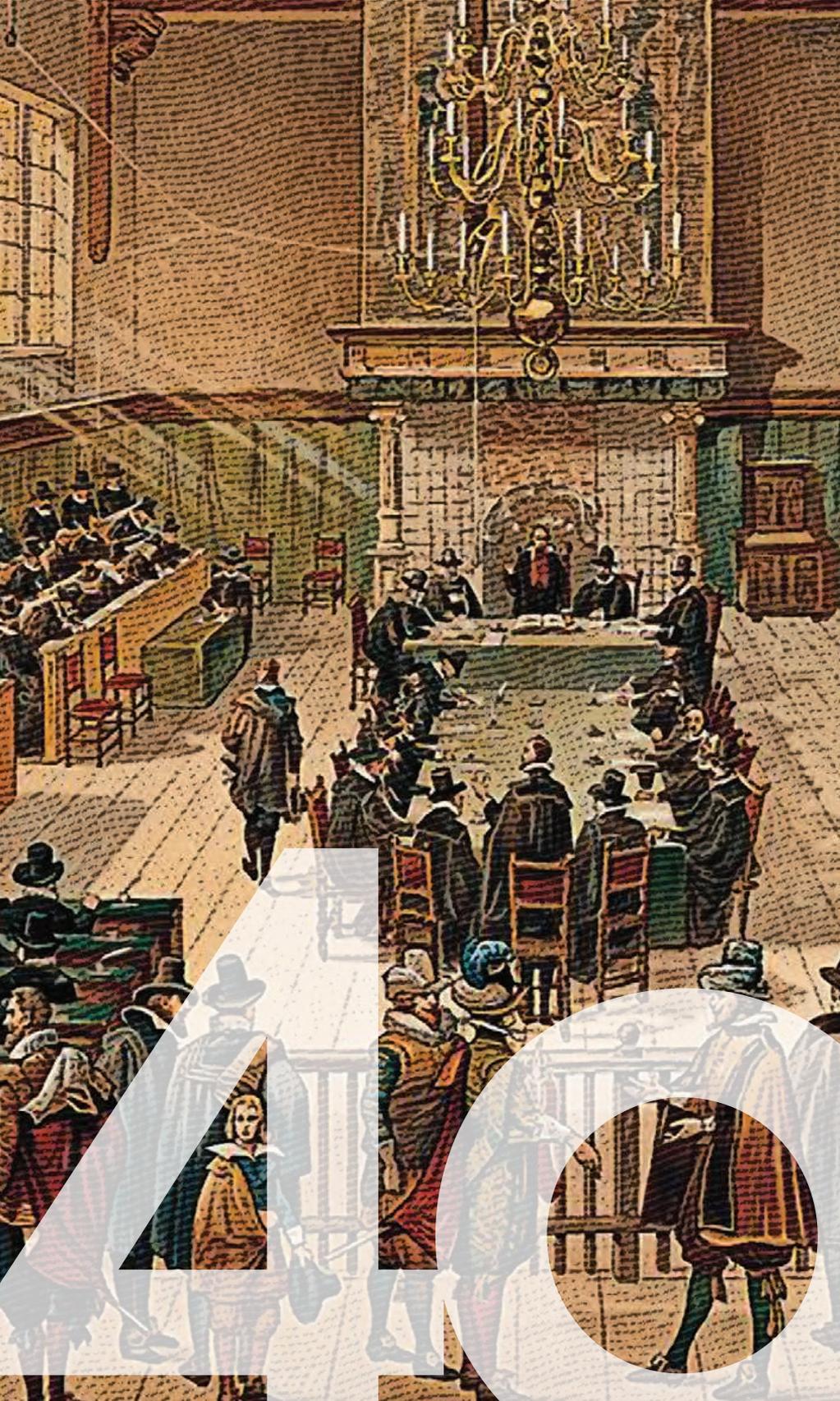


Dedicated to the Exposition and Defense of the Reformed Faith

The Outlook

NOV/DEC 2018

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IN A FEW WORDS

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AUTHORS RESPONSE**

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PREDESTINATION**

HEAVEN

**THE BOOK OF ESTHER,
AN INTRODUCTION**

FEAR

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SYNOD OF DORT
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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: *Commemorating Synod of Dort (1618–1619). 2018, marks the four hundredth anniversary of the convening of the Synod of Dort in Dordrecht, the Netherlands. Illustration enhancement by Jeff Steenholdt.*

In a Few WORDS

With the appearance this issue of *The Outlook*, we are approaching two major holidays in this country—Thanksgiving Day in November (Canadians already celebrated it in October) and Christmas in December. Both are secular holidays, by which I mean that neither was instituted by divine or biblical mandate. That does not mean, however, that Christians cannot or should not use these special occasions to give God the praise due to him alone. In fact, how we observe these holidays can offer a significant testimony to our world. We do that at Thanksgiving by offering God our thanks for all the material and national, as well as spiritual, blessings we have received from his hand and by recognizing him as the fountain of all good. We do that during the Christmas season by praising God for the greatest of all his gifts to us—his only-begotten Son to be our Savior. Thanksgiving in November should lead naturally for God’s children to the offering of our deepest thanks in December (and throughout the year).

We at Reformed Fellowship are also thankful to our Lord for the special ways in which we can serve him through our ministry. We publish this magazine bi-monthly for the instruction and inspiration of many readers in the Christian faith and its implications for our lives in this world, from a uniquely Reformed perspective. We trust these continue to be appreciated by you and others who come across our magazine. In fact, you could greatly help us by offering a gift subscription to *The Outlook* to your family members and friends. In addition, we publish and have available many good books which can also be of benefit to you and others who purchase them. That might be another gift opportunity.

What you may not realize, however, is that Reformed Fellowship sends out its magazine and books freely to persons who cannot afford them but have a burning desire to learn more about the Reformed faith. For instance, we have given books to organizations in other countries, like seminaries, to provide to their students. We have sent books and our magazine to persons in prison. We give translation rights to missionaries free of charge so they can further their ministries. We also publish the URC directory at a low price for the benefit of the membership of the United Reformed



Churches and others. We do all this to fulfill our purpose of disseminating the truth of the Bible, in accordance with the Reformed confessions, for the blessing of sinners (unconverted and converted) and saints.

As a non-profit organization, we do not receive, or desire to receive, financial gain from our efforts. In fact, we often lose money in the process. Yet, God provides for our needs, and we pray that you, our dear friends, will be one of his means of providing for our needs to continue our ministry for years to come. As the apostle Paul wrote to the Philippians (4:19–20): “And my God will supply every need of yours according to his riches in glory in Christ Jesus. To our God and Father be glory forever and ever. Amen.”



Rev. James Admiraal

is a board member of Reformed Fellowship, Inc.



Yes, There Are Five Points of Calvinism

In this year (and next) of commemorating the four hundredth anniversary of the Synod of Dort, it is good that we as Christians take special note of the important heritage this synod has given us, especially in its doctrinal statements called the Canons of Dort. This confessional document has been adopted as an official creed by Reformed Churches, or one of their doctrinal standards, alongside the Belgic Confession of Faith and the Heidelberg Catechism. I am thankful, therefore, that *The Outlook* is publishing a series of articles on the synod and Canons of Dort.

One way teachers and preachers have often sought to teach and pass on the doctrines set forth in the Canons of Dort is by means of the phrase “the five points of Calvinism.” However, a recent article in *The Outlook* (September/October 2018) by Rev. Daniel Hyde questions the propriety of that phrase. In fact, the title of his article, “Are There Really Five Points of Calvinism?” is answered by him with the bold statement: “There is no such thing as the five points of Calvinism.”

I am not convinced, however, that we should avoid or reject this phrase. In fact, I find it very helpful. Even the labeling of those points with the word **TULIP** (total depravity, unconditional election, limited atonement, irresistible grace, perseverance of the saints) can be a good way to remember them.

To be sure, the acronym has its shortcomings. As many have rightly noted, the actual order of these points as set forth in the Canons is **ULTIP**. And I agree with those who say that some of those points could have better labels. I personally prefer the expressions “particular atonement,” “invincible grace,” and the “preservation of believers.”

Nevertheless, we can profitably speak of these truths as the five points of Calvinism for the following reasons.

1. The canons contain “Five Heads of Doctrine.” One could well call them points or major points of doctrine. Rev. Hyde correctly notes that these were responses to five points or articles put forth by the Remonstrants, the followers of Arminius. But that does not negate the fact that the delegates to the Synod of Dort chose to respond with five major biblical truths or points.

2. While it is true that the five points of Calvinism do not set forth all that Scripture teaches and all that Calvinists believe, they do set forth five fundamental biblical truths we Calvinists believe. In fact, they set forth the very essence and heart of the gospel—man’s total depravity and lostness, our election by God from eternity, Christ’s atoning death for the elect, the Spirit’s powerful work of regeneration in dead sinners so they can come to Christ, and our eternal preservation by God. What is more basic than these biblical truths? I am sure Brother Hyde holds to all of them.

3. The five points of Calvinism provide not just a good summary of what the Canons of Dort teach. They also set forth what distinguishes Calvinism from Arminianism as systems of theology.

Those who affirm these points are called Calvinists. Those who deny them are not Calvinists!

Therefore, I hope pastors and catechism teachers will continue to teach the five points of Calvinism, and using the acronym TULIP is certainly a good way to do it.

P.S.: I recently read a short book by Rev. John Piper entitled *Five Points*. It provides a very good and concise explanation of the five points of Calvinism.

Rev. James Admiraal is a board member of Reformed Fellowship, Inc.



A Brief Response

to Rev. James Admiraal's "Yes, There Are Five Points of Calvinism"

I want to thank Rev. Admiraal for his cordial reply to my article. His pastoral desire to teach the doctrines of our confessions as we both signed up to do in our Form of Subscription comes through clearly.

This leads to what I consider a root issue in our exchange: popular pastoral simplifications versus the world of scholarship. As a PhD candidate in the field of historical theology, I read and write in the so-called Muller-van Asselt (or, Utrecht) school of thought that seeks to reassess modern conceptions of Reformed orthodoxy in the light of the actual texts of that period and to retrieve this material for use today. That's my goal in my forthcoming work *Grace Worth Fighting For: Recapturing the Vision of God's Grace in the Canons of Dort* (Davenant Institute). This means that my initial thesis, "there's no such thing as the five points of Calvinism," is going to sound extremely iconoclastic. I view that as a good thing. Ironically, going back into historical theology is a means of *semper reformanda* today. When I hear that preachers use "the five points" or "TULIP" to pass on the doctrines set forth in the canons, my response is, "Yes, we modern preachers do." To reiterate my previous article, Richard Muller and others have demonstrated that the acronym TULIP is an American oversimplification of the early twentieth century; it would've been impossible for our forefathers to devise since the Dutch word for tulip is *tulp*; it reorders the actual points of both the Remonstrants and the canons; and it is not a summary of Reformed confessional belief.

The goal of such reassessment and retrieval is to understand accurately the positions our forefathers were responding to so that we're clearer in communicating the truth today. "TULIP" doesn't take the positions of our opponents in the seventeenth century of today seriously and lends itself to imprecise generalizations about "Reformed" and "Arminian" churches. For example, why is it that when the Remonstrants drafted their five points our forefathers at Dort combined articles 3 and 4 into one in the canons? Writing to the synod from Heidelberg, the aged and preeminent theologian, David Paraeus, said why: the Remonstrants' third point on the sinfulness or depravity of humanity "needs not much examination: if we follow the natural sense of the words" that are "consentaneous [in agreement with] Holy Writ."

My exhortation to preachers and people is simple: stop looking at a few petals on a tulip; dive deeper into the soil of the canons.

Rev. Daniel R. Hyde is the pastor of Oceanside United Reformed Church in Carlsbad/Oceanside, CA.



When the Remonstrants or followers of Jacobus Arminius wrote their *Remonstrance* in 1610, they began with the doctrine of predestination, reflecting the language of Ephesians 1: “That God by an eternal and immutable decree has in Jesus Christ his Son determined before the foundation of the world to save out of the fallen sinful human race those in Christ, for Christ’s sake, and through Christ who by the grace of the Holy Spirit.” So far; so good. From Heidelberg David Paraeus (1548–1622) even advised the synod, “At first sight, this Article seemes to have no question or inconvenience in it, but to deliver the summe of the Gospell.”¹

The Issue

It’s the next statement, though, that was the issue: “who . . . *shall* believe in this his Son Jesus Christ and [*shall*] persevere in this faith and obedience of faith.”² The key issue was that election to salvation was conditional. God’s eternal and immutable purpose in Christ to save was conditioned and dependent on those whom God foreknew “*shall* believe . . . and [*shall*] persevere.”³ The Remonstrants defended this position at the synod in a list of theses. The first said, “God has not decided to elect anyone to eternal life, or to reject anyone from the same . . . without any consideration of preceding obedience or disobedience.” The seventh said, “The election of particular persons is decisive, out of consideration of faith in Jesus Christ and of perseverance;

not, however, apart from a consideration of faith and perseverance in the true faith, as a condition prerequisite for electing.”⁴ In other words, God took into account a person’s obedience when he elected.

At the synod, the English delegation considered the Remonstrant thesis of election to salvation under the condition of faith the fundamental issue.⁵ This is still the issue between us and those who identify as non-Reformed, who even use illustrations like a horse race in which God knew ahead of time who was going to win; in the same way he saw us “win” so he chose us.⁶

This brings us to the first counter-point or head (*caput*) of doctrine in the Canons of Dort on predestination. Gulp! Christians need to talk about it; pastors need to preach it. You may know there’s no more surefire way to create awkward silence among family and friends than to say, “Hey everyone, let’s talk about predestination.” It’s offensive to unbelievers; it’s even offensive to believers. I don’t want you to have that awkwardness. I want you to be effective witnesses for Jesus Christ and his grace. We need to grow in the knowledge of his truth; we also need to grow in the wisdom of “speaking [his] truth in love” (Eph. 4:15).

Common Christian Convictions

Predestination is like a beautiful painting. Before an artist applies paint he or she needs a canvas.

Then the painting can begin. The first point of doctrine opens with a canvas of six articles that are the common inheritance of all Christians. After this canvas is laid out, the paint of predestination is applied. Before saying a word about predestination, the canons emphasize humanity’s sin and God’s justice because of it (art. 1), the love of God that he manifested in the sending of his Son (art. 2), that God ordains the end of our salvation as well as the means of our salvation through preaching (art. 3), the necessity of faith for sinners to receive Christ in the gospel proclaimed (art. 4), that faith is a gift of God’s grace (art. 5), and the connection between faith and predestination as the eternal source of faith (art. 6).

Election Defined

With the basic biblical teachings of articles 1–6 laid out as a canvas, we’re finally ready to paint on God’s predestinating work in article 7, which we’ll focus on here. One of the reasons this is so important to highlight is that it keeps us from over-focusing on predestination. The Belgic Confession of Faith (1561) had one short article on predestination that says God “delivers and preserves from this perdition [of Adam’s fall] all whom He in His eternal and unchangeable counsel of mere goodness has elected in Christ Jesus our Lord, without any respect to their works” while “leaving others in the fall and perdition wherein they have involved themselves” (art. 16).⁷ As Andreas Beck

writes, “Indeed there is little is anything at all in this article of the *Belgic Confession* that would be specific to the Reformed tradition.”⁸ It was the Arminians who made a mountain out of a molehill. Another reason this is so important to highlight is the catholic context of predestination. In the words of Willem van Asselt, “Dordt did not invent the doctrine of predestination and the opposition against it is not new either . . . [they] did not have the intention to be original or introduce something new into the Christian tradition—original are only the heretics.”⁹ There was a whole history of Christian reflection brought to the fore by Augustine culminating in the Second Council of Orange in 529. This Augustinian consensus continued through the centuries in men like Isidore of Seville (ca. 560–636), Peter Lombard (ca. 1095–1160), Bonaventure (ca. 1217–1274), Thomas Aquinas (1225–1274), Nicholas of Lyra (1270–1349), and in the *schola Augustiniana moderna* of Thomas Bradwardine (ca. 1300–1349), Gregory of Rimini (ca. 1300–1358), and even Martin Luther’s nemesis, John Eck (1486–1543).¹⁰

The biblical truth of God’s eternal predestination to salvation passed down through the ages reveals to us the glorious grace of our triune God here in article 7.¹¹

It Is Unchangeable

What makes the doctrine of election so glorious? “Election [or choosing] is God’s unchangeable purpose.” Nowhere in any biblical passage do we ever get any idea that what God planned either God himself has changed or can be changed by us. God’s eternal plans are always described as certain, fixed, and immovable—“the unchangeable character of



Election:



Unchangeable



Eternal



Gracious



Definite



Christ-centered

“But election is not arbitrary, as it is based on something in God.
He gives it purpose and reason. Instead of what is in us, God elects on
what is in him: grace and love.”

[God’s] purpose” (Heb. 6:17–18). The followers of Arminius taught that there were various kinds of election, including a revocable kind. Scripture does speak of God “changing,” but this is accommodated language. What this highlights for us practically is that it’s so easy for us to judge God on the basis of our experience. Dad would make promises, dad would break promises; God is a Father, therefore he, too, changes. It’s easy for us to see people in church and then not and to think that somehow they were genuinely saved but then lost that salvation. Election is glorious because it is unchangeable.

It Is Eternal

What makes the doctrine of election so glorious? It is eternal.¹² “Election [or choosing] is God’s unchangeable purpose by which he did the following: Before the foundation of the world.” This language comes right from Ephesians 1:4. We are used to going into the polling station or sending in an absentee ballot during election season. We are used to having a say in things. Yet Scripture reveals to us that before anything was, there was only God. Before he actually made anything, he had a plan. Since he is eternal, so are his plans. His eternal plan for us was a gracious plan, saving us according to “his own purpose and grace, which he gave us in Christ Jesus before the ages began” (2 Tim. 1:9). This is why Paul praises God for this, saying, “For who has known the mind of the Lord, or who has been his counselor? Or who has given a gift to him that he might be repaid?” (Rom. 11:34–35). This is not only glorious, but also it should be inspiring to you and me. Have you come to realize that the eternal and glorious God had a plan for you in particular from all of eternity and for all of eternity?

It Is Gracious

What makes the doctrine of election so glorious? In his unchangeable purpose before the foundation of the world “by sheer grace, according to the free good pleasure of his will, he chose in Christ . . .” Paul says that at the heart of our praise to God the Father is his love for us. His love is an eternal love “as he chose us in him before the foundation of the world” (Eph. 1:4). His love for us is the cause of his predestining us (Eph. 1:5). His eternal love for us was that we would know his love in time, as his predestining love was “for adoption as sons through Jesus Christ” (Eph. 1:5). And his love for us was rooted in his prior love for his Son, “the Beloved” (Eph. 1:6).

This eternal grace was initiated, executed, and purposed in God himself, and not in us. “He chose us” (Eph. 1:4), “he predestined” us (Eph. 1:5), and this was “according to the purpose of his will” (Eph. 1:5). That word *purpose eudoki* can also be translated as “good pleasure” (NIV; NKJV) or “kind intention” (NASB).¹³ The cause of election is God’s love. It is not arbitrary or capricious but rooted in a deep love for us. As Moses revealed to the Israelites in Deuteronomy 7, it was not because they were more in number or greater than anyone else that he chose them, but it was merely because the Lord loved them!

So why did God chose one person and not another? More personally, why did God choose you and not another? God “chose us in [Christ] before the foundation of the world.” Then we read why: “that we should be holy and blameless before him.” In other words, it was not because we were holy and blameless. Again, we read that “in love [the Father] predestined us for adoption as sons

through Jesus Christ, according to the purpose of his will, to the praise of his glorious grace” (Eph. 1:5–6). His predestining us made us sons; we were not predestined because he saw us becoming sons. Have you ever heard a preacher use the illustration of a parade, where God, as it were, was in the broadcast booth watching the entire parade; from that vantage point he could see all humanity pass before him, believing or not, and then he reacts to this with his choice. Ephesians 1 says otherwise, that it was according to the riches of grace in God before time began that he chose you, not because of your faith in time.

The graciousness of God’s electing work is particularly glorious when we realize that he chose “us” as sinners. We were chosen “out of the entire human race, which had fallen by its own fault from its original innocence into sin and ruin” not because we were “better nor more deserving than the others, but lay with them in the common misery.” Because he chose us of all people, we sing at the top of our lungs from the bottom of our hearts, “O to grace how great a debtor, daily I’m constrained to be!” Why did God choose you and not another? It was not because of you!

This is so important for us, because it keeps grace gracious. Therefore, we are humbled to the core, not being puffed up because we were better. Grace is gracious.

Let me pause and anticipate a concern you may have. You may be thinking, “This sounds arbitrary.” But here’s the answer to that. If it were arbitrary, it would be for no reason. Like a bunch of ping pong balls in a lottery machine, one just comes up out of chance, luck, or odds. If all we said about election was that it was based on nothing in us, then

yes, it would be arbitrary. You would be like one of billions and billions of white ping pong balls with absolutely nothing to distinguish you. But election is not arbitrary, as it is based on something in God. He gives it purpose and reason. Instead of what is in us, God elects on what is in him: grace and love. The simplicity of Scripture demands this.

It Is Definite

What makes the doctrine of election so glorious? In his unchangeable, eternal, and gracious purpose “he chose in Christ to salvation a definite number of particular people out of the entire human race.” The doxology of Ephesians 1 is that “we” bless God because he has blessed “us” (Eph. 1:4). This is not an indefinite mass or class of people, but real people like you and me. Augustine said the “number [of the predestined] is so certain that one can neither be added to them nor taken away . . . neither to be increased nor diminished.”¹⁴

Why is this so important to debate over? If predestination were indefinite and impersonal we would ever be in doubt as to our participation in it. On the contrary, because it is definitely of particular persons, John Calvin said Paul’s intention in Ephesians 1 was “to rouse [our] hearts to gratitude, to set [us] all on flame, to occupy and fill [us] with this thought . . . No doctrine is more useful . . . [to] stir us up to give thanks.”¹⁵

It Is Christ-Centered

Another aspect article 7 points out that makes the doctrine of election so glorious is that we were chosen “in Christ.”¹⁶ This is one of the areas we need to grow in appreciation for. We can so often speak abstractly of “predestination,” forgetting that this doctrine is Christ-centered. In Ephesians 1, before he even says a word about predestination, Paul roots everything in Jesus Christ. How so? We bless “the God and Father

of our Lord Jesus Christ”; God has “blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing” (v. 3); God chose us “in him,” that is, Jesus Christ; God “blessed us in the Beloved” (v. 6). “In Christ” doesn’t mean that Christ’s foreseen merit was the basis of our then being chosen in him, as the Remonstrants taught, but that “even before [we] are fully united with Christ through faith, there is some specific connection and mutual relationship between him, as the head, and the elect, as the members destined for and given to him.”¹⁷ Paul also told Timothy that God “saved us and called us to a holy calling, not because of our works but because of his own purpose and grace, which he gave us in Christ Jesus before the ages began” (2 Tim. 1:9). Article 7 summarizes what it means to have been chosen “in Christ” saying of those whom God predestined, “And so he decided to give the chosen ones to Christ to be saved, and to call and draw them effectively into Christ’s fellowship through his Word and Spirit.” How? The article goes on: “In other words, he decided to grant them true faith in Christ, to justify them, to sanctify them, and finally, after powerfully preserving them in the fellowship of his Son, to glorify them.” Our Lord can do all this because he was “appointed from eternity to be the mediator, the head of all those chosen, and the foundation of their salvation.”

In practical terms, this means that Jesus Christ is like the mirror of our election. If the knowledge of God’s good pleasure and powerful love before the foundation of the world still leaves you in doubt, then the only remedy is to gaze upon Christ, as in a mirror. Look at him, and you will see reflected back yourself, being renewed in his image and chosen to be so.

What a doctrine! It reveals the glory of our wonderful God! As it does, it leads us to respond in praise and in holiness: “that we should be holy and blameless before him” (v. 4).

This is no hyper-Calvinism or fatalism that says, “God will do what God will do; therefore it doesn’t matter.” He did what he did in eternity and has made that real in your life so that your life would matter. He “chose us,” that is, he called us out (*ex/elexato*) of the mass of sinners deserving punishment. And having called us out from eternity past, in time we become his “sons through Jesus Christ” by adoption (v. 5).

When we meditate on his glory we burst forth in praise: “Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ” (Eph. 1:3) and “to the praise of his glorious grace!” (Eph. 1:6). When we meditate on his glory we respond in seeking to be holy. We were chosen for this. Out of the mass of sinners deserving punishment we were called forth “that we should be holy and blameless before him” (Eph. 1:4). What a God! What a life he has called us to!¹⁸

1. David Paraeus, “Epitome of Arminianisme: or, The Examination of the Five Articles of the Remonstrants, in the Netherlands,” in *The Summe of Christian Religion, Delivered by Zacharius Ursinus*, trans. A. R. (London, printed by James Young, 1645), 817.

2. As cited in “Appendix C: The Remonstrance of 1610,” in *Crisis in the Reformed Churches*, 208.

3. Paraeus, “Epitome of Arminianisme,” 817–18.

4. See Appendix 2: The Opinions of the Remonstrants (1619), as cited in “Appendix H: The Opinions of the Remonstrants,” in *Crisis in the Reformed Churches*, 222–29.

5. *Thesis de electione huius vel illius ad salutem sub conditione fidei, fundamentalis est*. Milton, *The British Delegation and the Synod of Dort*, 175 (4/13).

6. Chuck Smith of Calvary Chapel Costa Mesa, “Ephesians 1,” <https://calvarychapel.com/pastorchuck/c2k/ephesians-1>, accessed May 9, 2018.

7. Dennison, ed., *Reformed Confessions of the 16th and 17th Centuries*, vol. 2, 433–34.

8. Beck, “Reformed Confessions and Scholasticism,” 29.

9. W. J. van Asselt, "No Dordt Without Scholasticism: Willem Verboom on the Canons of Dordt," *Church History and Religious Culture* 87:2 (2007): 204–5, 206.

10. See Heiko A. Oberman, *Masters of the Reformation: The Emergence of a New Intellectual Climate in Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981); *The Harvest of Medieval Theology: Gabriel Biel and Late Medieval Nominalism* (1963; rev. ed., Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1967); Donald W. Sinnema, "The Issue of Reprobation at the Synod of Dort (1618–1619) in the Light of the History of This Doctrine" (PhD diss., University of St Michael's College, 1985), 8–51; David C. Steinmetz, *Luther and Staupitz: An Essay in the Intellectual Origins of the Protestant Reformation* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1980).

11. See how this definition was foundation in *Synopsis Purioris Theologiae/Synopsis of a Purer Theology*: vol. 2, ed. Henk van den Belt, trans. Riemer A. Faber (Leiden: Brill, 2016), 31.

12. *Synopsis Purioris Theologiae*, vol. 2, 31.

13. εὐδοκία, ας, ἡ, in *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament*, 319.

14. Augustine, "On Rebuke and Grace," 39, in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers: First Series*, ed. Philip Schaff (1887; repr., Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2004), 5:487 col. 2, 488 col. 1.

15. John Calvin, *The Epistles of Paul the Apostle to the Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians and Colossians*, trans. T. H. L. Parker, ed. David W. Torrance and Thomas F. Torrance, Calvin's New Testament Commentaries 11 (1965; repr., Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1972), 123, 126.

16. *Synopsis Purioris Theologiae*, vol. 2, 39.

17. *Synopsis Purioris Theologiae*, vol. 2, 41.

18. In the notes on Ephesians 1:4–6, the *Dutch Annotations* virtually show how the points in article 7 flow directly from the biblical text: "God chose us in Christ, before the foundation of the world [*Dutch Annotations* "from everlasting"], so that we should be holy and blameless before him with love; he predestined us [*Dutch Annotations* "from eternity"] whom he adopted as his children through Jesus Christ, in himself, according to the good pleasure of his will [*Dutch Annotations* "not for any merit or worthiness of ours but only according to his undeserved favor, grace and pleasure"], to the praise of his glorious grace, by which he freely made us pleasing to himself in his beloved." *Dutch Annotations* on Ephesians 1:4–6.

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Most of our thoughts about the future are punctuated by question marks. This is true in the short term; we wonder what the rest of this week will be like. But when we think about eternity, our questions multiply. For those who treasure Christ's promise—"I go to prepare a place for you . . . I will come again and receive you to Myself; that where I am, there you may be also" (John 14:2-3)—one of the biggest questions is "What is heaven like?" Even the form of that question implies that we can think about heaven only by analogy. It is like a wedding feast (Rev. 19:9), a many-roomed house (John 14:2), a city (Heb. 11:10, 16) with gates of pearls and streets of gold (Rev. 21:21), a country whose hills flow with sweet wine (Amos 9:13).

None of the Bible authors offer anything like a highly descriptive tourist guide to heaven . . . not even those who had been to heaven and back. After being caught up to paradise Paul could not lawfully express what he had experienced (2 Cor. 12:1-6). To convey his vision of heaven similes were John's go-to figure of speech; page for page the word *like* occurs four times as often in Revelation than in the rest of Scripture. Truly "eye has not seen, nor ear heard, nor have entered into the heart of man the things which God has prepared for those who love him" (1 Cor. 2:9).¹ The reward of heaven will be to believers "such a glory as never entered into the heart of man to conceive."²

Maybe because heaven seems so unfamiliar to us we struggle to believe it is real. We might not doubt the existence of heaven, but it can still feel less solid, less tangible, than

the world we now know. So, how real is heaven? What is it like? And how should the reality of heaven affect us now?

The Reality of Heaven

The biblical descriptions of heaven are indeed heavily metaphorical. This does not, however, argue for heaven's unreality but for its surpassing grandeur. In fact, that the biblical writers could successfully illustrate heaven by way of earthly analogies should suggest to us that the Promised Land is not as unfamiliar as we might suspect. When the ancient Israelites yearned for that "land flowing with milk and honey" (Exod. 3:17) they anticipated something more real than that metaphor suggests. They certainly did not imagine a land with milky, sticky rivers, a bizarre ancient-Near-Eastern version of Willy Wonka's chocolate factory. They anticipated a land of bounty, "the most glorious of all lands" (Ezek. 20:6, ESV); and they were not disappointed with what they found (Num. 13:27).

We might also be unnerved by the fact that the heaven into which Jesus ascended seems to be dauntingly ethereal, a place humans would find uninhabitable. We might even suspect that "the heaven into which Christ has gone is not a place distinct from earth and hell, but rather just that the heavenly kingdom is present everywhere."³

But the Bible speaks of heaven as a definite place, the place where Christ now dwells in real flesh (Acts 1:11). The promise made to the patriarchs, which they did not receive in their day (Heb. 11:13), was a tangible inheritance of land (Gen. 17:8), or as

Paul translates, the cosmos, the whole world (Rom. 4:13). God will fulfill that promise to them and their seed in the new heavens and earth (Heb. 11:14-16), and not by spiritualizing the gift of land into something less substantial.

Dispensational eschatology tends to see the millennium as the time when God fulfills tangible promises of restoration. But what if these promises are fulfilled more richly, not merely during a thousand-year period of partial renewal but throughout eternity in a renewed heaven and earth?⁴ John's Revelation helps us reconcile the apparent discrepancy that Jesus went to heaven by ascending into the air, and God's promise of a highly tangible heaven. In the age to come heaven and earth will not be distinct; heaven will come to earth and "the tabernacle of God" will be "with men, and He will dwell with them" (Rev. 21:3).⁵ We should not be surprised if a physical heaven sounds more inviting than a rarefied one. "Our heavenly hope is not only of saved souls but of a saved creation (Rom. 8:19-21) . . . Whatever the condition of 'the life everlasting,' it is more, certainly not less, than the embodied joy that such imagery suggests. We are creatures of time and space, and we will transcend not our humanity but the bondage of our humanity to the conditions of sin and death."⁶

Eternal life will perfectly answer the best longings of God's embodied children. "The Bible assures us that God will create a new earth on which we shall live to God's praise in glorified, resurrected bodies. On that new earth, therefore, we hope to spend eternity enjoying its beauties,

exploring its resources, and using its treasures to the glory of God.”⁷ Such is the message of both Testaments of Scripture. In the new heavens and new earth (Isa. 65:17) “they shall build houses and inhabit them; they shall plant vineyards and eat their fruit” (v. 21). God’s “elect shall long enjoy the work of their hands. They shall not labor in vain” (vv. 22–23). Animals will populate the age to come though one will no longer prey on another (v. 25).⁸ In the age to come, when the kingdom of God is fully bestowed, God’s people will eat and drink at Christ’s table in his kingdom (Luke 22:17, 29–30; Matt. 8:11).⁹ Geerhardus Vos explains that these physical descriptions of the age to come should not “be interpreted allegorically, as if they stood for wholly internal spiritual processes: they evidently point to, or at least include, outward states and activities, of which our life in the senses offers some analogy.”¹⁰ At the same time, if every apocalyptic image of the age to come is not to be taken in a strictly literal manner (e.g., streets of gold), they are meant to trigger our imagination to hope for better things.

If this very physical view of heaven somehow seems anticlimactic, we need to ponder God’s undiluted approval of his first creation. When God made the heavens and the earth it was undeniably physical, and it was very good (Gen. 1:31). Any vision of an intangible heaven ill-suited to fully embodied humans radically underestimates the vision of Scripture.

The Riches of Heaven

The Bible’s promise of eternal life is not just a promise of life without end but also life without defect.¹¹

Heaven Is a Reversal of the Pain of the Curse

The Bible frequently describes heaven as a place from which everything negative is banished. “And God will wipe away every tear from their eyes;

there shall be no more death, nor sorrow, nor crying. There shall be no more pain, for the former things have passed away” (Rev. 21:4). No one in heaven will hunger or thirst (Rev. 7:16) or fear (Rev. 21:8). Earthly relationships in the Lord, now sullied by sin, will be restored.

With the advent of sin people lost closeness with God and with each other, work became painful, and death began to reign (Gen. 3:1–19; Rom. 5:14). The words are hard to read: “The Lord God sent him out of the garden of Eden . . . so he drove out the man” so he could not eat of the tree of life and live forever (Gen. 3:22–23). In the new heaven and earth Christ grants his friends “to eat from the tree of life, which is in the midst of the Paradise of God” (Rev. 2:7).

Christ’s overthrow of sin at the last day will destroy its negative consequences so familiar to us. In heaven, “they shall be fully and forever freed from all sin and misery.”¹² Even things we now find tiresome, like work, will become a great delight.¹³ When God renews the world, which was created for man’s sake, it “shall at length be renewed and be clad with another hue, much more pleasant and beautiful.”¹⁴ Never again will God’s people encounter an unclean thing (Rev. 21:27). When God finishes reversing the curse in the new heavens and earth (Rev. 22:3) he will restore everything that was lost. In those days will the former troubles be forgotten for God’s children (Isa. 65:16).

Heaven Is a Realization of Fellowship with God

We who are but “a particle of [God’s] creation” long, more than anything, to know God and be known by him.¹⁵ Believers gain great comfort from their present status as children of God. But our present relationship with our Father is strained by our misunderstanding of his purposes

and disobedience of his will. The friendship with God we now experience in part we will gain fully in heaven (1 Cor. 13:12). John sees it this way: “Beloved, now we are children of God; and it has not yet been revealed what we shall be, but we know that when He is revealed, we shall be like Him, for we shall see Him as He is” (1 John 3:2). The elect shall enjoy eternity “in the company of innumerable saints and holy angels, but especially in the immediate vision and fruition of God the Father, of our Lord Jesus Christ, and of the Holy Spirit, to all eternity.” The communion which “the members of the invisible church shall enjoy with Christ in glory” shall be “perfect and full.”¹⁶ Heaven, as one of our young daughters once suggested, is the place that God keeps his promises; and the essence of his promise is perfect friendship.

Heaven Is a Realm of Worship

One heavenly scene that John repeatedly records is the exuberant worship of the redeemed (Rev. 4:8–11; 5:9–14; 7:10–12; 11:16–19; 15:3–4; 16:5–7). If the everlasting worship of God does not seem altogether inviting now—imagine a Sunday service that never ended—it is because our present worship is disrupted by sin and weakness. Now we worship God with mixed desires; then our love for God will be perfected (Jude 1:21). Now we worship God in bodies given to fatigue and distraction; then our bodies will be incorruptible (1 Cor. 15:42). Now we worship God in churches populated by people who hurt and misjudge each other; then we will truly be a holy family, finally able to consistently love our neighbor as ourselves. As we worship God now, he sometimes seems distant (Ps. 10:1). Then he will always be present (Ps. 16:11), and we will glorify and enjoy him as never before.

Heaven Will Host a Renewed Humanity



“Jesus taught his disciples to pray to our Father, ‘Your kingdom come. Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven.’ With this prayer we recognize that only God can make us more heavenly, while fervently committing to put into practice a divine ethic.”

In heaven believers shall be “filled with inconceivable joys, made perfectly holy and happy both in body and soul.”¹⁷ And not simply in the abstract but in pursuit of the best thoughts and activities that currently mark our humanity. God’s first people were to be culture-makers (Gen. 2:5; 4:19–22). Should we suspect that his vision for creaturely creativity will have diminished in the age to come? Anthony Hoekema reflects the sentiments of Hendrikus Berkhof and Abraham Kuyper in suggesting that “the unique contributions of each nation to the life of the present earth will enrich the life of the new earth” and that the redeemed will “inherit the best products of culture and art which this earth has produced.”¹⁸ In his glorious vision of the new heaven and earth John previewed the nations and kings of the earth bringing their glory and honor, cultural products in the form of gifts and sacrifices, into the holy city (Rev. 21:24–27).¹⁹

Heaven is an inestimably great reward (1 Pet. 5:4) tailor-made for God’s beloved people which we should pursue at all cost (Matt.

13:45–46). That some will find heaven to be a greater reward than others (Luke 19:15–19) should not bother us. If even now we are encouraged to “rejoice with those who rejoice” (Rom. 12:15) we can expect the entire category of unfairness to vanish with this old earth.

The Response to Heaven

Far from being an irrelevant topic, God breathes into our hearts the hope of heaven to help us on our journey to that great city.

Heaven Excites Us to Practice God’s Will

Jesus taught his disciples to pray to our Father, “Your kingdom come. Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven” (Matt. 6:10). With this prayer we recognize that only God can make us more heavenly, while fervently committing to put into practice a divine ethic (cf. Phil. 2:12–13). We should pray and strive “that we all may live on earth as in heaven, with all joy and gladness, according to his divine will.”²⁰ As the new heaven and earth are “an eternal, happy Sabbath from all deadly works”²¹ we ought to

begin this rest here and now.²²

Heaven Trains Us to Respect God’s Earth

Strangely, some people who seem least interested in a creator are the most zealous for creation, while those with a rich theology of divine creation and (at least the raw materials for) a theology of the restoration of the cosmos sometimes seem the least interested in ecological stewardship.

This should not be.

“If our goal is to be liberated *from* creation rather than the liberation *of* creation, we will understandably display little concern for the world that God has made. If, however, we are looking forward to ‘the restoration of all things’ (Acts 3:21) and the participation of the whole creation in our redemption (Rom. 8:18–21), then our actions here and now pertain to the same world that will one day be finally and fully renewed.”²³ Humans are the proper image of God. But the rest of God’s creation—like that which he purified with the great flood—is good and should be treasured by believers

because it “leads us to contemplate the invisible things of God, namely, His eternal power and divinity, as the apostle Paul saith (Rom. 1:20).”²⁴ Calvin is right: “Wherever you turn your eyes, there is no portion of the world, however minute, that does not exhibit at least some sparks of beauty” and overwhelm us by “the immense weight of glory.”²⁵ How can this reality not mightily impact Christian ecology?

Heaven Encourages Us to Pursue Deep Fellowship

Heaven will be quintessentially relational. Those concerned that marriages will cease in glory (Mark 12:25) will be overjoyed to find that the most transferable traits of marriage will then be shared by heaven’s entire population. There is no doubt that we will deeply recognize (to put it too mildly) our redeemed friends as well as the vast host of God’s people.²⁶ Fittingly, the Somerset Confession (1656) follows its article on heaven by insisting that “it is both the duty and privilege of the church of Christ (till His coming again) . . . to enjoy, prize, and press after, fellowship through and in the Spirit with the Lord, and each with the other (Acts 2:42; 1 Cor. 11:26; Eph. 2:21–22; 4:3–6; 1 Cor. 12:13; Eph. 3:9; Col. 2:2).”²⁷ One of the best ways to show an interest in heaven is to begin to live in harmonious love with others, and especially with other believers.

Heaven Helps Us to Be Patient in Tribulation

A theology of “suffering which says nothing of heaven, is leaving out almost the whole of one side of the account.”²⁸ Randy Alcorn reflects on Lewis’s thought: “Present sufferings *must* be seen in light of the promise of eternal happiness in God. The scales can’t be balanced in this life alone.” But as Paul says, “Our light affliction . . . is working for us a far more exceeding and eternal weight

of glory” (2 Cor. 4:17). Again Alcorn: “It’s not that temporary suffering is so *small*; it’s that eternal glory is so *huge*.”²⁹ Believers, even in the midst of the greatest tribulation, can confidently expect God to wipe away their tears and remove their rebuke (Isa. 25:8; Rev. 7:14–17). We can better endure reproach when our hearts are set on a greater reward (Heb. 11:26; 12:2).

Heaven Helps Us to Long for God

Wilhelmus à Brakel urges believers to “focus continually upon the glory of this inheritance, and by faith traverse heaven” by using John’s Revelation as a glimpse into their future.³⁰ In Scripture, wrote Richard Baxter, “Heaven is set open, as it were, to our daily view” for our encouragement, that we might long for the city of God (Heb. 11:10) and enter therein.³¹ This longing for glory does not distract us from godliness but infuses in us the kind of hopeful disposition necessary to follow God and rejoice in the hope of his glory (Rom. 5:2).

One of the most beautiful images of heaven is also the simplest and most familiar to us. Heaven is home. As a pastor, I commonly hear death-bed-

ridden believers say: “I want to go home.” Heaven as home is a concept many believers have learned from the Psalms. My grandfather chose Psalm 84 as his funeral text. After a ninety-seven-year pilgrimage he could say with the writer: “My soul longs, yes, even faints for the courts of the Lord” (v. 2). He had come to believe that a day in God’s courts is better than a thousand (v. 10). But he was not enamored with the beauty of God’s tabernacle (v. 1) because of its architecture. His deepest longing was to be with God. “My heart and my flesh cry out for the living God” (v. 2). A home is a place where one feels native, where fears of exclusion melt away. To make his point, the psalmist speaks of a sparrow finding a home for her young. Like that nest—built to fit around the young sparrows—believers will be able to say without hesitation, “The Lord of Hosts is nigh, our father’s God Most High is our strong habitation.”³²

Have you ever been on vacation and found yourself eager to get home? Similarly, a longing for heaven can speed and strengthen us on our way to God.

Study Questions

Why does heaven seem strange, even unreal to us? What are some of the dangers of such a view of heaven?

How does God’s promise to bequeath land to the patriarchs (Gen. 17:8; Heb. 11:13) help us understand heaven (cf. Rom. 4:13)?

Read Isaiah 65:17–25 and reflect on the tangible descriptions of the new heaven and earth.

Why is a physical heaven so important to our hope of glory?

Have you ever faltered over the thought of heaven as unending worship? How would you help a believer who found such a prospect uninviting?

Christ is the second Adam (1 Cor. 15:45–49) who will return to reverse the curse invoked by Adam’s sin. How are you encouraged by the thought of heaven as analogous to, but better than, pre-fall paradise?

Should we work for a sort of heaven on earth (cf. Matt. 6:10)?

What practical steps could you and your group take to better reflect the fellowship that believers will enjoy in heaven?

1. Paul seems to be alluding to Isaiah 64:4, in the context of which the prophet pleads that God would “rend the heavens” and “come down! That the mountains might shake at Your presence” (v. 1). When Paul insists that “God has revealed them to us through His Spirit” (v. 10), he seems to have in mind the events connected with Christ’s first coming. The events following Christ’s second coming still remain shrouded in glorious mystery.
2. Belgic Confession, art. 37, in James T. Dennison Jr., *Reformed Confessions of the 16th and 17th Centuries in English Translation*, vol. 2, 1552–1566 (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 2010), 449.
3. Against which the Bremen Consensus (1595) argues. James T. Dennison Jr., *Reformed Confessions of the 16th and 17th Centuries in English Translation*, vol. 3, 1567–1599 (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 2012), 660.
4. See Anthony Hoekema, *The Bible and the Future* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), 275–76.
5. Lest we think that the new heaven and earth must be two distinct places Vos reminds us that “the OT has no single word for ‘universe,’ and that the phrase ‘heaven and earth’ serves to supply the deficiency. The promise of a new heavens and a new earth is therefore the equivalent to a promise of world renewal.” James Orr, gen. ed., *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1952), s.v. “Heavens, New (and Earth, New),” by Geerhardus Vos.
6. Michael Horton, *The Christian Faith* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2011), 988–89. Similarly Vos says, “The eschatological kingdom differs from the present kingdom largely in the fact that it will receive an external, visible embodiment . . . It will have its outward form as the doctrine of the resurrection and the regenerated earth plainly show.” *Redemptive History and Biblical Interpretation: The Shorter Writings of Geerhardus Vos*, ed. Richard B. Gaffin Jr. (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 1980), 54.
7. Hoekema, *The Bible and the Future*, 274.
8. *The Hungarian Confessio Catholica* states, without proof, that while “the material of created things will be renewed and freed from corruption . . . dumb animals will not be resurrected.” Dennison, *Reformed Confessions*, vol. 2, 625. Citing Romans 8:22, 23 (“the whole creation groans”), Loraine Boettner offers a more balanced conclusion: “As in this present world one generation of plants and animals succeeds another, so in the new earth there will be plant and animal life, no doubt much more luxurious and varied and permanent than here, but . . . the individual ones that we have known will not be there.” *Immortality* (Philadelphia: P&R, 1956), 86.
9. Romans 14:17 could seem to suggest that the kingdom is merely spiritual and in no way physical. But Paul is making the point that citizenship in God’s kingdom does not hinge on how one “[pretends] to champion meat and drink, as though that were essential to God’s kingdom.” Martin Luther, *Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1954), 188.
10. Vos, *Redemptive History*, 54. Elsewhere Vos explains that regarding the creation of the new heavens and earth Scripture anticipates “a restoration of the primeval harmony on a higher plane such as precludes all further disturbance” (emphasis added). Orr, “Heavens, New.”
11. Vos, *Redemptive History*, 54.
12. Westminster Larger Catechism, Q/A 90, in *The Reformed Confessions of the 16th and 17th Centuries in English Translation*, vol. 4, 1600–1693 (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 2014), 318.
13. What if you could imagine without limits and build without frustration or disappointment? What if your body never ached and your plans never failed? Would not work be enjoyable?
14. Anglican Catechism (1553), Dennison, *Reformed Confessions*, vol. 2, 29.
15. Augustine, *The Confessions* (New York: E. P. Dutton & Co., 1949), 1.
16. Westminster Larger Catechism, Q/A 90, in Dennison, *Reformed Confessions*, vol. 4, 318.
17. Westminster Larger Catechism, Q/A 90, in Dennison, *Reformed Confessions*, vol. 4, 318.
18. Hoekema, *The Bible and the Future*, 286.
19. Dennis Johnson comments that the nations will bring their “wealth” into the city though not for the purpose of consumption but as “gifts and sacrifices of the earthly sanctuary, to be offered to the divine King enthroned on it.” *Triumph of the Lamb: A Commentary on Revelation* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2001), 318–19.
20. *Large Emden Catechism* (1551), Dennison, *Reformed Confessions*, vol. 1, 632. “Heaven is in the consciousness of Jesus the goal towards which every aspiration of the disciple in the kingdom ought to tend” (cf. Matt. 6:19–21). Geerhardus Vos, *Redemptive History* 306.
21. *Large Emden Catechism* (1551) in Dennison, *Reformed Confessions*, vol. 1, 598.
22. *Heidelberg Catechism*, Q/A 103 in Dennison, *Reformed Confessions*, vol. 2, 794.
23. Horton, *The Christian Faith*, 989–990.
24. *The Belgic Confession*, art. 2 in Dennison, *Reformed Confessions*, vol. 2, 425.
25. *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1962), 1.5.1. Thanks to John Jeffery for drawing my attention to this quote and to the many places in Calvin’s *Institutes* where he speaks of the majestic “theater” of creation (1.5.8, 1.6.2, 1.14.20, 2.6.1).
26. Though the disciples clearly felt out of place by the meeting, they certainly knew Moses and Elijah who appeared with Jesus on the mount of transfiguration having been dead for hundreds of years (Matt. 17:3).
27. Dennison, *Reformed Confessions*, vol. 4, 455.
28. C. S. Lewis, *The Problem of Pain*, in *The C. S. Lewis Signature Classics* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2017), 638.
29. Randy Alcorn, (September 28, 2013). C. S. Lewis on Heaven and the New Earth: God’s Eternal Remedy to the Problem of Evil and Suffering [web log post]. Retrieved from <http://www.desiringgod.org/messages/c-s-lewis-on-heaven-and-the-new-earth-god-s-eternal-remedy-to-the-problem-of-evil-and-suffering>
30. Wilhelmus à Brakel, *The Christian’s Reasonable Service, Vol 4*. (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 1995), 368. The closing section of Brakel’s dogmatics unravels the false notion that heavenly-mindedness results in spiritual laziness (see esp. pp. 367–70).
31. Richard Baxter, *The Saints’ Everlasting Rest* (Ross-Shire, Great Britain: Christian Focus Publications, 1998), 656.
32. Metrical version of Psalm 46.

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Bible Studies on Esther: Introduction



Dr. Norman
DeJong

Some people claim to “love” the book of Esther. It excites them. It tells them about a beautiful woman named Esther who becomes queen of Persia. The story contains conflict, it contains romance, it contains royalty. For some, it satisfies their desire for feminist revenge. For others, it puts a stamp of approval on beauty pageants. If such are our motivations, we are barking up the wrong tree.

The book of Esther is unique in a number of ways. It has been the object of much controversy, even though it is loved and treasured by the Jewish community. For many Christians, it is an enigma because it never mentions the name of God. Superficially, it seems as though God is missing from the story. Also, it recounts violent, widespread revenge by the Jews against their enemies, which seems to contradict the biblical message that vengeance belongs to God and not to man. Furthermore, there is a secular tone to the book, highlighting beauty pageants and sexual promiscuity that should be repugnant to Bible believers. Writing a commentary on the book of Esther presents an unusual challenge. In order for us to understand the book of Esther, we will need to recognize several important truths.

Important Preconceptions

■ **First and foremost, the book of Esther is an accepted part of the Old Testament canon.** It is, therefore, the Word of God. It must be treated as God’s revelation or disclosure to his Body, the church. It is, therefore, infallible and authoritative. Some commentaries will dispute that claim and argue that this book should not be in the Bible. It never mentions the name of God and, seemingly, does not point to Jesus Christ.

■ **Second, Esther is primarily a historical book.** It describes for us events that occurred sometime in history. It is imperative, then, that we know when those events occurred. **If we assume** that the Old Testament is organized in historical sequence, we will conclude or assume that the events of Esther occurred sometime **after** the events in Ezra and Nehemiah. The Old Testament, after all, has the book of Esther following Ezra and Nehemiah but well before the books of Psalms or Isaiah or Daniel.

■ **All human beings operate with certain assumptions or basic beliefs as we live our lives.** Without critical examination, we accept some statements or implied assertions as being true and worthy of acceptance. When we do that uncritically, we call them “presumptions” or “preconceptions” or “assumptions.” As serious students



of God's Holy Word, it is important that our assumptions are based on facts and not on opinions, for **opinions can easily be in error. Our preconceptions have to conform to reality.**

■ **The Bible is rightly described as “historical, progressive revelation.”** That means that it informs us about real historical events that occurred over periods of time. These events did not all occur at one specific time or point in history but over many decades, centuries, and millennia. God has progressively revealed his plan of salvation and the knowledge of himself so that we could know him truthfully and live accordingly. We should **also add the descriptive word “literary” to that definition because the Bible is a book.** It has all the qualities of literature, which, understood correctly, will enhance our understanding of the Bible and our appreciation for it.

■ **Events have consequences which follow after the events and do not precede them.** One of the qualities of God's Holy Word is that it frequently contains specific timelines and dates for events. The book of Esther, for example, begins with the phrase “Now in the days of Ahasuerus, . . . in the third year of his reign” (Esther 1:1, 3). What year was that? When did that occur? Working backwards in our Bibles, we read, “Now it happened in the month of Chislew, in the twentieth year, as I was in Susa” (Neh. 1:1). When we jump ahead to the book of Daniel, we read there that “in the third year of the reign of Jehoiakim, . . . Nebuchadnezzar” (Dan. 1:1). Throughout these historical books there are frequent, specific dates or times mentioned. We need to pay careful attention to those so that we understand correct chronological sequencing. An event that occurred in 605 BC is going to influence or affect people's lives and events in subsequent years. A proclamation

given in 539 BC, for example, is going to impact the lives of people living in 538 BC but not those living in 544 BC.

■ **God is sovereign ruler over men and nations, as is clearly taught in the book of Daniel.** The sovereignty of God is the primary theme in the book of Daniel. It is demonstrated in a variety of ways, among which are examples of God using pagan persons to accomplish his divine purposes and objectives. God often draws straight lines with crooked sticks. We have to assume that this principle is also operative in the book of Esther. Even though God is not specifically mentioned in the book of Esther, we can be sure that God is directing and controlling all the persons and events that are described. God is spirit, so we cannot see him with the naked eye, but we can see him with the eye of faith.

■ **God often uses fallible human beings to accomplish his purposes.** For example, Jeremiah refers to Nebuchadnezzar as “my servant” (Jer. 27:6). God has also described King Cyrus of Persia as “my shepherd” and my “anointed” (Isa. 44:28; 45:1), even though Cyrus did not know him (Isa. 45:4–5). As we peruse the books of Ezra and Nehemiah, we see King Artaxerxes of Persia issuing specific commands to advance the kingdom of God, even though the text leaves his personal relationship to Christ in doubt. God controls and uses those whom he chooses to carry out his plans, even though these people are obviously evil and responsible for their wicked actions.

Given these regulative principles, we will need to construct an accurate time line of events if we are to see how these events might possibly affect those persons that follow after them. As we construct such a chronology, we will be able to understand how earlier events might affect later events.

As we thumb through our English Bibles, we find four historical books that deal with events in the Persian Empire. **In order of appearance,** they are the books of Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther, and Daniel. If you have been following our Bible studies during the last years, you will recall that we have recently finished studies of Ezra and Nehemiah. Our study over these next months will focus on the book of Esther. Since the Old Testament begins with Genesis and moves through a number of historical books, most of us assume that these four are in correct chronological sequence. Of the four, Daniel tends to generate a lot of interest because it contains events and miracles that fascinate us. Daniel is also full of pictures of the pre-incarnate Christ, making it one of the most messianic books of the Old Testament. Daniel is full of Sunday school lessons, but we tend to focus only on the first six chapters. We tend to find the last half of that book to be somewhat confusing and difficult to understand. When we realize that much of that is prophetic and is rooted in the Persian Empire, we have added reason to avoid that section.

Typical pastors and professors know very little about the Persian Empire because that subject seldom gets studied by Reformed theologians. Most of our seminaries in the Western world do not teach courses on Persian history or culture. Since Ezra, Nehemiah, and Esther are set in the Persian Empire, we tend to ignore what we don't know. In fact, most laypeople assume that those last three books are in correct chronological order, with Esther being the latest book and the latest person of the four. That is a wrong assumption, as any serious study of chronology will indicate.

If we operate with the assumption that Ezra and Nehemiah occur before Esther, we will almost certainly make

The Biblical Sequence

Ezra

Nehemiah

Esther

Daniel

The Chronological Sequence

Daniel

Esther

Ezra

Nehemiah

The Chronology of Esther (All dates are BC, before Christ)

740-701	The prophet Isaiah foretells the destruction of Israel and the coming of Cyrus, King of Persia. (see Isaiah 44:24 –45:13)
605	Nebuchadnezzar begins siege of Jerusalem; Daniel and friends carried into captivity. (II Kings 24:10-16; Jeremiah 52:4-11; Daniel 1:1-2).
586	Jerusalem and the temple are destroyed. (II Kings 25:8-10; Jeremiah 52:12-16; Ezekiel 9:1-11)
539	The Medes and the Persians conquer Babylon and kill Belshazzar. Darius and Cyrus become co-rulers over the Medo-Persian Empire. (Daniel 5:30; 6:28).
538	King Cyrus issues his edict, allowing the Jews to return to Jerusalem and Judah. Some 50,000 people respond and go back to Judea. (Ezra 1:1; 6:3; II Chronicles 36:22).
536	Work on the temple begins, is opposed, but continues. (Ezra 1-4).
530-522	Cambyses [aka Ahasuerus] is King of Persia. (Ezra 4:6)
530	Work on the temple is stopped by force of arms. (Ezra 4:6, 23).
522-486	Darius I reigns over Persia (Ezra 5).
520	Work on the temple resumes. (Ezra 5).
515	The Temple is completed and dedicated. (Ezra 6:15-18).
494-449	The Persians wage war against the Greeks and the Egyptians.
486-465	Xerxes [aka Ahasuerus] reigns over Persian Empire. (Ezra 4:6; Esther 1:1)
483	Vashti is deposed as queen.(Esther 1:3).
479	Esther becomes Queen of Persia (Esther 2:16)
465-424	Artaxerxes I becomes king and reigns over Persia. (Ezra 4:7, 7:11).
458	Ezra is commissioned by Artaxerxes to go to Jerusalem and teach the Law of God. (Ezra 7:7).
445	Nehemiah is commissioned by Artaxerxes to go to Jerusalem and repair the walls of the city and to repopulate the city. (Nehemiah 2:1) He governs for 12 years.
445	The walls are finished in 52 days (Nehemiah 6:15) The city is restored.

a number of serious mistakes. Notice, too, that Daniel appears much later in our Bibles but predates the other three. Daniel is a very old man by the time that Darius, one of the Persian kings, puts him in the lions' den (Dan. 6). The Lord shuts the mouths of the lions. King Darius is mightily impressed. Notice also that this Persian king then issues a decree for all the people within his dominion to "tremble and fear before the God of Daniel for he is the living God" (Dan. 6:26–27). That decree is issued in 538 BC, fifty-nine years before Esther becomes queen. When we backtrack into the book of Daniel, we note there that Nebuchadnezzar has also issued some potent proclamations, insisting that Jehovah is the true God and the one to worship (Dan. 2:47; 3:28–29; 4:34–37). This latter proclamation is directed to "all peoples, nations, and languages, that dwell in all the earth" (Dan. 4:1). All the residents of the Babylonian Empire are commanded by their king to worship the God of the Bible. A few years later all the residents in the Persian Empire are also commanded by their king to worship the God of the Bible, known then as the God of the Jews. The powers of both of those empires are behind those commands. There are many idol worshippers throughout the empire who find this command to be repugnant. Such religious persuasion is almost ground for revolt.

As we peruse this chronology, note first that Daniel and his friends are taken captive to Babylon in the year 605 BC. Notice next the date for Esther becoming queen (479 BC), which is four years after Vashti has been deposed. What transpired during the interval? Compare those

events with the appearance of Ezra (458 BC) and Nehemiah (445 BC). Notice, too, that Haman's effort to exterminate all the Jews in the entire Persian Empire would have produced major consequences. Humanly speaking, if all the Jews had been killed, Ezra and Nehemiah could never have been commissioned by King Artaxerxes to lead worship in Jerusalem or restore the walls and the city. Our Bibles, humanly speaking, would not have the books of Esther, Ezra, Nehemiah, or Malachi, since all the Jews would have been annihilated by their enemies. The prevention of that planned genocide is then an event of monumental significance. Of even greater importance is the fact that all of Christ's genealogy would have been cut off. Esther is, therefore, very important in the development of historical, redemptive theology. Please join me in praying frequently for wisdom and insight.

Discussion Starters

Did you assume that the story of Esther followed after the stories of Ezra and Nehemiah? Is it difficult to adjust your thinking to the chronology offered here? Why?

Did you assume that Esther became queen soon after Vashti was deposed? What happened during those four years between the two events?

Are secular historians to be trusted? Are secular historians biased and prejudiced? What important factor are they ignoring? How significant is that?

On December 7, 1941, the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor. What effects did that attack have on world history?

In 539 BC King Cyrus of Persia issued a proclamation allowing Jewish captives to return to Jerusalem and Judah. He also granted them extensive privileges and immense wealth (Ezra 1:1–11; 2:64–70). What effect might this proclamation have had on all the idolaters in the empire?

Are human beings inclined by nature to love God and to obey his laws (see Rom. 3:9–18)? What types of response might we expect when kings issue decrees demanding worship of the true God?

If you were living during Daniel's time, what would be your reaction to the commands issued by King Darius? Would you expect widespread compliance?

If you were an idol worshiper, what would be your reaction to these same commands?

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It was the great missionary William Carey who said, "Expect great things from God, attempt great things for God." The URCNA appears to be doing little of either. We are a small-minded group of churches. In the opinion of this writer, the reason is fear.

Someone once said, "Fear is the beginning of defeat." Fear prevents the URCNA from expecting and attempting great things for God. Please do not misunderstand me. It is not as if nothing is being done or has been done in our churches or federation. Every profession of faith, every advance in sanctification, every mission and missionary are great things (not to mention the Trinity Psalter Hymnal). But there could be so much more if we were not crippled by fear. If we continue to be characterized by fear we will be defeated in our efforts to promote and advance the cause of our Savior. Allow me to explain.

The URCNA has existed for more than twenty years. And yet I continue to hear cries about potential and/or creeping bureaucracy. After all, "We don't want to become like the CRC!" "That is what we left behind." "It is a slippery slope toward what we do not want to be." The repeated and oft-heard opposition to anything done by or established beyond the local congregation is fear, and it will be our defeat because it is unhealthy. We would do well to remember all that the Christian Reformed Church (CRC) accomplished for the cause of Christ largely because they did not leave everything to the local church (more on this below). The term "bureaucracy" has a negative connotation—that is, excessive administration characterized by red tape and the concentration of power in administrators. The URCNA is about as far removed from bureaucracy as can be.

We have one one full-time employee (which some think is one too many).

Let me use an analogy from marriage that I convey in premarital counseling. In Genesis 2 we read, "Therefore a man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife, and they shall become one flesh." I inform the couple that it is necessary for them to "leave" their respective parents. That is not only a geographical reference but a spiritual and psychological one as well. What I mean is this: a couple is to establish their own covenant household separate and apart from their parents. They are to make decisions for themselves and not allow the parents to control or make the decisions for them. Many couples are heard to say things like "I want to do it this way because that is the way it was done in my home growing up," or,

“Fear is an inappropriate reaction born of a misdiagnosis and cripples our efforts to expect and attempt to do great things for God. It is unhealthy and in need of change for the better. And we can do better.”

“I never want to do it that way because I had to do it that way growing up.” I point out to the couple that despite having moved out of their parents’ homes they are still allowing their parents to determine their behavior in either what they will or won’t do because of the influence of the home from which they physically removed themselves.

I hope you see where I am going with this? The URCNA, despite having left our mother’s home (the CRC) is still allowing our parent to determine what we do or do not do. In our efforts (fear) to not be like the CRC we are still controlled by the CRC because, like the couples I counsel, the parent’s behavior is determining our behavior. And all of this is generated by fear. This ought not to be, especially after twenty plus years! It is time to get beyond this fear.

Here is a shocking statement from someone who was a leader in the secession. The problem in the CRC was not bureaucracy. The problem in the CRC was that the boards, agencies, and staff were unaccountable. Repeated efforts to get answers to questions about doctrine, practice, and money went unanswered. Numerous examples could be provided, but those of us who were there know them all too well. From headquarters at 2850 to the campus of college and seminary

there was no real accountability.

The varied activities of the CRC accomplished great things for the cause of Christ. In fact, they accomplished things far beyond their numbers, much more so than any other Reformed or Presbyterian denomination I am aware of. Missions, education, mercy ministry, and more were astounding given the size of the CRC. There was a lot to admire and even to emulate in the history of the CRC.

I began this series by noting that it is an effort to diagnose the spiritual health of the URCNA. A correct remedy depends on a correct diagnosis. If we continue to misdiagnose the problem of the CRC as bureaucracy, then we will continue to oppose any development of cooperation and coordination beyond the local congregation. The problem, I suggest, was lack of accountability. I suggest that we can accomplish accountability and have greater cooperation and coordination in our efforts to promote the cause of Christ. Here is how that can be done.

Instead of boards you have committees composed of nominated representatives from the churches. Then synod meets every year in order to hold them accountable.¹ There may

be some tweaking of this broad proposal, but in the opinion of this writer it will allow for more cooperation and coordination while maintaining accountability and accomplishing far more than what we currently accomplish.

Fear is an inappropriate reaction born of a misdiagnosis and cripples our efforts to expect and attempt to do great things for God. It is unhealthy and in need of change for the better. And we can do better. We have done better. Let us move forward together into the twenty-first century as a powerful force for the gospel and the kingdom of Christ.

1. I believe it was fear that led us twenty years ago to hold synod every three years. What were we thinking of—trying to get a brand new federation/denomination off the ground while meeting so infrequently?

The Orthodox Presbyterian Church delegates at the last synod told us as much when one informed us that is why they meet every year—that is, for the express purpose of holding their committees accountable.

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IRBC Third Step of Counseling: Evangelizing the Lost



Dr. Jeff L.
Doll

Step 3: Identify and Prioritize Problems

Identifying Problems

Aside from helping counselees frame their problems in light of God's sovereignty, one of the primary objectives of biblical counseling is to bring the Word of God to bear on the problems the counselee is facing in a compassionate manner. If this objective is to be fulfilled, the counselor must first accurately identify the counselee's problems.

Throughout time people have suffered from any number of spiritual, psychological, mental, emotional, social, and/or bodily problems. All of the problems from which people in the world suffer can ultimately be traced to the Fall that resulted from the sins of our first parents; more particularly, it can be traced to the curse of God which was poured out upon all creation in association with their fall into sin. Although all of the problems with which people suffer are ultimately the result of the Fall, not all of the problems with which Christians wrestle are directly the result of personal sin.

While the model of counseling that IRBC has developed takes into account the fact that a large number of common counseling problems are rooted in unaltered personal sinful behaviors (in the *Spiritual Domain*) and severe organic problems, such as organ damage and related dysfunctions (in the *Bodily Domain*), we believe that counselors are wise to evaluate five other areas as well. You were already introduced to the *7 Dominant Domains of Origin for Human Problems*[™], so we are not

going to revisit them here. We do ask, however, that you review earlier issues of *The Outlook* so they will be better kept in your memory. Properly identifying problems is essential in providing counsel which is sound and balanced.

Prioritizing Problems

Once the counselee's problems are identified, the counselor must decide upon the order in which the problems are to be addressed. The advice offered by Eyrich and Hines is among the most prudent: they suggest prioritizing the counselee's problems in terms of intensity of importance and the counselee's capacity to work toward resolving a particular problem at any given moment. They then go on to make a general recommendation, suggesting that counselors deal with the simpler problems first and then move on to the more complex ones (see Eyrich and Hines, 2007, p. 105). If it is determined that your counselee is unsaved, it is important that you make a presentation of the gospel to him or her. Because a large number of Christians have not received any training in presenting the gospel, a simple method is going to be shared.

How to Evangelize

While many of the counselees who will come to you for counseling may well be believers from the church under which your counseling program functions, there will also probably be a fair share of unbelievers (from both inside and outside the church) who are seeking answers to their problems. It is essential, therefore, that we have a good understanding of how to evangelize our counselees, since their being

reconciled to God should be the primary concern on our hearts. Evangelism is not always easy or comfortable, but it is necessary. In the next couple of articles, we will look at one example of how one might go about the evangelism process. It is by no means the best or only way to evangelize, but is an example that we hope you can use or adapt to fit the opportunities of evangelism in your life (whether in counseling or beyond) that God provides. The main thing is that we do not squander or hide from these opportunities. Please also note that God the Holy Spirit is the one who works saving grace into an individual's life, not you; but he can use you greatly to plant a seed that he can cause to grow in his time. What seeds are you planting?

Introductory Remarks

There are many people outside the visible church who suffer from a form of spiritual-based depression that is directly related to their condition of being spiritually dead—these people desperately need to hear the gospel. They need to hear it from the pulpits of the churches they are invited to visit, and from those who fill the pews and carry it to their homes, neighborhoods, places of employment, and the marketplace. They need to hear it, first and foremost, in order to be delivered from eternal condemnation. Hell is a real place where real people who have not placed their trust in Christ will spend eternity. Sometimes it seems we do not think about this fact with much gravity. Many of us often go about our lives caught up in the here and now, rarely giving thought to our unsaved family members, neighbors, friends, acquaintances, and work associates. Our fellow

Gentile kinsman are traveling on the broad road which leads to destruction; if we are honest, many of us will have to admit that we are complacent, showing little or no concern that the unsaved will spend an eternity in a place where they will, in both their bodies and souls, suffer unimaginable dimensions of pain and soul-wrenching agony.

Such was not the case with the apostle Paul. His heart was heavy for the lost. He said, "For I could wish that I myself were accursed and cut off from Christ for the sake of my brothers, my kinsmen according to the flesh" (Rom. 9:3). This man truly cared about the unsaved people in the landscape of his life and by God's grace was faithful in sharing the gospel with them. Later, in his letter to the church at Corinth he said, "Woe to me if I do not preach the gospel" (1 Cor. 9:16)! Paul was compelled by the Holy Spirit to preach the gospel. Let each of us fervently pray that the Holy Spirit will compel us, as well as each of our respective families and congregations, to present the gospel. Every Christian has a responsibility to share the gospel!

Because a presentation of the gospel is necessary for effective evangelism, and since many do not have a firm idea of how to share the gospel effectively, you will be provided a simple model for sharing it in the next couple of articles. The model which will be shared is designed for the unchurched. Don't skip over this segment. Learn it and use it to minister to lost souls that are suffering. If you don't like the model presented, don't complain about it or criticize it; instead, develop or adopt your own and use it. Don't make an excuse for failing to fulfill your God-given responsibility.

Before moving forward, a few words need to be said about motivation.¹ The Reformed believer's motivation for sharing the gospel should not ultimately be rooted in the alleviation of depression or any other problem experienced by lost or redeemed

souls. The ultimate thrust of our Spirit-initiated motivation to do the work of evangelism or any other work is the glorification of God. Unbelievers, in their rebellion against God, rob him of the glory due him. Our ultimate motivation for evangelizing the lost is that they will be reconciled to God, in order that they might engage in the chief end for which they were created: to glorify God and enjoy him forever. We are serious about *sola Dei Gloria!*

We are also serious about *sola fide!* The faith that we received from God was a free gift. By it we were justified apart from any of our works in relation to our salvation. Praise God concerning this truth, for the best of our works are as filthy rags in the sight of a thrice-holy God. But "faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead" (James 2:17). Reformed believers are serious about good works, about being obedient to the one who took upon himself their sins and the punishment they deserved for rebelling against a holy God. For it is Jesus Christ our Lord who said, "If you love Me you will obey My commands" (John 14:15). Jesus is the one who gave us the Great Commission. If we truly love him, we will obey him in fulfilling it. Please pray that the Holy Spirit will give you, your church, and all believers a desire to reach the lost with the gospel. Pray also that he will more fully equip all Christians to evangelize and make disciples of all nations, teaching all to obey everything that God has commanded for the glory of God alone.

Finally, as imitators of God (Eph. 5:1-2), particularly of Jesus Christ who is the head of the church, we should all be serious about reflecting his compassion to others in our lives. Our Lord did not isolate himself from those who suffered from forms of spiritual depression or other problems connected to lifestyles which were steeped in sin. He genuinely cared about them and compassionately ministered among

and to them saying, "Come to Me, all who are weary and heavy-laden, and I will give you rest" (Matt. 11:28). Our Lord cared about hopelessly lost, weary, and depressed souls. Do you? Be honest in your answer! If you answered no, please understand that you are disconnected from our glorious head and desperately need to pray that the Holy Spirit will reconnect you. As you pray to be reconnected, also pray that the Holy Spirit will both draw the unredeemed elect to you as well as use you to search for the lost among those you know so you can share the gospel with them; may it all be done for the sake of the glory of God alone.

Keep in mind that there are many people not only outside the visible church who suffer from a form of spiritual-based depression; there are also people within the church in the same spiritual state. They, along with all of us who have been born again, need to regularly hear the gospel from the pulpit and pew alike. It is like sunshine for the soul. Deprive souls of the gospel and they will become spiritually depressed,

The unregenerate in the church, however, are in a different category than those in the world. They have likely heard the gospel any number of times but have failed to respond to it in faith. Some of these people don't even know they are spiritually dead and only a heartbeat away from entering a place where they will experience unimaginable agony of body and soul forever. They need a tangible, scripturally rooted evaluation tool with which they can evaluate themselves. In such cases, churchled counselees may be encouraged to read a short tract such as *Are You Born Again?* by J. C. Ryle. In such cases, churchled counselees may be encouraged to read a short tract such as *Are You Born Again?* by J. C. Ryle.

An adapted form of J. C. Ryle's tract follows on the next two pages...

No Habitual Sinning

First of all, John wrote: "Whosoever is born of God doth not commit sin" (1 John 3:9). "Whosoever is born of God sinneth not" (5:18). A person who has been born again, or regenerated, does not habitually commit sin. He no longer sins with his heart and will and whole inclination. There was probably a time when he did not think about whether his actions were sinful or not, and he did not always feel grieved after doing evil. There was no quarrel between him and sin; they were friends. But the true Christian hates sin, flees from it, fights against it, considers it his greatest plague, resents the burden of its presence, mourns when he falls under its influence, and longs to be completely delivered from it. Sin no longer pleases him, nor is it even a matter of indifference to him; it has become a horrible thing which he hates. However, he cannot eliminate its presence within him. If he said that he had no sin, he would be lying (1 John 1:8). But he can say that he hates sin and that the great desire of his soul is not to commit sin at all. He cannot prevent bad thoughts from entering his mind, or shortcomings, omissions, and defects from appealing in both his words and his actions. He knows that "in many things we offend all" (James 3:2). But he can truly say, in the sight of God, that these things cause him grief and sorrow and that his whole nature does not consent to them. What would the apostle say about you? Are you born again?

Believing in Christ

Second, John wrote: "Whosoever believeth that Jesus is the Christ is born of God" (1 John 5:1). A man who is born again, or regenerated, believes that Jesus Christ is the only Saviour who can pardon his soul, that He is the divine person appointed by God the Father for this very purpose, and beside Him there is no Saviour at all. In himself he sees nothing but unworthiness. But he has full confidence in Christ, and trusting in Him, he believes that his sins are all forgiven. He believes that, because he has accepted Christ's finished work and death on the cross, he is considered righteous in God's sight, and he may look forward to death and judgment without alarm. He may have fears and doubts. He may sometimes tell you that he feels as if he had no faith at all. But ask him if he is willing to trust in anything instead of Christ, and see what he will say. Ask him if he will rest his hope of eternal life on his own.

Loving Other Christians

Fourth, John wrote: "We know that we have passed from death unto life, because we love the brethren" (1 John 3:14). A man who is born again has a special love for all true disciples of Christ. Like his Father in heaven, he loves all men with a great general love, but he has a special love for those who share his faith in Christ. Like his Lord and Saviour, he loves the worst of sinners and could weep over them; but he has a peculiar love for those who are believers. He is never so much at home as when he is in their company. He feels they are all members of the same family. They are his fellow soldiers, fighting against the same enemy. They are his fellow travelers, journeying along the same road. He understands them, and they understand him. They may be very different from himself in many ways—in rank, in station and in wealth. But that does not matter. They are his Father's sons and daughters and he cannot help loving them. What would the apostle say about you? Are you born again?

Practicing Righteousness

Third, John wrote: "Every one that doeth righteousness is born of Him" (1 John 2:29). The man who is born again, or regenerated, is a holy man. He endeavors to live according to God's will, to do the things that please God and to avoid the things that God hates. He wishes to continually look to Christ as his example as well as his Saviour and to prove himself to be Christ's friend by doing whatever He commands. He knows he is not perfect. He is painfully aware of his indwelling corruption. He finds an evil principle within himself that is constantly warring against grace and trying to draw him away from God. But he does not consent to it, though he cannot prevent its presence. Though he may sometimes feel so low that he questions whether or not he is a Christian at all, he will be able to say with John Newton, "I am not what I ought to be, I am not what I want to be, I am not what I hope to be in another world; but still I am not what I once used to be, and by the grace of God I am what I am." What would the apostle say about you? Are you born again?

Overcoming the World

Fifth, John wrote: "Whatsoever is born of God overcometh the world" (1 John 5:4). A man who is born again does not use the world's opinion as his standard of right and wrong. He does not mind going against the world's ways, ideas and customs. What men think or say no longer concerns him. He overcomes the love of the world. He finds no pleasure in things which seem to bring happiness to most people. To him they seem foolish and unworthy of an immortal being. He loves God's praise more than man's praise. He fears offending God more than offending man. It is unimportant to him whether he is blamed or praised; his first aim is to please God. What would the apostle say about you? Are you born again?

Keeping Oneself Pure

Sixth, John wrote: "He that is begotten of God keepeth himself" (1 John 5:18). A man who is born again is careful of his own soul. He tries not only to avoid sin but also to avoid everything which may lead to it. He is careful about the company he keeps. He knows that evil communications corrupt the heart and that evil is more catching than good, just as disease is more infectious than health. He is careful about the use of his time; his chief desire is to spend it profitably. He desires to live like a soldier in an enemy country—to wear his armor continually and to be prepared for temptation. He is diligent to be watchful, humble, prayerful man. What would the apostle say about you? Are you born again?

The Test

These are the six great marks of a born-again Christian. There is a vast difference in the depth and distinctness of these marks in different people. In some they are faint and hardly noticeable. In others they are bold, plain and unmistakable, so anyone may read them. Some of these marks are more visible than others in each individual. Seldom are all equally evident in any one person. But still, after every allowance, here we find boldly painted six marks of being born of God.

How should we react to these things? We can logically come to only one conclusion—only those who are born again have these six characteristics, and those who do not have these marks are not born again. This seems to be the conclusion to which the apostle intended us to come. Do you have these characteristics?

No
Habitual Sinning

Believing
in Christ

Loving
Other Christians

Practicing
Righteousness

Overcoming
the World

Keeping Oneself
Pure

In the next article we will discuss a simple method of presenting the gospel. Begin praying that God will make you desirous to share the gospel.

1. Portions of the following three paragraphs come from concepts presented in *Reformed Evangelism: A Challenge to Faithfulness* by Paul T. Murphy on the website entitled *The Center for Biblical Theology and Eschatology*; D. James Kennedy, *Evangelism Explosion* (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House, 1975), 89; William Fay, *Share Jesus Without Fear* (Nashville, TN: B&H Publishing Group, 1999), 33.

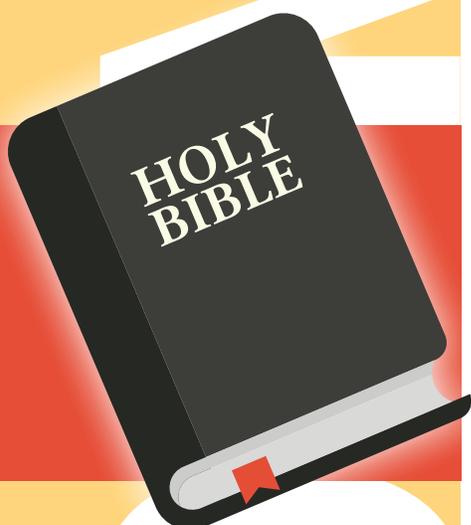
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Good News for Postmodern Man



Mr. Michael R. Kearney



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When you hear the word “postmodernism,” what comes to mind?

Do you think of a religious pluralism that affirms faiths of every stripe, so long as the subscribers of those faiths admit that all roads lead to heaven?

Do you think of social activists who welcome and tolerate the diverse views of anyone and everyone except “old white men”?

Do you think of a public arena in which elected officials and journalists practice deceit, yet complain about each other’s lack of integrity?

Do you think of a culture entranced by endless possibilities for new genders and new forms of love, yet perplexed by the anxiety and depression of its young people?

Or do you think of universities where internationally respected professors educate entire generations of students in the philosophy that undergirds these social trends while attempting to inoculate them against the “bigoted” and “closed-minded” doctrines of orthodox Christianity?

For many conservative Christians, the word “postmodernism” carries an ominous mystery. Postmodernism is like a unidentifiable puddle under your car or a rancid odor wafting out of your fridge—you may not know where it’s coming from, but you know it’s not good. If you’re a parent, you may wonder whether your son’s or daughter’s college teaches a postmodern perspective. If you’re a student, you may worry (as I did) about whether your favorite professors are secretly indoctrinating you in postmodern thought. What is postmodernism, anyway? Where *did* it come from? What does it mean for faithful Christian doctrine and life in the twenty-first century?

What Is Postmodernism, Anyway?

Root around in the philosophical literature for definitions of “postmodernism,” and you’ll quickly wish you hadn’t bothered. For example:

Postmodern philosophy . . . includes . . . anti-essentialism; anti-realism; anti-foundationalism; opposition to transcendental arguments and transcendental standpoints; rejection of the picture of knowledge as accurate representation; rejection of truth as correspondence to reality; rejection of the very idea of canonical descriptions . . . and a suspicion of grand narratives, metanarratives of the sort perhaps best illustrated by dialectical materialism.¹

After reading a definition like that, you might be tempted to renounce all further philosophical inquiry and take up a career in beekeeping. But don’t let the size of the words discourage you; bear with me as I attempt to make three simple observations from this definition.

First, note what postmodernism is and is not. Like any other philosophical term, “postmodernism” is an imaginary name for a particular way of thinking, intended to distinguish it from imaginary names for other ways of thinking. Postmodernism isn’t a certain set of doctrines or a particular list of books, and speculating whether a particular individual is a postmodernist is just as

“Given the social construction of reality, how can we uphold one person’s definition of “truth” more than another’s? In short, postmodernism seeks to shake off what it sees as the oppression and narrowmindedness of modern thought.”

unhelpful as labeling somebody a fundamentalist. We could use these words to mean almost anything. To a limited extent, the term “postmodernism” helps us by illuminating relationships among basic philosophical perspectives, and that’s how I’ll use it here. Beyond that, it’s not worth much.

Second, notice how often this definition uses the prefix “anti-” or the words “rejection” and “suspicion.” It’s called *post*-modernism because it emerges from and reacts to an earlier philosophical movement: modernism. With its origins in the Enlightenment of the eighteenth century, modernism included thinkers like René Descartes, John Locke, and Immanuel Kant.² Again, the same caveat applies: what “modernism” is depends on whom you ask. But in general, modernist philosophers upheld objective truth—that is, truth as an *object* that can be accessed and understood through methods of scientific observation like those we learned in high school science. Descartes, Locke, Kant, and others celebrated the power of human reason, the pursuit of science, and the unlimited possibilities of technological progress.

At the least, postmodernism questions these values. It calls us to admit the inevitable biases that cloud our reasoning abilities. It doubts the possibility of a truly “objective” point of view. It counters technological optimism by pointing out the unintended consequences of our inventions. But postmodernism critiques modernism in broader ways as well—the “anti-realism” and “anti-essentialism” mentioned

previously. A common theme is the “social construction of reality”—in other words, that our understanding of reality, or even reality itself, is a product of language.³ So postmodernism asks: Given the prejudice of our perspectives, is real knowledge possible? Given the Enlightenment’s exaggerated faith in reason, can we trust appeals to abstract ideas such as “morals,” “human nature,” or “God”? Given the social construction of reality, how can we uphold one person’s definition of “truth” more than another’s? In short, postmodernism seeks to shake off what it sees as the oppression and narrowmindedness of modern thought.

A third and final point—we live in an individualistic society whose default creed, if one exists, goes something like this: “We believe in the dignity, indeed the sacredness, of the individual. Anything that would violate our right to think for ourselves, judge for ourselves, make our own decisions, live our lives as we see fit, is not only morally wrong, it is sacrilegious.”⁴ Individualism is different than postmodernism; in fact, its philosophical roots are more closely entwined with modernism. Nevertheless, individualism combines with postmodernism in a variety of themes that so many of us have heard: “What you believe may be true for you, it’s just not true for me”; “I’ve got a personal relationship with God, and that’s what matters”; “I don’t personally agree with your lifestyle choices, but I’m not in a position to judge.” It’s one thing to claim that there are many different kinds of truth. It’s another thing to state that it is up to the individual to browse among the available kinds

of truth for the one that provides the greatest personal fulfillment. And that last sentence captures the crux of the matter—the threat that postmodernism and individualism pose for the health and witness of the Reformed church in the twenty-first century.

How Does Postmodernism Square with Faith?

In *Truth Decay: Defending Christianity against the Challenges of Postmodernism*, apologist Douglas Groothuis describes postmodern philosophy as “very bad news” for the church because of its suspicion of human reason, its denial of an objective perspective, and its belief in the social construction of reality.⁵ Indeed, postmodernism and individualism oppose orthodox Christianity on multiple counts, as we’ve just seen. But let’s back up for a minute.

If a friend asserted that language created the world, that human reason is essentially flawed, and that an “objective” view of things is humanly impossible, you would probably agree. The Scriptures declare that words—God’s words—created the world (Ps. 33). They also teach, as the Reformers affirmed, that man’s fall from grace brought “blindness, terrible darkness, futility, and distortion of judgment in his mind.”⁶ Rather than seeking a rational and “objective” perspective, we suppress the light of nature in unrighteousness.⁷ Postmodernism harmonizes with Christian beliefs at certain points like these—including the danger of idolizing the works of our hands,⁸ the need for a hermeneutic perspective on life,⁹ and the power of stories to convey meaning and ethics.¹⁰ If we view postmodern philosophy only as “very bad news,” we lose the chance to testify to the gospel at key points where our culture is currently willing to listen.

What about “objective truth,” though? Isn’t that where Christianity and postmodernism definitively part ways? Not quite. Universal truth is a Christian concept, but objective truth is merely a modernist one. As Groothuis endeavors to defend modernism’s “rational” and “objective” view of truth, he misses some of its own dangers.¹¹ Unfortunately, modernism is no friend of biblical faith (as the origins of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church can attest). The modernistic emphasis on empirical observation assaults the Bible’s accuracy, pursues more “scientific” alternatives to the doctrine of creation, and generates the kind of sheer arrogance captured in the Soviets’ response to space: “I looked and looked and looked, but I didn’t see God.”¹² As Reformed philosopher Esther Meek observes, modernism moves the Christian belief in universal truth to the decidedly anti-Christian assertion that our rational faculties can grasp the truth fully here and now.¹³

If we demand objective truth, we’ve forgotten that truth isn’t an object at all. Truth is a being—our triune God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. He is the way and the truth and the life (John 14:6). The Scriptures are true because he authored them (2 Tim. 3:16). His promises are unchanging because he made them (Heb. 6:13–14). Whatever theories and philosophies we may devise are true only insofar as they coincide with the general and special revelation that the Lord utters out of his entirely and absolutely true character. And, as Meek suggests, it is only in the covenantal relationship that God has entered into with us that we can encounter his truth in its fullness.¹⁴ “Objectivity” is a poor philosophical substitute for the eternally rich, enduringly robust, and deeply personal truth that is ours to enjoy in Jesus Christ.

Postmodernism and its view of truth are problematic, but they are not our culture’s central crisis. The central crisis occurs when individuals, families, corporations, and empires refuse to listen to the God who speaks.¹⁵ And the crisis occurs in modernity and postmodernity alike. Changing cultural tides may bring varying philosophies to the surface. But the underlying human condition remains the same. It is the plight of the individual, modern or postmodern, who seeks to define himself by himself, and so robs himself of the meaningful identity that is gained only by belonging, body and soul, in life and in death, to his faithful Savior Jesus Christ.

Postmodernism is no friend to orthodox biblical faith, but neither is it an enemy. It merely collects some of the dominant ideas of our era under one philosophical heading. And as such, it’s a worthy object of study for pastors, students, and all thoughtful Christians—not to turn our minds away from the revealed truth of the Scriptures, but to turn them toward the needs of a world steeped in these presuppositions. If Christ is true, we have nothing to fear from a dialogue with postmodernism. In an age skeptical of reason, troubled by technology, captivated by stories, and longing above all for meaning, we will have more than enough opportunities to introduce postmodern friends to a Book that speaks and a Person who wrote it.

1. Bernd Magnus, “Postmodern,” in *The Cambridge Dictionary of Philosophy*, ed. Robert Audi, 2nd ed. (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 725.
2. Kant’s essay “What Is Enlightenment?”

- offers a classic definition of this perspective.
3. See Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckmann, *The Social Construction of Reality: A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge* (New York: Anchor, 1967). Like any other facet of postmodernism, the theory of “social constructionism” and its implications are hotly debated.
 4. Robert N. Bellah, Richard Madsen, William M. Sullivan, Ann Swidler, and Steven M. Tipton, *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life* (New York: Harper & Row, 1986), 142.
 5. Douglas Groothuis, *Truth Decay: Defending Christianity against the Challenges of Postmodernism* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2000), 11.
 6. Canons of Dort, Head III/IV, Article 1.
 7. Canons of Dort, Head III/IV, Article 4.
 8. Jacques Ellul, *The Humiliation of the Word*, trans. Joyce Main Hanks (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1985).
 9. Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, trans. Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall, 2nd rev. ed. (1960; repr., New York: Crossroad, 1992).
 10. Walter R. Fisher, “Narration as a Human Communication Paradigm: The Case of Public Moral Argument.” *Communication Monographs* 51 (1984): 1–22.
 11. Groothuis, *Truth Decay*, 92.
 12. Marc Bennetts, “Soviet Space Propaganda Was Atheistic—but Putin’s Cosmonauts Fear God,” *Business Insider*, July 24, 2014, <https://www.businessinsider.com/strange-connection-between-russian-astronauts-and-god-2014-7>. This quote, commonly attributed to astronaut Yuri Gagarin, is disputed, but Bennetts shows that it reflects the general theme of Soviet space propaganda.
 13. Esther Meek, *Longing to Know: The Philosophy of Knowledge for Ordinary People* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2003), 135–40. This is a helpful critique of the modernist idea of knowledge by a philosopher at a conservative Reformed college.
 14. Meek, 177.
 15. Francis Schaeffer, *Trilogy: The God Who Is There, Escape from Reason, He Is There and He Is Not Silent* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 1990), 322.

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Book Review: The Cross and the Double-Edged Sword



Mr. Gary
Vander Hart

Book review of The Cross and the Double-Edged Sword, by Norman De Jong. Maitland, FL: Xulon Press, 2017. 164 pages. \$14.49.

This book was born of a series of Bible studies on the book of Revelation by Dr. Norman De Jong. The words “double edged sword” are from the opening vision of John on the isle of Patmos in which he sees Christ “sitting on the throne and from his mouth comes a sharp sword with which to strike down the nations, and he will rule them with a rod of iron.”

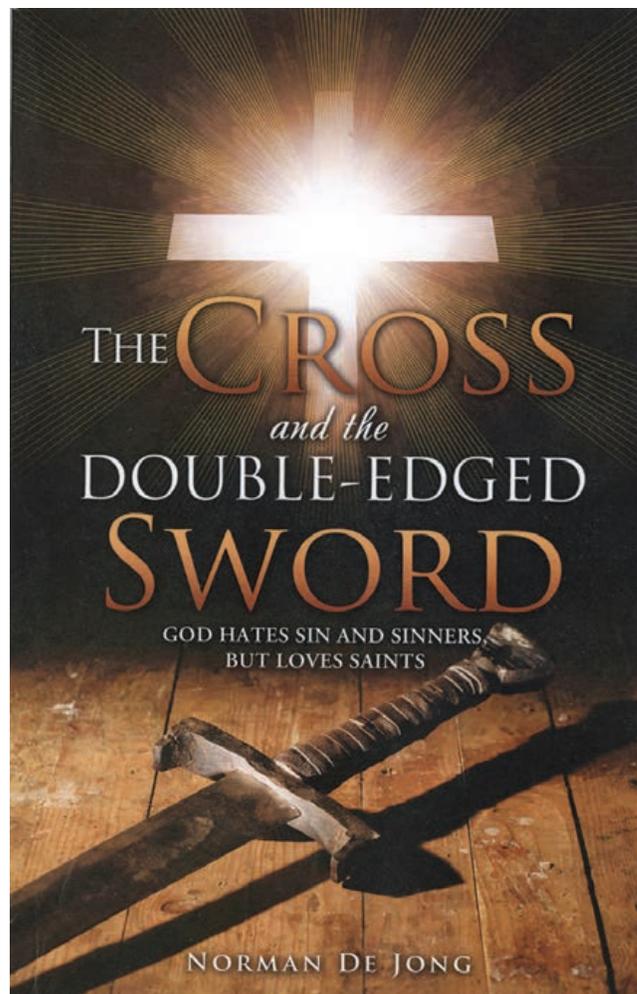
Dr. De Jong writes, “One of the hallmarks of the evangelical community in the twenty-first century is that it readily proclaims the love of Christ, while failing to recognize the justice and holiness of God. Love is popular, but wrath is often condemned. The love and mercy of God is the good news of the gospel, but it is only half of the message of God’s Word.”

The God of a liberal theologian is a doting grandfather, tolerant, affable, and permissive. Says De Jong, “If one did a serious, in-depth study of the book of Revelation, that person would soon have to change his mind. The book of Revelation has two dominant themes running through it: the wrath of God and repeated calls for repentance.”

Is it correct to say that God loves the sinner but hates the sin? To answer this, the author points to Psalm 5:5-6: “Thou dost hate all who do iniquity . . . The Lord abhors the man of bloodshed and deceit,” and Psalm 11:5: “The Lord tests the righteous and the wicked, and the one who loves violence his soul hates.” De Jong asks: “Did God love the people of Sodom and Gomorrah who died in the destruction of those cities? Does God love the radical Islamist who beheads Christians solely because they worship the name of Jesus Christ? Does God love the murderer who performs abortions and kills the very persons that he has so wondrously created?” Where are the preachers today who dare to preach about sinners in the hands of an angry God?

In all the chapters, after the author has reminded us of the wrath of a holy God, he strongly reminds us even more of the cross of Christ and the amazing grace of God to repentant sinners, as he showed to Paul, who was once a murderer of Christians.

Following this balanced approach to God’s holiness and mercy, De Jong spends a good bit of time looking at Christ



as portrayed in the Old Testament. For example, in the Psalms, Christ is both the lamb on the cross (Pss. 22; 69), the enthroned Son who breaks the enemies with a rod of iron (Ps. 2), and the Lord who shatters kings on the day of his wrath (Ps. 110).

The language of the book is easy to follow and could be understood by a junior high student. It is also an encouragement to pastors to seek to be balanced in presenting both the holiness and the mercy of our Savior and Lord.

Mr. Gary Vander Hart

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Book Review: God's and a Woman's Work



Mr. Gerry Wisz

A review of *Johanna and Henriette Kuyper: Daring to Change Their World*, by Abigail Van der Velde. Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2017. 268 pages. \$10.00 (and various prices online).

Lately, it seems impossible for me to escape: whether I open my business LinkedIn page, pick up a newspaper, or stick around long enough to watch a television commercial, there's now always a celebration of women in high-ranking positions who have "leaned in" to become "leaders" in their fields. Along with this, of course, is the flip side of the coin: the complaint that there are still not enough women CEOs, high-ranking government officials, or international movers and shakers.

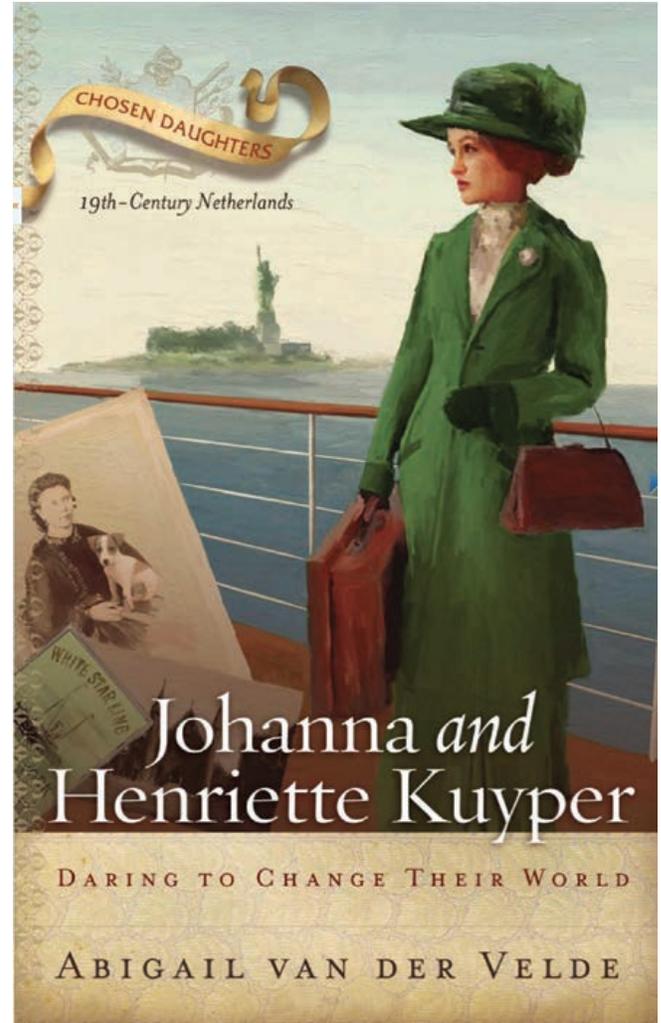
This is nothing new, but the clamor for female leadership, whether in business or government, seems to have gotten both more frequent and shriller since Hillary Clinton lost the presidential election in 2016, and Facebook executive Sheryl Sandberg published and built an organization around her book, *Lean In*, a how-to for women to lead in our society and culture.

It's refreshing, then, to read about a Christian woman who knows her own mind, a relatively well-educated one for her time at that, who is, firstly though not only, dedicated to her husband and children. Such a woman was Johanna Kuyper, wife to Abraham, as portrayed in this historical novel. Johanna ("Jo") is shown to be submissive though far from servile, an effective manager of a busy household who is much more than a housekeeper, and a counselor and godly example to both her children and husband.

A Woman's Gifts

Mrs. Van der Velde's book is part of P&R Publishing's Chosen Daughters series. Several Christian publishers have introduced such novels, portraying women, often behind famous and highly gifted men, who themselves are gifted and learn to use their gifts in the wider world even while serving as mothers and helpmeets. Such novels are fun to read as they paint historic backdrops for us, while also serving as instructional encouragement for Christian young ladies who still have much before them.

Mrs. Van der Velde's portrayal of mid-nineteenth-century Rotterdam with its bustling harbor and cobblestone streets is memorable, as are her descriptions of the family life of the Schaays, Jo, Jo's parents and siblings—from the rambunctious boys to the nineteenth-century women's dresses and fineries. Jo met Abraham Kuyper ("Bram") while on an outing at a distant town fair with his sisters, an event her aunt organized. Mrs. Van



der Velde captures Jo's excitement behind her propriety with the attention Bram pays her. The young Kuyper is portrayed as energetic, richly (though graciously) verbose, and intent on pursuing Jo. He wins Mr. Schaay's approval to visit several times, after which a five-year courtship begins, which ends with Jo and Bram marrying when she turns twenty-one.

Jo keeps a "workbook," a place for her thoughts, lists of to-dos, and miniature artistic creations. It's here, but also in her imagined interior monologues, that the author shows the teenaged Jo's girlish though not improper thoughts. After she marries, these interior monologues mature, becoming less about herself and more about others, or shift entirely into prayer. Most of the book imagines Jo's life

between the age of sixteen, when she first meets Bram, and her wedding day. Later chapters jump years at a time, as more children fill the Kuyper household and Bram starts thinking biblically through, and acting on, different social improvements, to which Jo adds her input.

A Woman's Ministry

In its entirety, the book is about three generations of women: Mrs. Schaay and her friends at church; Jo and her sisters, especially her older sister, Hennie; and later the Kuyper's oldest daughter, Henriette ("Harry"). Mrs. Van der Velde shows these women to be concerned about the needs of others as well as their own lives and households. Mrs. Schaay, along with Jo and her sisters, are part of a women's group that re-sews discarded clothes left at the church for the poor. Jo, the mature Mrs. Kuyper, managing a burgeoning household of her own, finds a way to rescue an overworked and poorly fed housemaid from neighbors to bring the young woman into her own employ. And Harry, who never marries, becomes, among other things, a children's advocate in Russia and Hungary and a leader of Holland's version of the Calvinettes.

The Kuyper's problems are not whitewashed, though not fully developed either. Willy's, their youngest son's, death from a bacteria infestation, perhaps a version of *E. coli*, is realistically and remorsefully portrayed by the author. The Kuyper boys, as they become young men—Guillaume in particular—live uncomfortably in Kuyper's ever-extending shadow cast by his growing notoriety, and as the years pass, a shadow instead of the man seems to become more evident, as Kuyper's travels take him not only around the Netherlands but throughout Europe and around the world over long periods of time.

There is dialogue, especially between Bram and Jo, about some of Kuyper's projects—government-sponsored Christian education and labor reform

in particular. These views wouldn't wear well with us here today, but to understand the impetus behind them in nineteenth-century Holland, they need to be placed in context: The division between secular and Christian education would, of course, be unacceptable to Kuyper, who saw all education as necessarily Christian. At the least, then, Christian schools should have the same advantages and resources as government schools, so poorer families that want a Christian education for their children could have one.

A Different Time

Also, poverty in nineteenth-century Europe cannot be compared with what we call the poor today here in North America. There was no welfare state at all then. Ruin and homelessness could be around the corner if a farmer's herd of cows contracted a disease or if the farmer suddenly died, leaving behind a wife and children. Wages were low, and for young women there were often no wages at all, just room and board. Hours were long and grueling, especially in the cities where people flocked to escape rural poverty, and opportunity for the poor to rise above their circumstances were virtually nonexistent. It's into this milieu that Kuyper spoke, not as a socialist, but as a Christian invoking love of neighbor, especially to businessmen who lived pampered lives while paying little to their workers, and not creating much opportunity for them to improve their lot either.

If we grimace somewhat at Kuyper's promotion of labor unions and government-sponsored Christian education, it's because our history is different from that of nineteenth-century Holland: Labor unions here have contributed to the stifling of our industrial competition and have a history of corruption and even mafia involvement. Most of us would say "No thanks" to government sending money to our Christian schools, fearing, rightly, future strings attached. But that wasn't the case in Kuyper's Holland, and of course as energetically brilliant as he

was, he did not foresee how bad ideas are really good ideas turned bad.

Mrs. Van der Velde portrays Mrs. Schaay, Jo, and Harry, three generations of Christian women, each with a more expansive sphere of influence outside her own household than the woman from a generation before: Mrs. Schaay is busy at home and at church, for the church but also for the community through the church; Jo as the mature Mrs. Kuyper is the same, but also has an eye and heart for young women around her, even ones who don't necessarily attend her husband's preaching; and Harry, a single woman, expands a ministry to children but also ministers among the war wounded and women in general, internationally.

What about Harry?

Henriette Kuyper, the Kuyper's oldest daughter, gets a scant few chapters at the end of this book compared with her mother, Jo, but they are filled with activity, all of it directed outwardly toward others. She is a Red Cross volunteer, working with the wounded during World War I, but also with a children's orphanage in Budapest, while at the same time serving as a war correspondent to Dutch newspapers. She is a writer and speaker at women's groups and conferences throughout Europe and eventually America, discoursing on Dutch history but also other historic topics, wanting to help women expand their thinking and worldviews. The daughter of Holland's former prime minister, she is the guest of President William McKinley but also of John D. Rockefeller—the means for helping the poor residing, as it did during the Gilded Age, only with wealthy philanthropists.

Her father didn't like Harry addressing assemblies, even if they were comprised only of women—it didn't seem right—but he eventually reconsidered and changed his mind as he neared the end of his life. Harry was a "lean in" woman in her way and in her time, not advocating for women's boardroom

Commemorating Synod of Dort (1618–1619)

Dr. Cornelis
Venema



This year of our Lord, 2018, marks the four hundredth anniversary of the convening of the Synod of Dort in Dordrecht, the Netherlands. The Synod of Dort was convened in order to settle the ongoing controversy in the Dutch churches regarding the teaching of Arminius and his followers on the topic of election. For those who cherish the teaching of salvation by grace alone through the work of Christ alone, the four hundredth anniversary of this great synod and the confession it produced, the Canons of Dort, ought to be an occasion for thanksgiving for the rich inheritance in the gospel that the synod bequeathed to the Reformed and Presbyterian churches. In a period of history when many evangelical believers are rediscovering the doctrines of grace, it would be ironic and disappointing were the Reformed churches to miss the opportunity to celebrate the synod and its achievements. In many respects, the work of this synod completed the Reformation of the church in the Netherlands and provided an enduring legacy for the conduct and ministry of the Reformed churches throughout the world.

seats but for them to be able to vote in elections (as her father had years earlier for congregation members regarding church business) and, though it wasn't an obsession with her, for the right of women to run for political office (not prime minister, but seats in parliament).

Mrs. Van der Velde has Harry say at the book's close to an assembled group of Christian women, "The Bible shows us that God called women to positions of leadership . . . Deborah, a prophetess and judge in Israel, made decisions that affected her people for good. Deborah is a model for any woman who allows the Spirit of God to shape her life." Did Harry really say this? This can't pass without a gloss. As true as these words are, there is a reason for Deborah's leadership, and it's not a good one. Actually, her position is a judgment, not on her but on God's people (Isa. 3:12) for what the male judges should have done but didn't. God's means, even the unexpected ones, are always justified, but they may signal that something bigger is not as it should be.

Accurately Portrayed

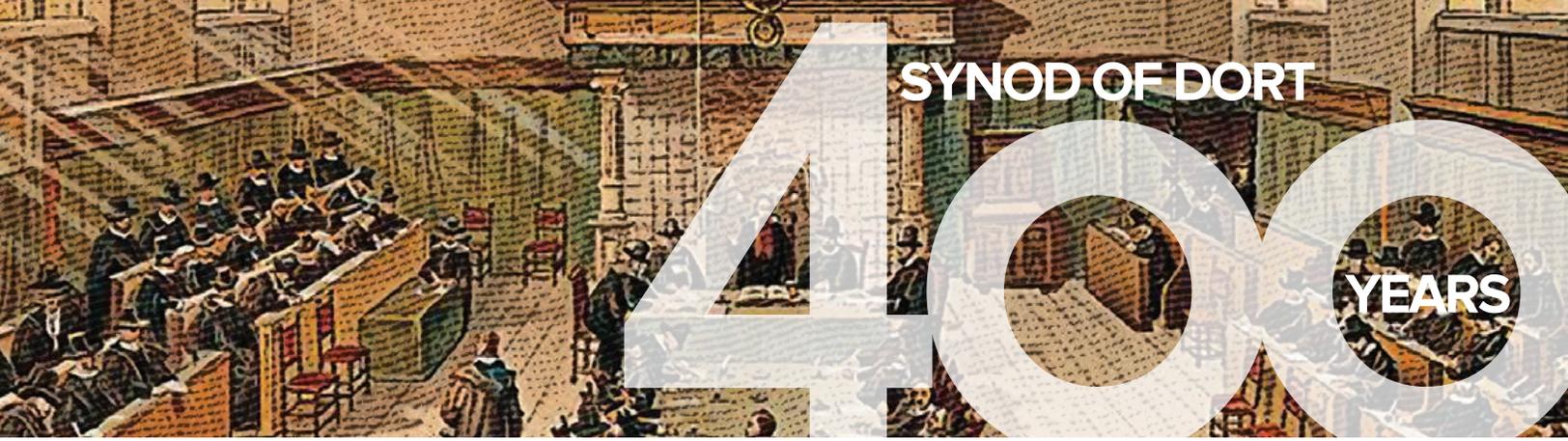
Though she is an experienced writer, this is Mrs. Van der Velde's first book, and it's a historical novel, not a biography. Nonetheless, she has done her homework. Events are replicated with a helpful timeline provided (not to mention a recipe for traditional Dutch apple pie), historical geographies are researched and accurately represented, and Mrs. Van der Velde was able to access correspondence between Jo and Bram. Broadly, the narrative is historically accurate even while on a relational basis between characters, it's pure—though reasonably believable—invention.

The novel is, however, imbalanced. Half of it occupies the Kuypers' courtship (of interest to a young teenaged Christian girl, no doubt), but it speeds up, skipping years at a time, and compacts most of their years together that follow. Harry is the subject of a short, factual, but also inventive biographical sketch. What's more, Bram's conversion to the faith, even as he's steeped in theological studies at Leiden University, is handled curtly, even off-handedly, and in Jo's family's living room—though in fairness, this is not a novel about Kuyper himself.

The dialogue between Jo and Bram at times seems instructive for the reader rather than natural, and thus contrived, and the presentation of Harry as a near proto-feminist is at times gnawing. If it is true, I'd think a reader would like to have seen more evidence for it. Women's treatment was, and still is, a genuine concern, and Mrs. Van der Velde drops narrative hints of the need for melioration on this front in nineteenth-century Holland—a baker's wife serving customers with a suspiciously black eye while her husband yells at her from behind a closed door, and the young, overworked, poorly fed housemaid rescued by Jo.

But the central theme, running like a thread through the novel, is not women's rights so much as their legitimate gifts, the good involved in discovering them and allowing them to flourish, and, as opportunity serves, the outward-bound use of these gifts that grows from their personal, Spirit-led development and exercise. That's not about leaning in, but looking up, then leaning out. Isn't that our hope and prayer for all our daughters?

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40 YEARS

My aim in this article is to provide a small contribution to the commemoration of the Synod of Dort. I will begin with a summary of the history of the controversy regarding election that necessitated the convening of the synod. Thereafter I will provide an overview of the main points of doctrine that were affirmed by the synod in its response to the errors of the Arminian party. Since the synod also dealt with a number of additional matters, I will conclude with an account of some of its less well-known contributions to the life and ministry of the Reformed churches.

Arminius's Doctrine of Conditional Predestination

The controversy regarding the doctrine of election in the Dutch churches arose as a result of the teaching of Jacobus Arminius (1560–1609). Arminius, who was a brilliant student of Theodore Beza, Calvin's successor in Geneva, initiated the controversy during his tenure as a pastor of the Reformed church in Amsterdam and subsequently as a professor of theology at the University of Leiden. Shortly before his death in 1609, Arminius summarized his teaching on election in two important works, his *Public Disputations* and *Declaration of Sentiments*.¹ In these works, Arminius expressed serious objections to the Reformed view of unconditional election as it was set forth in Article 16 of the Belgic Confession. According to this article, the salvation of those whom God mercifully elects in Christ depends entirely upon God's gracious purpose of election and not upon any human merit or achievement.

We believe that, all the posterity of Adam being thus fallen into perdition and ruin by the sin of our first parents, God then did manifest Himself such as He is; that is to say, merciful and just: *merciful*, since He delivers and preserves from this perdition all whom He in His eternal and unchangeable counsel of mere goodness has elected in Christ Jesus our Lord, without any respect to their works; *just*, in leaving others in the fall and perdition wherein they have involved themselves.

According to Belgic Confession, the salvation of God's people rests wholly upon his undeserved mercy toward them in Jesus Christ. From out of the fallen human race in Adam, God has out of "mere goodness" chosen to save some unto everlasting life and justly to leave others in their sinful and lost estate.

Contrary to the consensus of the Reformed churches, Arminius argued for what is best described as a doctrine of conditional election. In his *Declaration of Sentiments*, Arminius summarized his teaching by distinguishing four decrees or features of God's eternal mind and will. Though Arminius formulated these four decrees in a highly scholastic and theological manner, his position can be simply stated in four points:²

First, God eternally and absolutely wills to save all fallen sinners, and therefore has decreed to appoint his Son Jesus Christ as the Mediator and Savior of all who are lost. The first and foundational decree of God expresses his universal and gracious intention to save all fallen sinners without exception upon the basis of Christ's atoning work.

Second, God eternally and absolutely wills to receive into favor all fallen sinners who repent and believe, and to leave under his wrath all who remain impenitent and unbelieving. Though God eternally and absolutely wills the salvation of all, he also wills to save only those who choose to believe and persevere in believing, and to damn those who choose to remain in their sin and unbelief.

Third, God eternally wills to appoint the means by which fallen sinners are able to come to faith and repentance. These means include the ministry of the Holy Spirit, who uses the Word and sacraments to invite fallen sinners to respond to the gospel in the way of faith and repentance. The actual salvation of fallen sinners depends upon their willingness to meet the "conditions" of the gospel invitation. Those who

do not resist the work of the Spirit through the gospel, but respond in faith and repentance, are saved in consequence of their freely choosing to do so. Those who persist in resisting the work of the Spirit through the gospel remain in their lost condition in consequence of their freely choosing to do so.

And fourth, God eternally decrees to save those particular persons whom he foreknows will believe and persevere in believing in response to the gospel; and he eternally decrees to damn those whom he foreknows will choose not to believe and persevere in believing. The election and actual salvation of some fallen sinners rests upon God's foreknowledge of their free choice to believe and to persevere in faith.

It is not difficult to ascertain from this brief summary of Arminius's teaching why his view amounts to a doctrine of conditional election. Arminius's fourth point clearly draws out the implications of the preceding three points for the doctrine of election. Though God wills absolutely and antecedently to save all fallen sinners, he wills relatively and consequently to save only those particular persons whom he foreknows would believe and to damn those whom he foreknows would not. The basis for God's decree to save and damn "certain particular persons" is his foreknowledge of the way these persons freely (independently) choose to respond to the gospel call. Since God's decree to elect is based solely upon his foreknowledge of those persons who would meet the "conditions" (faith and repentance) required to be saved, Arminius's doctrine of predestination amounts to a doctrine of conditional predestination. The ultimate condition and ground for salvation rest upon the free choice of some to believe and to persevere in faith. Though God wills to save all through the work of Christ as Mediator, the actual salvation of the elect and the damnation of the non-elect depends ultimately upon what they choose to do with the gospel offer. On the one hand, God's universal will and intention to save all fallen sinners is frustrated or thwarted in the case of all those who persistently refuse to respond in faith to the invitation of the gospel. And on the other hand, God's decision to save the elect is dependent upon, or in consequence of, their choice to believe and to persevere in doing so.

The Ensuing Controversy with the Remonstrants

Because Arminius departed from some of the most basic features of the doctrine of election among his Reformed contemporaries, it is not surprising that his teaching became the eye of a storm of controversy among the Reformed churches in the Netherlands. During the early seventeenth century, the Dutch churches (and others as well throughout Europe) were racked with controversy, and two parties emerged, a party favoring the position of Arminius and a party opposing his position. Two important events also occurred, preparing the

way for the calling of an international synod in Dordrecht in 1618.

After Arminius's death in 1609, the Arminian party in the Dutch Reformed churches prepared a summary statement of their position. On January 14, 1610, more than forty representatives who championed Arminius's views gathered in Gouda. These representatives drew up a *Remonstrance* or petition in which their case was set forth and defended. After complaining that their cause had been misrepresented by their opponents, and then appealing to the state to exercise its authority to settle the controversy, this *Remonstrance* presented the Arminian position in a series of five articles. The Remonstrants, as they were called, hoped that this statement would be approved by the civil authorities, thereby answering the charge that their doctrine was in conflict with Scripture and the Reformed confessions.

Shortly after this *Remonstrance* was prepared, the States of Holland made arrangements for a meeting between representatives of the Arminian or Remonstrant and the anti-Arminian parties. This meeting took place from March 10, 1611, until May 20, 1611, and was the occasion for the preparation of a reply to the five points of the Arminians. The reply of the Reformed opponents of Arminianism was termed the *Counter Remonstrance of 1611*.³ In this reply, the main features of the later, more expansive statement of the Canons of Dort were anticipated. Finally, when the debate between the Arminian/Remonstrant and anti-Arminian/Counter-Remonstrant parties showed no signs of abating in the Netherlands, the States-General of the Republic of the Netherlands called a national synod to settle the dispute. The express purpose of this synod, to be held in 1618 in Dordrecht, was to judge whether the position of the Remonstrants was in harmony with the Word of God and the Reformed confessions, particularly Article 16 of the Belgic Confession. Though officially a synod of the Reformed churches of the Netherlands, the synod had in addition twenty-six delegates from eight foreign countries.⁴

By the time the synod convened, the Remonstrants were generally agreed on the following main points of doctrine.

The First Point: Conditional Election. Following Arminius, the Remonstrants taught that God elected before the foundation of the world to save those whom he foresaw would respond in faith to the gospel call. God does not give faith to those whom he chooses to save. Rather, God elects those whom he foresees will believe and repent of their own free will. Therefore, God's election is neither sovereign nor unmerited in the proper sense of these terms.

The Second Point: Universal Atonement. According to the Remonstrants, Christ "died for all men and for every man," although only those who believe in him will be saved. The atoning work of Christ made it possible for everyone to be saved, without actually securing the salvation of anyone.

The Third Point: Human Depravity. In the opinion of the Remonstrants, fallen sinners do not have the freedom to will any saving good without a prior (prevenient) work of God's grace through the Word and Spirit of Christ. On this point, there was no substantial disagreement between the Remonstrants and the authors of the canons. However, consistent with the Arminian insistence that election is based upon foreseen faith and that Christ's atoning work becomes effective only through the free choice of some to believe the gospel, the Arminian/Remonstrant position also maintained that human depravity is mitigated through the grace that comes to all who are called to faith through the gospel. There is a common gracious working of God in the hearts of sinners, short of granting salvation, which enables them to repent and believe. This common grace is sufficient to enable all sinners to cooperate or not cooperate with the gospel call to faith and repentance.

The Fourth Point: Resistible Grace. In the fourth article the Arminian party taught that the Holy Spirit does all that is necessary to enable fallen sinners to be saved. But the ministry of the Spirit may always be successfully resisted. Because fallen sinners can always choose to frustrate the work of the Spirit, they must first believe before the Spirit regenerates and converts them. Accordingly, the Spirit's application of the benefits of Christ's atoning death is effectual only in the case of those sinners who choose not to resist the Spirit and persevere in the way of faith. Accordingly, God's grace alone is not effectual to the salvation of any sinner. God's grace is always vincible, never invincible.

The Fifth Point: The Non-Perseverance of the Saints. The last article of the Arminian party was addressed to the question whether believers are preserved in the state of grace by the Holy Spirit. Though there was some uncertainty on this question in the early period of the controversy, by the time the Synod of Dort met in 1618 the Arminian party had repudiated the teaching that believers may be assured that they will persevere in a state of grace by the work of the Spirit.

The Five Main Points of the Canons of Dort

In the course of its deliberations, the Synod of Dort judged the five articles of the Remonstrants to be contrary to the Word of God and the confession of the Reformed churches. Against the Arminian teachings of divine election based on foreseen faith, universal atonement, resistible or ineffectual grace, and the possibility of a fall from grace, the canons set forth the Reformed teachings of unconditional election, definite atonement or particular redemption, radical depravity, effectual grace, and the perseverance of the saints. In form, the canons were structured to answer to the five points of the Remonstrants. On each major head of doctrine, the canons first present a positive statement of the scriptural teaching and then conclude with a rejection of the corresponding Arminian error.⁵

The First Main Point of Doctrine: Unconditional Election. In the opening articles of the first main point of doctrine, the canons begin with a summary of the most important aspects of the biblical gospel. These include the fact that "all people have sinned in Adam and have come under the sentence of the curse and eternal death" (Article 1), that God has manifested his love in the sending of his only-begotten Son (Article 2), and that God's anger continues to rest upon those who do not believe the gospel of Jesus Christ (Article 3). Within the framework of these truths—all have sinned and are worthy of death, God in love sent his Son to redeem fallen sinners, such sinners must believe in Christ to be saved—the authors of the canons raise the fundamental question to which the biblical doctrine of election is addressed: why do some believe and repent at the preaching of the gospel, but others remain in their sins and under the just condemnation of God? The answer to this question at its deepest level is God's unconditional election in Christ of some persons to salvation:

The fact that some receive from God the gift of faith within time, and that others do not, stems from [God's] eternal decision. For *all his works are known to God from eternity* (Acts 15:18; Eph. 1:11). In accordance with this decision he graciously softens the hearts, however hard, of his chosen ones and inclines them to believe, but by his just judgment he leaves in their wickedness and hardness of heart those who have not been chosen. And in this especially is disclosed to us his act—unfathomable, and as merciful as it is just—of distinguishing between people equally lost. (Article 6)

Because this sovereign and gracious purpose of God in the election of his people is the source of faith, the canons go on to assert that it cannot therefore be based upon faith: "This same election took place, not *on the basis of* foreseen faith, of the obedience of faith, of holiness, or of any other good quality and disposition, as though it were based on a prerequisite cause or condition in the person to be chosen, but rather *for the purpose of* faith, of the obedience of faith, of holiness, and so on" (Article 8).

After articulating the scriptural teaching of unconditional election, the canons further affirm that this sovereign and gracious election of a particular number of persons unto salvation means that some sinners have been "passed by" and "left" in their sins.

Moreover, Holy Scripture especially highlights this eternal and undeserved grace of our election and brings it out more clearly for us, in that it further bears witness that not all people have been chosen but that some have not been chosen or have been passed by in God's eternal election—those, that is, concerning whom God, on the basis of the entirely free, most just, irreproachable, and unchangeable good pleasure, made

the following decision: to leave them in the common misery into which, by their own fault, they have plunged themselves; not to grant them saving faith and the grace of conversion; but finally to condemn and eternally punish them (having been left in their own ways and under his just judgment), not only for their unbelief but also for all their other sins, in order to display his justice. (Article 15)

The formulation of this article is expressly infralapsarian. Those whom God does not elect to save in Christ belong to the company of all fallen sinners who “by their own fault” have willfully plunged themselves into a “common misery.” In the case of the elect, God mercifully and graciously elects to grant them salvation in and through the work of Christ. In the case of the reprobate, God demonstrates his justice by choosing to withhold his grace and to finally condemn them for their sins and unbelief.

The Second Main Point of Doctrine: Definite Atonement or Particular Redemption. Of the five points of doctrine summarized in the canons, the second is given the briefest treatment. In the opening articles of this second point, the canons affirm that the only possible way for sinful human beings to escape the condemnation and death that their sins deserve lies in the gracious provision through God’s mercy of a Savior who has satisfied God’s justice on their behalf (Article 2). After affirming the need for Christ’s atoning work on the cross, the canons affirm the infinite value and worth of Christ’s satisfaction. Christ’s atoning sacrifice “is the only and entirely complete sacrifice and satisfaction for sins,” and “is of infinite value and worth, more than sufficient to atone for the sins of the whole world.” Therefore, the church must proclaim the gospel of salvation through Christ to “all nations and peoples, to whom God in his good pleasure sends the gospel.” The church is called to proclaim “indiscriminately” that all who believe in Christ crucified and turn from their sins shall not perish but have eternal life.

After establishing the need for Christ’s atoning work and affirming its infinite value and sufficiency, the authors of the canons set forth the central thesis of the second point of doctrine. The atoning work of Christ was by God’s design and intention provided for the elect in particular:

For it was the entirely free plan and very gracious will and intention of God the Father that the enlivening and saving effectiveness of his Son’s costly death should work itself out in all his chosen ones, in order that he might grant justifying faith to them only and thereby lead them without fail to salvation. In other words, it was God’s will that Christ through the blood of the cross (by which he confirmed the new covenant) should effectively redeem from every people, tribe, nation, and language all those and only those who were chosen from eternity to salvation and given to him by the Father; that

he should grant them faith (which, like the Holy Spirit’s other saving gifts, he acquired for them by his death); that he should cleanse them by his blood from all their sins, both original and actual. . . . (Article 8)

The Third and Fourth Main Points of Doctrine: Radical Depravity and Effectual Grace. In the third and fourth main points of doctrine, the canons set forth the scriptural teaching regarding the radical depravity of fallen sinners and the effectual work of Christ’s Spirit in regeneration and conversion.

The position of the canons on the plight of sinful man is starkly portrayed in the first five articles of this section of the confession. In the first article, a sharp contrast is drawn between man’s original state of integrity, as he was created by God, and his sinful state after the fall.

Man was originally created in the image of God and was furnished in his mind with a true and salutary knowledge of his Creator and things spiritual, in his will and heart with righteousness, and in all his emotions with purity; indeed, the whole man was holy. However, rebelling against God at the devil’s instigation and by his own free will, he deprived himself of these outstanding gifts. Rather, in their place he brought upon himself blindness, terrible darkness, futility, and distortion of judgment in his mind; perversity, defiance, and hardness in his heart and will; and finally impurity in all his emotions. (Article 1)

Therefore, all people are conceived in sin and are born children of wrath, unfit for any saving good, inclined to evil, dead in their sins, and slaves to sin; without the grace of the regenerating Holy Spirit they are neither willing nor able to return to God, to reform their distorted nature, or even to dispose themselves to such reform. (Article 3)

The Canons of Dort begin their treatment of the work of the Spirit in the application of redemption by stressing that the gospel must be published to all the nations. In this publication of the gospel, God “seriously and most genuinely . . . makes known in his Word what is pleasing to him: that those who are called should come to him. Seriously he also promises rest for their souls and eternal life to all who come to him and believe” (Article 8).⁶ This means that the blame does not belong with Christ or the gospel when sinners refuse to believe and repent when called to do so through the gospel. God sincerely calls everyone through the Word of the gospel to believe, promising salvation to all without distinction who answer this call through faith and repentance. The fault for the unbelief and impenitence of many is, therefore, entirely their own.

But what about those who do believe and repent, who are converted, at the preaching of the gospel? Are they to be credited for their faith and repentance, as though these were

their own accomplishment? The authors of the canons answer this question, first, by denying that such faith and repentance are to be credited to the believer, and second, by affirming that they are the fruit of the Spirit's working through the gospel.

The fact that others who are called through the ministry of the gospel do come and are brought to conversion must not be credited to man, as though one distinguishes himself by free choice from others who are furnished with equal or sufficient grace for faith and conversion (as the proud heresy of Pelagius maintains). No, it must be credited to God: just as from eternity he chose his own in Christ, so within time he effectively calls them, grants them faith and repentance . . . in order that they may declare the wonderful deeds of him who called them out of darkness into this marvelous light, and may boast not in themselves, but in the Lord, as apostolic words frequently testify in Scripture. (Article 10)

In the following articles of the canons, the authors attempt, to the extent this is possible, to provide a biblical account of the manner of the Spirit's working in the heart and life of the believer. Speaking of the Spirit's work in applying the gospel, the canons affirm that God by the Spirit powerfully enlightens the minds of believers "so that they may rightly understand and discern the things of the Spirit of God" (Article 11). Furthermore, by "the effective operation of the same regenerating Spirit," God also "penetrates into the inmost being of man, opens the closed heart, softens the hard heart, and circumcises the heart that is uncircumcised." This work of the Spirit includes giving to the sinner's will, otherwise captivated to sin, the readiness to do good; making the will, otherwise dead and lifeless to the things of God, begin to live and become receptive to the gospel's call; making the will, otherwise unwilling because unable, begin to desire the right; and activating and enlivening the will, otherwise inactive and lifeless, to produce the good fruits that come from a tree that has been made good. In so doing, the Spirit of God effectively enables the sinner, by nature spiritually dead and in bondage to sin, to turn willingly in repentance and faith to God.

As a result, all those in whose hearts God works in this marvelous way are certainly, unfailingly, and effectively reborn and do actually believe. And then the will, now renewed, is not only activated and motivated by God but in being activated by God is also itself active. For this reason, man himself, by that grace which he has received is also rightly said to believe and to repent. (Article 12)

The Fifth Main Point of Doctrine: The Perseverance of the Saints. The opening articles of the fifth main point acknowledge that believers continually struggle with sin and temptation, and even fall on occasion into grievous sin (e.g., Peter's denial). Within the setting of this biblically realistic view of the ongoing

struggle with remaining sin, the canons affirm the Triune God's gracious preservation of true believers. If left to their own resources, believers "could not remain standing in this grace" for a moment (Article 3). Only as God, being faithful and merciful, strengthens and enables them, are believers able to continue in that state into which God has brought them through fellowship with Christ. The good news of the gospel is not only that God has provided an atonement through Christ and brought us by the Spirit through the gospel into fellowship with Christ. The gospel also promises that God will prove faithful and merciful by preserving his people within that fellowship.

For God, who is rich in mercy, according to his unchangeable purpose of election does not take his Holy Spirit from his own completely, even when they fall grievously. Neither does he let them fall down so far that they forfeit the grace of adoption and the state of justification, or commit the sin which leads to death (the sin against the Holy Spirit), and plunge themselves, entirely forsaken by him, into eternal ruin. (Article 6)

The *Pro-Acta* and the *Post-Acta* of the Synod of Dort

In my introduction to this article, I noted that the Synod of Dort did more than respond to the five opinions of the Remonstrants on the topic of election. The synod also addressed a number of important matters that would prove to be of abiding significance for the Reformed churches in the Netherlands and throughout the world. The work of the synod in this area is usually described as the *Pro-Acta* (lit., "the acts before") and the *Post-Acta* (lit., "the acts after"). As these terms indicate, the *Pro-Acta* were the actions taken by the synod in its early sessions while the delegates waited for the Remonstrants to answer the summons extended to them to come to Dordrecht and appear before the synod. The *Post-Acta* were the actions taken by the synod after the canons were completed and the foreign delegates were dismissed with thanks on May 6, 1619. Among the most important of these actions, I would note the following (the first three are *Pro-Acta*, while the others are *Post-Acta*):

- The synod appointed a translation committee, which eventually produced the *Statenvertaling* ("state translation") or Dutch version of the Bible. This translation would prove to be the Dutch equivalent of the King James Version in English, as it served the Dutch church throughout much of its history until recent times.
- The synod discussed the question of how to promote the teaching of the Heidelberg Catechism. Though the synod wisely decided not to adopt a proposal that would require young people to demonstrate an adequate knowledge of the catechism before they could be married, it did recommend a number of methods to the churches!

- The synod addressed the question whether the children of non-Christian servants living in Dutch households in the Far East should be baptized. A decision was made to require that such children be catechized first and be baptized only after they made profession of their faith.
- The synod, noting that several different texts of the Belgic Confession were in circulation among the churches, approved an official text.
- The synod adopted a revised Form of Subscription, which continues to be used to this day by Reformed churches that take seriously their adherence to the Three Forms of Unity (Belgic Confession, Heidelberg Catechism, Canons of Dort).
- The synod approved a number of liturgical forms for use in the public worship of the churches, the administration of the sacraments, the ordination of church officers, and the like.
- The synod adopted a Church Order that continues to serve as the basis for the church orders of Reformed denominations that subscribe to the Three Forms of Unity.
- The synod responded to a request from the province of Zeeland regarding the proper understanding of the Christian Sabbath. The points and advice of the synod on the Christian Sabbath would prove influential in forming the piety and practice of the Reformed churches in the Netherlands throughout their history.
- The synod responded to a letter from the French Reformed theologian Pierre Du Moulin, who proposed that a confession be produced that would unite all the Reformed churches throughout the world. The synod replied to this proposal with a unanimous declaration that the Belgic Confession was an acceptable statement of the Reformed faith for this purpose.[end bulleted list]

The Abiding Legacy of the Synod

My summary of the accomplishments of the Synod of Dort ought to remind Reformed believers and churches why it is necessary for us to commemorate its work. In my view, the synod ought to be celebrated chiefly for two reasons.

First, the canons produced by the synod offer a beautiful, pastoral defense of the simple gospel truth that “God saves sinners.” God does not simply make salvation possible. He actually saves, and he does so out of the depths of his eternal purpose of election. The atoning work of Christ for his own, and the ministry of the Spirit in communicating to us the benefits of Christ’s work, are an expression of God’s invincible and unchanging purpose to save out of the fallen human race an elect people from every tribe, tongue, people, and nation. Left to themselves, fallen sinners would remain justly under the wrath and condemnation of God for their sins. But they are not left to themselves. The gospel story is one that records God’s

relentless and invincible work to restore to favor with himself a new humanity in union with Christ. No human work, not even the act of embracing the gospel promise by faith, accounts for the salvation of any fallen sinner. The Triune God is the God of our salvation from first to last. We have nothing but what he has granted us by sheer grace, without any merit or deserving of our own. All that we receive in Christ is born out of God’s sheer grace and boundless mercy. In the words of the canons, “The bride of Christ . . . has always loved this teaching very tenderly and defended it steadfastly as a priceless treasure; and God, against whom no plan can avail and no strength can prevail, will ensure that she will continue to do this. To this God alone, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, be honor and glory forever. Amen” (V/15).

And second, the synod made a number of far-reaching decisions that continue to be of great benefit to the Reformed churches. Among these decisions, the preparation of the Form of Subscription and the writing of a Church Order have served the well-being of the Reformed churches throughout their history. After four hundred years, these gifts of the synod to the churches continue to preserve the church’s testimony to the truth of the gospel and to govern her life and ministry in an edifying manner.

1. *Public Disputations*, in *The Works of James Arminius* [hereafter: WJA], trans. James Nichols and William Nichols (London: 1825, 1828, 1875; reprint, Grand Rapids: Baker, 1986), 2:80–312; and *Declaration of Sentiments of Arminius, delivered before the States of Holland*, in WJA 2:580–732. For a helpful treatment of the historical background to and resolution of the controversy at the Synod of Dort, see *Crisis in the Reformed Churches: Essays in Commemoration of the Great Synod of Dort 1618–1619*, ed. P. Y. De Jong, 2nd ed.; Grandville, MI: Reformed Fellowship, Inc., 1968 [2008]).

2. *Declaration of Sentiments*, in WJA, 1:653–54.

3. For an English translation of this *Counter Remonstrance*, see De Jong, *Crisis*, 247–50.

4. For a list of the delegates to the synod, see De Jong, *Crisis*, 253–58.

5. For a comprehensive treatment of the scriptural basis for the canons’ teaching, see David N. Steele and Curtis C. Thomas, *The Five Points of Calvinism: Defined, Defended, Documented* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 1963), 30–38. For popular treatments of the canons, see Cornelis P. Venema, *But for the Grace of God: An Exposition of the Canons of Dort* (Grand Rapids: Reformed Fellowship Inc., 1994, 2011); James Montgomery Boice and Philip Graham Ryken, *The Doctrines of Grace* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2002); and Timothy George.

6. The language of the canons, describing the serious and genuine call that God issues through the gospel to all, is virtually identical with that employed by the Remonstrants in their fourth opinion. However, the authors of the canons refused to follow the logic of the Remonstrants or Arminians, who drew the conclusion that all sinners must then be able of themselves to comply with the gospel’s demands.

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