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Mary: The Image of the Christian Life

Now the birth of Jesus Christ was as follows: After His mother Mary was betrothed to Joseph, before they came together, she was found with child of the Holy Spirit. (Matthew 1:18)

Is Mary the “Queen of Heaven” or an instrument to reveal the Gospel? How should we understand Mary? Recently Rowland Ward has outlined for us how the Roman Catholic Church has turned her traditional teachings about Mary into the authoritative teaching of the church [“Jesus and His Mother,” *New Horizons* (Dec. 2002): 6-7, 9]. According to Ward, there are four authoritative teachings that have emerged since 1854:

- 1) Mary, at the time of her conception, was preserved from the stain of original sin.
- 2) The church declared Mary “Mother of God,” “Mother of Heaven.” As such, like God, she becomes the source and bestower of grace; like God, she is also to be viewed as an object of worship.
- 3) The church declared that after

Mary died, her body and soul were immediately joined together, and she was enthroned in heaven as queen.

- 4) The church declared Mary the “Mother of the Church.”

Presently, Ward reports that the Roman Catholic Church is looking into a fifth doctrine; Mary is co-redeemer with Christ.

If we stand in the tradition of our Reformed fathers, I think we would agree with Rowland Ward that a cultic religion about Mary has emerged in Roman Catholicism that has no connection to the teaching of Scripture. On the other hand, as children of the Reformation, we must be cautious not to overreact against the teachings of Roman



Volume 53, No. 10 (ISSN 8750-5754) (USPS 633-980) “And the three companies blew the trumpets...and held THE TORCHES in their left hands, and THE TRUMPETS in their right hands. . .and they cried, ‘The sword of Jehovah and of Gideon’ (Judges 7:20).”

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Catholicism about Mary. We must be open to see how Biblical revelation is truly portraying her. I believe a key to that portrayal can be found in the manner Paul interprets Sarah's life, the wife of Abraham (Galatians 4:21-31).

In ethnic Jewish history, there has been a tendency to elevate, isolate, and exalt Sarah to a position of prestige and honor. In effect, she is the epitome of the Hebrew woman. But the Holy Spirit does not direct Paul to be concerned with Sarah's ethnic position of status in Hebrew history. Rather, Paul is concerned with what God is revealing through her life in the redemptive history! In contrast to the bondwoman Hagar, Sarah is the free woman, associated with the covenant of promise—the heavenly city of Jerusalem (Zion).

Let me suggest that we follow this same principle of Biblical interpretation with respect to Mary! The Bible is not interested in elevating, isolating, or exalting Mary to any status that makes her complimentary to the activity of God. Nor is the Bible interested in making her an object of worship or a distributor of grace. Rather, Biblical revelation has a serious interest to teach us something about our relationship to the gospel through her! *Let us say it plainly: the Bible is not interested in elevating Mary to a status that resembles deity; rather, like Sarah in the Old Testament, the Bible is interested in teaching us how Mary serves the revelation of the gospel to Christ's church!*

In order for us to grasp how Mary serves the revelation of the gospel

to the church, we must understand the revelation of the gospel in Matthew's birth narrative. We must keep in mind that the focus of Matthew is the coming of Immanuel; redemptive-history has been waiting for the presence of God ("God with us") to dwell in all His power, glory, and righteousness in the midst of His people. Indeed, that day has come! Jesus, the Savior of sinners, has come both as priest and sacrifice for us! But Matthew also wants you to understand the immediate impact that Immanuel has upon the lives of

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those surrounding Christ's birth!

Specifically, Mary and Joseph appear in Matthew's gospel in order to show the incredible impact that the coming and presence of Christ has upon the lives of each person in the church. In Mary and Joseph you are to see your life in Christ. You are to note that as Christ comes into the world, lives change! Nothing is the same since Christ came!

There are at least two points we need to note in Mary's life:

1) The placing of Christ by the Holy Spirit in Mary (incarnation) typi-

fies the placing of Christ by the Holy Spirit in us as we are saved and are being saved (if you will, a "spiritual incarnation").

2) In Mary, we have the posture of the church as we live in this world.

A Spiritual Incarnation

Returning to the first point, let us begin with a reminder that the incarnation is the eternal Son of God becoming flesh! How does this event occur? By the almighty power of the Holy Spirit placing Jesus in Mary! Now please follow my thinking on this: the Son of God is placed within Mary by the Holy Spirit! There is a parallel to this pattern in our relationship with Christ. How is Jesus placed in your heart? Jesus is in your heart because the Holy Spirit has placed Jesus in your heart! The Bible teaches that such an action is a birth process. Specifically, you are born from above; you are born of the Spirit of God. And who does the Spirit put in your heart through this birth process? Jesus, who saves you from your sins!

Are you capturing the pattern? What a glorious pattern it is! The way in which God redeems the sinner follows the same pattern as Christ's incarnation! We can actually say that being born again in the Bible is a "spiritual incarnation". Christ is brought to dwell in your heart through the power of the Holy Spirit! The pattern of the incarnation of Christ coming in history is extended by God's sovereign grace to a "spiritual incarnation" of God saving us who are sinners in His sight! Herein lays God's revelation to us through Mary! Mary is not

only the chosen vessel of Christ's incarnation in redemptive-history, but this incarnation is also a forecast of how God will spiritually transform each one of us in Christ's church. Simply put, the Holy Spirit places Jesus in the inner confines of our being!

In drawing our attention to this parallel, I am not attempting to minimize or trivialize the profound and miraculous once-and-for-all event of the incarnation of Christ. As we know, there is absolutely no gospel without it! Indeed, Christ's incarnation is the climax of the opening chapter in the entire New Testament canon. There is no forgiveness from sin, no new covenant, and no salvation without the incarnation of Christ! Christ must enter a fallen creation by the power of the Holy Spirit, born of a woman, if anyone is to be born from above!

A Picture of the Church

In the second place, Mary depicts the posture of the church as we live in this world! Mary is the picture of how we live in the process of our sanctification each day! What becomes extremely interesting to note is that in Matthew's birth narrative Mary never speaks a word. She remains silent.

This silence is significant. Mary's condition brings accusation; it brings the appearance of scandal and hideous sin each day. It brings an unjust charge. Mary does not rise up to defend herself against her accusers, against the appearance of scandal!

Once again you see the life of the church and your life in Mary! Immediately as the New Testament opens, God reveals in Mary how the

church is called to live in a world of persecution and injustice. The theme covers the pages of the New Testament canon; the posture of Mary is the posture of Christ's church as Christ's church is the posture of the suffering Christ before His accusers at the crucifixion. Indeed, Christ stood silent (I Peter 2: 21-25).

What recourse does Mary have? What sustains her in this time of false accusation and the appearance of scandal? How is she vindicated in a time of injustice? Is it not our human reaction to plead

The way in which God redeems the sinner follows the same pattern as Christ's incarnation!

with Mary to speak on her own behalf? Indeed, she should defend herself since she is not guilty! Surely, it is a just act for her to justify herself! So why does Mary not speak? Let me suggest that the reason is because Mary is vindicated; she is sustained in the same way we are in the church! The power of the Holy Spirit has placed the presence of Christ within her. Only the presence of Christ through the Holy Spirit vindicates and sustains her.

Our own voice cannot vindicate us before our accusers; the essence of justice does not lie with the things that we say. The only way your

daily walk is vindicated before your accusers is if the Spirit has placed the Christ in your heart. The living Christ that is within you is the sole means of vindication and justice against the wicked world. In Mary this great truth is driven home. Mary had the Christ within her; she needed nothing more. Christ is totally sufficient; her union with Christ vindicates her for eternity before her accusers. Herein lay the victory and contentment of our daily walk.

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We Confess

An Exposition & Application of the Belgic Confession

Articles 6-7: Of the Difference Between the Canonical and Apocryphal Books & Of the Perfection of Holy Scripture

Do you have, in the sixty-six books of your Bible, all that you need to know for your salvation? Do we as churches have all that we need to worship God publicly as a congregation? This is the issue before us this issue as we look at the Belgic Confession, Articles 6-7.

The Sufficiency of The Inspired & Canonical Books

Article 7 speaks of the “sufficiency” (Latin, *perfectione*) of the Holy Scriptures. The context of the Confession was with the Roman Catholic Church, and its insistence that we could only know what to believe for salvation and what to do for worship in the Scriptures *and* the tradition of the Church. Reformed Christians say that the Scriptures are sufficient, complete and clear, in terms of what needs to be believed to be saved, and what we are to do in worshipping the One who has saved us.

Article 7 begins by speaking of the sufficiency of Scripture for salvation, saying, “We believe that those Holy Scriptures fully contain the will of God, and that whatsoever man ought to believe unto salvation is sufficiently taught therein.” Recall what Article 2 said about God’s revelation in the written Word: “He makes Himself more clearly and fully known to us by His holy and

divine Word, that is to say, as far as is necessary for us to know in this life, to His glory and our salvation.” Article 7 continues to speak of the Scriptures sufficiency for our worship by saying, “For since the whole manner of worship which God requires of us is written in them at large...”

We live in an age in which American Christianity has become in many respects like the Roman Catholic Church. Scripture is not seen to be sufficient for our theology and for our worship. After all, where are we told to pray the “Sinners’ Prayer” to receive salvation? Where are we commanded to introduce “visual sermons” in the form of drama and multimedia presentations? These and many other things have more in common with Rome than with Protestantism.

Keep in mind that when our Confession speaks of Scripture being sufficient, it is not saying that it tells how to do everything. It is sufficient in telling us what to do, or not to do, to be saved, and what to do, and what not to do, to worship God. It does not tell us all there is to know about parenting, science, art, music, history, etc. So where Scripture speaks on salvation and worship, let us be bold; but where it is silent, let us be silent.

What About the Apocrypha?

Are the books of the apocrypha a part of the sufficient Scriptures? Article 6 lists these books and deals with this question. Our English word “apocrypha” comes from the Greek word *apokruphos*, meaning “hidden” or “secret.” We as Reformed Protestants do not accept these books as inspired and canonical because their authorship and origin are hidden and secret.

Who wrote these books? We don’t know. All we know is that they were written sometime between B.C. 300 and 100 A.D. They were probably entitled as “apocrypha” because they have an uncertain and suspect authority, as Jerome says, and because they have an uncertain and suspect origin, as Augustine says.

Why were these books included in the Church’s Bible? The Jews who translated the Hebrew Old Testament into Greek (the Septuagint) included them. And when the Church Father Jerome translated the Septuagint into Latin, he included them as well. As a result, they came to be accepted by the Church of Rome, without any questions asked. Thus Rome said at the Council of Florence (1438-1455) that they were inspired by God, and at the Council of Trent (1545-1563) that they were a part of the canon of Scripture, and that anyone who rejected them was anathema!

The Reformers, on the other hand, rejected the apocryphal books, seeing them as uninspired and not part of the canon. There are several reasons why.

First, the Jewish Church never received them as canonical. To Israel was entrusted the “oracles of God” (Romans 3:2), the word of God of the Old Testament. The apocryphal books were not included because they were not written by the prophets. These books came after the period of the last Old Testament prophet, Malachi; and they were not written in the prophetic language, Hebrew (cf. Josephus, *Against Apion* 1:39-41; Augustine, *Psalms* [NPNF 8:132]).

Second, neither the Lord Himself nor the Apostles ever quote from them. Look it up yourself. As well, the Lord divided the Old Testament into the Law, Psalms, and Prophets (Luke 24:44), not Law, Psalms, Prophets, and Apocrypha.

Third, they were not received as canonical in the ancient Church. Most of the Church Fathers were readers of Greek only, and not Hebrew. Thus they used the Septuagint as their Old Testament. But their opinion of these books was the same – they were not a part of the inspired canon. For example, Rufinus’ treatise, *On the Creed*, written between 307-309, testified of the Church Fathers’ attitude toward these books, saying, “all of which they would have read in the Churches, but not appealed to for the confirmation of doctrine.” And Athanasius said in 367, “But the former [the Old and New Testaments], my brethren, are included in the Canon, the latter being merely read.”

The Reformers, as we said earlier, followed the belief and practice of the ancient Church. An example of how they did this was in the Dutch Bible, the Staten Bijbel, from the

Synod of Dort. In this Bible the Apocrypha was placed after the end of the New Testament, in small print, and with the disclaimer: “because they are not canonical, they are not to be read publicly in the congregation.”

Fourth, the apocryphal books contain historical inaccuracies, fanciful tales, and false doctrines. For example, the book of *Judith* calls Nebuchadnezzar the king of Ninevah even though Ninevah was destroyed years before Nebuchadnezzar. The book of *Wisdom* describes Olympic-style athletic contests in the time of Solomon although they didn’t exist until the Greek Empire. The book of *Bel and the Dragon* contains my favorite children’s bedtime story, in which Daniel proves that the king’s god wasn’t eating the food that was offered to it, but instead a fierce dragon was the culprit. Daniel then slew the dragon not by might, not by power, but by indigestible cake!

Finally, these books contain teachings which are in direct conflict with the Biblical faith, such as an unbiblical view of women, salvation by works, and in *Tobit*, the angel Raphael gives magical directions for driving away the devil by the smoke of a fish’s liver while he accepted prayers offered to him.

How is this applicable to us? In addition to our conversations with Ro-

man Catholics, we learn by our Confession that we need only the Word of God read and preached in our churches. Where I live, megachurches are constantly sending out mass mailings, advertising upcoming sermon series through Max Lucado’s books, through Dr. Laura’s books, and through topics like stress, being a good dad, and being financially wise. Paul rebukes these churches, saying, “Even if we, or an angel from heaven, preach any other gospel to you than what we have preached to you, let him be accursed” (Galatians 1:8).

What About Tradition?

There is good tradition, and there is bad tradition. We speak often of the “Reformed tradition” or the “tradition of our church.” But what the Confession wants us to be aware of is the kind of tradition that adds to or takes from the inspired word of God in terms of how we are saved and how we worship.

Who would ever do such a thing? The Roman Catholic Council of Trent, in Session IV on April 8, 1546 decreed that

this truth and discipline are contained in the written books, and the unwritten traditions ... [the Synod] following the examples of the orthodox Fathers, receives and venerates with an equal affection of piety and reverence, all the books both of the Old and of the

So where Scripture speaks on salvation and worship, let us be bold; but where it is silent, let us be silent.



Questions for Further Study/Discussion

1. To what extent does the Confession say the Apocrypha is valuable?
2. Can we use the Apocrypha to teach doctrine? (cf. Galatians 1:8-9)
3. What does Scripture mean when it speaks of “tradition?” (e.g., II Thessalonians 2:15, 3:6)
4. Is Scripture equally sufficient for every endeavor in life? (cf. Westminster Confession I, vi-vii)

New Testament – seeing that one God is the author of both – as also the said traditions ... But if any one receive not, as sacred and canonical, the said books ... as they are contained in the old Latin vulgate edition; and knowingly and deliberately condemn the traditions aforesaid; let him be anathema.

Reformed Christians do not hold to sinful traditions such as the veneration of the saints, the adoration of the Eucharistic bread, or bowing before a crucifix. But do we still have a tendency to add to God’s word with our traditions? Many Reformed churches today insist upon extra-Scriptural traditions such as bringing in crosses for the Good Friday service, the lighting of Advent candles, displaying banners in the sanctuary, never changing the Order of Worship, and praying in King James English only. Do not be fooled. Even these seemingly sincere practices can become idols. How can I say this? Just take these things away once and you will hear just how idolatrous we have become. The Confession says,

“Therefore we reject with all our hearts whatsoever does not agree with this infallible rule.”

What we need is a revival of our confidence in the sufficiency of God’s Word for salvation and for worship. We do not have to soften the message of salvation for our unsaved neighbors, by telling that “God loves you and has a wonderful plan for your life.” We do not have to change our worship services to accommodate the so-called “seeker.” Let us speak the truth in love – you are on the way to hell, so repent and believe in the Lord and you shall be saved. Let us worship in Spirit and truth, knowing that God will seek worshippers. And if we have to, let us as pastors, elders, and saints, re-reform our own theology and practice and that of our churches. It will not be easy, but it will be worth it.

Rev. Daniel R. Hyde is the Pastor of the Oceanside United Reformed Church in Oceanside, California.

Looking Out and About

- The Providence United Reformed Church of Strathroy, Ontario has moved into its newly constructed building. The church whose pastor is Rev. Harry Zekveld now numbers fifty-six families.

- Rev. J. Julien, who has served as the Stated Clerk of the United Reformed Churches since its founding, has asked to be relieved of his duties as Stated Clerk due to the responsibilities of his full-time teaching position. Rev. William De Jong, pastor of the Covenant Reformed Church (URC) of Kansas City, Missouri is now serving as Stated Clerk.

- The Board of Trustees of Mid America Reformed Seminary met on October 16 and 17. A special feature of the meeting was a dinner on the evening of the 16th honoring the founding fathers and the members of the first board of the seminary. Earlier on that day five of the founders, namely, Dr. Nelson Kloosterman, Rev. E.J. Knott, Rev. John Piersma, Dr. John Sittema and Rev. Tom Vanden Heuvel as well as Mrs. Elaine Vander Kam the widow of Rev. Henry Vander Kam had met with Professor Alan Strange to record memories in regard to the founding and early history of the seminary. Dr. P.Y. De Jong and Rev. Eric Fennema who were also founders were not able to be present. Following the dinner the five founders present served as a panel with Dr. Cornel Venema as moderator to discuss the rationale for the founding of the seminary.

Robert Bellarmine, in 1594 provides even more insight into his explanation of justification by faith. The book is entitled *A Learned and Profitable Treatise of Man's Justification*; it was translated into English and released in 1599. Piscator focused on the usual Protestant argument against the Roman Catholic doctrine of justification; the latter confuse sanctification with justification.

Bellarmino stood in the tradition of the Catholic Counter-Reformation Council of Trent (1545-1563) when he taught that the justification of a sinner before God must make him righteous (Latin: *justus facere=justificare*="to make just" or "to make righteous") by infusing (or putting into the sinner) the righteousness of Christ.

Protestants from Luther and Calvin on had argued that justification occurs by the imputation (the crediting, charging or reckoning) of righteousness to the sinner. Piscator agreed that justification is by imputation, but stated it this way: "imputation of justice" (or righteousness) "and not imputing of sins" are "one and the same thing." In other words, Piscator believed in the imputation of the work of Christ to the sinner (not infusion; hence he opposed the Catholic doctrine), but imputation equals the satisfaction of Christ's death on the cross (His so-called "passive obedience") and no more. "Justification is no other thing than forgiveness of sins" through Christ's death on the cross. In this little book, Piscator avoided joining imputation with the righteous life of Christ (His so-called "active obedience") and, as we have seen from the 17th century actions of the

For Piscator justification flows from the work of Christ, imputed to the believer and that work consists solely in the forgiveness of sins at the cross.

Synods of the Reformed Church of France, even repudiates the imputation of the righteous or obedient life of Christ to the sinner. That is to say, for Piscator, justification flows from the work of Christ, imputed to the believer and that work consists solely in the forgiveness of sins at the cross.

Holistic Justification

Now every Reformed and evangelical believer rejoices in the cross of Christ as a constituent element in removal of the guilt of sin. Concomitantly, remission of sin cancels the penalty which bars us from the holy courts of our righteous God. So we praise God for the forgiveness of sins as a constituent element of our justification (Acts 13:38-39). But every Reformed and evangelical believer is aware that removal of guilt and punishment is insufficient for acquittal in God's sight. Our consciences, as it were, though forgiven, are sensitive that we must possess a positive righteousness before God in order to cancel our positive unrighteousness. (Kind of like being back inside the Garden of Eden—because our sin penalty through which we have been evicted has been removed— but conscious that all is not yet just right, i.e., we are still not *righteous* in God's sight.)

Yes, Lord Jesus, remove the penalty for our unrighteousness; but dear Lord Jesus give us the righteousness which will constitute us

acceptable in God's sight. And Jesus says, "Take my righteousness! Take my righteous life—all 33 years of it! Take it—I give it to you freely so that with me you may stand righteous in God's sight. I will impute to you not only the benefit of my death on the cross (forgiveness of sins), but I will also—grace upon grace—impute to you the benefit of my life on the earth (righteousness). And in my resurrection from the dead, all of this will be confirmed to you, dear believer!!"

In other words, our Reformed fathers identified the glorious work of justification with the whole Christ—his life, his death, his resurrection. The unrighteousness which came by the sin of Adam was remedied by the righteousness of the second Adam (as Paul argues in Romans 5:17-19). The death penalty which came by the sin of Adam was remedied by the payment of that penalty by the death of the second Adam (as Paul argues in 1 Corinthians 15:22). And the confirmation of this double imputation—righteousness and forgiveness—was vindicated in the resurrection from the dead of the second Adam (as Paul argues in Romans 4:25). Justification is the work of the whole Christ: in His life (righteousness imputed), in His death (forgiveness of sin imputed), in His resurrection (vindication declared).

Truncated Justification

Piscator's refusal to affirm the ben-

efit to sinners of the imputation of the righteous life of Christ was a truncation of the Reformed and biblical doctrine of justification. In his exposition of righteousness issuing from the declaration of the sinner's justification, Piscator focuses exclusively on the death of Christ. For Piscator, righteousness unto justification is found only in the single event of Christ's death on the cross. While this is good news indeed, it is only half (or one third) of the "old, old story of Jesus and His love."

In order to stand justified/righteous before God, we need righteousness. Jesus graciously gives us His righteousness by imputation (Romans 5:17). In order to stand justified/righteous before God, we need forgiveness of the penalty of sin. Jesus graciously dies in our place and imputes forgiveness of sin through His blood (Romans 3:25-26; 4:7-9; 5:9). In order to stand justified/righteous before God, we need to be raised up in the status of Christ our Savior. Jesus graciously raises us up together with Himself in order that we may be declared righteous and forgiven (Romans 4:25; Ephesians 2:6). What a marvelous treasure is this holistic doctrine of justification by the life of Christ, by the death of Christ, by the resurrection of Christ.

Piscator's Hesitation

Was Piscator so gun shy of infused righteousness in Bellarmine's (and Rome's) doctrine of justification that he refused to consider any righteousness—infused or imputed—as a ground of justification? This intriguing question deserves more reflection, but it is plausible that in reacting against Rome's infused righteousness, Piscator over

reacted against historic Protestantism's imputed righteousness.

It is also possible that Piscator could not escape the limitations of the human forensic declaration of justification. By this I mean, a human judge may declare a penalty satisfied and thus a (penal) debt removed (forgiven). But the human judge cannot bestow the righteousness of which the criminal is deficient. No debt payment will fill up the

Our Reformed fathers identified the glorious work of justification with the whole Christ — his life, his death, his resurrection.

unrighteousness of a crime to the level of perfect righteousness. Thus "just" in the human forum is payment of penalty only. When the penalty is paid, the judge may declare "Not Guilty!" But the Lord God, the Righteous Judge of all the earth, is greater than any human judge. He is both able and willing to remit the penalty and constitute the sinner righteous in His sight on the basis of a righteousness which perfectly fills up the deficit measure of unrighteousness which the sinner has incurred. At the divine bar of justice, a superabundance of grace is revealed: forgiven *and* counted righteous.

Is it possible that Piscator was

trapped by the limitations of the human analogy and thus could not conceive of justification other than remission of judicial penalty? Whatever the explanation, Piscator cuts our precious justification off from the whole Christ. I am justified by His life (in Christ's righteousness, I am accounted righteous); I am justified by His death (in Christ's death, I am accounted forgiven); I am justified by His resurrection (in Christ's resurrection, I am accounted vindicated). All of these glorious redemptive-historical elements together as well as the whole work of Christ together constitute my justification before God.

Calvin and Piscator

Some have suggested that Calvin agreed with Piscator. Piscator even cited Calvin in support of his own position in his 1594 book against Bellarmine: "we perceive that Calvin makes the formal cause of justification to be imputation of justice which elsewhere [elsewhere] he calls forgiveness of sins." And in his *Aphorisms*, Piscator provides the following summary of Calvin's doctrine of justification in the *Institutes*: "so whom the Lord shall receive to grace, them He is said to justify, that is, of sinners to make them righteous, and this He doth by pardoning and discharging them from their sins." With Piscator therefore, some have argued that Calvin expresses justification solely in terms of forgiveness of sins.

It is true that Calvin does connect justification with forgiveness (as all Protestant and Reformed theologians do). But in his sermon on Deuteronomy 21:22, 23, Calvin declares, "Paul . . . says that because we cannot attain to righteousness,



but by fulfilling the law in all points, and by being discharged by God, it behooved our Lord Jesus Christ to be subject to the law to the intent that His obedience might now be imputed unto us, and God accept thereof as though we brought the like obedience of our own . . . And so by that means we are taken for righteous in Jesus Christ. Why so? because He was obedient.”

And again Calvin says, “Our Lord Jesus Christ hath fulfilled the law and not failed in any one point or iota thereof: now we be clothed again with his righteousness, and the same is allowed unto us as our own” (Sermon on Deuteronomy 27:4-6).

And finally, Calvin’s sermon on Galatians 2:16: “Thus, since the righteousness of the law is unattainable, and is something from which we are utterly barred, we need to find another righteousness. Put another way, we need God to accept us through His free grace. Instead of God receiving anything from us, we need the obedience of the Lord Jesus Christ to be imputed to us, though we do not deserve it.”

It would seem that any plain reading of the whole Calvin and the historic Reformed position on justification (as reflected in her Confessions and theological compendia) would conclude with the French Reformed Confession of 1559: “We believe that all our justification rests upon the remission of our sins, in which also is our only blessedness, as saith the Psalmist (Psalm 32:2). We therefore reject all other means of justification before God, and without claiming any virtue or merit, we rest simply in the obedience of Jesus Christ, which is imputed to us

as much to blot out all our sins as to make us find grace and favor in the sight of God” (Article 18; note the explanation of this Article cited earlier in this essay under the heading “French Reformed Synods”).

The Belgic Confession of 1561 contains the following chapter heading for Article XXIII: “Our Justification Consists in the Forgiveness of Sin and the Imputation of Christ’s Righteousness” (Schaff, *The Creeds of Christendom*, 3:409; cf. Cochrane,

*I am justified by
His life ... I am
justified by His
death ... I am
justified by His
resurrection.*

Reformed Confessions of the 16th Century, 204).

Nearly a century later, the Westminster Shorter Catechism echoes this teaching: “Justification is an act of God’s free grace, wherein he pardoneth all our sins, and accepteth us as righteous in his sight, only for the righteousness of Christ imputed to us, and received by faith alone” (Question 33).

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Sovereign Grace

Sovereign “candle” in the night,
When it is dark, no one in sight,
Father, You my pilot be
So that I can clearly see.

Father, Thou,
my “night time eyes”,
Piercing through the cloudy skies,
Help, dear Father, so alone,
None to care and none to own!

Father, Thou, my “lighthouse” be;
When it is dark
and I scarce can see,
Penetrate the darkness grim.
Tremble great for none but Him.

Nicholas Vogelzang

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Jesus Christ is Life

“In Him was life, and that life was the light of men” (John 1:4).

If you take the time to read the Gospel of John in one sitting, you cannot help but notice the word “life” is an important word to John. John writes about life often in connection with Jesus Christ and the life that He offers. In the twenty-one chapters of John, the word “life” appears more than thirty-five times. Add to that the related verb “to live” and there are over fifty references to Christ being the life of the world. What do all these references mean? What does it mean that Jesus is the source of life or that He is “life” to you and me?

Physical Life

The first answer to that question takes us all the way back to Genesis. It was the role of the second Person of the Trinity to give life to all living things in this world. It was the Word of God that created. John writes: “In Him was life.” In other words, John is declaring that, first, all of our physical life comes from God through Jesus Christ. This truth is hinted at already in Genesis 1:26 where God says: “Let *us* make man in *our* image.” A few verses later we read: “The Lord God formed man of the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and man became a living soul” (Genesis 2:7).

When God formed man back in the beginning of creation, He did not use silver or gold. He did not watch us evolve through the centuries. God used dust. Plain old, ordinary common, every day dust. Just like

the dust you find under your bed; just like the dust you find on your car after driving down a gravel road. We are made out of the same thing that the serpent was given to eat when he received the curse from God. Dust.

Even so, whenever I visit the hospital to congratulate a new mother, I do not compare her newborn to a vacuum cleaner bag. No, there is more to our creation than that. In Genesis 2:7, we are told that we are dust with the breath of God in us. It is that breath of God that gives us life. It is that breath of God that keeps us alive.

And what is the breath of God? It is that which goes forth from His mouth: The Word, and that Word is Jesus Christ. Jesus, then, is life to us - physical life. We have been made through Him.

Spiritual Life

John writes about Christ’s role in creation as the beginner of physical life so that we might be able to understand Jesus as the completion of our spiritual life. Our being made out of dust is only the ground work [pardon the pun].

As John continues his gospel, he writes more and more about our spiritual life, and about our need for Jesus Christ in our lives because He is our Mediator. He is the answer to Question 18 of the Heidelberg Catechism. Just as Jesus, in the beginning, is the source of our physical life, so also, Jesus, in the end, must be the source of your spiritual life. As unresponsive as a pile of dust is without the breath of God in it, so unresponsive are is the human life without Christ in it.

In Ephesians 2:1-3, Paul writes about what life is like without Jesus Christ. It is a most horrible life: dead in transgressions and sins; following the ways of the world; gratifying the cravings of our sinful nature; objects of wrath. What an awful, horrible life! It is a life filled with sin. That is the horrible condition we find ourselves in without a Savior and Mediator.

In our natural state there is nothing we can do to improve ourselves spiritually. We are spiritually dead! We are in desperate need for someone to give us life; someone to breath in us once again - not physically but spiritually! Thanks be to God that in the fullness of time He provided a Savior and Mediator for us in His own Son, Jesus Christ.

Following that awful life that Paul

Q *But who is this Mediator who is at once true God and a true, righteous man?*

A *Our Lord Jesus Christ, who was made unto us wisdom from God.*



describes in Ephesians 2, Paul describes a new, spiritual life: “But because of His great love for us, God who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions, it is by grace you have been saved (Ephesians 2:4, 5). What wonderful, good news those words are!

A Mediator was given unto us to give us life. Without this Mediator, no one has ever breathed one breath toward God. We can inhale and exhale the filthy air of this world all day long, but until we live and breathe for Jesus Christ we remain spiritually dead. Christ came to give us spiritual life.

Eternal Life

With that spiritual life comes the promise of eternal life. Already at the beginning of John’s gospel we see the great struggle between Jesus the life giver and the forces of death. We also see the outcome of that struggle. The darkness could not overcome Him who is the Light of the world. John writes about how those forces of darkness brought Jesus to trial; how they crucified Him; and how they laid Him in the tomb. He was dead.

But death could not hold Him. The great Creator of physical life and the giver of spiritual life could not be contained by death. He conquered sin, death, and hell. Death has been vanquished. Darkness has died. Hatred has been overcome. None of the forces that so often make our lives miserable are in charge. God is in charge. He is on the throne. His Son is victorious.

When your life is in Him, then you have the promise of this victorious life, too. Paul wrote in Romans

10:18 “If you confess with your lips that Jesus is Lord and you believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead, you will be saved.”

Through Jesus Christ, our Savior and Mediator, we not only have physical life and spiritual life, but we are given a life of such quality that it can never be lost. It is eternal life.

Abundant Life

Through Jesus Christ we have physical life, spiritual life, and eternal life. What more could a person possibly want? And yet, there is more! Jesus said, “I am come that you may have life, and that you may have it more abundantly” (John 10:10).

Many Christians claim they have physical, spiritual, and eternal life and they seem to be satisfied with just that. They live miserable lives filled with complaining. The life that Jesus gives to us certainly is not supposed to be that kind of life. Such a life is reserved for those who remain dead in their trespasses and sins.

Our lives are meant to be a blessing to others as we reflect the joy that we have in Christ. Filled with the Spirit of God, an abundant life must flow from us. The Christian life is more than living in the first part of the Heidelberg Catechism. It is also knowing that the perfect sacrifice has been made for us at Calvary and that, through Christ, we are no longer dead but made alive.

I have no doubt that everyone who reads this article has physical life. I think I can assume that

most readers of *The Outlook* also have spiritual life. I hope and pray that you have eternal life through Jesus Christ as your Savior. But do you have abundant life? Knowing that we can have peace with God given to us through His Son, how can we help but overflow with the joy that comes with the abundant life which Christ has earned for us?

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compiled by the Editor

The April and May issues of The Outlook were inadvertently both labeled as Volume 53, No. 4. This index will refer to the April issue as No. 4a and the May issue as 4b. We apologize for any difficulty this may have caused.)

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Evaluating the New Perspective on Paul (6)

Did Paul oppose “Legalism or “Boasting” in Human Strength?

The last question we consider regarding Paul’s view of the law is whether he articulated his doctrine of justification over against a legalistic teaching of salvation upon the basis of works performed in obedience to the law. Though the new perspective argues that this was not a significant problem in Paul’s day, there is evidence in Paul’s writings that his opponents were putting their confidence before God in their works of obedience to the law. There is also evidence that the “boasting” of some of Paul’s Jewish-Christian opponents was not simply a boasting in national privilege and distinction, but also a boasting in their achievements in obeying the requirements of the law of God.¹ Once again our procedure in addressing this question will be to consider briefly several key passages that pertain to this subject.

Romans 3:27-4:8

At the outset of this section of Paul’s argument in the opening chapters of Romans, the apostle refers to a kind of “boasting” that is wholly excluded by the “law of faith” (v. 27). The reason such boasting is excluded is then set forth, “For we hold that one is justified by faith apart from works of the law” (3:27-28). The implication of this explanation is that some of Paul’s opponents were tempted to boast of their works performed in obedience to the law. Such boasting

in one’s works militates against the truth of the gospel that Paul previously summarized in Romans 3:21-26. If we are justified by God’s grace “as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus,” then it would be contrary to God’s grace in Christ to appeal to any works of the law in respect to our

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justification. The boasting, then, to which Paul refers in these verses appears to refer to a kind of legalistic emphasis upon works of the law as a means of justification.

However, immediately after these verses, Paul raises the question, “or is God the God of Jews only? Is he not the God of Gentiles also? Yes, of Gentiles also” (v. 29). This question, which Paul poses in conjunction with his exclusion of boasting, leads some writers of the new perspective to argue that the problem Paul identifies in this passage is not legalism but Jewish exclusivism. E.

P. Sanders, for example, notes that there is no evidence that Paul opposes legalism in this passage. According to Sanders, Paul simply observes in this passage that no one is justified by works and therefore there is no ground for boasting. There is no evidence to suggest that Abraham or any other member of the Jewish covenant community was boasting of their righteousness before God.²

Dunn, as might be expected, takes a little different approach. The problem Paul is opposing, according to Dunn, is “privileged status as *attested* and *maintained* by the law.”³ The boast that Paul condemns, in this approach, is not primarily in the performance of works of the law, which are regarded as the basis for finding acceptance or favor with God. Rather, the boast that Paul condemns is born out of a kind of Jewish exclusivism, which regards God’s covenant favor and grace as a peculiar privilege reserved to those who are Jews and not Gentiles.

Though there may be an element of truth in Dunn’s interpretation, neither his approach nor Sanders’ adequately explains Paul’s argument in this passage. When Paul sweepingly rejects all works of the law as the basis for our justification, it is hardly likely that he is addressing a merely imaginary or hypothetical opposition. He is hardly “shadow boxing,” when he strongly speaks of how boasting is “shut out” by the law of faith (3:27). The rhetorical question, “what becomes of our boasting?”, is not merely rhetorical.

Furthermore, when he suggests



that Abraham, whose faith was reckoned to him for righteousness, has nothing to “boast about before God” (4:2), he makes a broad and inclusive point about *all human boasting about works before God*. For this to be true, it is not necessary to assume that Abraham was himself guilty of such boasting. It only needs to be the case that, if works were the basis for our justification, then we would have an occasion for boasting.

However, as the apostle vigorously argues in Romans 4:4-8, the principle operative in justification is that of grace and not of works. When God justifies the ungodly, he counts as righteous *those who have not worked and therefore have no basis in themselves for a claim upon God’s grace*. The kind of boasting that most properly fits in this context, therefore, is not a boasting in racial privilege or Jewish distinctives, but in any performance/work that might be regarded as the ground for our justification. In other words, the argument of Romans 3:27-4:8 constitutes a frontal attack upon any form of legalism. Why would the apostle present an argument that overreaches its target? It seems more probable that he aims the arrow of his argument at a real target.

It should also be observed that there is something rather unlikely in the explanation of Dunn. As he himself acknowledges, the boast of some in their “privileged status” included their claim to have received the law and to maintain themselves by it before God. It is hard to see how this differs in any significant way from the Reformation’s claim that Paul opposed legalism, when

he formulated his doctrine of justification. After all, boasting in the privilege of covenant status, *which is confirmed and maintained by means of the law*, is hardly distinguishable from a boasting in works before God. To share this boast, one would have to become a Jew, and to become a Jew, one would have to attest and maintain this status by works.⁴

Romans 9:30-10:8

Romans 9:30-10:8 is an especially important passage for the question whether Paul opposed a form of

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legalism in his articulation of the doctrine of justification. The critical question that Paul answers in this passage is why many of his Jewish kinsmen stumbled at the gospel of Jesus Christ. In the opening sections of Romans 9, the apostle argues that the unbelief of the Jews does not represent a failure of God’s Word. Throughout the course of redemptive history, God’s “purpose of election” distinguished between those who are “children of the promise” and those who are not (9:8, 11). Far from representing a failure of God’s Word, the unbelief of many of Paul’s fellow Jews was

the occasion for the realization of God’s purpose to bring salvation to the Gentiles. In this way, God’s promise through Hosea is being fulfilled, “Those who were not my people I will call ‘my people,’ and her who was not beloved I will call ‘beloved’” (9:25).

After providing this initial answer to the question regarding Israel’s unbelief, Paul in Romans 9:30-10:8 goes on to develop more specifically the occasion for Israel’s resistance to the gospel. Why, he asks, did Israel “who pursued a law that would lead to righteousness . . . not succeed in reaching that law” (9:31)?

The answer is that Israel “did not pursue it by faith, but as if it were based on works” (9:32). By pursuing righteousness on the basis of works, Israel “stumbled over the stumbling stone” and thereby fulfilled the prophecy of Isaiah 28:16. The fault Paul finds with this pursuit is not simply that Israel sought righteousness on the basis of works. Seeking to be obedient to the law of God is not Israel’s offence. The fault, according to the contrast Paul draws in these verses at the close of chapter 9, is that this pursuit was not “by faith.”

The likeliest explanation, therefore, of Paul’s words at the close of Romans 9 is that he is exposing the bad faith attempt on the part of many within Israel to obtain a righteousness that is based upon works or deeds performed in obedience to the law rather than upon faith in Jesus Christ. It is noteworthy that the “works” in question, as was true of Paul’s use of this language in Romans 4, refer to any human act or achievement that might be

Rather than submitting to the righteousness of God, which is granted to all who believe in Christ, Israel sought to establish her own righteousness.

regarded as meriting or earning a wage. In other words, Paul seems to oppose in these verses more than a Jewish nationalism that insisted upon obedience to boundary marker requirements of the law. Nothing in the immediate context suggests that he speaks only of such things as circumcision or dietary requirements.

As if the point were not clear enough at the end of Romans 9, the apostle goes on at the outset of chapter 10 to reiterate his explanation of the principal reason Israel stumbled through unbelief. “For, being ignorant of the righteousness that comes from God, and seeking to establish their own, they did not submit to God’s righteousness. For Christ is the end of the law for righteousness to everyone who believes” (10:3-4).

In these verses, the apostle explicitly characterizes the unbelief of Israel as symptomatic of a kind of *self-righteousness*. Rather than submitting to the righteousness of God, which is granted to all who believe in Christ, Israel sought to establish her own righteousness. The language Paul uses in these verses is similar, as we shall see below, to the language of Philippians 3:9. It clearly suggests a strongly negative judgment upon Israel’s attempt to obtain righteousness by some other means than through faith in Christ.

Furthermore, it can hardly be maintained that the only problem Paul diagnoses is that Israel had failed to make the transition to the new circumstance in redemptive history. Though there is a considerable debate regarding Paul’s use of the language of Christ as the “end” of the law, the primary reason Paul identifies for Israel’s failure to believe in Christ was her pursuit of a righteousness of her own.

Undoubtedly, Israel’s unbelief represented, as proponents of the new perspective argue⁵, a pride in her covenant privilege over against the Gentiles and a failure to see that the law finds its fulfillment or goal in Christ. But if the question is pressed regarding the reason for this unbelief, pride and failure, then it can scarcely be denied that the apostle ascribes it to Israel’s boast in her own righteous observance of the law.

An important part of Paul’s argument in this passage is his citation of Leviticus 18:5 in Romans 10:5, “For Moses writes about the righteousness that is based on the law, that the person who does the commandments shall live by them.” Since Paul also cites this passage in Galatians 3:12 in a negative way to argue that life and blessing cannot come by way of obedience to the commandments of God, it is most likely that he cites it here for the same purpose. Though obedience to the commandments brings life and

blessing in fellowship with God, such obedience lies beyond the reach of anyone, including the zealous Israelite who seeks to establish thereby his own righteousness before God. Thus, Paul appeals to Leviticus 18:5, in the context of his argument in this passage, to prove the futility of any attempt to pursue righteousness by the law rather than by faith. The citation of Leviticus 18:5 confirms that Paul is opposing a use of the law as a means of justification by works.

Paul’s use of Leviticus 18:5 in this passage raises an interesting question regarding the meaning of this text in its original Old Testament context. In that context, Leviticus 18:5 seems clearly to be used positively to commend obedience to God’s commandments as the way of blessing within the covenant community. However, when Paul cites this text, he seems to concede the way it was used by his opponents as a commendation of securing righteousness before God through obedience to the commandments. Paul’s appeal to this text seems to approve the “legalistic” interpretation of it by unbelieving Israel.

Perhaps the best answer to this question is one suggested by Moisés Silva.⁶ According to Silva, it is likely that Paul’s use of Leviticus 18:5 in this passage is “colored” by the interpretation of his opponents. Since his opponents were likely using this text to support their pursuit of justification by obedience to the commandments of God, Paul cites this text, *in the limited setting of the issue of justification*, to prove that the law cannot serve as the *source* of our righteousness before God.



Silva maintains that, in other contexts, Paul could speak of the law in the most positive terms. In Romans 10:5, however, he turns the tables on his opponents use of this text by arguing that the law cannot be “life-generating,” though it might in other contexts be life-preserving. Because Paul focuses exclusively upon the law in respect to justification, he can argue that the law cannot play the role his opponents ascribe to it. The law, when viewed narrowly (by itself, as consisting merely of God’s commandments), only reminds us that the way to obtain life and favor with God is through faith in Christ rather than through obedience to the law. The law *by itself* enunciates a principle—“do this and live”—that compels the conclusion that justification cannot come by the law but only by faith in Christ.⁷

Philippians 3:2-11

The last passage we will consider in connection with the question of legalism is Philippians 3:2-11. This passage is particularly interesting, since it has received quite a different interpretation among authors of the new perspective than that commonly found in the Reformation tradition.

E. P. Sanders, for instance, argues that this passage should not be read in overly personal terms. The apostle Paul is basically arguing that, now that salvation comes through faith in Christ, there is no

room left for the law as the way of righteousness. According to Sanders, Paul is not arguing in this passage against those who boast self-righteously of their “own” righteousness before God. When the apostle says, for example, that his life under the law was a “gain” (v. 7), he speaks positively of the law and its usefulness prior to the coming of Christ.⁸

For his part, Dunn treats this passage in the same context as many others in Paul’s writings. The righteousness that Paul rejects is a Jewish covenantal exclusiveness, which excludes Gentiles from participating in the blessings of the covenant. Paul is not opposing a kind a legalism in this passage, but a Jewish claim to covenant privilege and blessing that excludes the Gentiles.⁹

One of the more remarkable features of the handling of this passage by writers of the new perspective is the way Paul’s representation of his life under Judaism is interpreted. When Paul declares in this passage that he was “as to righteousness, under the law blameless,” he positively affirms his own accomplishments by the standard of the law of God. Paul did not articulate his doctrine of justification on the basis of any conviction that he was an incompetent sinner, who was incapable of doing what the law requires and thereby commend himself to God. To the contrary, the apostle

expresses a considerable confidence in his own righteousness when measured by the standard of the law. The problem with the law, accordingly, is not that no one can do what it requires and thereby be justified.

Here, as in so many other places in Paul’s polemics regarding justification, the apostle either wants to maintain that the law has been supplanted by the coming of Christ or serves as a barrier to the inclusion of the Gentiles. The problem with those who boasted of their own righteousness was not that they were failing to abide by the requirements of the law. Indeed, Paul regards himself as a paramount example of someone whose righteousness by the standard of the law was “blameless” and exemplary. The problem lies elsewhere.

There are several difficulties with this reading of Philippians 3:2-11, however. In the first place, it is difficult to defend the idea that Paul in this passage actually means to assert his own “blamelessness” by the standard of the law. To be sure, when compared to the boast of his opponents, Paul does not hesitate to compare himself favorably with them. As much as anyone, Paul asserts, he has the right to place his confidence in the flesh. “If anyone else thinks he has reason for confidence in the flesh,” he notes, “I have more: circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee; as to zeal, a persecutor of the church.” By the standard of blamelessness used by those whom he opposes, Paul compares rather favorably. But does this mean Paul

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believed his own righteousness was sufficient to comment him to God's favor? If we are to take his self-testimony in other passages seriously, this hardly seems likely.¹⁰

Furthermore, the kinds of credentials the apostle adduces in this passage to prove his "blamelessness" by the standard of the law are inconsistent with the interpretation of this passage by Sanders and Dunn. If the problem were primarily the failure of his opponents to see that salvation is *now* only through Christ or the insistence that the Jews have privileges from which the Gentiles are exempt, why does Paul speak of his achievements in such broad terms? The law-righteousness that Paul describes in this passage exceed or go beyond what Dunn and others refer to as the "boundary marker" requirements of the law. They concern a broad range of acts of obedience born of a zeal to serve and obey God.

By describing his righteousness in these broad terms, Paul refutes the boast of those who were undoubtedly making similar claims for their own accomplishments by the standard of the law. Moreover, if Sanders were correct that the problem with Paul's opponents is that they are not up-to-date so far as the new circumstance in redemptive history is concerned, it is odd that the apostle doesn't simply assert the same. Why doesn't the argument of Philippians 3 simply state that the problem with those who do not receive Christ by faith is that they are living in the past?

The actual argument of this passage, however, proceeds rather differently. Paul not only assumes that his opponents are guilty of a mis-

placed confidence in their own flesh. They are also, on that account, unwilling to receive that righteousness that is from God by faith. The language Paul uses throughout this passage is strongly personal and even existential. He speaks of those whose confidence is in their own flesh and righteousness (v. 4). He also speaks quite emphatically in the first person, not only when he compares his own righteousness with theirs but also when he speaks of the righteousness that is from

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God. In the strongest possible terms, he states, "I count everything loss for the sake of Christ. Indeed, I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God that depends on faith" (vv. 7-9).

For these reasons, it is difficult to deny that Paul opposes in this passage a kind of boasting in the flesh that is characteristic of all legalism. Rather than relying by faith upon

the righteousness that is from God, those who place their confidence in the flesh look to their own achievements as the basis for their commendation before God. Just as in the case of the boasting Paul mentions in Romans 3:27-28 and Romans 4:1-5, this boasting or confidence reflects an unwillingness to acknowledge God alone as the source of our justification in Christ. Such confidence fails to give the praise and honor to God to whom it properly belongs.¹¹

Endnotes

1. It should be noted that the presence of legalism in the teaching of Paul's opponents does not require that they relied exclusively upon their own works to find favor with God. It only requires that they insisted upon works performed in obedience to God as a (partial) means of self-justification. Paul's opponents were no doubt familiar with the themes of God's grace and election of Israel. As we have earlier argued, they were not full-fledged "Pelagians" (to speak anachronistically). The question is, however: did they insist upon works performed in obedience to the law as an indispensable ground for the believer's justification before God? And did they believe that they were capable of performing what the law required? Legalism includes both elements: the insistence upon obedience to the law as a means of justification, and the corollary conviction that such obedience is possible for sinners.

2. E. P. Sanders, *Paul, The Law, and the Jewish People* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1983), pp. 33-35.

3. Dunn, "Yet Once More—'The Works of the Law'," *Journal of the Study of the New Testament* 46 (1992): 113.

4. Cf. Simon J. Gathercole, *Where is Boasting?* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans,



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2002). Based upon his study of the motif of "boasting" in Second Temple Judaism and the argument of Romans 1-5, Gathercole concludes that the boast was not only made in relation to others (Gentiles) but also *in relation to God* before whom the faithful Jew expected to be vindicated/justified for his adherence to the law.

5. James D. G. Dunn, *Romans 9-16* (Waco, TX: Word, 1988), pp. 581-595.

6. "Is the Law Against the Promises? The Significance of Galatians 3:21 for Covenant Continuity," in William S. Barker and W. R. Godfrey, eds., *Theonomy: A Reformed Critique* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1990), pp. 163-67.

7. Silva, "Is the Law Against the Promises?," p. 165: "On the basis of Paul's positive statements about the law, I wish to argue that the apostle did indeed regard the law as leading to life—but not as life generating!—and that therefore he would have affirmed the truth expressed in Leviticus 18:5. On the other hand, he vigorously denied that the law could be the *source* of righteousness and life; indeed, he denied not merely that the law could be such but also the view that God had given it (*edoth-*, 3:21) with such a purpose (otherwise, it would be opposed to the promise)."

8. Sanders, *Paul, The Law, and the Jewish People*, pp. 44-45.

9. Dunn, *Romans 9-16*, p. 588.

10. See the references cited earlier in fn 4.

11. Cf. 1 Cor. 1:29, 31; 4:7; 2 Cor. 5:12; Gal. 6:4, 13.

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I first met Larry when he was 19 years old. My family and I had moved to a West Michigan Community where I had accepted the call to serve a well established congregation. It was the spring of the year. I was invited to teach the Bible lesson for the Men's Society which was still meeting. Following the first meeting which I led, one of the older men in the Bible Study approached me. He asked me if I knew the young man who had participated actively in the Bible discussion. When I replied that I did not, he said, "That's Larry, he has terminal cancer." Soon after that I invited Larry to visit me in the study.

I learned that Larry had been a college freshman when he found out about his terminal illness. I also found out that Larry had a steady girlfriend and that he was an outdoorsman. After some further conversation I asked him, "What's it like to be nineteen and to know that you are dying?"

I remember his answer as though it was just yesterday that it was given. He said, "All the things that mean the most to me, my family, my girl friend, my canoe, my fishing are just a handful in comparison to what is waiting for me in heaven."

Larry was interested in the life of the church. During the summer months he and I spent an afternoon attending the annual synod of the denomination of which our church was a part. Then the times of hospitalization became more

frequent. We talked about many things as I visited him. We talked about the Bible, about the Heidelberg Catechism, especially the first question and answer. We planned his funeral. He wanted me to use the words of II Corinthians 5:1-10. He had also selected the songs to be sung.

On the last day of his life I visited him at the hospital late in the morning. He was experiencing some added physical discomfort. A Christian nurse had directed his attention to Romans 8:18 so I read those words and the verses surrounding them to him. We talked about them briefly. A few hours later he personally experienced the realities of that glory with which the sufferings of this present life cannot be compared.

I remember that the older members of the church used to speak of "dying grace". As I reflect upon Larry's testimony in the face of death I am reminded of the reality of that grace given to the children of God, young as well as older so that they may not only live but also die in the assurance that "with body and soul they are not their own but belong to their faithful savior the Lord Jesus Christ."

Rev. Art Besteman is an emeritus minister in the United Reformed Church. He is a member of the Bethany URC in Wyoming, Michigan.

Looking Above

A Series on The Revelation of Jesus Christ

Christ in the Midst of the Lampstands

We have before us the wonderful climax of chapter 1: the vision of the glorious and exalted Christ. In the Spirit on the Lord's Day, John hears the voice of the Savior, like a mighty trumpet blast (vv. 10-11), he then turns to see the voice in verse 12: "And having turned I saw seven golden lampstands..."

The first things which John sees in the vision are the seven golden lampstands. John does not behold the lampstand that stood in the Old Testament tabernacle - that lampstand that served as a constant reminder of the presence of God. John beholds no such shadow. John beholds the reality. John beholds the presence of God Himself! John does not stand in the tabernacle made with human hands. John stands in the tabernacle made without hands - eternal in the heavens. John does not stand in the shadow. John stands in the reality.

John's attention is arrested, then, not by the lampstands, but by the One who stands in the midst of the lampstands. Notice that John gives no description of the seven lampstands, other than to say they are golden. But his description of the One who stands in the midst of the lampstands is lengthy and detailed.

Christ stands in the midst of the lampstands, and is described as

"One like the Son of Man", a reference taken from Daniel 7:13.

He is clothed with a garment down to His feet, as the Great High Priest. The fact that He is clothed with a garment down to His feet tells us that He is no longer offering sacrifices of blood, for in that case the garment would have been taken up by means of the girdle. His garment hangs down to His feet, because the great and final sacrifice for sins has been paid; and it has been paid in full. It is finished.

Nevertheless, He does continue to wear the golden band about His chest. Though the work of the final sacrifice is complete, Christ continues to serve as the High Priest of the Church. He is still serves in the Great Tabernacle where He ever lives to intercede for His people, as our Great High Priest.

The description continues. His head and hair were white like wool, as white as snow. This was the description that was given to the Ancient of Days in the book of Daniel. It is now given to Christ. Christ is God; He is One with the Father. He is the Ancient of Days - the everlasting God, without beginning of days or end of life. He is the Alpha and the Omega, the First and the Last, the One who is and who was and who is to come, the Almighty.

His eyes are like a flame of fire. He is the Great King - the Great King who judges - the Great King-Judge

who knows the thoughts and intents of the heart. With those eyes like a flame of fire, He knows and judges the deepest secrets of man's heart.

His feet were like fine brass, as if refined in a furnace. He is pure and those who would dwell in His presence must be pure, even as He is pure; they must be holy even as He is holy.

His voice is as the sound of many waters. Like the thundering of the waters upon the rocks of the shore, so is the voice of the Almighty. It is the voice that is heard the world over.

He had in His right hand, seven stars (more on that below).

Out of His mouth went a sharp two-edged sword. The Word of God - sharper than any double-edged sword - proceeds from His mouth, and by that Word He shall judge the nations. Here He is set before us as the Great Prophet - the Prosecutor of the Covenant, who will judge by the Word of His mouth.

And finally, His countenance was like the sun shining in its strength. He is the Bright and Morning Star; He is the Dayspring from on High. He is the Light that shines in the darkness. He is the Light of the World.

This description of Christ as "One like the Son of Man" is taken from Daniel 7, a chapter that opens with these words: "In the first year of Belshazzar, king of Babylon, Daniel had a dream and visions of his head while on his bed. Then he wrote down the dream, telling the main facts. Daniel spoke, saying, 'I saw in my vision by night, and behold,



the four winds of heaven were stirring up the Great Sea. And four great beasts came up from the sea, each different from the other....” (Daniel 7:1-3).

We have here nothing less than a description of the Satanic enterprise. Satan is bringing forth a kingdom in his own likeness. Did you notice the words of verse 2? It tells of the four winds hovering over the sea. Sound familiar? Genesis 1:2, and the Spirit of God hovered over the waters...! In fact, the same Hebrew word, *ruach* which is translated in Genesis 1:2 as Spirit, is used again here in Daniel 7:2, and is translated, “wind.” In Daniel 7 Satan is acting creatively over the Great Sea to establish his kingdom.

The four beasts that are then described in verses 4-8 are the agents of Satan ascending from the pit of hell to do his bidding. With each of the four beasts, there is an intensification of destruction and wickedness. Things grow progressively worse as Satan builds his kingdom.

The picture is parallel to that which we have in the book of Revelation. As you make your way through the book of Revelation - through each of the seven sections - the picture of evil intensifies. Horror and devastation are described more vividly. Things do not get better. Things get worse. Bear in mind that what is being described in Daniel 7 and what is being described in the book of Revelation is the time period from Christ’s first coming to His last. This means that we are living in the midst of the increase of corruption, the increase of wickedness, the increase of evil, the increase of sin, the increase of the kingdom of

Satan. Yes, Satan has formed and fashioned a kingdom after his own likeness; and in our day that kingdom continues to grow in strength and in number.

That increase in wickedness, that increase in Satan’s kingdom, continues until the final act of judgment in Daniel 7. “I watched till thrones were put in place, and the Ancient of Days was seated; His garment was white as snow, and the hair of His head was like pure wool. His throne was a fiery flame, its wheels a burning fire; a fiery stream issued and came forth from before Him. A thousand thousands ministered to Him; ten thousand times ten thousand stood before Him. The court was seated, and the books were opened.’ I watched then because of the sound of the pompous words which the horn was speaking; I watched till the beast was slain, and its body destroyed and given to the burning flame. As for the rest of the beasts, they had their dominion taken away, yet their lives were prolonged for a season and a time. ‘I was watching in the night visions, and behold, One like the Son of Man, coming with the clouds of heaven! He came to the Ancient of Days, and they brought Him near before Him. Then to Him was given dominion and glory and a kingdom, that all peoples, nations, and languages should serve Him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion, which shall not pass away, and His kingdom is the one which shall not

be destroyed’” (7:9-14). In this final act of judgment the Satanic kingdom is destroyed, even as the kingdom of the Son of Man is established in all of its glory forever and ever.

This Son of Man – destroyer of Satan’s kingdom (Daniel 7:9-12) and King of the eternal kingdom (Daniel 7:13-14) – is the Son of Man whom John beheld! Is it any wonder that John falls down at the feet of Jesus Christ as dead?! We cannot even bear a glimpse at the sun. But John beholds the glory of One whose countenance shines like the sun in the fullness of its strength! Is it any wonder that John falls down at the feet of Jesus Christ as a dead man?!

Yet Jesus Christ lays His right hand upon John and says to Him, “Do not be afraid; I am the First and the Last.” And Jesus proceeds to give John the interpretation of the vision. “I am He who lives, and was dead, and behold, I am alive forevermore. Amen. And I have the keys of Hades and of Death” (1:18). “I am the One, John, who entered death. I am the One, John, who entered the grave. I am the One, John, who entered the pit of hell. I am the One, John, who has done battle with the great Serpent. I am the One, John, who has become the death of death. I am the One, John, who has buried death in the grave. I am the One, John, who has stormed the gates of hell. I am the One, John, who has slain the dragon. I live,

Satan has formed and fashioned a kingdom after his own likeness; and in our day that kingdom continues to grow in strength and in number.

The background of John's vision in Revelation 1 is found in Daniel 7, but there is a great difference.

John! Though I was dead, John, I am alive forevermore! I have the keys of Hades, John! I have the keys of Death, John! Do not be afraid, John! I am greater than the evil one! I am greater than the serpent! I am greater than the dragon! I am greater than the devil! I am greater than Satan! My kingdom is greater than his kingdom! My kingdom is an everlasting kingdom! Do not be afraid!”

The background of John's vision in Revelation 1 is found in Daniel 7, but there is a great difference. Do you see it? It is the key to understanding the message of the vision! *Daniel sees the increase of Satan's kingdom before He sees the glory of Christ. John sees the glory of Christ before he sees the increase of Satan's kingdom. **The order has been reversed!***

Do you understand the message?! Do you understand the point?! In His death and resurrection, Jesus has begun the crushing of Satan's head! In His death and resurrection, Jesus has bound Satan! Satan, and his kingdom, are under the control of Christ the King!

This is the message that Christ would give to the church. Note His command to John, verse 19: “Write the things which you have seen, and the things which are, and the things which will take place after this.” Even as things continue to get worse and worse, we need not be pessimistic. We need not hang our heads low with a defeatist attitude,

for Christ the King is with us. Look at the words of verse 20, “The mystery of the seven stars which you saw in My right hand, and the seven golden lampstands: the seven stars are the angels of the seven churches, and the seven lampstands which you saw are the seven churches.”

Christ, the King, is in the midst of the lampstands. He abides with His Church. The Church belongs to Him! O Church of Jesus Christ, you belong to the Son of Man who walks in the midst of the lampstands! You belong to the One clothed with a garment down to His feet! You belong to the One girded about the chest with a golden band! You belong to the One whose head and hair are white like wool, as white as snow! You belong to the One whose eyes are like flames of fire! You belong to the One whose feet are like fine brass, as if refined in a furnace! You belong to the One whose voice is as the sound of many waters! You belong to the One who holds in His right hand the seven stars! You belong to the One out of whose mouth goes a sharp two-edged sword! You belong to the One whose countenance is like the sun shining in the fullness of its strength!

O Church of Jesus Christ, you belong to the One who is the First and the Last! You belong to the One who lives, who was dead, and behold who is alive forevermore! You

belong to the One who holds the keys of Hades and Death! You belong to Christ the King! He has gathered you; He protects you; and He will preserve you to all eternity!

“What do you believe concerning the ‘holy catholic church’? I believe that the Son of God, through His Spirit and Word, out of the entire human race, from the beginning of the world to its end, gathers, protects, and preserves for Himself a community chosen for eternal life and united in true faith. And of this community I am and always will be a living member.” Praise God!

Rev. Brian Vos is the Pastor of the Trinity United Reformed Church in Caledonia, Michigan. He is also the President of the Board of Reformed Fellowship.



Classis Michigan Summary

October 14, 2003

It was a rainy day when Classis Michigan met at the beautiful new facility of Trinity United Reformed Church in Caledonia, Michigan. Chairman Rev. Brian Vos led the delegates in singing and opened the meeting with prayer.

Two overtures for implementation at classis were approved.

The first dealt with the method in which the churches answer the questions to Church Order Article 26. In the past, these questions were answered “yes” or “no” on the credentials. Classis approved that each church will provide brief answers to the questions on the back of their credentials to classis. In addition, the clerk will assign some of the churches to give a five minute, detailed oral report of how they are implementing these questions.

Classis also approved an overture requesting an additional Church Visitor. Rev. A. Besteman was assigned the role.

Classis also approved two overtures for Synod 2004.

The first dealt with the manner in which members of the Committee for Ecumenical Relations and Church Unity are selected and how long their terms should be. Classis agreed that nominations should come from each classis and that the terms should be three years.

The second overture for Synod was divided into three separate overtures. These overtures request that Synod declare that:

a. All homosexual desires and actions are sins that are condemned by the Word of God and the confessional standards of the URC.

b. Abortion is a sin condemned by the Word of God and the confessional standards of the URC.

c. The teaching that there was any human death or animal death before the Fall in Paradise is a false doctrine condemned by the Word of God and the confessional standards of the URC.

The remainder of the day was spent considering four appeals in regards to discipline matters. The serious and deliberative manner in which the delegates of classis considered the matter before them was commendable. After almost eight hours of discussion, the classis voted with one voice not to sustain the appeals. Classis advised the appellants to repent of their sin, seek reconciliation with their Council, and show the proper respect for those in spiritual authority over them as required by God Himself. Classis also appointed two ministers to serve as mediators in facilitating the reconciliation.

Rev. W. H. Oord
Clerk of Classis

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Book Review

Hoeksema, Herman. *Righteous by Faith lone: A Devotional Commentary on Romans*. Edited by David Engelsma. Grandville, MI: Reformed Free Publishing Association, 2002. xxvi. 702 pp., including Scripture Index and short bibliography. \$41.95 US, hardcover. Reviewed by Rev. Jerome Julien.

For the lion's share of his ministry, Rev. Herman Hoeksema brought God's Word to one of the largest Reformed congregations in the United States, the First Protestant Reformed Church of Grand Rapids, Michigan. Always a brilliant and powerful preacher, his series of sermons were well received by God's people. Some of these series have been published. Here is another: a series of ninety-seven sermons on the Epistle of Paul to the Romans.

The fact that we have this marvelous collection is thanks to Mr. Martin Swart who was a member of First PRC until his death in 1977. Mr. Swart loved God's Word and set out to make as many transcripts of the messages of his minister as he could. His great legacy to the Church of Jesus Christ - not only to the Protestant Reformed Churches - was a collection of sixty-nine notebooks containing complete series of sermons on the Heidelberg Catechism. When one reads these sermons, one is aware of why that large church building seating perhaps twelve hundred people was

always full. At times there was standing room only to hear the great preacher.

These sermons have been gone over and edited by Professor David Engelsma. Do not let the word "edited" trouble you, however. This reviewer has in his possession photocopies of all the English sermons in the Swart collection. Random comparisons show that Professor Engelsma has done a magnificent job of preparing these sermons for print.

While the sermons in this volume do not cover all the verses in the epistle, they give the running significance of this marvelous book which god has given to us through the Apostle Paul. The result is a clear and simple presentation of the Gospel, and yet, a presentation that thankfully has theological content. In what other way can Romans be properly preached?

Those who would criticize Hoeksema for not preaching with a practical and personal emphasis *must* read these sermons. Already in the first sermon on Romans 1:1-4, entitles "Separated Unto the Gospel", the author concludes his powerful message: "Do you say to the Son of God, 'Our Lord Jesus Christ, to whom I belong'? Then this gospel is yours, and you can rejoice and say, 'I then, having been justified by faith, have peace with God.'"

In another message (Romans 1:18), Hoeksema writes, "...her who says, 'There is no hope for me,' and says, 'Be merciful to me a sinner,' and seeks his righteousness in the risen Lord, will no more taste the wrath of God."

Many passages stand out in their warmth and spiritual blessing. The messages demonstrate a concern for the flock God had given to Rev. Hoeksema to serve (p. 544f). Beautifully Rev. Hoeksema would lay out the Gospel (p. 671). He was very up to date, and remains so today. He asked, "Do the *all things* that are out of God also include evil?" Rev. Hoeksema answers that question on page 572. Like today, many parents had a deep concern for their wayward children. Rev. Hoeksema spoke to that deep hurt in his sermons (p. 402f).

Every minister will benefit from this volume, not only for clear exegesis and theology, but also for the pattern of sermon construction taught by example in this volume. Readers will be as spiritually blessed as were the people who sat in the pews to originally hear these messages. With perhaps one or two exceptions, each chapter is six or seven pages long. *A Devotional Commentary on Romans* is highly recommended. It can and should be used for devotional reading!

Rev. Jerome Julien is a minister in the United Reformed Church. He teaches full time at Zion Christian School in Byron Center, Michigan.



Sound Bites

The Outlook - 1979

January 1979

“Much of today’s evangelical lawlessness seems to be the fruit of an evangelical aimlessness.”

Christianity Has a Moral Backbone

Klaus Bockmuhl

“In many cases it’s not hard to determine what the Bible actually says, but it’s another matter whether we really want to communicate what the Bible says to our modern world.”

Rejecting the Doctrine of Hell
Jelle Tuininga

February 1979

“It is possible, of course, for the purpose of analysis and theorizing about the path to confessional declaration to distinguish the two strands of Bible and confession. But after such analysis, when the practice of teaching, preaching, believing, evangelizing, etc. is undertaken, such distinctions have no functional significance.”

Creed in Crisis
Nelson D. Kloosterman

March 1979

“It is a fallacy to try to educate anyone to be an intelligent viewer of filth.”

Is It Right to Sin?
Cecil W. Tuininga

April 1979

“Marrying a partner without a common faith in Christ ... means that one places his marriage outside

the only saving fellowship. Apart from Christ your only fellowship is with the first Adam, which is a fellowship of sin and death.”

The Wedding Feast At Cana
John H. Piersma

“Unless we clear up our view of inspiration, and once again become like children in our approach to Scripture, we are not going to solve the problems facing us today, but will instead be faced with more such problems in the future.”

The Bible’s Inspiration
Jelle Tuininga

May 1979

“Reformed churches have always upheld the right and duty of believers to secede from a ‘church’ when it no longer manifests clearly the marks of a true church.”

* * * * *

“The church which refuses to distinguish between truth and error has already in principle surrendered to the devil.”

Secession: Sin or Christian Duty?
Peter De Jong

June 1979

“There are limits to the tension that a denomination can bear without coming to the breaking point. Important and precious as they may be, if peace and unity can be maintained only at the cost of compromising the authority of Scripture as our only rule for faith and practice, their price is just too high.”

CRC Synod of 1979
John Vander Ploeg

“In an era when amorality, immorality, secularism, sensuality and humanism are rampart and we all have become more liberal in our personal behavior and manner of living (there is no sense in trying to deny it) we are petitioned to lower the bar still more and approve morally questionable entertainment.”

An Alarming Trend
Henry Baker

July 1979

“Christians must show a great love for the Muslims. The legacy of mistrust and misunderstanding must be replaced by respect and concern for their spiritual welfare.”

What Do You Say to 120 Million Muslims?
Bassam Madany

October 1979

“The crux of the matter is, of course, that if we would stop allowing the world to write the agenda of the church in the first place, we would be way ahead of the game. But the church still likes to swing with every new fad that comes along in society - and then try to baptize it with “Christian principles.”

* * * * *

“We would be much better off if we were not so much enamoured by the spirit of the age, but more governed by the Spirit which is from above.”

Reactions to the Synod
Jelle Tuininga

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