



The Outlook
Devoted to the Exposition and Defense of the Reformed Faith

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Focusing on Thanks

“I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me.” (Phil. 4:13)

Growing up in Michigan I recall Thanksgivings where snow covered the ground and relatives filled our home. It was quite the festive time! I remember being very excited to see family I saw all too infrequently, and how wonderful it was to smell all the different kinds of food being prepared by my mom and my aunts. To me, it was the greatest time of the year!

And yet, like many Americans, my day of “thanks” consisted mostly of *earthly*, self-centered joys and contentments, which revolved around eating too much and watching football on TV, rather than a *heavenly* focus on WHY we were to be giv-

ing thanks! Sure I had (public) school to tell me about the pilgrims who landed at Plymouth Rock; how the Indians helped them overcome the obstacles of a harsh winter; and the feast of thanks they had to celebrate - but the truth of WHY we gave thanks never registered in my heart! Until my eyes were opened to the glorious gospel of Jesus Christ, I failed to understand the importance of people giving thanks to God for His many blessings!

The apostle Paul was like that too. Until Christ confronted him on the Damascus road, he gave thanks for things that were *earthly*. Things like his nationality, his family lineage,

his education, his religious standing, and his zeal of the law of God (Phil. 3:4-6). But when his eyes were opened to the Christ of God such *earthly* joys and contentments were quickly replaced with a *heavenly* focus! All things that were once counted as “gain” to him, were now counted as “loss”. He regarded them as “rubbish” for the sake of knowing Christ the Lord. (Phil. 3:7,8)

Out of that knowledge of a living relationship to Christ, Paul *knew* how his life was to be lived! Now his eyes would always be lifted up to God in deepest *thanks* for the rich blessings he received in Christ, no matter what paths he had to travel down, or situations he would find himself in!

A beautiful picture of that “thank-



Volume 52, No. 10 (ISSN 8750-5754) (USPS 633-980) “And the three companies blew the trumpets...and held THE TORCHES in their left hands, and THE TRUMPETS in their right hands ... and they cried, ‘The sword of Jehovah and of Gideon’ (Judges 7:20).

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ful-living” is seen in that letter to the church in Philippi. Paul was imprisoned in Rome and unable to be among them as he wanted to be. Nevertheless, Paul never lost that *heavenly* focus while in chains! In fact, the things that had happened to Paul actually turned out for the furtherance of the gospel - including witnessing to the palace guard, and those of Caesar’s household! Such things brought *joy* to his heart and *thanks* to his lips! And further, it also *strengthened* Paul within himself that Christ would continue to be glorified by him, either in his continuing work, or even by his death! What a focus the apostle had on a thank-filled life!

Do we give praise and thanks to God - *in spite* of our circumstances and trials? Does that *heavenly* focus stay with us as much as it should? I don’t know about you, but as a redeemed sinner (emphasis on the latter) in need of daily grace, I know that I fall *far short* of the praise and thanks I ought to give - especially in trying circumstances! It’s easy to whine and pout about the difficulties of life, or to complain about your situation, or even to grow frustrated when life’s chains *shackle* you to people, situations, or experiences that you don’t want to be shackled too!

At times, instead of giving thanks to God as we should (Col. 3:17; I Thess. 5:18), and redeeming the time we’ve been given (Col. 4:5), we respond with *ingratitude*! We become hardened to that person God has put in our way, or that situation we’ve been placed in, and we forget, and even *refuse at times*, to give thanks to our heavenly Father who has given us those opportuni-

ties to make a difference in the lives of our family, our church, and our neighbors!

It’s at those times when I’m humbled to the dust, and shaking my head at my own failings and sins that I think of how Paul himself responded to similar situations,

“I have learned in whatever state I am in, to be content: I know how to be abased, and I know how to abound. Everywhere and in all things I have learned both to be full and to be hungry, both

Through that mighty King, we as His subjects, can keep our heavenly focus and do earthly good...

to abound and to suffer need. I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me.” (Phil. 4:11-13)

Aren’t Paul’s words amazing? Notice how *all* situations and areas of life are covered here: (1) “*whatever* state I am in...” (v.11); (2) “*Everywhere* and in *all things* I have learned...” (v.12)! And why? Was it because Paul, as an apostle, was kept from sinfulness in his life? Was he perfect? A first century “superman”? No. Paul was just like you and me. A man who was imperfect, weak, and who even had a thorn in his flesh to keep him humble.

The reason Paul can say these bold things *is because of Christ!* “I can do all things *through* Christ who strengthens me.” No situation, circumstance, or area of life escapes the sovereign rule of Christ the Lord! He IS LORD over our *entire life* - inward and outward! *Through* that mighty King, we as His subjects, can keep our *heavenly* focus and do *earthly* good, no matter how chained or shackled we may feel by the trials and challenges that God has apportioned to us! That same Christ will see to it that we have *all* we will ever need, for whatever path we are called to! Paul says to these Christians in their particular circumstance, “*And my God shall supply all your need according to His riches in glory by Christ Jesus.*” (Phil. 4:19) Notice the comfort of that passage: God *shall supply!* That expresses the *certainty* of God’s daily provision for body and soul. It provides *hope* and *confidence* to the weary and depleted, and above all it creates *joy* and *thanks* in the heart of the child of God!

When I step back from reflecting upon what Paul says, and then look upon my own life, past and present, I can’t help but give thanks to God for all His blessings to me in Christ! I can’t help but be in awe and amazement at how the Lord works mightily and generously for His covenant children! He is so gracious and good; patient and kind; compassionate and merciful - *even though I myself am so underserving!* Think of it: I can live the life God desires of me and HE will see to it that I *can* do it! Christ’s great supply will be mine; for my blessing and for His glory! Incredible! How can I not be filled with

thanks to my God?

Even with that wonderful truth, you and I need to remember something very important! Such thanks MUST cause us to *express* that thanks; *and to live out* that thanks in our daily lives! That means you and I need to respond to God's grace with "thank-filled" lives. We need to give thanks for our daily bread, for our homes, for our health, for our churches, for our jobs. *We are also to give thanks in all of life's circumstances and situations just as Paul does!* That means we are to thank our heavenly Father for all our opportunities to serve Him and make the best of them! We are to do so with the crabby co-worker; the tired house-

wife; the grieving neighbor; the needy fellow Christian. Such must be part of our lives!

May it never be said of us that we fail to show thanks for all God has done for us! May others see God's love and grace in all our words and deeds.

We can do this because we know that God *will supply* us with what we need for the tasks at hand; He will not fail us! As a result, we will continue to be stirred to praise Him and to give thanks to Him for all His daily goodness!

Therefore, as we celebrate this thanksgiving season in Canada and in the U.S., may our focus always be heavenward! Let us enjoy the

food and the fellowship! Let us make a point to gather together for worship as God's people! But most of all, may our thankfulness *overflow* to our Triune God for all we've been given in life! For we can do *all things* through Christ who strengthens us!

Rev. Ancil Merwin is the pastor of the Grace URC in Oro-Medonte, Ontario.

Wm. Jason Tuinstra

Shepherding the Flock of God Through Continuing Education

In my short time as a pastor, I have heard a common theme expressed among elders and deacons in various churches: "I don't feel equipped for the task of serving God's people." Whether they know it or not, they are expressing a frustration with the prevalent approach to office-bearer preparation: there is none. Not unlike throwing a child into the deep end of a swimming pool without his swimmies, we have grown accustomed to throwing men into the deep waters of church office with very little to keep them above the waters. We give them a slap on the back and send them on their way with a "Welcome to the pool!" kind of comment said in a

misery-loves-company kind of way. Unfortunately, we've grown used to bobbing men and gurgling sounds in the counsel room. Our assumption is that new elders or deacons will eventually figure out how to float. It's positive thinking, but not always realistic or good for the flock as men pick up bad habits to keep their heads above that threatening waterline.

Therefore, the subject of shepherding the flock of God through continuing education is a very serious one that needs to be addressed. Perhaps this sounds odd to the ear because we are not used to hearing it, but also because it

doesn't seem to make sense. How do you shepherd through education? You can pastor by *providing* an education. Catechism is an example of this kind of pastoring. But that is not what I am suggesting. I am suggesting shepherding our people by *receiving* an education. I am suggesting that spending time in a classroom and studying various subjects is how we will be able to pastor our people and, hence, it is in itself part of our pastoral responsibility.

In this article, I want to add some flesh to my skeletal suggestion that we need continuing education for men who hold office. It is time to see education for elders and deacons as not merely optional but necessary. Before we will be able to agree to this with gusto, we need to first of all see the need for continuing education. To do this, let me



start by defining what I mean by “continuing education.”

Working Towards A Definition

In my contacts with other churches, I have learned that many churches have some kind of educational classes for their elders and deacons. For many years at the church that I pastor, we dedicated an hour a month to education. We went through doctrinal books like Berkhof’s “Summary of Christian Doctrine,” as well as practical material like Sittema’s excellent book on having “A Shepherds Heart.” I don’t want to detract from the benefit of this time. It is time well spent in many councils. But this is not what I am suggesting when I speak of “continuing education.” By continuing education I mean, in definition form: “*A set of standardized education courses with the appropriate curriculum that will provide prospective elders and deacons with the requisite tools for shepherding the flock of the Lord.*”

At the risk of oversimplifying my definition and scaring men into not reading another word of this article, I’m suggesting a seminary-like education to provide prospective elders and deacons with a custom crafted education for their respective offices. Now before you go to the church directory to find out where I live, allow me to rehearse how office-bearer nomination normally takes place. Then we will better see the need for shepherding the flock through this kind of continuing education.

Establishing the Need

In most churches, men bring lists of people that they think are qualified

to serve in office. As a body of officers, we throw the names of these men into one pot and form an aggregate list of qualified men. We pick; we narrow; we choose; we achieve the needed number, and we send out the letters. With a seriousness and solemnity that is appropriate for the sacredness of the offices, we ask our brothers if they are willing to allow their names to stand. Now I understand that there are varying forms of this procedure, but I think this represents the typical formula that councils follow.

If you will allow me to characterize this for a moment, not to needlessly make fun, but to make a larger point, our formula goes something like this: “Mr. Doe, what are you doing for the next three years? Are you going to be free to serve?” Mr. Doe looks at his day-planner and sees that he’ll be able to and we say “Great!” If he can’t, then the council has more work to do in getting someone who “won’t mind serving.” It is precisely here that we get into trouble. In one form or another we have allowed a dangerous mentality to slip into our idea of office. The problem is summed up in the question “Would you mind being an elder/deacon?” Instead of office being something positively and passionately sought after, it tends to be something which is negatively viewed. “Are you going to be doing anything else that would prevent you from being an elder or a deacon?” Some men say yes; some men say no.

With this pervasive attitude, we

have lost something that is essential to making men true shepherds – desire. It would be a fun exercise to ask how many office bearers actually have a desire to be in office. How many men wanted to be in office before they were ever asked to hold office. You see, this idea of desire is far too often a foreign concept. How many elders actually say that it burns in their guts to be a shepherd in the church?

When we turn to I Timothy 3 we often pass right over Paul’s first word: “*If anyone sets his heart on being an overseer, he desires a noble task.*” Our first task is not to administer a mental breathalyzer. It is to look for men who *desire* to serve! In other words, we are not to say, “Well, he doesn’t do this, and he doesn’t do that.” We are to ask in the counsel room, “Has this man set his heart on being an overseer?” Why? Because before anything else, I Timothy says we need to discern desire! But that’s a tricky thing to discern. How do you do that? Allow me to begin to answer this question by further justifying my original thesis that we need continuing education for prospective elders and deacons.

Providing Justification

We never come up to young men and say, “Would you mind being a minister?” We might look at a man’s gifts, passions, and desires and encourage him to pursue the pastorate, but we do not approach men with a “would you mind” approach to office. The pulpit is too

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serious a thing to play around with. We don't want the wrong men preaching. It is because we want the right men as our ministers that we insist that men have an aspiration for the ministry. We want men who are dedicated to studying God's Word. We want men who are ready to count the cost. Men who have the courage and right convictions, who express that in a pursuit of the ministry. Which means what exactly? It means four years of college. It means three years of seminary. It means financial uncertainty. It means being willing to live in places far away from where you grew up. But when there is a desire to serve the Lord, these "costs" are hardly a second thought. If a man has a desire to be an overseer, he desires a noble task. Whatever hardships there may be, they are quenched in the joy of pastoral service.

In pointing this out, though, it must be noticed that we have unconsciously adopted a view that separates elders and deacons from the ministers of the Word. The minister is to desire his office and seek it out. That aspiration shows itself in a dedication to studying and training *in the hopes of someday being called to that office*. But we have never said the same for elders or deacons. What is more, we codified our expectations for the ministerial office by insisting that before a man can serve as a minister of the Word and Sacraments, he needs to *first* be properly trained. Only then, after his training, and after an examination, can he even be eligible for a call. But, again, this is not so for elders and deacons. With this, a kind of deadly professionalism has crept into some consistory and council

rooms. Because of this, it's not uncommon to hear every now and again, "Let the minister do it. He went to school after all, we didn't."

The question is, is education a nice bonus, or is it a necessity for the proper shepherding of God's flock? For our ministers we have insisted on the later. If they are going to be shepherds in United Reformed Churches, for example, Article 3 of the Church Order says that they must be trained. We say in this ar-

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ticle that men must be taught to be preachers. To be sure, they must have the raw gifts and talents. But those raw materials need to be honed and shaped. So, with our ministers we marry a passionate desire with a commitment to education. Our Church Order says, in effect, part of shepherding the flock of God is *knowing* how to shepherd God's flock. If there is any parity in the offices, then there needs to be parity in the area of desire and learning as well as respect and responsibility. If this seems too scholastic for the elders, then it must be too scholastic for the ministers. If it is necessary for ministers then we must also see the necessity of it for the elders.

To further justify my suggestion, I

want to dig a bit deeper in the Church Order. The Church Order says that all the training of the minister is for the express purpose of performing five specific tasks. Namely: praying, preaching, teaching, administering, and assisting. All those years of education come down to five basic functions. If all this education is for these tasks, then look at how the elders have, what could be argued, a greater "educational" burden from the Church Order Article 14 states that the elders are to:

- 1) Rule the church according to the principles taught in Scripture.
- 2) They are to ensure the purity of doctrine and holiness of life is practiced in the congregation.
- 3) They are to maintain the purity of the Word and Sacraments.
- 4) They are to assist in the teaching of catechism.
- 5) They are to promote God-centered schooling.
- 6) They are to exercise discipline.
- 7) Promote evangelism.
- 8) Make sure everything is done in good order.

Now if I, as a minister of the Word, need training to fulfill my work in the congregation, how can we be content without some form of continuing education for the eldership? I, as a minister, don't have rule over my elders, they have rule over me. Doesn't it follow then, that they should have the know-how to do this as I hopefully have some know-how to fulfill my office? I believe we need to pay more attention to those perplexing



gurgling sounds in our council rooms coming from men who, through no fault of their own, have never learned how to swim and now find themselves in very deep waters.

Practical Implementation

But how would this take shape? Nice idea perhaps, but can this Spruce Goose really get off the ground? Let me try to explain how this idea for continuing education could be practically implemented.

First, as churches we need to be committed to training men first and ordaining them second. We would never dream of sending men into operating rooms and then say, "Oh yeah, that must be the scalpel. It's sharp." But we put sick people in front of new elders and deacons with barely an ounce of training. This should be lamented. Training classes during a man's term can often be too little too late. We must be committed to training first and then ordaining. With that commitment, we can effectively continue to implement this approach to education.

Second, since pastoral service must stem from a personal desire, we need personal desire to be our beginning point for any practical training situation. Above, I asked how we would ever be able to ascertain whether or not a man has a real desire to serve. How do we know if a man has a heart to be an overseer? To practically solve this dilemma, I would propose that consistories annually call for all male members in good standing who have a desire to serve in office to enroll in training classes. This puts the onus on men to step for-

ward to express their desire and say by their actions "I have always wanted to serve in the church." The elders would look for men who express their desire to learn in much the same way that churches look for ministers out of the flock of men who have expressed their personal desire to serve in office by going to school.

A welcome byproduct of this method, not to be overlooked, is that a certain amount of criticism is

As churches we need to be committed to training men first and ordaining them second.

extinguished. It is not uncommon for disgruntled people to say in churches, "He always gets nominated. It is all because of his last name ya' know." Meaning, only people with the right job, income level, or family history get into office. Here is an opportunity for someone to step up or shut-up. Harsh words? Perhaps, but we need men in office because of commitment, not because it was their turn. We need men with a heart for the ministry. Here is one way for men to show that heart. Here is one way for a council to ensure, as much as they can, that they sit among men who truly desire to be there.

Third, training curriculum in which key areas of ministerial concern

and need could be developed into seminars that various churches could benefit from. In a given area or region, churches could work together to develop a system of more thorough training. Using the resources of ministers and more experienced elders, a training program could be put together and offered to men who seek to be elders and deacons. The classes could be offered to the churches in a particular area in the form of sessions, that is, concentrated classes which are spaced out over the course of a year or two. Some important areas to cover would be the Doctrine of the Church, Worship, Sermon Listening, Pastoral Care and Counseling, Church Government, Catechesis, and Communication Skills to name a few. This list isn't exhaustive, but should be the starting point for council training.

There is no doubt that this would be a large undertaking but most men who have never been trained look at the eldership and the deaconate as an even larger undertaking. Once developed, this could also be a blessing to the churches abroad in the form of summer weekend workshops. The possibilities are exciting to think about. Even more exciting is the prospect of nominating elders from a pool of a different sort. A pool of men who have stepped forward with desire, have trained with commitment, and are nominated in confidence. The nominees would have previously been grounded in the fundamentals of shepherding Christ's flock and hence are themselves able to take up their work with greater confidence. What a blessing for both the shepherds and the flock.

Criticisms

Given the nature of what I'm suggesting, I understand that there will be a fair amount of criticism. I want to briefly deal with some of the chief concerns that might be lodged against my suggestion.

First, some might say that this will eliminate men who would ordinarily be willing to serve but are not willing to undergo this kind of intensive study. We might call this the intimidation factor. This is very real, but here is where the elders especially would need to show that this is not meant to exclude anyone. The program, as suggested, is not meant to eliminate, it is meant to cultivate. It is to cultivate a crop of men who are suitable candidates for office in the church. Intelligence is not the primary or exclusive quality which is to be measured by these courses. It is one of many qualities such as love, servitude, a sacrificing spirit, perseverance, patience, self-control, and the like. But these are not either to exclude a proper knowledge, which we need to be committed to promoting in our office-bearers.

Second, this suggestion exalts education. The first suggestion deals with the intimidation of education. This criticism deals with the possible unhealthy elevation of education. To address this, it needs to be said that aspiration needs to be matched by competence. For example, a man can desire to fly a plane. He can dream about it day and night. But, his aspiration needs to be matched by competence. We would never say that the folks at

the FAA are a bunch of sticks in the mud because they require men to actually learn how to fly. We would not accuse them of exalting education. We would praise them for placing virtue in education. There is virtue in knowing the things that I have suggested above. Virtue not just for our ministers, but virtue for our elders and deacons. Virtue that our people need us to have.

Third, burn out. With all this work, the men would be burned out long before they ever got into office. Recently, smoke started coming from my washing machine. It was "burning out." Come to find out, it wasn't burning because it was doing what it was supposed to be doing. It was burning up because it couldn't do what it was supposed to do. A sock got in the water pump, and in the face of the obstacle, it started to burn and smoke. My point is simple. Men often burn out because they don't know how to do what they are supposed to do. Ignorance is their obstacle. They get tired of banging a locked door. Continuing education would go a long way to opening up many of the doors that we spend a lot of time beating on. Thus, far from burning men out, I would hope that this would bring a deeper joy to the hard work that doesn't need to be made more difficult through ignorance.

Conclusion

In this article, I have attempted to show you what I see as the benefits of looking into a new way of going about electing and nominating elders and deacons. What is more, it provides a new way of shepherding the

flock. My suggestion is education. I am not trying to sell my special elixir to fix the problem. I am addressing this subject because I feel it is time to start seeing how things could be done more effectively to the honor of the name of our God and the edification of His great church. It is time for us to reverse the trends that have left men feeling helpless. That have left men saying, "I'll never do that again." It is time to ask, "Is there a better way?." If nothing else, let us at least begin a new dialogue that has as its theme a desire to better shepherd the flock of our great God!

Rev. Wm. Jason Tuinstra is the pastor of the Community Reformed Bible Church in Highland, Indiana.

The program, as suggested, is not meant to eliminate, it is meant to cultivate.



TEEN SCENE

PROTECTED

Righteousness guards him whose way is blameless

Proverbs 13:6a



Did you ever go outside in the winter without a coat? Maybe you had to run to your car to get something or throw a snowball at a friend who was talking outside of school. I remember a student in college who never wore his coat. In the middle of winter, even on the coldest days, he would be outside without a coat.

We usually don't stay outside too long, especially if it's one of those winter days when the wind feels like it is going right through you. Ever wonder why don't we stay outside for a long time without a coat in the winter? Because it's cold!! Our bodies get cold. It's that simple to understand. Oh, we may run out for a minute without a coat, but we all know if we are going skiing for the afternoon we need a



coat - our parents don't even have to tell us that!

In the last Teen Scene we learned that God is the source of all truth. When it comes to the armor that we wear as Christians, truth is an all important element in the pieces of armor. Truth is a key component in all pieces, whether it is the belt, shield, sword or breastplate. This month we are going to look at the breastplate.

What is a breastplate and what does it do? If you know anything about armor, the breastplate was a piece of metal that was formed to cover the chest, stomach, a person's sides and his back. It gave your arms, head, and legs the freedom to move around in battle but protected you in some of the most vital areas of your body. The breastplate provided defensive protection from attack on all sides. Think of the things protected by the breastplate: your lungs, stomach, intestines, kidneys, spinal chord, and especially your heart. If these parts of your body are struck by an enemy's sword it would mean certain death.

These areas of your body have to be protected in battle. Our enemy the devil is looking to strike you at any time using whatever weapons he can get his hands on. He fo-

cus his attack on our hearts. When you read the Bible you will notice that it speaks of man's heart often because it is out of the heart that we live. Not the organ that pumps blood, but our thoughts, our desires, and the emotions of our life. That is our heart. The devil wants to influence and control those areas of the heart. God provides a way for Christians to protect that heart and all the other vital organs of life.

What is that protection? What does God provide in the breastplate for protection? Righteousness. Righteousness is something that is done within relationships. One way is in our relationships with other people. We should treat people honestly and justly. Being peaceful with one another (not gossiping or picking on someone else) or being helpful to those in need (helping someone who is being picked on) is acting justly. You could say it is treating others as you would want to be treated.

But righteousness is developed in a more basic relationship other than people. That relationship is with God. Everyone is in relationship with God whether they know it or not and whether they like it or not. That relationship can be either good or bad, but can not be avoided! The relationship with God can not be

avoided. God is righteous in His creative work, in His work of salvation and in His work of making us holy (to be set apart for God). When we have a good relationship with God we reflect the good virtues of God but not yet in a perfect way. Some of those virtues would be: goodness, holiness, justice, and righteousness. Righteousness is how we act as Christians all the time.

Where can we get this righteousness so we can have protection? Simply put, in Christ alone. We can not protect ourselves. We can only find protection from the cold in Christ. We do not have goodness, or holiness etc. on our own. In fact deep down our nature hates God and our fellow man. We would rather hide in the crowd than help the one being picked on (and we would be thankful it was not ourselves). We would rather go outside without a coat than listen to our parents. So, we have to get our righteousness from somewhere else. And Christ is where that righteousness can be found so that your

heart may be protected. We are not righteous because of ourselves or our faith, but Christ's righteousness is on us and that is what God sees. He sees us as righteous because of Christ's work on the cross and we have faith because God puts it in our hearts.

So, are you walking around outside in the middle of winter without a coat, without protection or do you have the breastplate of God? Are you reflecting the character of God in your life as He protects you? Are you ready for the battle of life in righteousness or are your vital organs exposed?

Mr. Dave Vander Meer is the Youth director of Cornerstone United Reformed Church in Hudsonville, Michigan.

A Study of Righteousness:

- Look up the following words in a dictionary.
 - A. goodness
 - B. holiness
 - C. justice
 - D. righteousness
- Look up Galatians 5: 22-23. Describe each fruit. How much of each fruit can we partake?
- Read:
 - Proverbs 13:6* - What protects us?
 - Proverbs 11:19* - What does it lead to?
 - II Cor. 5:21* - Who made us righteous?
 - Phil. 3:7-9* - Who's righteousness do we have?

In Memory of Rev. Clarence Werkema

Rev. Clarence Werkema was called home by the Lord on Wednesday, October 2, 2002 at the age of 82. During his life, Rev. Werkema faithfully served as Minister of the Word and Sacraments in three denominations and several independent churches.

Rev. Werkema began studies at Westminster Theological Seminary East after serving in the U.S. Navy during World War II. Upon graduation in 1954, he began working at Hope Reformed Church in Clifton, New Jersey. After five years in the RCA, Rev. Werkema was called to the Christian Reformed Church where he pastored five different congregations: Holland Center CRC, Lodgepole, South Dakota; Monroe CRC, Monroe, Washington; First CRC, Waupun, Wisconsin; Walker CRC, Grand Rapids, Michigan; and Bethany CRC, South Holland, Illinois. He retired from the Christian Reformed Church in 1983.

Ever faithful to his calling to the ministry, Rev. Werkema came out of retirement to serve the Nelson Reformed Church in Nelson, New Zealand for two years. Once back in the United States, Rev. Werkema was often called upon to serve as interim pastor at several congregations.

Known to be a man of strong convictions, Rev. Werkema was asked to help conservative churches in



their struggle against progressive trends in the Christian Reformed Church. He was instrumental in beginning the Champlain Valley United Reformed Church in Vermont; the Reformed Heritage Church in Holland, Michigan; and the Allendale United Reformed Church in Allendale, Michigan.

Rev. Werkema is remembered as a man who had a true love for the Church of Jesus Christ; a commitment to the precious truth of God's Word; and passion for the salvation of people.

He is survived by his wife, Thelma; his children Kathy and Arch Vanden Bosch, Criss and Terry Vander Meulen, George and Nancy Werkema, Andrea and Paul Pennings, Jeanie and Bill Elgersma, and Sam and Kathy Werkema; and twenty-one grandchildren.

Who Controls the Weather?

If you run out of small talk, you can always talk about the weather. When you get up in the morning, you check what kind of day it is. People have always been fascinated by weather forecasts and climate change. They pay careful attention to weather reports. Some even constantly watch the All-Weather channel on TV. We hear about tornadoes which can rip trees out by their roots, derail trains, sweep people into the air, and destroy buildings.

On May 29, 1986, twelve school children in west China were sucked up by a tornado. It put them down again on some sand dunes 20 km (12 miles) away - completely unharmed. In the summer of 1979 the Christian Reformed Church in Woodstock, Ontario, was totally destroyed by a tornado. "Freakish" Weather.

The year 2002 will go down in history as a "freakish" weather year. Douglas Lecomte, a drought specialist with the U.S. National Weather Service says, "Colorado and Arizona just had their driest June through May period in 107 years. Across the West, rainfall has been less than half of normal." In Arizona, where higher temperatures were one factor behind the

biggest fire in that state's history, thousands of residents were moved. "We're at the mercy of Mother Nature right now," said Larry Humphrey, a firefighting commander at Arizona's biggest blaze. In Canada, drought hounded much of the prairies, despite floods in southern Alberta. Canada's Environment Minister David Anderson

pointed to the flooding near Lethbridge, Alberta (attributed to high rains and a heavy snow), the raging fires in Northern Alberta and the drought and saw them as concerns as signs of global warming.

Secularism is not an open enemy attacking the Christian faith with physical weapons. It is more like a deadly virus.

The weather has contributed to the downfall of empires. A great ally in Russia wars is "General Winter." A Russian prisoner warned Napoleon, "Sir, in a month our cold will make your fingernails fall out." To his regret, Napoleon failed to pay attention to the prophetic words. His grand army had to retreat in the intolerable Russian winter. Napoleon's chief of staff, Marshall Berthier, reported: "The whole army is completely disbanded - even the 400 men who are all that is left of the Garde Imperiale. Twenty-five degrees of cold and heavy snow on the ground are the cause of the disastrous state of the

army, which no longer exists.” Hitler’s armies met the same fate as Napoleon’s. When winter came in 1941, with its killing frost, more German soldiers died of bitter cold than from Russian bullets and bayonets.

“General Winter” can be an ally in war, but can also increase the suffering of the oppressed. While France, Belgium and the southern part of the Netherlands were already liberated from the Nazis during 1944, the liberation of the northern part of the Netherlands did not come until May 1945 after a severe winter of famine.

Weather and World-Views

Who controls the weather? The answer to this question depends on one’s world-view. Secularism, the dominant condition of our Western culture - and to a large extent of the whole world - impacts values, human relationships, and even the way we think about the weather. It deprives modern science of its spiritual foundations. The supernatural understanding of the world is replaced by a naturalistic one. Who still thinks of God when we listen to the weather reports? What is the weather from a secular perspective? It has been defined “as the atmospheric conditions prevailing at a specific place and time....driven by the interactions of the atmosphere, water in the atmosphere and on the earth (oceans, rivers, lakes), and the solid earth, all driven by solar energy from the sun.”

Secularism is not an open enemy attacking the Christian faith with physical weapons. It is more like a deadly virus which worms its way into our lives practically unnoticed.

But secularism is not only a condition, it is also a deeply rooted faith in the illusion that man can live without God and take control of his own destiny. Although the weather fronts are still unpredictable and uncontrolled as centuries ago, the development of weather-modification technology is still progressing. The United Nations has taken note of its negative consequences. Its Charter states, “using environmental modification techniques to de-

In Christian circles there is no unanimity on who controls the weather.

stroy, damage or injure another state [is] prohibited.” On May 18, 1977, it banned altering weather in war and called specifically for the environment’s improvement and peaceful use. Nevertheless military planners of nations that possess advanced technology still work on weather-modification as an option. They believe that artificially created weather patterns can influence enemy battle actions, and also change the behavior and living patterns of an entire population.

Although modern secular thinkers live with the self-deception that they do not need God, at the practical level they still fill the gap left by the rejection of the true God with surrogate gods. When the world tries to live without God, it becomes a weird and homeless place. No

wonder that today ancient and new gods are mushrooming. As the polemicist and extremely versatile author G.K. Chesterton observed, “People who don’t believe in something can be persuaded to believe in anything.” It may seem astonishing, but astrology, which fell into disrepute in the 18th century, has now staged an amazing revival in the 21st century - a century of high tech, space flights, and satellites in order to take close-up photographs of Saturn. The New Age faith in astrology assents that the course of the planets determines life on this earth to the smallest detail and even our lives are under the sway of the stars. Horoscope charts in magazines and newspapers are daily consulted in the hope of gaining some knowledge about the future. Astrology is even applied to learning about weather conditions! Many people have more interest in what the stars have to say about the weather than in finding the hand of God in nature. In other words, in an age in which man declares himself free from God, he surrenders his will to the dictatorship of the stars.

The Weather and Satan

In Christian circles there is no unanimity on who controls the weather. Some evangelicals believe that Biblical stories illustrate Satan’s power over the weather. For example, one author states that the devil was responsible for the storm on the lake in Mark 4 involving Jesus and His disciples. In *Satan’s Devices*, Robert Morey states: “Both God and Satan can manipulate the weather. In Mark 4: 37, I believe with many commentators that Satan sent a violent storm to kill Jesus while He was asleep on the boat. It was rebuked



because Satan was trying to kill Him. Satan also caused a great wind to come and knock down the house and kill Job's children. (Job 1: 18,19)" In an article *Who Makes it Rain? A Question of Biblical Authority*, Kevin Cain tells about missionaries who give Satan credit for controlling the weather! Often it is because of a rainstorm. They speculate that Satan must have caused a rainstorm to ruin an outdoor event that the missionary believed was in God's will to run smoothly.

Scripture and the course of history since the Fall testify that Satan is a figure of great power. "We must not underestimate the power of the world of demons; we ordinarily think far too little of them," says K. Popma. "To be sure, they can do no more than what God permits, but let us not forget that they are by nature servants of mankind and thus know much about us and are able to affect us greatly through their rebellion and sabotage of God's plan."

But Satan does not have the power to affect the weather. Only God does. Satan cannot do anything without God's approval. He still needs God's permission for everything he undertakes. The Bible affirms that God restricts the operation of Satan in His creation. Nowhere does it concede to the forces of darkness. It repeatedly emphasizes that God never suffers evil to get out of hand. He controls it; He restricts it. Satan is bound.

God in Control

Who controls the weather? God the Creator does! In His revelation of Himself in His Son God, enlightens us about ourselves and the world

because nothing has meaning other than in the Son. In Christ everything is created and through Him all things are redeemed (Col. 1: 15-20) In the matchless story of creation recorded in Genesis 1 we see the light flashing out of the darkness as God said, "Let there be light!" He created the world in freedom, out of nothing. He called it into existence. It is upheld and governed by Him. He is personally involved and takes full responsibility for His cre-

***Nothing is more
important for God's
people than to be
firmly convinced that
God is in control.***

ation. It is He whose hand is directly at work in it, and He is not dependent upon any planet or any force of nature. He established the natural laws governing His universe when He created it. We indeed live in a God-ordered world. Through His creation God has revealed His eternal power. As G. K. Chesterton aptly said, "The sun does not rise because of the rotation of the earth. The sun rises because God says to it "Get up."

Neither the secular mindset, nor astrologers, nor Satan can direct the weather patterns or have perfect weather predictions. Nothing is more important for God's people than to be firmly convinced that God is in control. This is a rich comfort for us. In Scripture we hear that the God who controls the events of

nature also thinks of us. God is the One, as a poet said,

*Who points the clouds
their course,
Whom the winds and seas
obey,
He shall direct thy
wandering feet,
He shall prepare thy way.*

God never lets the weather run its own course. From the beginning God controlled it. Before He created man "the Lord God had not sent rain upon the earth"(Gen. 2:5). God's hand in the weather patterns is clearly seen in the account of Noah and the Flood. When the Lord saw how great man's wickedness on the earth had become and that every inclination of the thoughts of his heart had become evil all the time (Gen.6: 5), He decided to destroy the whole earth and the wicked by a flood. God told Noah to build the ark on land, far from rivers and seas, while the weather was peaceful, the sun brightly shining, not a cloud in the sky, the weather forecasters predicting continual sunny days ahead. When Noah had finished the ark, God sent the rain to float it. He said, "I will send rain on the earth forty days and forty nights (Gen.7: 4). Righteous Noah did not fear the elements. He knew that he was safe with God even in the external things. He knew that God had control over this catastrophic flood.

Although we often don't understand the why and wherefores of flooding, earthquakes, and "freakish weather," at any given time, the Bible assures us that nothing happens by chance. John Frame points out that God is the ultimate explanation of everything. The Biblical

writers do not hesitate to ascribe the events of the natural world directly to God. For example, the Psalmists testify of God's hand in nature. He waters the land (Ps. 65:9-11). He sends the lightning and the wind (Ps. 135: 5-7). He spreads the snow, frost, and hail and then sends out His Word to melt them (Ps. 147:15-18). Psalm 19 tells us that the sun is a servant of the Lord, a minister for our good. Psalm 104 gives a fresh vision of the beauty of the clouds and the grandeur of the sea. The author of this psalm describes the glories of God making springs pour water into ravines, making the grass grow for cattle, and rebuking the Red Sea so that it dried up. Our Lord said of our heavenly Father that He makes the sun rise and sends the rain (Matt. 5:45).

Blessing and Judgment

In the course of Israel's history, God blessed His people with good weather for a favourable harvest; but He also chose rain and other forms of weather conditions to communicate His displeasure with them. In 2 Samuel 12: 18, the Lord sent thunder and rain to demonstrate His power so that His people would fear Him. Elijah told wicked king Ahab, "As the God of Israel lives, before whom I stand, surely there shall be neither dew nor rain these years, except by my word" (1 Kings 17:1). When God was ready, He proclaimed through His prophet, "I will send rain on the face of the earth" (1 Kings 18:1). The prophet Jeremiah spoke of "a land not sown" (Jeremiah 2:2). He said that because of God's anger at Israel's sins, "the land mourns and the pastures of the wilderness are dried up"(Jeremiah 23:10).

Conclusion

Who controls the weather? No one should be so presumptuous to think that mankind can control it through technology. Furthermore, those who consult astrology for weather forecasts commit idolatry. Isaiah declared, "Let your astrologers come forward, those stargazers who make predictions month by month, let them save you from what is coming upon you. Surely they are like stubble; the fire will burn them up. They cannot even save themselves" (Isaiah 47:13b,14a). And those evangelicals who believe Satan is in control attribute to him powers which he does not possess.

As I have shown, the Bible clearly shows that on the one hand, the knowledge that God is in absolute control - and that we may trust Him completely - offers comfort and joy to God's people (Cf. Lord's Day 10). God is fulfilling His purposes. He is renewing His fallen creation

and building His Kingdom. On the other hand, when we think about the weather and the decadent age in which we live, the German theologian Helmut Thielicke's warning ought to be heeded:

And therefore this world, which we think we govern by our own power, may one day come crashing down upon us, because the thing we play so presumptuously has gotten beyond our control, and because God is not to be mocked. He may suddenly cease to hold the ocean in check and the unleashed elements will sweep us into their vortex.

Rev. Johan D. Tangelder is a retired minister in the Christian Reformed Church who resides in East Strathroy, Ontario.

Classis Summary

Classis Michigan United Reformed Churches September 10, 2002

A lovely drive in the country brought the delegates of Classis Michigan to the Grace United Reformed Church in Alto, Michigan for their eleventh classis meeting. Joining us at the meeting were several emeritus ministers, Rev. Zach Anderson of the Seventh Reformed Church in Grand Rapids, and a member of the URC church plant in Muskegon. Chairman of the day, Rev. Peter Adams, opened the

meeting with the reading of Colossians 1:3-14.

One of the first items of business was the forming of a committee to study the feasibility and propriety of a Classical Missions Committee. This committee will look into whether or not the churches of classis can better facilitate the mission efforts of our churches by cooperating with one another on a classical level.

Classis also discussed what options are available to a Classical Interim



Committee when there is no pending business for an upcoming classis meeting. Although there is a great desire for increased fellowship among the churches, classis voted to insert the word “ordinarily” into the following Rule of Procedure: “Classis shall [ordinarily] convene at least twice annually...”

In response to another overture, classis formed a committee to look into the possibility of having a Student Seminarian Fund to assist churches in providing for seminar-ians within their congregations.

The highlight of the meeting came after lunch when Rev. Derrick Vander Meulen and Rev. Steve McGee reported on Rev. McGee’s acceptance of a call to serve as a teacher/missionary in Trinidad. In addition to teaching at Grace Bible College, by God’s grace, Rev. McGee will be working as a church planter. Trinidad currently has four reformed churches on the entire island.

The remainder of the meeting was spent offering advice to consistories. This has always been a very profitable time for the churches seeking the corporate wisdom of experienced elders and ministers. It is also a very sad and humbling time as we realize that even in a federation as young as ours, discipline is still necessary and must remain a mark of the true church.

We thank Grace United Reformed Church for hosting the meeting, providing the delegates and visitors with ample refreshments and a delicious meal. We thank the delegates for the work performed. And we thank our God for calling

us to be a part of His Church and enabling us to work for His Kingdom. May all that was done at this meeting of Classis Michigan be to His honor and glory!

Respectfully Submitted
Rev. W. H. Oord
Clerk of Classis

Classis Southwest U.S. Report United Reformed Churches September 16-17, 2002

Classis Southwest U.S. convened at the Cloverdale United Reformed Church in Boise, Idaho, on September 16, 2002. Delegates from 13 out of 14 churches were present.

One of the first orders of business was to give concurring advice for the organization of two new congregations: the Belgrade United Reformed Church of Belgrade, Montana, and the Oceanside United Reformed Church of Oceanside, California. Both congregations had men present to give reports to the classis of their recent history. The classis thanked God for His work in these two bodies, and prayed for His continued blessing upon them. There are three other organizing congregations in Classis Southwest U.S.: the United Reformed Church of Magic Valley in Jerome, Idaho; the High Desert United Reformed Church in Victorville, California; and a new group forming in Lemoore, California.

Most of the two-day classis was taken up with the examination of two men being examined for candidacy and two men entering the federation via colloquia docta. Mr. Joshua Van Ee and Mr. Gene Crow both sustained their candidacy examinations. Rev. David Bosch, minister-elect of Calvary United Re-

formed Church, Loveland, Colorado, and Rev. Thomas Morrison, church planter for the High Desert United Reformed Church, both sustained their examinations. All four are now eligible to be called to the office of minister of the Word among the United Reformed Churches.

Classis had the sad duty to recognize the voluntary departure of the Saigon Reformed Presbyterian Church of Santa Ana, California, from the federation. Classis, with joy, continued its regular practice of hearing reports from each church about what God is doing in their midst.

The next classis is scheduled for March 17-18, 2003, at the Escondido United Reformed Church of Escondido, California.

Respectfully submitted,
Rev. Bradd L. Nymeyer, clerk
Classis Southwest U.S.

We welcome clerks of other classes and presbyteries to send a summary of the events of their classis to wyb.kath@juno.com for publication in The Outlook.

The New Perspective on Paul

The Contribution of E. P. Sanders

(Part Two)

I took the trouble in a previous article to consider briefly several fore-runners of the new perspective on Paul, since they pioneered emphases in New Testament and Pauline studies that form the background to the work of E. P. Sanders and other advocates of the new view. Though Sanders is undoubtedly the leading figure in the formation of a new perspective on Paul, he has acknowledged his indebtedness to the pioneering work of others. In that respect, Sanders' own argument against the older view of Judaism, together with its implications for an interpretation of Paul's understanding of the gospel, builds upon what might be regarded as a significantly new tradition of Pauline studies.

The "pattern" of religion in Palestinian Judaism: "Covenantal Nomism"

Sanders, who is a professor of religion at Duke University, published a book in 1977, *Paul and Palestinian Judaism*, that is now generally regarded as a classic presentation of the new perspective.¹ Despite its title, the primary focus of this highly influential study is the "pattern" of religion, to use Sanders' term, that characterized Palestinian Judaism

(often termed "Second Temple Judaism"). Following the lead of Montefiore and Moore, Sanders' aim in this volume was to describe Palestinian Judaism in its own terms rather than in terms of the interests of the Christian faith. Unlike Montefiore and Moore, however, Sanders writes as a Christian theologian who is interested in the implications of a new understanding of Palestinian Judaism for a proper interpretation of the apostle Paul's understanding of the gospel.

Sanders' stated purpose in his classic study was to compare the pattern of religion evident in Paul's writings with the pattern of religion in Jewish literature during the period between 200 B.C. and A.D. 200. By a "pattern of religion" Sanders means the way a religion understands the way a person "gets in" and "stays in" the community of God's people.² Traditional accounts of the differences between religions, particularly the differences between Judaism and Christianity, have focussed upon the distinctive essence or core belief of these religions. In doing so, Judaism has often been simplistically described as a "legalistic" religion, one that emphasizes obedience to the law as the basis for inclusion among God's

people, and Christianity has been described as a "gracious" religion, one that emphasizes God's free initiative in calling his people into communion with himself. Similarly, descriptive accounts of different religions that focus upon their distinctive "motifs" or "themes" often distort them by taking one religion's ideas as normative and applying them to the other. The best way, according to Sanders, to get an accurate picture of Judaism or Christianity is to compare their account of the way people enter into and remain within the community of faith.

The first part of Sanders' study involves a comprehensive study of Jewish literature during the two centuries before and after the coming of Christ. Based upon this study, Sanders concludes that Judaism exhibits a pattern of religion best described as "covenantal nomism." Sanders defines the meaning of this language as follows:

The "pattern" or "structure" of covenantal nomism is this: (1) God has chosen Israel and (2) given the law. The law implies both (3) God's promise to maintain the election and (4) the requirement to obey. (5) God rewards obedience and punishes transgression. (6) The law provides for means of atonement, and atonement results in (7) maintenance or re-establishment of the

*Sanders appeals to evidence in Jewish writings to support the view that it was
a religion of grace.*



covenantal relationship. (8) All those who are maintained in the covenant by obedience, atonement and God's mercy belong to the group which will be saved. An important interpretation of the first and last points is that election and ultimately salvation are considered to be by God's mercy rather than human achievement.³

Contrary to the typical Protestant assumption that Palestinian Judaism was legalistic, Sanders appeals to evidence in Jewish writings to support the view that it was a religion of grace in its understanding of how God entered into covenant with Israel. In the literature of Judaism, the theme of God's gracious election is consistently sounded. God graciously elects Israel to be his people, and mercifully provides a means of atonement and opportunity for repentance in order to deal with their sins. So far as Israel's "getting in" the covenant is concerned, this was not by human achievement but by God's gracious initiative. Obedience to the law, however, was required as a means of maintaining or "staying in" the covenant. The people of Israel were obliged to obey the law in order to maintain the covenant relationship and secure their inheritance at the final judgment. In this sense, getting in the covenant is by grace, staying in the covenant is by works with a view to the final judgment at the end of the age.

On the basis of his argument for understanding Palestinian Judaism as a form of covenantal nomism, Sanders endorses the basic claim of Montefiore and Foot that tradi-

tional Christian thought has badly misrepresented Judaism as a graceless religion. An independent and unbiased account of Palestinian Judaism clearly shows that it was a pattern of religion that emphasized the initiative of God's grace and mercy in establishing his covenant with his people. Judaism's emphasis upon obedience to the law was not aimed to compromise the priority of God's grace in the covenant relationship, but to require obedience from those with whom God

One of the obvious problems that surfaces, as a result of Sanders' argument for a new view of Judaism, is what to do with the apostle Paul.

graciously covenanted as a means of staying in the covenant and being vindicated at the final judgment.

The Apostle Paul: From "solution to plight"

One of the obvious problems that surfaces, as a result of Sanders' argument for a new view of Judaism, is what to do with the apostle Paul and his polemics against Judaism. If Judaism was not a legalistic religion, but one that emphasized God's grace and election so far as "getting in" the covenant is concerned, then what are we to make of Paul's vigorous arguments against claims to find favor with God on the basis of works or human achievement? Is Paul combating a

kind of "straw man" in his letters (especially in Romans and Galatians), when he combats a righteousness that is by the works of the law? Sanders, both in his *Paul and Palestinian Judaism* and in a sequel, *Paul, the Law, and the Jewish People*,⁴ answers this question by suggesting that Paul's view of the human plight was a kind of byproduct of his view of salvation. Paul started with Christ as the "solution" to the human predicament, and then worked backward to explain the "plight" to which his saving work corresponds. Though Paul has traditionally been interpreted to teach that the problem of human sinfulness, which is made known and aggravated through the law's demand for perfect obedience, calls for a solution in Christ's person and work, we should recognize that his description of the problem of sin derives from his convictions about Christ. Paul, in effect, starts from the basic conviction that Christ is the only Savior of Jews and Gentiles. On the basis of this conviction, he then develops a doctrine of the law and human sinfulness that corresponds to it.

Sanders claims, therefore, that the apostle Paul rejected the law as a means of salvation for two principal reasons: first, this conflicts with his conviction that salvation only comes through faith in the cross of Christ; and second, the requirement of obedience to the law as a means of salvation would exclude the Gentiles. According to Sanders, Paul did not oppose the law because he found himself unable to keep its demands. Paul was not a prototype of the sinner (compare Luther) who, burdened by his inability to do what the law required, could only

find comfort in Christ's righteousness. Passages like Philippians 3:6-9 do not offer a critique of the law as a means of salvation, but of the law as an alternative to faith in Christ. The apostle Paul actually expresses in this passage a considerable confidence regarding a righteousness that is according to law. What he opposes, however, is clinging to a righteousness (however real) that is an alternative to faith in Christ. Paul's opposition to the law expresses his prior conviction that faith in Christ is the only way to salvation and inclusion among the people of God. Any insistence upon the law as a means of salvation would undermine the exclusive claim of salvation through faith in Christ, and prevent Gentiles from being included among the true people of God.

Thus, the great problem with Judaism, so far as the apostle Paul was concerned, was not that it was legalistic. Paul did not contest, according to Sanders, Palestinian Judaism's insistence upon zeal for the law. Nor did he object to Judaism on the basis of a conviction that no amount of effort to obey the law could ever make a person acceptable to God. His real (and only) objection to Judaism was that it denied the new reality of God's saving work through Christ. In words that have often been quoted, Sanders concludes: "In short, *this is what Paul finds wrong in Judaism: it is not Christianity.*"⁵

The doctrine of justification

Though Sanders does not give a great deal of attention to the doctrine of justification in his studies of Paul and Palestinian Judaism, it is evident that his position has impli-

cations for how this doctrine is to be understood.

Unlike the older Protestant formulation, Sanders does not believe justification addresses the problem of how a sinner (whether Jew or Gentile) can find acceptance with God. Consistent with his view of how Paul moves from solution to plight, Sanders takes Paul's doctrine of justification to be addressed to the question of *who belongs to the covenant community*. Justification is not so much an individual question

To be righteous in Jewish literature means to obey the Torah and to repent of transgression, but in Paul it means to be saved by Christ.

(how can I, a sinner, find a righteous God?), as it is an ecclesiological question (who are numbered among the people of God?). Paul's main argument with Judaism was not that it taught a doctrine of justification by works. After all, Judaism was a form of covenantal nomism that also emphasized God's gracious initiative in salvation, while requiring obedience to the law as a means of maintaining the covenant relationship. In these respects, Paul's pattern of religion does not differ significantly from Judaism. The problem with Judaism, as we have noted, is that it fails to recognize the new way of entrance into the number of God's covenant people, a way open to Jews and Gentiles who put their

faith in Jesus Christ.

Sanders' positive statement of the doctrine of justification, accordingly, focuses upon the way in which Jews and Gentiles alike are incorporated into the people of God. Paul developed his doctrine of justification in order to support his conviction that all who believe in Christ are members of the new covenant community. Paul's problem with Judaism was not that it confused grace and works, or taught that we become members of the covenant community by human achievement. The problem with Judaism was that it misunderstood God's righteousness, as though it referred to the way members of the covenant community maintain their status rather than to the way God places one within the covenant community. In a complicated but revealing statement of his position, Sanders declares:

To be righteous in Jewish literature means to obey the Torah and to repent of transgression, but in Paul it means to be saved by Christ. Most succinctly, righteousness in Judaism is a term which implies the maintenance of status among the group of the elect; in Paul it is a transfer term. In Judaism, that is, commitment to the covenant puts one "in", while obedience (righteousness) subsequently keeps one in. In Paul's usage, "be made righteous" ("be justified") is a term indicating getting in, not staying in the body of the saved. Thus when Paul says one cannot be righteous by works of law, he means that one cannot, by works of law, "transfer to the body of the saved." When Judaism said that one is righteous who obeys the law, the meaning is



that one thereby stays in the covenant. The debate about righteousness by faith or by works of law thus turns out to result from different usage of the “righteous” word group.⁶

This view of the difference between Judaism’s understanding of God’s righteousness and Paul’s provides a fairly comprehensive statement of Sanders’ view of justification. Sanders interprets Paul’s doctrine of justification to be his way of explaining how God embraces Gentiles and Jews as members of his new covenant community. Justification refers to one’s status as a member of the community, and that status is obtained by Jews and Gentiles alike through faith in Christ. Because membership in the new covenant community is through faith in Christ, it cannot be based upon the law or obedience to the law. If membership in the body of Christ is open to Gentiles as well as Jews, through faith in the crucified and risen Christ, then it may not be restricted to those to whom the law was previously given (the Jews) or to those who come “under the law” as the Judaizers were insisting. The righteousness of God, furthermore, is God’s active fulfillment of his covenant promise to embrace Gentiles together with Jews in the number of his people.

What is remarkable about Sanders’ view of Paul’s doctrine of justification is that it looks and sounds rather similar to the traditional Protestant view. Sanders acknowledges that justification is by grace through faith in Christ. He also acknowledges that it is a judicial act, which declares Jews and Gentiles alike to be in the status of belonging

to the covenant people of God. As he puts it, it is an act of “transfer” in which God reveals his righteousness, or his covenant faithfulness, by fulfilling the promise of incorporating Gentiles as well as Jews into the covenant community. However, it should also be noted that his understanding of Paul’s doctrine has several features that substantially differ from the view of the Protestant Reformation. According to Sanders, justification is not central to Paul’s understanding of the gospel. What is central is the claim that

What is remarkable about Sanders’ view of Paul’s doctrine of justification is that it looks and sounds rather similar to the traditional Protestant view.

faith in Christ is the only way of salvation for Jew and Gentile alike. Justification is a subordinate teaching of the apostle Paul, which explains why, if faith in Christ is the one way of salvation for all, the righteousness of the law may not be regarded as a requirement for entrance into the covenant community. Paul does not base his argument for the doctrine of justification upon the conviction that the law can only condemn and aggravate the problem of human sinfulness. Justification is not a doctrine formed against the background of legalism, or the teaching that obedience to the law is the way to find favor with God. No such legalism was present in the Palestinian Judaism of Paul’s

day, nor was it something from which Paul claims to be delivered with his Christian conversion. The doctrine of justification, simply put, is Paul’s conclusion from his basic conviction that the way of salvation is through faith in Christ.

Within the framework of this kind of interpretation of Paul’s doctrine of justification, Sanders takes quite a different view of the righteousness of God that is the basis for the justification of Jews and Gentiles. This righteousness is God’s covenant faithfulness in Christ, fulfilling his promise to include Gentiles among his people. Missing from Sanders’ interpretation of Paul’s teaching is an emphasis upon the righteousness of God as his free gift to his people. In the traditional Protestant view, the righteousness of God, which is revealed in Christ’s perfect obedience to the law and substitutionary enduring of the curse of the law, is said to be granted and imputed to those who believe in Christ (compare the Heidelberg Catechism, Lord’s Day 23). On the older view, Christ’s righteousness, namely, his perfect obedience and sacrifice upon the cross for the sins of his people, is freely given by God to all who receive Christ by faith alone, trusting in his saving work on their behalf. By fulfilling the law and suffering its curse, Christ obtains righteousness and eternal life as a free gift for his people. Salvation, therefore, is all about how sinners, who are unable to keep God’s law perfectly so as to find favor with him, find salvation through the righteousness of Christ. Or, to state it a little differently, the older view regards Paul’s doctrine of justification to be *the answer to the basic problem of (Jewish and Gentile)*

sinner, namely, their liability to God's judgment and wrath on account of their failure to obey his law.

Conclusion

We shall see in forthcoming articles that many of the features of Sanders' interpretation of Palestinian Judaism and of Paul's understanding of the gospel are common to advocates of the new perspective on Paul.⁷ Though the new perspective is complicated and represented in a widely divergent and complex body of literature, some of the main themes emerge rather distinctly in Sanders' work. These themes include the following:

1. The traditional Protestant view of (Palestinian) Judaism seriously distorts its true character. Judaism, at the time of the writing of the New Testament and of Paul's letters, did not teach that a person is saved through works or human achievement. Rather, Judaism taught that God saved his people Israel on the basis of his gracious election and mercy.
2. The traditional Protestant claim that the teaching of Roman Catholicism was a new version of the old error of Pharisaism (which teaches salvation through works) is, therefore, incorrect.
3. Palestinian Judaism exhibited a pattern of religion that is best termed "covenantal nomism" (E. P. Sanders). In this pattern of religion, one becomes a member of God's covenant community *by grace*, and one remains a member *by works* performed in obedience to the law. "Getting in" the covenant is

by grace; "staying in" (and being vindicated at the last judgment) is by works.

4. The apostle Paul's argument with Judaism (and therefore the Judaizers) was not aimed at its legalism. Nor was Paul's argument with Judaism based upon the assumption that the law can only condemn Jews and Gentiles alike as sinners. The starting point for Paul's quarrel with Judaism was that it was not Christianity. Since salvation comes to all (for Jews and Gentiles) who believe in the crucified Christ, *the great problem of Judaism is its exclusivism, not its legalism*. The problem with Judaism was not so much its insistence upon the necessity of obedience to the law, but its insistence that Gentiles must become (through obedience to the law) Jews in order to be saved.
5. The apostle Paul developed his doctrine of the human plight (of sin) from his doctrine of salvation through faith in Christ. Because faith in Christ is the only basis for salvation, obedience to the (Jewish) law may not be imposed upon anyone as the basis for inclusion among God's people.
6. Paul's doctrine of justification is not the principal focus or emphasis in his writings. Justification by grace through faith in Christ was Paul's explanation of how God is fulfilling his promise to embrace Gentiles as well as Jews among his people. God's righteousness, which is the basis for the believer's justification, is his gracious act of including Gentiles among the

number of his people. Justification is about who belongs to God's covenant people, not how a sinner can find favor with God through the perfect obedience and substitutionary sacrifice of Christ.

7. Justification, though it has to do with our standing before God or being numbered among his covenant people, does not require that God graciously grant and impute the perfect righteousness of Christ to believers.

Notes

- ¹ *Paul and Palestinian Judaism: A Comparison of Patterns of Religion* (London: SCM, 1977).
- ² *Paul and Palestinian Judaism*, p. 17.
- ³ *Paul and Palestinian Judaism*, p. 422.
- ⁴ London: SCM, 1985.
- ⁵ *Paul and Palestinian Judaism*, p. 552. Cf. Sanders' comment on p. 497: "It is the Gentile question and the exclusivism of Paul's soteriology which dethrone the law, not a misunderstanding of it or a view predetermined by his background."
- ⁶ *Paul and Palestinian Judaism*, p. 544.
- ⁷ I am well aware that some readers of *The Outlook* (in the case of this article, perhaps most!) will find it difficult to grasp what the new perspective on Paul is saying. I offer the following points of summary, therefore, in the hope that it might at least clarify what are some of the differences between the new perspective and more traditional Protestant views.

Dr. Cornel Venema is the President of Mid-America Reformed Seminary where he also teaches Doctrinal Studies. Dr. Venema is a contributing editor to *The Outlook*.



God's People, My Parish

Marv sat nervously before the Elders. His voice cracked as he spoke. Marv was a retired farmer in his mid-seventies. Upon retirement he worked at the local lumber yard. He did not want to be in the Council Room.

Not then, not ever. The trouble was that he had just been nominated to serve as an Elder. Upon receiving the letter asking him to serve, he immediately asked to be excused. When the Elders did not remove his name from nominations, he came personally to plead with them.

In his own unassuming way, Marv explained how he did not feel qualified to be an Elder in the church. Although a faithful member of the church, he had never taught Sunday School, had never led any Bible Study, nor had he ever been a Deacon. He had never graduated from eighth grade while many in the church had college educations. He felt certain that there were others more capable and more competent to serve than him.

My heart went out to Marv as he spoke to the Elders. I thought anyone brave enough to make a plea before the Elders should be removed from the slate. I also thought Marv had explained his reasons well enough to be excused.

Everyone of the Elders disagreed with me. They knew Marv was a quiet, unassuming person; but they also knew him as a faithful member of the church who loved the Lord. "Besides," they argued, "considering the other men on the ballot, he probably won't even be elected." I have

learned in my years in the ministry that statements like that are what we would call "famous last words." Marv was left on the ballot and elected to serve as Elder for three years.

For the longest time I wondered why the Lord wanted Marv in the Council Room. He never contributed to any of the discussions; he always voted with the majority; and he seldom spoke up during Family Visiting.

***I thought anyone
brave enough to
make a plea before
the Elders should be
removed from the
slate.***

About two and a half years later, I received a phone call from a distraught parent. Their teenage daughter was in the hospital. She had just had a baby. The parents didn't even know that she was pregnant.

I went to the hospital to visit with Julie and her newborn son. She wanted to keep the baby. She did not want to marry the father. We talked about her baby, her responsibilities, and her relationship with her family, the church, and the Lord.

A few months later Julie came before the Elders. She spoke of her irresponsibility which led to her pregnancy. She acknowledged that she

had broken the seventh commandment. She told us that she had prayed to the Lord for forgiveness and that she wanted to be right with the church.

For the first time since he was an Elder, Marv spoke up. He told of how when he was a young man he had made several mistakes in his life. All his life he wondered if the Lord could ever forgive him for the things that he had done. It wasn't that he doubted that the Lord could forgive him, he just wondered why He would ever want to.

"He doesn't have to forgive us," Marv said, "but He does!"

It was the most eloquent speech I had ever heard. When he finished there wasn't a dry eye in the room.

Julie has since gotten married. She has two more children and is an active member in the church.

Marv still thinks he is not qualified enough to serve as an Elder, but everyone who served with him knows exactly why God wanted him in the Council.

[The names in this article have been changed.]

Rev. Wybren Oord is the pastor of the Covenant United Reformed Church in Kalamazoo, Michigan and editor of *The Outlook*.

The Kingly Office of Elder

Serious reading today has to a large degree become a lost art. Since the office of Elder is primarily dependent on the self-read, and self-trained layman. This bids fare to become a serious matter with regard to the future welfare of the church. Already a common complaint for many consistories is that they are hard pressed to find competent men for the slate of nominees. No doubt the reason is not inability in most cases, but simply a lack of developing that latent ability through study and good reading.

Let us remember degeneration within the church or denomination will be controlled or accelerated to a large degree by the ability and qualifications of those who fill this kingly office. If the office is to be filled with men of insufficient knowledge, ability and background concerning the spiritual things, it will eventually bring on a creeping paralysis in the spiritual life of the church. The inevitable would take such a church down the same path as other churches or denominations before us, of whom it can no longer be said that they are sound of doctrine. Unless qualified men are placed in this important office that church or denomination will hasten the day when this office will degenerate from a kingly office in the service of the Master to a merely formalistic office. This becomes a gradual process of which there is no immediate awareness within that particular church or denomination.

Must Have Knowledge

When examining the duties of this office we can see why an Elder

must have knowledge of the things spiritual if he is to serve the Lord honorably. An Elder must be knowledgeable so as to guard against the inroads of Modernism and Arminianism. The ruling Elders are appointed by Christ himself to rule the church and becomes mutually responsible with the teaching Elder for the welfare of individual souls and the church at large.

They must be able to judge the content of a sermon to determine its Reformed qualities. The Elder should be able to comfort the sick and sorrowing, plead with the wayward, and comfort and/or admonish the saints with the word of God, as the occasions demand. He must be apt to teach. He should understand the real purpose of and be able to properly conduct family visiting.

In order to perform these duties it is sensible to suppose that he is a man acquainted with and able to discuss the pertinent passages of scripture. He must know the doctrines of the church and be able to defend them. He must be thoroughly familiar with the contents and rules of church order. He must have more than a passing acquaintance with the catechism. In general he should be a man well read in the spiritual realm, otherwise it would be impossible to measure up to this Kingly office.

Furthermore, an Elder is *required* to sign the Formula of Subscription "To Defend the Reformed Doctrine and militate against any errors. In addition he must promise by implication publicly to perform all the aforesaid." This can hardly be said

to be the lot of men for whom reading is a lost art.

A New and Different Age

Why do we find a scarcity of quality men among us today? Simply because the younger men coming up today are the products of a new and different age. The laymen of yesteryear found life less complicated and spent evenings studying with Bible and Commentary or a religious book.

On the whole the laymen of a former day had more time to read and study. He could *speak* intelligently concerning the deeper truths of Scripture because he was not a stranger to them. He was also capable of debate on doctrinal subjects. By comparison, life today is extremely busy and complicated. There is much to occupy our time! Our business or workplace, the do it yourself projects, the sporting events, transporting our children to school, television, computers, etc. Little wonder with all these activities that one finds little time for serious study during the week.

Consequently the family altar is no longer in vogue. Often there is only time for hurried devotions at mealtime. The lack of attendance in many of our Men Societies indicates that there is hardly time for an hour of group Bible Study. Need we wonder why it is often difficult to find qualified men for the Kingly Office of Elder!

Examination Special Instruction

All this is not written to cast reflection on the ability of present Elders, many of whom no doubt are very



capable. But what of the future?

The only reason given in the past for our failure to offer special training for Elders was that our constituency generally was quite well informed. Also that it might induce some to seek the office, who for other reasons might prove to be unsuitable for service. These objections are somewhat obsolete when one considers the present day situation. It would seem the time has come to re-evaluate our thinking under present day circumstances.

Mr. Dow R. Haan, Sr. is a member of the Covenant United Reformed Church in Kalamazoo, Michigan.

PLEASE NOTE

By some error, that we still haven't completely figured out, several of our subscribers did not get the September or the October issues of The Outlook. We deeply regret this and are working to get to the bottom of it. If you are missing these issues, please contact our office. We will either send them to you or extend your subscription. Thank you.

The editor

Sound Bites

Torch and Trumpet 1967

January 1967

"...we must desist from labeling believers and churches as either 'conservative' or 'progressive' (liberal) as if the former are solely interested in preserving the heritage of the past and the latter concerned only with speaking appropriately to their own time. The self-conscious, committed Christian always strives to be both at the same time."

The Editor's Page
Peter Y. De Jong

"...if the gospel is to meet us where we are, not in terms of our conception but in terms of God's judgment, it must be a gospel of God's doing, of God's action, of God's action with reference to His own judgment upon sin."

The Relevance of History
John Murray

February 1967

"For today's Christians nothing is more foolish and sinful than to wish wistfully that it were yesterday. Those were the good old times; the times in which it was supposedly quite easy to be a Christian, because the world wasn't quite as bad and could be held farther away from the church than now. Not only is this vain and unrealistic reasoning. It is clearly wicked."

The Editor's Page
P. Y. De Jong

April 1967

"The church's lot in the world is not an easy one. She is called to do all things to God's glory in a world where men worship themselves,

their achievements and their bellies."

The Apple of His Eye
Edward Heerema

July - August 1967

"The Church in the New Testament is the community of the 'called out ones.' Men and women, called out of the world and called into fellowship of the redeemed, constitute a new race, a chosen generation, a royal priesthood. The primary task of those 'called out ones' is to call others to separate themselves from their allegiance to the world and come to Christ, confessing their sins and acknowledging Christ as their Savior and Lord."

The Priority of Proclamation
Roger S. Greenway

September 1967

"True Christian education is worth the price at any cost, but the question in any individual case is whether the school is truly Christian, or whether it is merely a 'public' school with a part-time Bible department."

* * * * *

"More people are sending their children to the Christian schools; more brick and mortar is going up; to the external eye the Christian schools are more successful than ever before. Just at a time like this we need to exercise care, lest while we attain to the external marks of 'success' we slip our moorings and depart from the basic

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(continued from page 23)

principles upon which our schools were founded.”

*Why I Send My Children to the
Christian School*
Gordon Girod

October 1967

“In certain situations extra-creedal pronouncements are beneficial and, we believe, necessary in the application of a creedal teaching to a concrete situation.”

*After Four and One Half Years
- A Decision*
John B. Hulst

December 1967

“The danger today is that when you really take a stand, when you avow a commitment, you run the risk of being thought of as archaic, you are not scholarly. Scholarship amounts to this in the eyes of so many people, that you are searching. You are on the search for truth, but it is a search in which you never arrive. You don’t find it, and you don’t ever stand up to say that you know there is a finality about anything you affirm.”

Portrait of a Protestant
John Vander Ploeg