewhat agreed, or were not sure! Think about that. Half of evangelical Christians believe their choice about being male or female determines reality, not how God created them. Is the Bible enough? This is the question of the sufficiency of Scripture that I want to explore.

Why is this even a question? Because we still protest the Roman Church’s rejection of the sufficiency of Scripture and now we must protest many evangelicals’ rejection. At its Council of Trent in 1546, Rome said the church “with like pious affection and reverence receives and venerates all the Books both of the Old and New Testaments . . . and likewise also the traditions.”<sup>1</sup> In 1965 Pope Paul VI declared, “It is not from Sacred Scripture alone that the Church draws her certainty about everything which has been revealed. Therefore both sacred tradition and Sacred Scripture are to be accepted and venerated with the same sense of loyalty and reverence.”<sup>2</sup> To this the evangelical adds sacred feeling!

Why is this an important question? Can you pick up a Bible, read it, and know what is necessary to be saved from sin and to live to the glory of God? In the words of Augustine: “In clearly expressed passages of scripture one can find all the things that concern faith and the moral life (namely hope and love).”<sup>3</sup> Or do we need something else, which Rome describes as its unwritten traditions and which evangelicals describe as what makes them feel good about a decision? This is so important because once you say Scripture alone is insufficient you can find “what [you] please out of Scripture, and escaping from every passage that might be urged against [you].”<sup>4</sup> That’s what John Calvin said about Rome’s tradition, which is equally appropriate in today’s culture.

What do we mean when we say the Scriptures are “sufficient”? Again, we are not saying the Scriptures say everything about everything, so that the only book we read is the Bible. The sufficiency of Scripture correctly understood means that the things we need to know for salvation and godliness are revealed by God in his Word: “The whole counsel of God concerning all things necessary for His own glory, man’s salvation, faith and life, is either expressly set down in Scripture, or by good and necessary consequence may be deduced from Scripture”

(Westminster Confession, 1.6). Let's take a look at a familiar passage about this: 2 Timothy 3:14–17. Notice the connection between the Scriptures being breathed out by God, meaning, he spoke them, and therefore they are “able to make you wise for salvation” and are “profitable for . . . training in righteousness.” This passage teaches the sufficiency of Scripture in several ways.

### **Sufficient for Salvation**

First, the Scriptures are sufficient for salvation. As Paul exhorts Timothy, “continue in what you have learned and have firmly believed” (v. 14). What did he learn and believe? “The sacred writings” (v. 15). He was taught these by his grandmother Lois and mother, Eunice (1:4), from childhood. Paul specifically reminds Timothy that these writings “are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus.”

Note that word *able*. Paul doesn't say the Scriptures *can* make you wise for salvation, as if it were merely a possibility. He uses a familiar Greek word that denotes power and might, *dunamis*. The sacred writings of the Old and New Testaments have the power and the might to grant to you wisdom from above so that you know God's saving grace. How? Because they are sacred or holy (v. 15) and breathed out (v. 16). They are the very voice of God. Note that Paul attributes the ability to grant heavenly wisdom for a saving knowledge of God to the Scriptures! He does not attribute this authority to any man or group of men or feelings we might have about God or how to live.

### **Sufficient for Doctrine**

Second, the Scriptures are sufficient for doctrine. Notice how Paul goes on to say that “all Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching” (v. 16). What we need for our doctrine about God is found in the Word. I'm no engineer or architect, but think

about a blueprint. An engineer has an idea for a building in his mind, which he then reveals upon a blueprint. All he envisions in his mind is upon that blueprint. Then a builder takes the blueprint and executes the plan in reality. The Word of God reveals the mind of God concerning all that is necessary for us to know about God, his world, and ourselves. We, like a builder, can turn to them to try as faithfully as possible to implement God's will in our doctrine, our creeds, and our confessional statements.

But here is where we hear the Roman objection: But doesn't Paul also say we are to “hold to the traditions” (2 Thess. 2:15)? Yes, he does; but what he says in 2 Thessalonians is not in contrast to what he says in 2 Timothy. The “traditions” of which Paul speaks are not extra authoritative truths passed down in addition to Scripture but the passing down of the teaching of the apostles in one of two ways: preaching and writing. Paul preached and Paul wrote. He didn't write everything he preached, but he reminded his people in his writings of his preaching and even summarized for them the main points of truth.

One of the Roman misunderstandings is that they seem to forget that what they are saying is analogous to the Israelites. They had the Word spoken and written in the Scriptures, but then they heaped up a whole host of unwritten traditions. What was the Lord's attitude towards these traditions? In the Old Testament the Lord said, “To the teaching and to the testimony! If they will not speak according to this word it is because they have no dawn,” meaning, they have no light, no enlightenment from the Lord himself (Isa. 8:20). The Lord went on to say, “This people draw near with their mouth and honor me with their lips, while their hearts are far from me, and their fear of me is a commandment taught by men” (Isa. 29:13). R. B. Kuiper once said, “He who today places something else on a par

with the Bible is practically certain to exalt that other thing above the Bible tomorrow.”<sup>5</sup> Our Lord Jesus said of these teachers of traditions that they were “blind guides” (Matt. 15:14). And Paul told the Corinthians that he wanted them to “learn by us not to go beyond what is written” (1 Cor. 4:6). When it comes to doctrine, we are ever to remember the prohibition of both the Old and New Testaments: we are not to add to or take from the Word of God (Deut. 4:2; Gal. 1:8; Rev. 22:18–19).

### **Sufficient for Godliness**

Third, because the Scriptures are sufficient for how we are to be saved and for what we are to believe concerning God they are also sufficient for godliness. “All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable . . . for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work” (vv. 16–17). The English Puritan, William Ames, said, “All things necessary to salvation are contained in the Scriptures and also those things necessary for the instruction and edification of the church.”<sup>6</sup>

Against all the manmade traditions of Rome about how we are to live the Christian life, the church fathers stand with us. Jerome said, “That which does not have authority from the Scriptures, we can as easily despise as approve.”<sup>7</sup> Again, Jerome said, “The sword of God smites whatever they draw and forges from a pretended apostolic tradition, without the authority and testimony of the Scriptures.”<sup>8</sup> Basil of Caesarea said, “It is a proof of unbelief and a sign of pride either to weaken any of those things which are written or to introduce what is not written.”<sup>9</sup>

### **Conclusion: A Sure Refuge**

Let me conclude by saying we have a sure refuge in the Scriptures for what it means to be a Christian.



What are we to believe about God? Look to the Scriptures. How are we to live before the face of God? Look to the Scriptures. There was an ancient commentary on the Gospel of Matthew that was never completed, and so called *Opus Imperfectum*, the imperfect work. In its comments on Jesus' teaching concerning the last days in Matthew 24, we read this:

There can be no trial of true Christianity; and Christians, which desire to know the truth, whereupon they may build their faith, have no other refuge, but to try and learn this by the scriptures. For . . . heretics have the counterfeit and likeness of those things which are proper to Christ. They have churches, they have the scriptures of God, they have baptism, they have the Lord's supper, and all other things

like the true church; yea, they have Christ himself. He therefore that will know which is the true church of Christ, how may he know it but by the scriptures? Therefore our Lord, knowing that there should be such confusion of things in the latter days, commandeth that Christians which live in the profession of christian faith, and are desirous to settle themselves upon a sure ground of faith, should go to no other thing but to the scriptures.<sup>10</sup>

And because you have this sure refuge for doctrine and doxology, theology and piety, immerse yourself in the Word.

1. Fourth session, first decree, April 8, 1546.
2. *Dei Verbum*, 2.9.

3. Saint Augustine, *On Christian Teaching*, trans. R. P. H. Green, Oxford World Classics (1997; repr., Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 2.31.
4. John Calvin, *Selected Works*, 3:69.
5. R. B. Kuiper, *The Bible Tells Us So* (1968, repr.; Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth, 1978), 22.
6. William Ames, *The Marrow of Theology*, 187.
7. Cited in Turretin, *Institutes*, 1:139.
8. Cited in Turretin, *Institutes*, 1:143.
9. Cited in Turretin, *Institutes*, 1:139.
10. John Jewel, "A Treatise of the Holy Scriptures," *Works*, 4:1170.

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# Reminders as You Enter the New Year

# 2017

## **Don't Worry About the Year 2017**

Don't worry about what you will eat, drink, and wear this year. Your Father in heaven knows your needs. Instead of worrying, "seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness," and all your needs will be given to you according to his will (Matt. 6:33, New King James Version).

After all, why worry about the unknown future of 2017 when you can pray? "O what peace we often forfeit / O what needless pain we bear / All because we do not carry / Everything to God in prayer." Yes, what will take place this year is not known to us, but for us believers in Christ, we know that God is causing all things to work together for his glory and for our good (Rom. 8:28–29). And the word *good* in this passage ultimately refers to our conformity to the image of Christ. The bitter events of 2017 will only make us better believers. Let us therefore welcome the New Year without fear.

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## **Don't Boast About the Year 2017**

Don't brag about what you will do in 2017; you don't know what will happen this year (Prov. 27:1). "You do not know what will happen tomorrow. What is your life? For you are a mist that appears for a little time and then vanishes" (James 4:14, New International Version).

Don't act as if you can control the future. You are not in control of everything. Don't think that you can do and get whatever you want this year. You are not all-powerful. Don't be overconfident about your future plans. You are not all-knowing. You don't even know if you are still alive tomorrow. Thus learn to qualify your plans by saying, "If it is the Lord's will, we will live and do this or that" (James 4:15, New International Version). Nevertheless, no matter what happens, God's will is always best for us because he is all-wise and all-good.

## **Don't Waste the Year 2017**

You waste this year when you use it only for your own pleasure. Remember the rich fool who said to his soul, "Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink, be merry." But God said to him, "Fool! This night your soul will be required of you; then whose will things be which you have provided?" (Luke 12:19–20, New King James Version).

What a wasted life this rich fool had! He used his time, energy, and resources only for himself. With God's help, let's spend all the days of 2017 for God's praise. Let's also seize all God-given opportunities this year to "do good to all people, and especially to those who are of the household of the faith" (Gal. 6:10, New American Standard Bible). Remember, "Only one life, so soon it will pass / Only what's done for Christ will last." A life spent in the service of Christ is the most meaningful life that anyone can live in this world.

*Have a blessed New Year!*

# Bible Studies on Ezra

## Lesson 9: Finishing the House of God, Undivided

Dr. Norman  
De Jong

### Scripture Reading: Ezra 6

### Background Reading: Zechariah 1

#### Discussion Starters

1. What was the response of King Darius to the request he had received from Tattenai and Shethar-Boznai? What did their research uncover? (See Note 6:1.)
2. Compare the text of the decree found in 6:3–5 with that found in 1:2–4. Are they identical? What differences do you note? What additional information does this decree convey? Are the two compatible with each other, or are they contradictory? (See Note 6:3.)
3. How were the expenses of temple construction to be met? At whose instigation were these financial arrangements made? Is that unusual? Is such instruction contradictory to the separation of church and state? (See Note 6:4.)
4. Was Darius sympathetic to the complaints of the Samaritans? Was he willing to compromise in order to pacify them? (See Note 6:6.)
5. When Darius issues his edict requiring the people of Samaria to provide the Levites with “bulls, rams, and lambs for the burnt offerings,” was he committing a sin? Do you think such sacrifices would be pleasing and acceptable in God’s sight? Was King Darius participating in a priestly function and thus violating the separation of duties which God had established? (See Note 6:9.)
6. What additional decree does King Darius issue in order to ensure that

his commands will be obeyed? Is the threat of punishment necessary to good government? (See Note 6:11.)

7. What kind of message does the prophet Zechariah present to the Jews who have been delayed in their rebuilding of the temple? What effect does the prophesying of Haggai and Zechariah have on the people? (Read Zechariah 1; see also Note 6:14.)

8. How much time had elapsed before the temple was finally finished? Why do you suppose that God gives us such precise chronology in the text of Scripture? Are dates and events important to him? (See Note 6:15.)

9. What kind of activities did the Jews organize as a way of celebrating the completion of the temple? What did they use as guidelines for planning and carrying out these celebrations? Is it proper for us to organize dedication feasts upon the completion of our churches and schools?

10. On what specific day did they celebrate the Passover? Why was that day chosen? Whom did they permit to eat the Passover lamb with them? (See Note 6:19.)

#### Text Notes on Discussion Starters

[6:1] Note that the search was first conducted in the archives or library in the city of Babylon, but the discovery was made at Achmetha,

aka Ecbatana, the ancient capital of Media, a city located almost three hundred miles northeast of Babylon. There may have been other copies extant, but this is where Darius’s researchers found that for which they were looking. The Lord preserved a copy of Cyrus’s proclamation in order that his plan might be accomplished. The Lord’s work is not to be stymied by the clever machinations of some Samaritans. God is in control not only of history but also of historical record keeping.

[6:3] What we have in this chapter is probably a copy of the minutes kept as an official record of what King Cyrus had done. In this version we have specific instructions as to the size and character of the temple building to be constructed, along with instructions as to how the costs were to be met. In the earlier version we have the proclamation that was sent throughout the empire, calling the Jews to respond to his invitation to let them go back to Jerusalem. There is no conflict between them.

[6:4] The costs are to be paid by the royal treasury. This is reminiscent of the Northwest Ordinance, passed by the United States Congress in 1787, in which every township in all of the newly formed states were required to set aside section 29 “for the purposes of religion, i.e., for the building of churches and the

payment of ministers' salaries" (De Jong, *Separation of Church and State*, 90). "Let the cost be paid at the king's expense from taxes on the region beyond the River, this is to be given immediately to these men" (6:8). Here is a royal edict, first enunciated by Cyrus, the anointed of God, and now repeated by Darius, requiring payment of the salaries of the priests and the Levites, the ones who are specifically assigned to build and oversee this project, out of the royal treasury! In keeping with this divinely motivated instruction, it would be perfectly legitimate to continue the practices of the Northwest Ordinance and to pay for the construction of church buildings and the payment of ministers' salaries from the local tax base. Such might be unthinkable in the twenty-first century in the United States, but we must always be reminded that our culture does not determine truth or falsehood. King Darius is acting here in complete harmony with the explicit command of God and is reproducing and endorsing the proclamation of Cyrus, which God the Holy Spirit had worked in Cyrus. If we are not careful and thorough in studying the books of Ezra and Nehemiah, we might deduce that we have here the source of confusion within the church on the matter of the relationship between the church and the state. In contrast to these disparate views, the language of the Belgic Confession still seems to be most in harmony with the teachings of God's Holy Word. Kings and princes and governors are truly appointed by God to do his will, just as Nebuchadnezzar and Cyrus and Darius were all put in positions of power at a particular moment in history to carry forward the plans of God for his people.

**[6:6]** Darius makes his sympathies abundantly clear. "Stay away from there. Do not interfere with the work on this temple of God. . . . Let the governor . . . and the Jewish elders

rebuild this house of God on its site" (vv. 6–7). God is telling us, through the instructions and edict of Darius, that one of the tasks of the state is truly that of protecting the churches of the land and preventing any kind of opposition to them. In the words of the Belgic Confession again, the magistrates must "protect the sacred ministry, that the kingdom of Christ may thus be promoted" (Art. 36). This is not a conflict between religious and irreligious people but between competing religions, between people who had quite different religious views, each one wanting to see his religious perspective dominate. During the time of the return from exile we saw that the Israelites had been commanded by God, through his agent, Cyrus, to take on the project of rebuilding the temple in Jerusalem. In his proclamation, Cyrus had commanded the people of the region, that is, the Samaritans, to support this project with their gifts and contributions (1:4). They had to help pay for this project. After contributing financially, they also wanted to participate in the building project itself. That is where the people of God drew the line, however, and insisted that only those who worshipped God according to the dictates of his Word could participate. That precipitated the fight, the hostility toward the church. That began the campaign of legal harassment, lies and propaganda and distortions, which culminated in King Artaxerxes's stop-work order (4:21). Darius now reverses the situation and compels them, under threat of severe punishment, to stop interfering and to start contributing.

**[6:9]** Both King Cyrus and King Darius seem to have an understanding of what was involved in God-pleasing worship. "Whatever is needed—young bulls, rams, male lambs for burnt offerings to the God of heaven, and wheat, salt, wine and oil, as requested by the priests in Jerusalem—must be given them

daily without fail" (v. 9). They knew that these offerings and sacrifices were not one-time affairs but required on a daily basis. Darius also knows that the offerings and sacrifices must be pleasing to God, that they must produce "sacrifices of sweet aromas to the God of heaven" (v. 10). The source of the animals was not the overriding concern of Darius or of the Jews, but the need for a "broken and contrite heart" (Ps. 51:17; 34:18; Isa. 66:2). In fitting conclusion, Darius asks the remnant to pray "to the God of heaven" for him and for his sons. Darius seems to have the same kind of reverence for God as that demonstrated by King Cyrus. He calls him "the God of heaven" (6:10), suggesting that he has a high reverence for God and has come to fear him. Paul gives similar commands to Timothy: "I urge then, first of all, that requests, prayers, intercession and thanksgiving be made for everyone—for kings and all those in authority, that we may live peaceful and quiet lives in all godliness and holiness" (1 Tim. 1:1–2).

**[6:11]** Darius throws the entire weight of the Medo-Persian empire behind his decree, promising to punish anyone who interferes by pulling a beam from the house of that person, impaling the offender on it, and making his house "a pile of rubble" (6:11). Darius knows, too, that God is sovereign and can "overthrow any king or people who lifts a hand to change this decree or to destroy this temple in Jerusalem" (v. 12). Darius, for one, has come to recognize and confess that the "Most High is sovereign over the kingdoms of men and gives them to anyone He wishes" (Dan. 4:17, 25, 32). The threat of punishment is often necessary to instill fear into the hearts of those who are naturally inclined to disobedience. Darius's decree is reminiscent of those issued by King Nebuchadnezzar, but the intent is significantly different (Dan. 2:5–6). The entire covenant



theme of Scripture is predicated on the consequences of disobedience, with God threatening his people with dire consequences if they refused to obey his law (Deut. 27; 28; 29; 30; 31:16–21). Idle threats are non-productive of desired behavior, but the enforcement of righteous threats produces the peaceable fruit of righteousness (Heb. 12:11).

**[6:14]** God is powerfully at work. Through the decrees of God's servant King Darius, Tattenai, Shethar-Boznai, and their allies are persuaded to stop the persecution of the Jews and to contribute to their needs, just as the king had commanded. God also uses his prophets Haggai and Zechariah to stir the people to renewed dedication and effort. Zechariah forcefully reminds the people why they had been sent into exile and then pleads with them not to imitate the sins of

their fathers (Zech. 1:1–6). The call to repentance brings desired results and is reinforced with the vision of the Angel of the Lord riding a red horse among the myrtle trees in the hollow. The vision occurs at night (Zech. 1:8); is set in a grove of dark trees in a ravine (v. 8); and represents the foreboding scene in which the Jews find themselves. In their time of despair, the Angel of the Lord comes with a wonderful outburst of jealous love (vv. 13–14), promising that "My house shall be built in [Jerusalem]" (v. 16) and "My cities shall again spread out through prosperity" (v. 17).

**[6:15]** God is not at all happy with the fact that work on his house has come to a standstill. He has sent his prophets Haggai and Zechariah to preach to the people and to spur them on to action. God initiates

action by coming to Haggai and to Zechariah with visions and a call to get back to work. The Lord says, "Give careful thought to your ways. Go up into the mountains and bring down timber and build the house, so that I may take pleasure in it and be honored" (Hag. 1:7–8). "So the Lord stirred up the spirit of Zerubbabel . . . and the spirit of Joshua . . . and the spirit of the whole remnant of the people" (Hag.1:14). In response to the working of the Holy Spirit, "they came and began to work on the house of the Lord Almighty, their God" (v. 14). The original work on the temple began under the reign of Cyrus, in 536 B.C. Then, "in the beginning of the reign of Artaxerxes" (Ezra 4:6), the work was halted "by force of arms" (v. 23). The work stoppage continued for sixteen years, "until the second year of the reign of Darius" (Ezra 4:24; cf. Hag. 1:1; Zech. 1:1), when the work was allowed to continue (520 B.C.). Finally, the temple was completed on the third day of Adar, in the sixth year of the reign of Darius, in the year 515 B.C. Since the work had originally been started, twenty-one years have passed. No wonder God had become displeased and the Jews had become discouraged.

**[6:19]** God had specified, through Moses, that the Passover was to be celebrated in the first month of the year, with the lamb chosen on the tenth day and slaughtered on the fourteenth day (Exod. 12:2, 3, 6). In obedience to God's commands, the Jews want to do everything "as it is written in the Book of Moses" (v. 18). Keenly aware of the holiness of God, they only permit those to participate who are "ritually clean" (v. 20) and "all who had separated themselves from the filth of the nations" (v. 21). Paul reinforces this need for holiness when he reminds the Corinthians to examine themselves, lest they eat and drink "in an unworthy manner" and thus bring judgment upon themselves (1 Cor. 11:27–29).

# Bible Studies on Ezra

## Lesson 10: A Second Wave of Blessings

### Scripture Reading: Ezra 7

Background Reading: Esther 1:1–8; 2:5–7;  
5:9–14; 7; 9:1–4; 26–27

### Discussion Starters

1. When do the events of chapter 7 occur? How much time has elapsed since the end of chapter 6? (See Notes 7:1 and 7:8.)
2. Who was Ezra? Why is such a long genealogy given? To whom does he trace his origins? Why is this important? (See Note 7:2.)
3. What was the greatest desire of Ezra's heart? What was his highest goal or ambition? (See Note 7:10.)
4. What is the attitude of the Persian king Artaxerxes toward the worship of Jehovah? How does he respond to the requests with which Ezra had presented him? (See Note 7:12.)
5. What does King Artaxerxes offer to Ezra? Is there some explanation for his amazing generosity? (Read the background passages from Esther; see Note 7:13.2.)
6. Is King Artaxerxes acting alone, or on the advice of his advisors and cabinet officials? Are they simply granting Ezra's request, or are they sending him on official government business? (See Note 7:14.)
7. What limits did the king place on the discretionary spending activities of Ezra and those who accompanied him? Did the king specify any spending priorities or restrictions? (See Note 7:18.)
8. Why did Haman and his co-conspirators demonstrate such hatred toward Mordecai and the

Jews? Was it only because of Mordecai's refusal to bow down to him, or were there other possible reasons? (Read Esther 3:1–10.)

9. Were there any provisions in the king's decree that might have been particularly offensive to Haman and the other high officials in the Persian government? (See Note 7:24.)

10. How does Ezra respond to the decree that was issued by King Artaxerxes? Is this an appropriate reaction to the amazing provisions contained in that decree? (See Note 7:27.)

### Text Notes on Discussion Starters

[7:1] From the end of chapter 6 to the beginning of chapter 7, there is a gap of fifty-seven years. Chapter 6 ends with the celebration of the dedication of the temple in the year 515 B.C., while the beginning of chapter 7 finds us in the seventh year of the reign of King Artaxerxes (v. 7), which would put us in the year 458 B.C. Almost six decades have passed, with no hint in the book of Ezra of what happened during that time. But we do find some fascinating connections if we study the book of Esther, which tells us some very significant events in the lives of God's people, as they continued to live in the midst of the Persian Empire. If we look ahead to the book of Nehemiah, we also pick up information about later events during the reign of Artaxerxes, when he allows Nehemiah to

go to Jerusalem. The Holy Spirit obviously wants us to see the Bible as an interconnected whole, giving us parts of the story in the book of Ezra, parts in Nehemiah, parts in Chronicles, parts in Haggai, parts in Zechariah, and important parts in Esther. We need to be reminded, too, that this King Artaxerxes in chapter 7 is not the same one mentioned in 4:7. That king ruled for only seven months during the year 521 B.C., while the Artaxerxes of chapter 7 and the book of Esther ruled from 465 to 424 B.C. We would have similar confusion if we wrote about President Adams or President Roosevelt. Without specifying first names, we would not be able to distinguish between Theodore or Franklin Delano Roosevelt. But even first names would not be sufficient to distinguish between the two John Adamses. In this case, you need to go one step further and distinguish between John and John Quincy. Such is the situation in the time of Ezra.

[7:2] Zerubbabel and Jeshua are either too old to be of service, or they have died. Haggai and Zechariah, the prophets sent by God to minister to his people, are also probably dead by now. What shall become of the cause of God and of Israel if they have no one to lead them? All the people can do is trust that God will raise up new leaders to take their place. Ezra, who is considered to be the author of this book, now finds it necessary to write about himself,

as he comes upon the scene. He describes himself in a somewhat unusual fashion, giving his pedigree or genealogy back through sixteen generations, back to no less than Aaron, the brother of Moses and the great-grandson of Levi. It is instructive to compare the genealogy of Ezra:

### Ezra as recorded in three different places

<b>Ezra 7:1-5</b>	<b>I Chronicles 6:50-53</b>	<b>I Chronicles 6:1-15</b>
		Levi
		Kohath
		Amram
Aaron	Aaron	Aaron
Eleazar	Eleazar	Eleazar
Phinehas	Phinehas	Phinehas
Abishua	Abishua	Abishua
Bukki	Bukki	Bukki
Uzzi	Uzzi	Uzzi
Zerahiah	Zerahiah	Zerahiah
Meraioth	Meraioth	Meraioth
	Amariah	Amariah
	Ahitub	Ahitub
	Zadok	Zadok
	Ahimaaz	Ahimaaz
		Azariah
		Johanan
Azariah		Azariah
Amariah		Amariah
Ahitub		Ahitub
Zadok		Zadok
Shallum		Shallum
Hilkiah		Hilkiah
Azariah		Azariah
Seraiah		Seraiah
		Jehozadak
<b>EZRA</b>		

This Ezra, who came from Babylon, "was a teacher well versed in the Law of Moses, which the Lord, the God of Israel, had given" (v. 6). Here was a man who had a pedigree that was outstanding, whose favor with the king was beyond doubt, and who was obviously being blessed by God. He was a man of great learning, conversant with the Scriptures and thoroughly acquainted with the law of Moses. According to Jewish tradition, Ezra had collected and collated all the copies of the Law that he could find. In addition, he collected all the other parts of the Old Testament canon and made them available to the people. Here is an outstanding Old Testament scholar!



**[7:8]** Ezra tells us that he left the Persian capital on the first day of the first month of the seventh year of King Artaxerxes's reign, arriving in Jerusalem in the fifth month of that same year. We learn from Esther that this same king had Queen Vashti deposed in "the third year of his reign" (Esther 1:3) and that Esther became queen in the "tenth month of the seventh year of his reign" (Esther 2:16). Esther and her adopted father, Mordecai, are both highly favored by the king, thus offering one explanation for the generosity of King Artaxerxes toward the Jews. Later, though, in the twelfth year of the king (Esther 3:7), the wicked Haman plots to have all the Jews annihilated (3:8–15).

**[7:10]** Notice the priority of God in this situation: the law of God must be brought to that far-off land, and the person who must do that must have the qualifications of an excellent teacher. If God's people are to worship him aright, if they are to love and obey him as they ought, they must know the law of God. In order to know it, they must be taught. Ezra fits the bill, "for Ezra had devoted himself to the study and observance of the Law of the Lord, and to teaching its decrees and laws in Israel."

**[7:12]** The history of Persia is well documented in the annals of what we call secular history. Ancient history books tell us that Darius, who helped Zerubbabel complete the temple in Jerusalem, was king from 521 to 486 B.C. During his reign he greatly expanded the empire and did much to conquer Asia Minor, Greece, and much of the Balkan states. He was followed to the throne by his son Xerxes, who ruled from 486 to 465 B.C. and who was noted for his continued subjugation of Greece and Asia Minor in what continued to be known as the Persian wars, conducted from 512 to 470 B.C. During this time in history Persia has expanded its empire all

the way from the Indus River on the east, through Asia Minor to Greece on the west, and through Egypt into the Sudan and into North Africa on the south. No other empire in history has reached such proportions as this. Persia was noted for its toleration of local religions, allowing conquered peoples in various parts of the empire to practice their own religion. The empire is also known for its system of government administration, with governors and satraps over each of twenty-one districts or satrapies, and which were further subdivided into 127 provinces during the time of Xerxes (Esther 1:1). The system of roads and communications made it possible to send edicts and proclamations all over the empire in a relatively short time (Esther 3:12–15).

**[7:13.1]** The king shows nothing but the highest respect for the worship of God, even though the dominant religion in Persia is known as Zoroastrianism, after its founder Zoroaster. This religion had some basic similarities to Christianity and specifically to the battle between good and evil. According to Zoroaster, God had created the world for the purpose of providing human beings a stage on which the powers of good and evil would oppose each other. All the classic characteristics of the great antithesis between God and Satan are present in this Persian religion, including the rewards of eternal peace for the good and eternal damnation for the evil. Artaxerxes's greeting of "perfect peace" to Ezra may reflect that dimension of the national religion. Because of this kind of religion, the kings of Persia tried to establish what we would call a moral monarchy. Kings Darius, Xerxes, and Artaxerxes are very public in their praise of the God of heaven and strive to do what is noble and honorable for the people of Israel. Apparently these kings were fearful of the consequences if they should offend the God of heaven (see 7:23). During the early

history of the Christian church these teachings of Zoroaster resurfaced under the name of Manicheism, which proved very troublesome to the early church and were held to for a time by Saint Augustine.

**[7:13.2]** From the book of Esther we know that Xerxes is king of Persia, that his capital is in Susa, and that his empire covered 127 provinces stretching from India to Cush (Egypt) (Esther 1:1). The book of Esther tells us how Xerxes put away his first queen because she refused for some unknown reason to appear before the king and all his guests, and then chose Esther to be queen in her place. We also gather numerous details about the way in which God protected his people while they were living under the rule of the Persians. Events in the Persian capital of Susa threatened the continuity of God's purposes in redemptive history. If Haman's murderous plans had been allowed to succeed, the future of God's chosen people would have been in jeopardy, and even the appearance of the Messiah. God worked his will in the lives of King Xerxes, Queen Esther, Haman, and Mordecai so that the evil forces of Haman are defeated and the good forces of the Jews are protected and made to prosper. Haman wanted to destroy all the Jews, including all those in Jerusalem who had gone there with Zerubbabel and who had finished building the temple. God used Mordecai and Esther to prevent that from happening. According to Josephus, Xerxes had a son whom they named Cyrus, but whom the Greeks called Artaxerxes (Josephus, p. 334). Such an assertion would not be contrary to the book of Esther.

**[7:14]** The chief advisors and their role in government are named for us in Esther 1:13–15.

**[7:24]** Four elements in the decrees of Artaxerxes must have proven particularly offensive to Haman: 1) Take whatever you need out of the royal treasury for

whatever need you might have. 2) No taxes, tributes, or duties are to be imposed on any of the priests, Levites, or temple workers. From the highest of the priests to the least of the temple workers, no one is to be taxed. 3) Ezra is empowered to appoint magistrates and judges and is told to teach the law of God to whoever does not know it. 4) All that knew the laws of Ezra's God were to be under the jurisdiction of these judges, so the people would be judged according to God's laws and not according to the laws of a pagan king in Persia. Haman's complaint that "their laws are different from all other people's, and they do not keep the king's laws" has some validity in fact, but was done originally with the expressed intent of the king and his highest advisors.

**[7:27]** If Ezra had been a profane man, he might have surmised that the Jews had earned these blessings because the king loved Esther more than all the other women (Esther 2:17) or because of the way Mordecai had spared the king from

assassination (Esther 2:19–23). Ezra knows that it was not the goodness of the Jewish people, not his sterling character or his knowledge of the law or his ability as a priest that brought about all these blessings on the people of God. Ezra knew, too, that it was not because of the good graces of King Artaxerxes that made him so kindly disposed toward God's people and toward the worship of God at Jerusalem. Praise be to God! Ezra concludes this chapter with a proper recognition: "Blessed be the Lord God of our fathers, who has put such a thing as this in the king's heart, to beautify the house of the Lord which is in Jerusalem." God works his will, sometimes through dramatic miracles such as opening the Red Sea or making the sun stand still in the sky, but more often through the power of the Holy Spirit, who quietly and powerfully works in people's hearts and minds so that they do the things that God wants them to do. The book of Ezra opens with the pronouncement that "the Lord moved the heart of

Cyrus, king of Persia" (1:1). Now Ezra is acknowledging the same kind of action in the heart of Artaxerxes, so that he would make all these provisions for the trip of Ezra and for the worship of God in Jerusalem. "The hand of the Lord my God was upon me" is a theme that comes through powerfully and repeatedly (7:6, 9, 28; 8:18, 22, 31). God is sovereign, demonstrating that sovereignty through responsible agents. God used Esther and Mordecai to preserve his people, and he also used King Artaxerxes to provide provisions, protection, and tax relief for his church. Now God is using Ezra the priest and scribe to lead another wave of exiles back home to Jerusalem. Ezra is properly humble and never takes any credit for himself but always gives all the credit to God.

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## TEACHING VACANCY – NEW ZEALAND

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*"The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge."  
—Proverbs 1:7*

## Introduction

Together we've been looking at what I believe to be some of the more glaring weaknesses of conservative Reformed and Presbyterian circles. Perhaps we might look at these as our seven deadly sins.

I confess that my thoughts about these matters aren't grounded in extensive research or the product of statistical data. Rather, they arise from my own experience, however limited, as a child of the Reformed faith and now as a pastor of the same.

It should also be said that while I've tried to capture our corporate shortcomings, in no way am I suggesting that we all are guilty of these things all of the time.

This series is admittedly diagnostic. Repentance that always stays general and never gets particular is dangerously close to not being repentance at all. It is helpful, indeed necessary, to locate specific areas where we collectively miss the mark.

But diagnostics are never the goal. Repentance is more than godly sorrow; it's turning to God in Christ for the mercy of forgiveness and the power to change. Admitting our tendencies is one thing. Growing in grace is another.

## Retreatism Diagnosed

Having considered legalism, familiarism, conservatism, elitism, and tribalism, we now turn the page to a sixth ism: what I call retreatism.

Though an uncommon word, retreatism is easy enough to understand. A quick dictionary glance defines it as "the attitude of being resigned to abandonment of an original goal or the means of attaining it." Another puts it this way: "A word describing the cowardly compulsion to flee."

Retreatism is a concept that comes from the field of battle, when a battalion withdraws prematurely out of fear. When applied to the church, retreatism is the practice of creating Christian ghettos or holy huddles, to the effect that our witness in the world is almost nonexistent, largely due to the fact that the only people we know are people like us.

Driven by fear of worldly influences, this mentality is driven by protection more than influence. Not wanting to be sucked into the spirit of the age, retreatism creates Christian subgroups for nearly everything. The result is a community that rubs shoulders with only itself, content to stay on the fringes as much as possible, just hoping to stay uncontaminated from the culture around it.

A community that immediately comes to mind that fits this diagnosis is the Amish. Wishing not to be conformed to this world, they have chosen to deliberately and sharply distance themselves from the world next door. They are content with a simpler life.

There is something attractive about them. In a culture run wild, the Amish are a breath of fresh air. There is much we can learn from their choice to stand out in these times. Paul is clear: "Do not be conformed to this world" (Rom. 12:2). So is John: "Do not love the world or the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. For all that is in the world—the desires of the flesh and the desires of the eyes and pride of life—is not from the Father but is from the world. And the world is passing away along with its desires, but whoever does the will of God abides forever" (1 John 2:15–17).

But is withdrawal what Jesus had in mind? Are holy huddles and Christian ghettos what God intends for us? Does he wish for us to completely separate ourselves, to build up walls and disassociate ourselves from everything that doesn't fit our Christian criteria?

I don't think retreatism is what Jesus had in mind for the church. In his high priestly prayer, our Lord prayed the following: "I do not ask that you take them out of the world, but that you keep from the

evil one" (John 17:15). Notice, Jesus said that his desire was not that his church create its own separate cities, but that the Father would protect us from Satan.

Perhaps you are thinking: But we aren't Amish! We haven't retreated! We drive their cars, shop in their stores, share their highways, and maneuver among non-Christians all the time.

But I contend that we have retreated, just in more subtle ways.

few people ask because the only people we spend time with are people just like us?

Retreatism assumes that we are safe just as long as sufficient protectors are in place. If we huddle up and create our own groups, then we'll be less like to be contaminated.

The problem with that assumption, of course, is that it assumes that worldliness is all outside of us. But the Bible teaches something different. Worldliness is in all of us. I could

long as I don't go to that school, then I'm good. As long as I don't belong to that denomination, then I'm godly. As long as I don't vote that way, then I'm ok.

But worldliness is a powerful thing. It's not just what happens out there, to other people. It's alive and well in here. Paul warned about people who will have an appearance of godliness while denying its power.

Sometimes we can even justify sin as long as it takes place in our bubble. All that really matters is



## Symptoms of Retreatism

Our retreatism isn't seen in the clothing we wear (that's a topic for another time), or in the technology we use (or don't use), or in what we drive down the highway.

But I'm afraid we are guilty of losing our saltiness. We have created so many little subcultures that I'm not sure we've really learned how to give an answer for the hope that is within us.

When is the last time someone asked you the reason for the hope within you? Could it be that very

lock myself in a room, away from every outside influence, and I'd still have my flesh to contend with.

Could it be that we are fooling ourselves into thinking that because we have Christian schools and Christian churches and Christian businesses and Christian music that we're all safe and sound? Or that these things, as institutions, are the definition of holiness?

I fear that we define godliness by what we're not more than by what we're called to be. As

that we don't commit the really big public sins that people in the world fall prey to. So while we shake our heads in disbelief at such atrocities as homosexuality, we put up with and even laugh off evils such as pride, drunkenness, and gossip.

Another result of retreatism is that we tend to be lousy at welcoming outsiders into our fellowships. Whether it's fear that they might shake up our traditions or just plain skepticism, we often come across as standoffish instead of warm and inviting.

It may be that we are living out of fear rather than faith. Fear that worldliness might creep into our churches. We want to protect our kids. We don't want to be contaminated.

But the Bible teaches we already are contaminated. Sin makes every one of us unclean! Yet this is why the gospel of God's free grace is so remarkable, so astounding, so surprising. Even while we were God's enemies, Christ died for us!

He died and rose again to cleanse our guilty consciences. He came to make the unclean clean. The gospel liberates us from an us-and-them mentality. It frees us to love our neighbors, to engage

them, to listen to them, and to share with them the good news of salvation to everyone who believes.

### Conclusion

We are in grave danger of losing our influence in the culture. Part of this stems from the culture's influence on us, to be sure. But much of it comes from the sin of retreatism, of shrinking back in fear instead of standing up for what we believe in.

May God grant us the grace to know what it means to live in the world but not of the world, but also to repent for how we've confused piety for fearful protectionism.

After all it was Jesus who said, "You are the salt of the earth, but if salt has lost its taste, how shall its saltiness be restored? It is no longer good for anything except to be thrown out and trampled under people's feet. You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hidden. Nor do people light a lamp and put it under a basket, but on a stand, and it gives light to all in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven" (Matt. 5:13-16).

### Rev. Michael J. Schout

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For informative travel information plus some Martin Luther history and location video, visit: <https://youtu.be/NgCOE9tv8el>

## Germany's Hamburg and the Luther Trail



Hamburg, Germany's mighty port city, has risen from the ashes of World War II with a gleaming new skyline and a brisk creative energy. From there, we visit the great historic sights of Martin Luther and the Reformation (Erfurt, Wittenberg, and Wartburg Castle) before finishing in the capital of Franconia: wine-loving Würzburg.



Have you ever noticed a change in your church's youth group right after attending a Reformed Youth Services (RYS) convention or participating in a Reformed Mission Services trip? In addition to gushing with enthusiasm for their favorite memories of the week or the countless new friends they made, there's often a euphoria that's harder to put into words. Many times I came home from a retreat or mission trip refreshed simply by realizing the existence of hundreds or even thousands of like-minded young believers. It is one thing to know and profess that the church is united, though "spread and dispersed over the whole world" (Belgic Confession Art. 27); it is another thing altogether to catch a glimpse of that real unity at a

particular time and place.

I experienced this same sort of enthusiasm in an even bigger way during the 2016 Reformed Presbyterian International Conference, held July 23–29 in Marion, Indiana. Attending the conference as a representative of my college choir, I witnessed the fellowship of about two thousand Christians comprising about 25 percent of the Reformed Presbyterian Church of North America for a week of teaching, worship, and fellowship. The conference has been held every four years for nearly a century, and it has become a fixture of church life for many in the RPCNA.

Attending the RP conference as a URCNA member was a

particularly interesting experience for me. Although I've grown somewhat familiar with the RPCNA through my time at Geneva, its denominational college, I came away from the convention impressed at the real extent of our churches' similarities: a commitment to a solidly Reformed world and life view, an almost incomprehensible family tree as well as increasing diversity, and vibrant church plants and mission efforts both at home and abroad. In terms of ecclesiastical closeness, the RPCNA and URCNA aren't just sisters, they're practically twins.

The downside of conferences like this one is that the sublime glimpses of true unity across the visible church quickly fade into the

mundane routine of worship in a local congregation. Whether it's the afterglow of a denominational conference or a smaller event like RYS, our sense of connection to the broader body of Christ is easily lost. So how can we cultivate and preserve a lasting sense of unity between Reformed churches in the twenty-first century? I'd like to explore this question from a layman's perspective in two ways, first by noting three false perceptions of unity and then by observing three steps toward true unity on denominational, congregational, and local levels.

### **1. False unity develops from pride in ethnicity, family history, or denominational identity.**

You've probably heard the aphorism, "If you're not Dutch, you're not much." While this false view of unity has often been caricatured, it is easy for churches and individuals to continue honoring this insidious lie. The presence of distinct "in crowds" and "out crowds" in a church indicates a seriously distorted view of unity, one that will ultimately kill a local congregation.

A similar kind of false unity can arise from a misplaced sense of denominational pride. Many of us know of churches that have become distracted from the real goal by being caught up in the glow of being one particular denomination—yes, even being Reformed. Such pride tends to result in blindness to one's faults and an inability to see the real destination of the church: not of becoming the best example of a particular denomination, but of becoming like Jesus.

### **2. False unity develops from abandoning true doctrine.**

A few of my acquaintances in Reformed and Presbyterian circles

have expressed serious concerns about the doctrinal faithfulness of the United Reformed Churches in North America. Probing deeper, I discovered that they had confused the URCNA with one of the large liberal affiliations of churches that also have the word *united* in their names. Indeed, while it is untrue of the URCNA, many groups of churches that have banded together are united merely in the abandonment of the truth. Under phrases like "coexist" or "doctrine divides," such groups have become reduced to the least common denominator, often fulfilling a role closer to that of a social club than anything else. These churches may be united, but not necessarily united in the truth. Their congregations may be historic or significant for other or cultural reasons, but they will lack loyalty to Jesus Christ as the only Head of the church (Belgic Confession Art. 29).

### **3. False unity develops from an insistence on identical doctrine.**

While most readers would probably utter a hearty "Amen" to the previous point, the third kind of false unity may strike a little closer to home. Especially in the Reformed tradition, individuals or churches sometimes create their own arbitrary standards of doctrine that others must meet in order to share fellowship. Sadly, there are many congregations that have fallen into this trap. Demanding absolute conformity to nonessential matters tends to set the church on a path of repeating schisms and fractures rather than steady growth in unity.

But what about the value of a credal, confessional Reformed church? The creeds and confessions serve a dual purpose: they not only set the church's standards for doctrine and life but also set the allowable margin for differences of conviction within

the church. The doctrinal standards and church order guard us from false teaching, but by their silence on certain issues they allow for a spectrum of opinion on the nonessentials. Christian school or homeschooling? Quarterly, monthly, or weekly communion? These are important debates for the church to have, but the absence of a confessional position on these matters shows that the discussion should occur within the walls of the church in a spirit of mutual edification, not used as grounds for judging the maturity or validity of fellow believers' faith.

Having pointed out three false paths to unity, let me conclude with three steps toward vibrant, true unity within and across denominations.

### **1. True unity requires humility.**

In contrast to the self-sufficient pride mentioned earlier, developing true unity in the church begins with an awareness of our equal unworthiness before God. As Paul challenged the schismatic church at Corinth, "What do you have that you did not receive? If then you received it, why do you boast as if you did not receive it?" (1 Cor. 4:7 ESV). The greatest attributes a denomination can possess—a commitment to the truth, a vibrant multigenerational presence, and so on—each comes from God alone. When we recognize this, we will be both thankful for what we have received and eager to share it with others.

Unity will grow as well when we realize that each church plays a tiny, tiny part in the grand scope of God's redemption plan. For most of us, that includes being grafted as Gentiles into the true Israel, as Paul describes in Romans 11. Again, this is cause for great humility as we recognize the grace and mercy of God in giving us a place with those who fear his name (Ps. 61).

## 2. True unity benefits from persecution.

Throughout history, the times of strongest persecution against the church have often also been the times when it enjoys the most health and vitality. Again, the Belgic Confession describes the state of the church in the world this way: "And this holy Church is preserved or supported by God against the rage of the whole world; though it sometimes for a while appears very small, and in the eyes of men to be reduced to nothing; as during the perilous reign of Ahab the Lord reserved unto Him seven thousand men who had not bowed their knees to Baal" (Art. 27).

Persecution can lead to greater unity in at least two ways. First, it has the effect of separating the true church from the false church. As Christianity becomes an object of shame and scorn to our culture, churches that exist for merely historical reasons will slowly fade away—a regression already visible across the globe. Second, persecution has the effect of drawing the true church closer together as different parts of the body rely on each other for support. In some cases, the nonessential issues that formerly divided us will seem insignificant compared with the challenges the church as a whole will face. While such an outlook may seem pessimistic, times of persecution can be unmatched opportunities

for the members of churches and denominations to grow closer together.

## 3. True unity grows from a willingness to learn from each other.

Ultimately, true unity rises from an awareness that we can benefit from each other's perspectives from different parts of the family of God. Insofar as we all confess the Bible to be infallible and authoritative, there are many aspects of our polity, worship, and church life that can be sharpened by our contact with other denominations. As one of the attendees at the Reformed Presbyterian International Conference put it, this unity just begins with recognizing that we can learn from each other. Perhaps RPCNA ministers and members would benefit from experiencing the URCNA's strong tradition of catechetical preaching or its church planting practices. Conversely, URCNA members would likely be refreshed by the RPCNA's commitment to Christian higher education, its extensive foreign mission efforts, and fellowship events like its international conference.

Although synodical decisions are helpful in establishing closer ecumenical relations with another denomination, these steps toward further unity must be reflected on a local level. The possibilities are endless and often very practical:

In West Sayville, my home church invited local OPC congregations to join with us for three nights of learning songs from the new *Trinity Psalter Hymnal* this summer. Similarly, the NAPARC member churches in the Pittsburgh area meet each fall for a joint evening worship service. Traditions like these are just a few of the many ways to build familiarity and, perhaps, unity with other denominations.

The challenge to pursue unity is one that the church has wrestled with since apostolic times. In our callings to be faithful members of local congregations, we typically have few opportunities to glimpse the broader scope of the body of Christ. Often, too, there are significant differences in tradition, heritage, or location that impair churches' efforts for further fellowship. Yet as we vigorously contend for the truth of God's Word, we will find ourselves encouraged in the battle as we fight together.

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## Letter to the Editor

The Reformed Fellowship Board received Christmas greetings from an inmate in California. He receives *The Outlook*, and in an enclosed letter he wrote:

"I really enjoy reading each issue from cover to cover. I then pass them along for others to read. Then I follow up and ask them questions on the articles, and this usually starts a godly conversation."

If you would like to have your letter appear in this column, send to the interim editor at: [dan8vandyke@att.net](mailto:dan8vandyke@att.net) or send in mail to: Reformed Fellowship, Inc., 3500 Danube Dr. SW, Grandville, MI 49418-8387



# What Is Covenant Theology, and Why Should I Care?

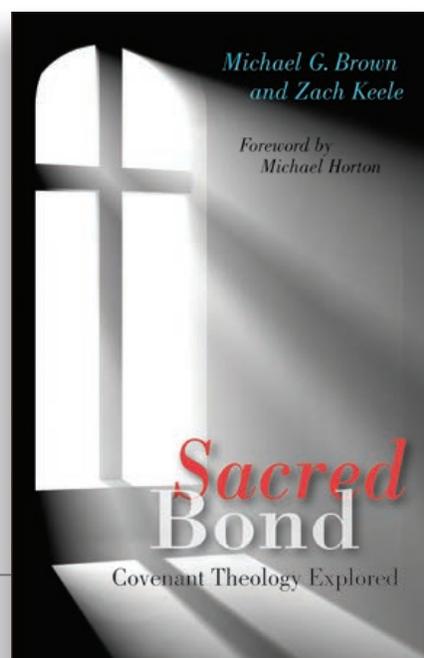
Rev. Michael G. Brown

Covenant. As anyone who has read the Bible knows, that word seems to be one of God's favorites. Yet it is more than just a word that appears frequently (more than three hundred times); it is one of the most important themes of sacred Scripture. The book of Genesis is primarily about God's covenant with Abraham and his descendants. The book of Exodus is in large part about God's covenant at Mount Sinai with the nation Israel. Throughout the rest of the Old Testament—in its historical, poetical, and prophetic books—we find continual references to these two covenants: the Abrahamic and the Mosaic. We then come to the New Testament and read of Jesus instituting a new covenant, the same covenant of which the prophet Jeremiah foretold (Jer. 31:31–34). The apostle Paul and the writer to the Hebrews elaborate on the vital differences between the old (Mosaic) and new covenants (Gal. 3–4; 2 Cor. 3; Heb. 7–10). On top of this, the Bible also reveals how God made important covenants with Noah and David. What do all of these covenants mean? Does it really make any difference how well we understand them?

Answering those questions is the task of covenant theology. Covenant theology is a way of reading and interpreting the Bible through the lens of God's covenants. It is not an interpretive grid that we impose upon Scripture, nor is it a system invented by Calvinists in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Rather, it is the Bible's own method of interpreting itself. This is why covenant theology has enjoyed such a prominent place in the Reformed

tradition. With its emphasis upon the authority of Scripture, the Protestant Reformation saw covenant theology as God's prescribed method for interpreting his revelation, for covenant is the way in which God has chosen to relate to human beings. It is impossible, therefore, to interpret Scripture faithfully without understanding the meaning of these covenants. As J. I. Packer put it, "The Word of God is not properly understood till it is viewed within a covenantal frame."<sup>1</sup>

This article is the first in a series that will concisely explore covenant theology. In each forthcoming issue of *The Outlook*, we will briefly examine one of the covenants revealed in Scripture, working our way chronologically from the covenant of redemption to the new covenant. If you find these short essays to whet your appetite for further study, consider reading *Sacred Bond: Covenant Theology Explored*, a book I wrote with co-author Zach Keele and published by Reformed Fellowship. That resource expands on the material found in these articles.



## What Is a Covenant?

Before we begin our survey of the covenants, we must answer the question: What is a covenant? Covenant is not a word we use in everyday conversation. Yet, in Reformed circles we tend to toss it around quite a bit. We thank God for his covenant mercies. We talk about our children as heirs of the covenant. We even use it to give our local congregations names like Covenant Reformed Church. But what does the word *covenant* mean? We can define it like this: *a covenant is an oath-bound relationship that implies sanctions*. Some covenants are mutual agreements, while others are imposed unilaterally from one party to another. Some have equal parties, some unequal. The nature of the relationship between the parties can vary, depending on the covenant. Some covenants create an intimate relationship, while others are impersonal. All covenants, in some fashion, involve oaths and promises and imply (if not explicitly state) consequences if the oath taker fails to keep his promise. In this sense, the relationship in the covenant has a certain legality.

If this sounds rather technical and complex, it may be helpful to reflect on the kind of covenants with which we are familiar in daily life. For example, consider the marriage relationship. Marriage is a covenant. A man and a woman formally commit themselves to each other by taking vows, pledging their love and undying loyalty to the other partner in the covenant. A marriage ceremony is essentially a covenant-making ceremony. The

# COVENANTS

The Covenant of Redemption

The Covenant of Works

The Covenant of Grace

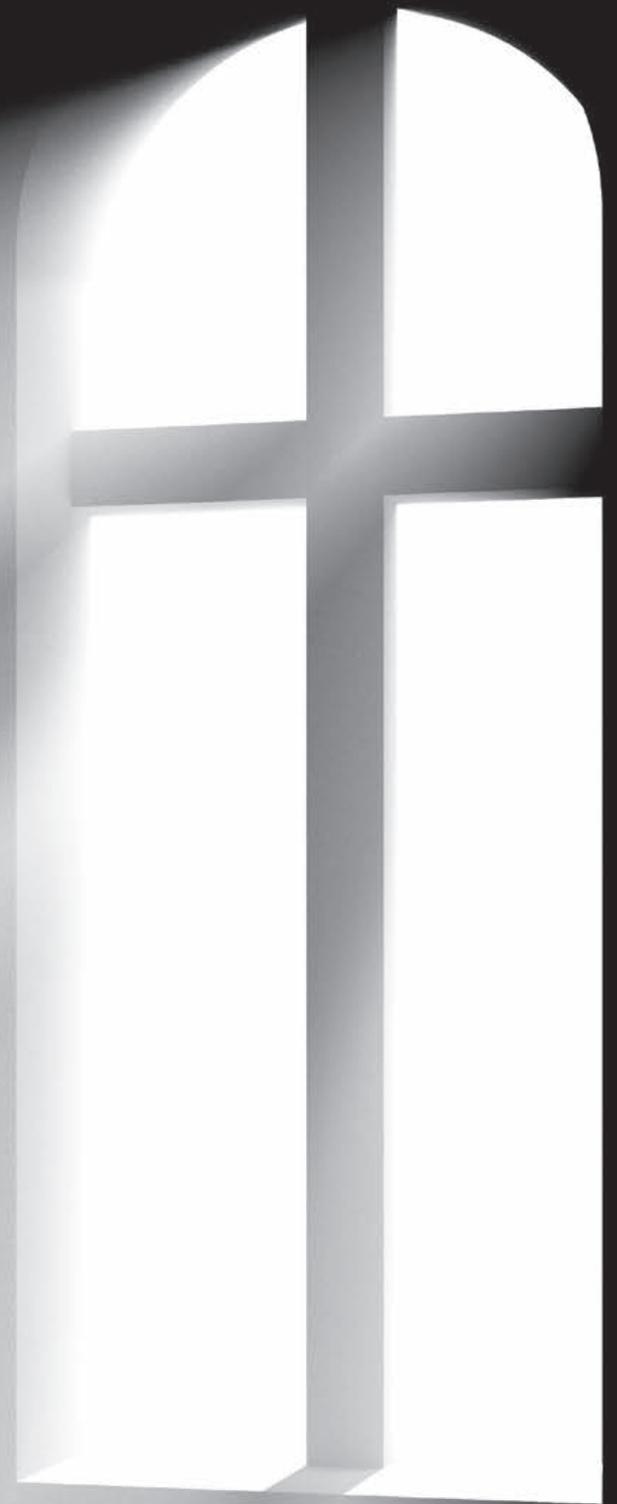
The Common Grace Covenant

The Abrahamic Covenant

The Mosaic Covenant

The Davidic Covenant

The New Covenant





guests are there not merely to share in the joy of the couple but also to hear the vows and witness the making of a covenant. The oaths and promises that the bride and groom make result in the creation of a new relationship: the officiant pronounces them husband and wife. However, in order for the relationship to work, fidelity is required from those who took vows. If either party in the covenant is unfaithful to the oath he or she made to the other, there will be negative consequences: anything from a strained relationship to a messy divorce with costly lawsuits. This is what it means for a covenant relationship to have legality; sanctions are involved where there is unfaithfulness in the covenant.

We must be careful not to put legality in opposition to intimate relationships. For example, some might consider the relationship between parents and their children to have nothing to do with legality and to be only about love and nurture. But this is not the case. The love and intimacy of the parent-child relationship does not make it void of legality. In fact, it may increase its legal character. As Hebrews says, the father who does not discipline his children does not love them (12:7–8). Children are obligated to their parents at birth and vice versa. If children refuse to obey their parents, there are consequences. Likewise, there are consequences if parents neglect their children. Although the vast majority of these consequences are not dealt with in a court of law, they are nevertheless real and usually very painful: loss of privileges, loss of trust, anger, bitterness, and so on. There is no tension between the fact that a relationship can be both intimate and legal, that is, involving consequences. This is important to remember when we consider the biblical covenants.

Some covenant relationships, however, are less intimate. Think

about the relationship between a bank and a borrower in a mortgage. Obviously this relationship is less personal and intimate than the covenant of marriage, yet it is still a covenant of sorts. This is a formalized agreement between two parties that states duties and consequences. The bank agrees to loan the borrower a great sum of money in order to buy a home. The borrower makes a promissory commitment to repay all the money plus interest over a long period. By signing his name to the mortgage documents, the borrower is giving his word that he will fulfill the conditions of the covenant. If he fails to keep his word, sanctions will follow. The house will go into foreclosure. His signature amounts to a self-maledictory oath whereby in essence the borrower says, “If I fail to keep my word, may the curses of this covenant come upon me!”

In one sense, the basic elements of covenant are present every time someone promises to do something for someone else. There are implied positive and negative consequences. If I promise my neighbor that I will collect his mail and put his trashcans on the curb while he is away on vacation, I have given him my word as an oath. If I keep my word, the positive consequence is that I will have gained more of my neighbor’s trust and appreciation. But if I forget, the negative consequence will be my embarrassment and shame. My promise, even in something small, implies sanctions. Our words can bind us to duties and to other people. Grasping this basic fact helps us to understand the nature of the biblical covenants, for a covenant in its fuller sense is a solemn formalization of commitments and promises.

### **Covenants in the Ancient World**

In the ancient Near East, the use of covenants was essentially the same as in our modern world. They were commitments that created

relationships with sanctions. Of course, the ceremonies and rituals associated with covenants in the ancient world were much different (and more gruesome) than ours. Instead of taking a self-maledictory oath by signing a contract, an ancient was typically required to participate in a ceremony that involved blood. Because the sanction for not keeping one’s covenant oath was the curse of death, the people making a covenant would kill animals as a symbol of their own death, serving as a warning to the oath taker. This imagery comes across vividly in the Hebrew idiom for making a covenant, which is literally “to cut a covenant.” The cutting referred to the ceremony of killing animals and cutting them in half. The person promising to fulfill the conditions of the covenant would then swear by a god that he would keep his word. Often, this included a dramatic ritual, such as passing between the severed animal or having its blood sprinkled before him. Added to this was a shared meal between the parties who made the covenant. They would eat the animals cut in the covenant ceremony. The meal was reflective of their committed relationship and a reminder of the oath made in the treaty. These rituals varied, however, according to the kind of covenant they accompanied.

The secular use of covenants in the ancient Near East provides us with important cultural background that is helpful for us to understand the religious covenants of the Bible. When God made covenants with his people in redemptive history, he did so in ways they could understand. As he brought Adam, Noah, Abraham, the Israelites, and David into particular covenants, he accommodated his language to fit their historical and cultural context. If God made a covenant with us today, we could expect him to use forms of treaties and legal agreements that are common to

Covenant theology provides us with the deepest comfort as we learn that God accepts us not on the basis of our covenant faithfulness but on the basis of Christ's. It sweetens our fellowship with the Father as we come to know of his oath and promises to us, promises that are yes and amen through the Mediator of the new covenant.

our society today. This does not mean that the biblical covenants are exhausted in their secular counterparts, but it does mean that our understanding of God's covenants is greatly aided by our knowledge of the common ancient covenants.

Furthermore, the Lord's accommodation to use covenant forms from the ancient world does not mean these are the original pattern for his covenants with his people. Reformed theologians have rightly observed that the original design for God's covenants is the perfect communion found in the Trinity. As Louis Berkhof (1873–1957) pointed out, "The covenant idea developed in history before God made any formal use of the concept in the revelation of redemption."

Covenants among men had been made long before God established his covenant with Noah and with Abraham, and this prepared men to understand the significance of a covenant in a world divided by sin, and helped them to understand the divine revelation when it presented man's relation to God as a covenant relation. This does not mean, however, that the covenant idea originated with man and was then borrowed by God as an appropriate form for the description of the mutual relationship between God and man. Quite the opposite is true; the archetype of all covenant life is found in the trinitarian being of God, and what is seen among men is but a faint copy of this. God so ordered the life of man that the covenant idea should develop there as one of the

pillars of social life, and after it had so developed, he formally introduced it as an expression of the existing relation between himself and man.<sup>2</sup>

We should not be surprised that God adopted covenant treaties for his own purposes, for covenant making among humans reflects the triune God in whose image they are made. The Father, Son, and Holy Spirit live in unceasing devotion and commitment to each other. As creatures made in the image of the triune God, we then reflect this life by keeping our promises and committing ourselves to others in ordinary covenant relationships. God used this function of his creatures for his own redemptive purposes to communicate his promises to us. We should be eager, therefore, to grasp the significance of ancient covenants in order to appreciate God's covenant relationship with us.

### The Joy of Studying God's Covenants

Studying God's covenants should never be a dry academic exercise. Nor should it be for the purpose of debating and arguing with our brothers in Christ. Studying God's covenants has one primary goal: to know God and understand our relationship with him more fully. In this way, covenant theology has immense pastoral and practical value for Christians. It revolutionizes our approach to Scripture, providing us with helpful categories to understand the relationship between the Old and New Testaments. It shows us that the Bible is *one* book with *one* story, told

on the stage of real human history. It highlights the plot line and central point of Scripture, setting every story in the context of the larger story about Christ.

More importantly, covenant theology provides us with the deepest comfort as we learn that God accepts us not on the basis of our covenant faithfulness but on the basis of Christ's. It sweetens our fellowship with the Father as we come to know of his oath and promises to us, promises that are yes and amen through the Mediator of the new covenant. It changes our view of the local church as we discover that we are part of God's covenant community and worship him in a covenant-renewal ceremony every Lord's Day. It transforms the way we see our children, namely, as the baptized members of God's covenant of grace. It helps us understand that covenant is not a means to an end but it is the end itself—the communion between God and his people.

In the next issue, we will turn our attention to the covenant of redemption. Until then, my prayer is that you will find the study of God's covenants to enrich your communion with the triune God and strengthen your assurance in his unfailing promises to us in Christ!

1. J. I. Packer, "Introduction: On Covenant Theology," in Herman Witsius, *The Economy of the Covenants Between God and Man* (Kingsburg, CA: den Dulk Christian Foundation, 1990), 5–8.

2. Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1938; repr. 1996), 263.

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In earlier articles we have discussed the concerns of IRBC's founding elders about the corrupted elements of culture and how these elements are being seen in increasing measure within the visible church. Thus far we have considered various aspects of these elements under the headings of hedonism and liberalism. Both of these systems of thought can be viewed as prisons of the soul.

Hedonism is the prison wherein souls have become bound in the chains of the flesh via the pursuit of worldly pleasures. In this dingy prison Satan anesthetizes the prisoner's soul by clouding his or her vision in relation to the chief end for which mankind was created. Even regular churchgoing

believers can be anesthetized in such a way as to be deprived of the wonderful experience of personally glorifying and enjoying God in public worship. How? By failing to enjoin themselves to the glorious reverential worship that is taking place in the sanctuary of heaven from Lord's Day to Lord's Day. Why? Because their attention becomes focused on a horizontal plane in connection with being influenced by the hedonistic tenor of our culture. What happens? When the focus becomes horizontal instead of vertical, the meaningfulness of their public worship experience becomes dependent upon the performance of the preacher, musicians, or other factors that have the ability to stir one's emotions. When their emotions

fail to be stirred by external factors, their assessment of the public worship experience is often negative and not commended to others. The lack of commendation and/or negative reports of such inaccurate assessments<sup>1</sup> negatively affect the pulpit ministry and the propagation of sound practices associated with public worship. (It seems such variables could be contributing factors to the low retention rate of post-high young adults in many conservative Reformed congregations).

On a day-to-day basis, worldly pleasure-seeking Christians are robbed of the joy of glorifying God via acts of service within and outside their local congregations as they run



after the “winds of pleasure.” As they forfeit service for wind they are also robbed of two other things, one in the present and the other in the future. In the present they are robbed of the privilege of enjoying the fullness of the ministry of the Holy Spirit who wonderfully manifests his presence in the communion of the saints as the Bible is studied, sick and shut-in members are visited, and the anguished of soul are encouraged and counseled. In eternity they are robbed of rewards that moth and rust cannot destroy and thieves cannot steal.

Those taken captive into the prison of liberalism have the incredible multidimensional light of God’s Word eclipsed in various degrees from their inner person. Oftentimes one of the major contributing factors to this devastating eclipse is the methodology many of these prisoners utilize in their study of Scripture. Instead of coming humbly before the Word and seeking with the Spirit’s help to get out of the text its true meaning (exegesis), they come to the text with their preconceived notions and read meaning into the text. This dangerous practice gives one the ability to twist Scripture to say whatever one wants it to say. Such a faulty interpretation methodology severely limits the light of the full counsel of God from shining upon the soul and thus severely stunts spiritual growth. It also often results in the propagation of aberrant doctrine. This is truly a sad reality given the fact that God’s children’s bodies are temples (1 Cor. 6:19) consecrated in part for the preservation and propagation of the divinely inspired doctrine of special revelation. The preservation and propagation of God’s truth from the realm of special revelation is not the only thing which is negatively affected by souls bound in this prison. Much of the truth God reveals through the realm of general revelation is either suppressed, polluted, or misrepresented by

“sloppy science,” poor accountability, and biased reporting.

Although God’s truth revealed through this realm is of a different nature than that of special revelation (i.e., it does not save or sanctify), it is still valuable truth that can greatly benefit Christians as they deal with various counseling-related types of issues.

We will now begin to draw the curtains on this dimension of our ongoing discussion wherein we have considered some of the corrupted elements of culture that are currently being used to overshadow the work of Jesus Christ in both American society and in the visible church. It was said earlier that we would look at these elements under the headings of hedonism, liberalism, and humanism. We have given ample time considering the elements under the first two headings. Let us close our time by briefly touching upon them under the last heading.

We do not need to spend a great deal of time discussing humanism, especially as it applies to counseling, because we have already interacted with the humanistic theories of three men who may be considered forerunners of contemporary psychology. We looked at these theories under the heading of (theological) liberalism because it is under this umbrella that most humanistic theories find their way into the visible church. (*Remember liberalism is a system of thinking that denies the complete truthfulness of the Bible as the Word of God and denies the unique and absolute authority of the Bible in our lives.*)

### **Humanism**

When viewing secular humanism as a collective system of thought wherein souls are imprisoned, it may well be called the darkest prison of all. It is, indeed, pitifully dark because in this system the agency of man (both individually and collectively)

and his ability to reason serve as the foundation for ethics and doctrine as opposed to God and the divine revelation which flows from his being. Thus the exalted position of the Creator and Sustainer of the universe is usurped by the creature who was created in his image. The leader of this usurpation-based revolt is Satan. He tried to usurp God’s throne in eternity past and was unsuccessful. Although severely wounded and chained as a result of Christ’s victory on the cross which occurred in the fullness of time, he still employs both angelic beings (demons) and human agents in his hateful battle to rob God of the glory due God as King of the universe.

Paul’s first epistle to Timothy describes the manner in which Satan’s demonic and human agents work together to carry out strategies against God and his people. In the context of a discussion wherein Paul shares that the “Spirit explicitly says that in later times some will fall away from the faith” (4:1a), he explains how this great falling away will occur: “Men will depart from the faith by giving heed to seducing spirits and doctrines of demons.” As the context indicates, these spirits are not men but demons. Like planets that seem to wander back and forth between the constellations, these spirits wander; moreover, they cause men to wander. They seduce, and lead astray. By giving heed to them one is giving heed to doctrines of demons (cf. 2 Cor. 4:4; Rev. 13:11, 14).

These doctrines are embodied “in the insincere utterance” (literally, in hypocrisy) “of those who speak lies.” “As Satan made use of a serpent to deceive Eve, and this by means of an insincere utterance (Gen. 3:1–5: he was hiding his real objective; for while he pretended to raise Eve to a higher level of glory, so that she would be “like God,” his real aim was to

dethrone God and enthrone himself), so these seducing spirits or demons make use of men who speak lies and who talk piously and learnedly in order to cover up their own arrogance or immorality.”<sup>2</sup>

We, therefore, understand that within the philosophical system of secular humanism the “doctrines of demons” supplant the doctrine of God and thereby dethrone God in the lives of the souls chained in this darkest of prisons. In this evil system, man and his worldly philosophies, which originate from the prince or ruler of this world (John 14:30), become the measure of all things. And when such a corrupted standard continues to prevail, the conscience is increasingly damaged to the point of being seared.

It needs to be mentioned that not every humanist denies the existence of God or the value of Scripture. For throughout the New Testament era there have been some who have identified themselves as “religious” and even “Christian” humanists. It seems that a number of these folks affix a different meaning to the term “humanism” in comparison with the one which is held by many.<sup>3</sup> Yet, one can only cringe when evaluating the

devastating results that the adoption of various forms of humanistic systems of thought have inflicted on Christendom throughout the years. In the nineteenth century many seminaries began denying the supernatural, which resulted in graduating pastors and other leaders who adhered to many of the ethical teachings of Jesus yet denied his resurrection. The overall consequence was a social gospel which had not as its emphasis the necessity of telling people of their need to be saved from God’s everlasting wrath due to sin, but one focused on feeding the hungry and doing various acts of charity. The social gospel still plagues a large segment of the visible church and is directly related to the spiritual decline of many congregations within mainline denominations today. Yes, we are to be about the work of caring for the needy as well as doing other charitable acts, but never at the cost of preaching the gospel and living in obedience to God’s Word. May God give us the grace to do both.

In closing, we recognize that what the inmates in the prisons of hedonism, liberalism, and humanism fail most to comprehend is the glorious treasure

that God’s Word is to mankind. They fail to see that Scripture is:

Authoritative because it is God-breathed. For this reason it is to be respected and obeyed.

A means by which God creates a proper fear for himself which affects man’s ethics and worship.

A perfect and reliable body of instruction to address all of the spiritual needs of every person at all times.

The product of divine thought which takes into consideration that God knows everything about us and understands what we need to know about him.

God’s Word is truly a glorious treasure for mankind! For this reason IRBC’s counseling philosophy and methodology are built upon and with it. In upcoming issues we hope to receive accelerated instruction in IRBC’s counseling model.

1. Accurate assessments of a public worship experience will be based on the purity of the preaching and the overall conformity of the worship service to Scripture (i.e., the regulative principle of worship).

2. William Hendriksen and Simon Kistemaker, *Exposition of Thessalonians, the Pastorals, and Hebrews*, New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2004), 146.

3. Many think of humanism in terms of *homo mensural*, which is a term that was coined by the ancient Greek philosopher Protagoras. It means “man the measure” and well summarizes the major tenets of what traditionally is understood as humanism.

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### Dr. Jeff L. Doll

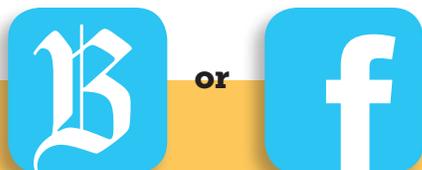
is director at The Institute for Reformed Biblical Counseling, director at The Shepherd’s Way Biblical Counseling Center in Holland, MI, and pastor of biblical counseling at Cornerstone URC in Hudsonville, MI.

# Fifteen Questions Every Facebook User Should Think About

## **Which do you really like the most?**

- 1** Opening God's Holy Book **or** opening your Facebook?
- 2** Checking your spiritual life's status **or** checking who likes your Facebook status?
- 3** Knowing your best friend Jesus more **or** knowing your Facebook friends more?
- 4** Inviting people to church **or** inviting people to like your new Facebook page?
- 5** Thanking God for loving you in Christ **or** thanking those who like your picture?
- 6** Joining prayer meeting **or** joining Facebook wrangling?
- 7** Commenting on God's Word **or** commenting on a friend's post?
- 8** Being cleansed from sin **or** being cleansed from Facebook spam?
- 9** Being delivered from the devil **or** being delivered from a hacker?
- 10** Being more excited to be in church **or** being more excited to be on a Facebook page?
- 11** Enjoying God's promises more **or** enjoying your news feed more?
- 12** Seeking God's approval **or** seeking your Facebook friends' likes?
- 13** Communing with God **or** chatting with your Facebook friends?
- 14** Sharing the message of Christ **or** sharing your Facebook friend's message?
- 15** Promoting God's glory in the world **or** promoting yourself in the Facebook world?

## **Which do you really like the most?**



**Rev. Brian G. Najapfour**

is the pastor of Dutton United  
Reformed Church, Caledonia, MI.



## Interview with **Rev. William Boekestein**

Compiled  
by the Editor



William Boekestein's latest book is *Bible Studies on Mark* (Reformed Fellowship, 2016), a twenty-one-lesson guide to Mark's Gospel with study questions for each chapter. Here's an opportunity to better get to know him and his book.

**Back-cover bios tend to provide only brief and professional information. Help us get to know you better by telling us about your pathway to ministry.**

When I graduated from high school I was certain that my days in a classroom were over; I was going to be a carpenter like my father. And I was for a few years, both in Michigan and in California. While working as a home builder for my cousin in California, mostly out of curiosity I responded to an advertisement from a missionary in India who was looking for a helper and companion. I went to India not as a missionary but as a twenty-year-old with almost no sense of direction. After three months of seeing God's Word work powerfully in the lives of hurting people, I had a new and growing desire to teach the Bible. Upon returning to the States I enrolled at Kuyper College (with my future wife, Amy). Seven years later I graduated from Puritan Reformed Theological Seminary. After serving Covenant Reformed Church in Carbondale, Pennsylvania, for seven years, I have been pastoring Immanuel Fellowship Church in Kalamazoo, Michigan, since May of 2015.

**Do you have a ministry team?**

I do. It was formed in 2003 and has been growing ever since! Amy and I married after graduating from college together. The Lord gave us two children (Asher and Eva) by the time I graduated from seminary. Mina joined us just after moving to Carbondale, and Hazel came along

the year before we arrived in Michigan. No one could say that family life is always easy. But these teammates have brought me tremendous joy along the journey!

**Clearly you enjoy writing, having written nine books in less than nine years of ministry. Do you have other hobbies or interests?**

I do love to write. Someone has said that thoughts disentangle themselves as they pass from the mind, through the lips, and over the fingertips. I find that nothing clarifies my thoughts and sharpens my thinking like writing (and rewriting!) ideas. The discipline of squeezing out unnecessary words to make an article fit its allowed word count can pay dividends in other areas of communication. For a writer, finding the right word for a sentence is like, for a shopaholic, finding the perfect item of clothing. Maybe as a former carpenter, writing satisfies a desire to turn the raw materials of words into a sort of finished (though imperfect) product.

Beyond writing I love to hunt. The mid-century ranch home we bought in Kalamazoo is surrounded by great hunting land. My wife can almost see me in my deer hunting tree stand from our kitchen window! As our kids



have grown, it has been a joy to see them begin to show interest in the sport as well.

We also love to bike as a family. We live very close to an excellent bike path (that conveniently passes an ice-cream shop!). In the last year we've begun riding tandem bikes, which is a great way to put on some distance with kids who, on their own, would not be able to make it so far.

### **Why did you decide to write a study on the book of Mark?**

This book grew out of my conviction that clear, lively, and practical expository preaching can well lend itself to written Bible study material. Preaching should be the explanation and application of Scripture with an acute awareness of God's redemptive work in Christ. Preaching through this Gospel is an excellent way to meet Jesus, the fulcrum of the biblical drama. The same can be true when we study the book on our own or in a small group.

### **What major themes do you find in this Gospel that the reader should remember?**

Mark, along with the other Gospels, vividly demonstrates a central reality of the Scripture—in Christ, God is the primary actor. The

Gospels show Christ fighting the forces of darkness, showing compassion on the needy, and fulfilling God's royal law on behalf of God's children. Christ lived and died and lives again to establish a kingdom of righteousness into which believers are graciously drawn by his Spirit. The Gospels can help us fix our eyes on Jesus as the author and finisher of our faith. When we do, we can begin to live out another important theme of the gospel: God's children are to follow Jesus in cross bearing and holy living.

### **Your study guide explains a Bible book that was written almost two thousand years ago to a very different culture. Does your book intend to bridge the gap between Mark's world and ours?**

The book is meant to bridge that gap in the same sense that preaching does. A preacher of the Bible should always plant one foot in the world of Scripture and the other in the world of his audience. This book "preaches" by helping the reader better understand parts of the story that aren't immediately clear to modern readers.

But the Bible teacher's task of bringing our two worlds together is aided by the character of Scripture itself. Every book of the Bible has a time and culture stamp, you might say. But the books are also timeless. At Pentecost people from a host of nations with their own languages and cultures were able to understand the basic message of the Bible, the gospel. So, today, aided by the Holy Spirit, this message still resonates with God's chosen people. Though we live two millennia after the book was written, we still hunger, thirst, and hurt. It doesn't take much translation for us to see relief in Jesus' compassionate giving.

### **How, in your opinion, can this book best be used?**

Scripture studies are almost always aided by well-written guides. Without a guide, we either struggle to know what to think or say about a text or we get in the habit of merely sharing our own thoughts that might have little to do with the intent of the biblical author. One of the dangers, though, of using a study guide is that the Bible can become eclipsed. It is easy to subconsciously begin to treat the Bible as the raw materials and the study guide as the finished product, favoring the latter. To avoid misusing supplemental materials it is important for students of the Scripture to carefully interrogate the Bible text they are studying. Ask hard questions of the text. Search for the theme of the verses you are studying. Be an investigator. Note observations and applications. Use the questions in your study guide to stimulate thought before turning to the answers in the book. In this way the book becomes a sounding board for your ideas and conclusions rather than a source book. The Bereans took such an approach. They "received the message with great eagerness and examined the Scriptures every day to see if what Paul said was true" (Acts 17:11, New International Version).

### **Dr. Jason Van Vliet praised your book by saying you pack "more food for the soul into a short paragraph than many others do in an entire page."**

These are kind words! If Jason is right, then the book takes its cue from the Gospel itself. John Mark's writing—the Spirit's writing—is anything but dry and wordy. Mark tells the story of Jesus in a rapid-fire, can't-sit-still kind of way. The movement in the story is often tied together by one of Mark's favorite adverbs, "immediately." Mark assures us that rich theological writing doesn't have to be dry and long-winded.

# Christ's Kingship in All of Life: Butchers, Bakers, and Candlestick Makers in the Service of Christ

Dr. Cornelis P.  
Venema



In previous articles on the topic of Christ's kingship in all of life, I offered a summary of what is known today as the "two kingdom/natural law" (2KNL) view. According to this view, Christians live in two kingdoms, the kingdom of the church where Christ reigns by his Word and Spirit, and the "common kingdom" of non-churchly life in God's world where Christ reigns by means of the natural law. Advocates of this perspective are wary of the idea that Christians are called to acknowledge Christ's redemptive rule in their common vocations or in the non-ecclesiastical realm.

After summarizing this two kingdom/natural law perspective, I began my evaluation of it by arguing that it does not adequately account for the way Christ's work of redemption involves nothing less than the renewal and restoration of human life in the presence of God, and that this work of renewal has implications for all of life. As the Dutch theologian, Herman Bavinck, often put it, "grace perfects nature." The new beginning God makes in His work of redemption is one that aims to restore His elect people to fellowship with Himself and to new obedience by the Holy Spirit. In Jesus Christ, a new humanity is brought back into communion

with God and is being renewed in true knowledge, righteousness, and holiness. The destiny of human life in union and communion with God is realized in and through the redemptive work of Jesus Christ. In Christ, God is making all things new.

In my last article, I also suggested that the well-known Reformed understanding of the threefold office of believers has important implications for our understanding of Christ's lordship in all of life. The doctrine of the threefold office of believers illustrates the life-embracing significance of Christ's saving work as our Mediator. In union with Christ,

the radical effects of the fall into sin are reversed, and those who belong to Christ begin, even if only in a small way (cf. Heidelberg Catechism, Q&A 114), to live before God in the way God intended us to live.

In this article, I want to consider two further themes that bear upon how believers are called to serve Christ in all that they do, and especially in their particular vocations.

### **The Christian Life of “Good Works”**

In the Reformed confessions’ summary of scriptural teaching, the Christian life in the world is represented not only as a participation in Christ’s threefold office but also as a life of “good works,” which believers perform by the power of the outpoured Spirit of Christ.

For example, in the Heidelberg Catechism’s well-known third part, which deals with the theme of gratitude, the whole of its exposition of the Christian life is framed by the following question: “Since, then, we are delivered from our misery by grace alone, through Christ, without any merit of ours, why must we yet do good works” (Q&A 86). The way this question is framed hearkens back to the catechism’s emphatic teaching that the salvation of the believer is entirely based upon God’s grace in Jesus Christ alone. In Lord’s Days 23 and 24, the catechism vigorously declares that believers find acceptance with God and are entitled to eternal life upon the sole basis of Christ’s work on their behalf. The great comfort of the gospel is that believers are justified before God, declared righteous and properly heirs of eternal life, upon the basis of the imputation of Christ’s entire righteousness to them. Only Christ’s perfect obedience and sacrificial death constitute the ground for the believer’s justification. The gospel promise of free justification need only be received by the empty

hand of faith, a heartfelt trust that Christ’s righteousness is a sufficient basis for reception into favor with God. Though such faith is never alone in the justified person, the works that faith produces contribute nothing to our justification before God. Because such works are always corrupted and stained with sin, they are not able to contribute anything that would warrant God’s pronouncement that believers are acceptable to Him in Christ. Whatever good works believers may perform, they are not the kinds of works that could satisfy God’s judgment or add anything to what Christ has accomplished on their behalf.

It is precisely this emphasis upon free and gracious justification that prompts the first question and answer of the third part of the catechism. If believers are justified by grace alone through faith alone, then is there no basis for insisting upon the importance of good works or Christian obedience to the law of God? To this question, the catechism answers with a resounding affirmation of the necessity of a Christian life of good works. While such good works are not born out of an unbelieving and self-righteous spirit, they represent the fruits of the work of Christ’s Spirit in us. Believers perform good works

[b]ecause Christ, having redeemed us by His blood, also renews us by His Holy Spirit after His own image, that with our whole life we may show ourselves thankful to God for His benefits, and that He may be praised by us; then, also, that each of us may be assured in himself of his faith by the fruits thereof, and that by our godly walk our neighbors also may be won for Christ. (A 86)

What is often missed at this point is the realization that the entirety of the Christian life is born out of the gospel grace and work of Christ’s outpoured Spirit. Believers do not produce good

works in order to obtain God’s favor. They produce good works out of a grateful acknowledgment of God’s grace in Christ and by virtue of the powerful work of the Holy Spirit in renewing them after Christ’s image. For this reason, the catechism goes on to describe the Christian life comprehensively as a daily conversion or repentance, which consists in the “mortification of the old man, and the quickening of the new” (A 88). Such daily conversion expresses itself in the believer’s Spirit-authored “love and delight to live according to the will of God in all good works” (A 90).

But what, according to the catechism’s exposition, does this mean concretely in the life of believers? At this point, the catechism prefaces its comprehensive exposition of the Ten Commandments and the Lord’s Prayer with an important explanation of what such “good works” entail. In answer to the question, “What are good works?,” the catechism answers this way: “Only those which are done from true faith, according to the law of God, and to His glory; and not such as are based on our own opinions or the precepts of men” (Q&A 91). Even though this answer is quite familiar to many Reformed believers, its implications for our question regarding the Christian life under the lordship of Jesus Christ cannot be overstated. What stands out in this answer is the comprehensive claim of the Christian gospel upon the Christian life in all of its expressions. To appreciate what this entails, it will be useful to note briefly each of the components that the catechism identifies that belong properly to any good work.

First, the Christian life in its entirety is performed from true faith. Unless believers know that they have been accepted by God for the sake of the work of Christ alone, they will inevitably act from “bad faith,” that is, serve God not out of gratitude or by

virtue of the work of Christ's gracious Spirit in them but out of a desire to obtain or curry favor with God.<sup>1</sup> Nothing Christian believers do as members of Christ may be motivated by the aim of securing thereby favor with God. Faith works through love, to be sure, but it is faith that works and produces a thankful Christian life (Gal. 5:6). As the apostle Paul declares in 1 Corinthians, "whatsoever is not of faith is sin," whether it be eating, drinking, marrying, buying or selling (Rom. 14:23). Or as the apostle Paul reminds Timothy, "[f]or everything created by God is good, and nothing is to be rejected if it is received with thanksgiving, for it is made holy by the word of God and prayer" (1 Tim. 4:4).

Second, the Christian life of good works aims to offer to God what is due Him. It is always a life that seeks to express what it means to glorify God and enjoy him forever. As Creator and Redeemer, God is the Author of every good and perfect gift. And his gifts are to be received with praise and thanksgiving, and used in his service and in the service of others. For this reason, sin is defined in the Lord's Prayer as "debt," an unmet obligation that is owed to God. Whenever believers (or any creature, for that matter) fail to give God what is due Him, which is nothing less than the love of all their heart, mind, and strength, they deny their duty and forget they are his redeemed creatures.<sup>2</sup>

And third, the Christian life of good works is normed by the standard of God's holy law. This standard is summarized in the Ten Commandments, whose two tables describe what we owe God as the foremost object of our love and delight and what we owe our neighbor who bears God's image and in whom God is represented to us. When the catechism expounds at length the

positive obligations and negative prohibitions of these commandments, it does not describe the Christian life as one that is restricted to the precincts of the church. Rather, it describes the manner of conduct that pleases God in all of life, whether in respect to God or to others.

Furthermore, the catechism treats the obligations of the holy law of God as binding upon all human beings, believers and unbelievers alike. The law of God in its moral content binds all human beings as image bearers of God, whether they acknowledge this obligation or not.<sup>3</sup> The law of God, as it is encapsulated in the Ten Commandments, does not norm a peculiar realm or dimension of human life before God. No sharp delineation is drawn between the norms for human life in the "common" kingdom in distinction from the "spiritual," as is customary in the 2KNL perspective. Rather, the catechism describes in detail the whole life of God's redeemed people in all of its diversity and richness. The assumption of the catechism is that the ordinary duties of human life in God's world are addressed in these commandments. While the moral content of these commandments coincides with the moral content of the so-called natural law, the catechism does not hesitate to appeal directly to scriptural applications of the law of God for the behavior of believers in all of the spheres of human conduct, whether in marriage and family, in business or labor, in the civil community, and the like.

### **The Believer's Vocation**

The last theme that I would like to explore briefly is that of the believer's vocation.

While in our modern society and culture in the West we have come to speak of our daily calling or work as our career, the better language from the vantage point of scriptural teaching is to speak of the priesthood

of all believers and particularly of their vocation to serve the Lord in their work. One of the most significant contributions of the Reformation was the restoration of the dignity and honor of human work, which is to be performed in service to God and others. The older medieval pattern of sharply distinguishing the religious, contemplative life, from the secular or worldly life was displaced by a comprehensive view of the calling of all believers to serve God in whatever station they may find themselves. In this respect, there is considerable agreement between Luther and Calvin, although Calvin (and the Calvinists) tended to view this calling to include not only the service of others in the daily work of believers but also the task to reform the structures and institutions of human society and culture.

In Luther's understanding of the vocation of believers, there is a clear connection between the gospel and the freedom of the Christian to lovingly serve others within the ordinary callings of life. While Luther distinguishes between the kingdom of heaven and the kingdom of earth in a way that 2KNL advocates find appealing, he does not divorce or separate them from each other. For Luther, the kingdom of heaven concerns our relationship to God, which is based upon faith's wholehearted trust in the work of Christ as Redeemer. Upon the basis of Christ's righteousness, believers may be assured that their acceptance with God does not depend upon their own works or performance of their duties toward God or others. In contrast to the kingdom of heaven, the kingdom of earth concerns our relationship to our neighbors, which expresses itself in love toward others whom we are called to serve freely in God's name. The ordinary tasks and works that belong to our particular vocations

belong to the earthly kingdom. The performance of whatever legitimate tasks belong to our earthly vocations does not spring from the motivation to obtain God's favor upon this basis. Rather, the performance of our duty or vocation is an act of Christian freedom in which we love others and serve them in Christ's name.

In Luther's doctrine of vocation, all of the tasks that pertain to our daily work are so many ways in which we relate to others and serve them in Christ's name. Whatever our station in life—whether we are husbands or wives, parents or children, magistrates or subjects, masters or servants, yes, even butchers or bakers or candlestick makers—we have a calling to serve others in God's name and in accordance with his holy will. Contrary to the medieval practice of privileging the so-called religious life of the monastery, Luther encouraged believers to “put our whole trust in his [God's] mercy and with utter certainty and without any doubt to have faith that we ourselves and all our works are pleasing to him not because of our worthiness or merit but because of his goodness.”<sup>4</sup> As Lee Hardy writes in summary of Luther's view of vocation,

By maintaining that one's relation to God is established through faith alone and relocating works of religious significance in the earthly realm, Luther showed it possible to respond to God's call even in the lowly and mundane occupations of this life. To follow Christ it is not necessary to abandon one's earthly station, for Christ commands us to do such works ‘as concern people here below who are in need, not those that concern God or angels. Therefore the Christian life does not consist of that which such men as monks invent; it

does not drive people into the wilderness or cloister. . . . On the contrary, the Christian life sends you to people, to those that need your works.’ According to Luther, virtually all occupations are modes of ‘full-time Christian service’—except those of the usurer, the prostitute, and the monk. The point of the Christian religion is not to leave the world behind to live the life of faith, but to live the life of faith in the midst of the world.<sup>5</sup>

For my purpose, it is significant that Luther, despite his clear affirmation of the distinction between the kingdom of heaven and the kingdom of earth, views the work of believers in their respective worldly vocations as a priestly service. When believers engage their callings in order to promote the good of others, they do so as believers, as those who have received the promise of free justification and acceptance with God on the basis of Christ's righteousness alone. When believers perform the duties that belong to their proper vocation in life—whether as a husband, wife, father, mother, son, daughter, schoolteacher, farmer, tradesman—they are performing a religious service that is born of faith and offered in grateful obedience to Christ. Even the rich biblical teaching regarding the Christian life as a self-denying and cross-bearing life is directly linked by Luther with the Christian's vocation: “I ask you where our suffering is to be found. I shall tell you: Run through all the stations of life, from the lowest to the highest, and you will find what you are looking for . . . therefore do not worry where you can find suffering. That is not necessary. Simply live as an earnest Christian preacher, pastor, burgher, farmer, noble, lord, and fully your office faithfully and loyally.”<sup>6</sup> When Hardy speaks of the “full-time

Christian service” that belongs to the Christian's fulfillment of his or her legitimate calling in life, he accurately reflects the implications of Luther's teaching regarding the Christian life.

In the case of Calvin's doctrine of vocation, it is even clearer that Christian service of others in one's daily calling is an act of spiritual service. Calvin shared Luther's repudiation of the medieval emphasis upon the monastic and contemplative life as the privileged form of service to Christ. In his commentary on Luke 10:38–42, a passage that recounts Jesus' visit to the home of Mary and Martha, Calvin strongly condemns the customary medieval allegorical interpretation of this passage. According to the medieval interpretation, Jesus' commendation of Mary was an affirmation of the contemplative life, which is the best and most desirable form of Christian service. However, in his comments on this passage, Calvin offers a robust defense of the broad understanding of the Christian's vocation in all of life:

Now this passage has been wickedly perverted to commend what is called the contemplative life. But if we aim at bringing out the genuine sense, it will appear that Christ was far from intending that His disciples should devote themselves to idle and frigid speculations. It is an ancient error that those who flee worldly affairs and engage wholly in contemplation are leading an angelic life. The nonsense that the Sorbonne theologians invent about this betrays their debt to Aristotle, who placed the highest and ultimate good of the human life in contemplation, which he calls the fruition of virtue. . . . But we know that men were created to busy themselves with

labour and that no sacrifice is more pleasing to God than when each one attends to his calling and studies to live will for the common good.<sup>7</sup>

Throughout his writings, Calvin frequently took issue with the medieval preference for a contemplative life, separated from daily work and industry. A significant dimension of human life in the image of God is our participation in the administration of God's handiwork, and our discharge of daily tasks in service to God and others. Just as God is "not the empty, idle, and almost unconscious sort that the Sophists imagine, but a watchful, effective, active sort, engaged in ceaseless activity," so those whom God redeems in Christ are called to active service and engagement with their earthly tasks.<sup>8</sup> According to Calvin, "God prefers devoted care in ruling a household, where the devout householder, clear and free of all greed, ambition, and other lusts of the flesh, keeps before him the purpose of serving God in a definite calling."<sup>9</sup> Unlike our tendency to withdraw from public life, particularly the civil and political arena, Calvin is well-known for his active engagement with the civil community. In his treatment of the calling of the state and civil magistracy, Calvin notes that "they have a mandate from God, have been invested with divine authority, and are wholly God's representatives, in a manner, acting as his vicegerents."<sup>10</sup> For this reason, political service is not to be disdained by believers but embraced as a high and legitimate calling. "Accordingly, no one ought to doubt that civil authority is a calling, not only holy and lawful before God, but also the most sacred and by far the most honorable of all callings in the whole Christian life."<sup>11</sup>

Although I have provided only a sampling of Calvin's understanding, it should be evident that Calvin, even more than Luther, had a robust view of the believer's calling to serve God, and all who bear his image, in every legitimate sphere of human endeavor within God's creation. Like Luther, Calvin did not ascribe any religious value or merit to such service, as though it formed a partial basis for our acceptance with God. In this respect, Calvin shared Luther's emphasis upon the doctrine of justification by grace alone through the work of Christ as a liberating doctrine. Within the framework of the believer's acceptance with God, Calvin viewed service to God and others as an expression of free obedience and obedient freedom. In every legitimate vocation, believers are called to a life of holiness in self-sacrificial service to God and to neighbor.

1. For a similar description of the "good works" of believers, see the Westminster Confession of Faith, Chap. 16, esp. section 7, which reads: "Works done by unregenerate men, although for the matter of them they may be things which God commands; and of good use both to themselves and others: yet, because they proceed not from an heart purified by faith; nor are done in a right manner, according to the Word; nor to a right end, the glory of God, they are therefore sinful, and cannot please God, or make a man meet to receive grace from God: and yet, their neglect of them is more sinful and displeasing to God."

2. David Vandrunen, *Living in God's Two Kingdoms: A Biblical Vision for Christianity and Culture* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2010), 166ff., acknowledges that this is true and therefore speaks of "subjective" versus "objective" differences in the conduct of Christians in the common kingdom. According to Vandrunen, believers perform the same duties and tasks as unbelievers, and they do so according to the norms of God's "natural law." The one distinguishing feature of Christian conduct is that it arises from a "different inner motivation and subjective attitude" (167). While I do not deny that believers and unbelievers alike perform actions that conform to the same standard, the "natural law" of God, and that these actions are not always "materially" different, if I may use such language, I do not believe Vandrunen and the 2KNL perspective do justice to the degree to which unbelievers

suppress and distort the natural law of God. Nor does the 2KNL perspective recognize the extent to which scriptural revelation clarifies and enlarges our knowledge of God's will for human conduct, which has real (objective) consequences for their life in obedience to God. As I shall note in a concluding article in this series, for the conduct of believers to be described as "distinctively Christian" in the fulfillment of their various vocations in the world, it does not have to be technically or materially different in every respect. For this reason, I cannot agree with Vandrunen's taking exception in this connection to the thesis that "to be a Christian is to be truly human." This is exactly the point I would wish to make: being truly human is precisely what it means to be a Christian, for God's work of redemption transforms us into the kind of persons we ought to be and for which we were destined at creation.

3. The Westminster Confession of Faith, Chap. 19.5: "The moral law [summarized in the Ten Commandments] doth forever bind all, as well justified persons as others, to the obedience thereof; and that, not only in regard of the matter contained in it, but also in respect of the authority of God the Creator, who gave it. Neither doth Christ, in the gospel, any way dissolve, but much strengthen this obligation."

4. Martin Luther, *Luther's Works*, gen. ed. Helmut T. Lehmann (St. Louis: Concordia, 1966), 44:277.

5. Lee Hardy, *The Fabric of This World: Inquiries into Calling, Career Choice, and the Design of Human Work* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990), 51.

6. Martin Luther, *Werke Kritische Gesamtausgabe* (Weimar: Hermann Böhlhaus, 1883), 51:404.

7. John Calvin, *A Harmony of the Gospels: Matthew, Mark, and Luke*, trans. T. H. L. Parker, ed. David W. Torrance and Thomas F. Torrance (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1972), 2:88.

8. John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960), I.xvi.3.

9. *Institutes*, IV.xiii.16.

10. *Institutes*, IV.xx.4.

11. *Institutes*, IV.xx.4.

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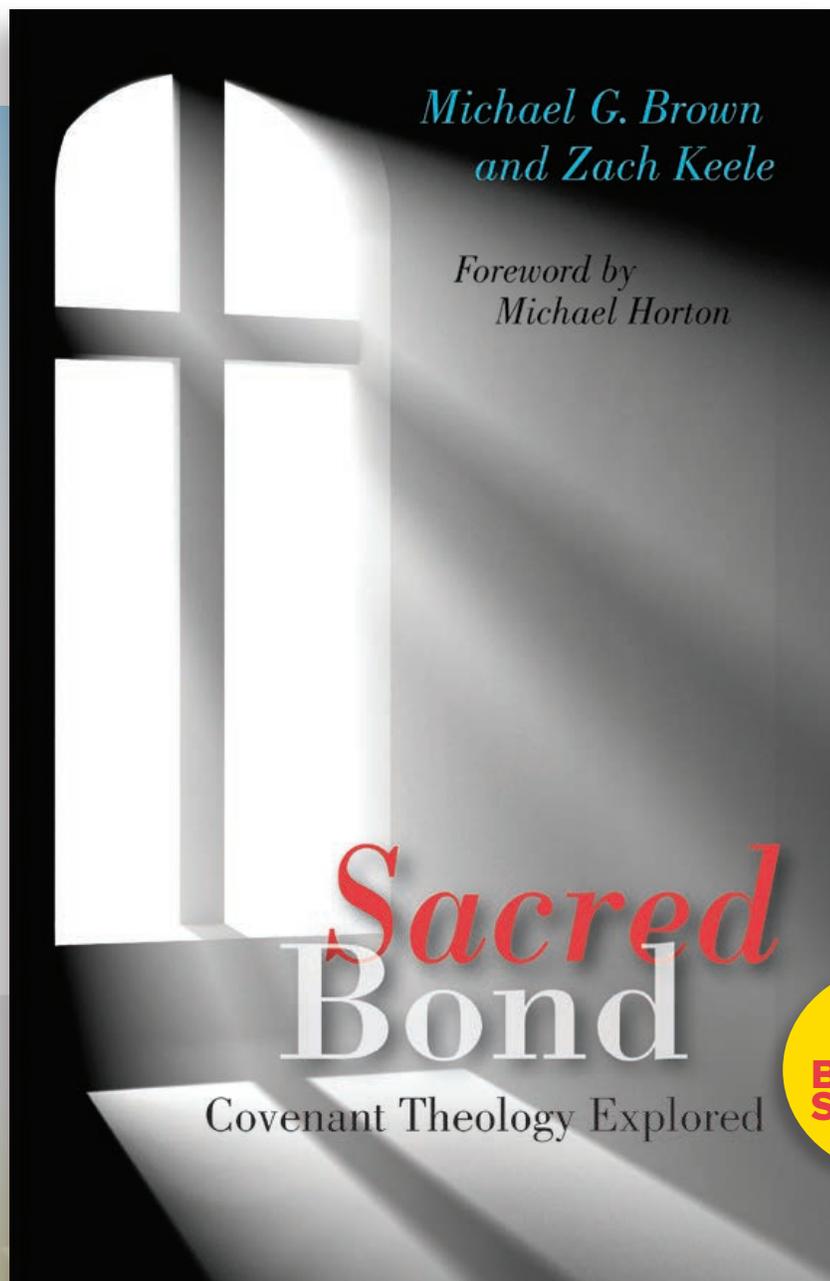
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