

Dedicated to the Exposition and Defense of the Reformed Faith

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IN A FEW WORDS

MINISTERING TO THE SICK AND DYING

THE GRACE OF REGENERATION?

FAITH AND FRUIT IN A POST-CHRISTIAN WORLD: THE SABBATH

A SPIRITUAL CHECKUP FOR THE URCNA: CHILDREN ARE LEAVING –WHAT TO DO?

THE BIBLICAL TRAITS OF A CHRISTIAN

THIRTEEN WAYS A HUSBAND CAN CULTIVATE HIS MARRIAGE

THE BOOK OF ESTHER

REFORMED EVANGELISM: PUTTING WHEELS ON THE CART

FOUR REASONS TO LOVE THE PSALMS

IS JEALOUSY A VIRTUE OR A SIN?

THANKFUL IN PROSPERITY

| | Title | Author | Synopsis |
|----|--|-------------------------|--|
| 3 | In a Few Words | Rev. Corey Dykstra | What are we to do with our minds? Could it be that in our self-centered, entertainment-saturated culture people are finally coming to discover the glaring issue of mindlessness? |
| 4 | Ministering to the Sick and Dying | Rev. Richard Anjema | Visiting the sick and dying is one of the most important pastoral callings for office bearers. With God's help, they may properly carry out this work of service with genuine compassion through prayerful preparation. |
| 7 | The Grace of Regeneration? | Rev. Daniel R. Hyde | Total depravity. Irresistible grace. We believe these and the Arminians don't, right? Are you sure? Going back in history helps us today in embracing and proclaiming what we actually believe about human corruption and the Holy Spirit's grace of conversion. |
| 10 | Faith and Fruit in a Post-Christian World: The Sabbath (3) | Mr. Michael R. Kearney | The historic Reformed faith offers a beautiful and compelling alternative to the indifference of the twenty-first century in the form of the Lord's Day. |
| 13 | A Spiritual Checkup for the URCNA: Children are Leaving – What to Do? (9) | Rev. Paul T. Murphy | What is it that will halt our youth from looking elsewhere for "authentic" Christianity? How about improving your baptism? |
| 15 | The Biblical Traits of a Christian | Rev. Bartel Elshout | In the Beatitudes, Christ gives a spiritual portrait of the Christian by formulating the essential components of Christian experience. |
| 18 | Thirteen Ways a Husband Can Cultivate His Marriage | Rev. Brian G. Najapfour | This article provides thirteen wise, practical, and biblical pieces of advice on how a husband can better cultivate his marriage. |
| 20 | The Book of Esther (5) | Dr. Norm De Jong | Esther 8 – Chapter 6: An Unbalanced Civil War Esther 9 – Chapter 7: A Puzzling Interlude |
| 26 | Reformed Evangelism: Putting Wheels on the Cart (2) | Mr. Gerry Wisz | How can we present the gospel without being intrusive? Is there any evangelism outside the church that can go beyond shotgun evangelism? How can we get there? |
| 30 | Four Reasons to Love the Psalms | Rev. William Boekestein | Some Psalms are easy to love. But what about the rest? Here are four reasons to love all the Psalms, and an introduction to a new resource for studying them. |
| 33 | Is Jealousy a Virtue or a Sin? | Dr. Norm De Jong | Are you married to a jealous husband? How does that affect you? Are you married to a God who says, "My name is Jealous"! How does that affect you? How is his love demonstrated? |
| 36 | Thankful in Prosperity | Dr. Harry Arnold | Counting your many blessings. Rejoicing and giving thanks! |

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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: "By the sea of crystal, saints in glory stand, Myriads in number, drawn from every land, Robed in white apparel, washed in Jesus' blood, They now reign in Heaven with the Lamb of God." Psalter Hymnal 469, by William Kuipers (1884–1933). Crystal Lake, Michigan photography by Jeff Steenholdt.

In a Few WORDS



“The scandal of the evangelical mind is that there is not much of an evangelical mind.”

Mark A. Noll

This statement recently popped into my head once again as I happened to read through another of Al Mohler's *The Briefing* (March 12, 2019). In this episode Dr. Mohler pointed out that there is an increasing interest in Buddhism and mindfulness here in the United States. In seeking to answer why, he cites an article in *The Atlantic* by Olga Kahzan in which it was stated that many Americans are wondering: "What are we to do with our minds?" Could it be that in our self-centered, entertainment-saturated culture people are finally coming to discover the glaring issue of mindlessness?

It would seem so, but with the result that many are turning to a kind of Buddhist meditation to scratch the proverbial itch. Whatever our own thoughts may be on that matter, I believe Dr. Mohler provides us a timely reminder of just what our Christian faith is like, a reminder that I hope you our dear readers may appreciate as well.

In *The Briefing* Dr. Mohler reminds us that Christianity (he also includes Judaism) is "theologically thick in the face," which is to say that the Christian faith and tradition consist of specific, objective truths revealed to us in the Word of God. Our faith is not one consisting of the careful conjectures and musings of earthly men; rather our

faith is established upon the Word of God since "men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit" (1 Pet. 1:21). Ours is not a faith where we devote our minds to looking inward at ourselves, but instead consists of the mind of Christ (1 Cor. 2:16), a mind set upon the Spirit which is life and peace (Rom. 8:6).

Sadly, many churches today imagine that the only way we will ever reach our world or culture is to empty the gospel (and our preaching?) of content. From my own experience, however, I have discovered that there is a great

hunger among many young people today: a hunger to learn, to know, to understand, and search out the deep things of God. While always remaining vigilant against pride, we ought to be incredibly grateful for the heritage we have received and unashamedly share it with the world. Theology is not an obstacle to the gospel, for the truth sets us free (John 8:32).

Perhaps this is an old reminder, though one we need continually to keep before us. I pray that through this magazine your hunger for Christ and the glorious teaching of God's Word continues to grow. And I would ask that you also pray: pray that young and old would delight to give their minds to the study of God's Word. And keep us in prayer, that as Reformed Fellowship we might faithfully encourage the use of our minds unto the praise, honor, and glory of our triune God.

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Ministering to the Sick and Dying



Rev. Richard
Anjema

Visiting the sick and dying is one of the most important duties for those who are called to the offices of elder and deacon. It can also be the most trying.

It is difficult to know what to say or how to give spiritual counsel to those who are dealing with trials related to illness or death. What do you say to a saint who has just received the hard news that he or she is dying of a terminal illness? How do you counsel young parents who have lost an unborn child? What kind of encouragement can you give to a mother and her teenagers who are losing their husband and father to cancer? How do you continue to minister to an elderly saint with chronic poor health? What can be said to young parents who watch their children suffer from a debilitating disease? How do you counsel those who have been in a serious car accident and are at death's door or those bereaved by the loss of a loved one who has recently walked through this door?

These are only a few examples of the sorrows that God's sheep face in this sin-cursed world. In times like these, we cannot rush to see a grieving parishioner without earnestly seeking the Lord in prayer and asking for the Holy Spirit's direction from Scripture. Thomas Murphy wisely observed:

It is no wonder that the youthful minister often trembles when he is summoned to stand by the bedside of a dying man and guide the soul that must soon launch out into eternity. . . . A man can scarcely be placed in a more solemn position than to be called to minister to the weak, the suffering, the dying, perhaps the self-deceived, the hardened, the ignorant and impenitent, or to the awakened whose minutes for finding pardon are almost closed. Who is sufficient for the solemn task of directing a soul that is tottering upon the brink of eternity, where a wrong word may be fatal or a right one may be the means of immediately opening the gates of endless glory?¹

Who is sufficient for this calling? Who can adequately address the weak, the dying, and the ignorant? None of us are able. We depend completely on the Lord for strength and wisdom. It is true that this task is daunting and weighs heavily upon our shoulders. However, there is also potential for great joy and blessing in ministering to those who are needy.

Proper communication, compassion, and preparation are all important in this, the most important of pastoral activities. These are all covered in further detail in the full chapter in *Faithful and Fruitful*. For now, let us look at the application of this work.

For those new to the task, here are some helpful hints regarding hospital or home visits.²

1. When at the hospital, ask the nurses at the nursing station for any information that might be useful in order to help you decide how long you should stay.

This article is adapted from a chapter in Reformed Fellowship's forthcoming book *Faithful and Fruitful: Essays for Elders and Deacons*, edited by William Boekestein and Steven Swets, a follow-up to *Called to Serve: Essays for Elders and Deacons*.

2. Knock before entering the hospital room, or verbally announce your presence, and wait for permission to pull back the curtain. This will avoid awkwardness for you and the patient.

3. Behave normally when visiting. Don't be overly jovial, but don't be unnaturally grave or serious. Be yourself and let the Lord use your personality to minister. You might find it nerve-wracking to see those who are suffering. For example, it can be shocking to see the outward changes of appearance of those who are sick. But remain calm and at peace. Trust in the Lord. You are God's servant. They are the same people with whom you have shared your life in various meaningful ways. Show the love of Christ to them.

4. Be conscious of the time. Visits need not be long. Usually those who are weak or suffering cannot bear to be visited for a long time because they tire easily. But don't be rushed or end the visit abruptly either. Make the patient feel that they and their needs are important to you.

5. Be seated. Generally it's not a good idea to sit on the patient's bed. Find a chair to sit on if one is available. Usually there are chairs in hospital rooms for visitors. If in doubt, ask the

nurses if there is a chair that you may use. At times, there may be no seat available, especially if the patient is in an emergency ward. In cases like these, it is appropriate to stand near the patient's bedside.³

6. Don't forget that the person is ill. Make sure that you talk about the seriousness of their illness if they desire to speak about it. Be prepared to encourage the person to seek the Lord and his purpose in their afflictions (Heb. 12:1–13; James 5:7–18). Be ready to speak about the hope of eternal life. Don't talk merely about trivial and mundane things, such as sports or the weather. These types of conversations may naturally arise during the visit, but they are not as important as the person's spiritual walk with the Lord.

7. Be prepared to discuss funeral arrangements if the person is facing the likelihood of death. Some of those near death have the presence of mind to speak about a text from Scripture that is important to them and/or particular psalms and hymns that they would want to have sung at the funeral. It is helpful to have some knowledge of what arrangements need to be made should there be a funeral.

8. Never leave a visit without bringing the suffering some spiritual nourishment from the Word of God, as well as carrying them before the throne of grace in intercessory prayer. This is always the main reason for the visit: to bring the Scriptures to bear in the lives of those who are suffering. Truly they cannot face this trial without the Lord's face shining upon them through

FAITHFUL AND FRUITFUL

ESSAYS FOR ELDERS
AND DEACONS



Edited by William Boekestein and Steve Swets
Foreword by Michael Brown

his Word. Don't forget that you are the instrument that God uses to bring that comfort.

9. If family is present in the hospital room, minister God's Word to them as well. Don't pretend that they are not there; they also need comfort. A passage that you have chosen to read will also speak to them, especially if you include them in the visit. You may also have the opportunity to speak to extended family outside the room. Take the time to minister to them in conversation, prayer, and Bible reading.

10. Be prepared to minister to strangers, especially unbelievers. Often patients share their hospital room with others who may overhear your conversations with members of your congregation. Hospitals and nursing homes are filled with lost souls who have questions about the afterlife or who may be dying without the comfort of personally knowing the Savior. Be available to them if they ask for your help and seek your attention. By God's providence, hospital visits can be opportunities to sow the seed of the gospel!

11. It is often best to find some time to spend alone with the person. This way you can speak to him or her more freely instead of being interrupted by nursing staff or other visitors. Some patients will have their consciences burdened by sin. This makes it necessary to see them alone so that you can direct their attention to Christ and the knowledge that joy and hope come with repentance. Only then can they face their pain with the sure knowledge that their sins are forgiven and their future is secure.

12. In some cases, it is wise to plan on reading longer portions of Scripture or summarizing a Sunday sermon that you may have preached or heard. Some patients may be in such a condition that they cannot speak but are still

able to hear the Word, and doing such can be a source of great consolation to them. This was the practice of the Scottish minister Robert Murray M'Cheyne (1813–1843); he would often preach an abbreviated sermon to those unable to speak. Also, if you bring along a fellow office bearer or your wife, you may want to spend time singing a few psalms and hymns. Those who cannot speak can still hear and be encouraged with a song of praise to the Lord.

13. In some cases a patient may suffer from dementia. We should never underestimate what they may be able to understand. Often those suffering from dementia can still remember old hymns and psalms that they learned as children. The Lord looks after his own sheep and knows their minds and hearts. Philippians 1:6 assures us that when it comes to salvation, God finishes what he starts. The Word of God is able to penetrate to the division of soul and spirit (Heb. 4:12–13). Therefore, we still need to minister to them. And it can be especially helpful to read familiar passages (such as Ps. 23).

14. Remember to encourage the rest of the congregation in their Christian calling to visit the sick and dying. Put reminders in the bulletin to encourage people to remember the sick and shut-ins by including a list of all the shut-ins and their residences. Visiting the sick or dying can be done by almost anyone (couples, small groups, young moms with a little one, families, singles). To those deprived of the privilege of going to worship services it is a great comfort when God's people can meet for fellowship, singing, and prayer with them. Moreover, it is not only profitable for the bedridden and shut-ins, but also a huge source of blessing for the visitors!

15. Be prepared to minister, but also be prepared to be ministered to. As

a pastor, I have benefited numerous times by the encouraging words of the saints in their trials as they respond to them with wonderful expressions of faith. They are often living testimonies to others of what it means to trust in the Lord's sustaining hand in the midst of all their troubles. Some of them have gone to be with the Lord but the memory lives on in our minds. They have gone before us, have fought the good fight, have finished the race, and await the crown of glory (2 Tim. 4:7–8). Or as the words of that triumphant hymn state: "We feebly struggle, they in glory shine."⁴

May the Lord give us much wisdom and grace that we may fulfill our calling to minister to the sick and dying. We may be just clay vessels, but the Lord is pleased to use willing servants to bless those in the sickroom and at death's door. *Soli Deo gloria!*

1. Thomas Murphy, *Pastoral Theology* (Dallas: Primedia eLaunch, 2013), 124.

2. Points 1 to 6 are adapted from Dr. Joseph Pipa's lectures in his course "Reformed Pastor."

3. Ed. Note: In many cases the patient will welcome the gift of appropriate physical touch, for example, holding hands during prayer. See Zack Eswine's excellent section on the place of physical touch in ministry in *Sensing Jesus: Life and Ministry as a Human Being* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2013), 181–94.

4. *Trinity Psalter Hymnal* (Willow Grove, PA.: Trinity Psalter Hymnal Joint Venture, 2018), song 408.

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One of the issues with the narrative that TULIP accurately summarizes what happened at the Synod of Dort is the first letter, T. The Reformed asserted “total depravity” because the Remonstrants didn’t, right? The original *Remonstrance* of 1610 said in its third article:

That man does not have saving faith of himself nor by the power of his own free will, since he in the state of apostasy and sin can not of and through himself think, will or do any good which is truly good (such as is especially saving faith); but that it is necessary that he be regenerated by God, in Christ, through his Holy Spirit, and renewed in understanding, affections or will, and all powers, in order that he may rightly understand, meditate upon, will, and perform that which is truly good, according to the word of Christ, John 15:5: “Without me ye can do nothing.”¹

Every human is in a state of unbelief and sin and therefore cannot think, will, or do any saving good including faith. This is why we must be born again. What’s wrong with this? Nothing. The Heidelberg theologian, David Paraeus, said it “needs not much examination: if we follow the naturall sense of the words” that are “consentaneous [in agreement with] Holy Writ.”² Maybe the Reformed taught the big T version of total depravity and the Remonstrants taught the little t version? Something’s off in popular conceptions of Dort. You may have noticed that the Canons of Dort have a third *and* fourth point of doctrine. The reason is the third Remonstrant article wasn’t the issue, nor was the first part of article 4:

That this grace of God [mentioned in article 3] is the commencement, progression, and completion of all good, also in so far that regenerate man cannot, apart from this prevenient or assisting, awakening, consequent and cooperating grace, think, will or do the good or resist any temptations to evil; so that all good works or activities which can be conceived must be ascribed to the grace of God in Christ.³

Some of the synod delegates even noticed this as the articles of the *Remonstrance* sounded more orthodox than the doctrine the Remonstrants defended in their writings.⁴

The Issue

What was the issue? “There is poyson in the taile,” to use the image of Paraeus;⁵ meaning, it’s the second part of article 4: “But with respect to the mode of this grace, it is not irresistible, since it is written concerning many that they have resisted the Holy Spirit. Acts 7 and elsewhere in many places.”⁶ It was King James who said the Remonstrant articles “were perhaps not greatly to be misliked: but . . . they were expressed with cunning and art to make a specious shew . . . the articles served but for a bait to swallow doctrine, which was of more danger than the articles would pretend.”⁷ A part of that cunning was the phrase “irresistible grace.” Paraeus called it “horrid and barbarous” and that “our orthodox men . . . acknowledge not this barbarous and ambiguous terme.”⁸ In fact, there is a sense in which we affirm grace *is* resistible

as well as irresistible. In the words of Richard Muller, it’s in the fourth Remonstrant article that “this insistence on prevenient grace is drawn into relation with the synergism of the first two articles.”⁹ When article 3 mentions faith, it denies that it arises from the power of human free will; but this has to be interpreted in light of article 4 and its insistence on “prevenient grace”—the grace that “comes before” a human’s response to God. The Reformed would agree that God’s grace “comes before,” but the issue is that the Remonstrants taught that its mode or way of working was to be a resistible grace. In other words, God’s grace comes before the overall work of conversion and specifically regeneration, but it’s effective only when the free will of the sinner cooperates with it; if a person rejects it, it does not work.¹⁰

Historical Background

Augustine versus Pelagius

One of the great debates in the Western church was between Augustine and Pelagius in terms of the grace of God in predestination. It also related to human nature, sin, and God’s grace. J. N. D. Kelly summarized the patristic teaching through the fourth century as “revealing the firm hold which . . . Christians had on the truth of man’s fallen condition and consequent need of divine help . . . [but also] side by side with it, of a dogged belief in free will and responsibility.”¹¹ If Augustine was the representative of the former, Pelagius was the poster child of the latter.¹²

Pelagius was a popular teacher in Rome from 380 onward but had to flee to North Africa in 409 in view of Alaric’s invasion. In North

Africa, Pelagius was shocked by the pessimistic view of human nature in Augustine's backyard. Emblematic was Augustine's line in his *Confessions*: "Give what you command, and command what you will."¹³ Augustine recorded Pelagius's response: "Pelagius . . . could not bear [these words]; and contradicting somewhat too excitedly, nearly came to a quarrel with him who had mentioned them."¹⁴ In contrast, "the keystone of [Pelagius's] whole system is the idea of unconditional free will and responsibility."¹⁵ This meant that even after the Fall, Pelagius "rejects the idea that man's will has any intrinsic bias in favour of wrongdoing."¹⁶ This also meant "he equally resists the suggestion that there can be any special pressure on man's will to choose the good."¹⁷ Grace was necessary in Pelagius's system, but he radically redefined it especially as the gift of free will itself with its possibility of not sinning.¹⁸ For Augustine, original sin means we participate in and are held responsible for Adam's sin. Kelly summarized the situation like this: "Others before Augustine had stressed our solidarity with Adam, but none had depicted so vividly our complicity with him in his evil willing."¹⁹ This means that while God's image in fallen man is not completely lost, it is horribly marred. We no longer have the freedom not to sin and enjoy the good, but our will is enslaved to our sinful nature. In the words of Kelly, "In the strict sense of free choice . . . man is always free, that is, he can choose freely the course he will pursue; but since his will acts on motives and certain motives may press irresistibly on it, the range of choices which are 'live options' for him is limited by the sort of man he is."²⁰

Council of Carthage

Some of these issues were dealt with at the Council of Carthage in 418. Eight canons or theological rules were decided upon, anathematizing Pelagian views. For example: 1) Adam was created mortal therefore would've died whether or not he

sinned, 2) infants shouldn't be baptized or that baptism forgives sins although infants do not have original sin, 3) God's grace helps us only in not sinning by opening to our understanding his commands and doesn't enable us to do his commands, 4) we can without grace fulfill the divine commands.²¹ What Carthage expressed was a thoroughly Augustinian view of sin and the necessity and power of grace in the lives of sinners.

Council of Orange

A century later at the Council of Orange in 529, this debate came to its ancient culmination. Knowing what this council said gives us important background to the debate within the Reformed community at the time of the Synod of Dort. Orange's doctrinal position is a lengthy list of twenty-five canons and then a conclusion²² from the writings of Gennadius of Marseilles and Prosper of Aquitaine, both quoting and summarizing Augustine. They rejected Pelagianism by identifying the necessity of grace in several canons. Adam's sin has affected man's body and soul; therefore, "the liberty of the soul [did not] remain[. . .] uninjured" (canon 1). Adam's sin has affected all humanity in passing "bodily death, which is the punishment of sin, and . . . sin also, which is the death of the soul" (canon 2). Adam's very condition of being a creature in the state of integrity was such that his human nature could not preserve itself without the help of its Creator; therefore, if humans could not keep salvation without God's help in that state, how does man have the power to be able to restore what he has lost without the grace of God (canon 19)? The Council of Orange also rejected Pelagianism by identifying the operation of grace *prior* to regeneration. Grace isn't conferred as a result of human prayer; prayer proceeds from grace (canon 3). God doesn't await our desire to be cleansed from sin; this desire "is put into us by the infusion and operation of the Holy Spirit" (canon 4). "The

beginning of faith" is not implanted in us by nature; instead, the gift of grace "correct[s] our will from infidelity to faith, from impiety to piety" (canon 5). God doesn't give us mercy because we, apart from his grace, believe, will, desire, strive, labor, watch, study, seek, ask, and knock for it; instead, all this proceeds from "the infusion and inspiration of the Holy Spirit" (canon 6). We cannot rightly think of or choose any good that relates to salvation or assent to the preaching of the gospel through our natural powers; instead, these proceed from "the illumination and inspiration of the Holy Spirit" (canon 7). In sum, "God loves us for what we shall be by His gift, not for what we are by our own merit" (canon 12). In reading the Canons of Dort, third and fourth point of doctrine, Orange's doctrine of the effective working of the Holy Spirit to change us is found throughout.

Common Christian Convictions on Sin

Turning again to the third and fourth point of doctrine you should notice its strange enumeration. The reason is that they were responding to the five points of the Remonstrants. Their original third point was not disagreeable on its own. It was when it was combined with the fourth point that it became objectionable. This means the outline of the third and fourth points is unique in the canons. The title of this point of doctrine says it's about humanity's corruption (*de hominis corruption*) but also about how humans are converted to God (*conversione ad Deum ejusque modo*). "Conversion" is being used as a general concept of being changed from a sinner outside fellowship with God to being a child of God in relationship with him. The articles go on to speak of "regeneration" as a particular aspect in that conversion or change.

Articles 1–2 open with the common Christian convictions about sin and then define sin and the necessity of regeneration as the initial aspect leading to conversion in article 3.

Canons from the Second Council of Orange (529)

Articles 4–5 return to common Christian convictions about the overall process of conversion before defining it in article 6. Articles 7–17 go on to speak of conversion in general and regeneration in particular.²³ In other words, these articles move from the general (conversion) to the particular (regeneration) work of God's grace in the lives of sinners.

1. As cited in "The Remonstrance of 1610," appendix C in De Jong, *Crisis in the Reformed Churches*, 208.

2. Paraeus, "Epitome of Arminianisme," 832.

3. As cited in "The Remonstrance of 1610," appendix C in De Jong, *Crisis in the Reformed Churches*, 208–9.

4. Goudriaan, "The Synod of Dort on Arminian Anthropology," 85.

5. Paraeus, "Epitome of Arminianisme," 832.

6. As cited in "The Remonstrance of 1610," appendix C in De Jong, *Crisis in the Reformed Churches*, 208–9.

7. Milton, *The British Delegation and the Synod of Dort*, 21 n. 59.

8. Paraeus, "Epitome of Arminianisme," 832, 833.

9. Muller, "Arminius and Arminianism," 34–35. On the issues of theological anthropology at Dort, see Goudriaan, "The Synod of Dort on Arminian Anthropology," 81–106.

10. On prevenient grace, see Muller, "gratia praeveniens," in *Dictionary of Latin and Greek Theological Terms*, 144.

11. J. N. D. Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines* (1960; rev. ed., New York: Harper San Francisco, 1978), 357.

12. For a summary of what follows, see Hubertus R. Drobner, *The Fathers of the Church: A Comprehensive Introduction*, trans. Siegfried S. Schatzmann (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2007), 404–9.

13. Augustine, *Confessions: Books 9–13*, ed. and trans. Carolyn J.-B. Hammond, Loeb Classical Library 27 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2016), 10.29.40.

14. Augustine, "On the Gift of Perseverance," chap. 53, *Nicene and Post Nicene Fathers: First Series*, 5:547.

15. Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines*, 357.

16. Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines*, 358.

17. Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines*, 359.

18. Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines*, 359.

19. Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines*, 364.

20. Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines*, 367.

21. For the text, see *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers: Second Series*, ed. Philip Schaff and Henry Wace (1900; repr., Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2004), 14:496–99.

22. On the specific sources of these canons in Augustine, Gennadius, and Prosper, see Hefele, *A History of the Councils: Volume 4*, 155–63; Woods, *Canons of the Second Council of Orange*, 14–49. See Woods for the Latin text with an at times antiquated English rendering.

23. This outline is contra Feenstra, who divides this point of doctrine into the total corruption of man (arts. 1–5), the miracle of conversion (arts. 6–12), and the manner of conversion (arts. 13–17). See *Unspeakable Comfort*, 97.

Canon 3

Grace isn't conferred as a result of human prayer; prayer proceeds from grace

Canon 4

God doesn't await our desire to be cleansed from sin; this desire "is put into us by the infusion and operation of the Holy Spirit"

Canon 5

The beginning of faith is not implanted in us by nature; instead, the gift of grace "correct[s] our will from infidelity to faith, from impiety to piety"

Canon 6

God doesn't give us mercy because we, apart from his grace, believe, will, desire, strive, labor, watch, study, seek, ask, and knock for it; instead, all this proceeds from "the infusion and inspiration of the Holy Spirit"

Canon 7

We cannot rightly think of or choose any good that relates to salvation or assent to the preaching of the gospel through our natural powers; instead, these proceed from "the illumination and inspiration of the Holy Spirit"

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Faith and Fruit in a Post-Christian World: The Sabbath



Mr. Michael R. Kearney

The comedian Brian Regan used to perform a sketch about the moving sidewalks found in airport terminals. No matter how abundant the directives to *Stand Right, Walk Left*, there are always a few passengers who fail to understand the distinction. Instead, they block the space reserved for walking and disrupt the entire rhythm of a crowded airport. It's often the same people, Regan remarked, who stumble in surprise when the moving walkway ends. Distracted or merely oblivious, they fail to comprehend crucial distinctions for navigating through a busy world.

Differences matter. The ability to make distinctions is essential to understanding the patterns and rhythms of human life. And differences must be taught. Children do not innately grasp the difference between medicine and candy, or between a friendly neighbor and a malevolent stranger. They must learn this faculty of discrimination through repetitive instruction, or their lives will be endangered.

These are general observations about the nature of the world, but they bear directly upon the way Christian individuals and communities live amid a culture that is no longer Christian. It is essential that we understand what differentiates faith in Christ from all other patterns of belief. This is the root meaning of the words *sacred* and *holy*: to set apart a specific person, place, or activity for a particular purpose. Like

the Levitical priests, we must learn “to distinguish between the holy and the common, and between the unclean and the clean” (Lev. 10:10). But, like the child who sees no distinction between the toy chainsaw and the real one, we must receive loving and consistent instruction if we are to learn the differences between the identity of the believer and the identity of the world.

Understanding what it means to be holy requires more effort than ever in a cultural context marked by increasing indifference to the significance of the set-apart. New church buildings shy away from sanctuaries (*sanctus* being Latin for “holy”) in favor of multi-purpose rooms, while more and more businesses maintain regular hours even on holidays (“holy days”). As our sacred spaces and times lose their significance, churches begin to look like nightclubs and weekends like work days. While we often attribute this decline to the triumph of secularism, the deeper issue seems to be that the sacred has ceased to mean anything. The global conversation surrounding Notre Dame Cathedral reveals widespread confusion not just about what the restoration of this sacred space will look like, but about what (besides the commercial interests of tourism) makes it a sacred space to begin with.

Across Christendom, one can observe a wide spectrum of attempts to counter our culture's tilt toward desacralization. At one extreme, the emergent church movement embraces the abolition of anything smacking of “sacred space.” We can get more people in the doors, the argument goes, if we rebrand church

as a hipster café or a theater. At the other extreme, many evangelicals show increasing interest in the sacred aura surrounding high-church liturgies and monastic orders, as exemplified by the popularity of Rod Dreher's book *The Benedict Option*.¹ Even in distinctively Reformed and Presbyterian orders of worship, centuries-old church traditions such as the lectionary and the liturgical calendar are beginning to reappear.² Though they may seem directly opposed to one another, extreme traditionalism and extreme progressivism share the common goal of restoring a sense of the sacred to a world of dulled senses. But can they succeed?

The historic Reformed articulation of biblical faith offers a beautiful and compelling alternative to the indifference of the twenty-first century—and it can do so without succumbing either to a rote liturgical format or to seeker-sensitive demands. The simple rhythm of the Reformed faith hinges upon learning to set apart one day a week for worship. We need not invent new forms of the sacred to shore up a sense of spirituality. Our God has already provided sacred space and sacred time for his people in the form of the Lord's Day.

Children learn about differences through repetitive habits of instruction. Through chores, they learn to distinguish between “dirty” and “clean.” In school, they learn to distinguish between nouns and verbs. In college, they learn (ideally!) to distinguish between sound argument and mere opinion. These habits of training are redundant and mundane—and that's exactly the point. Habits pertain to our character (think of



the word *habitual*). Habits also pertain to our dwelling places (think of the word *habitat*). Like the regularly occurring signs posted above airport walkways, it is the regular routines of our lives that shape our identity as we navigate through the world.

The notion of instilling habits through repetitive instruction reminds us of the apostle Paul's comment that the law was our schoolmaster to bring us to Christ (Gal. 3:24). In particular, the Sabbath served as a sign from the Lord to his covenant people to demarcate their holiness in his household. As a seven-day pattern, the Sabbath pointed to God as Creator (Exod. 20:11). As the liberation from daily labor, it pointed to God as Redeemer (Deut. 5:15). Setting apart the day served to remind the Israelites of their own set-apartness and to renew their commitment to the Lord's ways. With the finished work of Christ, the Law lost its authority as a schoolmaster (Gal. 3:25–26). Yet the grateful rhythm of weekly worship continues to develop our habits—the places we live and our ways of life—as we walk in ever closer conformity to Christ.

The Sabbath Is about Instruction

The Heidelberg Catechism's application of the fourth commandment to the Christian life (Lord's Day 38, Q&A 103) contains some surprises. The catechism begins not with a moral injunction against Sunday recreation, nor with a theological explanation for the shift from seventh-day to first-day worship. Rather, it begins by upholding "the gospel ministry and schools for it."³ The authors of the catechism recognized the Sabbath's role as a teaching tool: a routine exercise, like the alphabet or the pledge of allegiance, that cultivates the character of its students. (After all, the catechism itself manifests a structure of weekly Lord's Day instruction.) The Lord gives us the Sabbath as weekly practice for the eternal communion that we will enjoy with him in the life to come. Each Sunday we rehearse the holy dialogue in which God calls us to worship, shows us our sin, proclaims his forgiveness in Christ, seals us with the water of baptism, teaches us from his Word, and invites us to commune with him in table fellowship. This sacred routine is not a

burden; rather, it is what the catechism calls a "festive day of rest." Sunday school is the whole day: enrollment in the weekly "college of grace" prepares us for an eternal life of grateful worship.⁴

The Sabbath Is about Community

The catechism goes on to encourage diligent attendance of "the assembly of God's people." The Sabbath of the old covenant occurred in community. Not only must you refrain from work, but so must your household, your livestock, and the sojourner within your gates. Whereas leisure is a private activity, Sabbath rest occurs together.⁵ Here, too, we practice: since we will be living in community eternally, we should learn to get along with one another now. Life in the local church is simple but not easy—not when we must confess our sins to one another, not when we must challenge one another in the faith, and not when we must submit to the admonition and discipline of the elders of the church. But we must learn all of these character traits if we wish to grow in our love for Christ and his people. The Lord gives us the local church as a

rehearsal room for heavenly habits.

The Sabbath Is about Daily Rest

The most surprising aspect of the catechism's treatment of the fourth commandment, however, is its second part: "that every day of my life I rest from my evil ways, [and] let the Lord work in me through his spirit." The catechism suggests that the pattern of the Sabbath involves a daily mindset, not merely a weekly one. And this interpretation is consistent with Jesus' own treatment of the Old Testament during his earthly ministry. Where the scribes and Pharisees saw only the law's ceremonial implications, Jesus penetrated to the core. Just as the commandment against murder involves hateful words (Matt. 5:21–26) and the commandment about adultery includes passing fancies of the mind (Matt. 5:27–30), so too the commandment about the Sabbath engages all the habits of the heart every day of the week. We dishonor the Sabbath not just by working needlessly on Sundays, but by the heart problems that drive us to do so. We break the Sabbath by our arrogance and our self-assurance, by our anxiety and our workaholicism. We violate the Sabbath whenever we fail to remember that we were slaves in Egypt and that the Lord brought us out from there with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm, whenever we forget that it was God who in six days made the heavens and the earth, not us, and that even he rested on the seventh day and made it holy—in short, whenever we fail to recognize the colossal covenantal difference that the Lord has drawn between the things of heaven and the things of earth.

The Sabbath Is about Eternal Rest

Apart from Christ, the Sabbath is unkeepable. "Unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven" (Matt. 5:20). But the catechism's treatment of the

Sabbath concludes with comfort, not condemnation. Honoring the Lord's Day in our hearts allows believers to "begin in this life the eternal Sabbath." The heart of this commandment is not works righteousness but rest righteousness. Christ's dying words on the cross, "It is finished," put a merciful end to our straining and striving to find favor in the sight of God. And so the Christian's daily attitude of rest—rest from sin, rest from worry, and rest from the anxieties of the world—arises not from a guilty conscience but from a grateful one. We can rest because Jesus has already done the important work (Ps. 22:31), as we prepare for the "Sabbath rest that remains for the people of God, for whoever has entered God's rest has also rested from his works as God did from his" (Heb. 4:9–10).

And that gospel-centered rest bears mighty witness in a restless world.

The Rhythm of Rest in a World of Arrhythmia

Arrhythmia is a medical term for an irregular heartbeat—a problem that can cause anxiety, confusion, and fatigue. In our culture, the loss of sacred space and time manifests a deeper heart condition, a spiritual arrhythmia that saps the strength of individuals and communities. One of the symptoms of this cultural malaise is deadly fear toward anything routine. In our Athens-like preference for the new and different (Acts 17:21), we risk passing over the routine of work and rest, of confession and pardon, of a holy God calling and his holy people responding, which our merciful Lord has provided to treat our anxious condition and to remind us of the one difference that truly matters.⁶ But wherever faithful Christians gather

in corporate worship each Lord's Day and go forth from there to lead lives of grateful service, the Holy Spirit will continue to use the gentle heartbeat of the Sabbath, like the rhythmic flash of a lighthouse, to draw lost souls to himself.

Like the symbols on an airport walkway, Sabbath-honoring Christians in the twenty-first century may sometimes find their testimonies to the rest-giving gift of salvation walked over, spit upon, or ignored altogether. Yet amid the quiet rhythm of gospel-centered work and rest, we may still encounter a person or two whose curiosity leads them to ask, "What makes you so different?" And in noticing that difference, a weary traveler may stumble upon what the psalmist described as the "beauty of holiness" (Ps. 96:9).

1. See Rod Dreher, *The Benedict Option: A Strategy for Christians in a Post-Christian Nation* (New York: Sentinel, 2017).

2. See Carl Trueman, "Ash Wednesday: Picking and Choosing Our Piety," *Reformation21*, February 2015, <http://www.reformation21.org/articles/ash-wednesday.php>.

3. Here I use the translation of the Heidelberg Catechism found in the Trinity Psalter Hymnal.

4. Charles Spurgeon uses this phrase in his commentary on Psalm 25 in *The Treasury of David*.

5. Andy Crouch, *The Tech-Wise Family: Everyday Steps for Putting Technology in Its Place* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2017), 50.

6. See Michael Horton, *Ordinary: Sustainable Faith in a Radical, Restless World* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2014).

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A Spiritual Checkup for the URCNA: Children Are Leaving — What to Do?



Rev. Paul T. Murphy

My original article asked, “Where are our children going?” having observed youth leaving our Reformed congregations for broad evangelical churches. Last time we explored why, and then I asked for your thoughts.

I appreciate those who replied with observations and thoughts in answer to that question. Most were similar to what I had noted last time:¹ lack of vital, vibrant expressions of the faith and failing to see covenant youth as important members of the covenant community (i.e., the church). I pondered whether or not this is the canary in the coal mine. If so, it is yet another negative indicator on our spiritual checkup checklist. Do not despair, though. Allow me to offer some positive suggestions for renewal and revitalization in an effort to reverse the trend.

Children of believing parents are members of the church and should know that, sense that, and be expected to act like that. This begins by addressing them as what they are, Christians, and having the same

expectations of them as for adults.² I suggest taking a cue from our Presbyterian brethren and the Westminster Larger Catechism.

Question 167 asks, “How is baptism to be improved by us?” It answers, “The needful but much neglected duty of improving our baptism, is to be performed by us all our life long, especially in the time of temptation, and when we are present at the administration of it to others; by serious and thankful consideration of the nature of it, and of the ends for which Christ instituted it, the privileges and benefits conferred and sealed thereby, and our solemn vow made therein; by being humbled for our sinful defilement, our falling short of, and walking contrary to, the grace of baptism, and our engagements; by growing up to assurance of pardon of sin, and of all other blessings sealed to us in that sacrament; by drawing strength from the death and resurrection of Christ, into whom we are baptized, for the mortifying of sin, and quickening of grace; and by endeavoring

to live by faith, to have our conversation in holiness and righteousness, as those that have therein given up their names to Christ; and to walk in brotherly love, as being baptized by the same Spirit into one body.”

This is the prescription for a vibrant walk with the Lord, and our covenant youth need to see it lived out in their midst.³ Notice some of the featured items here: Improving our baptism is a lifelong endeavor. This should be emphasized every time an infant or adult baptism occurs.⁴ What is stated in the baptism form is not applicable just to the child or to the parents but to all who are marked by the sign and seal of God’s covenant. “Baptism teaches us we need to be born again [no presumption], to detest ourselves [no shallow views of our sin and sinfulness], to humble ourselves [no pride, ethnic or otherwise], and to turn to Him for . . . salvation [*sola gratia*, no self-effort].”⁵ Baptism further seals unto us his precious covenant promises—we



Matthew Henry, the beloved devotional commentator on the Bible, was asked by a friend how he disciplined his children when they misbehaved. He answered, "I grab them by their baptism." What did he mean? He was saying that he constantly instilled in them a covenantal mindset that they belonged to God and were expected to live like and talk like God's children.

belong to God! He is our Father in heaven, the Son as our Savior and elder brother to whom we are united, the Spirit of adoption⁶ who is at work in us to sanctify, purify, and daily renew us.⁷

And as in all covenants there are not only promises but also obligations; we are admonished of and obliged unto new life, that is, cleave to this one God (what does that look like?), trust in him, and love him with all we are, putting to death the old nature and show by our lives that we belong to God. This is the walk and talk of being a Christian.

Not only is this a lifelong task, but also it is to be a daily task. In Luke 9:23, Jesus calls his disciples to take up their cross and die daily. The Heidelberg Catechism calls this conversion; that is, we are to be converted daily by putting off the old man and putting on the new man created to be like God in righteousness and holiness.⁸

I trust you can see how the form reflects what the Larger Catechism explains and Scripture teaches? This lifestyle needs to be impressed upon our covenant youth often (in catechesis, in sermons, in the home, in the school). They are members of God's household and have covenant obligations and blessings. Matthew Henry, the beloved devotional commentator on the Bible, was asked by a friend how he disciplined his children when they misbehaved. He answered, "I grab them by their baptism." What did he mean? He was saying that he constantly instilled in them a covenantal mindset that they belonged to God and were expected to live like and talk like God's children.

This would address a serious deficiency among our youth. I cannot begin to tell you how many times at RYS conventions or in churches or Christian schools where I have given my testimony (of dramatic, adult conversion) that the young people have said to me, "I wish I had a conversion like yours." To which my response is, "No! I wish I had an upbringing like you, raised in a Christian home, brought up in the church, never exposed to the degradation of sin and the scars it has left on my soul."

How can our children come to "own their faith"? They should also have conversion stories. They are to be converted daily, After all, why is the teaching on conversion in the third part of the Heidelberg Catechism, the gratitude section? Would you not expect it to be in the second part, which deals with salvation through the work and person of Jesus? It is in the third section because it is to be a daily practice. Would it not make a huge, practical difference in your life and in that of our covenant youth if this was impressed upon them often and they saw it lived out in your lives?

Repentant sinners in our families, schools, and the body of Christ in our churches should show forth this vibrancy and vitality of true faith. May the Lord grant us renewal and revival that starts in our hearts daily.

More suggested remedies next time.

1. Contemporary worship styles are more appealing; lack of discernment of the differences between Reformed and non-Reformed churches.
2. In an age-specific sense. Nobody is advocating ten-year old doing calculus, for example.
3. I am not for a moment belittling anyone's faith or life. I think the members of our churches are exemplary in their faith. No one has worked out the implications of the covenant better than the Dutch. But a privatized faith needs to be shed.
4. I suggest using the form as an exhortation and not just reading it in a formal manner. I would encourage pointed questions by way of application.
5. Baptism of Infants Form 1.
6. Romans 8:15.
7. What a blessed domestic image is portrayed for us by baptism into the family of God!
8. Ephesians 4:22–24; Heidelberg Catechism, Lord's Day 33, questions 88–90.

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“How may I know that I am a Christian?” This question ought to be a matter of utmost importance for us, for the answer to that question will determine our eternal destiny. Therefore, to assume that we are Christians because we have been born and raised in the church, have been baptized, and have made a public profession of faith could have tragic results.

Regretfully, such an assumption is far too common. Christ alerts us to this in the conclusion of his famous Sermon on the Mount when he distinguishes between the broad and narrow way, between fruitful and fruitless trees, and between wise and foolish builders (Matt. 7:13–27). His most serious assessment, however, is expressed in these words: “Not every one that saith unto me, Lord, Lord, shall enter into the kingdom of heaven; but he that doeth the will of my Father which is in heaven. Many

will say to me in that day, Lord, Lord, have we not prophesied in thy name? and in thy name have cast out devils? and in thy name done many wonderful works? And then will I profess unto them, I never knew you: depart from me, ye that work iniquity” (Matt. 7:21–23, King James Version).

How sobering that there will be many on the last day who will have professed the name of Christ and have been actively engaged in various

church activities, and who will yet hear out of his mouth, “I never knew you: depart from me, ye that work iniquity.” It is even more sobering that these words were uttered by the One who will be the judge and who knew with precision what will transpire on the last day.

Thus, Paul’s exhortation must be taken seriously when he writes, “Examine yourselves, whether ye be in the faith; prove your own selves. Know ye not your own selves, how that Jesus Christ is in you, except ye be reprobates?” (2 Cor. 13:5). We will ignore that exhortation at our own peril! When our life’s journey ends, it will not matter what our pastor, elders, or family members think of us. The only opinion that will then matter is Christ’s opinion, and his final judgment will be without error. He

BLESSED ARE...



tells us that he will deny entrance into heaven to many professing Christians who will be shocked and dismayed by his final assessment of them.

Christ does not leave us in the dark, however, as to what the marks of a true Christian are. First, he tells us globally in Matthew 7:21 that true Christians do not only profess his name but also are doers of his Father's will. Briefly, his Father's will is that we come to his Son, believe in his Son, and follow his Son in the pathway of evangelical obedience. True believers in God's Son, the living Word of God, will honor him by honoring his written Word—by being doers of the Word.

Having briefly focused on the conclusion of the Sermon on the Mount, let us now turn to the opening section of this sermon, known as the Beatitudes, to find a more in-depth answer to the question, "How may I know that I am a Christian?" Christ answers that question at the outset of his sermon by pronouncing the citizens of his spiritual kingdom to be blessed—to be supremely happy—because of specific traits that will identify them as such.

In the first seven opening beatitudes, Jesus gives us a composite verbal portrait of the Christian, beginning with "Blessed are the poor" and ending with "Blessed are the peacemakers." This comprehensive portrait (Matt. 5:3–9) is followed by a concluding beatitude in which Christ describes how an ungodly world will respond to the citizens of God's spiritual kingdom. The ungodly will persecute genuine believers who reflect the character of Christ, and it will revile them and speak all manner of evil about them (Matt. 5:10–12). Remarkably, being persecuted for righteousness' sake also belongs to the blessedness of true believers.

As we take a closer look at this portrait, however, it should be noted that the traits of the Christian are set forth by Christ in a remarkable arrangement. The recognition of that arrangement is essential for a proper understanding of each of the individual traits set forth by the Beatitudes. To use a common analogy, we first need to consider what the entire forest looks like

before examining the individual trees.

Upon examining the sequence and interrelatedness of the first seven beatitudes, a remarkable structure will emerge. Let me begin by proposing that the fourth beatitude—the central beatitude of this seven-beatitude structure—represents the core trait of the Christian. It is the axle to which the other traits are connected as the spokes of a wheel. To put it differently, it is the focal point of Christian experience that unites all seven traits as a coherent and interconnected entity. Christ defines it as a hungering and thirsting after righteousness and being filled with that righteousness.

I will therefore first briefly consider this core activity of Christian experience. This will be followed by considering the internal disposition of the Christian (vv. 3–5) that will culminate in such hungering and thirsting. I will then conclude by examining the external disposition of the Christian, for he who is filled with the righteousness of which verse 6 speaks will manifest this by the fruits of his life. We will see, as Scripture says, that such will be merciful, pure in heart, and peacemakers (vv. 7–9).

In Matthew 5:6, Jesus says, "Blessed are they which do hunger and thirst after righteousness." Jesus thus uses an analogy that is familiar to everyone. He is saying that the people of his kingdom, the children of God, will be men and women who hunger and thirst after righteousness, and who cannot be satisfied unless they obtain that righteousness for which they yearn so intensely. In other words, this hungering and thirsting after righteousness, and being filled with that righteousness, represents the pith and marrow of the life of faith. The true believer will repeatedly embrace Christ by faith, followed by its inseparable fruit of abiding in Christ (John 15).

Christians yearn for that righteousness in a twofold way: they will yearn to be in a right relationship with God and to live a life that is right—one that conforms to God's righteous standard. Can you identify with that? This inner and experiential yearning is absolutely fundamental to true Christianity. Jesus here brilliantly merges two fundamental aspects

of the Christian life: a yearning for imputed righteousness and for imparted righteousness. Let me put it this way: a true believer longs to be redeemed by Christ and to be conformed to Christ—to be united to him and to be like him. That is the essence of the Christian life. To express it in theological terms, the Christian hungers and thirsts for justification and sanctification. Both of these foundational components of salvation are combined in this word *righteousness*.

Two questions now need to be asked, "What produces this spiritual hunger and thirst? What causes sinners to seek righteousness?" Naturally we have no such desire. By nature we seek for our blessedness in everything other than this righteousness, and we are ignorant of our need of it.

Therefore, the first thing Jesus mentions is being poor in spirit. He says, "Blessed are the poor in spirit." Why does Jesus begin here? Because without an experiential awareness of our spiritual poverty, we will never hunger and thirst after his righteousness. This prompted Jesus to say, "They that be whole need not a physician, but they that are sick" (Matt. 9:12).

However, the painful and experiential awareness of one's spiritual poverty will result in experiential mourning. The Beatitudes are cumulative, and this mourning represents the Christian's emotional response to his spiritual poverty. Recognition of one's spiritual bankruptcy is not something a Christian takes lightly. It causes him to grieve deeply (Rom. 7:24).

And that leads us to the next beatitude, "Blessed are the meek." Meekness is the disposition of a person who knows his proper place before God. A meek person is someone who sees himself as God sees him and thus recognizes the gravity of his sin. We hear this meekness in the confession of David in Psalm 51:4: "Against thee, thee only, have I sinned, and done this evil in thy sight."

A recognition of one's spiritual poverty, the mourning and grieving over that poverty, and the humbling of oneself before God will culminate in a hungering and thirsting after righteousness. That will cause us to

realize that as spiritually bankrupt sinners we need a righteousness outside of ourselves. That experiential realization will cause the Lord Jesus Christ to become, and continue to be, so very precious.

All who have such a hunger and thirst for righteousness will also “be filled.” Christ is saying here that when you hunger and thirst after righteousness, your soul shall be filled to overflowing. Thus, they who believe in, trust, and are united to Christ also will become like him. That will affirm the genuineness of our Christianity. Our faith is not real unless in some measure we begin to resemble Christ in how we think, speak, and behave. God’s Word therefore declares that “he that doeth righteousness is righteous, even as he is righteous” (1 John 3:7).

Christ then proceeds to describe how this grace manifests itself, highlighting the essential components of the Christian life: being merciful, pure in heart, and peacemakers. One striking feature of the structure of the Beatitudes is the direct parallel between the internal (vv. 3–5) and external disposition (vv. 7–9) of the Christian. Simply put, they who are poor in spirit will also be merciful; they who mourn over sin will also be pure in heart; and they who are meek will also be peacemakers. And since Christ uses the present tense in each beatitude, he is saying that these traits will habitually and repeatedly manifest themselves.

In summary, God’s children will thus have an internal, habitual disposition of being poor in spirit, mourning, and being meek, causing them to hunger and thirst after righteousness—a righteousness to be found in Christ alone. Then, the righteousness for which they yearn, and with which they are filled, will spill over into their lives and cause them to be habitually merciful, pure of heart and life, and peacemakers.

My overarching premise therefore is that Matthew 5:3–9 is the preeminent passage in all of Scripture to teach us what a Christian looks like. It is a flawless verbal portrait drawn by the living Word himself. It is not accidental that this portrait consists of seven components, for the biblical number seven is the number

of perfection. We may therefore conclude that verses 3 through 9 of Matthew 5 set before us a perfect portrayal of every believer who ever has lived or will live until Christ returns.

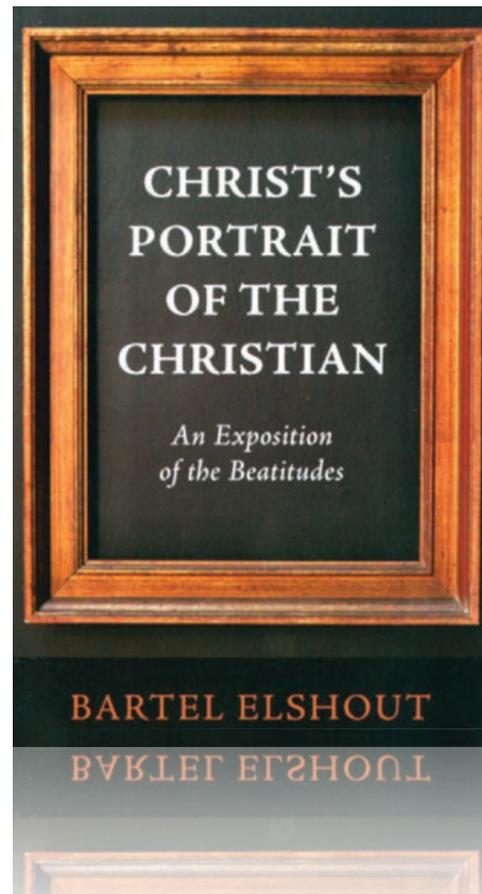
Having said that, however, we need to understand that we cannot pick and choose the individual components of this spiritual portrait. Rather, we need to understand that these seven marks are true at all times and at all seasons in the life of every believer—although not necessarily to the same extent. In some believers we see the features of this portrait more clearly than in others—just as there may be both clear and blurry photographs of a given individual. Yet, when you look at a blurry photograph, you will still be able to determine who is being depicted. These seven traits of the Christian therefore constitute an organic and interconnected whole.

We also need to realize that the order in which Christ gives us the components of this portrait is not arbitrary. That is to say, we cannot take these seven marks, juggle them, and then present them in just any fashion. Rather, Christ articulates these traits in a deliberate, precise, and cumulative order: one beatitude presumes the previous one and anticipates the next.

The seventh beatitude therefore most appropriately concludes in verse 9: “They shall be called the children of God.” Today we would say that this is the bottom line. Jesus is saying, “Those of whom this is true, and thus exhibit all of these marks, they, and they alone, shall be called the children of God.” The Greek word rendered as “children” in verse 9 is a word that means “they shall reflect the character of God.” It is as though Christ is saying, “They will prove themselves to be the sons and daughters of the living God.”

Reader, do you recognize yourself in this portrait? Do the inner disposition of your heart and the outward manifestation of your life revolve around a believing hungering and thirsting after Christ and his righteousness—a yearning that can be satisfied only by Christ himself? John summarizes this in the simplest of terms: “And hereby we do know that we know him, if we keep his commandments” (1 John 2:4). After all, they who genuinely profess the Father’s Son will also be doers of the Father’s will!

P.S. For a detailed exposition of each beatitude, please consult my recently published book, *Christ’s Portrait of the Christian: An Exposition of the Beatitudes* (Grand Rapids: Biblical Spirituality Press, 2019). This book can be purchased from Reformation Heritage Books.



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Ways a Husband Can Cultivate His Marriage

Marriage is like a garden. If you are a gardener and want to have a beautiful garden, you should work hard on your garden. Likewise, if you are a husband and do not invest time and energy in your marriage, you can't expect to have a wonderful marriage. And as a garden needs constant care, so does marriage. Like a gardener, you as a husband should water, fertilize, and weed your marriage regularly in order to have a healthy marriage. Of course, there are many ways by which you can cultivate your marriage. Here are some.

1. Pray for your wife regularly. Pray also with her. Despite your busy schedule, set aside time for you and your wife to pray together.

2. Be the spiritual leader in your home. Find ways to point your wife and family to Christ. Ensure that your wife has time for personal devotions. Your goal is to have a gospel-centered home.

3. Provide for your family. Depending on your circumstance, as God enables you, give your best to meet the physical and material needs of your family.

4. Spend quality time with your wife. You may see each other every day but feel like you miss each other because you don't really spend time together. Show genuine interest in listening to her.

5. Support your wife's passion. Your wife may have different interests than you do, but learn to appreciate what is important to her.

6. Continue to court your wife. Take her out (without your children, if you have children). Plan a date that will make your wife feel so special.

7. Give your wife time to hang out with her girlfriends. Your wife also needs to spend time with her close friends.

8. Write a love letter to her (not just on Valentine's Day). Send a short but loving and encouraging text or email to her during the day while you are at work.

9. Tell her "I love you" every day. Yes, it's wonderful to show her your love, but your wife wants to hear those "I love you" words, too.

10. Buy her something she enjoys, like flowers, chocolate, or whatever might bring a smile to her face. You don't have to spend much. She will already appreciate your thoughts of love.

11. Affirm your wife with words. Appreciate her beauty, her gifts, and the many ways she cares for you and your family. Tell her the she

is the most wonderful woman on earth. Don't forget to always thank her when she prepares a meal for your family.

12. Offer your help with the household chores. Help with the dishes. Sweep the floor. If you have small children, assisting with the bedtime routine can help your wife as her patience with the children may be severely tried by this point.

13. Treat your wife as God treats you. God does not deal with us according to the multitude of our sins but according to his rich mercy. Your wife is not perfect; she has flaws and weaknesses, but so do you. Therefore, as God is gracious to you, so be gracious to her. When you are wrong, be humble enough to admit your mistake. When you sin, ask for forgiveness. When your wife sins, forgive her as God has

forgiven you. Grow with her in God's mercy and love.

Of course this list is by no means exhaustive. And every spouse and every marriage is unique. That's why it's important that you become a student of your wife; study to know her better and learn to understand her more.

In summary, we husbands are to love our own wives as Christ loved the church (Eph. 5:25). You may say, "I can't do that!" Well, I'm glad you admit it. You're right. We can't love our own wives as Christ loved his church, for he loved her with perfect love. However, our inability to love as such should not discourage us to love our own wives with the love with which Jesus loved his Bride. Rather, it should cause us to cry out humbly to God for his help and grace to do what he has commanded us to do.

Therefore, marriage is a sanctifying means by which a husband and wife can grow in God's grace—the grace that enables them to love each other till death parts them.



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Bible Studies on Esther: Chapter 8

An Unbalanced Civil War



Dr. Norman
De Jong

Scripture: Esther 9–10

Background reading: Exodus 12:1–6

A Scripted Conflict

As we open Esther 9, we ought to scratch our heads over the highly unusual sequence of events. In the previous chapter we noted that royal edicts had gone out to all of the 127 provinces of this vast empire. Two royal edicts, both signed by King Ahasuerus, have been posted in multiple languages in every city and village of these many provinces. The first edict permitted Persian citizens to kill, destroy, and annihilate any person of Jewish descent, and to confiscate all of their possessions. The second edict permitted all Jewish persons to organize into military units and to defend themselves against any person who might attack them. The king has given full approval to civil war within his empire.

What is ironic is the fact that this civil war may not start until the thirteenth day of the twelfth month and may last for only one day. In almost comic fashion, this war is being orchestrated as though it were intended to settle a long-standing feud between two opposing parties. There is obviously deep-seated hatred against the Jewish population, for the words “enemies” and “hatred” occur multiple times in the chapter. There is a defined element within the Persian population that despises all Jews and wants them executed. Some commentaries suggest that these are Amalekites connected with Haman’s family. The connection with Haman

is beyond dispute, but the text does not offer definitive evidence as to the identity of these enemies. The choice of starting date for the conflict is also connected with Haman, who superstitiously wanted to organize this genocide. This casting of the lot was reported in Esther 3:7, which happened in the month Nisan.¹ That, coincidentally, was also the month of the Passover, which was specified by God. The roll of the Pur was apparently controlled by God, who had his own agenda in mind. The setting of that date allowed the Jews ample time to organize their defenses, but it also restricted their enemies in their attacks. The chatter in the villages must have approached that date with intense fear and trepidation.

When the thirteenth day of the twelfth month arrived, the balance of power had radically shifted. “All the officials of the provinces and the satraps and the governors and the royal agents helped the Jews, for the fear of Mordecai had fallen on them” (9:3). The rapid rise to power by Mordecai is highly unusual and can be attributed only to the blessing of God. It is not uncommon for government officials to rally around their king or prime minister in times of national danger, but for such to occur within the space of one year is unique. But it is not only the monarch who attracts support. The Jewish people themselves “gained mastery over those who hated them” (9:2).

The Casualty Count

The Jews were restricted to defensive measures. They might only fight and kill those persons who attacked them. On that first day of conflict, they killed five hundred men in the citadel of Susa. Then, almost parenthetically, the king adds the names of Haman’s ten sons. Susa is the seat of imperial government. That is the capital of the empire. The king, almost nonchalantly, informs the queen of the body count, expressing neither regret nor alarm. Treating her almost as field marshal, he inquires of her as to the casualty count in the rest of the empire. Before she responds to his request, she asks for two more favors: may we extend the edict for one more day in Susa, and may we have the bodies of the ten slain sons of Haman hanged on the gallows where he had been hung? The king immediately grants her wishes and commands those bodies to be hanged for all to see. Her request applies only to the capital city and not to the rest of the empire. The text gives no rationale for that narrow request, but its significance should not be lost on the reader. The implication is that there is an additional concentration of enemies in the capital city. The double date for defense will also send a clear message to the ruling party, headquartered in Susa. King Ahasuerus should be profoundly impressed when the God of the Hebrews protects his people, without any of them falling in battle. When we

project ahead to the books of Ezra and Nehemiah, there seems to be an intense desire on the part of King Artaxerxes to promote and protect the worship of Jehovah.²

The next day there are an additional 300 deaths in the capital city. In comparison with the rest of the empire, that body count is relatively small, but significant nonetheless. In one day, the Jews were able to kill 75,000 of their enemies, without losing any of their own men in battle (9:16). Such numbers often become the object of ridicule, with critics implying that the author of this book was obviously engaging in hyperbole and fabrication. The faithful follower of God will not buy into such assessment, for the Bible frequently reports such unusual numbers. When the king of Assyria threatened to destroy Jerusalem and capture King Hezekiah, God put to death 185,000 soldiers in one night as they camped around the city (Isa. 37:36). When the Lord pronounced judgment on one of David's sins, he sent a pestilence on Israel, which killed 70,000 men in one day (2 Sam. 24:15). When God opened the Red Sea for Israel to walk through on dry ground, he allowed Pharaoh's army to follow them in and then let the waters return to their normal levels, drowning the entire army (Exod. 14:28).

The Creator of heaven and earth is an awesome God, able to give life but also to decree death. As we have stated before, the warfare etched on the pages of Esther is ultimately a battle between God and Satan, between good and evil, between God's children and his enemies. Similar numbers of casualties are reported throughout the Bible, reminding us of his justice and his power. The penalty for enmity against the Sovereign is death. It is here being demonstrated in Persia.

The original edict allowing the Persians permission to "destroy, to kill, and to annihilate" the Jews also gave them permission "to plunder

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be remembered and
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GENERATION
in every clan,
province, and city,
and that these
DAYS OF PURIM
SHOULD NEVER
FALL INTO
DISUSE"

their goods." That same privilege was granted to the Jews in the edict granting them the right to defend themselves. Of significance is the fact that the Jews never once plundered the goods of their enemies. That behavior set them apart and demonstrated that they were not desirous of becoming wealthy. Their only purpose was in preserving their lives.

Even though they were surrounded by enemies who genuinely hated them, they did not crave their goods or deny their wives and children the basic necessities of life. The Jews were God's chosen people and acted in compliance with his tenth commandment: "thou shalt not covet." Their behavior was exemplary and may help to explain why "many from the peoples of the country declared themselves Jews" (8:17).

The Commands to Celebrate

When the two days of slaughter were accomplished, Mordecai, as prime minister of the empire, sent letters to all the Jews in all the provinces, "obliging them to keep the fourteenth day of the month Adar and also the fifteenth day of the same, year by year," as a national holiday (9:21). Upon receipt of these letters, "the Jews firmly obligated themselves and their offspring and all who joined them" (9:27). They further resolved "that these days should be remembered and kept throughout every generation in every clan, province, and city, and that these days of Purim should never fall into disuse" (9:28).

We, as students of Scripture, should wonder if those pledges and promises were kept. Did the Jewish people repeatedly celebrate the Feast of Purim? Did the remnant, by now settled in Judea, ever celebrate this feast? We also need to question whether this command from Mordecai had the blessing and endorsement from Jehovah. Did God in any way confirm or establish such an annual celebration?

The Feast of Purim, or the Feast of Passover?

Many years before the events recorded for us in the book of Esther, there was a large-scale migration of Jews back to Jerusalem. That migration occurred in the year 538 BC and was made possible by the commands of King Cyrus, the first ruler of Persia. That event is recorded for us in 2 Chronicles

36:22–23 and in Ezra 1–2. That return from exile had been promised by God in Jeremiah 29:10–14 and in Isaiah 44–45. Ezra, the outstanding, well-qualified historian, records those events in chapters 1 through 6. He describes that return from exile and reminds us that those returning peoples were anxious to worship God precisely as he had commanded in the law. Ezra also informs us that the returned exiles kept the Passover on the fourteenth day of the first month (Ezra 6:19), the same year that the rebuilt temple was dedicated in 515 BC. That turns out to be the same calendar day that Mordecai would later command the Jews to celebrate the Feast of Purim. Did Mordecai recognize the conflict? Did Mordecai and all the Jews who promised to obey his commands not know about Exodus 12 and God’s commands to celebrate the Passover on the fourteenth day of the first month?

God used the Passover as the tenth plague against Pharaoh as a final, convincing act to force the Egyptian peoples to let Israel leave their land. The Passover had two dimensions to it. On the one hand, it promised life to God’s people. On the other hand, it resulted in death for God’s enemies. God then commanded Israel to celebrate Passover every year on the fourteenth day of the first month as a memorial to their release from slavery. Now, more than one thousand years later, Mordecai seems to be ignoring the Passover and substitutes the Feast of Purim as the Jews escape from death. He initiates a secular holiday where there should have been a spiritual memorial service.

Esther becomes queen of Persia in the year 479 BC. That is only thirty-six years after the temple was rebuilt and dedicated in Jerusalem. Twenty-one years after Esther becomes queen, King Artaxerxes commissions Ezra to go to Jerusalem for the express purpose of “making inquiries about Judah and Jerusalem according to the Law of your God, which is in your hand” (Ezra 7:14). This was not

a personal desire of the king but a decision “by the king and his seven counselors.” The proper worship of Jehovah was a national priority.

A Continuing Mystery

When we take historical chronology seriously, we are left with a mystery that has no easy answers. The events of Esther obviously precede the books of Ezra, Nehemiah, and Malachi. All three of those authors lived during the time that Esther was queen and Mordecai was prime minister. All of them must have been familiar with the Feast of Purim, for it was required every year among all of the Jewish population. Yet, surprisingly, none of these three authors makes even oblique references to Esther, to Mordecai, or to Purim. The book of Ezra, in fact, seems to avoid that era of Jewish history. As a historian, Ezra devotes chapters 1 through 6 to the

events that occurred between 539 BC and 515 BC. He focuses not on Susa but on Jerusalem, not on military threats but on religious observances. True to his calling, he emphasizes the importance of worshipping God as it was prescribed in Mosaic law. Then, when he gets to Ezra 7, Ezra shifts to reporting on his own commissioning by King Artaxerxes. He leapfrogs from 515 BC to 458 BC, a span of fifty-seven years, omitting the era of Esther and Mordecai. Why? Is Ezra perhaps making a statement about the evils of cultural accommodation by ignoring it? When Nehemiah follows thirteen years later, he, too, focuses on Jerusalem and worship, ignoring the events in the rest of the empire. Is God, the primary author of Scripture, directing his writers to shift from secular society in Susa to religious observances in Jerusalem? Is God calling his people to repentance? Without clear textual evidence, that appears to be the case.

Discussion Starters

1. Do civil wars usually start on a specific date, prescribed in advance? Why did Haman choose the thirteenth day of the twelfth month?
2. Do you believe that God was controlling the roll of the Pur? If yes, why would God pick the date that he did?
3. Why would a sizable portion of Persia’s population hate the Jews and wish them killed? Read Ezra 6:6–12 for answers.
4. Did the Jews kill women and children on the day that was assigned? Would their enemies have killed women and children if they could have?
5. Why did the Jews refrain from taking any plunder when they had opportunity?
6. Should the Jews have celebrated Passover instead of the Feast of Purim? Why? What are some of the differences between these two feasts?
7. Why do Ezra, Nehemiah, and Malachi ignore or fail to mention Esther, Mordecai, or Purim?
8. How would you justify Esther as part of Scripture when some reject its inclusion?
9. What lessons can we learn from our study of Esther? Would you recommend it for study by new converts? Why not?

Notes

1. Exodus 12:1–2. The Hebrew name for that month was Abib, but the Babylonian name was Nisan.
2. See Ezra 7:1–6, 13–16; Nehemiah 2:4–9.

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Scripture: Ezra 6:19–7:6

At the conclusion of our study in the book of Esther we expressed some surprise and frustration. We had concluded that the events of Esther occurred between the time of Daniel and that of Ezra. We raised the issue of why Ezra, Nehemiah, and Malachi all ignored the persons of Esther and Mordecai and the Feast of Purim, even though those men lived through those periods of history and should have known much about them and that feast. The book of Esther is rightly accepted as part of the Old Testament canon, but it is nowhere referenced in other parts of Scripture. At the same time, though, we find that the character of Esther is immortalized in the writings of some Christian novelists. In some of those, the Persian queen is characterized as a great heroine of the faith. She is the one who was responsible for saving the Jewish nation.

As we probe the book of Ezra, we note that there is a large gap between the closing verses of Ezra 6 and the opening verses of Ezra 7. Ezra 6 ends with a glorious celebration of Passover, while Esther 10 ends with a celebration of the Feast of Purim. The Passover is pure worship, celebrating the release from slavery in Egypt. Purim is radical nationalism celebrating the death of 75,810 Persian enemies. The contrast is stark. When we begin reading Ezra 7, we note that

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we are now in the seventh year of King Artaxerxes, which would put us in the year of 458 BC. The celebration of the Passover in Ezra 6 occurred in 515 BC. That leaves a gap of fifty-seven years. There is no mention of what occurred during those years, even though we can be certain that Ezra was a highly respected historian living in that land during those years,

Why the omission? Why no mention of any of them? What explanation might be offered? The first theory would suggest that King Xerxes, the husband of Esther, was an evil person who brought dishonor to God's people and God's name. We might posit that he was such an embarrassment that he is best left off the pages of Scripture. Our analysis of his role in the book of Esther characterizes him as a hot-headed, narcissistic, immoral person who had grand visions of himself burning Athens and conquering Greece. Historians of his day call him an Oriental despot. The Scriptures describe him as demanding daily sexual gratification and prone to excessive drinking. He is obviously not a man of God.

A second theory suggests that there were no bridges or linkages between the government of Persia during the rule of Xerxes, Esther, and Mordecai and the salvation of God's people. Persia was a spiritual wasteland with

no redeeming values. There were idols in abundance, but there was also a national religion called Zoroastrianism, a religion emphasizing a great conflict between good and evil. King Xerxes persisted in his efforts to conquer the Greek city-states and engaged in military expeditions with the hope of burning Athens and controlling its economy. His efforts resulted in repeated failures, right up to 466 BC, when his Persian navy attacked the Delian League. Xerxes' navy lost eighty ships, and his army was roundly defeated. Xerxes was forced to return to the palace at Shushan, where he was soon assassinated by palace guards in 465 BC. Two of his sons were accused of plotting the attack, so a third son, Artaxerxes, had both of them killed. None of Xerxes' efforts or those of Esther and Mordecai were aimed at promoting the kingdom of God or worshiping Jehovah. In fact, there is little evidence linking them to the worship of Jehovah. The sovereign ruler of the universe, by contrast, protected his chosen people from genocide, with little or no help from those leaders.

Some pastors approach the book of Esther as a potential source of messages about Jesus Christ. They feel that they need to preach Christ in every sermon. They reason that the risen Savior, on the road to Emmaus on Easter Sunday, had convinced his traveling partners that he, the Christ, could be found on all the pages of the Old Testament. "Beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he interpreted to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning himself" (Luke 24:27). Logic, therefore, dictates that Jesus Christ will be found in the book of Esther. Such pictures of the preincarnate Savior are all over the book of Daniel and in Ezra. That is obvious, but where are they in Esther? Since God is nowhere mentioned, and there

are not even references to worship, it soon becomes apparent that the Son of God is either ignored or not easily recognized. Weaving the Savior into sermons from the book of Esther often becomes an exercise in eisegesis instead of exegesis. Yet, Christ is there but is being studiously ignored. The sovereign God had so governed the rolling of the Pur that it fell on the thirteenth day of the twelfth month. Every reflective Jew in Persia should have recognized the connection with the Passover, which celebration had been commanded by Jehovah every year since the release from slavery in Egypt. At the heart of Passover is the Lamb of God, the one who saves his people and brings death to his enemies. The captives in Persia should have seen that connection. They should have ignored Esther's commands to celebrate the Feast of Purim. They should have waited one short month and celebrated Passover instead. They should have reminded her that it was God who saved them from genocide. But they did not. They ruined a glorious opportunity by ignoring God's commands and by listening to their queen.

When we move into Ezra 7 we are struck by another lapse of time. We are told that the next event worthy of note occurred "in the seventh year of Artaxerxes the king" (Ezra 7:7). This suggests that there were seven years of time before the king and his seven counselors decided to send Ezra to Jerusalem on assignment. We are immediately puzzled by the efforts of King Artaxerxes to advance and promote the worship of God in Jerusalem. We are initially surprised by this king's willingness to send Ezra to Jerusalem with one specific purpose: "to make inquiries about Judah and Jerusalem, according to the law of your God, which is in your hand" (Ezra 7:14). This is not just a personal wish on the part of the king but a governmental effort involving "the seven counselors"

or highest advisors to the king. The text provides few clues as to the motivation behind this unusual generosity and wholesale provision. What motivates the monarchy of a pagan, idol-worshiping nation to offer such provision? There is some speculation that Artaxerxes was a son of Esther and may have been influenced by her wishes. Credible sources lead us to conclude that Esther is the mother of Artaxerxes, but the text does not characterize her as a God-fearing woman. She is thrilled to celebrate Purim but makes no mention of the Passover or any other inclination to worship God.

The clearest rationale for the Persian king's unusual generosity and strong support for the true worship of Jehovah is found in verse 23. The king orders that "whatever is decreed by the God of heaven, . . . let it be done in full . . . lest his wrath be against the realm of the king and his sons" (Ezra 7:23). This text reminds us of what happened on the thirteenth and fourteenth days of Adar, some sixteen years before in Persia. Because of the horrific civil war designed by Haman and Xerxes, 510 men were killed in the capital city of Susa in one day. That was followed the next day by another 300 men. Throughout the empire there were another 75,000 deaths, all in one day. At the same time there are no reports of death among the Jewish population. Can you imagine the panic? Can you picture the reaction within the capital?

This was clearly the hand of the Jews' God at work. This is the ruler of nations controlling history. There is only one appropriate response. Worship him! Fear him! Do whatever he requires! Do it posthaste! If we offend him, he could kill us all in one fell swoop!

In conclusion, we need to be reminded about the one who is writing these historical books. Yes, Ezra is doing the writing, but he is

merely an instrument in the hand of God. The entire Bible, including these books about events in Persia, is the Word of God. His primary concern is the worship that he has ordained. Ezra, Nehemiah, and Malachi are primarily concerned about the same thing. Their focus is the worship of Jehovah. His dwelling place is in Jerusalem. That is where these books focus their texts. That is where we, too, must focus our attention. The ruler of nations is jealous for his chosen people, wanting them to worship him according to his own dictates. The primary author of Scripture is less concerned about the military escapades of empire-building monarchs than he is about the worship of his people. The ruler of history is fulfilling the promises made to Nebuchadnezzar and Daniel about the “rock cut out of the mountain” (Dan. 2:34, 45). That stone was promised to “break in pieces the iron, the bronze, the clay, the silver, and the gold” (Dan. 2:45). We saw it already in the death of Belshazzar. We saw it in the edicts of Cyrus and Darius. What we see in Esther 9 is a partial fulfillment of that dream, initially terrorizing the Persian king, but then also the bureaucracies in Shushan, the palace of Persia. They are awestruck by the power of God. They respond by promoting the worship of Jehovah. The author of the Bible wants that reaction recorded for all posterity.

Discussion Starters

1. Were you cognizant of that gap between Ezra 6 and Ezra 7 when you first read through Ezra? Did that seem strange when you recognized it?
2. Had you noticed the proximity between the Feast of Purim and the celebration of the Passover? Why did the Jewish people celebrate Passover at the dedication of the temple? Did the completion of the temple warrant that?
3. What major historical events occurred between 515 BC and 458 BC? Would you have included them in your history if you were writing it at that time?
4. What arguments would you have advanced for including stories about Xerxes, Esther, Mordecai, and Haman? Would you have included the killing of 75,810 Persians in your history? Was that an event of major consequence?
5. It is significant that no other biblical accounts make mention of the Feast of Purim. Why is that so? Did the Jewish people celebrate it often? Do they still celebrate it today? Did God endorse it?
6. Should Esther and Mordecai have recognized the approaching proximity to the Feast of Passover? Should the Jewish people have recognized that connection? Why did they not?
7. What is the primary purpose for God creating millions of people around the world? What was his purpose in creating Adam and Eve? Why did he create you?
8. What characterized Adam and Eve in the garden before the fall into sin? What happened to them after they disobeyed God’s single command?
9. Are men, women, and children naturally inclined to love God and desire to worship him? What is their natural inclination? How does God restore in mankind that desire to worship and praise him?
10. What did God have to do before his remnant could return to Jerusalem and worship him properly? Read Ezekiel 36:22–30.

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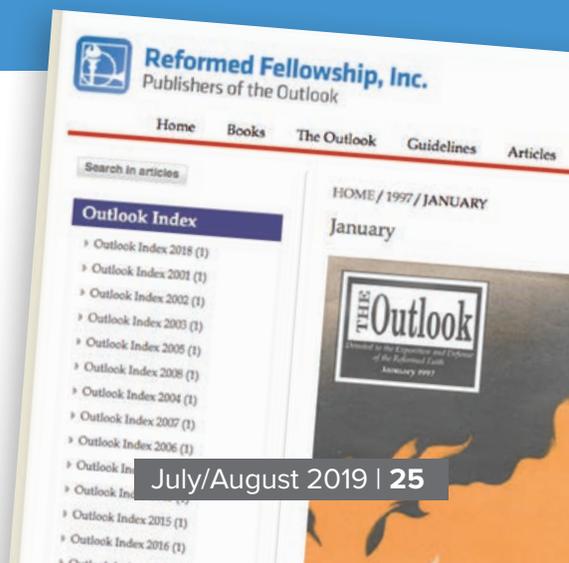
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Reformed Evangelism: Putting Wheels on the Cart



Mr. Gerry
Wisz

Last time, I tried to show that Reformed evangelism is simply biblical evangelism: It emanates from the church, is not necessarily a “pastor-only” job—since the Scriptures identify evangelism as a spiritual gift that’s correlative with but that can also be distinct from the pastor-teacher role—and its power is not in the evangelist, his methods, gimmicks, approaches, or winsomeness, but in God. This is what the Scriptures show us, and we should heed them to ensure evangelism is thought of and conducted properly. However, these scriptural guidelines are not there to restrict evangelism in order to harbor the illusion of control: that is, inside the church building only, pastor only, and serious, plain-speaking sermon-from-behind-the-pulpit only—anything else is not “in decency and in order.”

Church pastors are the most likely also to be evangelists, certainly. In fact, they’re told to be by example in 2 Timothy 4:5, but that doesn’t mean they have to be the only ones in the church who are. Moreover, the church is normatively the place where people come to hear the Word and worship God, and to interact or fellowship with God’s people; but that doesn’t mean the Word cannot be spoken (even by you) to a neighbor, acquaintance, or friend who’s not a Christian or isn’t sure what a Christian is. Moreover, there’s nothing wrong with using evangelistic tools, that is, ways to introduce oneself to strangers, gather an audience, or initiate a conversation—so long as one isn’t run by them. Formulaic gimmicks, generally, should be avoided: they’re impersonal and encourage Christians to think they’ve done their job if they’ve walked through the formula with someone.

There are many ways to present the gospel. I’ve known people to play guitar and sing Christian songs on sidewalks, having literature available. Others have given presentations on marker boards in a town square, also having “To Know More” material on hand. This is a pull-in or audience-creation technique, not especially known for its effectiveness. Mostly, it’s a way for a church, typically an urban or busy-town church plant, to introduce itself to the community, letting people know that the church is there. As such, it’s an example of shotgun evangelism: not very much more promising, practically speaking, than dropping leaflets over a town from a Piper Cub.

However, before we dismiss shotgun evangelism as a poorly conceived way of presenting the gospel, we should consider how it can serve as a jumping-off point. An example of shotgun evangelism is tract distribution with church contact information stamped inside. What a waste of time and resources! Maybe. I and others I know have handed out thousands of these in New York City borough neighborhoods, only to fish most of them out of wastebaskets farther down the street (if there’s no accompanying goo on them).

Many Pellets, One Duck?

Shotgun evangelism is generally frowned upon because the effort is typically long and arduous and the apparent fruit scant. Moreover, firing away at people—whether through audience-gathering techniques, tract distribution,

or preaching on a busy street corner—has that love ‘em and leave ‘em feel to it, doesn’t it? The temptation is to think, “Well, I did my part; it’s now up to God to sort them out.” No, we know something more is necessary. We need to develop relationships with people. The question, however, is what will you use as a point of contact that makes developing such a relationship even possible.

Here’s the thing: it may take a hundred, five hundred, or a thousand tracts distributed (and nearly as many fished out of wastebaskets) before one person stops to talk to you. After several months of doing this on weekends when I was with Urban Nations in the 1990s, about ten people stopped to talk with me. Of those ten, I developed relationships with four of them, eventually teaching some of them, along with their families and friends, English as a second language in their homes using gospel-based materials. That, in addition to their getting a handle on verb tenses and vocabulary, provided a way to talk about Christ and the gospel.¹ With some of these and others, things went further: I’d developed relationships with them to the point where I visited them in their apartments on weekends. There we’d open the Bible together, read a portion (such as John 1), and discuss it, and often prayed. It didn’t take long for these people to treat the Bible for what it is, the authoritative Word of God. Some at first questioned its authority, but it wasn’t long before they stopped smirking and questioning and instead wanted to be sure they

understood what it was saying.² But you see, I would never have gotten to this point unless I had that initial point of contact—the frustrating, seemingly goofy, exercise of tract distribution on a busy street corner.³

So shotgun evangelism isn't conducted for its own sake but for what it may lead to. Do we have the patience for this? If we're going to take this on, we need to know early that perseverance is the watch word. If we expect people to fall over our words and get converted on the spot, well, even more realistically (though still quite unrealistically) for them to take a piece of literature and say, "Oh, sure, come over my house tomorrow; I'll invite friends and family over and we can all talk about the Lord Jesus Christ," then we'll give up before we even really get started. We'll need to be patient, prayerful, and engaged (listen as well as speak). Depending on the person we're talking to, we'll also need to develop thick skin. We may be challenged, mocked, and doubted in terms of our motives for doing this. None of this should surprise us. In fact, each of these reactions was also experienced by the apostle Paul. What can get you through this? God and his sovereignty in the salvation of people—nothing and no one else.

Maybe this is more than you're

quite ready for, and that's all right, totally understandable. Then how about this: Every mall has a food court where people take a breather from shopping or even go to eat on their lunch breaks. They're not walking but sitting. I and a brother, Gus Mongiello from Pompton Plains Reformed Bible Church, have adapted my pastor's Evangelism Explosion questionnaire (that he still had from his seminary days), which we use to conduct surveys in a nearby mall's food court. Most people are willing to take surveys if they're sitting down and not directly involved in doing something, so long as you tell them, "It'll only take a few minutes." That's the point of contact. Once I tell people what the survey's about ("the church and the Christian faith"), some demur, but others, feeling non-threatened, are happy to give their two cents about what they think is going on.

Keep It Simple and Pointed

There are six parts to this Evangelism Explosion survey in all, but we use only the Opinion Poll, which has six questions. The first few questions are basic: "Do people attend church today as often as they did five years ago?" "Do you think it's important for people to read the Bible?" "Which groups (children, youth, singles, young marrieds, seniors, etc.) do you think the church needs to give

more attention to in ministry?" It isn't until we get to the fourth question ("In your opinion, is it important for a person to have a right relationship with God?") that there's an opportunity for the rubber to meet the road. There are two more questions to the poll, but typically I never get to them. Number four serves as a gateway to present the gospel.

The gospel, of course, is not strictly speaking the church, the Bible, or who in church needs more ministry attention; it's the atoning work of our Lord Jesus Christ, who gave himself as a ransom for sinners on Calvary's cross. There can be different ways of introducing this, depending on how the respondent answers, but I've found that if the person I'm speaking to has allowed me to get as far as question four, then I have an opportunity to present the gospel. At times, the conversations are long, at other times short. At times, respondents want it to be over quickly, or to justify themselves (which provokes me to ask more questions), or appear genuinely affected. We always have literature to leave behind with our churches' contact information stamped inside, and invite respondents to visit. On some occasions, depending on how the conversation went, I'll also give the person my cell number. The



literature we use are short booklets by the late R. C. Sproul, which are thematic, and so provide us with a way to assess, based on the conversation, which booklet to leave with them. I always tell them that I'm usually there on Friday mornings if they'd like to meet again.

We don't want to send the message that we're manipulators—asking Opinion Poll questions, not for a genuine poll, but only so we can get to question four and, by God's grace, beyond that. After all, people said yes to the poll, not to a presentation of the gospel. That's why I tell people afterwards that I intend to publish the results. Surprisingly, many say they'd like to see it when it's finished. This affords me the opportunity to ask for their email address to which I'll send a PDF of the article when it's completed—another point of contact.

Gus and I have spoken to old, middle-aged, and young people of all races and both genders (yes, there are only two). We've spoken to Muslims, Roman Catholics (lapsed and otherwise), non-attending-church Protestants, and believers, who we don't spend too much time with, except to tell them about our churches. These people are happy to see us and commend us for what we're doing, which is an encouragement. Now, the big question is, How many of these people have visited Preakness Valley URC or Pompton Plains Reformed Bible Church? None, that I'm aware of. Then why are we doing this? This has a two-part answer.

Beyond Shotgun

First, insofar as we're able to share, not information about Christianity, but the gospel itself, we are seed sowers. The seed will fall without it ever making it into the soil, or on rocky ground so that it'll sprout but not last, or among thorns with competing concerns blocking any

growth, choking it off. But it may also fall on good soil, in which case God will bring forth a harvest of righteousness, whether Gus and I get to see it or not. Remember, God's Word, if it's really God's Word we're presenting, will not return to him void but accomplish what it was sent forth to do (Isa. 55:11). To him be the glory. We may be the first encounter, the second, the tenth, any one among several that God is using with someone to bring that person to himself.

Second, practically speaking, although our mall food court adventure is another (though more focused) form of shotgun evangelism, our hope and prayer continues to be that any one (or more) of these people will make it to church, if not ours, then another where they can hear the Word and become part of the body—or that we may be able to develop a relationship with any one (or more) of these respondents so that we can begin a home meeting with them, a Bible study and/or prayer group, to which they can invite friends and neighbors. Are we anywhere close to this? Late Friday mornings see many people in the food court, but retirees are a staple. One fellow, George, a retired engineer, is a regular. There have been times when Gus or I or both of us have sat with him. His early reactions were smirking questions (some of them quite challenging), and he has refused a free Bible several times. Recently, he lost his closest food court companion, another retiree who died. George now sits by himself. The last time I talked to him, he took a Bible, and said, non-facetiously, "I have a question . . . Why are we here?"

Could George be the person at whose home we gather to open the Word with him, his friends and neighbors? I'm not betting the farm on it, but with God all things are possible.

Neither Gus nor I is very dramatic; we pretty much follow the script, although we do try to home in on people's questions, and not just hurl Scripture verses at them. We have seen people's eyes well up with tears, have heard people confess their sins (as though we were Roman Catholic priests), and have listened to people ask us to pray for them or loved ones. The truth is the Word of God is a double-edged sword, cutting to bone and marrow, discerning the thoughts and attitudes of the heart (Heb. 4:12); it, not we, is powerful!

Your church's men's and women's groups, if you have them, are optimal places to invite people, where the Word is opened and people interact in conversation, encouraging and even correcting one another in a brotherly (or sisterly) way. Remember the Neighborhood Bible Study series? I'm dating myself, perhaps as far back as more than thirty years, but there were once questionnaire booklets on nearly every book of the Bible, with a leader's guide, especially designed to introduce people to the Bible and what it says. Midweek home groups (typical of large churches) are also appropriate places to invite people to encounter God's Word with others. There is an advantage, however, to the Neighborhood Bible Study series approach, which is particularly geared, not so much toward building up the saints (although any encounter with the Word does that) as to evangelism (which is upbuilding in itself).

The EBS

People are more reluctant to open their homes today than they were thirty years ago. That may have to do with how we've become even more individualistic as a culture or it may be because of fear, warranted or not, of more widespread crime. But there is something about people going to the lengths of opening

their own house, putting on a pot of coffee and laying out some donuts or crumb cake that makes people more amenable to talk about things they wouldn't naturally want to talk about. The evangelistic Bible study may start strong and peter out, or start with very few and gradually populate. One never knows where things will end up, so it's best to allocate the time, stick to the schedule, and remain open to what the Lord will be doing.

We've seen our own home evangelistic Bible study start and peter out. Otherwise, the evangelistic Bible study is primarily a referral-based affair; in other words, someone you know who's interested in or excited about the gospel wants others he or she knows to hear about it, too. (This is where we hope to get with George or perhaps others in the food court.) Here's an example: Years ago, a friend had converted to the faith and began attending a local Baptist church; but then he took the next step and came to the Reformed faith. He said if initially coming to Christ was like stepping out from the dark into a lighted room, then becoming a Calvinist was like pulling up all the shades and opening all the drapes. He asked me (although he could have asked others he knew as well) to conduct a Bible study in his home on a week night, when he knew many of his friends, acquaintances, and friends of friends were most likely to be available.

He was Italian and lived in a predominantly Italian neighborhood just north of inner-city Newark, New Jersey. I worked through the Gospel of Mark and used J. C. Ryle's commentary (skipping his premillennial eschatological comments). I answered questions but also asked them, and (some people will find this hard to believe) didn't do all the talking. We closed with everyone having an opportunity to pray, and we stayed afterwards,

at times for as long as an hour, discussing the Scriptures and getting to know one another. Many people came and went; some stayed longer than others. But one young woman was consistent, there every week. She got converted and started attending our church. Within a month, she'd professed faith and became a member.

Aside from the normative church plant, these are the basic methods for evangelistic outreach from the church, not in competition with it. Conducting evangelism requires patience, a love for (though not exhaustive knowledge of) the Word of God, and an appreciation for its power, and—very important—prayer. God's power, not ours, is what will keep us motivated when discouraged and enable us to work past barriers and our own mistakes. You'll see, I think, from reading this that it's an investment of time and energy, but it needn't be seen as a chore or a duty; in fact, it's a privilege. A consistent schedule helps; that will make it manageable and allow for exceptions. But there will be surprises: an unexpected phone call, a follow-up question you may not be prepared for, an irksome falling away that ends up in a joyous coming back months later (or not). And so, there's, then, emotional investment, as well as investment in time and energy.

Maybe you're saying, "Yeah, well, you're semi-retired and have time on your hands. I have a career, family responsibilities, and work around the house I have to get to! As far as I'm concerned, this is the pastor's job." If that's the way you feel, I'm not sure what else I can tell you. Maybe now's not the right time; maybe you're not the right person for this. The Lord expects you to work, earn a living, fulfill your family and home responsibilities, and be a faithful church member. I did (and do), working for corporations in the 1980s, a start-up in the 1990s, and

in my own business into the twenty-first century, with a wife and, most of the time, a bevy of kids. (Plus I cut the grass and trim the shrubs myself.) If you're waiting until every single thing in your career, family, and domestic management is exactly as you want it to be before you take something else on, whether lay evangelism or other extracurricular activities, then you'll not ever take on any such activities, not meaningfully anyway. May the Lord graciously disrupt you!

Evangelism is less a program or committee assignment than an extension of being a Christian. We like our money, leisure, and comforts—and yes, they are God's gifts for which to give thanks. But these will all eventually disappear, certainly in their present form; the fruit of the gospel, though . . . now *that* will go on . . . forever.

1. Churches have organized, and still do organize, ESL (English as a second language) classes for immigrants in their communities, using gospel-based materials as part of the teaching curricula. This is a mercy ministry that by extension can become an easy, friendly way to present the gospel.
2. This was a special situation as there wasn't a nearby church where I could optimally send them. The church that sponsored Urban Nations was in Brooklyn; I was in Greenpoint, Queens. Most of the people I met didn't drive, and a subway ride on Sundays with all its connections would have taken hours. Some of them eventually settled in a nearby Baptist church.
3. We used John Blanchard's *Ultimate Questions*, which is Calvinistic, although some consider it too much at one sitting. The advantage of this booklet is that it's available in many languages.

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Four Reasons to Love the Psalms



Rev. William
Boekestein

Psalms Teach Us How to Sing

Christians are singers. But what should we sing? Our forefathers help answer that question. The Psalms were Israel's inspired song book. Fifty-six psalms are dedicated to "the Chief Musician." At least thirteen designate the tunes to which the poetry is set. The tunes have been lost. But we know that the Psalms were meant to be sung (see Pss. 95:2; 105:2). And this is just what the church has always done. With his disciples Jesus sang the Passover Psalms (113–118; Matt. 26:30). The New Testament churches continued the practice of singing these ancient

Some psalms are easy to love. It is no mystery why Psalm 23 is a perennial favorite. But it is also no mystery why we cherry-pick the psalms. What do you do with prayers that ask God to let the children of the wicked become vagabonds (Ps. 109:10)? Parts of some psalms can hardly be read in a group setting without explanation (e.g., Ps. 137:9).

Despite their difficulties the Psalms have always been precious to the church; there is a reason why they often accompany pocket New Testaments. Since it might not be immediately clear why, let me give four reasons Christians should love this book of ancient poetry and then introduce a new resource that my family has found helpful in studying the Psalms.



poems (I Cor. 14:26). Early Christian monks chanted the entire Psalter every week. In Geneva John Calvin commissioned musicians to set each psalm to meter. In Thomas Cranmer's Book of Common Prayer the entire Psalter is sung in the course of a month.

In fact, God commands psalm singing. "Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly in all wisdom, teaching and admonishing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing with grace in your hearts to the Lord" (Col. 3:16; cf. James 5:13). The songs of the modern church should, at least, be psalm-like.

Psalms Personalize the Christian Faith

The Psalms are replete with first- and second-person pronouns (more than two thousand). In psalm reading and singing we do not simply address "the Lord" but "my God" (fifty-seven times). We do not merely affirm the God's trustworthiness; we declare to him that we trust him (Ps. 25:2). Calvin famously called the Psalms "an anatomy of all the parts of the soul." He defended this title by saying that "there is not an emotion of which any one can be conscious that is not here represented as in a mirror." He goes on to say that "the Holy Spirit has here drawn to life all the griefs, sorrows, fears, doubts, hopes, cares, perplexities, in short, all the . . . emotions with which the minds of men are wont to be agitated." The Psalms give us personal language to talk to God in every situation.

Psalms Expand Our Consciousness

Some worship music—old and new—tends to conform to our experiences or to the experiences we would like to have. The Psalms take us places we don't want to go, but need to. Psalms help us fight when we would rather coast (Ps. 144:1). Psalms help us lament though we would rather rejoice (Ps. 143:3–4). Psalms teach us to repent when we are tempted to cover up (Pss. 51, 32). Psalms help us worship no matter our circumstances (Ps. 95:1). Psalms call timid Christians to be bold with God (Ps. 44:23–26) and haughty Christians to be humble before him (Ps. 18:27). Breathed out by God and evidencing a startling awareness of the human condition, the Psalms are just what we need to be stretched beyond our current preferences and comfort levels.

The Psalms Help Us Know and Love Jesus

In the New Testament, when people didn't understand who Jesus was, he took them to the Old Testament, and to the Psalms in particular (Luke 24:44). The disciples did the same in their preaching (e.g., Acts 2:34–35; 13:35). The Psalms are Christ's experiences in prophetic form. In his prayer in the garden he referenced the cup of salvation from Psalm 116 (Mark 14:36). On the cross Jesus voiced his forsakenness (Mark 15:34) and thirst (John 19:28) through Psalm 22.

The Psalms set before us our suffering Savior (Ps. 129:3) and our conquering King (Ps. 47). The Psalms assure us

that God sympathizes with us in our suffering, rules over suffering for our good, and will one day fully rescue us from suffering.

One excellent new resource for getting to know the Psalms is *Christ's Psalms, Our Psalms: Devotional* (LittleANGELS Press, 2018). Editor Peter Holtvlüwer and his team of contributors provide at least two reflections on all 150 psalms. In addition, several appendices apply many of the psalms to important events in Christ's ministry, as well as to regular seasonal events, and the Lord's Supper. The contributors are pastors; skilled exegetes and experienced teachers. Their devotionals don't shy away from the difficult phrases and concepts found in many of the psalms. The Bible isn't always a pleasant read. But then life itself isn't always pleasant. The Psalms, like the rest of Scripture, proves that God understands our grief and through his grace is working out a massive rescue for his chosen people. If you are looking for a reliable and engaging guide to the Psalms, one that provides clarity to difficult concepts, asks searching questions, and helps readers—old and young—to use the Psalms the way Jesus did, consider *Christ's Psalms, Our Psalms: Devotional*.

Rev. William Boekestein

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

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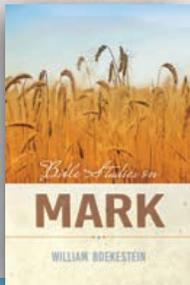
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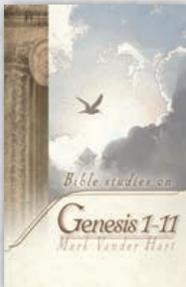
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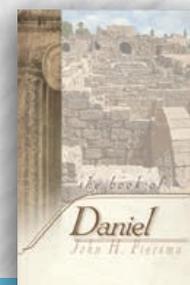


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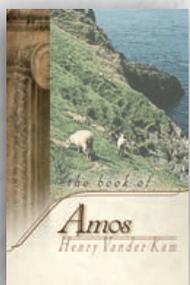
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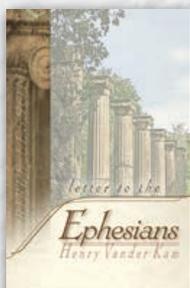


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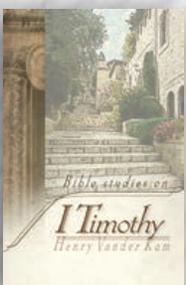
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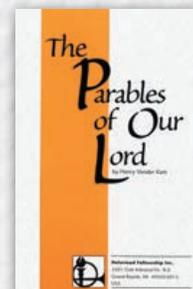
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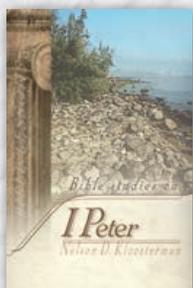


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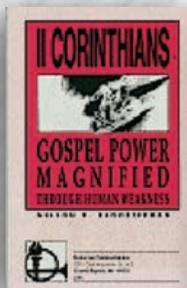
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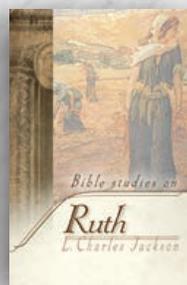
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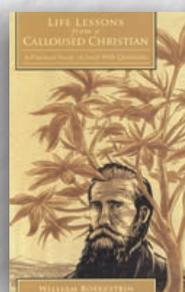
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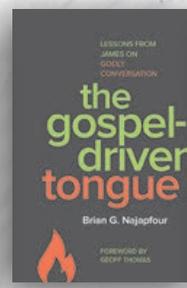
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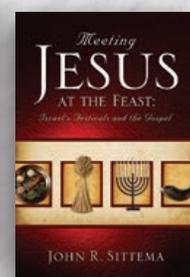
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Is Jealousy a Virtue or a Sin?



Dr. Norman
De Jong

Now, therefore, let me alone, that my wrath may burn hot against them, and I may consume them
—Exodus 32:10

Did you ever ask yourself that question? Did anyone ever accuse you of being jealous? Was there the implication that jealousy is a sin to be avoided and for which repentance is required? Recently I put that question into my computer. What kind of answers could I expect? Would this usually unreliable source tell me that jealousy is a virtue? Or, would it tell me that jealousy is a sin? As usual, the answers were confusing and contradictory. One blog reported, “In the Scriptures, jealousy is a virtue. Like all good things, it can be bent and distorted into a sin.” Another article intoned: “Jealousy: The Green-Eyed Monster! How to Handle It.” *Psychology Today*, that secular source of implied wisdom, offered “Ten Reasons why Jealousy Is Bad.” Another source offered “Three Reasons We Can Get Jealous.”

If you are one of those persons who still loves to read the plays of Shakespeare, you probably recognize that jealousy is a prime subject in many of his tragedies. One of the most impressive delineations of jealousy is found in *Othello the Moor*. In it, jealousy is portrayed as an all-consuming, destructive, and tragic passion leading to death. Given this kind of imagery, readers will conclude that jealousy should be harshly condemned as a combination of ignorance, infatuation, despotic temperament, moral unfitness, and merciless means to win someone’s love. Shakespeare seems to have been convinced that jealousy is the root of evil and the cause of death. Sad to say, he contributes to our confusion.

As Reformed believers, we hold to the doctrine of *sola Scriptura*. We believe that God’s Word is our ultimate authority for all matters of faith and life. We look to God

as the source of knowledge and wisdom. Furthermore, we believe that the Bible is its own best interpreter. Whenever we confront fundamental issues of life, we look to it for conclusive answers.¹ When we deal with relationships between ourselves and our neighbors, or between ourselves and God, we need to consult God’s Word. Secular psychology will only confuse us and, probably, lead us down a wrong path.

When we turn to our concordance or go to our search engine on our computers, one of the first sources would be the Ten Commandments, where we are told that we should not make any graven images or worship any other god, for “I the Lord your God am a jealous God” (Ex. 20:5). That would, quite likely, leave us focusing on the commands and not on the adjective describing God. We could easily pass over that

JEALOUSY



without a second thought. But, as we read further, we encounter some expositions of those commands when the Israelites foolishly persuade Aaron to fashion a golden calf as an object of worship.

God is so angry that he threatens to wipe out the whole nation, but Moses argues against such a radical response. Amazing reaction: God listens to Moses and softens his reaction. He tells Moses:

Observe what I command you this day. Behold, I will drive out before you the Amorites, the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites. Take care, lest you make a covenant with the inhabitants of the land to which you go, lest it become a snare in your midst. You shall tear down their pillars and cut down their Asherim (for you shall worship no other god, for the Lord, whose name is Jealous, is a jealous God). (Ex. 34:11–14)

His Name Is Jealous

If you were asked to list a number of names for God, what names would you suggest? You would probably start with the name Jehovah. Maybe you would even revert to the Hebrew version of Jahweh, thereby parading your Hebrew credentials. You would certainly refer to him as Lord God Almighty. You would probably add such designations as King of kings and Lord of lords. You would also put down such names as Father, Creator, Almighty, Sovereign Lord. Recognizing the three persons of the Trinity as being God, you would certainly add the names of Jesus, Christ, Son of Man, Savior, Lamb of God. You would also add the various names for the Holy Spirit, such as Comforter and Holy Ghost.

The Context

Not many of you, I suspect, would list his name as Jealous. Yet, that is what God calls himself. He wants us to know him as being Jealous. What does that mean? How are we to understand and apply that in our lives? When we examine the context, we note that God is incredibly angry at his own people, the ones he has just rescued from slavery in Egypt. In conversation with Moses, God declares, “I have seen this people, and behold, it is a stiff-necked people. Now, therefore, let me alone, that my wrath may burn hot against them, and I may consume them” (Ex. 32:10). That anger takes an even more radical turn when Moses commands the Levites, “Put your sword on your side each of you, and go to and fro from gate to gate throughout the camp, and each of you kill his brother and his companion and his neighbor.” And the sons of Levi did according to the word of Moses, and that day about three thousand men of the people fell” (Ex. 32:27–28).

When God continues his response to Moses, he makes a promise: “I will drive out before you the Amorites, the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites” (Ex. 34:11). Those are the people currently living in the Promised Land, all of them idol worshippers. He will tolerate no competitors. He will annihilate all those people who worship other gods. His anger is so intense that he threatens to destroy his own people. But, it is also directed against those who break that first and second commandment. He will brook no false worship.

The Old Testament is clear. God is holy. He is righteous. He hates idolatry. The book of Ezekiel, which foretells the potential return to Jerusalem, makes eight references to divine jealousy. When the remnant

does return from exile and restores the temple worship, God, through his prophet Zechariah, declares: “I am jealous for Zion with great jealousy, and I am jealous for her with great wrath” (Zech. 8:2). God is not ashamed to focus on the fact that he is a jealous God. He is not afraid to confess to intense anger at false worship.

The Confusion

Quite probably, few of you have been reading Shakespeare’s play, *Othello the Moor*. So that is not the source of your confusion. Quite probably, you have been reading your New Testament, which is the source of much confusion, especially among Christians. If you have been using the New International Version (NIV), you probably have encountered a number of texts which list jealousy as a sin. According to my count, there are fourteen passages where “jealousy” is listed along with other sinful behaviors. If you have been using the New American Standard Bible (NASB), you probably found some twelve passages where that language occurs. If so, you should then be asking some questions: How can jealousy be the name and attribute of God in the Old Testament but a sin in the New? Are not the two Testaments supposed to be in agreement? Is jealousy a virtue with God but a sin with men?

The confusion comes not because of illogical revelation from God, the source of all knowledge. On the contrary, the confusion comes from poor translation. If you read the Authorized Version (the King James Bible), you will not be confused. That historic version uses the word *envy* where the NIV and the NASB insert the word *jealousy*. God never calls himself Envy, but he does call himself Jealous. Envy is evil; it is the object of the tenth commandment, usually referred to as coveting.

Envy and coveting are sinful, but being jealous, rightly understood, is righteous.

Let me explain. In the Greek, the original language of the New Testament, the root word is *zelos* (dzay-'los). That word, in the Greek, had multiple meanings, all of which conveyed an intensity, a fervor, a fierceness of expression. *Zelos* could mean jealousy, or it could mean envy. The NIV and the NASB wrongly chose to use the meaning of jealousy, thus setting up a conflict with Old Testament usage. Why that wasn't caught by the final editors we will leave to academic speculation. Apparently, our culture is so convinced that jealousy is sinful that the use of it sent up no red flags.

We need then to ask the question: What is the difference between jealousy and coveting? Why is jealousy a virtue? Why is coveting a sin? The answer lies in the behavior of God first of all. God is jealous because he is trying to protect and preserve his people. Israel was his chosen people. He reminded them of that in numerous ways. When Satan or evil neighbors tried to entice them away, he was righteously angry. When they succumbed to idol worship, he was deeply offended. When God gave Moses the Ten Commandments, he concluded with: "You shall not covet your neighbor's house, or his wife," or his servants, and a host of other things besides (Ex. 20:17). Coveting is wanting something or someone that is not yours, something that God did not provide. Jealousy is an attempt to preserve and protect what is yours, what God has given to you. If a wife senses that another woman is attempting to entice her husband, she has a right to be jealous. She has a right to become protective and angry.

The Implications

Maybe you are asking the age-old question: So what? What difference does this make? Is the author just putting his academic credentials on display? I hope not. The difference is profound and significant. If you think of the God we worship as loving, kind, gracious, and forgiving, your worship will reflect that. If you think of God as jealous, as angry, as highly possessive, your worship will take on a different tone. The evangelical world today tends to see God as a loving, doting grandfather who willingly ignores the sins of his children. He exudes kindness and love. He blesses us with riches, with money, with prestige, and with power, if we just try to be nice and kind with each other. There is no fear of God in the land, as Paul says in Romans 3:18.

In our western world, church attendance is dipping and many churches are closing. Too many churches have reduced their theology to "Be nice! Love your

neighbor!" Those messages, in and by themselves, are good and wholesome, but when that becomes your primary message, God will be deeply offended, for he is jealous. He will tolerate no substitutes. He will be angry and full of wrath. In the Old Testament, Israel often ignored God's jealousy and cozied up to their idol-worshipping neighbors. They forgot that God was intensely jealous and righteously angry whenever they listened to the siren songs of those around them. Are we doing the same? Are we ignoring an attribute of God that ought to strike fear in our hearts? Are we imitating Israel of old? Does Ezekiel offer some powerful lessons?

1 All Bible quotations are from the English Standard Version unless otherwise noted.

Dr. Norman De Jong

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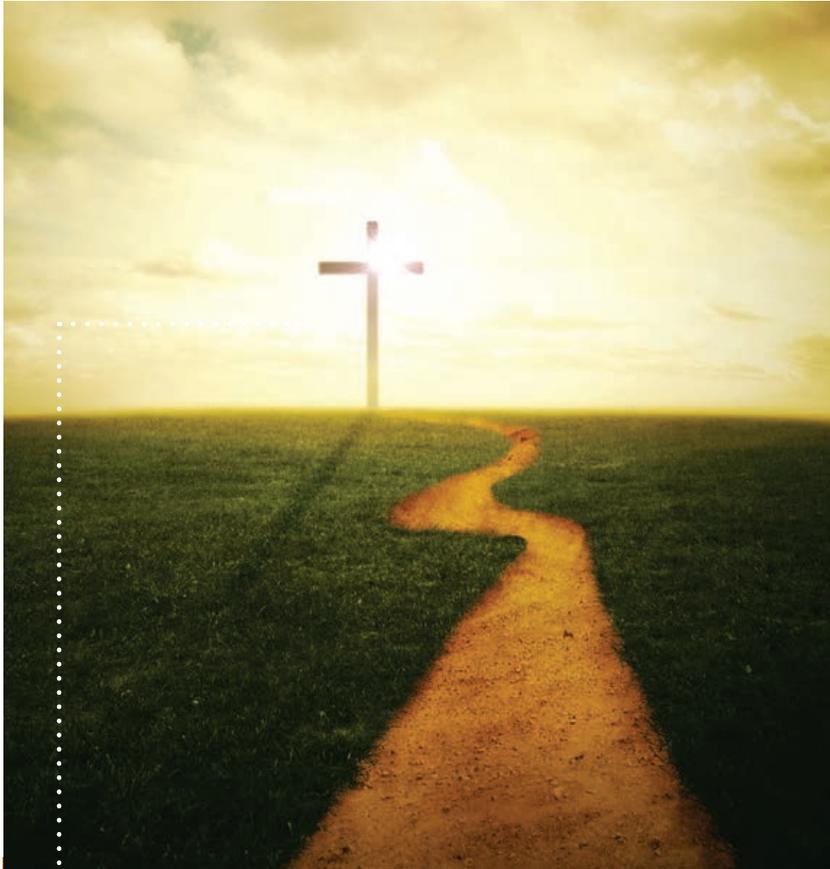
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“I suggest we start from where we are and look back on the path of our lives and consider how Jesus has led us all the way to where we are now. Everyone will find more than enough reasons to be thankful in the prosperity of past events in our lives.”

In a recent article it was noted that the Heidelberg Catechism teaches us that we are to be “patient when things go against us.” In this article we want to discuss a second thing that God’s sovereign control over all things teaches us, namely, to be “thankful when things go well.” A third aspect that God’s sovereign control over all things teaches us—namely, “good confidence in our faithful God and Father’s love”—will be considered in a later article. Since these benefits derive from God’s sovereign control over our lives, it would seem that Christians should be keen observers of all events that take place in their lives. By reflecting on the events in their lives, believers will more clearly discern what God is trying to teach them.

Let’s begin by asking a question: “Have I really counted my blessings?” At some time or other, most of us have probably quoted the chorus of an old hymn to a Christian brother or sister:

Count your blessings, name them one by one;

Count your blessings, see what God hath done.

Count your blessings, name them one by one;

Count your many blessings, see what God hath done.

—Johnson Oatman Jr. (*Celebration Hymnal*, 786)

When we quote this chorus to someone we mean to remind that person of the abundance of God’s favors to them as a source of encouragement, to be sure. But the question still remains: “Have I really tried to count my blessings?” The answer is probably “not really.” To count all God’s blessings in detail would require one to have all knowledge of God’s dealings with us. And that is impossible, because only God knows all things.

And where should we start to count our many blessings? After all, in the deepest sense, our blessings begin in eternity. Our lives have their origin in the mind of God. In his eternal counsel God determined to create mankind and whom he would elect to salvation. Furthermore, God planned our lives—to whom we would be born, the kind of a home we would be raised in, the culture and environment by which we would be shaped. The totality of our lives are in God’s hands, but none of that is known to us until after it happens. Thus, we can count the events of our lives only after they happen. So where does one start? I suggest we start from where we are and look back on the path of our lives and consider how Jesus has led us all the way to where we are now. Everyone will

find more than enough reasons to be thankful in the prosperity of past events in our lives.

Just a quick glance at our lives will alert us to the many blessings we receive daily in our common living, For example, while we are quick to complain when smitten by a common cold or the flu, the fact of the matter is that almost all of us enjoy many more days of health and well-being than we do of sickness and ill health. Count your many blessings. Give thanks!

Or consider the matter of employment and the ability to have access to the provisions of life to sustain our families. Even in the worst of economic times, most people, in North America at least, have access to food, shelter, and adequate protective clothing. Yes, these needs may be met by charitable agencies in many cases. Nevertheless, the fact of the matter is, they come to us ultimately by “the mercies of the Lord.” Count your many blessings. Rejoice and give thanks!

Again, consider the families into which we have been born and raised. The psalmist makes it crystal clear that our lives are totally under God’s control. We do nothing apart from God’s attentive care. Thus, he writes:

O LORD, you have searched me and you know me.
You know when I sit and when I rise;

you perceive my thoughts from afar.

You discern my going out and my lying down; you are familiar with all my ways.

Before a word is on my tongue you know it completely, O LORD.

Such knowledge is too wonderful for me, too lofty for me to attain.

—Psalm 139:1–6

Such knowledge causes the psalmist to declare elsewhere in the Psalms: “O LORD, You are the portion of my inheritance and my cup; You maintain my lot. The lines have fallen to me in pleasant places; Yes, I have a good inheritance” (Ps. 16:5–6, New King James Version).

So the psalmist makes clear that the God who created us is also watching over us and caring for us in all things. This knowledge gives believers the perspective to be “thankful when all things go well.” How thankful one can be to have been born and raised in a happy Christian home and family. To be happily married to a loving husband, to have a faithful Christian wife with obedient children who also serve the Lord is one of the greatest joys one can experience in life. Count your many blessings. Be thankful!

Furthermore, Christian families have the privilege and opportunity to join with other believers in a congregation that worships and

serves God. Thus, together in church, God’s people are taught to see God’s rich blessings in their lives and to be “thankful when things go well.” What a privilege to know the joys of church fellowship and be participants in promoting Christ’s eternal kingdom. Count your many blessings. Rejoice and “give thanks when things go well.”

The more we view our lives from the viewpoint of God’s sovereign control over all events that take place in them, the more we will come to see abundant reasons to “be thankful when things go well.”

Let today be the day of beginning to count our many blessings and of being “thankful when things go well,” as they ultimately do for the believer. For God’s Word assures us that “all things work for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose” (Rom. 8:28). Therefore, let us always sing of the “mercies of the Lord,” with thankfulness and praise all the days of our lives.

Dr. Harry G. Arnold

is a retired minister in the Christian Reformed Church and lives in Portage, MI. He is a member of Grace Christian Reformed Church in Kalamazoo, MI.

Remembering Dr. Harry Arnold

Harry George Arnold was called home by his Lord and Savior on June 16, 2019. He was born on December 27, 1925, in Paterson, NJ, the son of George C. and Clara (Gross) Arnold. During his senior year in high school he enlisted in the United States Army Air Corps, serving on active duty from 1944 through 1946. After release from military service in WWII he enrolled in Calvin College in Grand Rapids, MI. Completing his college degree in 1950, he enrolled at Calvin Seminary from which he graduated in 1953. Having received and accepted a call to become pastor of the First Christian Reformed Church in Minneapolis, MN, he was ordained to the Ministry of the Word on September 25, 1953. Thereafter, as pastor, he served churches in East Palmyra, NY, Zeeland, MI, Lansing, IL, and Grace CRC in Kalamazoo, MI. He retired from Grace Church in January of 1991 but continued to serve area churches as supply pastor for the next twenty-five years, concluding his preaching ministry on his ninetieth birthday in 2015. He would want to be remembered only as a faithful servant of the Lord. During the years of his ministry Pastor Arnold continued theological studies, receiving a Master of Theology degree from Calvin Seminary in 1970 and a Doctor of Ministry degree from Trinity Evangelical Divinity School in Deerfield, IL, in 1981.



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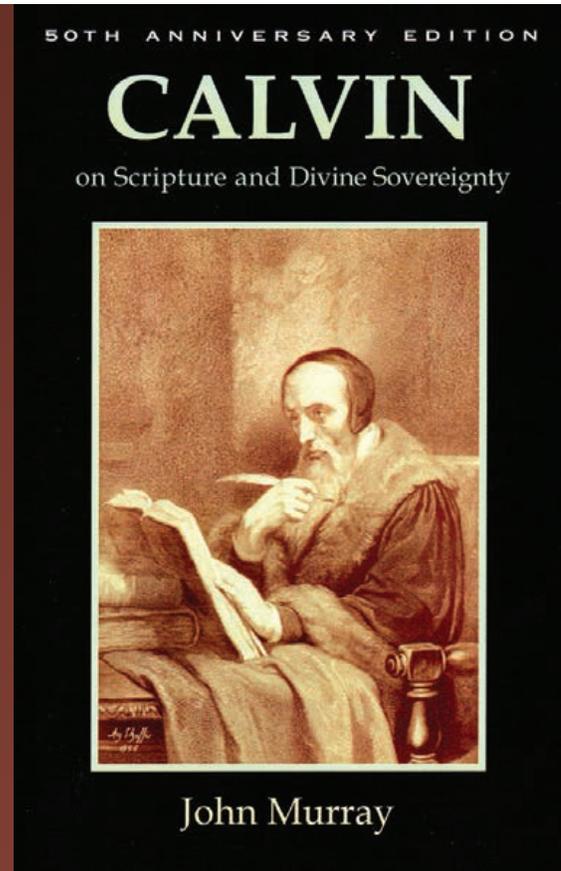
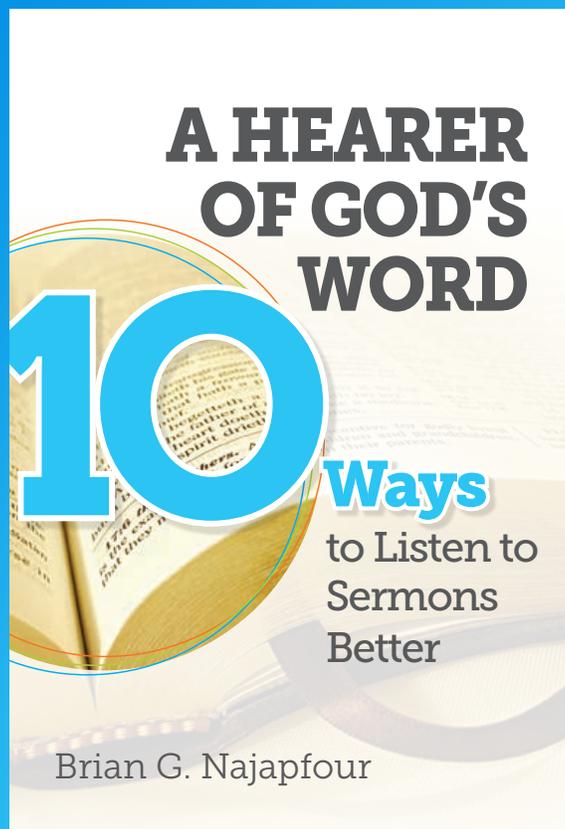
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