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# Standing Before the Mirror

*“If anyone is a hearer of the word and not a doer, he is like a man who looks at his natural face in a mirror; for once he has looked at himself and gone away, he has immediately forgotten what kind of person he was. But one who looks intently at the perfect law, the law of liberty, and abides in it, not having become a forgetful hearer but an effectual doer, this man shall be blessed in what he does.” (James 1:23-25)*

James calls our attention to two types of people who stand before a spiritual mirror. The mirror into which we peer is the spoken or written Word of God. Through this mirror we are called by God to take a good look at ourselves. But what does this mirror show us? It shows us the light of Jesus Christ; and in that light we see our sin. We see our “*natural face*”. We see ourselves as we really are.

When we look in the mirror we can

see a lot of similarities between us and the rest of the human race. We all have two eyes, two ears, a nose, a mouth, and so on. Looking at ourselves through the Word of God is the same way. It shows the entire human race in the same light. It shows us that we are all sinners in need of a Savior. Even a quick look lets us know that is true.

## The Quick Look

Even so, the person who takes a quick glance at himself in this mir-

ror gets a temporary, superficial glimpse of his face. He does not get the true picture. He does not see how the marks of sin have defaced him.

Sometimes that quick look may make us think that we are not as bad as someone else. We look in the mirror and we say to ourselves, “I am so thankful that I have these rugged good looks. I am not like what’s-his-name who has this feature too large and that one too small.”



Volume 53, No. 7 (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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A quick look into the mirror of the Word of God may tempt us to say the very same thing. We think to ourselves, "I am a good person. I am much better than Saddam Hussein; much better than you-fill-in-the-blank; why I am even better than some people that go to the same church as I do." That is what happens when you look too quickly.

But look again. The divinely inspired Word of God really cuts through that superficial diagnosis and allows you to see yourself as you really are. But that can present yet another problem for the person who takes a quick look. For him, the tragedy is that once he gets that full glimpse of himself and he sees his true condition, he doesn't linger long enough for a cure to his condition. He is like the man who gets up in the morning and only glances in the mirror. Sure enough, he sees the stubble of beard and he sees the messy head of hair, but he turns away without doing anything about it.

James writes: "*he has immediately forgotten what kind of person he was.*" In other words, he has gone away from the mirror of God with the resolute purpose of staying away. He is not going to change. He does not want to change. He knows he is a mess but he chooses to forget.

It is amazing what poor memories people have for what God says when they know His Word speaks against their activities. I remember a case in which a man was harboring anger against a brother in Christ. When an Elder and I spoke with him, he could quote Scripture to justify his anger. But he had

misquoted the Scripture. In his presence I pointed the verse out to him. He looked at it; looked at the cover of my Bible, and said: "Well, that's your translation." He was convinced that he had memorized it right and my Bible had translated it wrong.

I say he was convinced, but *he knew* the truth. He knew he was wrong but he didn't want to change. He had looked into the mirror, saw the stubble and the mud on his face and he thought the mir-

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***It is amazing what poor memories people have for what God says when they know His Word speaks against their activities.***

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ror was wrong.

Forgetting God's Word is a deliberate act. By walking away from the mirror a person can avoid his problem and move on to other things like telling you what your problem is. The consequence of this willful forgetfulness is that it dulls the conscience. When a person does this again and again - hearing God's Word; reading God's Word; looking into that mirror and forgetting what he has heard, read, and seen - he begins to think that he is okay. He paints a very different picture of himself than the one that the mirror reflects and the one that God would have him see.

### **The Intense Look**

The sincere looker pauses long enough before the mirror to allow it to instruct him. "Oh, I've got a spot here. I should shave. I should comb my hair, etc." Likewise, you look at the Word of God to get the real meaning so that you can apply it to your everyday life.

The first thing that such a listener must do is learn that law and liberty are not contradictory words. The law James is writing about is not necessarily the ten commandments (although they certainly play an important role in our lives). The law James is referring to is found in James 1:21: "*putting aside all filthiness & all that remains of wickedness, in humility receive the WORD implanted, which is able to save your souls.*"

This WORD is all of God's Word; all that He has revealed to us. But more, it is Christ who was the WORD from the very beginning. He alone can save. He is the light that must shine upon the mirror if we are to see ourselves correctly and make any changes in our lives. He is the Perfect Law.

This perfect law is also the Law of liberty. Without Jesus Christ a person will find himself under a worse bondage than that of Egypt. Jesus Christ offers liberty for those who are under the condemnation of sin; those who truly see themselves for what they are and are filled with a desire to change. Jesus rescues us from the captivity into which Satan has led us.

The world and all it has to offer will try to take dominion over you and rule over you and then it will op-

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press you. The Law of Liberty opens the way to freedom. This is what Jesus meant when he said in John 8:36: *“If the Son therefore shall make you free, you will be free indeed.”*

### **True Freedom**

Freedom is really a relative thing. The people of Iraq have been given freedom. They are free from Saddam Hussein’s tyranny. They know personally the horror and the atrocities that we only read about. They have lived with them for years. They have been liberated.

Likewise spiritual freedom means: we have been liberated. But from what? The liberty that James refers to is a freedom from the dominion of Satan and sin in our lives. Sin is our greatest bondage. Look in the mirror, God’s word of Truth, and you know that to be true. But know this as well: you cannot achieve freedom unless you submit yourself to the bondage of some authority. Either the principalities of this earth or Jesus Christ.

Look at it this way: why do you enjoy the freedoms that this country offers? It is because there are people in authority over us who allow us to exercise our freedoms. When you travel, you know what side of the road to drive on. That didn’t just happen. Someone in authority over you said “Here, in this country, we will drive on the right hand side of the road.” Now you are free to drive on the right hand side of the road. Imagine the chaos if it were not so.

Our age needs to desperately learn this truth! We are so into our own personal freedoms, but have you

ever noticed that in order to get those freedoms, we have to bind ourselves to some authority. Look again at the freedom the Iraqi’s have. It is absolute chaos. Looting; breaking into hospitals and museums; taking whatever you are strong enough to take from whoever is too weak to stop you. Until the people place themselves under bondage again, that is, until they get some sort of organized leadership, Iraq will continue to be a mad house. And they know that! That

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is what the big debate in Iraq is all about now. Whose bondage do they want to be under?

Now let me ask you this: Spiritually speaking, whose bondage do you want to be under? Satan or Christ? True freedom is to place yourself under the Law of Liberty. It is to live in submission to Christ. Once you accept the bondage of God’s will in your life, you will be free from all other bondage.

God did not give us the ten commandments because He chose some arbitrary things He did not want us to do. He gave them to us because they work. They make life work. They make life easy.

You will get along a whole lot better with your friend if you do not lie to him. Your marriage will be a whole lot better if you are faithful to your spouse.

The person who knows Christ and seeks to reflect Him will find true freedom by keeping the perfect law of liberty.

Jesus tells us in John 14:15 *“If you love me, you will keep my commandments.”* If you really understand your own sin as reflected in the mirror of God’s Word and you see the sacrifice which Jesus made on Calvary’s Cross as being made for you out of God’s great love, you will respond in love to the Lord. You will abide in His Word. You will *want to* keep His commandments. Being freed by God’s grace, saved through the blood of Christ does not diminish the requirements of God’s Law. Rather, it focuses us upon that Law because we see it as the holy will, the holy standard, set for us by Him who loved us and gave Himself for us.

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



# The Unique Character of the Bible

It is already two years ago that the great tragedy of September 11 occurred. We were all wondering at that time what the future would hold, whether there would be still more attacks upon the country, and how we would deal with such attacks. Clearly we were faced with something we had not faced before in our comparatively short history. Our enemy was not simply another nation or group of nations, but adherents of a militaristic religion, Islam, with its many millions of excitable adherents around the world.

## The First Attacks

This war of religion (or “jihad” in Arabic) has been going on for a long, long time. As a matter of fact, it has been going on for fourteen centuries! Islam was founded in the first quarter of the seventh century as a militaristic faith. Mohammed himself went out with armies conquering other people, subduing them, and forcing them to accept his newly invented religion.

Hardly had he died in 632 A.D. than the armies of Islam began to go forth to conquer the world. They had remarkable success. The whole Middle East and the Persian Empire (what we now call Iran, Afghanistan and Pakistan) fell into their hands like ripened fruit from a tree. Then Egypt and North Africa, right across to the Atlantic Ocean were conquered. Where formerly there had been hundreds and thousands of Christian churches, where

Athanasius of Alexandria had set forth the truths of the personality of our Lord Jesus Christ and the nature of God as Triune (Father, Son and Holy Ghost), and where Augustine had worked and ministered in Hippo in the present country of Tunisia, there was hardly a Christian Church left in existence, and all that within just about one hundred years.

Then in 711 A.D. the North African Moors, having become Muslims, crossed the Straits of Gibraltar into Spain. In the space of one year they overthrew the Visigothic Kingdom that had existed in Spain for 350 years, and conquered the whole Iberian Peninsula apart from a very little strip along the Bay of Biscay in the northern part of the country. They poured across the Pyrenees into modern France, and were only stopped in 732 A.D. by the Franks under Charles Martel, the grandfather of Charles the Great whom we know as Charlemagne. They were thrown back from France across the Pyrenees.

In 722 A.D. a Christian resistance began in Spain to reconquer their land from the Muslims. Do you know how long it took? Seven hundred and seventy years! Only in 1492, with the conquest of Granada in the south of Spain under Ferdinand and Isabella, was the last Muslim kingdom in western Europe destroyed.

In the meantime, the rest of Europe

began to be alarmed. Eventually in the 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> centuries of the Christian era, they sent their forces into the Near East. The Moors had ceased to be the leaders of Islam. The Turks had taken over and they were another vicious and militaristic group of people. They had cut off the routes to the holy places in Palestine to which many Europeans delighted to go on pilgrimages to pray in the Church of the Holy Sepulchre in the City of Jerusalem. The great Crusades began. They are much maligned by modern teachers who have no appreciation whatsoever for what was attempted, namely to deliver at least a portion of Christendom from the yoke of Islam which had been laid upon them. They were not ultimately successful. For a while the Near East was free once again, but eventually the vices of the Crusaders themselves undid their success. They were driven out of the Near East, but it wasn't long before the Muslims were on the attack once again. Throughout this history, and in almost every case, it was the Muslims that sought to overcome and stamp out Christianity if they could.

In 1453, only a few years before the recovery of Southern Spain by Ferdinand and Isabella, they conquered and took Constantinople, the Christian capital of the East. The great church called Hagia

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Sophia, the Holy Wisdom, after the Lord Jesus Christ “who of God is made unto us wisdom, and righteousness and sanctification and redemption” (I Corinthians 1:30), was turned into a mosque. From there, they conquered all of the Balkans and most of the Kingdom of Hungary. In 1683 under Suleiman the Magnificent they camped before the City of Vienna itself, and they would have taken it had not all of Europe combined to throw them back.

1683 is not so long ago. The Dutch Reformed Church in the City of New York was already 55 years old in 1683. This gives you an idea how the time line progressed. From 1683 until 1919 the Muslim forces were driven back step by step until there was left to them nothing but the City of Constantinople itself and its suburbs on the European continent. But they have never given up. It is their religion to conquer the world.

Our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ sent us out to preach the Gospel to every creature. He promised to be with us to the end of the world. Mohammed sent his forces out to conquer the world by fire and sword and to compel all people to accept the crescent.

### **The Major Issue**

We must begin to face this issue. There is a choice to be made between Islam and Christianity. People may not realize that. In fact, many of our leading opinion-makers today cannot imagine that there could be conflict on such a thing as religion. Many of them are agnostic. They cannot imagine that anyone could be that committed to

something that doesn't concern them at all. They are like the people of whom Zephaniah spoke (1:12) “The Lord will not do good, neither will He do evil.” In other words, He is irrelevant to the issues of our lives today. I remind you that He is not.

Islam claims that its book, the Koran, is the very word of God. Christians (at least those who are committed to the historic understanding of our faith) insist upon the proposition made in II Peter 1:21, “that holy men of God spake as

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they were moved by the Holy Ghost”, in the book we call the Bible. Is it possible to discern between them? Or is it as many people today think: a toss up? One book of cunningly devised fables over another book of cunningly devised fables? Is there truth in all of this? Is there a choice to be made? This article seeks to convince you that there is only one choice to be made: the Bible!

The Bible is absolutely unique. There is not another book like it in all the world, and surely not the Koran. There are three ways in which I would suggest this to you.

First of all, I want to point out to you the unique origin of the Bible over against that of every other holy book and especially over against the Koran. Secondly, I want to remind you of the unique contents of the Bible, so different from any thing else that claims to be the Word of God. Finally, I want to address the unique function of the Bible over against every possible substitute.

### **The Unique Origin**

We look first at the unique origin of the Bible. The name itself is very, very significant. “*Ta Biblia*” in Greek means “the books”. Dr. Philip Schaff in his “Christian Catechism” of 1863 asks “What is the Bible?” His answer is this: “The Bible is the Book of Books, the best and most important of all books.” That’s a very fitting answer, isn’t it? The Bible consists of 66 books, 39 written before Christ and foretelling His coming, and 27 written after His coming and revealing His Gospel.

The Bible’s only real rival is the Koran. Hindu scriptures, Buddhist scriptures are totally unlike the Bible or the Koran. They are the remnants of ancient philosophical and liturgical writings, of songs and other material. They are not the truth of God, given for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness, as Paul writes in II Timothy 3:16. The choice ultimately comes down to the Bible or the Koran.

It is claimed, of course, that the Koran comes directly from God. The story is plainly told and widely believed by Muslims all over the world. Mohammed, in about 622 A.D., received it directly from God. Muslims insist that Mohammed was



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really an illiterate man. It's very possible that he was. They want to insist upon it in order to make the point that *he* didn't write the Koran, God wrote it. Or at least, God dictated it, in exactly the form in which it now exists, from heaven above.

Mohammed, during most of the time that the Koran was written, was out of the body. He was in a trance. He lay on the ground. He rolled about. He foamed at the mouth and he spoke strange things. Those who heard him wrote down what he said. Lo and behold, it came out in perfectly literary and grammatical Arabic! Believe that, if you will, but at least that's the story they tell. They believe that every single word and phrase and verse of this book is the literal Word of God.

Many Muslims themselves will tell you it is a rather confusing book, but they virtually worship it. Beautifully printed, finely bound, placed in the *mihrab* of the mosque, that is in the prayer corner facing Mecca to which all the faithful turn and bow their heads at the appropriate time. It is the sacred book.

Most Muslims cannot read the Koran. You would think they would consult it as we consult the Bible. The Koran, however, may not be translated by pious Muslims. It has been translated by foreigners. That is why you can find copies now and then in English and in other modern languages, but Muslims may not

translate the Koran or read it in any other language but Arabic.

How many of them speak Arabic? Well, the Arabs do, the people of the Near East do, the people of North Africa do, but in such a dialectical form that the ancient classical Arabic is almost like a foreign language to them. The majority of Muslims do not speak Arabic at all! They may write with Arabic characters, but it's not in the Arabic language that they write. The Turks and all of the people of Central Asia, in Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, etc., all the way into western China speak Turkish languages. They have no relationship to Arabic whatsoever. The Iranians, the Afghanis, the Pakistanis, speak Indo-European languages which are more closely related to our own than they are to Arabic. Of course, the whole Muslim community of Malaysia and Indonesia speak Malayan languages which are yet another whole family of languages. They cannot understand the Koran. They are totally dependent on their Imams and Mullahs and others who claim to know what it's all about, to tell them what it says.

Listen by contrast to the origin of the Bible. It is summed up in these few words: "Holy men of God spake as they were moved by the Holy Ghost". God is its origin, needless to say. "Holy men" were the human authors. Mohammed was not holy. He was a visionary, a soldier, and polygamist. Holy

men, prophets and apostles, were guided, moved by the Spirit of God, to teach us about Himself and His will. In origin, there is simply no comparison between the Bible as God's Word and the Koran as the word of men.

### **The Unique Contents**

As to the contents, both the Bible and the Koran presuppose a single God. The Koran uses the same word for God as the Hebrew Bible. There is an obvious relationship between "Allah" and "Elohim", the Hebrew word for "God", except for the ending, but there the similarity ceases.

The God of the Koran is a despot. That is, he has all power and he uses it as an irresponsible sovereign. He cares nothing for the people he has made. He makes no covenant with them. He never binds Himself to any way of life for salvation. He makes no promises to them. He offers no salvation or help to them at all. They struggle as best they can. Their salvation is ultimately summed up in their constant expression "*inshallah*" ("if God wills"). They do not know. They cannot know until the last day, when they rise from the dead before the judgment seat of God, who then decides who will and who will not be saved.

Unless they are met with the favor of God, if he likes their looks, or something about them, they have no hope. That is why many Muslims become so fanatical, because they have the idea in their mind that if they sacrifice themselves in behalf of Allah they may get to the head of the line. God will notice them and ultimately reward them with eter-

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***Most Muslims cannot read the Koran .... They cannot understand the Koran.***

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nal life. But common folk, like you and me, what does Allah care for us? What has he ever cared for us? Prayer? There is no such thing. It is all rote. Five times a day, to be sure. The Muslim seems very devoted when he bows his head before Allah and proclaims himself the slave of Allah. That's what "Muslim" means.

What does the Bible say about its contents? Jesus put it plainly and beautifully in the eighth chapter of John "Ye shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free." You are free from the yoke of bondage, free from the yoke of error, free from the uncertainty of God's attitude towards you. You may know that for the sake of Jesus Christ His Son, God is your Father in heaven who loves you with an everlasting love; who while we were yet sinners, sent His Son Jesus Christ into the world to die for our sins in order that we might have everlasting life through Him. Is there a choice between these two? Would any rational man say "I would rather serve Allah" than the living God?

### **The Unique Function**

The Koran has one function and that is to lay a yoke of life-long bondage upon those who hear it and believe it. If you think the law of the Old Testament as interpreted by the Pharisees was a yoke of bondage, as the apostles clearly bear witness, think of this: at least the God whom the Pharisees preached is a God of grace as well as a God of laws. "I am the Lord Thy God which have brought thee out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage." Grace, first, and then law.

You do not find any grace at all in

Allah. He simply says "Do this because I say so". He has no moral law. The Ten Commandments do not exist in Islam. The Sermon on the Mount is unknown in Islam. He has no morality. Four wives are permitted to every man at a time, and he can divorce any one or two or three of them and take others in their place as he pleases. Six hundred years after Christ clearly abolished the institution

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### ***What does the book of the Mohammedans do except put mankind in a bondage from which they cannot escape?***

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of plural marriage! "In the beginning it was not so", he said, and that was the end of it.

Violence? Slavery? The two nations that continue to practice slavery under their own laws today are both Islamic nations, the Sudan, and the so called Islamic Republic of Mauritania. We are told that slavery has recently reappeared in Nigeria. How can the black Muslims here in this country, for example, say that Islam is the answer to their needs when Islam has always been the primary defender of slavery in the world and still is? What does the book of the Mohammedans do except put mankind in a bondage from

which they cannot escape?

The Bible, on the other hand from the beginning to the end, promises salvation. It sets forth Jesus Christ who is Himself our Savior, who loved us with almighty love, who died for us on Calvary's cross, who says to us "Come unto me all ye that labor and are heavy laden and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn of me. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light, and ye shall find rest unto your souls."

### **Conclusion**

My dear friends, this is not a toss up. It is not "the Bible is good", "the Koran is good", whatever you want to follow is "good", as long as you do it sincerely, as long as you think you are getting a blessing or a profit out of it or any thing of that sort. It is not the idea that is so popular among us and that is constantly being hammered home in the public schools and through the media that religion doesn't matter. We need to wake up before it is too late. I don't believe it's too late for us, but I do believe the old saying of II Chronicles 7:14, "If my people, which are called by my name, shall humble themselves, and pray, and seek my face, and turn from their wicked ways, then will I hear from heaven and will heal their land".

There is only one hope for us. Do not think that what we saw on September 11, 2001 is necessarily the end. It is possible that greater evils than this can come upon us, but the other alternative is possible, too. It is possible that the two billion people in the world who have a Christian heritage will wake up and will say "This is our God", and "This is the gospel of redemption He has given us, and this is the loyalty that we need to have. This is what we need."



This is what Islam needs as well, for Islam is poor, and naked and blind. Not simply in physical things, but spiritually. Hundreds of thousands of them have already recognized this, but they hardly dare to say it for fear of their co-religionists. Both Christian and Muslims need the Bible, God's unique Word, offering pardon and peace to all through the only Savior, Jesus Christ.

*This article is an abbreviation of last year's address given at the 2002 Annual Meeting of the Reformed Fellowship. Tapes of the lecture are available from the office at a cost of \$5.00. Be sure to see the ad for this year's Annual Meeting of Reformed Fellowship on page 13.*

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# We Confess

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

### *Article 2 (Part 2) Special Revelation*

The second book of revelation is a literal book, namely, the written word of God. We call it "special revelation" because it makes known to God's special people, His elect, that He is their Redeemer.

The knowledge of God in creation is superb, as Scripture shows, but it is not a knowledge sufficient to lead one to salvation in Christ. We need the Word to find the clear and sufficient revelation of God as Redeemer in Christ.

#### **The Perspicuity of the Word**

*"He makes Himself more clearly and fully known to us by His holy and divine Word."*

Psalm 19:7-11 teaches us that the Word is "perfect," or complete, and contains a knowledge to be greatly desired. And that knowledge, according to Jesus, is a knowledge of *Him* (John 5:39).

So we need the Word because without it all we do is blur and mess up everything that God has given us. Therefore the Word of God is like a pair of glasses.<sup>1</sup>

Have you ever seen a 3-D movie? At Sea World in San Diego there is a 3-D movie about pirates. If you do not wear 3-D glasses, all you see is three of everything, with plenty of blurriness. But once you

put the 3-D glasses on, you can see the screen properly. So it is with the Word of God and the knowledge of God. Our eyes have become blurred by sin. We cannot clearly see God in general revelation; therefore God "makes Himself more clearly and fully known to us by His holy and divine Word."

Psalm 19 also teaches us our response to God's revelation. God is to be addressed by His covenant name, "LORD," Jehovah, Yahweh in verse 7, "the law of the LORD." And then in verse 14, He is called our "Rock" and "Redeemer". The Word tells us He is our Savior, our Redeemer, our covenant Lord, our refuge and strength.

And God, the LORD, is "more clearly and fully known" to us in the Person of His Son, our Lord Jesus Christ. He is the eternal Word (John 1:1), whose name is "The Word of God" (Revelation 19:13). Remember John 1:14, "and the Word became flesh, and we beheld His glory, the glory as of the only-begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth." Remember John 5:39, "You search the Scriptures, for in them you think you have eternal life; but these are they which testify of Me." Remember I Peter 1:10-12 says that the Old Testament prophets ministered not to themselves, but to us, in speaking of the coming sufferings and glory of Christ. So what is the knowledge given to us by the Word? Christ, Christ, Christ!

For in Him all the promises of the Old Testament are “yes” and “Amen” (II Corinthians 1:20).

The necessity of this revelation in the word is taught to us in the Psalm, which says that the word “converts,” make us “wise,” and “enlightens” us. Why? Because we have blurred and suppressed the knowledge of God in our minds (cf. Romans 1:18ff). Another Psalm says this in these words: “My soul clings to the dust, revive me according to Your word” (119:25), and, “open my eyes, that I may see wonderful things from Your law” (119:18).

### The Sufficiency of the Word

*“...that is to say, as far as is necessary for us to know in this life, to His glory and our salvation.”*

In II Timothy 3:14-17 Paul reminds Timothy that the Scriptures are able to make us wise for salvation. This means that it is sufficient, that it is enough to accomplish this task. So why do we confess this? It is important to realize that the Reformers emphasized the sufficiency of Scripture not just against the Romanist doctrine of Scripture-plus-tradition, but also against the Anabaptist doctrine of Scripture-plus-new-revelations-of-the-Spirit.

The Confession is very practical for us in the day we live. Most evangelical Christians, and I was one of them, are fascinated with “the gifts of the Spirit,” especially tongues and prophecy. The issue is whether God speaks uninspired words or only inspired and trustworthy words. If His words through modern prophets are mixed with human sin and error, then who cares if someone claims to speak

from God because their words are not totally inspired. But if they are, then they must be canonical Scripture – meaning that we should start adding pages in the back of our Bibles!

*“to His glory and our salvation.”*  
- redemption is theme of Scripture.

So what’s the point of God revealing knowledge of Himself in creation if we are just going to mess it all up? As Paul says in Romans 1:20, the reason is “so that they are without excuse.” The knowledge of God as Creator is Law, not Gospel, it condemns, but does not justify, it damns, and does not save!

But there are limits to the knowledge which Scripture gives us of God. Notice how our Confession explains it, “*as far as is necessary for us in this life to His glory and our salvation.*” One example is the Trinity. Can you understand the doctrine of the Trinity? No, you cannot understand it. Can you comprehend the doctrine of the Trinity? No, you cannot comprehend the Trinity. You can only apprehend it by faith. Sure, it is a faith built upon Scriptures’ revelation, but even what it reveals is only enough. It is like peering through your blinds early in the morning and having the sunlight strike your eye so that you

close it and cover the window. You know the sun is there, but you cannot gaze upon it for more than a brief second.

The Word reveals all you need to know “to His glory,” the law, and what we need for “our salvation,” the gospel. And how can we glorify God? God gives us a roadmap on how to live in the Ten Commandments, and a blueprint for prayer in the Lord’s Prayer. It gives us “the form of sound words” to believe and study and meditate upon for all eternity.

### Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> *Commentaries on the Epistle of Paul the Apostle to the Romans*, trans. John Owen (Calvin’s Commentaries: Volume XIX; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, reprinted 1996) 71.

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### Questions for Further Study/Discussion

1. What does Scripture “clearly” reveal about God?
2. If Scripture is sufficient to reveal God’s will to us, how should we evaluate modern tongues and “prophecy”?



# Christian Education: Is It a Mess?

## (Part 3)

### Where Can We Turn?

If the evangelical and the Reformed communities are experiencing fragmentation in respect to educational philosophy and their employment of a pragmatic ethic, then where is one to turn?

Christian schools must follow faithfully the simple solution to this complex mess upon the American ecclesiastical landscape of Christian education. Succinctly stated, that solution is this: *hold fast to the holy Word of God and the Confessional Standards that interprets that Word. Only the Holy Spirit's power to use God's Word and the Confessional Standards are to control the educational agenda and curriculum of the Christian school.*

Sadly, many Reformed educational institutions to which we once entrusted our children seem no longer to reflect the historic truths of our faith. They lost our trust when theistic evolution was taught and academicians attacked male headship and its relationship to ecclesiastical office. But the issues of evolution and ecclesiastical office were only expressions of a deeper problem. By rejecting the historic Reformed view of Scripture, the so-called "progressive" element of Reformed educators had lost their infallible directive to integrate Scripture and the Confessional standards into the disciplines of the academic curriculum. Even if Reformed educators gave verbal assent to the authority of Scripture, they would conclude

that there was absolutely no consent how to interpret the Bible. If the authority and interpretation of Scripture are questioned, then where does one turn for a model for educational pedagogy?

Whether consciously or unconsciously, the new breed of Reformed educators seems to have been left with one alternative which they have freely put into practice; it is the ancient secular method of pedagogy known as "antilogic" or *utramque partem*. Simply put, these terms refer to a method of resolving disputes by examining the arguments on both sides of the questions, without any reference to an objective criterion of truth or some standard of behavior.

For example, let's say the Reformed Doctrine teacher is presenting the issue of ecclesiastical office to his class. During his lecture he will outline both sides—those who hold to exclusive male office and those who do not. He will point out there are respectful Reformed exegeses on both sides of the issues. Since nobody has absolute insight in the meaning of Scripture, then both sides should be held in respect. So the child walks out of the classroom confused about whether there is

anything that he can have absolute knowledge about (the same conclusion is reached by the student as difficult issues are presented in the same manner in the other disciplines of the curriculum).

Meanwhile, the new breed of Reformed educators see this model as a healthy pedagogical method because, in the educator's eyes, his students have been opened to a world of tolerance, peaceful coexistence, and pluralism in which no one can make a dogmatic claim of possessing absolute certain knowledge. In their view, reconciliation and harmony among believers as well as many in the secular non-Christian world are a possible goal. This model and method is nothing but Christian relativism. It is a disgrace to the standards of the historic Reformed faith.

### Covenant and Education

In this mess, what is needed? Do we need a pragmatic vision? I would suggest, "No!" Do we need a charismatic leader to rally your troops? I would suggest, "No!" Do we need a curriculum that will establish our children as superior academic elites in American culture? I would suggest, "No!" Do we need an agenda that will transform secu-

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***[T]he new breed of Reformed educators ... have freely put into practice ... the ancient secular method of pedagogy known as "antilogic" or utramque partem.***

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lar culture as well as the lives of children as we turn the world upside down? I would suggest, “No!”

As we hold fast to the holy Word of God and the Confessional Standards of the Reformed tradition, we need to recall and embrace a Biblical truth that has long been at the heart of continental Calvinism. This truth is found within the person of God’s name; it comes from within the very fabric of God’s revelation to His people; it is descriptive of His binding personal relationship of fellowship and communion with His people—it is *covenant!*

At one time it was clear to the Reformed community that the Biblical notion of covenant meant “set apart,” “separate,” and “being a distinct and a holy nation unto the Lord” from the secular and pagan worldviews of the nations. If one truly grasps the Biblical view of the covenant, he will not be interested in fads or quick solutions. He will not run around seeking the wisdom of the most recent individual who has declared himself the new Reformed pope or the most recent movement which has declared itself as the new headquarters of the Reformed Vatican. Furthermore, those who understand the Biblical teaching of the covenant will not be so brash to claim that the covenant, rightly understood, dissolves all our problems.

Covenant is a revelatory word, which is not accompanied with the fanfare of human attention and self-declaration. Covenant describes God who, rich in His grace and mercy, condescends to a people and forms a bond of fellowship and communion in mutual love and faithfulness. It is an oath—a

vow, a bond—of mutual love and faithfulness between the Creator and the creature. In this bond, the believer seeks no glory for himself in this world, he seeks no position of prominence and prestige at the table of political, social, and cultural shakers; rather, he lives within the parameters of the blessing and responsibility of the covenant itself.

Covenant life, or in our case, *covenant life applied to education, is to live from Him, through Him, and to Him* (Romans 11:36). The focus of all of life is God—the triune

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***Every single subject  
taught in the  
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God of the Bible. Every single subject taught in the academic curriculum is to be studied as having its *origin* from God, its *content* through God, and its *end* to God. I like to refer to this as the “covenantal Christian educational circle”: from, through, to God. At the heart of applying the covenant to Christian education is the eschatological nature of God; the subject matter *begins* with God, and it *ends* with God (Revelation 1: 8, 11)!

**The Goal of Education**

For example, from the covenantal perspective with respect to the field of mathematics, our goal is not to

have a Christian Noble Prize winner in mathematics; our goal is not to have a Christian mathematician on the Board of NASA; our goal is not to have a Christian mathematician as head of the mathematics department of MIT.

What is the goal? What is the purpose of learning mathematics? Well, if it is not to achieve a prestigious honor or high position in technology or academics, then is the goal merely to be able to do the basic financial functions of the home? Absolutely not! You learn mathematics to understand the incredible simplicity and mysteries of God’s world, and to understand every mathematical question, problem, and answer in covenant relationship with God—that everything—to repeat—is from, through, and to God. Herein is the goal; to live in covenant with God when applying mathematics to any level of our life recognizing that all mathematical propositions hold together by the Word of God’s power (Hebrews 11:3).

Whether the believer is applying mathematics to his personal and family budget, or he has chosen mathematics as his field of vocation (from school teacher to engineer), the believer allows his covenant identity in Christ to totally define the discipline. In this context, as the covenant is understood, the issue is not the position you hold with respect to men, but whether you are performing your task in a self-conscious, covenant manner with your God! In the final analysis, it is only God that counts.

Our covenant youth must be educated in the context of a curriculum in which the Biblical conception of

covenant is at the heart of the *integration* enterprise. In Genesis 2, God introduces His reader to His covenant name. In fact, the name of God, Yahweh “Lord” is introduced. In chapter two, we begin to read the phrase, “Lord God.” In Genesis 2:7, we read about the actual creation of Adam; the text says that the “Lord God” breathed into Adam and he became a living being. Adam is given life from God in covenant with him. It is God’s covenant name that gives him life. Adam has no existence, or to say it more generally, man has no existence unless God in covenant creates man.

There is no biological aspect of Adam’s existence without God creating him in covenant relationship (natural sciences). Once Adam is created in time and space, Adam is a being in history. Adam has no history unless God in covenant creates him (historical sciences). From this point, he enters into communion and fellowship with his Creator; he has no communication skills unless God in covenant creates him as a creature of language (language arts). Hopefully, you are beginning to grasp the point; there is absolutely no existence or integration of life without our God in covenant with us.

Furthermore and perhaps most importantly, into the heart of God’s covenant activity as Creator is the Lord of the covenant, His beloved Son, Jesus Christ! As the Scriptures will tell us, in Him is life—there is no biological aspect of God’s covenantal act of creation without Christ. As the Scriptures teach us, Christ is the Lord of history—He is the focus and center of history, and thus, humanity’s existence in time

and space has no meaning outside of Christ. As the Scripture instructs, at the heart of God’s communication and fellowship with Adam is the condescension of His Word, which will be most intimately made known in the second person of the Godhead, the Word of God!

Simply put, you cannot do biology, history, language arts, or any other discipline in the academic curriculum without integrating covenant and Christ into the subject matter!

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***“...there is absolutely no existence or integration of life without our God in covenant with us.”***

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Christ, without covenant, reduces Christian education to imitation and moral platitudes, whereas covenant, without Christ, will reduce Christian education to social relationships (human relationship bonds) which will attempt to recover the social and psychological harmony of humanity under some type of transformation of culture.

On the other hand, Christ, with covenant, defines a Christ centered education in complete devotion of directing our youth to the inheritance of our triune God in all His cosmic integrated glory! Union with the exalted Christ is our only true end in Christian education!

Herein, lays our hope, trust, confidence, and faith as a pilgrim people against the mess in the secular world as well as the mess in the evangelical and Reformed worlds of education.

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## **Annual Meeting of the Reformed Fellowship**

will be Thursday,  
September 25 at the Trinity  
URC in Caledonia,  
Michigan.

Punch is at 6:00 PM.  
Dinner is served at 6:30 PM  
There is a cost of \$7.00 per  
person for the dinner.  
Please call the office for a  
reservation.

Everyone is welcome to  
attend the 8:00 PM address  
by Professor Robert  
Swierenga  
The topic will be “Ethnic  
Glue and a Three-legged  
Stool: The Chicago  
Experience”



# To Give God a Ransom

*“No man can redeem his life for another or give God a ransom for him - the ransom for a life is costly, no payment is ever enough.”* (Psalm 49:7, 8)

In Acts 16, Paul and Silas are thrown into prison for performing a miracle in the name of Jesus Christ. While they were there, they prayed and sang hymns of praise to God. Suddenly a violent earthquake took place, unloosed their chains, and opened the doors of the jail. As the Philippian jailer prepared to kill himself, assuming that his prisoners had all escaped, Paul cried out, “Don’t harm yourself! We are all here.” The jailer, who no doubt had heard Paul and Silas singing and praying, realized that these were no ordinary prisoners. They had to be men sent from God. The jailer then asked them, “What must I do to be saved?”

This is the question that should be on the hearts and lips of everyone who has become aware of his own sin and misery. The Heidelberg Catechism, after telling us about our natural tendency to hate God and our neighbor, begins a new section. Happily, the section dealing with our sin and misery has come to an end. Now begins a new section - a section on Deliverance. It be-

gins with the question: “How then can we escape this punishment (of God’s wrath) and return to God’s favor?”

This is a very serious question. To ask this question requires some humble admissions on our part. We must admit that we deserve punishment from God because of our sin. We must admit that we are no better than any other people in this world. We must admit that we are guilty and can offer no excuse for our sin. Also, we have to admit that the judgment of God is just and that we deserve His punishment.

In this question there is a sincere desire to escape God’s punishment. Such a desire is very understandable. It is a desire expressed several times in Scripture with people asking: “What must I do to be saved?”, “How shall we escape?”, “Who shall deliver me?”.

Notice that in the question asked by the Catechism there is not only a desire to escape, but also a desire to return to God’s favor. In asking this question, the Holy Spirit has

already led us to the point where we long for that communion with God that was lost in the Garden of Eden. And so we ask not only to escape punishment, but to be restored to God.

The Catechism does not give to us an easy answer. The first sentence tells us “God requires that His justice be satisfied.” Many people today want to make light of God’s justice. Strange as it may seem, if any of our rights are infringed upon, we are moved to wrath and demand satisfaction. How dare anyone tell us where we can or cannot go or what we can or cannot do. But when it comes to the right that the Most Holy, Almighty, and Supreme Being has to punish those who sin against Him we do not take it seriously. We tell jokes about Saint Peter at the Pearly Gates and buy greeting cards that humorously depict hell and Satan. We maintain a bumper-sticker theology that God loves everybody and punishes nobody.

But the Word of God makes very clear that the justice of God shall be satisfied. The Law must be obeyed! Every part of it! One infraction against the Law of God places us under the wrath of God. It makes us deserving of eternal punishment. How shall we escape?

We can escape in two ways. First, by paying for our own sin. Second, by having another party pay for our sin. Since we are responsible for our own sin, certainly it should be our duty to pay for it. If I were to break a window of your home, it would not be enough for me to say “I’m sorry” and be on my way; you

**Q** *How then can we escape this punishment and return to God’s favor?*

**A** *God requires that His justice be satisfied. Therefore the claims of His justice must be paid in full, either by ourselves or by another.*



would expect me to pay for that window. Likewise, when we sin against God, it is not enough to say “I’m sorry”, we must pay our debt in full.

Can we somehow satisfy God’s justice and pay for our own sin? Absolutely not. First of all, we cannot bear the full punishment of God required to redeem ourselves. God is terribly angry at us because of our sin and if He were to punish us as we deserve it would destroy us. If God were to punish us in doses small enough for us to handle, it would take all eternity - and still, not one sin would be paid for. Add to that the fact that we increase our guilt every day and we begin to understand that there is no possible way for us to satisfy the justice of God.

Another false delusion is to think that some other creature might save us from God’s wrath and restore us into His favor. Certainly saints would not be able to do that. By nature, they were sinners themselves. If they could not pay their own debt, how can we expect them to pay ours? Animals cannot save us, either. Even if we were to sacrifice animals for the rest of our lives, they would not be a proper sacrifice. The Lord demands a broken spirit and a contrite heart, not a bunch of dead animals. Angels cannot save us, either. They can do a lot of things but they cannot take our place in hell. The Catechism makes clear that “God will not punish another creature for man’s guilt” (q/a 14). It is a matter of justice. Man has sinned and man shall be punished.

So, we cannot put our hope in ourselves, or in saints, offerings, ani-

mals, or angels. Is everything, then, hopeless? Rightly, the Catechism asks, “What kind of Mediator and Deliverer should we look for then?” And we are told He must have three qualifications. He must be truly human; truly righteous; and truly divine. Lord’s Day 6 explains why these qualifications are necessary and we will look at them in the upcoming issues of *The Outlook*.

Just looking at those qualifications may make us all the more discouraged. After all, who is there that can fulfill all three of them? We, like the Philippian jailer, are compelled to cry out, “What must I do to be saved?” The Word of God responds the same way Paul did: “Believe in the Lord Jesus Christ and you will be saved.” He alone fulfills the criteria demanded by God’s justice.

As the second person of the Trinity, Christ, the anointed One of God, is truly divine. As One conceived by

the Holy Spirit, Jesus was born without original sin. His obedient life made Him the perfect sin offering. Being born of Mary made Him human. Surely, Jesus Christ is the One we need in our lives in order to be delivered from our sin and brought into fellowship with God.

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

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**REFORMED FELLOWSHIP**

# Evaluating the New Perspective on Paul (4)

## What Does Paul Mean by ‘Works of the Law’?

### Part 2

#### WHAT IS MEANT BY THE “WORKS OF THE LAW”?

Within the richness and complexity of Paul’s use of the language of the law, the most pressing question raised by the new perspective is: what is the meaning in Paul’s epistles of the expression, “the works of law,” and of a more general, but related expression, “works”? Particularly in his treatment of the doctrine of justification, the apostle uses these expressions to draw a contrast between justification by faith and justification by works of the law.

The new perspective maintains that this expression is primarily used by the apostle Paul to refer to “boundary marker” requirements in the Mosaic law, such as circumcision, dietary requirements and other ceremonial distinctives. According to the new perspective, we should not take these expressions as references to general (moral) requirements of obedience to the law of God that no Jew or Gentile is able to meet and thereby find favor with God.

Rather, the “works of the law” are those “badges” that distinguish Jews from Gentiles and prevent those who do not submit to them from being numbered among the covenant people of God and heirs to the promise to Abraham. The Reformational understanding of the expression “works of the law,” which takes them for human deeds performed in obedience to the com-

mandments of God, fails to read the apostle Paul in the context of his dispute, not with Jewish legalism, but with Jewish exclusivism.

In my judgment, this pivotal claim of the new perspective—that the “works of the law” are simply “badges” of covenant membership that served to exclude Gentiles from the covenant community—cannot be sustained by a careful reading of the epistles of the apostle Paul. Though we will not attempt to consider all the evidence from Paul’s writings, it is not difficult to show that the “works of the law” refer to more than the “boundary marker” requirements of the law. This can be seen from the way Paul uses this language in Galatians and Romans, the two epistles that give most direct and sustained attention to the doctrine of justification.

#### The “works of the law” In Galatians

Paul’s use of the language of the “works of the law” in Galatians is especially significant, since this epistle in its historical context seems most agreeable to the claim of new perspective writers like Dunn and Wright that the works of the law are boundary marker requirements. It is quite clear, for example, that those whom Paul op-

poses in this epistle were stipulating that circumcision was a necessary pre-condition for inclusion among the covenant people of God. For this reason, they were denying the inclusion of the Gentiles among the people of God in fulfillment of God’s covenant promise to Abraham.

In chapter 2, which describes the problem Paul was confronting, it is evident that the “circumcision party” was requiring that Gentile believers submit to circumcision and thereby “live like Jews” (compare vv. 3, 7-9, 12-14). However, even though this insistence on the part of his opponents was the occasion for Paul’s argument in Galatians, an examination of his use of the expression “works of the law” in this epistle indicates that the deeper problem goes beyond an appeal to the boundary marker requirements of the law.

The first instance of the use of this expression is in Galatians 2:15-17: “We ourselves are Jews by birth and not Gentile sinners; yet we know that a person is not justified by *works of the law* but through faith in Jesus Christ, so we also have believed in Jesus Christ, in order to be justified by faith in Christ and not by *works of the law*, because by *works of the law* no one will be

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*It is not difficult to show that the “works of the law” refer to more than the “boundary marker” requirements of the law.*



justified” (emphasis mine). The immediate occasion for this assertion by the apostle Paul that no one is justified by “works of the law” is fairly evident: the claim of those of the circumcision party that Gentiles must “live like Jews” to be received into the fellowship of God’s people. This passage seems, therefore, to lend support to the new perspective’s position that the “works of the law” are those boundary markers that some Jewish-Christians were stipulating as prerequisites to inclusion within the covenant people of God.

However, though there is little doubt that Paul was opposing this kind of appeal of the “works of the law” on the part of Jewish-Christians who were unprepared to acknowledge that the promise to Abraham extended also to the Gentiles, the apostle Paul’s use of this expression elsewhere in Galatians indicates that more is involved than the boundary marker requirements of the law. This becomes evident when we consider such passages as Galatians 3:10-14, Galatians 5:2-4, and Galatians 6:13. In these passages, the apostle argues that his opponents’ insistence upon obedience to the “works of the law” as a means of justification imperils the gospel of Christ. If justification is by “works of the law,” then the one who is justified is under obligation to find life and blessing by means of obedience to the *whole* of the law. That is a road no one can travel without finding it to be a way of the curse and death.

### **Galatians 3:11-14**

*“For all who rely on works of the law are under a curse; for it is written, ‘Cursed be*

*everyone who does not abide by all things written in the Book of the Law, and do them.’ Now it is evident that no one is justified before God by the law, for ‘The righteous shall live by faith.’ But the law is not of faith, rather ‘The one who does them shall live by them.’ Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us—for it is written, ‘Cursed is everyone who is hanged on a tree’—so that in Christ Jesus the blessing of Abraham might come to the Gentiles, so that*

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***It is not enough,  
therefore, to keep the  
former requirements  
in order to be  
justified. One must  
also live in  
conformity to all that  
the law enjoins.***

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*we might receive the promised Spirit through faith.”*

What is striking about these familiar verses is the way the apostle Paul *enlarges* the principle of his opponents, namely, that believers are justified by “works of the law” such as circumcision or other boundary marker requirements. Those who would be justified by such “works of the law” are reminded that the law pronounces a curse upon everyone who fails to keep “all things” that are written in it.

Thus, if anyone seeks to be justified

by the works of the law and thereby escape the curse of God, he will have to abide by everything required in the law. Any failure in respect to the law’s requirement will inevitably bring about the curse pronounced in Deuteronomy 27:26.

Though the particular “works of the law” that his opponents were emphasizing were no doubt what Dunn and others call “boundary markers,” Paul generalizes on the basis of the threatened curse of Deuteronomy that God’s judgment rests upon anyone who falls short of anything that is written in the law.

Furthermore, it is instructive that the requirements of the law in the context of Deuteronomy 27 include more than such things as circumcision, dietary laws and feast day (Sabbath) provisions. They also include prohibitions against idolatry, dishonorable behavior toward one’s father or mother, incest, and murder (Deut. 27:15,16,20,24). It is not enough, therefore, to keep the former requirements in order to be justified. One must also live in conformity to all that the law enjoins.

For this reason, the apostle also appeals to the principle of the law enunciated in Leviticus 18:5: “The one who does them [that is, the things required in the law] shall live by them.” If life and the blessing of favor with God are to be based upon doing what the law prescribes, then the way of life can only be found in the performance of everything that the law demands.<sup>1</sup>

The implication of Paul’s argument in these verses seems clear: since no one abides by all things written in the book of the law, all are under its curse and unable to find life on the

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***The law and its obligations cannot be treated piece-meal, as though it were possible to be justified by obedience to certain of its requirements.***

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basis of obedience to the law. That no one is justified by the “works of the law” expresses a truth that goes beyond the occasion of the Judaizers’ unwillingness to embrace Gentile believers who were uncircumcised and disobedient to the law’s boundary markers.

**Galatians 5:2-4**

*“Look: I, Paul, say to you that if you accept circumcision, Christ will be of no advantage to you. I testify again to every man who accepts circumcision that he is obligated to keep the whole law. You are severed from Christ, you who would be justified by the law; you have fallen from grace.”*

In this passage the apostle clearly states that his opponents were emphasizing the necessity of circumcision as an identifying marker and entrance requirement for all who were included in the number of God’s people. This is again a reminder of the particular occasion for the apostle’s polemics in Galatians. However, the Judaizers’ insistence that Gentile believers submit to circumcision in order to be admitted into the covenant people of God is tantamount, according to the apostle Paul, to requiring submission to “the whole law.” The law and its obligations cannot be treated piece-meal, as though it were possible to be justified by obedience to certain of its requirements (e.g. boundary markers).<sup>2</sup>

If his opponents want to base their justification with God upon such things as circumcision, they will have to assume the full burden of the law as the means of justification. The implication here, though unstated, is clear enough: because his opponents have not met and cannot meet this burden, they have embraced an obligation that is beyond their reach. Moreover, to seek justification in the way of obedience to (certain) requirements of the law is inimical to the grace of Christ. Either one is justified freely through faith in Christ or through obedience to the law.

**Galatians 6:13**

*“For even those who are circumcised do not themselves keep the law, but they desire to have you circumcised that they may boast in your flesh.”*

In this verse the apostle Paul uses admittedly an *ad hominem* (concerning the person) argument. He charges his opponents, in effect, with a kind of hypocrisy. When the Judaizers insist that others be circumcised in order to be justified, they do so in order that they may “boast” in the “flesh” of others, even though they themselves are guilty of not having kept the law. When the apostle Paul speaks here of the failure of his opponents to “keep the law,” he cannot be referring to their failure to fulfill the boundary marker requirements of the law. They were undoubtedly

circumcised. What he refers to is their failure to recognize the consequence of their boast in the flesh, namely, that such boasting requires a great deal more conformity to the whole law than they are able to produce. Thus, Paul’s opponents stand condemned by their own boast.

In each of these three passages, then, Paul is contending with a larger issue than whether circumcision, for example, is a necessary precondition to inclusion among the people of God. Though writers of the new perspective are quite correct in their emphasis upon the particular historical occasion for Paul’s argument in Galatians, they do not do justice to the way Paul answers his opponents.

**Endnotes**

1. Cf. James 2:10: “For whoever keeps the whole law but fails in one point has become accountable for all of it.”
2. For a more extended defense of this claim than that provided in what follows, see Douglas J. Moo, “‘Law,’ ‘Works of the Law,’ and Legalism in Paul,” pp. 90-99; and Charles E. B. Cranfield, “‘The Works of the Law’ in the Epistle to the Romans,” *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 43 (1991): 89-101.

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# God's People, My Parish

I met Shaul (sha-OOL) Mayer ben Yitzchak at Hebrew School. We were inseparable.

Jewish kids who attended public school (like us) were sent to Hebrew School in the afternoons in the hope that they would learn enough Hebrew to avoid humiliating dad at the Bar Mitzvah. Hebrew School was Monday through Thursday from 3:45 to 5 p.m., and again on Sunday morning for a couple of hours.

I remember one day a student asked one of our instructors, Mrs. Berger, about Jesus. She was very careful to explain that Jesus was a good Jewish man, a rabbi of great wisdom. Modern Jews don't like bigotry and prejudice, you see. Mrs. Berger was a modern Jew and did her share to foster peace between the two dominant groups Eastern European Jews, and Italian Catholics. (Protestants—I didn't know any personally—were a very tiny minority, regarded by the rest of us as Roman Catholic also-rans.)

Mrs. Berger's kind words were the first non-epithetical ones we had ever heard spoken by a Jew about Jesus. Before that we were simply taught that everyone is entitled to his religion, that if Christians want to worship idols, well, that's their right and we must not criticize them. They just don't know any better. But Jews . . . well, we are different. We have a special calling.

A Jewish boy has to have his Bar Mitzvah. First, though, I would have to get through Hebrew School. And that was far from automatic. It was

easier for Shaul Mayer ben Yitzchak. He was a serious thinker. I suppose people would have considered this Schlissel to be one, too. After all, I had skipped third grade altogether and was placed in the "SP" (Special Progress) program in junior high. But I kept getting into mischief. "Bad boy," some said. "Gifted under-achiever," others said. "Bored," I said. So I made my own amusements.

On the other hand, Shaul Mayer ben Yitzchak was a no-nonsense person. Though just a kid, he stood out as one interested in serious matters, even the answers to life. Mrs. Berger's kind comments about Jesus, intended innocently by her to quickly and quietly put the subject to rest, Shaul and I found quite remarkable. She had uttered that NAME, had even said something nice about him, and did not die! A door which had, for Jews, been marked "ENTRY FORBIDDEN," had, in that instant, become less foreboding. "Verboten" had not become "Welcome," it's true, but she had touched the fruit and lived.

At that time, of course, I had no idea where Shaul might range with the license he felt had been handed to him; our respective bravados were of different sorts. I tried try hard to understand him because I thought that at some level he was onto something. While other Brooklyn kids would hypothesize *ad in-*

*finitum* about the "facts of life," offering as certainties the most amazing (and wrong) theories of the method of human reproduction, Shaul calmly sought out the actual facts. Like the rest of us, he would never consider asking his folks, any more than he would ask Mrs. Berger. But Shaul had the *sechel* (wisdom) and the *chutzpah* (nerve) to go to the public library and borrow *A Catholic Parents' Guide to Sex Education*. If the dreaded word Catholic wouldn't have stopped other Jewish kids, the fear of humiliation at the check-out desk would have (humiliation, after all, is to 12-year-olds a mortal dread). Yet, Shaul, neck-stiffened in the right direction, was *determined* to find out the facts, the truth. "You don't have to know everything," he said, "you just have to know where to find it."

Finding the truth. That was his strange prepossession. That's what set him apart—in my view at least—what made him different, if not a bit odd. Most newly pubescent kids were content merely to speculate about those matters our parents never mentioned; they were not obsessed with finding out the truth. For them, it was process, not content, that mattered. But Shaul went right to the book. (To the right book, as it turned out.)

Shaul's search for truth was not limited to the biological sphere. It was *life* he wanted to understand, especially its meaning—if there was

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***Mrs. Berger's kind words were the first non-epithetical ones we'd ever heard spoken by a Jew about Jesus.***

such a thing. For a time he thought it quite a nice question whether there was. He wrote a poem shortly after his Bar Mitzvah:

*Be it here, be it there  
Being has no matter.  
Truth exists in emotional lies  
And the lies appear much  
fatter.  
Books lie and looks lie  
A pen lies and a lens lies  
And I lie, but my lie  
Be truth to itself.  
For although the only  
existing truth  
Lies in what you feel,  
The only lies exist in truth  
So you'll never know what's  
real.*

*The Catholic Parents' Guide* provided Shaul with info on the *how* of life; Shaul still wanted to know the *why*. My other friends were not chewing on ontological and epistemological challenges. So Shaul found himself in a tough position: he had great questions, but no one - certainly not me - of whom to ask the answers.

But he did have books. I did, too, though I didn't read much. The first book I remember reading cover to cover was *Son of Flubber* when I was in the sixth grade. It had a picture on the cover of Fred MacMurray bouncing through the air. Shaul's tastes were in a different league, veering in our teen years toward Epictetus and Marcus Aurelius. While he got into Schopenhauer, I just got into trouble.

Eventually, Shaul did too. Perhaps I was a bad influence. About the time I began meandering along a wrong path Shaul began experimenting with what he had learned in *The*

*Catholic Parents' Guide*. It was the '60s, after all, the days of the hippies and yuppies, the days of rejecting everything except the ephemeral. For me, they were days of despair. For Shaul, too. "I Can't Get No Satisfaction" began to speak for both of us. We experienced similar degrees of angst and frustration, but chose dissimilar paths to relieve them. I looked toward hedonism, but Shaul kept searching for meaning; he kept grasping for an anchor behind the veil.

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He was relentless. He pumped up on his reading and pumped out more poetry. I appreciated his efforts to understand life and I hoped that he would succeed. I had no such hopes for myself. For me, life was three things: 1) loneliness, 2) pain, and 3) methods to muffle 1 & 2. We both managed to survive the despair for a decade. While I was ready to call it quits on more than one occasion, Shaul refused to give up. Thank God, Shaul kept up the search. Through his reading, he had come to the conclusion that death held the key. Whatever meaning was to be found in life *had* to be found in the reality of death. That, he had learned, was the business of

philosophy. But philosophy itself told him nothing about the other side of the grave.

Shaul began reading a Gideon Bible he had procured years before from a hotel room in Massachusetts. He looked up every death-related passage, using a concordance he had sent away for from some TV evangelist. When he happened upon Ecclesiastes, Shaul concluded that the Bible was a very hip book. I agreed wholeheartedly: "Vanity, vanity, all is vanity." Absolutely! It is hard to describe the comfort we experienced knowing that we were not the first miserable wretches on the planet! Of course, we didn't understand the significance of Solomon's analysis, but we were relieved beyond words to know that our observations about the futility of life were not original.

Shaul kept on reading and studying the Bible. He brazenly went beyond the border built by rabbinic Judaism, even reading what was called *The New Testament of Our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ* (I told you he had *chutzpah*). "But," he insisted, "the New Testament is *very* Jewish." I was skeptical. "And didn't Mrs. Berger say Christ was a good teacher?" Striking, isn't it, how life-changes can sometimes be traced to unpremeditated, even nonchalant, remarks?

Shaul encountered Jesus Christ on the pages of the New Testament and believed. It was that simple. I embraced— or rather, was embraced by— that same faith, Abraham's joy and hope. After being obsessed with death, I found life through Shaul's search, a search that ended at the feet of our Messiah.



Shaul's poem was wrong. Not *all* books lie. Truth exists. Now we knew the truth, and that not as a mere concept, but as a Person. Jesus Christ forgave us and turned us from our sins, from our futility, from our death. He wrote a new chapter for our lives. No. He wrote a new book: "Meaningful, meaningful, everything is meaningful!"

Jewish boy finds Christ.

I am Shaul Mayer Ben Yitzchak.

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**Annual Calgary  
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# Looking Above

## *A Series on The Revelation of Jesus Christ*

### *Revelation 1:1-3*

#### ***"Blessed is He Who Reads, and Hears, and Keeps"***

The book of Revelation is an "unveiling," an unveiling of Jesus Christ, who is both Revealer and revealed. Jesus Christ is both *the One who reveals* in the book of Revelation as well as *the One who is revealed* in the book of Revelation. The book of Revelation, then, is supernatural revelation spoken from heaven above to earth beneath to draw us to heaven above.

The opening verses set before us the chain of revelation: from God to Christ, from Christ to His angel, and from His angel to John. The Apostle John, is the recipient of the revelation, and the Spirit-inspired author of The Revelation of Jesus Christ.

In *The Gospel according to John*, John writes of the intrusion of heaven to earth in the person and work of Jesus Christ (John 1:1-18). In the *Epistles of John*, John lays down the ordering of the Christian's life in this world, calling the Christian to live in this world as one born of God, who by faith has overcome the world (I John 5:4). In *The Revelation of Jesus Christ*, John describes the heavenly reality of things as the world is increasingly stripped away, and the world to come is brought into clearer view.

### **Come and See**

The opening verses of Revelation read much like the opening verses of the Old Testament prophets. Think of Isaiah, ushered in to the very council chambers of God – surrounded by the seraphim - there to see and hear the deliberations of the living God (Isaiah 6)! Think of Ezekiel, ushered in to the very council chambers of God – surrounded by the cherubim - there to see and hear the deliberations of the living God (Ezekiel 1-2)! God summons the prophets up into His own deliberative chambers, that the prophet might not only see what is going on in heaven, but that he might also hear the articulation of God's redemptive plan. So it is with John. He is ushered in to the very council chambers of God – surrounded by the four living creatures, the twenty four elders, and the whole host of heaven – there to see and hear the deliberations of the living God. John not only sees what is going on in heaven, but he hears the articulation of God's redemptive plan.

John is shown "the things which must shortly take place." In other words, John is shown the history of the Church as she lives in the world, from the time of Christ's first coming to the time of Christ's return. "The things which must shortly take place" are not to be limited to those events which occurred just prior to the fall of Jerusalem in 70 AD, as though that is what the book of Revelation is describing (thereby

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rendering much of the book irrelevant to the Church today, forcing us to put our hope in some “golden age”).

Nor are “the things which must shortly take place” to be limited to those events immediately preceding the return of Christ, as though that is what the book of Revelation is describing (thereby rendering much of the book irrelevant to the Church today, forcing us to put our hope in some pre-tribulation rapture). “The things which must shortly take place” refers to the entire time period between Christ’s first coming and His return (thereby rendering the entire book of the utmost relevance for the Church today, leading us to place our hope in the only place it can be found: Jesus Christ!). John is shown a comprehensive history of the Church!

#### **Go and Tell**

In the Old Testament, the prophets were ushered in to the presence of God, and then commissioned to go forth with the message of that which they had seen and heard. So it is with John. Having seen and heard the divine deliberations of God in heaven – even the history of the Church itself as she lives in the world between Christ’s first coming and His return – John is now summoned to bring that message to the Church. John will bear “witness to the word of God, and to the testimony of Jesus Christ, to all things that he saw” (v. 2).

Those visions which John beheld are now given to the Church. As we hear, read, and keep the words of Revelation, we have the inestimable privilege of looking above into the very throne room of God Himself.

Heaven is opened to us. The world above is unveiled for us, and we learn that our life is found there. We are given the comprehensive history of the Church! Again I remind you, this story is our story. This history is our history. We are not spectators sitting in the arena, watching the events unfold before our eyes; we are participants in the arena! Our life is being set before us.

Such an experience for John was life-altering. He had been summoned into the very throne room of

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***The Revelation of  
Jesus Christ must not  
be shut up; it must  
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God Himself. He had heard and seen God’s redemptive plan for the Church. Heaven itself was opened before him, and there he beheld the glory of the risen and exalted Christ (cf. 1:10-20). In seeing the glory of heaven, John saw his own end, his own victory in Jesus Christ, and John was transformed. He could never be the same again. Why do you think he prays at the end of the book: “Even so, come, Lord Jesus!” (22:20)?!

Such an experience ought to be life-altering for us as well. Revelation summons us to look above, and

in looking above, we see that Christ is on the throne. It is to Him we belong, for our lives are hid with Christ in God. This world is not our home, nor was it ever intended to be. Our home is in heaven. Our life is in Christ. In seeing the glories of heaven, we behold, as it were, our own end, our own victory in Jesus Christ, and we are transformed. We can never be the same again. Our prayers, then, reflect the prayers of the saints of all ages, “Even so, come, Lord Jesus!”

The Revelation of Jesus Christ must not be shut up; it must not be silenced; it must not be rendered irrelevant. The Revelation of Jesus Christ must be read; it must be heard; it must be lived. For all those who read it, who hear it, and who keep it, there is blessing: “Blessed is he who reads and those who hear the words of this prophecy, and keep those things which are written in it; for the time is near” (v. 3).

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# CRC Synod, 2003

When the Synod of Dordt met in 1619 it became the butt of considerable ridicule. Despite the fact that it affirmed the Biblical doctrines of grace, cartoons appeared depicting the delegates at Dordt standing around cheering as the reprobate are cast into the fiery pit of hell. Much public sympathy was obviously with Arminius, the irenic professor in Leyden, whose teachings were condemned by the delegates to Dordt. Their views were not politically correct but their biblical soundness was expressed in the Canons. It was a defining moment in the history and development of Reformed thought.

The Synod of the CRC which met in Sioux Center, Iowa, at Dordt College, on a more modest scale could have made some significant statements to the churches. To its shame, it did nothing. For that it may be inviting the judgment of God. At the least, it merits no praise.

The information for this article comes primarily from the e-mail reporting of Synod and a brief discussion with a synodical delegate. I did not attend Synod nor did I observe the proceedings via the internet. If, however, the reporting is correct, this Synod ought to cause the churches some grave concern.

## The Officers of Synod

The officers of Synod were president, Rev. Wayne Brouwer, pastor of the Harderwyk CRC in Holland, Michigan. Rev. John Witvliet, pastor of the First CRC, Sioux Center,

Iowa was the vice president. Elder Don Dykstra of Hammond, Indiana CRC and Rev. Henry Kranenburg, pastor of Immanuel CRC in Hamilton, Ontario served respectively as first and second clerks of Synod.

## Home Missions

On Monday evening a new Denominational Ministries Plan was unveiled that calls for “aggressive effort to plant up to 30 new

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churches a year.” John Rozeboom, long time executive director of CR Home Missions, noted, in support of the new plan, that this was “the most effective way of reaching unbelievers for Christ in North America.” Whether or not that is the case is open to debate.

What was not addressed was the question of how these churches are to be supported and staffed. Last year some 28 ministers retired. An additional 14 ministers (half the number of retirees) left the ministry for various reasons (discipline, release from office, etc.). That makes

42 ministers who because of retirement or other reasons left office or became inactive. This does not include ministers who were placed on loan to other denominations. On Tuesday morning 39 people were approved as candidates for the ministry. If every one of them entered the ministry there would still be a net loss of at least three ministers. If Home Missions plants 20 new churches a year there would be a shortage of 23 ministers and the denomination has not yet begun to touch the serious problem of staffing existing vacant churches. It is difficult to find a pastor to call in the CRC. The average length of vacancy now is 18 months. If Home Missions pursues this ambitious new plan and there is not increase in the number of candidates the CRC will face a serious ministerial shortage.

## The Banner

The Rev. John Suk, editor of the *Banner* for the past decade retired. Quoting Kenneth Burke he noted that “nothing can more effectively set people at odds than the demand that they think alike.” A nice quote but what the outgoing editor fails to understand is that this is precisely the reason why people join a church, a community of faith, because people do think alike about God, about salvation, about the authority of scriptures, about the creeds, about worship, about ordination and about a host of other issues.

The problem in the church is not that people don’t think alike, but that they are not thinking alike about issues they had once communally agreed upon and articulated in their

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creeds, confessions, and in their ecclesiastical life.

Disagreement about significant issues is in fact being soundly squelched. This was illustrated on the floor of Synod itself. Under Suk's leadership the *Banner* declined from a weekly to a bi-weekly to a monthly publication. The Rev. James LaGrand, delegate from Classis Illiana, made a motion to the effect that every effort be made to restore the *Banner* to a weekly periodical and when the Board of Publications presents its findings on a successor to Rev. Suk, at least two nominees be presented for Synod to choose from. Such threats to the peace and tranquility of the bureaucracy are not lightly taken. The editor may pay lip service to the merits of disagreement but the chair ruled the motion out of order.

### Candidates for Ministry

Another example of how dissent is squelched and consciences are compromised could be seen in the vote to approve the candidates for ministry. It is possible that there may have been some delegates that had valid Biblical reservations about voting to approve women as nominees for ordination to the ministry. Synod had little concern for their consciences. Unlike former years the candidates were not presented individually but "en masse" for Synod's approval.

### Study Committees

Two study committees were authorized this year. One was in response to an overture from Classis British Columbia North-West regarding "restorative justice". The other synodical study committee was mandated to study issues of "war

and peace". There are some who think that it is incumbent upon Synod to make pronouncements about every issue. It is interesting that when the Pharisees tried to draw the Lord into a political statement about paying taxes to the hated Roman government he replied simply, "Render to Caesar the things that Caesar's." Synod would have probably authorized a study committee on "methods of equitable taxation" to give Caesar some unsolicited advice.

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## *Our unqualified support of Christian education is clearly waning.*

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The study report on issues raised by bio science and genetic engineering raised considerable discussion. The report from Synod noted that Synod "affirmed life, but refused to say that the destruction of frozen embryos is murder." There was some disagreement about when life begins and Synod disagreed with the report's conclusion that all human embryos must "be given an opportunity to implant and develop into a child." Perhaps Synod should have spoken out against the practice of Petri dish fertilization. It is rife for scientific abuse such as attempting to grow test tube babies to harvest their genetic material for medical treatment, and raises some serious moral questions.

### Christian Education

The other study report Synod considered dealt with the matter of Christian Day School Education. One of the hallmarks of the CRC has always been its unqualified support of Christian schools. One of the questions church visitors were to ask church councils under Art. 41 of the Church Order was "Does the consistory diligently promote the cause of Christian education from elementary school through institutions of higher learning?" In some CR churches if a family did not send their children to the Christian School they could count on a visit from the elders. In many churches it was an unwritten rule that if a father did not send his children to Christian school he would not be nominated to serve as an office bearer.

With that history one would have thought that endorsing this report would be like endorsing motherhood or apple pie. The debate, however, was described as "lengthy and often critical." The committee was told to add to its study the relationship between a "church's commitment to missions and to Christian Day Schools; how smaller, isolated churches can fulfill their baptismal vows regarding Christian education; and brokenness in churches where not all families have equal resources or commitments to Christian Day Schools." (The latter concern was precisely what this report was trying to address).

I suspect that the debate on the floor of Synod came as somewhat of a surprise to those who drafted this report. Our unqualified support of Christian education is clearly waning. Synod turned down a rec-



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ommendation of the committee that CRC Publications work in conjunction with other organizations to develop materials that “will help promote Christian schools.”

When Christian schools were established it was understood that if the church and the covenant community were to survive and flourish it needed to begin with our families training covenant children in the way they should go. This growth was never taken for granted. It involved commitment, time, treasure and sacrifice. In retrospect they were right. Studies have shown that if a church simply manages to keep its own children it will grow (25 – 30% in a decade).

In the seventies there was a shift in emphasis in the CRC. Covenant growth, or internal growth, was not considered real “growth” in a church. Consequently the historic emphasis on Christian education was gradually diminished. What has replaced it is a kind of fundamentalist emphasis that sounds alien to reformed ears. We no longer stress our reformed covenantal heritage but look for leadership in mega church leaders who have no ecclesiology and we use strange phrases like “God’s heart is broken for the lost.” The consequence of this emphasis can be seen in the comments regarding this Christian education report. Underlying these comments is the unspoken yet real shift that has taken place.

In some measure Christian schools are now being viewed as impediments to true evangelism. Money spent on Christian education is money spent on “ourselves” and really doesn’t count as money invested in true outreach efforts. In

fact, to promote Christian education is something that should be avoided since the cost of Christian schools discriminates against the poor (even though grandparents and great grandparents who established these schools were also poor).

Christian schools are now declared a hurdle to evangelism because they may demand a level of financial support and commitment that many are unwilling to make. Whether or not this was fully articulated in the discussion on this report,

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***This Synod will  
not be measured  
by what it said,  
but by what it did  
not say.***

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I do not know. This attitude, however, does exist and represents a major shift in emphasis in this denomination.

#### **Ministers’ Pension Plan**

Synod approved a change in the funding of the minister’s pension plan. Under the new arrangement smaller churches will have to pay approximately \$4,500 for their ministers participation in the denominational pension plan. Larger churches (over 250 professing members) will pay an assessment based on membership. Thus the pension assessments for larger churches will not increase as much as they would have without this amended plan for funding.

#### **First Toronto**

Finally, however, this Synod will not be measured by what it said, but by what it did not say. Classis Yellowstone overtured Synod to apply special discipline to the council of First Toronto, CRC who made the decision to carry out a congregational vote considering “nominations of gay and lesbian members, including those living in committed relationships, for all elected (church) offices.”

At the very first plenary secession Synod decided to withhold action on this overture on the grounds that Classis Toronto is addressing this matter and plans to make a decision on June 25. What an extraordinary opportunity was lost. Synod could have addressed a word to those who are gay and lesbian in First Toronto. It could have been a word of kindness, a word of encouragement, a word of warning, a word of rebuke, a word of forgiveness, a word of grace. Synod could have communicated to them that the church is not first of all interested in their sexual preferences but in their salvation – that in response to God’s grace we strive to live lives pleasing to the Lord. At the very least Synod could have said this is what the Bible says. They are entitled to hear the word of the Lord. Instead Synod said nothing.

Or, Synod could have addressed the Council of First Toronto. They are responsible for the spiritual care of the flock. To present a proposal such as this to the congregation represents a calloused indifference to the spiritual welfare of God’s people. It suggests that living as the catechism notes “decent and chaste” lives both inside and outside

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## *Since when does one pray about being disobedient?*

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of marriage is not a requirement for office. It sends a message, particularly to children and young people that an “alternative lifestyle” is pleasing in the Lord’s eyes when it is not. To the Council of First Toronto, Synod said nothing.

On June 14, 2003 the Synod convened ministers and elder delegates from forty seven classes in the Christian Reformed denomination. The next day the Rev. Tim Ouwinga in a worship service issued a call to faithfulness – that we be in submission to God and His Word. Was anyone listening?

Perhaps the office bearers there should have been reminded of the form for ordination of elders. They are “to rule in the Name of the ascended King, and as servants of the Great Shepard, caring for His flock.” They are to maintain the purity of the Word and sacraments, uphold the good order of the church, carefully guard the sacredness of the office and faithfully exercise discipline. Would anyone suggest that the Council of First Toronto by its actions even remotely sought to live up to these standards expressed in their vows as office bearers in Christ’s church? Is it enough to hide this matter under a pietistic mantle of prayer? Since when does one pray about being disobedient? The writer of Proverbs says an open rebuke is better than concealed love. (Proverbs 27:5) The Lord disciplines those whom he loves. (Hebrews 12:6) Was there any shred of discipline or

love shown by Synod? Was it wiser than the Lord? What did Synod say to other office bearers in the church? It said nothing.

### **Conclusion**

A few days after Synod adjourned, two significant stories were headlined in the newspapers. One concerned a decision by the U.S. Supreme Court overturning a Texas anti-sodomy law. The other concerned the Canadian government joining the Netherlands and Belgium in approving the legislation of “gay marriages”. This radical redefinition of marriage is now incorporated into Canadian law. It is ironic that the CR Synod can direct the general secretary to send letters to President Bush and to send similar letters to the Canadian government to “Provide a choice in education without financial penalty to families of school age children.”

It is ironic that we can appoint study committees to consider the matter of “restorative justice” and the inadequacies in our penal system. It is ironic that we can have a study committee to address matters of war and peace and perhaps influence foreign policy. But when it comes to addressing a church council that has flagrantly ignored the Scriptures, the church order and the decisions of Synod itself, the silence is deafening. What did Synod say to the world? It said nothing.

The legacy of this Synod will be grief for the churches. We now have a year of “discussion and

prayer” in which the wolves can be turned loose in the flock. Perhaps next year’s Synod will apologize to Classis Yellowstone – but that is unlikely. There are those who love the Christian Reformed Church who may shrug their shoulders or shed a tear. Is this the way the church will end, not with a roar, not even with a whimper, but with stone cold silence? The poet T.S. Eliot once observed that “April is the cruelest month of the year”. For those who love the CRC this year it was June.

**Rev. Richard Blauw** is pastor of the First Christian Reformed Church of South Holland, Illinois.



# Solomon's Sublime Song

Sebastian Castellio departed John Calvin's Geneva in June 1544. Though he left the city with a letter of reference from Calvin, Castellio departed in bitterness. The rift between Calvin and the first rector of the College of Geneva is traceable, in part, to the canonicity of the Song of Solomon. Castellio had described the book as an obscene love poem, unfit for inclusion in the Word of God. Calvin defended the inspiration of the Song as well as its suitability for the church.

This incident merely reminds us that the struggle over the nature of the Song of Solomon is not new. Others before us have faced the challenge of this small book and we are called once more to address its meaning for the church today.

This Song which is Solomon's—Song of Songs—Canticle of Canticles (as it was called in the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries)—this sensuous love song beckons us to a wedding. The wedding to which we are invited is situated at the climax of an elaborate courting ritual. But this wedding is also anticipatory of the everyday sameness—the humdrum routine—when the honeymoon is over.

Solomon's Song beckons us to sense marital love as God intended

it. Not crude, vulgar sex with its contemporary pornographic overtones. Not sex as an idol of pleasure through which the High Priest of the Playboy cult, Hugh Hefner, has become a millionaire, as well as the cause of the suicides of several foolish women who sold their bodies to him. No, Solomon's Song beckons us to marvel at the beauty, the grace, the loveliness of marital love. Love which begins in the yearning affection of courtship (chapter 1); love which ripens in the joyous exhilaration of the wedding night (5:1); love which deepens in the maturing passion of two becoming one (chapters 7 and 8).

All of our senses are aroused by the world of Solomon's Song. Our eyes are witnesses in this love poem. Our ears are eager channels at the audition of these two lovers. Our noses are receptacles for the aromas of the drama. Our mouths are sated with the tastes of love. Our hands—yes, even our bodies—are touched with the feelings of love. This biblical love poem is a sensuous love poem. All our senses are aroused by the world of Solomon's Song.

We behold the physical beauty of the bride (4:1-5; 7:1-7) and gaze upon the handsome virility of the

groom (5:10-16). We hear the cooing of the birds (2:12) and the gentle bleating of sheep, goats, kids and lambs (1:8; 4:1, 2). Our noses are alive with perfumes (1:12; 3:6) and spices (4:14, 16)—there is a swirl of aromas from trees and flowers (2:13; 4:13-16). Our mouths are filled with luscious sweets: raisins (2:5), grapes (2:15), figs (2:13), pomegranates (6:11; 7:12). Our hands fondle exquisite jewels (1:10, 11; 4:9); our fingers explore graceful bodies—bodies bathed in shimmering liquids, bodies clothed with elegant shoes, robes, gowns (7:1; 5:3; 3:6-11)—bodies which caress one another (2:6; 8:3).

All these rich sensations occur in the experience of two persons—a man and a woman. A man and a woman sensuously tasting, seeing, smelling, hearing, feeling love. Was it not so in the beginning? Was it not so when the first man and woman sensuously experienced love. Love which tasted very good; love which felt very good; love which ear and eye and nose sensed was supremely, superlatively, *very* good! Did not God himself make it so? Did not God himself make this love very good? Sensuous love, sensuous male-female love—very good, sensuous man-woman love. “And God saw all that he had made and behold it was very good” (Gen. 1:31).

Solomon's Song takes us back—back to that first garden where God introduced woman to man as his complement. Solomon's sublime

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*This biblical love poem is a sensuous love poem. All our senses are aroused by the world of Solomon's Song.*

song enables us to sense how it was when the Lord God Himself brought Eve to Adam. For, you see, the Lord God knew—yes, God knew that it was not good for the man to be alone—incomplete, without a helpmate. So the Lord God fashioned the man’s other self—his perfect mate—his other half—his one and only—and behold *she* was very good!

Solomon’s Song is set, for the most part, in the springtime of the year (2:10-13; 7:12). The flowers are bursting their blossoms; the fruit trees are green and fragrant; the birds are singing over their nests; kids and lambs are frolicking with the flock. New life is breaking forth—the fruit of the union of male and female is springing to life (7:11-13). The whole world expresses the exuberance, the vigor, the companionship which the man and the woman share in the stages of love: courtship, wedding, consummation, life-long marital union.

Solomon’s sensuous drama set against the newly created springtime of the year occurs in a garden location (6:11; 8:13). In a garden, Solomon and his Shulamite (as she is called in 6:13) court, wed, grow to profoundly fathom love which is as strong as death (8:6). Our lovers walk in a garden—a paradise of trees and animals and streams of water. Their sense of love projects them back to another garden—a garden paradise in which the first man and the first woman were united. Solomon’s Song is a poem of ecstasy—a celebration of what that first couple tasted, naked and unashamed (Gen. 2:25).

But Solomon’s Song is in the Bible *after* the Fall of man and woman

into sin. The Song of Solomon comes *after* Genesis 3. This after-the-Fall love poem cannot ignore the fact that the first marriage with its sensuous delights and paradise garden has been marred, tarnished and corrupted by the Fall. Sin has sullied man and woman’s sensuality. The Shulamite pursues Solomon through the streets (3:1-5), pursues him whom her soul loves; frantically seeks him, actively pursues him, but cannot find him. Love’s estrangement comes home in a fallen

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***This after-the-Fall love poem cannot ignore the fact that the first marriage with its sensuous delights and paradise garden has been marred, tarnished and corrupted by the Fall.***

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world; love’s loneliness overpowers her as she lays upon her bed in the night watches. But him whom her soul loves—him whom *she* cannot find—is replaced by the watchmen who do *find* her. Her loneliness is expressed in the phrase, “Have you seen him?” (3:3). There is a happy ending to the separation and lonely pursuit in chapter 3! She does find him whom her soul loves and they are joyously reunited (3:4, 5).

But the pattern of estrangement and separation will be repeated in chapter 5. Following the intimate wedding scene of 4:16 and 5:1 (and I should note as an aside that these two verses are the center of the

book; the hinge on which the two sections 1:1-4:15 and 5:2-8:14 swing—the place where God himself places his benediction upon the two lovers on their wedding night when he says, “Drink and imbibe deeply, O lovers”)—following this intimate wedding scene, the Shulamite once again seeks her lover who has withdrawn at her rebuff (5:2-8).

As he comes home late from work one night, she says, “I have put off my robe; I have washed my feet” (5:3), do I have to get up and open the door? You see, she falls into the trap of the humdrum which occurs in every marriage. She has become presumptuous—complacent. In her now post-married estate, she has forgotten that she does not belong to herself, but that she and he belong to one another as one flesh. Her weariness—her exasperation—her selfishness—is a rebellion against the oneness of marriage. When she finally gives in because he keeps on knocking, she gets up to find him gone (5:6). *He* has become exasperated! And so he has withdrawn, absented himself. He has become distant and remote. Once again, she frantically pursues him, but this time (unlike chapter 3), the watchmen find her and beat her, striking and abusing her as if she were a common street prostitute (5:7).

The effects of a fallen world penetrate even the marriage bond: frustration, loneliness, exasperation. Solomon and his Shulamite taste love and marriage outside the garden of Eden. Now, outside the garden, love and marriage are affected by tension, alienation, isolation, even manipulation.



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And yet, precisely that condition is the reason Solomon's love song is in the Bible. After the garden, from this side of the Fall, men and women need a revelation of what love ought to be—of what it once was—of how God made it—of how that first marriage remains a model even after the Fall.

That model is now realized only through the eschatological marriage—the marriage of Solomon's Lord and the Shulamite's antitype. Christ Jesus has a Bride—that Bride is his best beloved by the intimacy of oneness—union of Bride and Groom. In that mystical union, the garden returns; the sensuous is restored; the springtime love is made new. Christ Jesus and his Bride behold one another in passionate affection. Christ Jesus and his Bride possess one another in the expression of love, "My beloved is mine and I am his." Christ Jesus and his Bride sense the sweet aromas of love, "My beloved is to me as the trees of frankincense, myrrh and aloes." Christ Jesus and his Bride taste the sweet fruits of love, "Let him kiss me with the kisses of his lips." Christ Jesus and his Bride plumb the depths of this divine love—feeling the touch of their mutual passion.

The eschatological Solomon, Jesus Christ, sings a poem of love to his Bride; she reciprocates with a poem of ecstasy to her divine Lover. Together they possess and caress one another in the bonds of love in the paradise garden of God. And it is to that eschatological wedding — that eschatological marriage — that eschatological union — that Solomon's Song and the Marriage Supper of the Lamb beckon the

sons and daughters of God. This sublime song of the king in Jerusalem invites Christian men and women, Christian husbands and wives, to taste and see that what was in the beginning, though corrupted by the curse, nevertheless in its eschatological relation transforms the union between a man and a woman to a heavenly ecstasy — a divine intimacy.

The new order invades the old; the eternal penetrates the temporal;

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the protological returns in the eschatological; the horizontal is invaded by the vertical. Only this redemptive-historical approach allows the believer to fully comprehend Solomon's sublime Song. Only the eschatological perspective—the Christ-centered approach—makes sense of the Song of Solomon.

The Song of Solomon is a revelation to believing men and believing women that sexual love within marriage — even marriage in a fallen world — sexual love in marriage can express the intimacy of the world to come. Even now, that heavenly ecstasy may be tasted in

part. But when our mystical union is fully consummated in glory, how sweet that will be! How ecstatically sweet that will be! How perfectly passionate will be the affection of our divine Lover for us.

In the marital union, God declares through Solomon's Song, "I am revealing to you something of the sense of what it was like in the garden of Eden—something of what it will be like in the garden of glory—something of what it is like even now for those whom I have taken into intimate, personal union with myself through my Son by the power of the in-dwelling Holy Spirit."

The church needs the Song of Solomon! We need the Song of Solomon! Christian husbands and wives need the Song of Solomon! It directs our attention to the sensuous, so that all our senses may be ravished in the divine ecstasy of union with Christ. May that sweetness enrich your faith — your precious union with your heavenly Lover, the Lord Jesus Christ.

**Rev. James T. Dennison, Jr.** is Academic Dean at Northwest Theological Seminary, Lynnwood, Washington where he also teaches Patristics.

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## WORLDWIDE MEETS HEALTH NEEDS WORLD WIDE

In an increasingly dangerous world, health concerns are indeed world wide. Whether it is SARS, AIDS or other life threatening diseases that afflict many, much effort and money goes to assisting those stricken, whether the innocent victims or those who engage in unhealthy behaviors. In many areas of the world it is children who are often the most innocent but the ones most affected. Statistics on the life expectancy of children in developing nations is distressing to those who believe all are made in God's image.

Worldwide Christian Schools, whose home office is at 1009 44th St. SW in Grand Rapids, Michigan, is committed to helping the educational efforts of Christian schools in

developing countries like Africa, India, and Central America. These countries, especially in rural areas and among the poor, are in desperate need of not only literacy, but of more attention to health issues along with the Christian gospel.

According to Dale Dieleman, Field Director of WCS, WCS is collaborating with the Reformed Church of East Africa to produce elementary school curriculum which covers many aspects of health, including AIDS.

Dieleman said, "We see schools, and particularly Christian schools, as the best hope for these countries to improve attitudes and behaviors in young people". These materials

will be sent initially to the Reformed Christian schools in Kenya for field testing in selected partner organizations.

For a dozen years, Worldwide Christian Schools has helped schools in third world countries with building projects and with teaching equipment. Now it is turning its attention to teacher training and curriculum helps.

Where textbooks are either scarce or nonexistent, we believe that Worldwide can meet a real need, Dieleman suggested. Worldwide Christian Schools looks to schools and the children in them as their mission focus, knowing that it is the next generation that will determine the health and welfare of their people.

Submitted by  
Dr. Donald Oppewal

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## Looking Out and About

• Thursday, June 12, 2003 was a significant date for the United Reformed Church of Doon, Iowa. On September 18, 2001 the congregation had approved the council's proposal for a two stage building program. On October 19, 2002 the ground had been broken for the building of the Fellowship Hall. June 12 of this year the dedication service for the newly completed Fellowship Hall took place. The Fellowship Hall contains classrooms and space for the youth pro-

gram of the church. It will be used for worship services while the auditorium is constructed. It is hoped that construction can begin in the near future. The congregation which has grown to number 65 families is served by Rev. Larry Johnson.

• Rev. and Mrs. Patrick Edouard and their four children moved into the newly purchased parsonage of the Covenant Reformed Church (URC) of Pella, Iowa during the first week of August. Rev. Edouard

was installed as the pastor of the Covenant Reformed Church on August 10. Dr. P.Y. De Jong and Rev. John Piersma both of whom had served in the Pella area in years gone by participated in the installation service. Rev. Edouard, a graduate of Mid America Reformed Seminary, formerly served the Covenant Reformed Church of Toronto, Ontario.

• Mid America Reformed Seminary, Dyer, Indiana is anticipating the beginning of its 22nd academic year with an expected enrollment of thirty-five students.



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# Sound Bites

## *The Outlook - 1976*

### **January 1976**

“Instead of asking what we can do to make worship more exciting, we ought to be asking what worship is all about. We ought to be seeking to know the Biblical principles of worship.”

\* \* \* \* \*

“Many who for years have tried all kinds of additions and changes - changes that range all the way from intense ritual to a religious vaudeville, so to speak - are finding them to be without significance and, therefore, without spiritual benefit.”

*The Sacrifice of Praise*  
Jerome M. Julien

### **February 1976**

“...when we view worship as a Covenantal experience, humility reminds us that we do not come into God’s presence and offer the first word. God speaks to us first. God has the first word.”

*The Sacrifice of Praise*  
Jerome M. Julien

### **March 1976**

“...anyone teaching at Calvin may enjoy academic freedom to his heart’s content - but only within the framework of the Bible as God’s Word and our confessional standards as expressing our persuasion. Anyone who might regard this as a straitjacket to which he is unwilling to be confined should be honest enough to realize that he has no other freedom except to leave and go elsewhere.”

\* \* \* \* \*

“We don’t only want questions at

Calvin, we also want answers.”

*Centennial Challenge for  
“Onze School”*

John Vander Ploeg

“...too many Christians lack the knowledge necessary to articulate clearly a Biblical position against prevailing sins and destructive ideologies. The average American Christian lacks the Biblical knowledge, and consequently the ability, to tell the neighbor across the back fence why abortion is wrong. The average American Christian lacks the Biblical knowledge and consequently the ability to tell a fellow bowler in his league why pornography on screen or page should be punished to name just two of the blights which plague us.”

*Feed My Lambs*

Laurie Vanden Heuvel

### **April 1976**

“...we are still in the militant church. God has blessed faithful and obedient work in the past and He will continue to do so in the future. We are called to faithfulness and obedience, and anything less than that will not receive Divine approval.”

*Events and Trends*  
Henry Vander Kam

### **May 1976**

“Everyone of us is a teacher. If we are silent about the things of the Lord, we are still teaching - teaching indifference or hostility to the things of the Lord.”

*Feed My Lambs*

Laurie Vanden Heuvel

### **June 1976**

“There is no place for draft dodgers in the militant church of the Lord Jesus Christ.”

*It’s Our Battle Too*  
John Vander Ploeg

### **August 1976**

“We accept the authority and inspiration of Scripture because of loyalty to Jesus, not primarily because the church taught it for nineteen centuries.”

*Two Words*  
Fred Van Houten

### **September 1976**

“Office-bearers who do the will of Christ revealed in Scripture are really means in the hand of the Master. They exercise authority in the church in such a way that Christ really rules through them.”

*For Elders and Deacons*  
Harry G. Arnold

### **October 1976**

“Though we really don’t like to think so, deep down inside, we are conformists by nature. It’s a conformist’s world, and we are always imitating people. So it takes a concerted effort to pattern our life after One who is not of this world.”

*Imitators of God*  
Harlan G. Vanden Einde

### **November 1976**

“God doesn’t ask you to understand Him, but to follow Him and trust in His promise day by day.”

*In the School of Patience*  
John Blankespoor

### **December 1976**

“The church in her witness to the world in this century needs members grounded in the Word, committed to the truth of the Reformed

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(continued from page 31)

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