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# “Who May Ascend the Hill of the Lord?”

## Psalm 24

Ascension Day is a day of great interest and importance for the Christian. It was on this day that our Lord and Savior, having accomplished the work of redemption, ascended into the very glory of heaven itself. There He took His rightful place at the right hand of the Majesty on High. Psalm 24 points us to Ascension Day.

The Psalm begins with God’s sovereignty over all things: “The earth is the Lord’s and all its fullness, the world and those who dwell therein.

For He has founded it upon the seas, and established it upon the waters” (vv.1-2). The imagery of these opening verses is that of creation, and specifically, Genesis 1:2, “The earth was without form, and void; and darkness was on the face of the deep. And the Spirit of God was hovering over the face of the waters.”

Though God created all things out of nothing, the picture that we are given in Genesis 1:2 is that of chaos, an uninhabitable formlessness, a

chaotic void, with darkness on the face of the deep.

Throughout the creation week God speaks, bringing order out of chaos; God creates, making the world inhabitable; God makes man, placing him in the garden. In that perfect creation, man dwelt in the presence of God. Man stood in the presence of a Holy and Living God. He fellowshiped with God. Eden could have been given the name, “Immanuel, God with us.” Such is the imagery of verses 1-2.

Then we come to the great question of the Psalm in verse 3: “Who may ascend into the hill of the Lord? Or who may stand in His holy place?” The question ultimately is this: “Who may stand in the presence of the Lord?” “Who may enter



Volume 53, No. 4 (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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heaven?” That is the question of verse 3. It is the great question of Psalm 24.

The question seems abrupt, almost an intrusion in the Psalm. “Who may ascend into the hill of the Lord?” What is this question doing here in the Psalm? What does this question have to do with the theme of creation stated so eloquently in verses 1-2?

Verse 3, though seemingly abrupt, has everything to do with verses 1-2. Verse 3 speaks of “the hill of the Lord.” In the parallelism of verse 3, “the hill of the Lord” is equated with “His holy place.” The hill of the Lord is the place of God’s holy presence. God makes Himself known on His holy hill - His holy mountain. Throughout the Scriptures, God makes His presence known on the mountain (cf. Exodus 3:1;19; Psalm 2:6; 48:1-3; 87:1-3; 125:1-2).

It should come as no surprise that the Garden of Eden itself - that place of God’s presence where God revealed Himself to His own - was founded upon a mountain. Yes, a mountain! Ezekiel 28:13-14 tells us that Eden was founded upon a mountain: “You were in Eden, the garden of God; every precious stone was your covering .... You were the anointed cherub who covers; I established you; you were on the holy mountain of God...” The garden of Eden is here described as the holy mountain of God.

We have further evidence that the garden of Eden was founded upon a mountain from Genesis 2:10ff., where we read of the river that flows out of Eden and goes forth from there to water the earth. The

description suggests a mountain with a river flowing down. We may conclude therefore, on the basis of the biblical evidence, that the Garden of Eden was founded upon a mountain, the holy mountain of God.

The question of Psalm 24:3, then, makes perfect sense! Verse 3 continues the theme of creation begun in verses 1-2. Verse 3 reminds us that in God’s creation, the Garden of Eden was the place of God’s

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*Adam was entrusted  
with the task of  
guarding the  
presence of God.*

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holy presence; it was the hill of the Lord. God’s presence was there in the Garden of Eden, founded upon the holy mountain of God.

Verse 3 makes good sense; in fact, it is a necessary question. God’s presence was there in the garden, and Adam was given the charge to guard it. Recall the words of Genesis 2:15, “Then the Lord God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to tend and keep it.” The Hebrew reads literally, “to tend and guard it.” Adam was entrusted with the task of guarding the presence of God. If anything unholy were to enter the garden, Adam must lift his heel and crush its head.

Adam, of course, failed to do so. The devil, in the form of a serpent, slithered into Eden - slithered up into the hill of the Lord - slithered up into

His holy place. There Satan sought to do battle with God’s appointed guardian. Satan entered the garden, and Adam, God’s appointed guardian, stood passively by. Adam failed to guard the garden, driving out that which was unholy and evil. He failed to raise his heel to crush the head of the serpent. He sinned and was consequently cast out of the garden - no longer can he stand in God’s holy place, no longer can he ascend the hill of the Lord. The guardianship of the garden was then entrusted to the cherubim, placed on the East of Eden, with flaming swords in their hands flashing back and forth. Thus, Adam and Eve left the garden, descending from the hill of the Lord with the full knowledge that the only way back to the presence of God was through the sword of the cherubim. The only way back to life was through death.

The question of Psalm 24:3, then, is not an abrupt question at all. The question fits the Psalm. Not only does it fit the Psalm, it is a question that must be asked. The Garden of Eden, founded upon the hill of the Lord, was the place of God’s holy presence. Adam had been cast out. In Adam, all his posterity had been cast out. Hence the great question: “Who may ascend into the hill of the Lord? Who may stand in His holy place?”

The answer is given in verses 4-5, “He who has clean hands and a pure heart, who has not lifted up his soul to an idol, nor sworn deceitfully.” What is necessary to ascend into the hill of the Lord? What is necessary to stand in His holy place? Righteousness - absolute, perfect, undefiled righteousness!

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God is a holy God. No sinner can stand in His holy place. No sinner can ascend into His holy hill. Righteousness is necessary!

But we are not righteousness. We do not have the right to ascend the hill of the Lord. We do not have the right to stand in His holy place. Like Adam, and in Adam, we are cast out. We must seek our righteousness in another. We are instructed to look outside of ourselves for that righteousness which can stand in the presence of a holy God.

That is why we have the words of Psalm 24:6: "This is Jacob, the generation of those who seek Him, who seek Your face." Why is Jacob mentioned here in verse 6? For two reasons. The first is Genesis 28. The second is Genesis 32.

In Genesis 28 Jacob has just deceived his brother Esau. He is fleeing for his life; he is leaving the land of blessing; he is leaving the land of God's presence. He comes to Bethel. That night he sees a ladder. On the steps of that ladder are angels ascending and descending. And God Himself - guarded by the angels - came down those steps and stood beside Jacob. He spoke to Jacob. Jacob saw the face of God, and Jacob would not forget it. For the next several years, as Jacob sojourned in a foreign land, that night at Bethel sustained him. He had seen the face of God!

In Genesis 32, Jacob is on his way back to the promised land. That night, Jacob wrestles with God. As dawn approaches, the Lord touches Jacob's hip and cripples him so that Jacob could not win the wrestling match. God says to Jacob, "Let Me go for day breaks." The Lord issues

His warning to Jacob: "Jacob should you behold My face in the daylight, I will slay you. Let Me go for the day breaks!" Jacob responds: "Though it may cost me my life, I will not let You go! Though You slay me, yet will I trust in You!" Jacob was brought to the place that every true believer must be brought: to the place of complete and utter dependence upon God.

"This is Jacob, the generation of those who seek Him, who seek

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***We celebrate not only  
the ascension of  
Christ, but our  
ascension in Christ.***

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Your face" (Psalm 24:6). Jacob named the place Peniel, "the face of God" The very same word is used in Psalm 24:6. Jacob saw the Lord; he saw the face of God. From that day on, he would walk with a limp, but what a blessed limp it was! For Jacob had learned to depend and to cling to his Lord, and to his Lord alone. From the lips of Jacob, then, we have the precursor to the great and final statement of faith from the lips of our Lord Jesus Christ. You remember His last words upon Mount Calvary? "Father, into Thy hands I commit My Spirit." Into the hands of the Father who has forsaken Him! Into the hands of the Father who has poured out His wrath upon Him! Into the hands of the Father who slays Him! "Though He slay Me, yet will I trust in Him!"

It is to Christ that Psalm 24 points us. Only those who cling to Him, as Jacob clung to God - only those who cling to God as the Son clung to the Father - only they may ascend the hill of the Lord. Only they may stand in the presence of the Holy God. Only those ascend who depend fully, entirely, and utterly upon the righteousness of another: the righteousness of Christ!

It is to Christ, then, that Psalm 24 points us in those great and majestic words of verses 7-10: "Lift up your heads, O you gates! And be lifted up, you everlasting doors! And the King of glory shall come in. Who is this King of glory? The Lord strong and mighty, the Lord mighty in battle. Lift up your heads, O you gates! Lift up you everlasting doors! And the King of glory shall come in. Who is this King of glory? The Lord of hosts, He is the King of glory."

On the great day of Ascension, Christ enters into heaven! The gates had to lift up their heads, they could not do otherwise - the King of Glory was in their midst! The everlasting doors had to be thrown open, they could not do otherwise - the King of Glory was in their midst! And He took His rightful spot there upon the throne, at the right hand of the majesty on High. The King of Glory has come in!

But don't forget the theme of creation. The great question of Psalm 24:3, was "how do we go back?" Paradise has been lost - how do we go back? How do we go back to the garden? How do we go back to stand where Adam stood, in the holy place of the Lord, on His holy hill?



You see the answer, don't you? We don't go back to the garden! Our Savior brings us to a city! We don't go back to the first Adam, we have been joined to the last Adam! We are not brought back to the first Adam, in his original state - righteous, yet able to fall! We are brought to the last Adam, beyond probation, confirmed in righteousness! Already now we are seated in the heavenly places in Christ (Ephesians 2:6)! We have gained far more in Christ than we lost in Adam. We don't go back to Eden, we have been lifted up to Zion - to the presence of the living God! Now we long for His return when He shall establish a new creation: the new heavens and the new earth!

Ascension Day is a day of great interest and importance for Christians. It is on this day that Christ entered into the glory of heaven. We celebrate not only the ascension of Christ, but our ascension in Christ, for He has seated us in the heavenly places, there to behold the face of the King of Glory!

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# The Ascension of Jesus: Myth or Fact?

“The account of the Ascension is quite useless to the historian,” wrote the German church historian and theologian Adolf von Harnack. His claim made a lasting impact. Many people, even within the church, deny the historicity of the Ascension. Perhaps one of the reasons for disbelief is the seemingly fantastic nature of the event. The narrative of Jesus' Ascension, portrayed in Acts 1:9, as an upward spatial movement may be a great scene for a movie, but it appears absurd in an age of space travel.

Modern theologians also question the Ascension. They claim that the literal ascension narrative is conditioned by its time and culture. It was a pre-scientific age when people imagined heaven to be “up there” so that Jesus had to be “taken up.” They argue, “We have now an altogether different understanding of the universe, an up-to-date view of science, technology and space. We should, therefore, demythologize the Ascension.”

We may point to liberal theologians and their questioning of the Ascension, but how meaningful is it for us? Has this central fact of the doctrine of salvation disappeared from our theological “radar screen,” and from our faith experience? Or is it still alive and well for us? Most of us pay special attention to Christmas, Good Friday and Easter. But judging by the poor attendances at the Ascension Day services, the same cannot be said of the Ascension.

We may profess it when we recite the Apostles' Creed, yet forget about it the rest of the week. This is regrettable. Augustine once said, the Ascension Festival is that “festival which confirms the grace of all the festivals together, without which the profitableness of every festival would have perished. For unless the Saviour had ascended into heaven, his Nativity would have come to nothing... and his Passion would have born no fruit for us, and his most holy Resurrection would have been useless.”

In our time of theological confusion and controversy, political uncertainty, unprecedented prosperity in North America, combined with the war against terrorism, the Ascension of our Lord is a crucial doctrine to recover. The belief that Jesus is in heaven right now should greatly affect how Christians live and function in our world today. Jesus is not dead. The tomb is empty. We serve the risen and ascended Savior.

## Jesus' Expectations of the Ascension

The New Testament refers to the Ascension in many places. Our Lord descended to earth to ascend to heaven (John 3:13). Having lived with His Father from the dateless past, Jesus, as He lived and ministered on earth, longed to be back in heaven - His original home. The heavenly host sang praises at His birth. The Holy Spirit descended upon Him at His bap-

tism. An angel came from heaven to minister to Him in Gethsemane. He eagerly anticipated His Ascension.

Jesus steadfastly faced the cross, knowing that it would be followed by His coronation (cf. Luke 9:51). He promised His own that He would go and prepare a place for them in His Father's home (John 14:3). With all authority, He pronounced "I am going to the Father" (John 14:12). Our Lord prophesied His Ascension and longed for it.

### **The Ascension: a Historical Fact**

The Gospel proclamation may not be divorced from history. As Christ rose bodily from the grave so He bodily ascended to heaven. The church does not proclaim a myth but a historical event. She does not only confess the historical Jesus but the reality of His presence today. "The Ascension," notes Peter Toon, "is the removal of the resurrected body of Jesus from space and time into the immediate presence of God."

Our Lord's Ascension was visible and public as He wanted His disciples to know that His departure was final. His disciples were to wait for somebody else: the Holy Spirit (Acts 1:4). Our Lord left this world to pass into the other world, to remain there until His second advent (Acts 3:21). The author of Hebrews says Jesus "will appear a second time, not to bear sin, but to bring salvation to those who are waiting for him" (Hebrews 4:14; 9:28).

Luke has much to say about the importance of eyewitnesses for the verification of the Gospel. The dis-

ciples clearly saw Jesus ascending to heaven. It happened while Jesus was in the act of blessing His disciples on their return from Jerusalem (Luke 24:50,52). As His hands were lifted up in a priestly benediction, Jesus vanished out of sight. They were witnesses. That's why we can be sure of the fact of the Ascension. The apostles mention frequently the Ascension. Paul speaks of Jesus "received up in glory" (1 Timothy 3:16). He exhorts the Colossian believers to "set your

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*The belief that Jesus is in heaven right now should greatly affect how Christians live and function in our world today.*

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hearts on things, where Christ is seated at the right of God" (Colossians 3:1). Peter declares that Jesus has "gone into heaven and is at the right hand of God" (1 Peter 3:22).

### **The Exalted King**

What does Jesus' ascension mean for Himself and us? John Calvin summed up Jesus mediatorial role as taught in the Scriptures: "In order that faith may find a firm basis for salvation in Christ, and thus rest in Him, this principle must be laid down: the office enjoined upon Christ by the Father consists of three parts. For He was given to be prophet, king, and priest" (Cf. Heidelberg Catechism q/a 31). With the Nicene Creed, the church confesses:

He ascended into heaven, and sits at the right hand of the Father. He shall come again in glory to judge the quick and the dead; and his kingdom shall have no end.

His Ascension was the crowning moment, the act of enthronement, inaugurating His eternal reign as the God-human Lord. Christ is not *going* to be King. He is the exalted King and Lord of lords - today. He is seated at the right hand of God, which implies the position of dignity, honor, and authority. He had completed His redemptive work on earth. The victory was won. Our Lord's death on the cross in principle broke the hold of Satan over the hearts and lives of people.

Jesus now governs all the affairs of the world for the glory of His Father. In heaven, He rules as King for the glory of God for the fulfillment of His purposes (Hebrews 1:3) As King, He exercises power in upholding and controlling the world. All power over angels and mankind is His. He has full authority over all other authorities whether spiritual, demonic, or otherwise. He is the Ruler over the church by His Word and Spirit and guards her against her enemies. He is sovereign over His world and over history.

### **Public Truth**

What is the relevance of the Ascension in an age of internet, technology and scientism, which is deliberately debunking the Gospel? The Ascension brings the claims of the Gospel right into the public square, the open market of real events in space and time. The Gospel engages the realities of both personal and public life. It is not



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otherworldly or anti-intellectual. It speaks about heaven as well as earth. There is no distinction between the sacred and the secular, the spiritual and the temporal. The Christian faith is not just for home and church or for the life to come. It is lived in this world. The Gospel resists the spiritualizing the Ascension.

Today Christians are told that their faith is a private matter, and it is best kept that way. This is a false dichotomy between public and private faith. Many claim that the world of facts, of science and education, politics and governing, leisure, and work are realms of public truth. What is truth can be known and seen. Therefore, religious faith and belief systems are placed in area of private truth.

Let me give an illustration from politics. The privatization of faith in Canada has advanced more rapidly than in the USA. In the last Canadian election, the main challenger for the federal premiership was Stockwell Day, an evangelical Christian. He was vilified by the national press for allegedly believing that human beings once coexisted with dinosaurs. The then and still Prime Minister Chretien and several of his cabinet ministers protected themselves by claiming to be Catholic. Yet Chretien is an advocate of abortion and homosexual "rights" - both practices called sinful by his church. Nevertheless, he is adamant that church and state should be completely separated. Unfortunately, Mr. Day declared that his Pentecostal beliefs were no more relevant or deserving of scrutiny than his opponents!

Douglas Farrow, Professor at

McGill University, Montreal, commented: "Imagine the furor had either Mr. Day or Mr. Chretien said that he believed that all true public authority was now vested by God in a crucified, resurrected and ascended Jew, and that, if elected to political service, he would attempt to serve this Jew to the best of his ability by pursuing a sound and merciful exercise of justice for all the people within the Canadian dominion!"

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***Christ is not going to be King. He is the exalted King and Lord of lords - today.***

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The present situation amounts to a fundamental reversal of Christ's Ascension and Kingship. The danger is great that by refusing to recognize the Kingship of Christ over the state, the state will take on a demonic character (cf. Rev. 13). Christians, servants of the ascended Lord and King Jesus Christ, have a calling to bear witness to Him in private and public life. To serve Him in every sphere of life, including politics and social-economic life, also in the sciences and the arts is our task and privilege.

Wherever we are placed in life, we are to seek the glory and honor of our King, Who is still in heaven. In our decadent culture, we need more than a private faith to carry us through our daily struggle. We need a wholehearted commitment

to the Lord in every sphere of our lives. The everyday activity of ordinary Christians has indeed deep religious meaning. The English poet George Herbert expressed this insight so well:

Teach me, my God and King,  
In all things thee to see;  
And what I do in anything  
To do it as for thee.

This is the kind of obedient witness in imitation of Christ that will be tested by martyrdom - whether social, political and, if necessary, even unto death.

**Conclusion**

The more a Christian knows and understands the great Ascension theme, the more he realizes there is so much more to be known. Although we may not fully understand the doctrine of the Ascension, it still is a comforting and challenging truth. Nowadays, it seems that the powers of this world have the final word. On the surface, we can't find many signs of Christ's Kingship. Presidents, prime ministers, generals, dictators may think they are in charge, but they are wrong. The Bible teaches us not to fear the powers of this world but the One Who sits at the right of God the Father. We must put all our trust in Him and serve Him.

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# Did God Really Say?

When God placed Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden He gave them maximum freedom and He gave them dominion over all things. They were to rule the earth. There were no restrictions as to how they would rule - except for the matter of one tree: the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil. From that tree they were not allowed to eat.

Many foolish things have been said about that tree. I have read that it was an apple tree - the Bible never tells us that. One writer claimed that the fruit of the tree was grapes and the sin of Adam and Eve was making wine and getting drunk. Others say that the tree is only symbolic and the sin of Adam and Eve was a sexual awareness of one another. How they were going to "be fruitful and multiply" without that awareness is never explained.

Know this, dear reader, the Bible is the infallible, inerrant Word of God. It speaks the truth to us. There was a tree in the Garden of Eden, and although Adam and Eve had maximum freedom, although they had dominion over all the creatures of the earth, they were not to eat from that tree.

That tree was there to remind them that they were not God. They were created in His image, as we saw last month with q/a 6 of the Heidelberg Catechism, but they were still responsible and answerable to the almighty God who had created them and who had dominion over them.

Satan, the father of all lies, seems to come to Adam and Eve very quickly after they were placed in the garden. He suggests to our first parents that perhaps God is not as benevolent as He appears to be. Perhaps, Satan suggests, the words of God are not to be trusted.

It is the validity of the Word of God that is at issue with Satan's temptation. Satan's first words to Eve are designed to cast doubt upon the word of God. Satan asks: "Did God really say...?" This is the first question in the Bible. I am convinced that not only Eve's sin, but the origin of all sin is involved in that very same speculation that Satan cast into Eve's heart: "Did God really say...?"

· Did God really say you are saved by grace, or must you earn your salvation?

· Did God really say women cannot hold office within the church?

· Did God really say abortion and euthanasia are wrong?

· Did God really say a loving monogamous same-sex relationship is sin?

Let us look back at the very first time Satan used those words in Genesis 3. The exact words of Satan are of special interest to us because they show us how Satan operates. "Did God really say 'you must not eat from any tree in the garden?'"

Is that what God said? NO! That is not what God said at all. God had told Adam and Eve that they *could* eat from *any* tree in the garden with the exception of one: the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. And He even explained why they could not eat from it: Because the day they did, they would surely die.

Do you see what Satan did? Satan took a very positive invitation from God to eat of every tree save one, and he changed it into a negative prohibition designed to cast doubt upon God's goodness. Satan suggested that God was not good, that God was nothing more than a "Thou shalt not". He did not wish the best for His creatures.

At first, the woman disagrees with Satan, but Satan has already put her on the defensive. After she explains that she and her husband can eat from any tree except the one in the middle or they will die, Satan says: "You will not die!" This is an outright denial of God's word.

That is really the issue, isn't it? Is God telling the truth or is Satan telling

*Q Where does man's corrupt nature come from?*

*A From the fall and disobedience of our first parents, Adam and Eve, in Paradise.*



the truth? Can the giver of every good gift be trusted? Does the Almighty Creator of heaven and earth purposely deceive His children by His Word?

Sadly, we read in Genesis 3, that the woman looked at the fruit and saw that it was good and pleasing to the eye and also desirable for gaining wisdom. Eve took some of the fruit, ate it, and then gave some to her husband and he ate as well. Since that time, the catechism teaches, everyone born of Adam and Eve is born a sinner, corrupt from conception on. The Fall has poisoned our very nature with sin. Sin is unbelief; it is a rejection of God's Word.

We are not sinful because we were so created. We were created good, in God's image. We are sinful because we chose to be sinful. We chose to reject God's Word. We have no one to blame but ourselves.

Once we begin to understand our fallen state as a rejection of God's Word, we can, by the power of the Holy Spirit in us, return to that Word for deliverance. No sooner did Adam and Eve fill themselves with guilt, than God came to provide grace. That grace is found in His Word, the Word that became flesh and dwelt among men. Our trust must be in the crucified and risen Savior, Jesus Christ, because God really did say: "All who believe in His Son will not perish but have eternal life."

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## TEEN SCENE

### Shielded by Faith



*"He holds victory in store for the upright,  
He is a shield to those whose walk is blameless,  
for He guards the course of the just  
and protects the way of His faithful ones."*

*Proverbs 2:7-8*

Ephesians 6:16 states, "In addition to all this, take up the shield of faith, with which you can extinguish all the flaming arrows of the evil one." We need a shield away from our bodies to protect us. If we do not have a shield an arrow may hit us. It may even be able to pierce our armor. Even worse the arrow may strike our necks or faces which are not covered by armor.

This shield needs to be large like the Roman shield of Paul's day - a shield that would cover most of the body. The Roman shields were not only large but they were also covered in animal skin which could be dipped in water before battle. That way, if the enemy shot flaming arrows, the water would douse out the flame as the arrow struck the wet shield.

The enemy will do anything to destroy the people of God. There are no holds barred from his arsenal. As the devil attacks with these flaming arrows you can take hits in your shield. Whatever momentum the arrows have can be absorbed by the shield.

What is this shield that we have for protection? It is faith! Faith comes from the Lord to cover and protect that which the other parts of armor can not protect. All parts of armor are necessary. That is why this is in addition to the other parts of the armor. The armor is not complete without the shield, nor the shield complete without the rest of the armor. You are only ready for battle when you have all the pieces. You can not pick and chose which you want. You do not want to go into battle without a shield or a breast plate! An arrow would take you out early in the battle.

The arrows of the devil are real. Some examples of them would be: greed, lust, pride, jealousy, drunkenness, sexual impurity, and even physical persecution. If we read the paper or watch television we can see that we are surrounded by these very things.

We need to build up that faith which God has given us. How do we do this? By being in His Word, soaking in it. Believe every syllable in it and practice the teachings in

our daily lives. By worshiping God and hearing His Word proclaimed to us for a better understanding of that Word and God's will for our lives.

When we are in worship and partake of the sacraments, this too, builds our faith. The Lord's Supper and Baptism remind us that we are in Christ and that we are His and that the Father keeps His covenant promises to us. We also strengthen our shield by being in constant prayer to God, having open communion with Him directly. What an awesome ability, to go directly to God in prayer because Christ is mediating for us before the Father. Christ is speaking to God on our behalf! Finally surround yourself with Christian family and friends. These are the people who are truly concerned for you and can help you

and minister to you when you are under constant attack. This is the way to build up the faith.

When we build up our faith we can even use our shield as an offensive weapon. The shield is primarily a defensive weapon but it can be used to smash an enemy. If you take a hard object and ram it into someone, it can do a lot of damage. I think Paul may have had this in mind when he wrote in 2 Corinthians 10:3-6, "For though we live in the world, we do not wage war as the world does. The weapons we fight with are not the weapons of the world. On the contrary, they have divine power to demolish strongholds. We demolish arguments and every pretension that sets itself up against the knowledge of God, and we take captive every

thought to make it obedient to Christ." You see, faith with the knowledge and proper use of God's Word can demolish sinful desires. Faith, given to us by God, gives us the courage to stand up and actually attack with it. A mind that is set in God's ways is a powerful weapon.

This may seem like a graphic picture of battle. The soldier needs to prepare in such a way as to protect himself against anything that the enemy might try to do to him. That is true. But we have a great hope and we are not to be afraid in this battle for God provides our armor! He is the one who gives us our shield. He gives us the means to soak it in the water of His word. Everything in God's Word is for the Christians benefit. He sent His Son to save us from the wrath we deserve and from the fiery flames of the evil one. Remember it is God who shields you. So, go soak your shield!

## *For Further Study*

Read Hebrews 11

- Count how many times the word faith is used in this passage. Does this say anything about the importance of faith and its relationship to the people mentioned concerning faith?
- How is faith defined?
- Where does faith have its source from?
- When you have faith what does it act on?
- Who was the Old Testament patriarchs faith based on? Had He come yet? What was Moses looking forward to?
- What can faith overcome?

Read Hebrews 12:1-2

- Who is the one who gives and completes our faith? Do we do anything ourselves?

Read Acts 11:5-7 ; Ephesians 1:13-14

- Is faith a gift? Who from?
- What does it mean to be sealed? Who seals us in our faith?

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# He Is Coming Again

*“Ye men of Galilee why stand ye gazing up into heaven? This same Jesus which is taken up from you into heaven shall so come in like manner as you have seen him go up into heaven.”*

Acts 1:11

The angels came to lift up the spirits of the disciples, but at the same time to jolt them into action “Why stand ye here gazing up into heaven?” the angels asked, as if to say: “The master has given you your mission. The Lord has ascended, so it’s time to get busy before He comes again!”

So what did Jesus tell us about end time and His second coming? One of the first things we learn is that when Jesus comes again it will spell the end of time as we know it to be. The portals of eternity will be swung open. We are told that the end time will not come until the number of the elect is complete, a time that God will alone determine. Jesus said: “But of that day and hour knoweth no man, no, not the angels of heaven, but my Father only” (Matthew 24:36).

The apostle Peter tells us: “But the day of the Lord will come as a thief in the night; in which the heavens shall pass away with a great noise, and the elements shall melt with fervent heat, and the earth also and the works that are therein shall be burned up” (II Peter 3:10).

There are many who scoff at such predictions. However, if man can destroy a city with just one atom bomb, who would doubt that the almighty God who created the heavens and the earth by the spoken

word, and man by the breath of His mouth, is not only able, but will most certainly do as He said.

## An Implied Warning

There is an implied warning in II Peter 3: 10. If the Lord calls one out of this world prior to His return, then for him the hour would have arrived. One would immediately come face to face with eternity, an eternity that spells either heaven or Hades. There will be no second opportunity. Scripture admonishes us not to get so engrossed with the material cares of this world that we erode the spiritual values of life to our own detriment.

The Scriptures remind us of the brevity of life so that we might ever be prepared for that hour:

“As for man, his days are as the grass; as a flower of the field, so he flourisheth. For the wind passeth over it, and it is gone; and the place thereof shall know it no more” (Psalm 103:15,16).

Jesus emphasizes this truth as He warns us, “Therefore be ye also ready, for in such an hour as ye think not the Son of Man cometh” (Matthew 24:44).

When the believer is called home, that person yields his soul into the loving care of the almighty God in heaven. There he shall enjoy the

blessedness of paradise, in the presence of the Savior (II Corinthians 5:8). For the unbeliever there is no heaven. The Bible refers to their eternal dwelling place as Sheol (O.T.) or Hades (N.T.). Thus the warning of Isaiah: “Seek ye the Lord while He may be found, call ye upon Him while He is near” (Isaiah 55:6).

Jesus compared His second coming with the time of the flood. All the while Noah was building the ark the people ignored the warnings to repent. They mocked Noah. “They were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, until the day that Noah entered into the ark, and knew not until the flood came and took them all away” (Matthew 24:38, 39). So it will be when Jesus comes again. People will be eating and drinking and making merry, refusing to repent and believe, caught in the element of surprise and forever too late.

## Signs of the Times

The Scriptures do not inform us of the time of Christ’s second coming. It does, however, give us some signs that will precede His coming so that we might not be caught unaware. One of the first signs associated with the second coming is that the gospel will have been preached in every nation. This will be done “for a testimony” unto all nations (Matthew 24:14) In Mark 13:10 we read that the gospel must first be “published” in every nation.

There are some who interpret these texts to mean that the gospel must be preached to every individual in these nations. The text says the gospel shall be preached for “a testi-

mony” against these nations. This does not imply that the gospel shall be known to all men individually, nor does it infer that Christianity will be the prevailing religion among all nations at the end time. With all the modern means of communications in our modern world: radio, television, the Internet, etc. which can reach around the world, one might come to the conclusion that this prediction is rapidly being fulfilled, if indeed it has not already reached this point.

In addition, we are told that there will be wars and rumors of wars. Since World War II this world has continually experienced wars and rumors of wars: Bosnia, India, Pakistan, Iraq, Israel, Korea, and Vietnam to name but a few. Somehow we fail to associate these things with what Scripture predicts concerning the end time. One has to wonder, when we see the multiplicity of these events, if we have not already entered the first phase of the end times.

### **The Great Tribulation**

Following these signs we are told will come the great tribulation and apostasy. There will be a great falling away from the truth. Iniquity will increase and the love of many will wax cold (Matthew 24:12; II Thessalonians 2:3; I Timothy 3: 1). Many will depart the faith, giving heed to seducing spirits and doctrines of devils (I Timothy 4:1).

The apostle John writes in his vision: “And he causes all, both small and great, rich and poor, free and bond free, to receive a mark in their right hand, or in their foreheads: And that no man might buy or sell, save that hath the mark, or the name of the

beast, or the number of his name” (Revelation 13:16, 17).

Those of the true church will be severely persecuted. There will be great tribulation according to Matthew 4:21; Mark 13:12; I Timothy 4:2; and I Timothy 3:1,2.

This is, in more ways than not, a description of many attitudes expressed in our day. Previously, many sinful things were done in secret, and, when they were exposed, society placed a mark of shame

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## ***One has to wonder if we have not already entered the first phase of the end times.***

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upon them. Today these same sins are practiced in the open without shame, and with the general approval of society, and under the protection of the law. Could it be that the shameful proclivity of these activities are a mark of the things predicted regarding the end time?

### **The Antichrist**

Following the time of the great tribulation, the antichrist will make his appearance on the world stage. Even “him” whose coming is after the working of Satan with all power, and signs, and lying wonders.

There is much speculation as to who or what this antichrist really is. Some think the antichrist will be an institutional power. Others think he will be born out of a succession of persons such as the papacy. However our

reformed doctrine clearly states that he will be a person “That man of sin be revealed, the son of perdition” (II Thessalonians 2:3)

Satan will be seeking to imitate God. He will oppose and exalt himself above God. He will hate the worshipers of the true God. He will deceive many with lying wonders, and will rage against the church. He will bitterly persecute the faithful.

Consternation will reign among the people. There will be utter confusion, as persecution and tribulation will bring great fear among the people. They will no longer know where to turn, nor whom to believe. They will be surrounded by suffering and death on every side.

“Except those days should be shortened, there should no flesh be saved; but for the elect’s sake those days will be shortened” (Matthew 24:22). “And shall not God avenge His own elect, which cry day and night unto Him, though He bare long with them? I tell you He will avenge them speedily. Nevertheless when the Son of Man cometh shall He find faith on the earth?” (Luke 18:7,8).

Reflect for a moment on the terrorist situation of our day. One man, Bin Laden seems to have many terrorist cells trained and scattered into all parts of the world. As such he holds many countries in abject fear of where he will strike next. His only purpose is to kill people. His actions, much like the antichrist are born out of religious hatred for Christianity. Bad as this situation is, it will pale in comparison to that persecution and tribulation that the antichrist will bring to the world’s stage.



## Christ Will Appear

Then suddenly the Christ will appear on the clouds of heaven. "And I John saw the Holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down from God out of Heaven" (Revelation 21:2).

It will be a glorious coming as He will be preceded by the archangel. The angels of heaven will form a body-guard, as it were, and following them will be the saints of God. At the great sound of the trumpet of God, a sound like as never been heard on earth before, the dead in Christ shall arise first, and all that are in the graves shall hear His voice (I Thessalonians 3).

It will be a bodily resurrection, similar to that of Christ. This corruptible body must put on incorruption, and we shall be changed in the twinkling of an eye. Thus our vile bodies shall be changed into the likeness of Christ's resurrection body, and we will be freed to meet our Lord in the air.

"Ye are come unto mount Zion, and unto the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to an innumerable company of angels. To the general assembly and church of the first born, which are written in heaven, and to God the Judge of all, and to the spirits of just men made perfect, and to Jesus the mediator of the new covenant." (Hebrews 12:22)

Yea, come Lord Jesus, come quickly!

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# We Confess

## *An Exposition & Application of the Belgic Confession*

### *Article 1 (Part 1) The Nature of God*

"Who is like the LORD our God, who dwells on high, who humbles Himself to behold the things that are in the heavens and in the earth?" (Psalm 113:5-6). "For who in the heavens can be compared to the LORD? Who among the sons of the mighty can be likened to the LORD?" (Psalm 89:6). "Who is like You, O LORD, among the gods? Who is like You, glorious in holiness, fearful in praises, doing wonders?" (Exodus 15:11).

Texts such as these fill our minds and hearts with wonder and awe before our great covenant God. But these words must also cause us to be faithful witnesses in our culture which is so dark with unbelief. Although the latest surveys show that 97% of Americans claim to believe in "god," many do not believe in the one true God of Scripture. Of these 97% notice the following numbers of people who worship false gods

- 3% believe *there are many gods*
- 4% believe *everyone is God*
- 7% believe that *God is the total realization of human potential*
- 11% believe that *God is the state of higher consciousness*

While almost everyone in our culture believes in "god," 25% of them have created a god in their own image! As one theologian has said, "In the beginning God created man in His image, and man has been returning the favor ever since."

Are you "ready to give a defense to everyone who asks you a reason for the hope that is in you?" (I Peter 3:15) All of us are called to be salt and light, and the best way to let our light shine and our salt sting is to know what we believe and why we believe it - *before* we are asked! This is why we study the Belgic Confession.

Our Confession of Faith has six major parts to it. First, there is the Doctrine of God in articles 1-13. Second, there is the Doctrine of Man in articles 14-15. Third, there is the Doctrine of Christ in articles 16-21. Fourth, there is the Doctrine of Salvation in articles 22-26. Fifth, there is the Doctrine of the Church in articles 27-36. And sixth, there is the Doctrine of the End in article 37.

Let us begin with the first part of our Confession: the Doctrine of God Article 1, which can be outlined as follows:

- I. The Nature of God
- II. The Attributes of God
  1. Incommunicable Attributes
  2. Communicable Attributes

### ***Beginning in the Beginning***

The doctrine of God is what we call

“Theology Proper.” And our Confession of Faith begins, rightly so, with the doctrine of who God is and what He is like. Our Confession begins just like the Bible begins: “In the beginning God...” (Genesis 1:1). To begin our Confession with God is a confession of how we view the world. God has eternally existed before all things, He is the beginning of all things, and He is the end of all things. As Paul says, “For of Him, and through Him, and to Him are all things, to whom be glory forever. Amen” (Romans 11:36).

### I. The Nature of God

*“...there is one only simple and spiritual Being, which we call God.”*

#### *God is One*

We will deal with the unity of God when we get to articles 8-9 on the Holy Trinity. For now, though, let us understand that we affirm the simple teaching of Scripture as understood by the ancient Church. The three great ecumenical creeds of the “one, holy, catholic and apostolic Church” affirm the unity of God by saying

*I believe in God  
(Apostles’ Creed)*

*We believe in one God  
(Nicene Creed)*

*The catholic faith is this:  
that we worship one God  
in Trinity, and Trinity in  
Unity (Athanasian Creed)*

One of the purposes of the Confession was to link the Reformed Faith back to the ancient faith so that we would not be seen as radicals, like the Anabaptists, but as in essential harmony with all true Christians.

#### *God is Simple*

We also confess that God is “simple.” Anyone who has delved into books such as Stephen Charnock’s, *The Existence and Attributes of God* or Herman Bavinck’s, *The Doctrine of God*, knows that God cannot be understood simplistically. So what does the term “simple” mean? It obviously doesn’t mean that we can fully understand Him or that God is a simpleton; instead it means that He cannot be divided.

This means that God cannot be di-

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***While almost everyone in our culture believes in “god,” 25% of them have created a god in their own image!***

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vided up like a piece of pie; one part being the Father, one part being the Son, and another part being the Holy Spirit; or, one part being love, one part being just, and another part being holy. Each Person of the Trinity is 100% God, not one third of God. And the whole essence, the

whole Being of God *is* love (1 John 1:5), *is* just (1 John 1:9), and *is* light, or holy (1 John 4:8). God is 100% love, 100% just, and 100% holy all of the time.

#### *God is Spirit*

We also confess God to be “Spirit” (John 4:24). This means that God has no physical body (except God the Son who became a man) and that He is of a different substance than us. The spirituality of God and the simplicity of God go together, as a “Spirit” does not have flesh and bones and a “Spirit” cannot be cut up into parts.

So “who is like the LORD our God?” (Psalm 113:5) No other person, thing, or “god.” He is uniquely our God and the only God.

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### ***Questions for Further Study/Discussion***

1. What are some of the false beliefs about God that you know of in your circle of influence that the Biblical doctrine of God can respond to?
2. How does the Belgic Confession’s beginning with the doctrine of God apply to how we view the world?



# Three Questions for Those Who Favor CRC Decision on Homosexuals

*(The following article is a reprint from the August 1973 issue of The Outlook. It has been edited for size.)*

The 1973 CRC Synod has spoken on homosexuality.

In a nutshell, Synod rejected *homosexuality* (homosexual practice) as sin (for which we are in deed grateful!) while at the same time it made certain pronouncements about *the homosexual* that call for the most careful scrutiny and Scriptural consideration.

Some are horrified.

Many, myself included, are deeply concerned. It may be fitting then to address three specific questions to those who prepared the report for Synod, to those who voted for it at Synod, and also to others who give it their approval.

Please be assured that the questions here posed are being asked in good faith and with genuine concern.

## Question Number One

Where is the evidence for the basic assumption that homosexuality is constitutional rather than something acquired and cultivated?

No evidence from Scripture is given for this basic assumption in the report. The study committee states: "Paul does not make the kind of distinction we have made earlier between homosexuality and homosexualism" (Agenda 1973, p. 485).

On whose say-so must we then accept this basic assumption in the report and in Synod's decision? On the word of Synod's study committee, science, the experts? But that the experts are not all agreed in saying that homosexuality is "constitutional" is evident from the following:

In *His* (Feb. 1966, p. 24), Magazine of Inter-Varsity Christian Fellowship, Dr. Charles Young, a psychiatrist with the University of Illinois health service in Urbana, Illinois (MD from the U. of Mich. Medical School and psychiatric residency with the Menninger School of Psychiatry) had this to say:

"I am persuaded that homosexuality is mainly a learned condition, and that anything learned may be altered by further learning. I do not believe that anyone is damned from the time of his conception to become homosexual. I agree with Freud in his 'Three Contributions to the

Theory of Sex' (Sigmund Freud *The Basic Writings of Freud*; New York Modern Library, 1938; p. 560) that every person has the potential to become homosexual. If a person encourages and cultures the deviant urges which can be aroused in all of us, he is on the way to a life of sexual perversion."

However, the study committee that drew up the report affirmed and also convinced Synod that there are "those who are constitutionally homosexual in their sex orientation." Their report states: "A person who is homosexual, we have seen, has a disordered sex condition, so that what is 'natural' to him is to have sex relations with a member of his own sex, and what is 'unnatural' for him would be to have heterosexual relations" (1973 Agenda, p. 487).

Concerning the classic Romans 1:26, 27 passage, the report says: "Is Paul not speaking of those who willfully exchange sex relationships and willfully give up their natural relations? What then of those for whom it is not a case of willful exchange or willful giving up of the natural?" (1973 Agenda, p. 487).

You see then that the study committee has convinced Synod, without any proof from Scripture for this, that there are "those who are constitutionally homosexual." And if we ask now: On whose say-so do we have to believe this? here is the committee's answer:

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*Where is the evidence for the basic assumption that homosexuality is constitutional rather than something acquired and cultivated?*

“As we have seen in the earlier part of this report, *we have leaned from the sciences* [italics added] that, homosexuality often is a condition which is rooted deeply in biological and psychological aberrations that create a disorder for which the individual can be held only partly responsible, if at all” (1973 Agenda, p. 489).

Please tell us: Is this a well-established fact, with adequate evidence for it, or possibly only another of those many theories of science readily accepted as gospel today and just as readily scuttled again to morrow? The study committee itself concedes the following in its report “A precise definition of homosexuality is impossible, and to say who is homosexual and who is not is a matter on which there is no unanimity” (1973 Agenda, p 478). Please tell us then how the study committee and the Synod can be at all apodictic in attempting to tell us what homosexuality is.

And please tell us also: Is there any evidence from Scripture for this assumption that is basic to the study committee’s report and to the decision Synod has made? Are “the sciences,” on whose authority this assumption is accepted, truly *normative* for us in this matter? And if so, why? Did the majority of Synod who voted in favor of this really know “the sciences” to be correct on this score?

### Question Number Two

On what ground may the CRC officially absolve the homosexual from responsibility for his condition?

Is that what Synod did? To be precise, Synod adopted the following

as its first statement of pastoral advice for the churches:

“Homosexuality (male and female) is a condition of disordered sexuality which reflects the brokenness of our sinful world and for which the homosexual may himself bear only a minimal responsibility.”

This pronouncement on the part of the church, while leaving room for responsibility on the part of others who may have contributed to the homosexual’s condition, encour-

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### *On what ground may the CRC officially absolve the homosexual from responsibility for his condition?*

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ages him to believe that it may be that only a minimal part of the responsibility may be charged to him.

Now, on what ground may the church say this? Once again, no evidence from Scripture is given.

Here too, we are obviously expected to come to this conclusion on the ground of what “the sciences” tell us about homosexuality as a “constitutional” condition.

Would anyone among us deny that homosexuality also, like any other evil tendencies and urges in fallen man, is nothing else than part and parcel of *total depravity*, or just another instance of what it means *we are conceived and born in sin*, and that by *nature we are prone to*

*all evil and incapable of any good*. Sure, that’s old-fashioned language from which we may be supposed to have emerged in our day of greater knowledge of science. But are we now ready to deny that this is still the plain teaching of Bible?

On what ground does the church have the right to make an official pronouncement that, with respect to this phase of total depravity, anyone is to be excused from all but “minimal responsibility” for it? Please show us from Scripture how such a pronouncement can be justified. If this cannot be done, it seems safe to conclude that, in making this decision, the CRC is heading in the wrong direction.

For the church to absolve a homosexual from all but “minimal responsibility” could very well prove to be cruel rather than a kindness, harmful instead of helpful.

To quote once again from the *His* article by Dr. Charles Young, psychiatrist with the University of Illinois health service:

“Mental disorders are never resolved till the disturbed person accepts responsibility for his role in causing his difficulty. It needs to be said that anyone in good physical health with average intelligence reaching late adolescence has already had a lot to say about the kind of person he is.

“Some of the studies cited above excuse the homosexual of any accountability for his situation. Many of the theories of the cause of homosexuality blame the environment for the homosexual’s plight. These theories may be true to a certain



extent, but they seldom do justice to the person's input to his own condition. Sartre says: 'You are your choices.' This statement certainly holds true for the homosexual. Often he has failed to exercise his ability to choose between the easy and the difficult. He has often given his assent to the easy, the comfortable, the expedient, and has deafened himself to the restorative voices around him" (p. 24).

I want to be second to none in extending Christian sympathy, counsel, and help to the homosexual as well as to the kleptomaniac, the alcoholic, the drug addict, psychopathic liar, the hypersexual person, and to any others with a powerful urge toward one evil or another. But let's be on our guard lest we make a bad matter worse by shifting the responsibility from the person involved to someone or to something else without having a clear and convincing warrant (preferably from Scripture!) for what we do.

We not only challenge the warrant and justification of Synod's statements, but also the wisdom of such pronouncements without first producing Scriptural or other more conclusive evidence for them. For example:

- Synod's pronouncement about homosexuality being a condition "for which the homosexual may himself bear only a minimal responsibility."

- the study committee's statement: "Within this fellowship of love the homosexual who has also been 'justified and sanctified by Christ' (I Cor. 6:11) must be accepted in his homosexuality, so that in the con-

gregation he does not need to wear a mask and conduct himself like a hypocrite, living in constant fear of discovery and exposure ..." (1973 Agenda, p. 492). *Question: What ground is there to assume, as the committee does, that those Christians at Corinth who had once been "abusers of themselves with men" (I Cor. 6:9) were still homosexuals after they had been "washed .... sanctified ... justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, and in the Spirit of our*

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***On what ground could Synod pronounce that the homosexual must also be made eligible for the office of minister, elder, and deacon in the church?***

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*God"? (I Cor. 6:11). What warrant is there for that assumption?*

- and also the following indictment on the part of the study committee: "Unfortunately, the homosexual has not experienced this kind of love and acceptance of his person in either the church or society. It has been said that the homosexual has been far more sinned against than he has sinned. In the light of our understanding of homosexuality today, Christians bear a great burden of guilt relative to such persons" (1973 Agenda, p. 492).

Of course, there may be some truth to this. Let us confess and repent of our guilt as far as the need may be. But are we really helping the homo-

sexual (or making a bad matter worse?) if we run the risk of giving him any encouragement to make a whipping boy of the church and to point his finger to the church as the chief culprit rather than to himself?

### **Question Number Three**

On what ground could the study committee responsibly advise, and Synod then responsibly pronounce, that the homosexual must also be made eligible for the office of minister, elder, and deacon in the church?

Did Synod really say that?

Here it is: "By the same token, churches should recognize that their homosexual members are fellow servants of Christ who are to be given opportunity to render *within the offices* [italics added] and structures of the congregation the same service that is expected from heterosexuals." So, we must be willing to accept homosexuals not only as members but also as ministers, elders and deacons. Of course, the study committee and Synod would add that this applies only to *non-practicing homosexuals*.

Once again, no Scriptural proof. Moreover, does it make common sense?

Frankly to give this as "pastoral advice" to the churches seems unbelievably irresponsible.

Anyone diagnosed to be an alcoholic, a drug addict (even though he has taken the cure), a kleptomaniac, or a psychopathic personality is a dubious candidate for the ministry or the consistory. And, if the homosexual is "constitutionally" what the study committee and Synod have

defined him to be, it only makes sense not to expect him to be satisfactorily qualified to be entrusted with the special care of Christ's precious sheep and lambs purchased with His precious blood.

Conscientious men ask at times to be excused from serving in the church offices because of a nervous condition, high blood pressure, age, or other circumstances, and their wish to disqualify themselves is respected. If, as we are told, the homosexual is really suffering from a "constitutional" disorder, would it not be the better part of wisdom and kindness to regard such a person as one not qualified for the exacting demands of the duties of church officers that often prove to be so very difficult even for the normal person?

We are genuinely concerned for the best interest not only of the homosexual but also for the name and future of the church and the honor of our Lord Jesus Christ.

**Rev. John Vander Ploeg** (1902-1983) was a minister in the Christian Reformed Church. He served as editor of *The Banner* from many years and was the editor of *The Outlook* when he wrote this article.

# Sound Bites

## *The Outlook - 1973*

### January 1973

"All the consistorial meetings in the world are no substitute for person-to-person contacts to which the elders are called by the Lord"

*Guidance for Elders and Deacons*

Peter Y. De Jong

### February- March 1973

"In many areas of the church today we have lost that sensitiveness to the truth and to the presence of the enemies of the truth."

\* \* \* \* \*

"...we have allowed our Reformed ears to become dull in hearing, our Reformed eyes blurred in seeing, and our Reformed mouths inarticulate, if not indeed, actually silent."

*Some Missing Notes in Contemporary Christianity*

Leonard Greenway

"The whole creative work of God moved in the direction of man as its culminating point, and it is hard to see, why He should retard the attainment of His end a hundred thousand years or more."

*The Creation Record - Strictly Literal!*

Jan De Vries

### April 1973

"In our day also the church and the cause of our Lord are so sorely in need of stouthearted reformers brave enough to endure the disfavor of others whose chief concern is to be in the mainstream of modern 'Christendom' whether it be in the way of truth or error."

\* \* \* \* \*

"A bona fide conservative worthy of the name is always progressive, but he knows also that if he ever goes along in order to get along; and if, in so doing, he ever yields an inch of holy ground, then he is succumbing to retrogression and even guilty of treason to his risen Lord and His glorious cause."

*Freedom From Fear*

John Vander Ploeg

"In these days of togetherness when all men should be brothers regardless of creed, when we hear so much about dialogue with the Buddhist and the Mohammedan, it is hard to write, even for a Christian, about the message of the Scriptures. There is plenty of good news in the Bible, but there is never any flattery or back scratching."

*We Could Use Some More Dogmatists*

Johan D. Tangelder

### May 1973

"If we go to church in the morning or second service, to 'hear the minister' we will certainly not benefit spiritually. We should instead go to church to hear 'the Word of God,' and we will certainly find that God uses even 'dull' ministers to instruct us from the Bible."

*Our Whole Outlook on Second Service is Incorrect*

H. Nymeyer



The Board of the Reformed Heritage Christian School Association of Kalamazoo, Michigan, is inviting applications for a part-time high school teacher for the 2003-2004 school year.

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## Evaluating the New Perspective on Paul

### A Third Question Regarding Sanders' View of Second Temple Judaism

Advocates of a new perspective on Paul often insist that the Reformational view of the doctrine of justification is based upon an incorrect and outdated understanding of Second Temple Judaism. According to authors of the new perspective, E. P. Sanders has persuasively demonstrated the error of the Reformation's claim that Judaism in Paul's day taught a form of legalism or Pelagianism. In their opposition to the teaching of the medieval Catholic church, therefore, the sixteenth century Reformers mistakenly viewed the doctrine of justification by works as a revival of an error that characterized Judaism at the time of the writing of the New Testament. The Reformers' wrongly claimed that the apostle Paul's opposition to a Judaistic/legalistic teaching of justification by works was similar to their own opposition to the legalism and merit theology of the Roman Catholic church. According to the new perspective, this Reformational assessment of Judaism is seriously in error. A new understanding of Paul's teaching is required, therefore, that is not shaped by the Reformation's mistaken view that Judaism taught a merit theology of salvation by works.

In my last article, I raised two questions regarding Sanders' claim that Second Temple Judaism was not legalistic. The questions raised (how strong is Sanders' case? Does

"covenantal nomism" really eliminate the presence of any legalistic emphases in Second Temple Judaism?) cast some doubt upon Sanders' insistence that we need a significant reassessment of Paul's understanding of the gospel.

I would like to raise two additional questions regarding the new perspective's understanding of Judaism. The first of these questions, which we look at this month, has to do with the broader context for the new view of Judaism that has proven so popular among authors of the new perspective. The second question, which we will look at next month, has to do with an ambiguity in the writings of some of the new perspective authors regarding what is meant by Judaism itself.

#### **What role is played by the fear of anti-Semitism and other social concerns?**

Proponents of the new perspective on the apostle Paul often criticize the Reformers of the sixteenth century for reading the debates of their own age (between Protestant and Roman Catholic) "back into" the debates between the apostle Paul and his opponents in the New Testament period. According to this criticism, the Reformers' reading of the apostle Paul was historically inaccurate because it permitted the interests of their own day to shape their understanding of the context within which the apostle Paul la-

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bored. Rather than permitting historical studies to determine the character of Second Temple Judaism, the Reformation read its conflict with Rome into the polemics of the first century of the Christian era. What we need, therefore, is the kind of study of Judaism represented by the work of E. P. Sanders, namely, one that is based more upon historical scholarship rather than the theological polemics or prejudices of the sixteenth century.

The intriguing feature of this criticism of the Reformation is that it invites the question whether something similar may not be true of the writings of the new perspective authors. No student of the Reformation would deny the powerful role that the Reformers' conflict with Rome played in their reading of the writings of the apostle Paul. On this score, authors of the new perspective are no doubt correct. However, if the Reformers were influenced in their reading of the apostle Paul by the circumstances of their own time, the question may also be raised whether something similar may not also be true of writers of the new perspective. Are there, perhaps, cultural and historical circumstances that might help to explain why authors of the new perspective are so anxious to take another look at Second Temple Judaism? Are there features of the older view of Judaism that have become particularly objectionable in the context of contemporary historical and biblical studies?

To this question, the answer is undoubtedly "yes." One of the more subtle features of the new perspective is the role played by a fear or worry about Christian anti-

Semitism. Frequently, authors of the new perspective decry the pervasive presence of an implicit anti-Semitism in the traditional polemics of the Reformation. If, as the Reformers are said to have taught, Judaism is infected with a pattern of religion that is legalistic and moralistic, this can easily reinforce stereotypical and critical attitudes toward Jews. The presence of remarks in Luther's writings that exhibit a crude and harsh criticism of Judaism, when coupled with the sad history and reality of Christian anti-

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***One of the more subtle features of the new perspective is the role played by a fear or worry about Christian anti-Semitism.***

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Semitism, constitutes a sorry chapter in the history of the church and theology.

Writers of the new perspective often note the implications of the older view of Judaism for relations between the Christian and Jewish communities. Because of the intensity of the attacks upon the alleged legalism and moralism of the Jewish tradition, particularly in its Rabbinic expressions, Christian theology has often contributed to the formation of a negative attitude toward the Jewish community. The point is not that authors of the new perspective allege that the Reformers and those in the Reformation tradition of interpretation were anti-

Semites.<sup>1</sup> However, by articulating a stereotypical and largely negative portrait of the role of the law in Judaism, the older tradition, especially in its Lutheran expression, contributed to the shaping of a largely negative and critical picture of Judaism. Though the concern about anti-Semitism is often cited by defenders of the new perspective,<sup>2</sup> it is most pronounced in the writing of James D. G. Dunn, a significant proponent of the new view.<sup>3</sup>

The concern of the new perspective authors to combat negative and stereotypical views of Judaism is also coupled with a desire to formulate the doctrine of justification in a way that overcomes the divisive polemics of the Reformation period.

Whereas the Reformation treated the doctrine of justification in opposition to Catholicism, the new perspective, which maintains that the doctrine of justification answers the racial exclusivism of Paul's opponents, treats justification as a *socially inclusive* doctrine. N. T. Wright, for example, insists that justification, because it emphasizes that Gentiles and Jews are included in the covenant family of God, is the great *ecumenical* doctrine of the Christian faith.<sup>4</sup> Thus, the cultural and social concerns of the present day (to promote racial and social harmony) are served by a fresh understanding of justification as an inclusive doctrine. The doctrine of justification, far from serving to divide groups along racial and theological fault lines, encourages the practice of racial, social, and even theological reconciliation. The new perspective's revision of the Reformational understanding of justifica-



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tion, accordingly, fits well the contemporary cultural milieu with its emphasis upon ecumenicity and harmony in the context of acknowledged differences.<sup>5</sup>

There are several problems, however, that attend this concern of the new perspective authors to avoid presenting Judaism in a negative light and to offer a doctrine of justification more congenial to the modern spirit.

First, though the concern to resist anti-Semitism and unduly negative portraits of Judaism is no doubt legitimate, students of Second Temple Judaism must carefully avoid the temptation to allow this concern to skew their findings. If the older portrait of Judaism was inappropriately shaped by the Reformers' disagreement with medieval Catholicism on the doctrine of justification, the newer portrait must not be shaped by an inordinate fear of discovering something that might be objectionable to Christian theology. The argument that the older view of Judaism was unduly influenced by the theological debates of the sixteenth century is a double-edged sword. It would not be any more proper to allow the worry about a negative view of Judaism to unduly influence contemporary studies of the pattern of religious ideas found in Second Temple Judaism.

Second, one of the ironies of the new perspective's study of Second Temple Judaism is that it shares the Reformation conviction that "legalism" is an objectionable point of view. Even though definitions of "legalism" vary, Sanders analysis of Second Temple Judaism assumes that legalism is any view that bases

Israel's relationship with God upon the moral achievements of the covenant people. By that standard, he concludes that Second Temple Judaism was not legalistic. However, as our earlier comments on semi-Pelagianism suggest, legalism can take more subtle forms. One of these forms seems to be present in some of the literature of Second Temple Judaism. In this form of legalism, obedience to the law complements God's grace and constitutes an important part of the basis for God's continuing favor

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***We have to be careful  
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study to allow  
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their own integrity.***

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and final vindication of his people. Now, from the standpoint of historic Protestantism such a modified form of legalism is objectionable. What is often not appreciated, however, is that this kind of legalism might be a perfectly acceptable viewpoint *so far as some branches of Second Temple Judaism are concerned*, just as it is acceptable to some branches of the historic Christian church.

The point I am making with this observation is that we have to be careful in our historical study to allow distinct patterns of religious expression their own integrity. Why should we assume that a *Christian* concern about legalism in any of its

forms must be shared by Second Temple Judaism? There is a real danger at this point of a kind of Christian imperialism in historical scholarship. The studies of writers of the new perspective are, in this respect, just as slanted in their worry about Judaism being labeled "legalistic" as those of the older scholarship were by their opposition to medieval Catholicism. Though the results of the newer and older studies may be markedly different, they proceed from remarkably similar, and decidedly theological, assumptions about the propriety of viewing a person's acceptance with God as though it were based upon their moral achievements.

And third, in the writing of many new perspective authors, especially in the works of James D. G. Dunn and N. T. Wright, some expressions of Second Temple Judaism are regularly characterized as a form of "racial" exclusivism. The appeal to the "works of the law" among the Judaizers whom Paul opposed was born out of a resistance to the reception of non-Jews or Gentiles as full members of the covenant community. According to Dunn, for example, the great problem Paul faced in his opposition to the Judaizers was their unwillingness to admit non-Jews into the covenant community, unless they submitted to those "boundary markers" in the law that distinguished Jews from non-Jews. The intriguing feature of this position is that *it ascribes to Judaism in the first century a kind of racism that is by some standards no more attractive than the legalism ascribed to Judaism by the older perspective*. One of the frequent objections to the older view of Judaism (that it

was legalistic) is that it perpetuated a stereotypical and negative picture. The problem with the new perspective's portrait of Judaism in the first century is that it could easily perpetuate a different, yet equally stereotypical and negative, picture of Judaism. Though it is difficult to rank sins, to charge Paul's opponents with a form of Jewish racism does not appear to be much of an improvement upon charging them with legalism.<sup>6</sup>

These problems illustrate that the new perspective, no less than the Reformational view of justification, represents far more than a scholarly rediscovery of the real nature of Second Temple Judaism or the gospel according to Paul. It is also a perspective born out of desire to understand the gospel in a manner that is more congenial to the ecumenical emphasis and social agenda of contemporary mainstream Christian theology. Though the writers of the new perspective maintain that their position is the product of careful historical scholarship and biblical exegesis, the role played by these broader cultural and social factors should not be ignored or denied.

### Notes

1 Cf. E. P. Sanders, *Paul and Palestinian Judaism* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1977), p. xiii. Sanders is quite explicit that he does not wish to accuse the older interpreters of Judaism of anti-Semitism.

2 Cf. N. T. Wright, *What Saint Paul Really Said* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), p. 19; Frank Thielman, *Paul & the Law* (Downers Grove: Intervarsity, 1994), pp. 45-7.

3 James D. G. Dunn, *The Theology of Paul the Apostle* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), p. 338: "If post-Vatican II

theology could no longer simply restate the old debate between Protestant and Catholic in the traditional terms, post-Holocaust theology could no longer stomach the denigration of historic Judaism which had been the dark-side-of-the-moon corollary to the Christian doctrine of justification."

4 *What Saint Paul Really Said*, p. 158: "Paul's doctrine of justification by faith impels the churches, in their current fragmented state, into the ecumenical task. It cannot be right that the very doctrine which declares that all who believe in Jesus belong at the same table (Galatians 2) should be used as a way of saying that some, who define the doctrine of justification differently, belong at a different table. ... The doctrine of justification is in fact the great *ecumenical* doctrine."

5 For a treatment of the *social* implications of the new perspective's understanding of justification, see James D. G. Dunn and Alan M. Suggate, *The Justice of God: A Fresh Look at the Old Doctrine of Justification by Faith* (Carlisle, UK: Paternoster Press, 1993). Dunn summarizes these implications in a striking way (p. 29): "God accepts all who believe and trust in him: Gentile as well as Jew, black and white, Palestinian and Israelite, central American and US citizen, Roman Catholic and Protestant, Orthodox and Muslim."

Reformed Churches are invited to request qualified students from Mid-America Reformed Seminary for ministerial internships in the congregations this summer.

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6 Cf. Seyoon Kim, *Paul and the New Perspective* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), p. 61, n. 212: "In this post-Holocaust age, any attempt to exonerate even the ancient Jews of what modern people deem negative may be laudable. But in order to exonerate them of a 'works-righteousness' religion, the New Perspectivists as a whole and Dunn especially tend to present them emphatically as what in our modern language can only be termed as 'racists' and '(religious) imperialists' ...."

**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*.

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# Classis Southwest U.S. URCNA

March 17-18, 2003

Classis Southwest U.S. of the United Reformed Churches in North America held its 10th regular session on March 17-18, 2003, at the Escondido United Reformed Church in Escondido, California. The weather was as pleasant as the work to be done.

The main business of classis was the candidacy examination of Mr. Mark Stromberg, and the colloquium doctum of Rev. Gary Findley. Both men were examined in the areas prescribed by the Church Order and both sustained their examinations. Mr. Stromberg has been serving as stated supply and will be called by the newly formed Belgrade United Reformed Church of Belgrade, Montana. Rev. Findley, comes to us from the Orthodox Presbyterian Church, and will be called by the Covenant United Reformed Church of Fresno, California, to continue his work as a prison chaplain with the possibility of doing church planting in the future. We thank God for both these men.

On Monday evening, classis took time to hear reports of what God is doing among the churches. Several of the delegates reported with praise that God continues to bless and also challenge His church. We spent time together in prayer for the work of the ministry.

We had the privilege of receiving greetings from several guests and ecumenical observers. Rev. Ben Wickner of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church brought greetings from

that denomination as well as information on the newly forming Providence Christian College. Dr. R. Scott Clark shared with the delegates about the work going on at Westminster Seminary in California.

Rev. Jay Fluck from the Western Classis of the Reformed Church in the United States brought greetings and words of encouragement. We were also informed about the work of International Theological Education Ministries by Mr. Barry Klaassen.

This fall, the delegates will conduct business in the northern-most church in our classis - the Grace United Reformed Church of Kennewick, Washington. That meeting is scheduled for September 16-17, 2003.

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

## Looking Out and About

*“For all my brethren and companions’ sakes My prayer shall be, Let peace in thee abide”*

- Rev. Fred Folkerts who has served the Providence Reformed Church of Winnipeg, MB since his graduation from Mid America Reformed Seminary in 1992 has accepted the call to the newly established United Reformed congregation in the Listowel, Ontario area.

- Mr Gene Crowe a graduate of Westminster Theological Seminary in Escondido, California has accepted the call extended to him by the Cornerstone United Reformed Church of Hudsonville, Michigan to serve the United Reformed Church Plant in Muskegon, Michigan. Mr. Crowe will be submitting to his ordination examination on June 3.

- Rev. Eric Fennema who has served the First Christian Reformed Church of Rock Valley, Iowa since 1988 announced that he had accepted the call extended to him by the Trinity Reformed Church of Lethbridge, Alberta. Rev. Fennema will be submitting to a Colloquium Doctum when Classis Western Canada meets in mid June.

- The Faith United Reformed Church of Olive Center, Michigan which was organized in 1994 and which erected a church building in 1997 was recently able to burn its mortgage. Plans are being made at present to erect a youth building. Rev. Ed Marcusse of Bethel URC in Calgary, Alberta has accepted the call to Faith and will be installed, D.V., in early September.

- The Covenant Reformed Church in Pella, Iowa voted on January 21 to affiliate with the United Reformed Churches in North America. On March 3, Classis Central U.S. met at the Covenant Reformed Church in Pella and voted unanimously to receive the Covenant Reformed Church into membership in the federation.

- On March 9 the Bethany United Reformed Church of Wyoming,

*(continued on page 24)*

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(continued from page 23)

Michigan took note with gratitude to God of the 50th anniversary of its founding. Currently in the church there are thirteen members who were among those who were present at the organization of the congregation fifty years ago. The Bethany Church formerly known as the Beverly Church before its relocation to a new building four years ago is one of the charter members of the URCNA. A further celebration is planned for later this spring when many of the members who spend the winter months in warmer climates will have returned home.

• Immanuel Fellowship in Kalamazoo, Michigan hosted the Spring Meeting of the North American Fellowship of Reformed Churches. Dr. Steve Simmons conducted a seminar entitled, "Discipline: From Start to Finish." Immanuel will be breaking ground this month for their addition.

• Rev. Steve McGee of Covenant United Reformed Church in Byron Center has accepted a call to serve as a missionary in Trinidad. His farewell at Covenant will be on May 11. Lord willing, Rev. McGee will be moving with his family to Trinidad in June.

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