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Don't Blame God

“Let no one say when he is being tempted, I am being tempted by God; for God cannot be tempted by evil and He Himself does not tempt anyone.” (James 1:13)

The Epistle of James is an intensely practical guide in matters of Christian living. The author's wisdom cuts through all the religious sham and all our pious play acting. He calls for a commitment. A commitment that is more than just words & sentiment. He calls for a faith that shapes our lives.

James especially takes aim against our self-deception and the many ways in which we kid ourselves into thinking that things really are not our own fault. One of those illusions has to do with temptation. James

wants us to get rid of our false, self-serving notions about temptation. *“When you are tempted,”* he writes; when you sense that strong pull toward doing something you know is wrong; when you find yourself under pressure to compromise; when you find yourself about to lie to someone, or about to exploit someone, or about to inflict pain upon someone, who is to blame?

Blame Shifting

How quick we are to put the blame on someone else when we are

tempted. Usually we point that blame in one of three directions: our environment, our companions, or our heredity.

The most common excuse for our sin today is “Everybody else is doing it.” And everybody else probably is! Too much of the world's morality is based upon the prevailing standards of our environment. People today drift along in whatever direction the wind happens to blow. If the majority of people say “This is okay” who are we to argue?

But that doesn't make it right! That is the excuse Pilate used as he stood with dripping fingers before a crowd that had shouted: “Crucify Him! Crucify Him!” But that did not exonerate him or excuse him



Volume 54, No. 3 (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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from the guilt of condemning a righteous Man. Paul writes in Romans 12:1 “Do not be conformed to this world.” You cannot use the world as an excuse for your sin.

The next thought that comes into our minds is that if we can not blame the world, maybe we can blame somebody else. That is not a new technique. When God confronted Adam with his sin in the Garden of Eden, Adam was very quick to reply, “Oh, but that woman you gave me, she gave me from the tree and I ate.” Then when the Lord turned to Eve, she very quickly responded: “Ah, but that serpent, he deceived me and I ate.”

When we cannot blame our surroundings or others, we blame our failures on heredity. How many times doesn't the Bible teach us that homosexuality is sin and how many times haven't you read that people are born that way? How many times haven't you heard that for other sins, as well?

All of these excuses are nothing but a reenactment of the drama that took place in Eden. We see already there the ability to make excuses. But we also see how those excuses really blame God. Ever since the Garden we have all excelled in placing the blame for our evil upon anything but ourselves and ultimately upon God. Proverbs 19:3 says: “The foolishness of man subverts his way, and his heart rages against the Lord.”

James has no patience with a foolish fatalism in which a poor person blames his poverty for turning him into a thief or in which a drunk blames his business or his domestic

problems for turning him into an alcoholic. He certainly will have nothing to do with those who say, “God tempted me.”

A Holy God

James challenges us to figure it out logically. He writes that God Himself cannot be tempted with evil. That truth concerning our God is made plain in Scripture. That statement is only true concerning the one, true, living, holy God. All the man-made, demon-inspired, pagan gods reflect the frailties and shortcomings of those who created them. If you read about the Greek and Roman gods of mythology, for example, you will find them to be incredibly immature and, at times, downright wicked. They have supernatural powers but they are without supernatural wisdom. They commit gross sins and often lead their mortal subjects into sin.

The true God is totally different than them. God is light and there is no darkness in Him. Our God has no experience of evil. He is holy. In the actual personal experience of God there has never been any evil nor has there ever been any desire for doing evil. How can goodness experience evil?

What a marvelous statement that is about character and the nature of the God whom we serve. Is God to blame for the sin in us? NO! Is God to blame for our evil desires? NO! In Him there is no sin or experience of sin.

Even in the incarnate life of God, from the very day the Son of God was born in Bethlehem to the very day He died upon the Cross of Calvary, He knew no sin. Most certainly, Jesus encountered a great deal of sin everywhere He went while He was on this earth but it never became a part of Him.

Tempting or Testing

Our God, whom no evil can ever even tempt, certainly tempts no one Himself. To understand that more fully, we need to look carefully at a key Greek word. The Greek verb “PEIR-I-AS-MOS” means “to test”. That very same word also means “to tempt”. Whenever the word is used in the New Testament, we have to discover what the word means by the context within which it is used.

Remember the Old Testament passage where God gave Abraham the command to sacrifice his son, Isaac, as an offering to Him? In early Greek translations the verb used in that passage is PEIR-I-AS-MOS. It can be translated: “God tested Abraham” or “God tempted Abraham.”

In the Gospel, we read of a wilderness experience in which Jesus was met by the devil. The verb used to describe the devil's activity is that very same word once again: PEIR-I-AS-MOS. Bibles translate what happened in the wilderness as: “Jesus was tested by the devil” or “Jesus was tempted by the devil.”

Ever since the Garden we have all excelled in placing the blame for our evil upon anything but ourselves and ultimately upon God.

And so we have two different passages. One tells us about the activity of God; the other tells us about the activity of Satan. They both use the same verb. But are they both describing the same action?

Let us look at a common English word to get a better understanding of this Greek word. Let us say you are running for political office. Your campaign manager realizes that you are not very well known in the community. You need to have your name and your face more widely and prominently displayed. Your manager promises that he will take care of that. He tells you: "I will give you the exposure that you need. I will let everyone know what an attractive, competent, dedicated public servant you are."

Your political opponent has a different idea in his mind. He wants to ferret out your weaknesses. He wants to discover some moral lapses in your past. He wants to know about every compromising situation you have ever been in. Then, having compiled some of these, he threatens you, saying: "I'm going to expose you."

Both parties want to create exposure, but they do it with completely different motives. They do it to produce completely different results.

James tells us that the devil is out to trip us up. He wants to see us fall. He would like nothing better than to see us renounce God and make a complete mess out of our lives. And so he tempts us. God, on the other hand, wants nothing but the best for us. He wants to see our faith come forth in the midst of life's struggles as pure gold. And so He tests us.

In the very same experience in life Satan may be tempting us and God may be testing us. From God's perspective, the event is an opportunity designed for our spiritual growth. It is a trial that can strengthen us. From Satan's perspective, the event has potential for evil that will weaken us.

The primary difference, then, is not in the PEIR-I-AS-MOS - that is, in the event that is happening. The difference is in how you respond to it. If you respond in faithful obedience to God's Word, you have suc-

When you surrender to temptation you cannot pretend to be a helpless victim. It is no one's fault but your own.

cessfully endured the trial. If you respond by succumbing to the flesh, doubting God and disobeying, you have yielded to temptation.

The Real Blame

If you fall for the tempter's bait do not blame God. That was not what God was after. That was no part of His plan for you. When you responded to temptation, you had to silence His still small voice and turn your back on God to do what you did. In fact, God was there all the time with resources to help you resist Satan. Paul writes: "No temptation has overtaken you but such as is common to man; and God is faithful, He will not allow you to be tempted beyond what you are able,

but with the temptation will provide a way to escape also, that you may be able to endure it" (I Corinthians 10:13). You certainly cannot lay the responsibility of your sin at God's door.

For that matter, you cannot lay the responsibility of your yielding to temptation at Satan's door, either. The tempter did not overpower you nor did he compel you to do something that was against your will. When you surrender to temptation you cannot pretend to be a helpless victim. It is no one's fault but your own. It is our own venomous nature that turns everything into poison.

Temptation may come from the outside, but the yielding, the giving in, and the allowing it to take control of our life comes from inside of us. Sin is always an inside job. We would never have a problem with temptation if there were not so much within us to which it appeals. According to James, the culprit is our own evil desires.

No woman can tempt you if your heart is right. Strong drink is no temptation when your inner desires are under control. Money would not be a problem if you didn't love it so much. It is the desire for the forbidden object - the fruit that attracted Eve; the gold that attracted Achan; and the beauty that attracted David - that led them to sin.

The Cure for Blame

There is a way our desires can be curbed. They can be cultivated and controlled. Paul writes: "Finally, brethren, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is of good repute, if there is any excellence and any-



thing worthy of praise, let your mind dwell on these things” (Philippians 4:8).

Think on those things! We must identify ourselves with Christ. Then evil will find no place in our lives! When we focus upon Christ; when we become fascinated with His death upon Calvary for our sin, then temptation will not have its way with us because our desire is to love Christ. The more we desire Him, the less we will desire anything else.

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“Ethnic Glue and a Three Legged Stool: The Chicago Experience”

Writing the book, *Dutch Chicago: A History of Hollanders in the Windy City* (2002) gave me a new appreciation of our rich heritage. I was particularly intrigued, when tracing the history of the churches over the past 150 years, to find that some thrived and some died. Why the different outcomes, I wondered.

The contrast was especially apparent between congregations of the Reformed Church in America (RCA) and of the Christian Reformed Church (CRC). The two mother congregations on Chicago’s West Side—First RCA (1853) and First CRC (1867), were so alike and yet so different. They stood a stone’s throw from one another. Groningers dominated in both. Both were made up of immigrants from the same villages and even the same congregations. Both had roots in the Secession of 1834, the religious revival that swept across the Netherlands, as well as Western Europe and the USA in the 1820s and 1830s. The two churches were also bound in doctrine and in life by the three forms of unity. Both birthed daughter congregations, went through the painful transition from Dutch to English services in the era of the First World War, and both relocated to the western suburbs after World War II.

Similarities and Differences

Despite the many similarities, there were differences from the outset. First RCA was eager to interact with the American scene, while

First CRC guarded its Dutch theological and cultural treasure. First CRC was part of the True Dutch Reformed Church (later CRC), founded in 1857 in West Michigan. The fifteen founding families of First Chicago shared the same concerns that fueled the 1857 break. They feared changes occurring in the RCA that signaled the loss of its Reformed orthodoxy.

In the very year of the Chicago schism, 1867, the RCA officially Americanized its name by dropping the word “Dutch.” This is a telling marker of more profound changes. RCA congregations found themselves on the fast track to Americanization. Why? Because they were part of a 250 year-old denomination centered in New York. This historic church, one of the nation’s oldest, became independent from the Classis of Amsterdam just before the American Revolution. It then aligned itself with the English Calvinist churches—Presbyterians and Congregationalists primarily, which had come under the influence of American evangelicalism and the Second Great Awakening.

The RCA, like its American sister churches, introduced mid-week prayer services; Sunday schools; the use in worship of organs, choirs, and hymns; Sunday evening programs for young people; youth ministries; English-language services; and in modern times, women suffrage and women in ecclesiastical office.

The three-legged stool was held together an by ethnic glue. This stool enabled the CRC to thrive by slowing the inevitable process of Americanization.

The RCA de-emphasized Heidelberg Catechism preaching and instruction of the youth, practiced “open,” i.e., unregulated communion, and neglected annual “family visits.” Further, the RCA allowed elders and pastors to be freemasons, an oath-bound society that was the ultimate American club of the powerbrokers. In short, the RCA was losing its “Reformedness” and “Dutchness.”

CRC congregations, in contrast, remained connected to the Christian Seceded Church in the Netherlands (1834), The CRC held on to its ethnic identity and religious heritage. It followed Groen van Prinsterer’s motto: “In isolation is our strength.” For this the CRC was derided as the “Dutchy” church.

In the 1880s and 1890s, the CRC established Christian schools, in keeping with its motto. The schools, of course, are one of the three legs of the stool of faith, along with parents and the church. The three-legged stool was held together by an ethnic glue. This stool enabled the CRC to thrive by slowing the inevitable process of Americanization. As a result, the CRC lagged the RCA by several generations in adopting American ways in church and social life.

The long-term impact on church membership of this “lag rate” is remarkable. In 1899 RCA congregations (First Chicago and its En-

glish-speaking daughter church, Trinity RCA) had 1,400 souls. First CRC had 1,250 souls. One hundred years later, in 1999, the CRC congregations in the western suburbs (8 in number)—all products of First CRC—had a total of 3,800 members—more than a 300 percent increase. In telling contrast, the RCA congregations in the western suburbs (6 in number)—all products of First RCA—had 1,080 members, a loss of 25 percent. Thus, in 1999 the RCA had barely one-fourth the membership of the CRC, even though it had 10 percent more souls a century earlier.

Why was this? Two reasons. First was the Dutchness of the CRC, which attracted most of the immigrants between 1865 and 1920. Second was the Christian school system that CRC parents established at great sacrifice. The CRC held on to its youth because of the schools, especially the high schools where young people found their marriage partners.

**First RCA —
Bernardus De Bey**

Revivals began in the RCA in New York City in 1857, at the Fulton Street Noonday Prayer Meeting at North Church. This revival prepared the RCA later to embrace other evangelists, especially Dwight L. Moody, the father of urban revivalism. Moody found Chicago so hospitable to his ministry that he established a church and missionary

training school there (Moody Bible Institute), which has deeply influenced Dutch Reformed believers to the present day.

First RCA of Chicago was impacted by American revivalism under its most dominant pastor, Bernardus De Bey. De Bey arrived in 1868 from his prominent pulpit in the Christian Seceded Church in Middelstum (Groningen). At 53 years of age, he was at the height of his powers, with a reputation for effective leadership in church and society. De Bey dominated First RCA for the next quarter century (1868-1891).

Church life at First Reformed Church under De Bey took on more and more aspects of the American style. He attended a nearby Presbyterian church every Sunday night to practice the English language and pick up tips on sermonizing. De Bey particularly admired Yankee ministers for focusing on the central idea of the text and applying it in practical ways to everyday life without much Biblical exegesis, analysis, or synthesis.

He also marveled at the full orbbed ministry of American Protestants. In a letter to his cousin in Groningen, De Bey reported:

In our churches here we have something going on virtually every evening of the week—prayer meetings, preaching, catechism, youth societies, choral groups.... I could no longer feel at home with some of the pious customs and exclusively Sunday Christianity which characterized my life in Groningen. Here Christianity is more a



way of life, an active love, a devotion to God—preaching his Word and laboring for the kingdom.

Given these new activities, De Bey dispensed with family visitation; such “superficial chats” were a “waste of time,” he said. He substituted informal Bible studies on Saturday evenings at the vestry.

More importantly, he adopted the spiritual rhythms of American evangelism—conversion, backsliding, and renewal. Like his denomination generally, he was “methodized.” In 1878, when George F. Pentecost, an understudy of Dwight Moody, held revival meetings in the neighborhood, De Bey volunteered as a counselor and encouraged his members to attend. The spiritual condition of his flock was languishing, he believed, and Pentecost brought hope for revival.

He [Pentecost] is a blessed awakening whom my people (as many as understand English, and most do) attend regularly. I also attend as often as possible. He [Pentecost] holds meetings four times each day.... Hundreds remain until 10 p.m. to receive added counsel from Pentecost and other pastors, and I am also among the counselors. Here in this land our divine worship is a lively activity. Conversion and renewal are the fruits of Rev. Pentecost’s work.

Another “fruit” of revivals was ecumenism, which De Bey adopted wholeheartedly:

We have here a number of churches or denominations,

and in very many of these the gospel is preached, and they contain a good Christian element. The best denominations are included in the general category of evangelical churches.... Besides working in their own circles, these churches work together for the general promotion of Christianity. Thus, there are combined gatherings, prayer meetings, and other occasions in which there are no references to particular denominations. Together, then, they preach, speak, and pray to influence the unbelieving world and lead sinners to Jesus.

I have a high regard for that work because, after all, faith in Jesus, turning to God, and renewal of the Holy Spirit are really what counts where Christianity and eternity are concerned. Fighting for one’s own church and the remote, unimportant, and speculative doctrines has no significance for true Christianity and eternity.... A practical Christianity—faith, living, and doing—is earnestly recommended everywhere.... I tell you, cousin, I feel genuinely at home in this Christian life.

After quoting this very telling letter at length, historian Herbert Brinks

concluded: “Though not explicitly embracing the nondenominational dictum ‘No creed but the Bible,’ De Bey’s perspective clearly encompassed the essence of that peculiarly Anglo-American anticredal expression.” Immigration had happily offered him the opportunity to throw off the Old Dutch Reformed ways and associate with evangelical American churches.

De Bey had become an American preacher, and his six children lived out these convictions; only three remained in the RCA. The others joined American churches. One of his grandchildren joined the Congregational Church and two ended up at the liberal Fountain Street Church in Grand Rapids.

Since De Bey had rejected his religious roots, it is no wonder that he and Rev. Adriaan Zwemer in 1871 wrote the first major tract condemning the 1857 secession in West Michigan (*Stemmen uit de Hollandsche Gereformeerde Kerk*). De Bey castigated “our separated brothers” for “proceeding along the old paths.” They were, in his words, “beneath criticism.” Ignore the self-righteous “True Brothers” and they would quickly disappear. “They can say and write what they want,” he declared, “and no one pays any attention to them. That is the best and quickest way to kill them off.”

Little did De Bey realize that soon

Since De Bey had rejected his religious roots, it is no wonder that he and Rev. Adriaan Zwemer in 1871 wrote the first major tract condemning the 1857 secession in West Michigan.

the explosive issue of freemasonry would come to a head in his denomination. Many RCA clerics and leaders in the East were members and their refusal to condemn the secret and oath-bound society would send 10,000 members (10 percent) into the CRC in the mid-1880s. The Particular Synod of Chicago, made up of the Midwestern immigrant classes, condemned the “God-dishonoring sin of Freemasonry” in the strongest terms, and it would not admit a freemason to membership in any congregation.

But the Chicago Synod could not change denominational policy, try as they might.

Condoning freemasonry also set the RCA at odds with the GKN, the mother church in the Netherlands. In 1882 the GKN decided to send membership papers with its blessing only if immigrants joined Christian Reformed congregations.

Under De Bey, First RCA also established a non-denominational youth program, Christian Endeavor. C.E. was founded in 1881 by a Congregational pastor and within a few years it had 7,000 local societies with 500,000 members. In 1888 the RCA Synod endorsed the program and strongly recommended it to all pastors and churches. The C.E. focus on prayer meetings and missionary outreach bore the unmistakable marks of American evangelicalism, rather than the Dutch Reformed emphasis on

God’s sovereignty and covenantal faithfulness. Some members of First RCA complained that C.E. was Arminian, and for a time, under De Bey’s successor, the consistory considered disaffiliating, but finally it reaffirmed its support of the program.

During World War I, First RCA made the transition from Dutch to English, first in the morning service and in catechism classes, and soon in the second service every other week. This in effect reduced Dutch services to two times a month. This momentous change, according to a classical report, in what must have been a gross understatement, “slightly ruffled the calm” of the congregation.

Following the War, First RCA made further concessions to modern ways; it substituted plates for the offering “sacks” at the end of long poles, it allowed women members to vote in congregational meetings, and deacons came to the front of church for a pastoral prayer before the collection. The church also appointed a “reception committee” at morning worship services to “look out for strangers ...[and] to shake hands.”

First CRC

While the RCA embraced Yankee Christianity, First CRC held to Dutch Reformed ways. The first pastor, Jan Schepers, set the tone for the congregation. He stood on the three forms of unity and the

Dort Church Order, as espoused by the De Cock-Van Velzen wing of the Secession of 1834. This contrasted sharply with the more latitudinarian and outward-looking De Bey, who represented the Brummelkamp-Van Raalte southern wing of the Secession.

Schepers was not alone among CRC pastors. From 1857 to 1900, every one (100 percent!) of 114 clerics ordained in the CRC had been affiliated with the Christian Seceded Church, mostly the northern wing, as compared with only one-quarter of 116 Dutch-born clerics ordained in the RCA in those years.

The CRC remained an immigrant denomination that sought to keep itself “unspotted from the world.” Indeed, the very name the CRC chose—True Holland Reformed Church, signified its self image as a “bride of Christ ..., a garden enclosed, a well shut up, and a fountain sealed” (to quote Groen Van Prinsterer).

The late Lewis Smedes in his memoir *My God and I*, labeled pre-1960 CRC members as “people of the gap.” Gap thinking, as reflected in the journal *Torch and Trumpet*, said Smedes, builds a “spiritual ravine between the mind of Reformed Christians and the mind of unbelievers and liberals. Gap people want to build walls along the edge of the ravine to protect the innocent from the allure of the siren songs they heard coming from the other side.” Smedes contrasted the gap people to the “people of the bridge,” *Reformed Journal* readers—his crowd, those who “build bridges across the gap so that they can cross over and reap the benefits of

The CRC remained an immigrant denomination that sought to keep itself “unspotted from the world.”



contact with the people on the other side.” Bridge people, he said, want to “dialogue” with unbelievers and liberals. But bridges carry traffic both ways. No wonder that bridge thinking allows pagan thinking to infiltrate and corrupt the mind of believers.

This is the nub of the common grace issue. In September 2003 at Grand Rapids, David Engelsma, professor in the Protestant Reformed Seminary, debated Richard Mouw, president of Fuller Seminary, on the topic of whether common grace is rightfully a Reformed doctrine. Abraham Kuyper developed the doctrine to undergird his politically activist Calvinism in the 1890s. The CRC Synod of 1924 prescribed this doctrine for all and expelled those who disagreed. Engelsma charged that the doctrine is not in the creeds, it undermines the antithesis, and it often leads to universalism. Further, following Common Grace theology opened the CRC “wide to the world” and “severely hurt and corrupted it.”

Prior to 1924, CRC leaders taught the antithesis and warned parishioners against “being conformed to the image of this world.” The clear stands against freemasonry and “worldly amusements” gives evidence of this non-conformity.

The commitment to Christian schools is the best evidence of counter-cultural thinking. In 1893, First Chicago CRC established a parochial day school (Ebenezer Christian School), which soon became a “free school” after the Kuyperian model. In 1918 Christian school advocates established Chicago Christian High School for those seeking further education.

The commitment to Christian schools is the best evidence of counter-cultural thinking.

While CRC youth went to Christian schools, RCA youth for the most part attended public schools. This had dire consequences, as I already pointed out.

In the three decades from 1890 to 1920, First CRC clung to its Dutch ways and attracted new immigrants with considerable success. “The pastor of the Seceders is commendably prompt and zealous to welcome these strangers,” admitted Rev. Peter Moerdyke of Chicago’s Trinity RCA, “and he is gathering nearly all that kind of material into his church, where they find a really Holland congregation, and feel at home.”

Pressures for Change

But pressures for change were building at First CRC too. Younger families demanded English language worship and catechism classes, and they left when the consistory put them off. Ebenezer Christian School had cut Dutch instruction to only an hour a week, and the churches had to change too. Elderly immigrants, declared a school anniversary booklet, “wished to maintain the Dutch language in the worship services, fearful that a change to the English language would break down the barriers to the inroads of modernism, while the younger generation growing up in an American climate of English usage would be lost to the church. One stalwart elder of the congregation expressed the sentiments of many, declaring (in Dutch): “When English is preached,

the Devil is in the pulpit.”

Finally, to relieve the pressure, in 1912 First CRC and its Dutch-language daughter, Douglas Park CRC, jointly birthed the first CRC English congregation—Third CRC. The second English congregation, Fourth CRC, followed in 1923.

First CRC in this era had a Dutch-born pastor with a doctorate from the Free University of Amsterdam. This was John Van Lonkhuyzen (1918-28), the most educated and widely traveled pastor ever to serve the congregation and also its last “Dutch” Dominie. Van Lonkhuyzen was a friend of Abraham Kuyper, fluent in six languages, and a former missionary pastor to Dutch Reformed immigrants in Argentina. Van Lonkhuyzen was named editor of Chicago’s Dutch-language newspaper, *Onze Toekomst* (Our Future), where he addressed the key issues of the day—Christian schools, the language question, and the rising pre-millennial movement. The denomination stood solidly in support of Christian schools, but friction arose over the issues of English usage and millennial teachings. Van Lonkhuyzen encouraged English but condemned millennialism.

Over the next years, Van Lonkhuyzen succeeded in gradually introducing English in his own congregation, but only by doubling the number of services from two to four. Usually a guest pastor conducted one or two, but his successor, the energetic Benjamin

Essenburg (1929-45), led all four. Even more amazing, a few zealous, bilingual members could boast of attending all of them. However, attendance at the Dutch services declined steadily in the 1930s and 1940s. The last Dutch worship at First CRC was on Christmas Day of 1955; this was eighteen years after First RCA dropped Dutch services.

Essenburg was a popular preacher, a “pulpit pounder,” who drew large audiences with his dynamic messages, which he modeled after the renowned British evangelist, Charles Spurgeon, much to the chagrin of some “amateur theologians” in his congregation who thought Spurgeon’s Reformed Baptist theology too Arminian. Essenburg had a heart for community evangelism. His congregation organized a “Community Mission” with a Sunday school and evening gospel meetings. Thus, under Essenburg, First CRC moved toward American evangelicalism, like First RCA across the street.

World War II had a major impact on the CRC. Thousands of sons served in the armed forces, and dozens of pastors enlisted as chaplains. Many returned with a new appreciation for mainline Protestantism and a desire for the CRC to end its isolation and make its mark in society. The ex-chaplains and post war intellectual leaders in the CRC, such as Henry and George Stob, Harry Boer, and James Daane, were bridge people. They had the best minds and won the struggle for the hearts and minds of the church, beginning in western Michigan.

In Chicago, CRC congregations were slow to follow the new think-

ing. Perhaps because of the threatening environment of the big city, and being such a small minority, they remained isolationist in their thinking. Holding the line in the church brought a sense of stability in an otherwise rapidly changing environment. The church was a cultural island where tradition was desired and valued. So Chicago churches were among the last to install women in office and to fight worship wars. They are also loyal to their denomination. Only in the “colony” of South Holland did church secessions occur in the

Holding the line in the church brought a sense of stability in an otherwise rapidly changing environment.

1990s—Lynwood (formerly First Roseland) and First South Holland.

Yet the signs of bridge thinking are evident in Chicagoland. Women serve as elders in some CR congregations, worship wars have broken out, and an increasing number of students in the Christian schools come from non-Reformed homes, thus weakening the theological foundation.

Indeed, the key role of Christian schools in the life of the CRC is appreciated less and less. Pastors do not single them out in congregational prayers as they once did, elders rarely visit families who chose public education for their children, and many congregations are unwill-

ing to fund tuition costs for member families. Synod 2003 shocked its own study committee by refusing to give Christian education its unqualified support and endorsement.

Richard Blauw got it exactly right in his comments on Synod in the September 2003 issue of *Outlook*:

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.... Studies have shown that if a church simply manages to keep its own children it will grow (25-30% in a decade.)

Blauw notes that CRC leaders rate such internal growth as less desirable than external growth through evangelism. “Money spent on Christian schools is money spent on ‘ourselves’” which actually impedes “true evangelism.” I agree with Blauw. Evangelism has to begin at home. God has no grandchildren; every generation must own the covenant for themselves. And historical evidence, as I noted at the outset, shows that money spent on training covenant youth in Christian schools bears much fruit in families and in the church.

The CRC in Chicago looks more and more like the RCA. The wooden shoes were burned in the 1980s and the ethnic glue is weaker with every passing generation. The CRC has closed the generational lag with the RCA and given away its advantage. The three-legged stool is wobbling. My prayer is that Reformed Christians will learn their history anew and hold on to the in-



stitutions, beliefs, and values that sustained them for more than a hundred years.

This article is an edited version of the address given at the Annual Meeting of Reformed Fellowship on Sept. 11, 2003. Tapes are available from the office for \$5.00. Readers interested in more information about the history of the Hollanders in the Windy City are encouraged to purchase Dr. Swierenga's book, Dutch Chicago [Eerdmans, 2002; 908 pages.].

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We Confess

An Exposition & Application of the Belgic Confession

Articles 10-11: Of the Eternal Deity of the Son of God, our Lord Jesus Christ & Of the Person and Eternal Deity of the Holy Spirit

In our last two articles we have looked at what our Confession of Faith says about the Holy Trinity. Now in articles 10-11 we pause and study the divinity of both the Son and Holy Spirit.

The Deity of the Son

Eternally Begotten

The Biblical language of God is an accommodation to us ignorant sinners. The language of Father and Son evokes in us the intimate relationship of love that exists between a father and his firstborn son. But because of this, the history of the church is filled with Arians and Jehovah's Witnesses that reasoned that because the Son is called "son," He had to have been begotten by the Father at some time. This is logical, right? After all, when we look at the world around us we see men become husbands, and husbands become fathers when their sons enter the world after having been made in the womb.

We get a glimpse into the doctrine and piety of the early church when we compare the Apostles' Creed with the Nicene and Athanasian Creed. The Apostles' Creed simply uses the language of Scripture itself when it says, "I believe in Jesus Christ, His only begotten Son..." (John 3:16; NASB). But because of false teachers who were infecting the church, the creeds of the church added the following phrases

... the only begotten Son of God, *begotten of the Father before all ages, God of God, Light of Light, very God of very God; begotten, not made, being of one substance with the Father ...* (Nicene Creed)

The Son is of the Father alone, *not made nor created, but begotten ... God of the substance of the Father, begotten before the ages...* (Athanasian Creed)

Has the Son always existed? Yes. Was He created? No. Our Confession of Faith simply follows the creeds, saying

We believe that Jesus Christ according to His divine nature is the only begotten Son of God, begotten from eternity... He is the Son of God, not only from the time that He assumed our nature but from all eternity (emphasis mine).

And because He is eternally begotten, the Confession says that He is

not made, nor created (for then He would be a creature), but co-essential and co-eternal with the Father, "the very image of his substance and the effulgence of his glory," equal unto Him in all things.

We can not comprehend what it means that the Son is “eternally begotten”, but we apprehend it by faith as little children. The language of “begetting” is that of a child being born to a father, but the Son is “eternally” begotten. This means that the Son has always been the Son, the Father has always been the Father, and they have always loved, communed, and fellowshiped with one another.

Scripture Testimony

Where do we find this idea of eternal begetting in Scripture? The Confession is like a jeweler who takes many pearls and makes them into a beautiful necklace. Notice how the individual Scripture testimonies are brought together in Article 10. In Genesis 1:1 we are told that “*God* created the heavens and the earth.” Then in the prologue of John’s Gospel we are taught that “all things were made through *Him* [the “Word”], and without *Him* was not anything made that was made” (John 1:3). So which one is it? Did God create or did “the Word” create? Yes! The New Testament writers explain the creation to say that God created the world “through” and “by” the Son (Hebrews 1:2; Colossians 1:16), “through” Jesus Christ (1 Corinthians 8:6).

These pearls of Scripture are put together on a strand as the Confession says:

Therefore it must needs follow that He who is called God, the Word, the Son, and Jesus Christ, did exist at that time when all things were created by Him.

As well, we have the testimony of

Micah the prophet, who spoke of a king who would come to Israel. But this would be no ordinary king, instead “His goings forth are from of old, from everlasting” (Micah 5:2). The writer of Hebrews also testifies of the Son’s eternity, saying, “He hath neither beginning of days nor end of life” (Hebrews 7:3).

The Benefit of Confessing Christ’s Deity

So how does this doctrine benefit us? For the sake of space I will only offer one benefit and leave

Fifty-five per cent of “born again Christians” reject the existence of the Holy Spirit!

you to ponder this in the “questions for further study” at the end of this article. The benefit of this doctrine is that we can worship our Lord and Savior: “He therefore is that true, eternal, and almighty God whom we invoke, worship, and serve.” Since He has saved us, as God the Son, we have an object of affection and adoration in responding with grateful worship and praise.

The Deity of the Spirit

We now turn to the “unknown” member of the Trinity, who is not thought of enough, nor is who He is and what He does known enough. This is shown in a past survey in which 70% of Americans said they believed that Jesus will come back,

but 61% of Americans said that “the Holy Spirit is a symbol of God’s presence or power, but is not a living entity.” And the saddest statistic of all? 55% of “born again Christians” reject the existence of the Holy Spirit! Although not saying everything there is say about Him, the Confession guides our thoughts to remedy this ignorance.

Eternally Proceeding

The first thing we can say about the Holy Spirit is that, as the third Person of the Holy Trinity, He was not created, but is eternal just as the Father and Son are. In Hebrews 9:14 we read of Christ, “who through the *eternal Spirit* offered himself without blemish to God.” The Spirit has always been God for He is eternal.

But, whereas the Son is begotten, the Spirit is spoken of as “proceeding.” Again, as with speaking of the Son as “eternally begotten,” so too, with the Spirit we have an accommodated language so that we can somehow grasp a finite bit of the infinite relations between the Persons of the Holy Trinity.

The imagery of “procession” or “proceeding,” is that of being sent, going forth. We can understand that the Holy Spirit was sent on the day of Pentecost in redemptive history (John 14:16, 26, 15:26; Acts 2:33), but how does He “eternally” proceed? We get a glimpse of the inner life and workings of the Persons of the Trinity by way of analogy from what Jesus says about the Spirit’s mission in history. Before He was sent into the world and upon the Church, the Spirit was reciprocally sent from the Father to the Son and from the Son to the



Questions for Further Study/Discussion

1. What are some ways you can incorporate the *doctrine* of the Holy Trinity into *living* as a Christian?
2. What are some other benefits for the believer in confessing the deity of Christ?
3. What does the emphasis of the Confession on the deity of the Holy Spirit tell us about what we emphasize in our teaching, worship, and piety about the Spirit?
4. What are some aberrant views of the Holy Spirit in our day?

Father. As St. Augustine says:

And the Holy Spirit, according to the Holy Scriptures, is neither of the Father alone, nor of the Son alone, but of both; and so intimates to us a mutual love, wherewith the Father and the Son reciprocally love one another.

The Spirit is that Love that is poured out from the Father upon the Son, and from the Son upon the Father, just as the Father pours out His love upon the world by sending His Son, and just as the Son pours the Father's love upon the Church on Pentecost.

Because He eternally proceeds, the Confession says He therefore

neither is made, created, nor begotten, but only proceeds from both; who in order is the third person of the Holy Trinity; of one and the same essence, majesty, and glory with the Father and the Son; and therefore is the true and eternal God, as the Holy Scriptures teach us.

The "Filioque" Clause

The second thing we say about the Holy Spirit is that He eternally proceeds from the Father *and the Son*. The Belgic Confession follows the Western version of the Nicene Creed in teaching the "double procession of the Holy Spirit." The Third Council of Toledo (589) revised the Nicene Creed so that the difference between the Western and Eastern versions is found in one word: *filioque* (Latin, "and the Son").

So why do we say that the Spirit "proceeds from the Father and the Son?" Because it is taught in Scripture:

The Spirit proceeds from the Father for He is the Spirit of God (John 14:16, 15:26; Romans 8:9; Galatians 4:6);

The Spirit proceeds from the Son for He is the Spirit of Christ (John 15:26, 16:7; Romans 8:9; Galatians 4:6).

The Benefit of Confessing the Spirit's Deity

This leads us to a brief consideration of the relevance for this doctrine.

First, confessing the Spirit's deity ensures that we will be sanctified. Too often we speak of justification as God's work and sanctification as our work. In fact, sanctification is the work of God the Holy Spirit, in and through us. And since it is the sovereign Spirit of God at work within us, we have confidence that the root of faith will produce good fruits.

Second, because He is God, the Holy Spirit will abide with us forever, sealing, preserving, and leading us to the final day as children of God.

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Looking Above

A Series on The Revelation of Jesus Christ

“The Seven Lampstands”

In our last article, we learned that Revelation 1:20 is the lens through which we must read the seven letters to the seven churches in Revelation 2-3. We learned furthermore, that “the seven stars” which are “the angels of the seven churches” are indicative of the office of the ministry of the Word.

Now we come to “the seven lampstands” which are “the seven churches.” How are we to understand this?

Some have maintained that what we have in Revelation 2-3 is seven successive and chronological periods through which the church must pass. In other words, what we have is the history of the church divided into seven sections. Is this the way in which we are to understand the seven letters to the seven churches? William Hendriksen steers us in the right direction when he writes, “The notion that these seven churches describe seven successive periods of Church history hardly needs refutation ... It should be clear to every student of the Bible that there is not one atom of evidence in all the sacred writings which in any way corroborates this thoroughly arbitrary method of cutting up the history of the Church and assigning the resulting pieces to the respective epistles of Revelation 2 and 3. The epistles describe conditions which occur not in one particular age of Church history, but again and again.”

The internal evidence also points us in this direction. Near the end of each letter, we find the phrase, “He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says *to the churches.*” Each letter is relevant for the church universal. We have, then, in Revelation 2-3 a composite picture of the church in the world from the time of Christ’s first coming to the time of His return.

The picture that is given us is a very realistic picture. One commentator has written, “We see no idealized picture but the mixture of faith and unfaith, responsibility and irresponsibility, which always characterize the church in this world.” Another commentator writes: “The seven churches fall into three groups. The first and the last are in danger of losing their very identity as a Christian church. Therefore, they are exhorted to repent in order to prevent their judgment and to inherit the promises The churches addressed in the three central letters have to varying degrees some who have remained faithful and others who are compromising with pagan culture These churches are exhorted to purge the elements of compromise from their midst in order to avert judgment ... and to inherit the promises The second and sixth letters are written to

churches which have proved themselves faithful and loyal to Christ’s name even in the face of persecution from both Jews and pagans They are to endure with the hope that they will inherit the promises of eternal salvation ... The significance of this is that the Christian church as whole is perceived as being in poor condition, since not only are the healthy churches in a minority but the churches in the worst condition form the ... boundaries of the letters and the churches with serious problems form the very core of the presentation.”

The Judge of the Church

We are given a most sobering picture here. In fact, in the very middle of the center letter we find the only statement that is explicitly written to all the churches: chapter 2:23, “...all the churches shall know that I am He who searches the minds and hearts...” All the churches shall know that Christ will judge the church. Christ knows the mind of the church. Christ knows the heart of the church. Christ stands as the judge of the church. At the end of the day, it matters not what man may think of the church. It matters not what our neighbors think of the church. It matters not what the world thinks of the church. In fact, it doesn’t really even matter what you think of the church, or what I think of the church. At the end of the day, all that ultimately matters is what Christ thinks of the church. And that is a most sobering thought.

At the end of the day, it matters not what man may think of the church all that ultimately matters is what Christ thinks of the church.



The great question of Revelation 2 and 3 is the great issue presented to us in the seven letters to the seven churches: how is the church to live in the midst of the world?

The Response of the Church

The church is to live in the midst of the world with her eyes fixed on Christ. That is why the vision of Christ is given to us at the very outset of the book! There is to be an identification between Christ and the Church. Note that each of the seven letters begins with a description of Christ taken from the vision in chapter 1. To the church in Ephesus we read, "These things says He who holds the seven stars in His right hand, who walks in the midst of the seven golden lampstands" (2:1). To the church in Smyrna we read, "These things says the First and the Last, who was dead, and came to life" (2:8). To the church in Pergamos we read, "These things says He who has the sharp two-edged sword" (2:12). To the church in Thyatira we read: "These things says the Son of God, who has eyes like a flame of fire" (2:18). To the church in Sardis we read: "These things says He who has the seven Spirits of God and the seven stars" (3:1). To the church in Philadelphia we read: "These things says He who is holy, He who is true, 'He who has the key of David'" (3:7). To the church in Laodicea we read: "These things says the Amen, the Faithful and True Witness, the Beginning of the creation of God" (3:14). Each of these elements are taken from the vision of Christ in chapter 1. There is to be, then, an identification between Christ and His Church. The Church must keep her eyes fixed on Christ, even reflecting Christ in her

present life.

Recall that the church is pictured here in terms of lampstands. The lampstand in the Old Testament tabernacle was lit each evening. It would burn through the darkness of the night. It was a light shining in the darkness. The light that emanated from that lampstand illuminated the way to the Holy of Holies, to the presence of God. That is to be the witness of the Church. She is called to light the way to the presence of God. In the midst of a dark world, the church is called to proclaim Christ as the Light of the World.

The Warning to the Church

There is then in these letters a great warning to the church: she must remain faithful to her calling. For not only does the message of God's Word bring a division between the Church and the World, it also brings a division between the true Church and the false church. Indeed, already now that division - that separation - is taking place. Christ warns the church in Ephesus that if they do not repent, He will come to them quickly and remove their lampstand (2:5). Christ warns the church in Pergamos that if they do not repent, He will come to them quickly and fight against them with the sword of His mouth (2:16). Christ warns the church in Thyatira of great tribulation (2:22). Christ warns the church in Sardis that if they do not repent and watch, He will come to them as thief in the night (3:3). Christ warns the church in Laodicea, that if they do not repent, He will vomit them out of His mouth (3:15).

These warnings are given to us!

The church in the world always faces the danger of becoming like the world: a little compromise here, a little compromise there - all in an effort to make our life in this world a little more comfortable! The warning that is given to the church in Revelation is this: the one who compromises will not overcome - those who seek a middle way will not overcome - those who have compromised with the world will not overcome - they will, in fact, lose their lampstand.

The warnings are real; we are not immune from such things. Remember that this section of Revelation, like the other sections, covers the time period from Christ's first coming to His return. In other words, it covers the time period in which we now live. As long as the church is in the world the dangers of compromise are real. As long as the church is in the world the danger of becoming like the world is real. As long as the church is in the world, the warnings must be heard.

The Promise to the Church

But let us not forget the promises that are held out to those who overcome: "To him who overcomes, I will give to eat from the tree of life, which is in the midst of the Paradise of God" (2:7). "He who overcomes shall not be hurt by the second death" (2:11). "To him who overcomes I will give some of the hidden manna to eat. And I will give him a white stone, and on the stone a new name written which no one knows except him who receives it" (2:17). "And he who overcomes and keeps My works until the end, to him I will give power over the nations ... as I also have received from My Father; and I will give him

the morning star” (2:26-28). “He who overcomes shall be clothed in white garments, and I will not blot out his name from the Book of Life; but I will confess his name before My Father and before His angels” (3:5). “He who overcomes, I will make him a pillar in the temple of My God, and he shall go out no more. I will write on him the name of My God and the name of the city of My God, the New Jerusalem, which comes down out of heaven from My God. And I will write on him My new name” (3:12). “To him who overcomes I will grant to sit with Me on My throne, as I also overcame and sat down with My Father on His throne” (3:21).

The kingdom of Satan rises against the church. The dangers are real. The persecutions are real. The warnings are real. But so are the promises! Let us hold fast the foundation that is laid in the Word of God - let us hold fast to Christ - keeping our eyes fixed on Him - that in Him, we may overcome. And may God grant us grace that we may have ears to hear what the Spirit says to the churches.

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True Faith

Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.” [Hebrews 11:1]

I would imagine that Noah’s neighbors knew a lot about the ark. They saw him build it from scratch. They heard Noah preach about the coming judgment for one hundred twenty years. But even with all those neighbors knew about the ark and the coming judgment, they perished miserably when the floods came because they were not in the ark.

Likewise, a good person may know a lot about Jesus Christ and the Bible, but that knowledge will not save him. You can have a certain conviction that the promises of the Bible are true, but only when you have a firm confidence, given to you by the Holy Spirit, that those promises are for you, will they benefit you. Only then are your sins forgiven through Christ because only then do you have a true faith.

The best definition for faith is found in Hebrews 11:1. Faith says “Yes” to everything that God says. Faith takes God without any “ifs”. What God said, we believe.

Yet Uncommitted

So often we wonder why people backslide in the church. Once they were excited for the church and participated in many of the church’s activities. Then, it seemed, they became bored or angry with the church and lost interest. One reason people backslide is because they are not sound in their faith. They have not really commit-

ted themselves to Christ.

A good number of people are committed to a church, or a denomination, or some of the programs a church may offer. They go to church because they enjoy the beautiful singing, the friendly people, and the good minister. They are, then, committed to the good singing, the friendly people, and the good minister. But they are not committed to God. If you place your faith in anything but God, what will happen when that thing changes? Only God does not change.

Have you ever heard somebody say that he was disappointed in a fellow Christian? He will tell you how that person cheated him out of some money or property and then he will end his accusations with this statement: “And he calls himself a Christian!”

Then he will use that anger and bitterness as an excuse to skip church because he refuses to forgive that person. How foolish such a person is! He is willing to give up his faith in order to save his own pride. But then, if he had true faith in Jesus Christ, his faith would not have been shattered because a fellow sinner cheated him out of some money or insulted him in some other way.

When a person has faith in Jesus Christ, he has something to hold on



to so that he will not backslide. With true faith a person can stand fast in times of trial and temptation because he knows the truth of God's Word and has the assurance of God's salvation.

Faith's Importance

Some people think that when the Heidelberg Catechism teaches about true faith in God's Word and in Jesus Christ that it must be some kind of miraculous faith. Others say it does not matter what you believe as long as you are sincere. Still others say it really does not matter what church you belong to as long as you are a good member in that church.

But it really makes all the difference in the world [and afterwards] whether you believe the truth or a lie. The devil wants nothing more than to have us believe a lie. You do not have to worship him or become a member of some cult or sect. You do not have to paint Satanic symbols on every bridge or overpass to be wrong about what you believe. No matter how close to the truth you may be, if you are believing a lie then you are being greatly deceived. You **MUST** believe the truth that is the Word of God. You **MUST** have knowledge and a conviction that God's Word is true and that it is for you.

That means taking the time to study God's Word so that you know what it contains. You cannot have a sure knowledge and certain conviction that the promises of God is true if you have no idea what that Word contains or what the promises are. The Holy Spirit will never give you a deep rooted assurance of salvation through Christ if you do not take the time to know who Jesus is and what He accomplished on the cross of Calvary. Faith means knowing in Whom we believe: knowing God the Father; knowing God the Son; and knowing God the Holy Spirit.

Knowing God

One of the joys of the ministry is the people you get to visit. Most Elders will say the same thing about being an Elder.

In one of the churches I served, I visited an elderly woman who was dying of cancer. We would talk about the promises of God found in His Word. She knew she was forgiven through the grace of God. She knew Christ's sacrifice had made her right with God. She knew she was going to heaven. Her faith never wavered.

"You have a great faith," I told her.

"No," she replied, "I have a great God."

Another person I visited was dying of emphysema. As he lay there on the hospital bed he literally shook, the pain was so intense. Being his pastor, I struggled to find some comforting words. All that came out was: "You must really be suffering."

He turned to me with tears in his eyes, took a deep breath, and said, "Not near as much as my Savior suffered for me."

I have never met anyone who had a sure knowledge and a certain conviction that everything God reveals in His Word is true, who didn't at the same time have a deep rooted assurance of God's grace and the comfort He brings through His Spirit. You cannot truly know God without having a true faith in God.

Instead of mourning because you have no faith; instead of living in fear because you have little faith, study the Word of God. Get to know those heroes of faith mentioned in Hebrews 11. Look at their lives and see how they grew in their knowledge of God and His grace. See Jesus Christ presented in the Bible as *your* Savior and Messiah.

Anything else is unbelief. To not study the Word of God is unbelief. To not desire to know more about Jesus Christ is unbelief. To not want to serve Him is unbelief. And unbelief is sin. It is not believing the Word of God. Not believing His Word is what placed us in our sin and misery in the first place. Unbelief is not a "misfortune," it is a sin.

Do not look at all kinds of religions and denominations to see if you

Q

What is true faith?

A

True faith is not only a sure knowledge ... but also a firm conviction.

have the right faith. Look and see if you have the right Jesus Christ in your life. Look to God and see if you are serving Him and glorifying Him in your life.

True faith always looks to God!

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Evaluating the New Perspective on Paul (9)

“The ‘Righteousness of God’ and the Believer’s ‘Justification’” (Part Three)

Romans 3:21-26

A second passage in Romans that uses the expression, “the righteousness of God,” is Romans 3:21-26. Like Romans 1:17, this passage plays a pivotal role in outlining the major theme of the epistle, and summarizes the argument of the apostle up to this point. In this passage, Paul returns to the theme of the “righteousness of God” and directly affirms that it is received “through faith in Jesus Christ” (v. 22).

But now the righteousness of God has been manifested apart from the law, although the Law and the Prophets bear witness to it—the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus for all who believe. For there is no distinction: for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified by His grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as a propitiation by His blood, to be received by faith. This was to show God’s righteousness at the present time, so that He might be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus.

In order to interpret what the apostle Paul means by the “righteousness of God” in this passage, it is critical to understand this lan-

guage within the preceding context of the argument in Romans 1:18-3:20. The context is one of a sustained and withering indictment of all human beings, Jews and Gentiles alike, as sinners who lie under the wrath and judgment of God. Beginning with the well-known words of Romans 1:18 (“For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteous of men”), the apostle carefully adduces the grounds for this indictment and his conclusion in Romans 3:10 that “none is righteous; no, not one.”

In the case both of Gentiles who sinned “without the law” and of Jews who sinned “under the law” (2:12) there is no escape from the just judgment of God, before whom every mouth is stopped and the whole world is accountable (3:19). Whatever advantages the Jews may have enjoyed, including the privilege of receiving the law and the oracles of God (3:2), the conclusion of Paul’s argument is captured in the words, “there is no distinction: for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” (3:22-23).

The background, then, for Paul’s return to the revelation of the “righteousness of God” at this juncture in the book of Romans is *thoroughly judicial*: the whole human race, when presented before the One who will judge the world (cf. 3:6), stands condemned before



God. The possibility of being justified before God on the basis of “works of the law” is utterly excluded.

When interpreted within this context, the language of the “righteousness of God” in this passage clearly refers to something more than God’s faithfulness to His covenant promise or His saving acts on behalf of His people. No doubt the themes of God’s faithfulness and saving action are included. But what especially characterizes the “righteousness of God” is His *justifying* action, that is, His restoration of believers to the status of acquitted and forgiven sinners.

This explains why the apostle, after having spoken of the revelation of the “righteousness of God,” goes on to speak of how sinners “are justified by His grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as a propitiation by His blood, to be received by faith. This was to show God’s righteousness . . .” (3:24-25). The gospel reveals God’s saving power in the work of Christ through whom believers are justified or receive a right standing with God.

What is remarkable about this passage is the way the apostle describes the work of Christ, which reveals God’s righteousness. When God graciously justifies guilty sinners, He does so because of Christ’s work for them. Paul describes this work by using two rich biblical terms, “redemption” and “propitiation.” Though these terms can hardly be explained briefly, they certainly unpack something of the nature of God’s righteousness that is revealed in the gospel.

“Redemption” refers to Christ’s work in payment for sin, which purchases release from the bondage of sin for His people. Typically, redemption in the Scriptures emphasizes the related ideas of the “payment of a price” and the “securing of release” from captivity. In the context of Paul’s argument in Romans 1-3, it is not difficult to see that the redemption Christ effected includes a payment for the wages of sin and the obtaining of freedom from its consequence (cf. Romans 6:13).

What is remarkable about this passage is the way the apostle describes the work of Christ, which reveals God’s righteousness.

Though there is a great deal of dispute regarding the meaning of the language of “propitiation,” the context again is decisive. In the context, the apostle has been describing at length the reality of the revelation of God’s wrath against guilty sinners. He also speaks in this passage of the way God in His patience formerly (under the circumstances that obtained prior to Christ’s coming) had “passed over” sins (3:25). This contextual evidence confirms that the work of Christ in “propitiation by His blood,” was nothing other than His endurance, as a substitute for His people, of the wrath of God against them on account of their sin.¹ In this way, that is, in the way of Christ’s redemptive and propitiatory work, the gospel is a rev-

elation of God’s righteousness in justifying His people.

A further feature of this passage is the clear way it speaks of the bestowal of the gift of justification to believers. God’s righteousness is not simply revealed in the gospel of Jesus Christ. The righteousness of God is not exclusively the objective work of Christ for believers. God’s righteousness, according to the language of this passage, is also a *gift* that is subjectively received through faith.

It is not enough, when speaking of God’s righteousness, to speak of the work of Christ in redemption and propitiation. We must also speak of the way the benefit of this work, namely, a new status of righteousness before God, becomes the possession of believers.

More clearly than in Romans 1:17, this passage speaks of a righteousness that justifies because it is granted to believers by God’s grace as a gift. The somewhat redundant expression, “by His grace as a gift,” underscores two features of God’s work of justification: one, it is an act of sheer grace and, therefore, antithetical to works of any kind whatever; and two, it involves a transaction whereby God gives a righteous status to believers who are through faith partakers of Christ.

Paul’s insistence in this passage that justification is received by faith clearly demonstrates that the righteousness of God is something that is imparted or granted to believers. Though this was already evident in Romans 1:17 in the language “from faith to faith,” it becomes particularly clear in this passage.

Romans 10:3

The final passage in Romans that uses the expression, “the righteousness of God,” is Romans 10:3, “For, being ignorant of the righteousness that comes from God [lit. of God], and seeking to establish their own, they did not submit to God’s righteousness.”

This text, though it does not elaborate upon the way the righteousness of God is exhibited in the gospel, is quite similar in emphasis to Romans 3:21-26. The “righteousness of God” is not only His saving activity in justifying His people, but also His granting of the benefit (“being justified”) of that activity to those who believe. A sharp contrast or antithesis governs this passage, as in earlier passages in the book of Romans, between righteousness that is from God and received through faith, and righteousness that is inherent and obtained by works. Between these alternatives, there is no middle ground. As the apostle Paul puts it in the following verse, “For Christ is the end of the law for righteousness to everyone who believes” (v. 4).

In the immediate context of this verse, Paul speaks of his fellow Jews who “have a zeal for God, but not according to knowledge” (v. 2). This language parallels his observations at the end of Romans 9, that they “pursued a law that would lead to righteousness,” a pursuit that was not “by faith” but “by works” (vv. 31-32; cf. Philippians 3:9). When the language of these verses is coupled with that of Romans 10:3 and 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”), the conclusion seems unavoidable: Paul is opposing a misguided endeavour to obtain righteousness by means of obedience to the law of God, rather than by faith. Either righteousness is received by faith or it is obtained by works. In this context, the language of the “righteousness of God,” which is revealed in God’s gracious work in Jesus Christ, refers most especially to the new status of acceptance with God that comes to those who believe.

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In a manner that fully conforms to Paul’s usage elsewhere in Romans, the “righteousness of God” refers both to God’s gracious provision in Jesus Christ and to the *gift of a new status* (justification) to those who receive that gift in the way of faith, not works. As we have previously noted, moreover, the way of “works” in these verses is not limited to the so-called “boundary marker” requirements of the law, circumcision, dietary laws, and the like. Paul’s objection to those whose zeal for the law is misguided is not limited to their Jewish exclusivism; it includes also, and most emphatically, their attempts to establish a righteousness of their own that is based upon their obedi-

ence to the law as such.²

Summary

Based upon our review of the language of the “righteousness of God” in the book of Romans, it appears that this language probably includes several themes. It may refer in a general way to the covenant faithfulness of God in action, which secures the promise of salvation for His people. But it certainly refers more specifically to a special kind of saving action, namely, God’s work as Judge in securing the acquittal of His people from condemnation before Him. The righteousness of God, in this respect, includes both His saving work through Jesus Christ and the imparting of the benefit of that work to those who receive it through faith. God’s righteousness is objectively revealed in Christ’s death and resurrection for guilty sinners (cf. Rom. 4:15). But is also subjectively granted to those who acknowledge the benefit of Christ’s saving work with a believing heart. The language of the “righteousness of God,” therefore, clearly speaks of the justifying work of God in Christ and the reception of the benefit of that work through faith. In these respects, the Reformation’s understanding of this language seems quite closely conformed to the apostle’s usage.

Endnotes

¹ For a fine exposition and defense of this understanding of Christ’s cross as a propitiation for sin, see Leon Morris. *The Apostolic Preaching of the Cross*, 3rd ed. (1965; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001 [reprint]), pp. 144-78.



² Cf. Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans*, p. 636: “The Jews failed to ‘submit’ to God’s righteousness not only because they did not recognize God’s righteousness when it arrived but also because they were too narrowly focused on seeking a righteousness in connection with their obedience to the law.”

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

Classis Central US Report

Classis Central US of the United Reformed Churches in North America held their 13th meeting at the Doon URC of Doon, Iowa on January 13, 2004. Classis was called to order around 8:30 a.m. by Rev. Larry Johnson of the Doon church. All the congregations were represented. Rev. Jacques Roets of the Cornerstone URC in Sanborn, Iowa assumed the chair for the day.

Classis was pleased to welcome fraternal observers from the Presbytery of the Dakotas of the OPC, Rev. Randy Klynsma, from Classis Covenant East of the RCUS, Rev. Jeff De Boer, and from Classis South Central of the RCUS,

Rev. Herman Van Stedum. Each minister brought greetings to Classis and encouraged us to continue to be faithful in the Lord’s work.

Rev. Paul Murphy, a URC home missionary in New York City, was present as a guest. He spoke to classis and showed slides of efforts to plant a new congregation just 10 blocks from ground zero in New York.

Three overtures were presented to classis. The first asked synod to appoint a Biblical and Theological committee to deal with theological concerns regarding entering into Phase 3 of Ecumenical Relations (church union) with the Canadian Reformed Churches. The overture was defeated. A second overture asked classis to form a committee to draft a new form(s) for the celebration of the Lord’s Supper which would be shorter and more conducive to more frequent celebrations of the Lord’s Supper. This overture was also defeated. A third overture asked classis to urge each of its churches to set aside funds for the support of seminary students and to have these funds administered by guidelines established by classis. This overture was also defeated.

Classical elections were held in which Rev. Peter Kloosterman was elected the new stated clerk of classis beginning June 1, 2004 and Rev. Tom Wetselaar was re-appointed alternate Church Visitor for the eastern side of classis.

The Covenant URC of Kansas city was granted permission to report on their church planting effort in Springfield, Missouri which began worship services last November

and now has about 10 families attending regularly. They also reported, in accord with Church Order Art. 34, that they are involved in an alliance of Reformed churches in the Kansas City area which has sponsored two ecumenical worship services so far and has a third planned. The group is also planning an evangelistic program for the first weekend in June featuring Dr. Sinclair B. Ferguson as the main speaker.

Three churches were given advice in executive session on discipline matters.

The date and place for the next meeting of Classis was set for June 2 at the Lynwood URC.

On the evening preceding classis, most of the delegates and URC members from area churches gathered to hear Rev. Paul Murphy speak of the need for church growth by making new disciples from the nations. He noted that although God has richly blessed us through internal growth by births and transfers, that is not the only God ordained method of church growth and we should not be content only with internal growth. He challenged the audience to use their personal contacts in the community and at work for building the church by inviting the unchurched to come to a worship service where they can hear the gospel proclaimed. He encouraged his hearers to pray to the Lord to gain a heart of compassion for the lost and to pray regularly by name for the salvation of unbelievers.

Respectfully submitted,
Ralph A. Pontier
Stated Clerk

This Is My Outlook

I flipped through the channels and settled on a late night talk show. The host was interviewing a famous actress who was talking about her view of life after death. It amazed me that a show known to be mostly “fluff” would take on such a serious subject. What amazed me more were the views that she had taken; and even more, I was amazed at how the audience was applauding as they took her views in.

People today are so hungry for spiritual direction that they will follow anyone who tickles their ears. The audience seemed to think that simply because this person could stand in front of a camera, say a few memorized lines, and move the way a director has told her to, suddenly she is a qualified theologian.

But then, this actress had it all figured out. She told everyone who was listening that God is a God of love and therefore He would not just give us one chance, but many chances to get our lives right. If in this life you don’t get it right, you would reincarnate into another life and you would keep on reincarnating until you lived a life that God would accept.

Her logic was great. As an actress, she has to memorize certain lines and act the way the director tells her to. If she stumbles, misspeaks, or makes any mistakes, the director stops the scene and they start all over again. She carried this on to the sports arena

where in baseball you get three swings at hitting the ball, in bowling you get two tries at knocking all the pins down, etc. So also in real life. You get to go around until you get it right.

As I clicked the “off” button on the remote, I thought about how this thinking was really nothing new. It has been around for centuries. Satan, who often disguises himself as an angel of light, doesn’t really have to come up with a lot of new ideas. He just keeps recycling the old ones.

Later, I thought about how nice that would be, if we could “go around until we got it right”. I could live a life of debauchery and sin now, and then next time live a life that would be more pleasing to God. But then, what would keep me from wanting to live a life of debauchery and sin in the next life? Or in the next?

Would there *ever* be a time when I would not want to live a wicked life? Even worse, would there ever be a time that I would want to live a life where I “got it right”? Unfortunately, no. In our totally depraved state, we would always choose the life of sin. We would never get it right even if we lived a thousand lives.

Paul writes: “It is appointed once for man to die, and then the judgment.” Thanks be to God that our salvation does not depend on our “getting it right” but on work of the Holy Spirit and the blood of

Jesus Christ. Only through the irresistible grace of God can we ever respond in the right way. When our hope rests in Jesus Christ, it is not that we “got it right” but Jesus made it right!

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



Sound Bites

The Outlook - 1982

January 1982

“Elders must never be afraid to do what is right, certainly you need to be responsive to the needs of the congregation - no doubt about it. But remember that ultimately you as elders are responsible to God and to Him alone. When you do His will you need not be afraid to offend a few members or even many members of the congregation.”

Attitudes of Elders Toward Their Work
John Kalsbeek

“It is unscriptural to represent the church as only one of many ‘organizations’ which equally represent the body of Christ. In scripture, the church has a special, focal position. The church is the body of Christ.”

* * * * *

“It is the job of the church to provide motivation and direction for believers in all areas of life, and to bring believers to a knowledge of the Christian life in its fullness.”

Are the Reformed Creeds Worth Keeping in Schools?
John M. Frame

“To think that many who appear to live in total indifference to the gospel and never darken the door of a church, might still somehow be counted among the elect, is to engage in wishful thinking.”

The Bible and the Creeds do not Teach Unconditional Good News
Jelle Tuininga

March 1982

“We are not nearly so certain about the Scriptures as we used to be. Witness, for example, all the study committees we have appointed in the last decade. In many cases, these committees were appointed because we didn’t like what we were quite sure the Bible was saying, and so we wanted to ‘study’ the matter some more to see if we couldn’t find room for some ideas that seem more palatable to us.”

The Clarity of Scripture
Jelle Tuininga

April 1982

“Many laymen of the church have been captive participants in worship services where a variety of unsettling, sometimes nightmarish music experiences have replaced the smooth Bible-based texts and sturdy tunes which comprised their vehicles of praise in days past.”

Church Music: Accommodation or Discrimination?
Laurie Vanden Heuvel

May 1982

“It is amazing how, time and again, there is recorded in the Gospels (often in the very words of Christ) the testimony to the factual nature of the very parts of Scripture Satan most likes to attack in order to chip away at our faith.”

Will You Believe Christ’s Words?
Sandra Heynen

June 1982

“If I think back to my own parents and to many others of the older generation (many of whom had a very limited formal education) and take note of their knowledge of Scriptures and of the Reformed confessions, then I am both amazed and ashamed. Amazed at their knowledge and understanding of the Reformed faith, and ashamed at how comparatively little the present generation (most of whom have far more formal education) understands of that faith.”

Catechism Without Learning
Jelle Tuininga

August 1982

“The abiding message of the Bible is religious, not scientific. Science, by definition, restricts itself to the horizontal relationships of life, which are constantly changing. The Bible, by its own proclamation, is the Word of God and emphasizes the vertical relationships of life. Therefore, the Bible can, and does, have an abiding message.”

Expository Preaching for Today
Allan Dykstra

“Our views must not depend on whether they are old or new. In our turbulent times, just as in all other times, let us in our thinking, actions, and speech be governed by the Word and Spirit of God. If that is the case, we will be ruled by other considerations that the question of whether or not something is ‘up-to-date.’”

Twenty Years Behind
Peter De Jong

October 1982

“Giving up our constitutional definitions of Christianity threatens our schools with the loss of the very

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- Sermon on the Mount
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(continued from page 23)

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December 1982

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