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In the Day of His Justice

Obediah

In the Ancient Near East when a king was captured the war was over. The nation was conquered. King Nebuchadnezzar thought he has brought about the demise to another nation. In his quest to expand his empire he had crushed another rebellion. He had captured Zedekiah the leader of a rebellion. In turn, he had publicly deprecated another nation and another god. Their god was too weak to defend his people. Little did this arrogant ruler and icon of the city of man realize that this city he had conquered was different from the other cities. This was not a city that had merely a hu-

man king or a temporal dynasty. This was a heavenly dynasty with a heavenly King. This meant that Nebuchadnezzar had not conquered Jerusalem at all! Israel's King sat unscathed in the heavenly courts looking down upon Nebuchadnezzar's offenses, his arrogance, and his gloating. Nebuchadnezzar's deed would not go unpunished. The prophet Obediah announces that Jehovah will administer His justice on the appointed day.

Jehovah's Day

"For the day of the Lord draws near on all nations. As you have

done, it will be done to you. Your dealings will return on your own head. Because just as you drank on My holy mountain, all nations will drink continually. They will drink and swallow, and become as if they never existed" (Obediah 15, 16).

In these verses, the prophet Obediah tells us that all the nations hear the declaration that Jehovah has not forgotten His people. The call to rally to war at the beginning of the book (v. 1) now comes to its full fruition at the end of the book. The declaration that Edom will be brought low has been heralded and will come to pass.

In this passage of Scripture the prophet portrays God calling the nations to see that the Day of Jeho-



Volume 53, No. 5 (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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vah is coming upon them. Edom has had his day of temporal glory, the day of gloating and murder, the day of aiding in the demise and plunder of his very brother Jacob as he scoffed from a distance safely nestled in the hills watching Israel march away (cf. v. 1-3). Now Jehovah will have *His* day - the day when *He* claims the ultimate victory. This day is also described in Joel 2 as a day when the nations appear before Jehovah without any hope of escape. There will be no running because this is the day of Jehovah's *public* and *ultimate* victory.

The nations must realize that they have not accomplished anything. Edom thought that they had captured the king. The Babylonians thought that they brought low the spirits of those in Israel, but they have not captured the true king of Israel. They have not captured the city of God. They have overpowered merely a small model of heaven's reality. The day of oppression will give way to the day of victory. The day of suffering will give way to the day of Jehovah's exaltation and glory. Thus, the true king of Israel still watches over His people and the nations. Edom cannot gloat so quickly. Babylon cannot claim another defeat so readily. The terror and pain that they inflicted upon Jehovah's people will be inflicted upon them. *They* will not be able to walk away as the innocent party. *They* will receive the justice that is due to them.

These same wicked people got together and drank their victory toast upon Jehovah's holy mountain, the holy place that Jehovah secured for His people. This is the holy moun-

tain that we read about in Isaiah 11:9 - the *heavenly* mountain upon which Jehovah will build His city. He has not missed what they have done. Their drunken victory banquet is what is going to overwhelm them. Their celebration will come to an end.

We read of a different application of the banquet cup. This is the cup of God's wrath that they will drink up until they perish. The cup of Je-

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hovah will be poured out, the cup that is referenced in Isaiah 51:17 and Jeremiah 25:15-18 - the cup of wrath by which Jehovah executes what He declared at the exit of Eden. The flaming sword of the cherubim will give way to the flaming sword wielded by Jehovah.

Thus, these enemies of Jehovah will not endure. Those who make sport of the people of God are those who make sport of God Himself. They cannot claim their victory by celebrating on this holy mountain because they will be called to account again when Jehovah pours out His wrath when they drink *His* cup.

Jehovah's Justice

"But on Mount Zion there will be

those who escape, And it will be holy. And the house of Jacob will possess their possessions" (Obediah 17).

Jehovah is not just an angry God who goes through the nations arbitrarily displaying His wrath. He will not spare those who flee from His justice, because His justice is executed according to righteousness. Jehovah's people were rounded up like cattle and cut off as covenant breakers. Esau the covenant breaker acted as another Cain, implementing his self-centered justice as he warred against God's people (v. 10-14). There is nothing of lasting consequence because of what Edom has done. The people of God will dwell upon the Lord's mountain once again! The new mountain will be a better mountain that will not be overrun because this will be Mount Zion, the mountain of the New Jerusalem.

The house of Jacob and the house of Joseph are going to be involved in administering Jehovah's justice. The point that is being made here is that all of Israel is going to be involved in this cutting off. These two houses will serve a particular purpose. They will come together as a fire and a flame that will consume the nations. They will go through the house of Esau, leaving no survivors because Esau's house is like the house of chaff and it will be consumed. It will be like the Egyptians who were reduced to chaff in the Red Sea as recounted by the song of Moses in Exodus 15:7. In all of Egypt's might and power they did not have anything that was lasting. Likewise, the fire of the Lord will consume Edom and

the nations. This is precisely what we are told: there will be no survivors in the house of Esau. They will be cut down like the covenant breakers they are! What Jehovah stated about Esau at his birth is being reiterated and worked out here in Obadiah.

Obadiah tells the people that they will take possession of Edom's mountain. The prophet assures Israel that they will regain all that was lost. The victory of Jehovah is secured even as Edom gloats and Nebuchadnezzar thinks that he has captured their king. This is because Jehovah is nestled upon Mount Zion. This is the mountain from which His salvation will proceed. The King of Israel will call them to account from His safe abode.

Thus, we see that Jehovah has not forgotten what has taken place! His people will be vindicated! The gloaters will be brought low!

Conclusion

"...and the kingdom will be the Lord's" (Obadiah 21b).

You and I both know that the intended fulfillment of this prophecy is not the Maccabees' capture of Edom. It is not with man making war and temporarily subduing the enemy, but the prophet sees something that is *greater* in the works the ultimate victory of Jehovah *in Christ*. It is with the coming of Christ that John the Baptist preaches the fire that comes with the Messiah is the fire that will consume. It is Christ who prays prior to the cross, "Father if it be your will take this cup from me." Christ does not tremble because of the wine in the cup, but because of the cup's implications. The cup is the wrath

of God that will be poured out upon Him. Then what happens after His death? Christ is raised from the dead, and baptizes the saints in a fire baptism. They emerge unscathed through the ordeal.

This means that what the prophet had spoken about the victory of Jehovah has come to pass through the irony of the gospel in a two-fold event. The judgment is manifested in Christ and those who are in Christ, but it still awaits its full application when Christ comes again. It is in Christ that you have over-

come. It is in Christ that you have been made worthy, adopted as heirs and coheirs. Do not go forth as one who is defeated, but live in the confidence that you have been made alive in Christ. Continue along the pilgrimage seeing Edom's mount trampled by Zion through Christ.

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William D. Dennison

Christian Education: Is It a Mess?

Introduction

Public education has come increasingly under scrutiny by the government, the news media, and the public herself. Interestingly, the voice criticizing the failures of public education is no longer just the heckling of religious groups or the wealthy that have placed their children in private schools. Recently, those living in economically depressed communities have joined the cry for quality education.

Parents in those communities are fed up with the hostile environment of public education, and its failure to provide quality education for their children in a safe environment. Even the National Education Association (NEA), one of the strongest

unions in our country, has faced pressure and opposition from these low income communities who were once viewed as their loyal supporters. At last, parents in these communities have vocalized their concern: "We want a quality education for our children."

This principle is so deeply emotional that it has caused cracks in the foundation of the bureaucratic NEA and its willing compliances: the federal, state, and local governments. After all, what parent, if asked, does not want quality education for their child? Hence, many parents have decided to act; they want a "choice" concerning where their children attend school. Many have taken ownership for their children's education.



Perhaps, in this context, the voucher system, so strongly supported for years by religious families, received its strongest support as parents and representative politicians in low economic communities saw its need. Even so, as the populace—whether lower, middle, or upper classes—become increasingly fed up, a growing number of parents are home schooling (both Christians and non-Christian), whereas others send their children to private schools (both Christian and non-Christian), satellite schools, magnet schools, charter schools, and classical schools (both Christian and non-Christian).

How Christians Have Responded

Meanwhile, as Christians applaud this recent attack upon public education, the question is: “What has the Christian community presented in its place?” Perhaps, a quick empirical glance reveals a strong reaction of unity by Christians. It has been observed that Christian education is booming in our day; Christian schools are starting everywhere. Many of them are beginning in churches and denominations that we, in the Reformed tradition, would never expect.

Indeed, Christian schools are emerging at an unprecedented rate in Lutheran churches, Assembly of God churches, Baptist churches, and in small, as well as large, non-denominational churches. Churches are adding to their existing buildings in order to create a Christian school, while others are buying old deserted buildings, fixing them up and starting a school. Some are buying and putting up pre-fab buildings. All such adventures are done with

great sacrifice and energy for their children. From this consolidated effort to create Christian day schools in our nation, it would seem that the Christian community is pulling together—that the community is solidified as one body against those who continue to defend an archaic and dismal failing system of public education in this country.

Perhaps, we can say that the unity of the Christian community is found in the purpose statement of these new emerging schools. These pur-

Christian schools are starting everywhere. Many of them are beginning in churches and denominations that we, in the Reformed tradition, would never expect.

pose statements seem to resemble the basic fundamentals of our Christian Faith which can unite a broad spectrum of evangelicals in a given community. If one is a student of church history, one will realize that those basic fundamentals embody the same agenda endorsed by conservatives Christians in the 1920s as they combated the secularization of American and ecclesiastical culture. Here is a sample of those fundamentals which seem to be part of many present Christian schools:

- The Bible is the holy, infallible Word of God.

- We believe in the Triune God of the Bible: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, who is the creator of all things, sustainer of all things, and redeemer of sinful humanity.

- The creation of the universe and of man are a unique, fiat act of God’s creative activity—man being uniquely created in God’s image—not evolving from any lower life form.

- The Son of God, the Lord Jesus Christ, came into the world to save sinners through His atoning work on the cross. Hence, God raised Him from the dead. We believe in the bodily resurrection and that Christ will come again.

- In terms of Christian education: to train our children to make an impact in culture and society.

When you examine such a purpose statement, it appears that the Christian community is definitely united. Indeed, many seem to have the same concerns for Christian education: they want to accent the central truths of Scripture while not losing sight of the Christian tradition as they encourage their children to be transforming agents in a secular world. The purpose is clear, the mission is clear, and the goal is clear. Herein, the evangelical community seems to present a solid front by which she confronts the secular world in which she lives. But the question that I would ask is this: *but does she present a united and solid front?*

Where is Unity?

Over the last ten to fifteen years, my view of Christian education has been slowly changing; an idealistic and optimistic view of

Christian education has been evolving into a more realistic and pessimistic view. The present enthusiastic spirit for Christian education has *not* gripped me as it has others. In fact, in my judgment, the recent explosion in Christian education points more to the problem of Christian education than its unified state. It seems to me that we must interpret the rise of Christian education in this country within the context of the rise of diverse ecclesiastical bodies. When we closely look at the rise of diverse ecclesiastical bodies, diversity seems to be the rule, not unity.

Let me place before you some examples:

- Is there a common consent concerning church government? Various forms of church government are evident in evangelical churches, from hierarchical to Presbyterian as well as congregational.
- Is there common consent concerning the doctrine of salvation? Most evangelical churches are Arminian and not Reformed with respect to the doctrines of soteriology.
- Is there common consent concerning how we are to worship God? Many evangelical churches couch worship in the contemporary context in order to appeal to a technological culture, whereas others attempt to maintain a semblance to the Protestant Reformation's view of worship (whether Lutheran or Reformed).
- Is there a common consent in this country concerning whether preaching is the center of worship, or whether performance, play, or

drama is the center of worship? Let us be more specific: is the pulpit central in worship, or is the stage central? In our day, it seems that the stage is becoming more central in worship among evangelical churches.

In light of these differences, I think it is fair to say that the broad evangelical community does not have unity; rather, it exists in diversity as reflected in the various denominations as well as non-denominational churches that continue to survive.

It seems that every particular view of Christian education has their own angle or perspective on the truth.

Perhaps, there is a deeper explanation for the diversity within the broad evangelical community. It seems to me that we need to observe the depth of the secular American spirit of individuality, autonomy, and personal freedom that is reflected in most evangelical families. Specifically, evangelical families love, treasure, guard, and worship our social and cultural freedom. As Americans, evangelicals maintain that they can believe and act in the way they feel fit; that no one is permitted to tell them what to believe, or how they are to live.

Moreover, no one can tell them how to raise their children, nor can anyone tell them what teaching they can or cannot place before their children. (If you wish to question

my analysis about the sanctimonious freedom of the Christian family, then ask yourself how serious ecclesiastical discipline exists in evangelical churches. Besides the fear and hesitation of losing numerical members, those who may need to be confronted about discipline claim that their personal life is no business of the church; their life is a private manner before God).

Hence, the autonomy of the American spirit embodied in the Christian family is extended into their view of the church, which in turn finds a home in a model of Christian education which blends a secular view of individuality with the freedom of one's own religious beliefs. As many evangelicals embrace this strange synthesis of secular freedom with religious freedom, they construct Christian schools to propagate their individual freedom and beliefs in isolation from the world. Under this synthesis, we can witness clearly the American evangelical landscape under the banner of personal and religious rights: a Lutheran Christian school there, a Pentecostal day school there, an Assembly of God Christian school there, a Baptist School there, a non-denomination school there, and a family home schooling there. In my judgment, such an atmosphere does not present a unified community in Christian education at all!

If you stand in the historic Reformed tradition and you are fascinated with American evangelicalism, let me suggest that you need to control your enthusiasm. The present evangelical community is a marriage between the American ethos and carefully chosen fundamentals of the Christian religion.



How Great the Fall

This marriage employs a Biblical hermeneutic which *freely chooses* what it believes to be the essential universal truths of the Christian faith while minimizing or dissolving any teaching they find to be divisive of their vision of Christian unity. A pragmatic philosophy of success underlies how they view Christianity.

Ironically, instead of unity, their pragmatic vision gives birth to as many pictures of Christian education as there seems to be churches, or even individuals. Just like any American, it seems that every particular view of Christian education has their own angle or perspective on the truth, and hence, since we are dealing with religious convictions, everybody believes that they are in tune with their own subjective “special” revelation from God that leads them to implement their vision. In my judgment, the broad evangelical community is in a mess!

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“When the woman saw that the fruit was good for food and pleasing to the eye, and also desirable for gaining wisdom, she took some and ate it. She also gave some to her husband, who was with her, and he ate it” (Genesis 3:6). In a way, everything that follows this verse in the Bible is an answer to q/a 8 of the Heidelberg Catechism.

The catechism has brought us systematically to the point where we must admit that we are sinners, and that our sin is our own fault. The catechism has shown us the summary of the Law, and our inability to live up to that which is expected of us. It has told us that we were created in God’s image, but that Adam and Eve rejected God and fell into sin.

The next logical question we would ask is: “How bad is it?” Even that the catechism has answered for us in q/a 5, telling us that we have a natural tendency to hate God and our neighbors. We ask: “Does that mean we are totally unable to do any good at all?” Again the response comes: “Yes, that’s right.

Unless you are born again by the Spirit of God.”

The result of our being sinners is that we take sin lightly. We laugh or keep silent when God’s Name is being taken in vain; we joke about excessive drinking and sexual infidelity; we look the other way when people fail to worship God in His house. We need to struggle with the depth of our sin! Without a true knowledge of our own unfaithfulness and rebellion against God, we can never come to know how truly great and wonderful God’s grace is. Nor will we come to Him for the healing that we need.

Spiritual Death

In Ephesians 2:1, Paul tells us that we are “dead in our trespasses and sins.” We are dead as far as our relationship with God is concerned. When we fell, we fell hard! The fall affected our spirit, our intellect, and our body.

Our spirit died when the fellowship we had with God was broken. At one time the man and the woman could walk in the breeze of the afternoon in the Garden with God.

Q But are we so corrupt that we are totally unable to do any good and inclined toward all evil?

A Yes, unless we are born again, by the Spirit of God.

Sin ended that. After he sinned, the very first thing that Adam did when he heard God was hide from Him. This alienation from God is the first result of the death that came upon our first parents after eating from the forbidden tree.

It is also the most dreadful of deaths, even more dreadful than physical death. Man's highest destiny is to know God. We were created to be in a relationship with God. Our sin, however, blots out God's face, making us want to hide from His holiness.

Not only have we lost communication with God, we have no right whatsoever to come before His throne anymore, nor can we call upon His holy Name. Our alienation is so total in effect that it is impossible for us to find our own way back to Him to rekindle any fellowship with Him.

Instead, what has to happen is that, just like in Genesis 3, God must come to our rescue. We have separated ourselves from Him; now He must come to us. In the Garden, Adam and Eve hid from God and Jehovah came and sought them out offering them grace through the promise of a Messiah. In the very same way, Jehovah comes to us and offers us grace through His Son.

Intellectual Death

The second area the Fall affected is our intellect. Our intellect began to die when, already in the Garden, man began to make excuses. He started to rationalize his lying, cheating, stealing, and even murder.

One may argue that we are still intelligent, rational beings. After all,

we can add and subtract, we can invent things, we can do all kinds of smart things. However, of all the knowledge we have, we can't apply any of it to an understanding of God. Apart from the working of the Spirit of God in our lives we can have absolutely no understanding of spiritual things. I Corinthians 2:14 says: "Man without the Spirit does not accept the things that come from the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him, he cannot understand them because they are spiritually discerned."

Instead of searching for the true God, man settles for lesser gods. In the Bible and in third world countries people make gods out of gold and wood. In more "civilized" countries, we make gods out of power, alcohol, money, etc. We will even make gods of ourselves. The hard words of Romans 3 are: "There is no one righteous, not even one."

Physical Death

Finally, the Fall affected our physical lives. No longer do we live forever in perfect harmony with our Creator. Our sin stained bodies give way to illness, disease, and decay. If you read through the genealogy of Seth's children, they all end the same way: "And then he died."

All in all, Lord's Day 3 of the Heidelberg Catechism can be very depressing as it tells us about our perverse nature. Yet, even here the catechism comes with comfort. Question 8 asks: "But are we so corrupt that we are totally unable to do any good and inclines toward all evil?" Woefully, the answer is: "Yes." But then comes the word: "Unless..."

Unless

What a powerful word "unless" is in this answer! The good news of the Gospel is that God comes to us while we are still in this horrible state of death. He provides what we need to be set free from our alienation, our lack of understanding, and our desire not to know Him. He even saves us from the horror of physical death.

The whole point of Lord's Day 3; the whole point of the Sin and Misery section of the catechism, is to have us see our sin so that we might know our need for Christ who alone is able to provide us with life. His body was pierced, His blood was shed; He died our death so that we might become alive through Him.

Unless we are regenerated by the Spirit of God we shall remain forever dead in our trespasses and sins. In the righteous robes of Christ, we are able to stand once again in the presence of the holy God, once again to have fellowship with the One who created us in His image. The alienation is broken. With the spectacles of faith, we can understand things as they relate to God. Through the Spirit, we are even filled with a desire to come into the presence of God.

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We Confess

An Exposition & Application of the Belgic Confession

Article 1 (Part 2) The Nature of God

II. The Attributes of God

“...He is eternal, incomprehensible, invisible, immutable, infinite, almighty, perfectly wise, just, good, and the overflowing fountain of all good.”

1. Incommunicable Attributes

We confess that God has incommunicable attributes. This means that these attributes cannot be communicated, or given, to His creation. These attributes make God uniquely God and distinguish Him from His creation as the Creator.

God is Eternal

Negatively, this means that our God is not limited by temporal limits. There are no time constraints with Him. He has no beginning, no end, and no duration of time. Positively this means that our God exists in one indivisible and eternal present. His existence is indivisible because it cannot be divided into beginning, middle, or end. And His existence is eternal because He always is.

Scripture speaks in popular language to us about this eternity of God. It speaks of eternity in terms

of God having an endless duration. We read phrases such as “who lives forever and ever” (Daniel 4:34), “from everlasting to everlasting, You are God” (Psalm 90:2), “I am the Alpha and the Omega, the Beginning and the End, the First and the Last, who is and who was and who is to come” (Revelation 1:8, 22:13).

But do not think of eternity as a timeline, with arrows pointed in opposite directions. God has no time; His plans and works cannot be divided into time, but, simply stated, *He is*. He is Alpha and Omega. He is Beginning and End. He is First and Last. And because, as we saw last month, God is simple, His wisdom is an eternal wisdom, His justice is an eternal justice. His goodness is an eternal goodness. Everything that God is, He is eternally.

God is Incomprehensible

Can this one, simple, spiritual, and eternal God be known? Yes and no. Yes: He can be known, but only inasmuch as He reveals Himself to us. No: He cannot be known fully and perfectly. This is what we mean when we say God is “incomprehensible.” Because of this we

speak of God as “God revealed” and “God concealed.” We know what He reveals about Himself, but we don’t know what He conceals in Himself.

When we say God can be known we are not saying that we know everything there is to know about God, nor is it possible to fully know everything about Him. There is what we call a “Creator-creature distinction.” Therefore only God knows Himself as He is in Himself fully and perfectly (1 Corinthians 2:6-12). This means that our knowledge of God is a derivative knowledge. We derive our knowledge of Him from Him. He is the source and we are the receivers of that source. Just like a reservoir has to be filled by a river, so too, we can only be filled with knowledge from God.

We can also think of creation and the Word as a mirror. God stands in front of them, as a mirror, and what we can see is not God Himself, but a reflection of Him. As Paul says, “For now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then face to face. Now I know in part, but then I shall know just as I also am known” (1 Corinthians 13:12). There is so much about God that we do not know and that which we do know, even this, we know imperfectly.

God is Invisible

We can know this God, but we cannot see this God. The Bible and the Confession speak of God as being

God has no time; His plans and works cannot be divided into time, but, simply stated, He is.

“a simple and spiritual being.” These two ideas go hand in hand with God being invisible. Because He is “Spirit,” He is of a substance that is different than this universe. Because He is “simple,” He cannot be divided and made into parts by us. When we say that God is invisible, we are saying that because He is Spirit and because He is simple, He cannot be seen.

Scripture simply states this in texts like “no one has seen God at any time” (1 John 4:12 cf. Exodus 33:20). But what about texts that say Moses saw His “backside” (Exodus 34), or that Isaiah saw the King of glory (Isaiah 6), or that Paul saw heaven (2 Corinthians 12)?

Herman Bavinck says, “Every vision of God presupposes a divine ‘condescension,’ a revelation by means of which God descends to our level and makes Himself known to us” (*The Doctrine of God*, p. 182). When the saints of old “saw” God, they were not seeing Him in His essence but in a form suited to our capacity. We call these “theophanies,” revelations of God in the likeness of a man, an angel, or an other created form.

God is Immutable

The Confession next speaks of the immutability, or unchangeableness of God. Scripture speaks of God as being immutable in three ways:

God is immutable in His essence - there never was a time when He was not, and there never shall be a time when He shall not be.

God is immutable in His attributes - for example, His truth is unchangeable (Psalm

119:89), His love is unchangeable (Jeremiah 31:3), and His mercy is unchangeable (Psalm 100:5).

God is immutable in His counsel - His “counsel ... stands forever” (Psalm 33:11).

God is Infinite

When we say that God is infinite, we are saying that He is at the same time wholly transcendent above time and space (eternity) and wholly immanent as He fills time and space (immensity). As Solomon prayed, He cannot be contained in temples made with hands (2 Chronicles 6). Johannes Wollebius, the great Reformed theologian said, “God is neither contained in one place, nor limited to one place, not included in, or excluded from, any place” (*Compendium Theologiae Christianae*, Book I, Ch. 1, sec. 2b: v). Meditate on that statement!

As Psalm 113:5-6 says, “Who is like the LORD our God, who dwells on high [transcends in eternity], who humbles Himself to behold the things that are in the heavens and in the earth?” [immanently immense].

God is Almighty

The last of the incommunicable attributes is God’s omnipotence. He

has all power, He is totally sovereign, and He is totally in control. His almighty power is best expressed in our beloved Catechism, Q&A 27-28.

2. Communicable Attributes

The Confession then speaks of the communicable attributes of God. These are the attributes that He has and that He communicates to us in part. We are created and re-created in His image, and we reflect a faint image of what God is like as image-bearers.

God is Perfectly Wise

Wisdom is the skillful application of knowledge. It is taking a body of knowledge and using it in a certain situation. For God this means that all He knows, which is everything, is used to bring about the greatest glory for Himself. And it is in the gospel, most particularly, that God is most glorified. Notice how Paul praises God for His wisdom, after speaking of the good news, in Romans 16:27 and 1 Timothy 1:17.

He is Just

To confess the justice of God in our culture is to stand against the false god of tolerance, in which all will be loved by God for eternity - except, of course, really, really bad people who will not be punished, only painlessly annihilated. But the Scriptures

Questions for Further Study/Discussion

1. How do God’s incommunicable attributes assure you of your salvation?
2. How is God just in saving sinners? (see Romans 3:25-26)
3. In what ways can you concretely and gratefully mirror the communicable attributes of God before the world?



teach that God is just, and so should we without shame. Justice is administering the law without discrimination. A judge views a defendant in terms of the law when he pronounces guilt or innocence. And praise God that He does this for us in Christ!

He is Good

The goodness of God is His freely giving to us all that we need as He deals kindly with us. Notice how the Confession of Faith describes God's goodness further with that beautiful image, "the overflowing fountain of all good." And He daily showers His blessings upon us as rain waters the grass. He daily gives us more than we can ever deserve. It's like when we say to someone who gives us a Christmas present unexpectedly, "you're way too good to me," or, "you're so gracious." With God it is multiplied. As James 1:17 says, "every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights."

Goodness is another way of speaking of grace. Notice how Psalm 34:8 says "taste and see that the Lord is *good*;" this is interpreted in the New Testament by Peter when he says "taste and see that the Lord is *gracious*" (1 Peter 2:3).

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Evaluating the New Perspective on Paul

A Final Question Regarding Sanders' View of Second Temple Judaism

Is there a distinction between Old Testament and Second Temple Judaism?

A final question that needs to be addressed to the new perspective's treatment of Second Temple Judaism relates to the distinction between Old Testament and Second Temple Judaism. Does the new perspective adequately take into account the difference between the teaching of the Old Testament and the kind of religious practice that characterized the Judaism of the first century AD?

One of the claims of writers of the new perspective is that the Reformational reading of the apostle Paul fails to recognize the important continuities between Paul's understanding of the gospel and Judaism. According to the new perspective, Paul did not repudiate Judaism when he became an apostle of Christ. Rather, Paul's teaching and understanding of the gospel are in significant continuity with his Jewish background. By drawing a sharp contrast between the "law" and the "gospel," the Reformation (especially Luther) failed to appreciate the extent to which Paul viewed the gospel of Christ as the "end" or

"fulfillment" of the law.¹ The Reformation interpreted Paul's doctrine of justification by faith apart from works as though it were a "new" teaching that was unknown to Judaism. However, the new perspective argues that Paul's teaching was in more substantial continuity with Judaism than the Reformation perspective allows. By drawing a sharp contrast between law and gospel, the Reformation failed to recognize the important similarities between Judaism and Paul's understanding of the gospel. Whereas the apostle Paul viewed the gospel of Christ as a fulfillment of the law and Judaism, the Reformational understanding of justification encourages a reading of Scripture that does not do justice to the Old Testament background of Paul's writings.

Though this is a complicated subject that we will take up again in our consideration of Paul's teaching on the doctrine of justification, one of the weaknesses of the new perspective at this point is its failure at times to bear in mind that there are at least *two distinct ways in which we may speak of Judaism*. When the apostle Paul's relationship to Judaism is considered, it is impor-

***There are at least two distinct ways in
which we may speak of Judaism.***

tant to remember that his opposition to a particular form of Judaism in the first century is not tantamount to an opposition to Judaism as such. Nor does it require the conclusion that Paul taught a conflict between the gospel of Christ and the teaching of the Old Testament (Judaism).² The Reformational view that Paul opposed a form of Jewish-Christian legalism does not mean that his teaching was somehow at odds with the teaching of the Old Testament. In the Reformational understanding, the apostle Paul was combating a *distortion* of the Old Testament's teaching, when he confronted those who insisted upon obedience to certain requirements of the law as a basis for acceptance with God. Paul's opposition to the Judaizers, in other words, was an opposition against a *contemporary distortion of the teaching of the Old Testament, not to Judaism as such.*

If this distinction between Old Testament and Second Temple Judaism is borne in mind, the new perspective's claim that the Reformation failed to consider fully the continuity between Paul's gospel and the teaching of Judaism is placed in a different light. The problem with Judaism, so far as the Reformational view of justification is concerned, was not with Judaism itself (and certainly not with the Old Testament). Rather, the problem with the Judaizers whom the apostle Paul resisted was that they had perverted the grace of God into a means of self-justification. Or, to put the matter in the language of Paul's epistle to the Galatians, the Judaizers had failed to reckon with the truth that the promise of the gospel predated the giving of the

(Mosaic) law by some 430 years (compare Gal. 3:17-18).

Conclusion

By raising these questions regarding the new perspective's understanding of Second Temple Judaism, I do not mean to suggest that we can adequately evaluate the new perspective without also considering the writings of the apostle Paul. The most important measure, as we have noted previously, of the new perspective is the teaching of the

Nothing in the new perspective's interpretation of Second Temple Judaism, seems to establish a need for a revolution in our understanding of the apostle Paul's doctrine of justification.

apostle Paul himself, as this is set forth in his New Testament epistles. Consequently, the remainder of our evaluation of the new perspective in subsequent articles will be occupied with a direct treatment of the apostle Paul's writings and understanding of the doctrine of justification. However, these questions do raise serious doubts regarding the bold claims of writers of the new perspective. Whether we need a revolution in our understanding of the apostle Paul's doctrine of justification remains to be seen. Nothing in the new perspective's interpretation of Second Temple Judaism, however, seems in itself sufficient

to establish this need. For that to be the case, the new perspective would not only have to show that Second Temple Judaism was devoid of any "legalistic" emphasis upon salvation by works. It would also have to show why its entanglements with contemporary cultural and social interests do not warrant the observation that the new perspective is as much a product of the present theological climate as was the Reformational perspective.

Notes

1. Cf. Dunn, *The Theology of Paul the Apostle*, pp. 368-71.

2. A key to understanding Paul's contrast between the "law" and the "gospel," as we shall see in a subsequent article, lies in the recognition that he sometimes uses the language of "law" to refer to the Old Testament Scriptures or the Mosaic administration of the covenant as whole, and sometimes to refer more narrowly to the commandments and obligations of the law.

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Looking Above

A Series on The Revelation of Jesus Christ

“Set Your Mind on Things Above”

It used to be said that Christians were “too heavenly minded to be any earthly good.” That critique no longer holds; in fact, it has been reversed. Far from being “too heavenly minded to be any earthly good,” Christians today, it seems, are “too *earthly* minded to be any *heavenly* good.”

Though the Scriptures exhort us to “set our minds on things above”,¹ we spend little time thinking upon the things of heaven. When we do consider the subject, we tend to think of it as something that lies entirely in the future, forgetting that the apostle calls us to set our minds on things above *now*, in the present!

Tragically, the very book of Scripture which most poignantly sets our minds on things above, is also the least understood book of Scripture. What the church needs is a good dose of the book of Revelation.

Before we begin an in-depth look at the book, however, it is fitting to set the parameters in which the book must be understood.² Of paramount importance is the fact that The Revelation of Jesus Christ is *history*. There are three types of literature in the New Testament: gospel, such as the gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke; epistles, such as those of Paul and Peter; and church history, such as the book of Acts. John is the only New Testament author to write all three

types of literature. He writes a gospel: The Gospel According to John. He writes letters: The Three Epistles of John. And he writes church history: The Revelation of Jesus Christ.

The Revelation of Jesus Christ is church history. It is not merely the

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history of those events that transpired shortly *after* the death of Christ. Nor is it only the history of those events that will transpire just *before* the return of Christ. Revelation is the history of the church as she lives in the world between Christ’s first coming and His second coming - between Christ’s incarnation and His return.

Revelation records that history in seven sections: chapters 1-3, 4-7, 8-11, 12-14, 15-16, 17-19, and 20-22. These seven sections parallel one another.³ That is to say, each of the seven sections spans the same time period: the time be-

tween Christ’s incarnation and His return. Chapters 1-3 span the time period between Christ’s incarnation and His return. Chapters 4-7 span the time period between Christ’s incarnation and His return. Chapters 8-11 span the time period between Christ’s incarnation and His return. This pattern continues through each of the seven sections. The seven sections, then, parallel one another, so that you are reading the same history seven times over.

Not only do these seven sections parallel one another, they are also progressive in nature.⁴ That is to say, as you move from section one (chapters 1-3) to section two (chapters 4-7), there is progress. As you move from section two (chapters 4-7) to section three (chapters 8-11), there is progress. This pattern continues through each of the seven sections. The imagery becomes more intense, the details more vivid, the curses more terrifying, the blessings far greater. There is an intensification in each of the sections over against that which was recorded in the sections before (the seals of chapters 15-16 are more intense than the trumpets of chapters 8-11; the trumpets of chapters 8-11 are more intense than the seals of chapters 4-7).

You begin to understand, then, the genius – the sheer genius – of the book! Revelation, in recording the history of the church as she lives in the world between the incarnation of Christ and His return, records *your* history! Where do you live, after all? You live in the world, between the incarnation of Christ and His return! You live in the very time period described in the book of

Revelation. The history recorded here is your history. The story recorded here is your story. You are involved in the drama. You are not mere spectators sitting in the stands watching the events unfold before your eyes. You are participants in the arena! This is truly your history and your story!

Thus, the book of Revelation is not the property of the Premillennialists, who tragically reduce the book of Revelation to events that are entirely in the future (thereby rendering the book useless for the church today!). Such views must be *left behind!* Nor is the book of Revelation to be left in the hands of the Postmillennialists, who tragically reduce the book of Revelation to events that transpired in the year 70 AD, with the fall of Jerusalem (thereby rendering the book useless for the church today!). Such views are *Jewish dreams!*¹⁵

The book of Revelation belongs in the hands of the Amillennialists, who understand that the book of Revelation is describing the Millennium (not some literal 1,000 year reign of Christ in the literal nation of Israel, in the literal city of Jerusalem, in a literal temple): that time period between Christ's incarnation and His return.⁶ The Millennium is now! You are in it!⁷ Dear Church of Jesus Christ, this is your history!

The Revelation of Jesus Christ, then, in describing for us the history of the church as she lives in the world between Christ's first coming and His second coming, summons us to look above! Revelation does not summon us backwards to the year 70 AD. Nor does Revelation summon us forward to the unknown date of Christ's return.⁸

Revelation summons us to look above. Revelation sets our minds on heaven, for in Christ Jesus, our redemption *is* accomplished – already now! Our victory *is* secure – already now! Our goal *is* certain – already now! In setting our minds on things above, The Revelation of Jesus Christ comforts us with the truth that already now “our lives are hid with Christ in God.”⁹ For the Church of Jesus Christ, living in the world between His first coming and His return, there is no other comfort!

***Revelation sets our
minds on heaven, for
in Christ Jesus, our
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accomplished –
already now!***

Notes

1. Colossians 3:1-4.
2. At the outset of this series, I wish to express my profound indebtedness to the late Rev. Charles G. Dennison, pastor of the Grace Orthodox Presbyterian Church in Sewickly, PA, for many of the insights on the book of Revelation; also to the late Dr. William Hendriksen, for his overview of Revelation in his masterful commentary, *More Than Conquerors*.
3. Cf. Hendriksen, William. *More Than Conquerors*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1967. pp. 16-22.
4. *Ibid.*, pp. 34-36.
5. Second Helvetic Confession, Article 11.

6. Cf. Revelation 20:1-10.

7. As one bumper sticker put it: “Honk if you are enjoying the millennium!”

8. Though Revelation does point us forward to the coming of Christ, even ending on that note (Revelation 22:20), this is not its primary focus.

9. Colossians 3:1-4.

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Book of the Month *The Parables of Our Lord*

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Popeye, Evangelism, and the Reformed Faith

I hate cooked spinach; always have, always will. Always looked to me like seaweed, and tasted just as bad. I blamed Popeye for it. The cartoon character with the forearms and the muscle-generating can of spinach caused many boys (and girls) to eat more of the green stuff than they wanted. At least I could console myself with the knowledge that spinach had so much iron in it that it was the “best thing on the planet to eat”, and would build strong bones, blood, and biceps.

Or so I thought. Not too many years ago, the FDA in Washington DC revealed that spinach, while good for you, has nowhere near the amount of iron in it that Americans have thought for many decades. Seemed that a scientist many years ago misplaced a decimal. Spinach is only one-tenth as good for you as they said! That mistake led scientists, cartoon writers and moms to believe in the “doctrine of the value of spinach”, thus foisting the horrid tasting stuff on generations of children. Oh, the power of a mistake!

Doctrine Shapes Life

“Doctrine shapes life”, Christians always say, and rightly so. But *mis-*

takes in doctrine shape life, too, often with terrible consequences. Think of how people once read the Biblical *descriptions* of the system of slavery in the Roman world as *prescriptions* allowing for the trafficking in human flesh. It led to horrifying abuses of human beings created in the image of God.

In this article, I want to reflect on how misunderstandings, distortions, and errors in doctrine have compromised some Presbyterian and Reformed churches in regard to evangelism. Specifically, how such errors have undercut evangelistic zeal, activity, and success in many of our churches. I hope such reflection makes you think about your perspective, and about your church.

A scant bit of history is in order. In the centuries prior to this one, some of the greatest evangelists in this country were Calvinists. Who has not heard of George Whitefield, the passionate Methodist – but thoroughly Calvinistic – preacher who was used of God to evangelize much of this land in the mid 18th Century? Recently, a Baptist acquaintance who is a careful student of early American Baptists, reminded me

that in the United States, early Baptists were almost universally Calvinistic in doctrine. They led the way in evangelistic fervor and success. Calvinism, back then, *meant* evangelistic fervor!

Yet, despite this legacy, Presbyterian/Reformed churches in this generation do not lead the North American Christian world with a passion for evangelism. In fact, in many Calvinistic churches in the U.S., about the only “evangelism” that takes place is marital. That is, a son or daughter of the church falls in love with and marries a person with non-Calvinist (and/or non-Christian) roots.

Members of Calvinistic churches, with few notable exceptions, are not passionate about the lost. Budgets in such churches support “missions” – but often only to the extent that they send money to others. Local evangelism is almost non-existent. Sadly, a correlative attitude seems to be acceptable and popular among Calvinists these days: “people get saved in Baptist or other fundamentalistic churches, and then they learn good theology and become Calvinists.” If it weren’t so arrogant, it might be funny. Fact is, not many “get saved” through the evangelism efforts of Calvinistic churches in today’s Christian world. And that’s a shame.

Why is this so? I believe there are several reasons, and I commend

“Doctrine shapes life”, Christians always say, and rightly so. But mistakes in doctrine shape life, too, often with terrible consequences.

them to you for your reflection, and prayer.

Theological

First of all, Calvinistic theology – which once drove missionaries to all lands – has seen many distortions that seem to justify evangelistic inactivity.

In the first place, Calvinists I know argue that “evangelism” is properly an activity in which only official preachers in their official pulpits are to be engaged. Thus, the common believer’s only duty is to “get people into church” where they can “hear the preaching”. But this minimizes the role of all believers in “witness” and “testimony” – those legal-sounding terms the NT uses to describe the calling of all Christians to bear witness to their Lord and Savior. To be sure, preachers preach, and steelworkers don’t. But recall that preachers preach “to equip the saints – including steelworkers – for their ministry.” (Ephesians 4:11-12) And that ministry commissions each believer as a testifier, a witness-bearer, who must live his/her life “on the witness stand”, thus testifying and speaking of the power of the crucified and risen Lord.

Secondly, the doctrine of election seems to be used with greater frequency to argue that “evangelism is God’s business; if He chooses people, He’ll bring them in. I have nothing to do with it. In fact, I *cannot* affect the outcome by my efforts!” I know pastors and even groups of churches that use such argumentation to oppose what I’ve heard called the “Arminian practice of evangelism”. Such an argument seems to ignore that those chosen before the foun-

datations of the earth (Ephesians 1:4,11) are “included in Christ” *when they hear the gospel.* (Ephesians 1:13) In other words, our spiritual forebears were right: the Calvinistic doctrine of election *demand*s and *drive*s evangelism, rather than excusing us from it!

Cultural

There are also cultural reasons evangelism is in trouble in many Presbyterian/Reformed churches.

The Calvinistic doctrine of election demands and drives evangelism, rather than excusing us from it!

First, many such churches operate like a closed circle. We use “in-house jargon” that only people from our background will understand (think of such terms as “votum and salutation” or “the regulative principle” or some of our theological terms). We tend to move socially only within our own circles of redeemed people. To be sure, we’ll be polite with new folks to the church, but to spend the time and effort to intentionally seek close friendships with unbelievers as a strategic gospel priority? Doubtful. In fact, many of our church members don’t have *any* close friends who are unbelievers. In such tight and exclusive circles, evangelism is dealt a double stumbling-block: before one can embrace Christ as Lord, he must “fit in” with our socio-economic-cultural group.

Doesn’t sound that different from the Judaizers, who demanded that people be circumcised or they couldn’t be in Christ. Frightening.

Second, Calvinists in our generation seem to be flirting with a non-Reformed understanding of the covenant. That is, “being in the covenant” seems to equate, in many Calvinists’ minds, with “being elect” and “being saved.” OT Israel had that view, and it resulted in spiritual destruction! It’s a very small leap indeed to the contemporary corollary, that “we Calvinists are the covenant people. After all, we have the heritage of the faith and the sign of infant baptism for our children!” As a result of this distortion, “election” and “salvation” are somehow connected to being Scottish Presbyterians or Dutch Reformed Calvinists.

Such a view is remarkably arrogant, and wrong on several levels. Being in the covenant does *not* guarantee that one is saved. Remember Achan, Korah, Dathan, and Abiram? All of them were members of the covenant; yet all of them were destroyed in their sin. And in Webster’s dictionary, the term “covenant” does not include as one of its definitions a reference that says “see Dutch Calvinism”. God’s covenant is indeed a blessed relationship of God’s gracious favor, of God’s promise. But it demands faith; it does not render faith unnecessary for the children of Calvinists. And God’s covenant is established far and wide, with all kinds of people, both Jew and Gentile, who “repent and believe”, including “their children, and all who are far off, all whom the Lord our God will call unto himself.” (Acts 2:39)

Third, many Reformed churches



confuse faith-identity with cultural/ethnic-identity. I can't even begin to guess how many times I've heard Presbyterians or Reformed Christians talk about "our people" and "our churches", meaning of course not Christians, but *Scottish* Presbyterians or *Dutch* Reformed people of the Calvinist worldview. Don't get me wrong. I enthusiastically subscribe to Calvinist creeds and read Scripture with a worldview shaped by such understandings. But there's a huge difference between Biblical *conservativism* (which holds firmly to the truths of Scripture) and ethnic/cultural *traditionalism* (which holds stubbornly to "the way we've always done it, because our way is the only right way.")

Here's the point: when we confuse Biblical Christianity with ethnic or cultural traditionalism, we not only don't seek the lost, but we even hinder evangelism efforts. "Not Dutch? You're not much!" The bumper sticker famous among Dutch Calvinists might be tongue-in-cheek, but the attitude behind it fairly shouts: "Even if you're washed in the blood of the Lamb and renewed in the image of God, you don't fit in here unless you are just like us!" "You don't go to church twice on Sunday? You'll never fit in here until you get your 'sabbath-observance' straightened out like we do."

What a shame. For a spiritual heritage that celebrates grace as one of its fundamental hinge pins, far too many of our churches' doors squeak on cultural rust.

Popeye could get away with being wrong about spinach. He was only

a cartoon character. But you and I may not be wrong about our doctrine – or the attitudes our doctrine generates — if it destroys our passion for the salvation of the lost. Jesus addressed just such a situation in the parable popularly known as the "prodigal son" in Luke 15. I'll remind you of the first half of the chapter. Jesus was eating with "sinners", and the pharisees were indignant. So Jesus told 3 stories. There was a lost lamb. The shepherd left all behind to seek and find it, and

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invited everyone to celebrate that the lamb was found. There was also a lost coin, for which a woman searched diligently. When found, it was the occasion for a great celebration with friends and neighbor. In both these cases, Jesus commented "in the same way, there will be great rejoicing among the angels in heaven over one sinner who repents."

And then the point. There was also a lost son. You know the details: wasted an inheritance, worked with accursed pigs, ate their food, came to his senses, was repentant, and was received by his father with a party, a ring, and a robe. But the son

had no passion for the salvation of the lost. In bitterness, he was moved by the arrogant envy that a fool received forgiveness and joy even greater than he who was the "good boy", the "covenant" son.

Jesus taught the parable against the arrogant "covenant people" of the day who had no heart for evangelism. His point is sharp. And it sticks close to home, doesn't it?

Dr. John R. Sittema serves as an Associate Pastor in the PCA Church and is the author of *A Shepherd's Heart*.

"IT'S ALL GREEK TO ME"

The 5th Annual Men's Conference will be held at Trinity United Reformed Church, 7350 Kalamazoo Ave., Caledonia, MI, on July 18-19. Rev. Jim Dennison (Academic Dean of Northwest Theological Seminary in Washington) and Dr. Bill Dennison (Professor of Interdisciplinary Studies at Covenant College in Lookout Mountain, Georgia) will be speaking on Biblical Interpretation. Please mark your calendars with plans to attend the Men's Conference on July 18-19!

God's People, My Parish

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.

Successful applicants must be committed to the Reformed faith, Biblical inerrancy, 6-day creation, male headship, the antithesis between Christianity and the world, and covenantal theology.

Applicants should send a letter of application and resume to:

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For more information,
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Dutton United Reformed Church, Caledonia, Michigan is seeking a full-time pastor to share pastoral responsibilities with another full-time pastor. Contact the Pastor Search Committee for a church profile and list of responsibilities. All replies will be kept confidential.

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It was another time and another place. I was just new to the ministry. One of the people that I began visiting regularly was a woman in her early sixties. She had never married and had very little family to speak of.

We would visit and have coffee and poppy seed bread. Alice made the best poppy seed bread in town and often I got to take a loaf or two home with me. Alice would also show me the latest craft she was working on, and frequently I got to take that home, too. Soon I had a house full of embroidered fly swatter covers, embroidered door handle covers that said "Noel", embroidered snow flakes for the windows. Alice loved to embroider things.

And she loved to talk. Alice and I could talk about anything and everything. Our time together would fly by quickly. Afterwards, I would end the visit with Scripture reading and a prayer, thinking I had done my pastoral duty.

I came home from a meeting one night and returned to my study. I had visited Alice for most of the afternoon and I needed to burn some midnight oil to catch up on my sermon preparation.

I wasn't there long and I heard a knock on the door. It was Alice's nephew. "I don't mean to disturb you so late," he said, "but can you come? Alice has passed away."

I remember thinking then, and I think about it often: we had talked about everything, Alice and I. We had talked about the people in town, the weather, even passages in the Bible. But I could not remember ever pressing upon her the claims of Christ and her need for salvation. I just assumed she knew.

How I had failed to be Alice's pastor! Certainly, I had gone through the motions - faithfully visiting, reading and praying with her. But I had never told her about the most important thing in life and death - her need for Christ. I don't doubt that Alice is in glory. If ever there was a precious lamb in the Lord's fold, it was her. But as her minister, it was something that we should have talked about.

As I think about Alice, I can't help but think of how often we as Christians just go through the motions. We faithfully do our Christian duty. We can defend the faith with great vigor. But do we really know how to apply it? Do we really know the most important thing of all? Or do we just assume salvation?

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



Sound Bites

The Outlook - 1974

January 1974

“One of the real dangers when facing this problem is that we will seek solutions which we will learn to regret. History ought to teach us a few things. Various ‘gimmicks’ have been used to increase attendance in some churches. Of course, they failed. The church, the body of Christ, the pillar and ground of the truth, has but one commodity to ‘sell,’ i.e., the Word! God’s people will come to hear His Word. Soul-hunger has to be satisfied with the ‘bread of life’. No other food satisfies.”

The Second Service
Henry Vander Kam

“When you turn from preaching to something else you will find yourself undergoing a constant series of changes. You’ll be forever looking for something new as the new of the previous month soon becomes another habit.”

What Greater Excitement Can One Have
Johan D. Tangelder

February 1974

“History proves that apostasy infiltrates so gradually and subtly that the majority do not recognize it until it is too late to do anything about it.”

Secession or Polarization?
John Vander Ploeg

April 1974

“We play with fire at the peril of

our lives. To trifle with the fire of God’s Word is to run a risk that is infinitely greater.”

How to Rekindle the Fire
John Vander Ploeg

“Anyone not willing to become informed cannot expect to be or become Reformed.”

Polarization in the CRC
John Vander Ploeg

May 1974

“If women want equal rights, they must figure on losing their unequal privileges. If they enter what was always man’s sphere, men will no longer treat them as women.”

Equal Rights?
Johanna Timmer

July 1974

“When the fires of heresy are kindled in the church, why is it that those who sound the alarm are charged as being the culprits rather than those who are guilty of this kind of arson?”

Where Are We Going?
Peter De Jong

September 1974

“The thought was thrown out that eventually, by the sovereign grace of Him whose guidance we will implore, that the outcome of all of this might even prove to be a *United Reformed Church* in the United States and Canada.”

A Dream, A Response, and a Request
John Vander Ploeg

October 1974

“One of the major difficulties with modern education is that it does not consider God an issue of consequence.”

God is The Issue
Johan Tangelder

November 1974

“Remove the miracles from the Bible and you have done away with all of its supporting pillars.”

Smorgasbord Christianity
Peter De Jong

“The question is not whether one joins in the expression of some kind of thanksgiving; but rather, is God acknowledged as the Giver, and do we see the centrality of the cross of Jesus Christ in the midst of the ‘things’ for which we are grateful.”

Thanksgiving and “Things”
Harlan Vanden Einde

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

Contact Rev. Mark Vander Hart, Mid-America Reformed Seminary, 229 Seminary Drive, Dyer, IN 46311-1069. Call (219) 864-2400; Fax: (219) 864-2410; E-mail: mvh@jorsm.com

Christian Reformed Church Agenda for Synod, 2003

For those interested in the Christian Reformed Church the annual agenda provides a good read. Unfortunately most of the copies will go unread. There are some 443 pages in this year's Agenda for Synod. One can hardly summarize them within the confines of a short article, but the following are some highlights with a bit of commentary. This year's agenda, like other years consists of two parts. The first is the reports of various agencies and study committees. The second is overtures and communications from the classis and the churches. With respect to the reports of the various agencies and study committees the work of synod has been reduced to a ceremonial function. While we claim to be "Protestants" vigorous debate and protestation in the Synod has been largely silenced. The decisions have already been made in board meetings, committee meetings or in the collegial halls of the denominational building. Synod is simply being asked to approve the requests as presented. Vigorous debate on these reports and requests has diminished significantly in recent years.

The Board of Trustees

The Board of Trustees report notes that again, Synod will have women

advisors and ethnic advisors. It is interesting that women advisors were appointed while ethnic advisors were not. It has been difficult to find ethnic advisors and the program has not been an unqualified success even though the BOT is recommending that Synod continue the practice for an additional five years.

In anticipation of Synod 2005 it is being recommended that a review committee be appointed of the "appropriate balance" of men and women to review the "classical-local" option of women in office. After eight years only twenty-one of the forty-seven classes have approved declaring the word male "inoperative" in the Church Order. Some must be distressed by the tenacity with which a majority of the churches and classes cling to the clear teaching of Scripture. After 2005 the freedom to be obedient on this issue may not be tolerated.

The Judicial Code Procedure was reviewed as the consequence of an employee termination. The BOT is recommending that employees of "an agency, board or committee", do not have the right to use the judicial code to bring an appeal against "an agency board or committee". This insulates the bureau-

cracy from ecclesiastical judicial action and makes the BOT the final arbiter in the appeals procedure. Since the BOT is also the *de facto* employer, this can hardly be construed as a victory for workers rights to fairness and justice. The committee on social justice was strangely quiescent on this matter.

The BOT is presently engaged in a Denominational Ministries Review with various agencies and educational institutions. The report presented to the February 2002 board meeting is being reviewed and responses will be received at the Fall 2003 board meeting. An interesting study in itself would be a review of the vision statements, restructuring documents and other grandiose plans that have been foisted on the denomination over the past three decades. Recall "Key 73" in which the burning issue was whether or not churches grow along "homogeneous" lines. It seems we spend an inordinate amount of time producing definitive pronouncements that are promptly ignored.

There are a number of denominational executives who are retiring or approaching retirement age in the next few years. An unnamed Secession Planning Committee has been appointed to develop a new leadership model for the bureaucracy. A single-leader model with a cabinet of executives and department heads is being proposed but no synodical action is requested at this time. In view of the collapse of Enron, World Com, the bankruptcy

With respect to the reports of the various agencies and study committees the work of synod has been reduced to a ceremonial function.



of United Airlines, Kmart and Arthur Andersen, and in view of the checkered financial past of the CRC's investments in IRM, it is puzzling why we continue to be so enchanted by the executive structures of corporate America. Endless reviews, reports and hours may be spent tweaking the bureaucracy, but will that cause our children to be faithful, our families to be strengthened. Will this increase our faith? The church is not a business. It is unlikely that a revised corporate structure will stem the denomination's decline.

In many ways the Board of Trustees has become a surrogate Synod and has usurped the prerogatives and functions that once belonged to broadest ecclesiastical assembly of the church. For example, this past February a "pastoral letter" (Appendix K, p. 85) was sent to the church by the BOT urging the churches to reflect and discuss matters of war and peace particularly with respect to the U.S. policy in Iraq. Curiously it was signed by the chairman who is not a pastor. It was filled with the requisite platitudes about love, justice, peace and reconciliation but fell a bit short of openly declaring that the BOT did not approve of President Bush's foreign policy. What was especially annoying was that the BOT which is not an ecclesiastical assembly presumed an authority which it does not possess.

Pastoral letters should come from consistories, pastors, classis or synod. The pulpits and members of our churches do not need pretentious pastoral letters from denominational boards.

Committee Reports

Since a number of people are now engaged in pastoral vocations not related to the parish ministry there is an extended report of the Chaplaincy Ministries Study Committee. The Office of Chaplain Ministries will be supervising the increasing number of chaplains functioning in institutional and military settings. Reports from the Office of Abuse Prevention, and the Directors of the offices of Disability Concerns, Pastor-Church Relations, Race Relations, and Social Justice and Hun-

In many ways the Board of Trustees has become a surrogate Synod.

ger Action are also included in the Agenda There is as well a press release noting that the CRC had received a grant from the Lilly Foundation regarding Sustaining Pastoral Excellence.

Mission Boards

The Home Missions report noted the commitment of the denomination to Church Planting. The historic and most successful way this was done was through local "mother" churches establishing "daughter" congregations. There is a different approach now with new church developers planting churches that are more isolated from other established churches.

Twenty years ago in 1983 the total number of churches was 828 and the total membership was 299,685. Now there are 995 churches and the total membership is 278,798. That means 167 more churches are serving some 20,887 fewer members. The report also notes that the total net denominational growth was 542 persons, yet the total membership in 2001 was 278,944 and in 2002 it was 278,798 which translates into a decrease of 142 members. It seems these statistics are not as optimistic as they first appear.

World Missions reported on the work in Cuba, the Philippines and various field partnerships in other parts of the world. Since 9/11 there is a heightened awareness of security for our missionaries. It is apparent that this world is not a friend to grace. There remains an increased need for those who are willing to commit their lives to serving the Lord on mission fields throughout the world. CRWRC also faces many of these same challenges as it seeks to bring Christian mercy to those in need.

Pensions and Insurance

The office of Pensions and Insurance reported on some proposed changes in the Minister's Pension Plan. One of the changes is to farm out the disability portion of the plan to outside private carriers. This relieves the trustees of the headache of dealing with questions related ministerial disability benefits. It may also relieve them of dealing with ministers who may have a touch of hypochondria. The pension plan also reported a loss of 10.5%, some 13 million (U.S. dollars), and 4.4%, approximately 1.8 million

(Canadian dollars) in the market value of their portfolios. This is hardly a stellar performance on the part of the investment managers, but the market has been depressed this past year.

Study Committees

There are two sizable study committee reports. Both are worth reading. The first is on issues raised by Bioscience and Genetic Engineering and the second is on Christian Day School Education. The study committee report on Genetic Engineering deals with a broad range of ethical questions regarding issues as diverse as abortion, in-vitro fertilization, genetic engineering and birth control. With the progress of modern science we are increasingly confronted with ethical problems regarding reproductive technology, stem cell research and a host of other questions. Hopefully this report will be helpful in sorting out some of these issues from a biblical perspective.

The second study committee report is on Christian Day School Education. It provides a foundation why churches should seek to support our children's Christian Day School education through covenantal giving plans. This is commendable and long overdue. One of the problems, however, is that some of our Christian Schools are losing their distinctively reformed character. Many students are from non-reformed churches and some schools are acquiescing to allowing non-reformed teachers and non-reformed members on the Board. When there are widely divergent views among the students and in the Boards, inevitably this leads to a weakening of the historic ties that

have existed between the Church and the Christian School. We have not clearly defined whether the Christian School should be primarily for our covenant children or whether it should be considered an evangelistic outreach effort. The report partially addresses some of these concerns and is worthy of a careful reading. Overture 9 from Classis Lake Superior also ad-

If Synod is serious about "earth keeping" it should not be looking for ways to increase junk mail.

dresses similar concerns about this committee report.

Board of Publications

The main concern of the Board of Publications report is the future of *The Banner*. In the past few years the magazine has declined from a weekly, to a bi-weekly, to a monthly publication. Obviously it is not generating the interest or touching the hearts of its readership as it once did. It is estimated that within five years the magazine will not be able to sustain itself. The proposed solution to this problem is incorporating the cost of *The Banner* into ministry shares and sending it to every household in the denomination. This would effectively turn *The Banner* into a mouthpiece for the bureaucracy, and provide job security for those who have failed to reach or to cultivate *The Banner's* readership.

If Synod is serious about "earth keeping" it should not be looking for ways to increase junk mail. There are other alternatives which could be explored, one of which would be to hire some people trained in journalism who are more interested in good copy than in high quality paper, color pictures, graphic design and collecting awards from printers and religious publishers. If one considers the success of a magazine like *World* it can be done.

Overtures

There are eleven overtures in this year's agenda dealing with issues as diverse as "restorative" justice, reviewing the CRC's position on women in office, birth control, Christian education, the report on genetic engineering, First Toronto and the ordination of homosexuals, withdrawing membership in the World Alliance of Reformed Churches, and one issue which has been dealt with in previous synods, i.e., the casting of lots in the selection of office-bearers.

The first overture from Classic B.C. on "restorative" justice reads like a term paper in an ethics class. It overlooks individual responsibility and tends to categorize crime in communal terms. With all of its talk about "justice" it offers no helpful definition. I prefer the simple yet elegant definition which the late Professor Henry Stob once offered in class, "justice is getting one's due". This overture sounds like a pretext for creating another denominational office.

The overture on withdrawing from the World Alliance of Reformed Churches rightly points out the incongruity of holding ecclesiastical



membership in an organization that allows heretics within its ranks. Since being expelled from NAPARC we found ourselves in an ecumenical wilderness so WARC became the alternative. One does not crawl into a bear's den to get out of the cold.

The most pressing issue that this Synod may have to face is the question of Overture 4 and whether it will apply special discipline to the Council of First Toronto for permitting the ordination of practicing homosexuals to church office. Some will contend that the position of First Toronto is a logical consequence of the women's ordination issue and the arguments used to support this are the same arguments used to support women's ordination. It will be interesting to see if Synod will have the corporate will to uphold the scripture, and its own decisions and take decisive disciplinary action in this case.

Synod 2003 is not yet history. Pray that the Lord may give wisdom and discernment to the delegates, that the decisions made will be pleasing in His sight, and that He will be merciful to the Christian Reformed Church.

Rev. Richard J. Blauw is the Pastor of the First Christian Reformed Church in South Holland, Illinois.

Looking Out and About

- On May 4 Mr. Mark Stromberg, a recent graduate of Westminster Theological Seminary in Escondido, California, was ordained as the first pastor of the newly organized United Reformed Church in Belgrade, Montana. Dr. W. Robert Godfrey, the president of Westminster Seminary, California participated in the ordination service.

- The Bethany United Reformed Church of Wyoming, Michigan celebrated its 50th anniversary on May 2, 2003. All six of the men who have served Bethany Church as pastor are still living. Three of the retired pastors, two of whom: Rev. E.J. Knott and Rev. A. Besteman are associate pastors at Bethany, spoke at the anniversary celebration. Fourteen of the charter members of the church are still members of the congregation. Ten of them were able to be present at the celebration. Rev. Casey Frewick has served as pastor of the church since the fall of 1999 .

- Zion Christian School opened its doors to students for the first time on September 7, 1999. Zion School which has been meeting in portable classrooms on the grounds of the Cornerstone United Reformed Church in Hudsonville, Michigan is supported by many of the United Reformed congregations in the Grand Rapids/Hudsonville/Holland area. The school which began as a high school added grades five through eight last year. Zion plans

next year the Lord willing to add kindergarten through fourth grade. The school presently has seventy-four students. The association recently approved the purchase of twelve acres in the Byron Center area. The property includes a large building which is being renovated and enlarged to accommodate the growing student body. It is hoped that the newly purchased property will be ready for use for the 2003-2004 school year.

(continued page 24)

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(\$10.00 plus *\$3.00 postage)

Norman Shepherd

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(\$2.00 plus *\$1.00 postage)

(continued from page 23)

• Reformed Youth Services sponsored a Junior High Retreat at Camp Geneva near Holland, Michigan in May. Almost ninety 7th & 8th graders spent two days playing games and hearing about "The Good Life". Rev. Wybren Oord spoke on "Jesus Christ Brings the Good Life", "Dealing With Anger", and "Only Good Things".

• Reformed Youth Services is planning LOGOS 2003 for mid-August. The main speakers will be Rev. Brian Vos of Trinity United Reformed Church in Caledonia, Michigan. Workshops will be led by Rev. Todd Joling, Mr. Rick Poll, and Rev. Bob VanManen. For more information call RYS at (616) 667-0694 or email rys@iserv.net.

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