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The Outlook



Renewed Minds and Pierced Bodies

Be transformed by the renewing of your mind, that you may prove what is the good and acceptable and perfect will of God.

Romans 12:2.

How we parent changes as our children grow and mature. My current methodology for parenting, because my four sons are all quite young, consists largely of establishing and maintaining rules. Many of these rules are designed to exact behavior most of us would regard as rather obvious: don't stare at people; don't draw on the furniture; don't cut up your clothes.

I am prepared to accept that my boys are not the sharpest tools in the shed—they are, after all, *my*

children—but I chalk up this need for them to have obvious rules more to their immaturity than their stupidity.

As our children grow we discover we can relax the rules. They begin to understand for themselves that they should not stare at people, draw on furniture, or cut up their clothes. We call that maturity. Sometimes our children disappoint us and we find ourselves saying to them, “You're grown up now and you've got to act grown up.”

There's a sense in which Paul is saying the same thing in Romans 12.

The Bible teaches us that we all are born with an impulse we inherited from father Adam to hate God. Earlier in Romans, Paul explained how God gives those who hate Him over to a debased mind. A mind that is worthless and unfit. The mind of God-haters is unqualified, unable to assess, appreciate, and approve the truth of God and the will of God.

A Metamorphosis

What is required for God-haters, in the words of Romans 12, is transformation, comprehensive transformation. Interestingly, the word Paul uses here has been taken into the English language almost unchanged



Volume 55, No.4 (ISSN 8750-5754) (USPS 633-980) “And the three companies blew the trumpets...and held THE TORCHES in their left hands, and THE TRUMPETS in their right hands. . .and they cried, ‘The sword of Jehovah and of Gideon’ (Judges 7:20).”

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and we know it as “metamorphosis.”

When I was in seminary I had to read a book about interpretive fallacies. One of the fallacies I read about was called “semantic anachronism.” This particular fallacy involves reading a contemporary meaning of a word into the original meaning of its archetype. I have no interest in committing this fallacy, but I do think that our word ‘metamorphosis’ is illustrative of the change Paul is talking about.

When we talk about ‘metamorphosis’ we generally have in mind the profound changes in form an organism goes through in its life. We might talk, for instance, about the metamorphosis of a caterpillar into a pupa and then into a butterfly. It is a transformation of that scale that Paul is talking about in Romans 12. Such a transformation is not simply away from the standards and patterns of behavior of the world; it is a transformation within oneself.

Holiness is never achieved merely by observing the world and doing the opposite. It is far more complex and far more challenging. The good news is that the Holy Spirit enables us to meet the challenge by renewing our minds. With our minds being constantly reprogrammed by the Spirit of Christ we can begin to approve the will of God. We can begin, in other words, to understand and agree with what God wants of us, with His moral direction.

That is, of course, the purpose of the transformation. Sin made the mind debased and unfit to assess and appreciate the will of God, but this inability is reversed through the

transformation of which Paul speaks: “*Be transformed by the renewing of your mind, that you may prove what is the good and acceptable and perfect will of God.*”

Maturing In Christ

The transition of which Paul speaks here is not just a transition from unbelieving mind to believing mind, but from old covenant context to new covenant context. In the old covenant God provided a guide for conduct that was comprehensive and all-inclusive. It addressed virtually every sphere of life, from how you build your house, to the clothes you wear and the food you eat.

There is a sense in which that comprehensive law has been replaced by the renewed mind of the believer. This is because God has brought His people into the age of maturity. Israel in the old covenant was juvenile, immature, unruly and childish. Therefore the law, Paul says in Galatians 3, was a tutor or a disciplinarian to lead her to Christ. But in Christ, the mature man, God’s people come of age. We have something today Israel lacked—namely, the Spirit of the glorified Jesus, the Spirit of the mature man (John 7:37). We have, as Paul says elsewhere, the mind of Christ.

Now, it is not as if the mind of Christ is all we presently need. Eric Alexander, one of my favorite preachers, from Glasgow, Scotland,

used to say that a train doesn’t just need an engine to move effectively, it needs tracks. We need more than a mind renewed by the Spirit: we need external laws, objective standards, God’s commandments.

There is a sense, however, in which we do not rely on commandments as much as our old covenant counterparts did. We’ve entered our maturity, all of which means that thought, reflection, wisdom and prudence mean more today than ever before in biblical history.

This can be disappointing for some. There’s something about human nature that craves rules. We want everything to be carefully mapped out for us: how we should dress; what kind of music we should listen to; whether we should have a television. This is what makes the Amish life so attractive to people. Everything is literally black and white—all your questions are answered and you don’t need to think.

Maturing in Faith

As a pastor, I have found it’s impossible to preach about Lord’s Day observance without disappointing some. Everyone has a set of questions he or she wants answered. Is it right to watch television on Sunday, or to cut the grass, or to take a nap, or to do homework?

God has not directly answered those questions in His Word and

***Holiness is never achieved merely by observing
the world and doing the opposite.***

that is because He wants us to think. What is really exciting about this is that we are growing up. We can think and reason and make conclusions about what God wants from us through the renewal of our minds. We can begin to approve the perfect and pleasing will of God.

Let us consider as an application of our text the question: should men wear earrings? The first thing we need to do is consult the Bible. We discover the Bible forbids certain markings and piercings in Leviticus 19. It would be a mistake for us, however, to appeal to these prohibitions since in the very same context God forbids men from shaving. The laws of Leviticus 19 still have relevance for us, though clearly not in the form in which they are given.

We read in 1 Corinthians 6 that our bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit and that may relate in some way to body piercing. I am of the mind that it does apply, especially to the phenomenon of multiple piercings, the kind that makes an individual look like a tackle box blew up in his face. Since God created our bodies, redeemed them, and will resurrect them, we ought to treat them with respect. To pierce our bodies anywhere and everywhere is a sign of disrespect. But are all body piercings disrespectful to the body? If we say yes, then women should not get their ears pierced either. And that is a position some Christians hold.

Then there are those who appeal to the first part of this verse and insist that we must not be conformed to the world. If men wear earrings in our culture and we are not supposed to be conformed to the world then

Christian men shouldn't wear earrings. This argument also fails to persuade. Women in our culture wear makeup. Does that mean that Christian women should not wear make up? That would be ludicrous.

Because the Bible does not address this issue directly we must not be dogmatic about the position we take. Having said that, I do believe the Bible points in the direction of disapproving earrings for men. We learn in 1 Corinthians 11 that woman is the glory of man. They are the glamorous ones who adorn themselves with jewelry, makeup, and colorful clothing. The only kind of adornment for women the Bible frowns upon is that which is merely outward (1 Peter 3:3).

This is reversed in pagan cultures where men are often the peacocks. They grow their hair long, wear the colorful clothing, the jewelry and sometimes the makeup. That's becoming true of our culture with the rise of what are called "metrosexuals"—heterosexual men who tan, for example, and get manicures and pedicures. Man, however, is not the glory of woman; woman is the glory of man. This leads me to conclude that earrings and the makeup are best left to the women.

I grant that there are many other important variables we need to consider in our moral decision making, including motive, consequence, and situation. Each of these has something to say about this issue as well.

The point of this exercise is to il-

lustrate the text. Holiness has become far more challenging and complex than it was in the old covenant. Things aren't black and white anymore. And that's all part of growing up. But give thanks to Christ for His mind-renewing Spirit.

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We Confess

An Exposition & Application of the Belgic Confession

Article 22: Of Justifying Faith and the Justification of Faith

All you need is faith. As long as you have faith, you're fine. If you have listened to politicians, watched television, and kept up with the pop philosophy of the culture around us this is a predominant view of spirituality in our day. As long as a person has faith, no matter what that faith is placed in, he is considered to be a spiritually good person and things will work out for him.

In this context we must hold up one of the great dividing lines between the Christian Faith and the "faith" of the world just mentioned, along with all other faith systems in the world. This dividing line is what faith embraces as its object. In the holy Scriptures, as summarized by our Belgic Confession here in article 22, we learn and confess that faith in and of itself is useless to give us a standing before God unless it is placed in Jesus Christ, who is the sole object of faith for justification.

The Author of Faith

Before we can discuss what faith is, we have to ask, "Where does faith come from?" Article 22 begins here when it says, "*We believe that, to attain the true knowledge of this great mystery, the Holy Spirit kindles in our hearts an upright faith...*"

In order for us, who have a corrupt nature, to receive the benefits of Christ's work, the Spirit of God "kindles" in us an "upright," or, true

faith. This visual language of "kindling" faith evokes the imagery of igniting a flame, thus, of creating faith within us. We see this most clearly taught in Scripture in Ephesians 2:8, where our entire salvation, including faith, is called "the gift of God."

This faith brings us to a true knowledge of a "great mystery." It is the mystery of Jesus Christ and the salvation He brought us. Why does our Confession of Faith speak of the salvation won for us by Christ as a "mystery?"

We most often use the word mystery to describe something unknown, but there is another way in which this word can be used. The word mystery comes from the Greek word *musterion*, meaning something that was once veiled but now is revealed. Remember back in our discussion of Article 21 we confessed that Jesus Christ was ordained a priest in the order of Melchizedek, offered Himself on the cross, and shed His blood to purge our sins. And all this was "as the prophets had foretold." And although the coming of Christ was foretold by the prophets, it was not fully revealed to the eyes of the world until God raised the curtain of eternity and sent His Son in the flesh. The Spirit of God, then, creates faith within us to see this unveiled truth of who Christ is.

The Object of Faith: Christ Alone

What true faith does in attaining this great mystery of Christ and His saving work is further described for us as the Confession continues, saying,

...which embraces Jesus Christ with all His merits, appropriates Him, and seeks nothing more besides Him. For it must needs follow, either that all things which are requisite to our salvation are not in Jesus Christ, or if all things are in Him, that then those who possess Jesus Christ through faith have complete salvation in Him. Therefore, for any to assert that Christ is not sufficient, but that something more is required besides Him, would be too gross a blasphemy; for hence it would follow that Christ was but half a Savior.

Faith "embraces" and "appropriates" solely "Jesus Christ with all His merits." This is also what our Catechism teaches when it says in Question 20 that only those are saved "who by true faith are ingrafted into Him and receive all His benefits."

We confess Christ alone and His righteousness alone as the sole object of true, saving, justifying faith. Faith looks outside of itself and our own merits and grabs hold of the only One who has done anything good in the eyes of God, the only One who merited, that is, was rewarded with righteousness to give to His people on the basis of His obedience to the Law.

We should not cringe or be afraid of the word “merit,” as if it somehow teaches a Roman Catholic view of salvation. In fact, our Confession uses the term to do what all the Reformers did in using the term “merit”. They reformed Rome’s concept of merit to extol the virtues of Christ’s work on our behalf! Rome spoke of congruent and condign merit. Congruent merit was the reward of “trying your best and letting God do the rest.” It was a half-merit that was rewarded not because the demands were met, but because God decided to accept us as if it was fully meritorious. On the other hand, condign merit was the reward of actually meeting the demands of justice, albeit Roman theologians will always say it is “with the help of the Spirit.” Interestingly this “Spirit-wrought sanctity” is being promoted today, ironically, as if it was somehow a way of guarding *against* the Roman error of justification!

Contrary to Rome, the Protestant Reformers taught that we had neither type of merit. Thus, when our Confessions and the Reformers use the term “merit,” they use it to say there was only one kind of merit that could stand before the justice of God – the condign merit of Jesus Christ! Herman Witsius described it this way in 1677: the “merits of Christ” were “a merit of condignity, as it is called; such as no mere creature is capable to acquire.” But if no man can acquire

that righteousness of God that is demanded by the law *and* needed by the sinner to stand without fear before God, how can we stand before God?

Our Catechism tells us that we are righteous before God only because God “grants and imputes to me the perfect satisfaction, righteousness, and holiness of Christ, as if I had never committed nor had any sins, and had myself accomplished all the obedience which Christ has fulfilled for me” (Q&A 60). Notice that! What this means is that we are not only unable condignly to merit God’s love and favor, but also this means that we cannot congruently merit that favor either. *Our* works have no place before God; only *Christ’s* do! And thus we confess that our only righteousness is that of Jesus Christ. And furthermore, because we “embrace” and “appropriate” His merits, our Catechism teaches that we are as righteous as Jesus Christ. God looks at us and He see us as if we had “accomplished all the obedience which Christ has fulfilled” for us.

Because of this doctrine of the sufficiency of Christ’s merit, we confess that our faith “seeks nothing more besides Him.” Therefore we either have all that we need for salvation in Jesus Christ alone, or we do not. And if we do, then “those who possess Jesus Christ through faith have complete salvation in Him.” Any doctrine that as-

serts the merits, works, obedience, or faithfulness of anyone or anything besides our Lord Jesus is “too gross a blasphemy” making Christ “half a Savior.” This led Calvin’s colleague and successor in Geneva, Theodore Beza, to say, “Our unworthiness is covered and swallowed up by the holiness of Jesus Christ, which is far more powerful to sanctify us before God than natural corruption is to pollute us.”

Faith Alone

The final paragraph of Article 22 is a conclusion. Based on what was just said about faith embracing only Jesus Christ and His merits, we confess,

Therefore we justly say with Paul, that we *are justified by faith alone, or by faith apart from works*. However, to speak more clearly, we do not mean that faith itself justifies us, for it is only an instrument with which we embrace Christ our righteousness. But Jesus Christ, imputing to us all His merits, and so many holy works which He has done for us and in our stead, is our righteousness. And faith is an instrument that keeps us in communion with Him in all His benefits, which, when they become ours, are more than sufficient to acquit us of our sins.

When the Apostles Paul says, “For we hold that one is justified by faith apart from works of the law” (Romans 3:28) he is concluding an argument, contrasting works versus faith. There is no middle ground. Thus we teach justification *sola*

If you try to earn your salvation through strict obedience you will get what you deserve.



fide, through faith alone. No one is justified by obedience to the law, for, as Paul says, the law as a way of justification can only reveal our sin (Romans 3:20). The righteousness that justifies is that which is “apart from the law ... through faith in Jesus Christ” (Romans 3:21-22), no matter if the one who believes is Jewish or Greek, since both are sinners (Romans 3:22-23 cf. 3:9), and since justification is a matter of God’s gift, not man’s merit (Romans 3:24). As Paul says in possibly the most remarkable statement in all of Scripture,

Now to the one who works, his wages are not counted as a gift but as his due. And to the one who does not work but trusts Him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is counted as righteousness” (Romans 4:4-5).

This does not mean that “faith itself justifies us.” What it means is that faith “is only an instrument with which we embrace Christ our righteousness.” Being only an instrument, faith is simply the *means* by which we are justified, not the *ground*, as we said above, which is Christ. This what Paul is saying in Romans 4:4-5.

Notice again, that if you try to earn your salvation through strict obedience, or even in more pious terms as “covenant faithfulness,” you will get what you deserve. Your wages, whether heaven or hell, will be on the basis of what you did. But if we trust in the God who justifies the ungodly, that is, stripped of his works, naked and without claim, we shall be declared righteous. Faith simply trusts in another, it rests in

the mercy of God, who, because Christ was condemned in our place, can bestow salvation upon us.

It is amazing just how simply this is. We either save ourselves, or are saved by another. We either rely on our merits, or Christ’s. We either bring before God our works, or the “so many holy works which He has done for us and in our stead.” Our Lord took upon Himself every single one of our filthy rags of self-righteousness and replaced them with His holy works, His merits. But even more than that, He imputed to us not one holy work for each sin, but His entire righteousness! And because His righteousness is that of the infinite Son of God, it is greater than all our sins past, present, and future – and thus it is “*more than sufficient* to acquit us of our sins.”

To conclude, then, we do not proclaim “faith” apart from its object. We proclaim that faith alone must be placed only in Jesus Christ in order for one to have “peace with God” (Romans 5:1). This is such an

amazing truth. God the Father sent His eternal Son to become a temporal man in our place and that the Son satisfied the wrath of God and merited the righteousness needed to stand before God. And in beautiful harmony, God the Holy Spirit has done the wonderful work of kindling the faith to embrace Christ and be justified, and, as we shall see later, the faith that begins to burn brighter in the life of sanctification.

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

Study/Application Questions for Article 22

1. According to Article 22 of our Confession, what is the Holy Spirit’s primary role in our salvation?
2. Why is it so important that we teach that faith is the gift of the Holy Spirit?
3. What is the means by which the Holy Spirit creates faith within us? (cf. Rom. 10:13-17; Heidelberg Catechism, Q&A 65)
4. What are Christ’s “merits?”
5. Why are Christ’s merits sufficient to justify us?

The Riches of the Reformed Faith

“The Glory of God” Part Two

Last month we saw that Jude 24 teaches us to give God alone the glory because we are forever preserved by God. A second reason as to why The Glory of God has historically been one of The Riches of the Reformed Faith is because of the fact that we will be FAULTLESSLY PRESENTED.

Jude 24 tells us: “To him who is able to keep you from falling and to present you (Greek: to cause or make to stand) before His glorious presence (lit: in the presence of His glory) without fault (Greek: *amomos*; or without blemish) and with great joy.”

Think of the implications of that verse! Just as the animals selected to serve as the Passover Lamb in Old Testament times needed to be lambs without defect, so too as 1 Peter 1:18-19 tell us, Christ our Passover Lamb was without blemish or defect. Jesus was totally and completely sinless and blameless! The good news of the gospel of Jesus Christ as set forth in II Corinthians 5:21 declares that, “God made Him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in Him we might become the righteousness of God.” When we who are in Christ stand before God’s judgment throne, God will declare us “Not Guilty! Blameless! Perfectly pure and clean!” No sin will be charged to our account! Think of it! Not because we are not sinners, but because we will be wearing the white robes of the righteousness of Christ that were credited to us, im-

puted to us, by God’s grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone!

Indeed, that is why Heidelberg Catechism Q&A 60&61 states,

60 Q. How are you right with God?

A. Only by true faith in Jesus Christ. Even though my conscience accuses me of having grievously sinned against all God’s commandments and of never having kept any of them, and even though I am still inclined toward all evil, nevertheless, without my deserving it at all, out of sheer grace, God grants and credits to me the perfect satisfaction, righteousness, and holiness of Christ, as if I had never sinned nor been a sinner, as if I had been as perfectly obedient as Christ was obedient for me. All I need to do is to accept this gift of God with a believing heart.

61 Q. Why do you say that by faith alone you are right with God?

A. It is not because of any value my faith has that God is pleased with me. Only Christ’s satisfaction, righteousness, and holiness make me right with God. And I can receive this righteousness and make it mine in no other way than by faith alone.

Jude goes on to tell us that the fact that in His grace and mercy God preserves us forever and presents us faultless before His sovereign throne ought to fill us with “great” (or extreme or exceeding) JOY! Indeed, in Habakkuk 3:17-18 the prophet declares, “Though the fig tree does not bud and there are no grapes on the vines, though the olive crop fails and the fields produce no food, though there are no sheep in the pen and no cattle in the stalls, yet I will rejoice in the Lord, I will be joyful in God my Savior.”

Such joy in the Lord in the midst of sorrow and suffering, pressures and pains proves to be an exceedingly powerful witness to the unsaved of this world around us! That is why, in John 15:11, Jesus said to His disciples, “I have told you this so that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete.” In I Peter 1:8-9, the Apostle Peter declares, “Though you have not seen Him, you love Him; and even though you do not see Him now, you believe in Him and are filled with an inexpressible and glorious joy, for you are receiving the goal of your faith, the salvation of your souls.”

It is because of the assurance of such a grand and glorious salvation; it is because of the fact that we are forever preserved and faultlessly presented before the face of our God, that Jude declares in his doxology, “To him who is able to keep you from falling and to present you before His glorious presence without fault and with great joy – to the only God our Savior be glory, majesty, power, and authority through Jesus Christ our Lord, before all ages (God’s glory majesty, power



and authority are eternal!), now and forevermore! Amen.”

Implications for Work

This exhortation to give God the glory has profound implications concerning the way in which we work. For example, in their book *The Doctrines of Grace*, James Montgomery Boice and Philip Graham Ryken write:

This cosmic vision of Reformed theology obviously encompasses much more than the Five Points of Calvinism. It thus serves as a helpful reminder that the heart of Reformed theology is a passion for God’s glory, not simply in redemption but in all of creation. The doctrines of grace teach that God is sovereign in the salvation of an individual sinner, but this is only one implication of the all-encompassing truth that God rules over everything.”

The above authors go on to quote Abraham Kuyper who said:

“Wherever man may stand, whatever he may do, to whatever he may apply his hand, in agriculture, in commerce, and in industry, or his mind, in the world of art, and science, he is, in whatsoever it may be, constantly standing before the face of his God, he is employed in the service of his God, he has strictly to obey his God, and above all, he has to aim at the glory of his God.” (*The Doctrines of Grace*, Boice, James Montgomery and

Ryken, Philip Graham, Crossway Books, Wheaton, Illinois, 2002, pp. 201 and 212).

Implications for Worship

Similarly, just as “giving God the glory now” has profound implications for all of our work, it also has profound implications for the way in which we worship. For example, in Heidelberg Catechism QA 96 we read, “96Q. What is God’s will for us in the second commandment? A. That we in no way make any image of God nor worship him in any other way than he has commanded in His Word.”

In Reformed Theology this “not worshipping God in any other way than he has commanded in his Word” has come to be known as the “Regulative Principle” by which we govern what does and does not take place in our worship services. This is a critically important matter!

In Leviticus 10:1-3, the Lord struck dead the sons of Aaron because these two presumptuous priests offered what the sacred Scriptures refer to as “strange or unauthorized fire” before the Lord. This event powerfully portrays the fact that even with the very best of intentions, it appears to be relatively easy for us in worship to “do the right thing in the wrong way”. And so, while we by no means desire to use the so-called “Regulative Principle” to

quench the Holy Spirit, to destroy our joy in the Lord, or to use it as a “club” with which to beat down other believers whose worship style may differ somewhat from that of ours, please know that what the Sacred Scriptures make unequivocally clear that our worship must never be centered on MAN but rather it must ever and always be centered exclusively on GOD!!

And what this means is that our worship must never seek to incorporate or accommodate the man-centered means and methods and motives of this world, but rather all elements of our worship must be found faithful to the Holy Spirit inspired Word of the Living God to the praise, glory and honor of His Holy Name! To quote from the book, *The Doctrines of Grace*, while speaking to such themes as secularism, humanism, relativism, materialism, pragmatism, and mindlessness, the authors write:

These are some of the prevailing trends in American culture at the dawn of the new millennium. If the church has become worldly, then we would expect to find these same attitudes in evangelical churches. And of course that is what we do find. As surprising as it may sound, evangelicalism has become increasingly secular. In an effort to make new-

Sacred Scriptures make unequivocally clear that our worship must never be centered on MAN but rather it must ever and always be centered exclusively on GOD!!

comers feel comfortable, pastors teach as little theology as possible. Worship has become a form of popular entertainment rather than transcendent praise. New church buildings are designed to look more like office parks than houses of worship. All of these trends contribute to the secularization of what once was sacred. (p. 21)

And so, in our work as well as in our worship (to name just two critically important areas of the Christian life), “... To the only God our Savior be glory, majesty, power and authority, through Jesus Christ our Lord, before all ages, now and forevermore! Amen.”

Now friends, as I began this series of articles so also as I conclude I would like to share with you two practical principles.

Principle #1

Principle #1 concerns the matter of what I will call “our Reformed spirit” toward those brothers and sisters in the faith with whom we may differ or disagree.

People sometimes speak of ‘TRs’, meaning those who are ‘Truly Reformed.’ But what this term brings to mind usually is not very nice (some people have the same instinctive response to the term ‘Calvinist’). The ‘Truly Reformed’ are considered narrow in their thinking, parochial in their outlook, and uncharitable in their attitude toward those who disagree. They have a bad reputation, and sadly, perhaps some of it

Though he lived and ministered over 100 years ago, Spurgeon seems to have been speaking about Harold Camping when he preached.

is deserved. There is a combative streak in Calvinism, and whenever the doctrines of grace are divorced from warm Christian piety, people tend to get ornery. Some Christians who identify themselves as Calvinists seem to be in a perpetual state of discontent with their pastors, often making uninvited suggestions for their personal improvement. Others seem overly concerned with converting people to their ecclesiastical denomination. Still others have memorized TULIP but somehow seem to be missing the heart of the gospel ... This ought not to be. In fact, it cannot be, provided that Calvinism is rightly understood. The doctrines of grace help to preserve all that is right and good in the Christian life: humility, holiness, and thankfulness, with a passion for prayer and evangelism. The true Calvinist ought to be the most outstanding Christian — not narrow and unkind, but grounded in God’s grace and therefore generous of spirit. (*The Doctrines of Grace*, p. 179-180)

I once read that a woman asked the great 18th century preacher George Whitefield a question about the equally popular and powerful

preacher John Wesley with whom he had such great doctrinal differences — Whitefield being a staunch preacher and supporter of the Doctrines of Sovereign Grace (Total Depravity, Unconditional Election and the like), with Wesley, basically, being an Arminian. One day this woman asked Whitefield, “Do you suppose that we will one day see Mr. Wesley in heaven?” And to this George Whitefield replied, “I should think not. I would suppose that he will be so close to the throne, and we so far from it, that we shall scarcely be able to catch a glimpse of him!” May that same gracious, humble spirit exhibited by George Whitefield toward Mr. Wesley also increasingly characterize the spirit that we display toward other brothers and sisters in the Lord with whom we may disagree.

Principle #2

In Genesis 25:34 we read, “Then Jacob gave Esau some bread and some lentil stew. He ate and drank, and then got up and left. So Esau despised his birthright.” Dear friends, while everything that I have said in Principle #1 is true, still in all, as I mentioned in the first article in this series, the ever increasing burden on my heart has been that so many of our Reformed brothers and sisters in the Lord who have been nurtured and enriched with so many blessings of the Reformed faith ever since the day they were born are increasingly forsaking the



faith of their fathers. In effect, they despise their birthright for the spiritual equivalent of some lentil stew, when they, of all people, ought to be “contending for the faith once for all entrusted to the saints” (Jude 3).

Consequently, as you and I seek to live our lives before His face each and every day, by the grace and mercy, Spirit and strength of the Lord our God, may we and our children, and indeed, should our Lord tarry in His return, even our children’s children continue to be found faithfully resting and rejoicing in The Sovereignty of God, The Lordship of Christ, The Covenant of Grace, and The Glory of God ... four of THE RICHES OF THE REFORMED FAITH!

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Looking Above

A Series on the Revelation of Jesus Christ

Revelation 4:3

“A Rainbow Around the Throne”

A tsunami snuffs out the lives of hundreds of thousands in Asia in a matter of moments. A string of hurricanes wreaks havoc upon the southeastern states. Tornadoes twist through the Midwest, leaving hundreds homeless. Earthquakes shake the West Coast. Fire rages along the plains of the West. Torrential downpours flood many homes, with mudslides in their wake. Our world is fraught with natural disasters.

Yet our world is not spinning out of control. Things do not happen by chance nor by coincidence. The tsunami submits to the voice of God. The hurricane is directed by the sovereign hand of God. The path of the tornado was ordained by God. The extent and magnitude of the earthquake was determined according to God’s wise counsel. The fire scorches only that which God has decreed. The rain falls only where God has determined. Everything is so completely in His hand that nothing can move nor be moved apart from His sovereign will. There is a God. He is there, and He is not silent. There is a throne in the heavens, and it is not vacant. God sits upon the throne.

It is to the throne room of God that John points us in Revelation 4. “After these things I looked, and behold, a door standing open in heaven. And the first voice which I heard was like a trumpet speaking with me, saying, ‘Come up here, and I

will show you things which must take place after this.’ Immediately I was in the Spirit; and behold, a throne set in heaven, and One sat on the throne. And he who sat there was like a jasper and a sardius stone in appearance; and there was a rainbow around the throne, in appearance like an emerald” (4:1-3).

God sits upon the throne. Surrounding His throne is a rainbow. Why a rainbow?

The Old Testament Context: God’s Promise

To answer that question we must go back to Genesis. When Adam and Eve fell into sin, God came to judge. But God did not treat Adam and Eve as their sins deserved. Final judgment was not meted out on the day Adam and Eve fell into sin; final judgment was delayed. To be sure, things were not as they were before: the world was subjected to frustration, held in bondage to corruption; even now it groans in the pains of childbearing. The world is under the curse, but the world continues. God preserved the lives of Adam and Eve, even allowing them to be fruitful and to multiply upon the earth. They bore children; their children bore children. Cities were built; culture developed. You can read all about it in Genesis 4, 5.

Along with the propagation of the human race and along with the development of culture, however, came the increase of wickedness.

So great was the wickedness of man, that in Genesis 6:5, God looked down upon mankind and saw that all the thoughts of his heart were only evil all of the time. “And the Lord God was sorry that He had made man on the earth, and He was grieved in His heart. So the Lord said, ‘I will destroy man whom I have created from the face of the earth, both man and beast, creeping thing and birds of the air, for I am sorry that I have made them’” (Genesis 6:6-7).

God then gave man 120 years to repent and turn to Him. During those 120 years, Noah built the ark; and as he built, he preached. He preached to his generation, commanding them to repent of their sins and to turn to the Lord, while the Lord was yet long-suffering with them. The people scoffed at him. God had issued the warning: the world would not continue forever; it would soon be destroyed in the waters of the flood. The warning was not heeded, and the waters of judgment came.

The fountains of the great deep were broken up and the windows of heaven were opened, and the rain fell upon on the earth for forty days and forty nights. The judgment was catastrophic for the flood was nothing less than an intrusion of divine judgment. It was a picture of the final judgment to come. The world that then was, was destroyed (II Peter 3:6).

Noah and his family, however, were preserved through the waters of the flood; they were brought safely through the waters of judgment. They came out of the ark into a new creation, into the world that now is (II Peter 3:7), a world that God has

promised never to destroy with the waters of a flood. He says at the end of Genesis 8, “I will never again curse the ground for man’s sake, although the imagination of his heart is evil from his youth; nor will I again destroy every living thing as I have done. While the earth remains, seedtime and harvest, cold and heat, winter and summer, and day and night, shall not cease” (8:21-22).

***God sets the rainbow
as the sign of the
covenant with all
creation: the sign
that He will
maintain the created
order.***

God makes this covenant with all creation. God also gives a sign of the covenant. Genesis 9:12-16, “And God said: ‘This is the sign of the covenant which I make between Me and you, and every living creature that is with you, for perpetual generations: I set My rainbow in the cloud, and it shall be for the sign of the covenant between Me and the earth. It shall be, when I bring a cloud over the earth, that the rainbow shall be seen in the cloud; and I will remember My covenant which is between Me and you and every living creature of all flesh; the waters shall never again become a flood to destroy all flesh. The rainbow shall be in the cloud, and I will look on it to remember the everlasting covenant between God

and every living creature of all flesh that is on the earth.’ And God said to Noah, ‘This is the sign of the covenant which I have established between Me and all flesh that is on the earth.’” God sets the rainbow as the sign of the covenant with all creation: the sign that He will maintain the created order. Seedtime and harvest, cold and heat, winter and summer, day and night, shall not cease, as long as the earth endures.

In this connection how appropriate the sign of the rainbow! After all, what is needed for a rainbow, but rain and sun? As the rain comes down and the sun peers through the clouds, the rainbow, in all of its magnificent splendor, appears. The rainbow is set in the clouds—those clouds that are portents of rain—reminding us of the judgment waters of the flood. But the sun shines through, creating a rainbow! And we are reminded that God is faithful! We are reminded that the seasons are fixed by wisdom divine! We are reminded that God has made a covenant with all creation to preserve the created order. How appropriate the sign of the rainbow!

But it goes even farther than that. The Hebrew word that is translated in Genesis 9 as “rainbow” is literally the word for a warrior’s bow. God often appears in Scripture as a warrior with his bow poised to render judgment. Deuteronomy 32:41-42, “If I whet My glittering sword, and My hand takes hold on judgment, I will render vengeance to My enemies, and repay those who hate Me. I will make My arrows drunk with blood, and My sword shall devour flesh, with the blood of the slain and the captives, from the heads of the leaders of the enemy.”



The rainbow in Revelation 4 is intended to remind you that God will come to judge the earth.

Psalm 7:12-13, “If he does not turn back, he will sharpen His sword; He bends His bow and makes it ready. He also prepares for Himself instruments of death; He makes His arrows into fiery shafts.” Psalm 18:14, “He sent out His arrows and scattered the foe, lightnings in abundance, and He vanquished them.” Psalm 64:7, “But God shall shoot at them with an arrow; suddenly they shall be wounded.” Psalm 77:17, “The clouds poured out water; the skies sent out a sound; Your arrows also flashed about.” Psalm 144:6, “Flash forth lightning and scatter them; shoot out Your arrows and destroy them.” In each of these passages, God is pictured as the divine warrior, His bow and arrow raised to fight and to destroy.

But now consider the rainbow set in the clouds: the warrior’s bow is not held up in the position of warfare and judgment with arrows ready to fly, but at the side in the position of peace. The rainbow, set in the clouds, in the position of peace, reminds us of God’s covenant with creation—a covenant in which God promises to maintain the created order. “While the earth remains, seedtime and harvest, cold and heat, winter and summer, and day and night, shall not cease.”

With that background in mind, we come back to our original question concerning Revelation 4:3: why the rainbow around the throne?

**The New Testament Context:
God’s Judgment**

Recall what we have said concerning the seven sections in the book of Revelation, namely, that each of these sections span the time period between Christ’s first coming and His second coming. The section with which we are now dealing, chapters 4-7, cover this time period as well. In that light, consider what we have before us in these chapters: in chapter 5, we shall read of a scroll sealed with seven seals together with the Lamb who is worthy to open the seals of that scroll; then in chapters 6-7, we shall read of the actual opening of each seal.

These seven seals, then, are opened throughout the time period between Christ’s first coming and His second coming. They bring about great devastation on the earth. But before we come to the seals, we have set before us the throne room of God in Revelation 4. God sits upon the throne, and around that throne there is a rainbow. Before the horrific scenes of judgment are set before us, we are brought back to the sign of the rainbow.

Why the rainbow? To remind us, even in the face of these eschatological woes, of God’s covenant with all creation, “While the earth remains, seedtime and harvest, cold and heat, summer and winter, day and night, shall not cease.” Why the rainbow? To remind us that the bow of God’s wrath is still carried in the peaceful

position. God has promised to maintain the created order—that was the message of the covenant in Genesis 9.

Revelation 4, however, pushes us beyond Genesis 9. The rainbow in Genesis 9 is intended to remind you that God preserves the earth. The rainbow in Revelation 4 is intended to remind you that God will come to judge the earth. God is dealing with the world in forbearance and with longsuffering now, but final judgment will come. The day will come when the earth will no longer remain. The day will come when seedtime and harvest will cease. The day will come when cold and heat will be no more. The day will come when winter and summer will no longer arrive. The day will come when day and night shall be no more. The day will come when these things shall cease. The day will come when the earth will no longer remain. The day of Final Judgment will come.

This covenant with creation, then, is not an eternal covenant. It is a covenant with creation that endures as long as the earth itself endures, but no longer. When the final Day of Judgment comes, this covenant with creation shall be null and void.

The rainbow, as pictured in Genesis 9, speaks to us of God’s preservation of the created order. But that same rainbow, as pictured in Revelation 4, speaks to us from a different perspective, telling us that while judgment is delayed, it is coming. You can look at the matter from both sides. To be sure, God is preserving the created order, but that preservation of the created order is ultimately a delay of final judgment.

The rainbow, then, issues forth these two statements: 1) God is preserving the created order; and 2) that that preservation is a delay of final judgment.

The rainbow comforts us as it reminds us that God is in control. But at the same time the rainbow warns us that this world, though preserved by God, is also reserved by God for judgment. Peter tells us as much in 2 Peter 3:7-9: “But the heavens and the earth which are now preserved by the same word, are reserved for fire until the Day of Judgment and perdition of ungodly men. But, beloved, do not forget this one thing, that with the Lord one day is as a thousand years, and a thousand years as one day. The Lord is not slack concerning His promise, as some count slackness, but is longsuffering toward us, not willing that any should perish but that all should come to repentance.”

The rainbow is a reminder that God preserves. But it is also a reminder that final judgment has only been delayed; final judgment is sure to come. To this Peter turns our attention in the next verse, “But the day of the Lord will come as a thief in the night, in which the heavens will pass away with a great noise, and the elements will melt with fervent heat; both the earth and the works that are in it will be burned up.” In other words, the world that now is following the same pattern as the world that then was—the paradigm for the world that now is the world that then was—“as it was in the days of Noah...”

Our Response

How then are we to live in the midst of such a world—a world over

which the rainbow spreads its glorious arc—a world preserved by God, but reserved for final judgment? How then should we live? 2 Peter 3:11-18 tells us, we ought to conduct ourselves in holiness and godliness.

As always, John pushes you. He pushes you in your understanding of the rainbow. He pushes you to understand that this world is preserved by God, but at the same time is reserved for final judgment. John shows you the throne with the rainbow surrounding it to warn you of the judgment to come.

Ultimately, John shows you the throne with the rainbow surrounding it to bring you to the cross, in order that you might cling to the One who there cried out, “Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do!” What was that cry, after all, but a cry for a delay in final judgment? If ever there was a time in the history of the world where final judgment should have come, certainly it was at the cross, when man killed the Son of God. But Jesus prays “Father do not send final judgment upon the world; let that final judgment fall upon Me, that I may bear it in the place of My people!” Jesus prays for a delay in judgment. But note, and note well, it is only a delay! Judgment is sure to come!

Do not despise, then, the riches of His goodness, forbearance, and longsuffering; for it is the goodness of God that leads you to repentance. The rainbow is God’s sign to you that He is longsuffering, but also that there comes an end to His longsuffering. Let the rainbow in the skies beckon you to lift your eyes

to the rainbow that surrounds the throne, and as you lift up your eyes to throne, may you know that His longsuffering is salvation, and since you know this beforehand, may you beware, lest you also fall from your own steadfastness, being led away with the error of the wicked. Let the rainbow remind you to grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

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Spiritual Warfare and Islam

Islam is constantly in the news. Open any newspaper or magazine, turn on the radio or television, and there will be stories about Islam. Many news stories report on the resurgence of Islam, the increasing attendance at mosques, the devout observance of fasting during Ramadan, a proliferation of Islamic publications in print and audiovisual media, and increasing emphasis on “Islamic dress” in many parts of the world, especially for women.

In 1997 Malise Ruthven argued in *Islam: A Very Short Introduction* that the religious revival in modern Islam is a reflection of social and technological change in the Muslim world, particularly the disruptive effects of a rapid increase in urbanization. He also predicted not a Muslim confrontation with the West, but rather a retreat into the mosque and private family space. He also believed that the culture of Muslims is likely to become increasingly passive and consumer-orientated.

The September 11, 2001, attack on New York’s twin towers showed that the religious revival is more than a reflection of social and technological change. It revealed a face of Islam Westerners find difficult to understand. What motivated the hijackers? Lead hijacker Mohammad Atta left behind a five-page handwritten document subsequently called a “suicide letter,” in which he exhorted his fellow murderers, “Keep a very open mind, keep a

very open heart of what you are to face. You will be entering paradise. You will be entering the happiest life, everlasting life.”

Atta’s document shows that his radical act is not based on supposed “cultural differences,” with the West, or “oppression,” or “hopelessness.” It shows that we are not faced with a social problem, which liberal policies and public money can solve. We must open our eyes and open our minds to understand what these people who are willing to die for their version of Islam are about. Why is that in most of the violent conflicts throughout the world - whether in Africa, the Philippines, or the Middle East - one side is fighting in the name of Islam? Samuel Huntington, an influential Harvard professor, states that “Islam has bloody borders.” He also predicts a “clash of civilizations” between “Islam,” and the “West.”

The Religious Imperialism of Islam

Not every Muslim is either violent or a terrorist. Many Muslims are also innocent victims of terrorism. But why is it that Islam harbors so many terrorists in its bosom? Islam in its cradle was already an example of religious imperialism. Within fifty years of the death of Mohammad, Islam had by force of arm taken over Northern Africa, placing under the state of serfdom and deprivation of rights known as *dhimmitude* all Jews and Christians who did not con-

vert or flee. Christianity there all but disappeared.

It is barely remembered today that the famous Church Fathers, including St. Augustine and before him Tertullian, lived in Northern Africa. And what about the treatment of the Copts in Egypt over the past 1,300 years? They have been reduced from being the entire population of Egypt, to about 10% of the population. They still suffer persecution and indignities. The little liberty they do have has been given on the basis of the tacit assumption that the Church must keep strictly to its business, to preach and to serve as a center of harmless edification. In Iraq there was a Christian presence before Muhammad was born. Why do terrorists burn and bomb churches in the name of Islam?

The World of the Islamist

The Muslims involved in much of the violence are the so-called Islamists. They long for a return to the “golden age” when *dar al-islam* (the sphere of war) was still expanding, and Muslim communities were said to excel in all the arts of civilization. They are rabid anti-Semitic and vehemently opposed to Christianity. They are modern in their methods, which may include sophisticated techniques of organization as well as the use of guns, rockets, and bombs. They are modern in that they absorbed into a “traditional” Islamic discourse many ideas imported from outside the Islamic intellectual tradition. Many Muslims had a well-documented admiration for the dictators of the

1930s. A number of Arab leaders had worked closely with Hitler in his campaign to exterminate the Jews and continued the fight against the Jews in the Arab world even after the end of the war.

A prime example is the Grand Mufti of Jerusalem, Hajj Amin al-Husseini. As the leader of Arabs in Palestine during the 1930s he called a jihad to annihilate the Jews of Palestine. In his words: "I declare a holy war, my Moslem brothers! Murder the Jews! Murder them all!" He incited anti-Jewish riots that caused the death of hundreds of Jewish settlers, including the Hebron Riot of 1929, in which the entire Jewish population of Hebron was massacred. He was an early supporter of Hitler. When he was in Berlin, he gave a speech in which he called the Jews "the most fierce enemies of the Muslims" and an "ever corruptive element" in the world.

The changing of times has not changed this spirit of hatred. Ahmad Bahar, one of the main spokesmen of the political wing of Hamas said, "If Muslims all over the world unite, they can implement the empire of Islam. The Islamic empire ... We would have a central leadership, a central army, and a central policy." Jews and Christians would be welcome to live as subject peoples (dhimmis) in this Islamic republic as long as they do nothing to oppose Islamic domination." He also said, "We look forward to a day when Israel will cease to exist."

The prominent Saudi government cleric Sheikh Saad al-Buraik harangued an audience at a Riyadh

mosque against Americans. He proclaimed on April 11, 2002, that America "is the root of all evils and wickedness of Earth ... Oh Muslim Ummah, don't take the Jews and Christians as allies ... Muslim Brothers in Palestine, do not have mercy, neither compassion on the Jews, their blood, their money, their flesh ... Why don't you wage jihad? Why don't you pillage them?"

Loss of Religious Liberty

The loss of religious liberty in the world of Islam is a burning issue

The average Muslim is ready to die for the sake of Islam, or to kill a man whom he considers to be a defiler of Islam.

for Christianity and Christian missions. Either all propaganda of a "foreign" religion is forbidden or it is made ineffective by the rule that one is only allowed to remain what one is or to become a Muslim.

For example, Saudi-Arabia, an ally of the United States in the war against terrorism, is a prime violator of religious freedom. It only tolerates Wahhabism, its own fiery brand of Islam. U.S. diplomats have complained to Congress that they are forced to hold church services on Sundays like secret conspirators, in specially guarded rooms in the U.S. embassy in Riyadh, or face arrest by

the Wahhabi religious police.

How do we account for the resurgence of Islam? Pundits point to high unemployment among youth, poverty, and the lack of democracy in Islamic nations. Why are they so difficult to reach with the Gospel? The Dutch missiologist Dr. H. Kraemer points out that Islam has a grip on its adherents greater than any other religion has. He says that everyone who knows the Muslim world by personal experience will bear witness to the truly remarkable fact that a Muslim who is fervid and convinced, or a lukewarm believer, or even a secret disbeliever and agnostic, as a rule becomes beside himself with anger if a man turns Christian or changes his religious allegiance. And he notes that all over the world we know the curious and disquieting phenomenon that the average Muslim is ready to die for the sake of Islam, or to kill a man whom he considers to be a defiler of Islam. He concludes that from this superiority -feeling and from this fantastic self-consciousness of Islam is born that stubborn refusal to open the mind towards another spiritual world.

The Doctrines of Islam

Islam cannot be regarded merely as an incomplete but honorable response to God. Of all the major religions of the world, only Islam arose *after* God's full revelation of Himself to man in His incarnation in the person of Jesus Christ, aware of Christianity yet contradicting it. It plainly contradicts the very foundations of the Christian faith. Islam acknowledges Jesus as a prophet, but at the same it



says that Mohammad is far superior to Jesus. It denies the doctrine of the Trinity. When a Christian speaks of the Trinity, the Muslim immediately replies, "You have committed the sin of SHIRK. You have given God an associate. You have placed another beside Allah."

In Islam there is not room for a personal relationship with God. Allah is the wholly other and not our Father. One of Islam's favorite expression about God, which testifies to an intense religious feeling is, "He whom everyone needs and who does not stand in need of anybody or anything." In Islam man is entirely absorbed in the greatness and majesty of God and vanishes away. There is no real place in the relation of God and man. Kraemer remarked, "Fellowship does not exist between God and man. God is too exalted for that, and the relation of Father-child between God and man is not primarily abhorrent to the Moslem because of the association of parenthood and sexual life, but because it suggests a sacrilegious lack of reverence towards the Divine."

My argument, therefore, is that notwithstanding its strong religious elements and devotion, Islam is the religion of the natural man in rebellion to the God Who revealed Himself in Jesus Christ. In Pascal's short reflections on Islam in his *Pensees* he lays his finger on the sore spot. He says, "Muhammad chose the way of human success, Jesus Christ that of human defeat."

Spiritual Warfare

But the key to the struggle with Islam is found in the invisible world. In the drama of world his-

tory or also called history of redemption, there are two powers engaged in a life and death struggle.

We must recognize the reality of the spiritual realm, including Satan and demonic powers. The conflict with Satan and his powers is at the very center of Christ's ministry. According to 1 John 3: 8b, "The reason the Son of God appeared was to destroy the devil's work." A spiritual battle is being waged between the kingdom of God and the god of this age, and demonic

We overestimate the political and social solutions in the struggle against Islamism but underestimate the spiritual dimension.

presence and activities are part of the non-Christian religions and ideologies.

In *Encountering Religious Pluralism: The Challenge to Christian Faith & Mission*, Harold Netland points out: "Too often Western Christians have adopted a functional naturalism that, while theoretically acknowledging the supernatural dimension, in practice ignores it." He also observed, "A genuinely biblical perspective on other religions should recognize that much religious activity and belief is influenced by the Adversary, Satan." In other words, we overestimate the political and

social solutions in the struggle against Islamism but underestimate the spiritual dimension.

The greatest missionary of all times, the apostle Paul, declared, "For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms." (Ephesians 6:12) The apostle Paul reminded his readers that the pagan sacrifices in Corinthian religion, which might have seemed quite innocent, were in fact offered to demons (I Corinthians 10:20). Satan has one goal - to deprive man of salvation, of eternal happiness - and one of the ways to achieve that goal is through the propagation of false religions, the primary victims of which are its own adherents. Wherever the Gospel is preached, Satan opposes it.

Satan and His Mission

Satan's name means "adversary," since he is the adversary of man's salvation. He is also called "disrupter" or "destroyer of peace," "the tempter," "the god and prince of this world," the "chief of demons," "a murderer from the beginning," "a lion looking for someone to devour." He is also called the "father of lies." The lie is the deliberate twisting of truth. Demons enjoy perverting truth. Why? Because their adversary is Christ is the King of truth (John 18: 37). Therefore, we see the powers of the father of lies do their utmost to destroy the truth, to undermine the Gospel. Scripture speaks of those who are not yet saved as "spiritually blind"

and under the power of the “god of this age” (II Corinthians 4:4; Ephesians 4:17-18).

Certainly Satan uses false teaching and deception to blind followers of other religions. Satan blinds so that people cannot see God’s saving truth. The apostle Paul saw this happen repeatedly. Wherever he went in the service of Christ and His gospel, he was confronted time and time again with the dark forces of evil. When Paul preached the Gospel on Cyprus, he was confronted by Elymas, a sorcerer. Paul told him, “You are a child of the devil and an enemy of everything that is right! You are full of all kinds of deceit and trickery. Will you never stop perverting the right ways of the Lord?” (Acts 13: 6-11)

No wonder that Paul in his letters repeatedly testifies that he sees Satan busy to frustrate his work on behalf of Christ in many different ways. Paul shows that there is an intelligent power called Satan at work behind the scene who tries to lead as many people to perdition as possible. Satan has standard methods with which he operates and forces that he exploits to try to bring about the loss of as many souls as possible. He always tries to bring discord and division on earth. Islam is used by Satan to oppose the Kingdom of our Lord Jesus Christ and stir up trouble for the Church.

Satan: the Defeated Foe

When we survey the powerful

forces opposing the Gospel, the picture looks grim. We can become so impressed by the power of Islam and the forces of the prince of darkness at work in the world, that we are tempted to minimize the victory of Christ and become defeatists. But we dare not give up hope. Jesus is the conqueror over evil. He faced every combination of wickedness on the cross, and He overcame. The cross spelled the defeat of evil in God’s world.

Michael Green noted that it is a shallow theology which dismisses Satan as unreal. The great anti-God is very much in business still. But he is still a defeated foe. He met his match in Christ on Calvary. Green is right. The power and success of the Evil one must be seen in the light of the victory of Jesus Christ. In this world, full of lies and temptations, in this world divided by the work of Satan, the Lord said, “you will have trouble,” But He also said, “But take heart! I have overcome the world.” (John 16:33) Christ’s victory is the guarantee of our victory.

The power of Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit is able to deliver Muslims from the grip of Islam. We still have a wonderful opportunity to bring the Gospel of the meek Savior to the world of Islam. And reports from the world of Islam tell about conversions. There are Muslims who have learned to see that the only true God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, is totally different from Allah. The born-

again Muslims no longer recognize Mohammad as supreme, but Jesus Christ as their Lord. Although the foes are fierce, the Gospel must be proclaimed to the end of the earth and to the end of time. There is no other remedy for a sin-sick world.

The author of this article writes under the alias of “**Dick Wunnink**” due to past threats received from the Islamic community when writing about this subject. Some articles by this author also appeared in *The Outlook* in the year 2002.



A Balanced Approach to Spiritual Warfare

The title of this article would seem to indicate to the reader that there exists among Christians today an unbalanced approach to the whole matter of spiritual warfare. After researching the matter personally in conjunction with some of my doctoral studies in Biblical counseling, it has become apparent that such is the case. There is an increasing number of Christians adopting an unbalanced view of spiritual warfare that has as its emphasis Satan and the demonic.

The traditional tripartite balanced view held within orthodox Christianity¹ is quickly losing ground as many are being influenced by popular sensational writings where teachings on demons and exorcism have abounded. The popular trend is to teach people how to “bind” and “cast out demons,” to “exercise dominion over Satan,” and deal with so called “territorial spirits.”² While Christians are wise to recognize that their battle is against Satan, they must never forget the relationship that exists between Satan, the flesh, and the world.

John Calvin was exceptionally masterful at keeping a proper balance in his view of the world, the flesh, and Satan. By God’s grace he was given the wisdom to keep himself from ever viewing the three in isolation or overlooking any one of them altogether.³ The overlap of the three is particularly brought out in his understanding of the world. Calvin constantly emphasized that it “is impossibly hard for a man by

his own strength to rid himself of (this) love of the present world that can so hold down his soul in evil bondage.”⁴

Unlike the popular thinking, which promotes the erroneous idea that “demonization” or “degrees of demonization” are highly responsible for much of the spiritual bondage that people find themselves in today,⁵ Calvin rightfully taught that the flesh is the main culprit. He correctly maintained that the world is the sphere of the flesh, of self-life and Satanic power. He taught that it is “in the sphere of the ‘world’ that self-will finds its pleasure and is most easily exercised,”⁶ and that “it is through the fascination of the world that the devil obtains tyrannical sway over the human heart.”⁷ Such an accurate perspective is, indeed, refreshing in a day and age when many professing Christians are all too ready to blame the devil and the world for the spiritual bondage they find themselves in due to their failure to accept responsibility for their sins.

Instead of regularly examining one’s life for sin, taking responsibility for sin, confessing it and being released from its related bondage, many are becoming satisfied to leave sin out of the equation and catapult themselves into a hyper-sensational world that is filled with Satan and his demons, which constantly need to be “bound,” “rebuked” or “cast out.” One of the problems of creating such a world within one’s mind has to do with

the preoccupation of the occult that occurs as a natural consequence of doing so. Instead of one’s mind being filled with thoughts about God, His sovereignty, and the positive aspect of fulfilling His will by actively serving Him in accordance with His word, thoughts quickly become focused on the negative, dark world of the occult. This is far from being God’s design for the thought-life of His children. Of course, the biggest problem associated with denying the aspect of human responsibility for personal sin in this fast emerging trend has to do with the bondage of guilt that people find themselves enslaved due to fact that they are going about their activities of daily living with unconfessed sin in their lives.

David understood the bondage of guilt associated with unconfessed sin. In Psalm 32:5 he wrote, “I acknowledged my sin to Thee, And my iniquity I did not hide; I said, ‘I will confess my transgressions to the LORD’; And Thou didst forgive the guilt of my sin.” (NAS) What a difference we would see in the visible Church today if the words “sin” and “confession” once again occupied their rightful places in our congregational, family, and individual lives. The restoration of such words and their associated doctrines would, indeed, provide a great deal of help in restoring to the contemporary Church a balanced approach to spiritual warfare.

Endnotes

¹ The traditional view of spiritual warfare has recognized the relationship that exists between the flesh, the world, and Satan.

² Dr. David A. Powlison does an

excellent job of pointing out the fallacies in many of the teachings associated with this trend in his book, *“Power Encounters: Reclaiming Spiritual Warfare,”* Baker Books, Grand Rapids, Michigan, Seventh printing: February 2003.

³ Wallace, Ronald S., “Calvin’s Doctrine of the Christian Life” Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, Grand Rapids, Michigan, 1959

⁴ Ibid. pg 124.

⁵ Robert Dean and Thomas Ice reveal of some the errors in the hermeneutics that lie at the roots of such popularized thought in their book, *“What The Bible Teaches About Spiritual Warfare,”* Kregel Publications, Grand Rapids, Michigan, Second Edition 2000

⁶ Wallace, pg.204, cf. Comm. on Gal. 6:14, C.O. 50:265-6

⁷ Wallace, pg. 204, cf. Comm. Eph. 5:16, C.O. 51:220

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Monasticism in the Early Church

Prior to the Protestant Reformation, monasteries covered the landscape of Europe. Christians were convinced that monastic seclusion was among the highest forms of holiness. Self-deprivation and ascetic rigor were treated as virtual means of grace.

The apostles did not establish monasteries. Far from promoting self-deprivation as a way to holiness, the Apostle Paul, in *1 Timothy 4:4-5*, taught that, “everything God created is good, and nothing is to be rejected if it is received with thanksgiving, because it is consecrated by the Word of God and prayer.” The Gospel of Jesus Christ sets men free from rules, regulations, and ineffectual human striving for holiness. Yet monasticism touted the virtues of self-denial and deprivation, ascetic fervor, and human labor as means to holiness.

Egyptian Hermits

Monasticism first arose and flourished in Egypt. Solitary cave dwellers, pole sitters, and other desert madmen sought a slow martyrdom of starvation and insanity. Actual martyrdom had ceased when Christianity received legal protection from Rome. Men who desired to seal their discipleship with blood adopted the next best alternative; they sealed it with loneliness, self-denial, horrible deprivations, and often, insanity and death. The supposed spiritual value of asceticism was a belief that took root early and deeply. Whether it was life lived as a hermit in a dank cave or under the scorching sun, the urge

toward monasticism found its most ardent and extreme devotees in Egypt.

The western church suffered introduction to hermitic excesses when Athanasius, the great Bishop of Alexandria, brought with him on a visit to Rome two Egyptian hermits. The citizens of Rome were shocked and appalled by these emaciated and haggard looking men of Egypt. There were, however, especially among the women, a few who looked upon the hermits with wonder and admiration. A very few hardy souls ventured to Egypt or to other lands in the east, seeking to find a similar holiness in ascetic self-deprivation.

Athanasius visited Rome in AD 340. In AD 590 Gregory the Great became the first monk elected pope. In the interim, monasticism was transformed, shedding its image as the extreme practice of a few Egyptian madmen, and becoming instead a respected and institutionalized arm of Christianity. It was, in large part, the labors of four men that brought that change in the western church: Martin of Tours, Jerome, John Cassian, and Benedict of Nursia.

Martin of Tours

Martin was born in present day Hungary in AD 315. Christianity was officially protected within the Roman Empire, but not widely accepted by the Roman aristocracy. Martin’s father, a soldier, cleaved to the old pagan religion of Rome, but Martin, at the age of ten, ventured



to a local Christian church, wherein he discovered Jesus Christ.

Martin was conscripted into the army at the age of fifteen, but desired instead to live the life of a hermit. Assigned to duty in Gaul, he did not behave like most officers. Although granted a personal servant, Martin insisted on washing his servant's feet. Once, while riding patrol on a cold winter day, Martin saw a freezing beggar, wrapped in tattered clothes. He removed his own fur-lined cloak, cut it in half with his sword, and gave half to the beggar. Later that night he had a dream in which he saw Jesus Christ, wearing the half of the robe given to the beggar. Christ turned to his angels and said, "This is the cloak that Martin, still a catechumen, gave me."

Shortly thereafter Martin's religious beliefs led him to become a pacifist, a conviction that is largely incompatible with military life. He retired from the service, and returned home.

After traveling briefly, Martin founded the first monastery in Gaul, at Ligug. He soon achieved fame, both for his piety, and for a variety of purported miracles, not the least of which was the claim that he had brought dead men back to life.

In AD 370 Martin was, under false pretenses, lured out of his monastery and into the city of Tours, where the people then elected and forcibly consecrated him bishop. Throwing himself into the work, Martin labored ceaselessly for the poor, for those in prison, and for the sick. He moved away from the city, founded a new monastery in

the countryside, and yet continued to carry out his duties from afar.

It was his success as both a bishop and a monk that helped to promote and to legitimize monasticism in the west. While Egyptian hermits might achieve a measure of personal holiness, their commitment to solitary living prevented them from serving as a blessing to the church. Martin of Tours helped to take the principles of asceticism and self-denial and combine them with communal living and Christian charity. That a monk could also serve as a dedicated churchman and pastor helped to legitimize monasticism in the western church.

That legitimacy was strengthened by the life and labors of Jerome.

Jerome

Born around AD 340 to wealthy Christian parents, Jerome was educated in Rome, his studies focusing on rhetoric. He rebelled against the faith of his parents for a time and indulged himself in a licentious life. His conscience soon convicted him and he repented, received baptism, and devoted himself to Jesus Christ.

Although he was very bright and was a rising academic star, Jerome renounced worldly success, and with a few friends began an informal monastic community in his home. This was, however, not enough to satiate the monastic urge in Jerome, so he ventured to Antioch to become a hermit.

Jerome had difficulty devoting himself to the hermitic life in no small part because of his love for books. His favorite author was Cicero, whom he read voraciously and loved deeply. While living in a cave outside of Antioch, Jerome was plagued with a vexing dream. As he stood before the judgment throne of Christ, Jesus asked him what he was. Jerome replied that he was a Christian, to which Christ replied, "You lie! You are a Ciceronian, not a Christian." Jerome was terrified and vowed forever to forsake secular literature and to feed himself only on the Word of God.

Jerome was displeased with solitary life. He loved that it provided him with ample study time, but loathed solitude and self-deprivation. He recognized quickly that, while he could and did run away from some of the sinful temptations of the world, the greatest temptations proceeded from his own heart.

After two years in the sands of the desert, Jerome returned to civilization. He stayed briefly in Antioch and then in Rome, but eventually withdrew to Bethlehem, where he founded the monastery in which he would live for the rest of his life.

Jerome's greatest contribution toward the establishment of monasticism in the western church was his biblical scholarship. The pen of Jerome helped to prove that monastic life could be of academic and theological benefit to the church.

Martin of Tours helped to take the principles of asceticism and self-denial and combine them with communal living and Christian charity.

While the monastery was indeed a retreat from the world, it was not a place of luxury or of ease. It became a place to work the mind and body. It was in the confines of his monastery that Jerome produced his greatest work, the *Vulgate*, his Latin translation of the Scriptures. If the monastery could produce such a masterpiece as the *Vulgate*, what other gems might it mine for the sake of Christ and His church? Jerome helped to lure scholars and academics into the seclusion of the cloister and helped to begin a lasting tradition of scholastic excellence within the monasteries of the western church.

The movement toward monasticism, however, still lacked a theological footing. The monastic impulse had grown out of an undefined belief in the value of asceticism. In the writings of John Cassian, that impulse was given systematic expression, and the practice of monastic life was grounded in the theology of semi-pelagianism.

John Cassian

John Cassian was a contemporary of Jerome. He was born into a Christian home and spoke reverently about the piety of his parents. His family was Latin, aristocratic, and moderately wealthy. Cassian received an exemplary classical education and, while barely out of his teens, went to Bethlehem to study in a monastery.

Around AD 380 Cassian visited Egypt. The fame of the desert hermits had spread to Palestine, and Cassian was intrigued by their pursuit of holiness. Throughout his life, Cassian manifested a devo-

tion to the spiritual value of asceticism that seems to have been grounded in this early visit to Egypt. He truly believed that self-denial and sanctification went hand in hand. Traveling the deserts of Egypt, Cassian learned a strict asceticism from the solitary cave dwellers, pole-sitters, and other hermits of the east.

By AD 400 Cassian had traveled to Constantinople, attracted by John Chrysostom, the Golden-Mouthed bishop of New Rome. Chrysostom, not unlike the majority of the eastern

*In the writings of
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church fathers, taught that while salvation required the assistance of the grace of God, fallen men nevertheless possessed the strength of will to pursue righteousness. Chrysostom's teachings on salvation resemble the unbiblical, but popular adage, "God helps those who help themselves." Cassian later developed Chrysostom's views into a theology of salvation that is called semi-pelagianism. The semi-pelagian system taught that fallen men could, and were required to, take the first step toward God, who then met their effort with His grace, thus enabling them to do the good works by which they would save themselves.

Cassian already believed in the

value of self-denial and asceticism, and Chrysostom's teaching that salvation was due, at least in part, to human effort, grounded that belief in a broader theology of salvation.

After traveling throughout the east, Cassian settled in Marseilles, France in AD 415. Serving as a link between the east and west, Cassian brought many of the principles of eastern asceticism to the west. His monastic writings were revered throughout the Middle Ages, especially in the years just prior to the Reformation. Like most monks, Cassian tended overly to exalt the virtues of ascetic rigor. Men involved in the cloister life often overemphasized external separation from the world, external rites and activities, external holiness, and external law keeping. The heart of the faith rapidly came to consist in obedience to a lengthy list of externals, the keeping of which fostered a spirit of pride and self-satisfaction.

Against that ascetic and monastic ideal, Augustine's conception of the unmerited grace of God in salvation was a hammer stroke. Augustine taught that monastic asceticism was useless toward salvation. God saves, not based on the strivings of men, but based solely on His good pleasure, and according to the free gift of His grace. Church historian Philip Schaff has written that, "Monasticism sought in cloistered retreats a protection against the allurement of sin, the desolating incursions of the barbarians, and the wretchedness of an age of tumult and confusion. But the enthusiasm for the monastic life tended strongly to overvalue external acts and ascetic discipline, and resisted the



free evangelical bent of the Augustinian theology.” If grace and salvation were as Augustine taught, then the monastic ideal, with all its ascetic rigor and external strivings, was nothing but a chasing after the wind. Cassian would not abide that possibility.

John Cassian therefore became the chief proponent of semi-pelagianism. Cassian grounded his devotion to asceticism in the semi-pelagian theology he had learned years earlier from Chrysostom. Cassian’s monastic writings therefore not only promote asceticism as the ethic of western monasticism, but also semi-pelagianism as the theological foundation for that asceticism.

Martin of Tours had proved that a monk could be a pastor, and Jerome had proven the academic value of the cloister, but John Cassian provided the western church with a theology to support its preexisting devotion to the spiritual value of asceticism. Although his semi-pelagian system was later declared heretical, its spirit continued to infuse an element of human works into the Catholic Church’s doctrines of salvation until the very eve of the Reformation.

The establishment of monasticism as a legitimate arm of the Catholic Church was nearly complete. All that remained was the necessity of providing monasticism with a unifying purpose and structure. These were provided through the fertile mind of Benedict of Nursia.

Benedict of Nursia

Born in Italy in AD 480 to noble parentage, Benedict was sent to

school in Rome but was appalled by the immorality of the citizens of the city and by his fellow students. He fled the corruption of Rome and, desiring the solitary life, settled in a small cave at Subiaco, thirty miles east of Rome in a valley of broken rocks and thistles.

Benedict spent three years alone in a cave. He suffered the usual deprivations, torments of soul, and temptations that accompanied utter solitude. He was once so consumed with lust, tormented by a vision of a voluptuous woman he

Augustine’s conception of the unmerited grace of God in salvation was a hammer stroke.

had known in Rome, that he considered for a moment casting aside his hermit’s garb in pursuit of carnal pleasures. But, summoning up courage against the vision, Benedict stripped off his clothes and threw himself naked into a patch of thistles, rolling around until the pain of the lacerating and piercing thorns had all but extinguished his lust.

Haggard, hairy, and emaciated, Benedict was more than once mistaken for a wolf or other wild beast, and on one occasion an unknowing shepherd attacked him as such. Eventually word of his presence in the cave spread and Benedict began to attract both novelty seekers and

genuine followers.

When the abbot of a local monastery died, the monks convinced Benedict to serve as their new abbot. Much to his dismay, he found their discipline lax and their spiritual exercises weak. He sought for a time to enforce a more rigorous asceticism on the cloister, but after his monks responded by attempting to poison him, Benedict departed.

Benedict’s experience as an ascetic abbot in a lax monastery convinced him of the need for both obedience and permanence within the walls of a cloister. Monasteries were noted for their instability, both in their practice and their membership. Each new abbot brought his own set of rules and each monastery had its own abbot. If a monk did not care for the rules of a new abbot, he simply left to find another cloister. Monasteries throughout Europe lacked discipline and continuity.

Benedict, therefore, crafted a *Rule*, which was a veritable textbook for the organization and practice of cloister life. The brilliance of Benedict’s *Rule* was manifold. Benedict was an ascetic, but not overly harsh. Setting western monasticism apart from the almost masochistic extremism of the east, Benedict prescribed that each monk should receive two cooked meals a day, including fresh fruits and vegetables when available. Each monk had his own bed, with a pillow and blanket for comfort, and wine was served with dinner.

In the same vein, however, Benedict required each monk to work physically. Every monk performed every task, and even the

Benedict added the final cornerstone to the foundation of monasticism in the western church.

most menial tasks were treated with respect.

At the heart of the *Rule* stood two pillars of thought: permanence and obedience. Benedict's *Rule* demanded permanence. Once a man committed himself to a given monastery, he was required to stay there for life, unless ordered to go elsewhere by his abbot. Obedience to that abbot was the second pillar. The word "abbot" means "father" and Benedict intended abbots to behave as such. The will of the abbot was to be obeyed unquestioningly and immediately. The habit of imposed obedience was intended, over time, to cultivate a spirit of willing obedience in the hearts of the monks.

In order to promote a communal life that was God-centered, Benedict's *Rule* taught that the purpose of the cloister life was the worship of God. The monks met for worship and prayer eight times a day, including once in the middle of the night. The Psalms and other portions of Scripture were read, prayers were recited, and hymns were sung. The Benedictine *Rule* prescribed that every Psalm would be recited over the course of any given week and it was not long before every monk knew the Psalter by heart. Benedict prescribed the reading of John Cassian's interviews with several Egyptian hermits so that the Benedictine monks might benefit from the wealth of knowledge of the desert fathers. Nearly seven hours

daily were devoted to manual labor or academic instruction, three to private prayer and meditation, two to eating, and about six hours a day were given to sleep.

The *Rule* of St. Benedict spread like wildfire across the landscape of western monasticism. Gregory the Great became acquainted with the Benedictine *Rule* in Rome and encouraged its adoption by the monasteries in that city. Thus, when Gregory sent the monk Augustine to the British Isles to evangelize the pagan people, Augustine took the Benedictine *Rule* with him.

Cloister after cloister across western Europe adopted Benedict's *Rule*. By the time Charlemagne was crowned Holy Roman Emperor in AD 800, the question was legitimately posed whether there were any monks left in Europe that were not Benedictine.

Thus, Benedict added the final cornerstone to the foundation of monasticism in the western church. Martin of Tours had shown that monks could benefit the church through pastoral ministry. Jerome had given the church the Vulgate, and had written cherished commentaries on Scripture, luring fertile minds into the seclusion of the cloister. John Cassian had grounded the asceticism of the monastery in a semi-pelagian theology that taught the necessity of such strivings for salvation. But Benedict had folded monasticism into the arms of the

church by teaching that monasteries of Europe became houses of worship and prayer, bringing a faithful discipline and civilization in the wake of a crumbling Roman Empire.

Monasticism Evaluated

When the Reformation burst upon the church, monasticism, as a system of thought and life, was entrenched throughout Europe. And it was, in many ways, a blessing. In the preservation of learning, the cultivation of farmland, and the Christianization of society, all of western Christendom owes a debt of gratitude to the labors of countless, nameless, hard working monks. But it was not monasticism itself that was responsible for the blessing that these monks had on Western Europe. As Phillip Schaff has so significantly noted, "It was Christianity in monasticism which has done all the good, and used this abnormal mode of life as a means for carrying forward its mission of love and peace. In proportion as monasticism was animated and controlled by the spirit of Christianity, it proved a blessing; while separated from it, it degenerated and became a fruitful source of evil."

Monasticism promoted, in reality, a significant theological deviation from the plain teachings of Scripture. The Gospel of Jesus Christ and the biblical teachings on salvation by grace, monasticism obscured rather than promoted. Schaff has said, "For the simple, divine way of salvation in the Gospel, [monasticism] substituted an arbitrary, eccentric, ostentatious, and pretentious sanctity. It darkened the all-sufficient merits of Christ by the glitter of the over-



meritorious works of man. It measured virtue by the quantity of outward exercises instead of the quality of the inward disposition, and disseminated self-righteousness and an anxious, legal, and mechanical religion.” The monastic life was simply antithetical to the theology of the Reformers, and they railed against it.

Monasticism nevertheless served a purpose in the providence of God, who used the structure of the cloister and the self-discipline of the Benedictine *Rule* to bring civilization, Christianity, and self-control to the bright and ambitious, but brutal and warlike Germanic peoples that inherited the ruins of the Roman Empire. When those passions had been curbed, trained, and brought under the sovereignty of Jesus Christ and the influence of the Holy Spirit, those nations were prepared to break free from the cloister, to cast off the burdensome legalism of Rome, and to venture forth into the freedom of the Gospel. Without the asceticism and legalism of the cloister, there would not have been the freedom and evangelicalism of the Reformation. Schaff has concluded of monasticism that it “became in some sense the cradle of the German reformation. Luther belonged to the order of St. Augustine, and the monastery at Erfurt was to him a preparation for evangelical freedom, as the Mosaic law was to Paul a schoolmaster to lead to Christ. And for this very reason, Protestantism is the end of the monastic life.”

As Reformed believers, we heartily reject monasticism, for we understand that salvation comes not through asceticism, self-denial, or

heroic effort. Rather, salvation comes by grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone. That conviction is simply incompatible with the fundamental principles of the monastic life.

Rev. Russell St. John is the pastor of the Grace United Reformed Church in Kennewick, Washington.

Looking Out and About

- Rev. James Howerzyl, a retired pastor in the United Reformed Churches in North America, died in Escondido, California on Tuesday, February 1, 2005 at the age of 86. Rev. Howerzyl graduated from the Protestant Reformed Theological Seminary in 1946 and began his ministry serving the Protestant Reformed Church in Oskaloosa, Iowa. He continued to faithfully serve the Lord in Redland, California and, for the last twenty years of his ministry, served in what is now known as the Escondido United Reformed Church in California.

- Rev. Fred Gunnink, a retired minister in the United Reformed Churches in North America, passed away on Tuesday, February 22, 2005 in Tucson, Arizona where he and his wife were vacationing. Rev. Gunnink, whom the Lord called to the ministry after he had established a successful career as a carpenter, served churches in Michigan, Illinois, Iowa, and New York. He was 72.

- Mrs. Anna Greenway, the widow of Dr. Leonard Greenway, was called home to be with the Lord on Tuesday, March 1, 2005 at the age of 90. Her husband was one of the founders of *The Outlook* and

served for many years on the Reformed Fellowship Board. Those who served on the Board in its early years recall fondly that in the early years the Editorial Committee met monthly at the Greenway home where Mrs. Greenway graciously served refreshments to the members of the committee.

- A group of Reformed believers in the vicinity of South Holland, Illinois have been meeting for worship in the Dyer, Indiana area. On Sunday, January 30, 2005 they organized as a Reformed Church adhering to the Three Forms of Unity. Three men have been installed as Elders and three men were installed as Deacons. The Congregation has chosen the name Illiana Reformed Fellowship and are meeting at various churches in the community.

A Brief History of the Church

Part One: The Old Testament Church

The word “church” is derived from the Greek word “kyriakee” signifying that it is of the Lord. We know that everything that exists belongs to the Lord, but the church is the Lord’s in a very special sense. It is His personal possession, purchased by His blood. It has been referred to as His bride and His eternal kingdom.

The church is not a human institution. It has existed from eternity in the counsel of God. He has always had His church on earth and therefore it can be said that the church was born with the ages. The church is called by God through His Word and Spirit.

The need for the church developed as a consequence of Adam’s sin in Paradise. God had made Adam good and in His own image. Yet, when Adam was tempted to transgress God’s command not to eat of the fruit of the Tree of Life, Adam elected out of his own free will to disobey God. Adam immediately suffered the consequences of sin. He not only brought the curse of death upon himself, but on his posterity, as well, including all of creation. Paul reminds us of this in Romans 15:12 where he writes: “Therefore, as through one man sin entered the world, and death by sin, so death passed upon all men for all have sinned.”

In the curse pronounced upon Satan in the presence of Adam and Eve, there is a message of good will from God to the guilt-ridden

couple. There was a ray of light to give them hope for the future. It was the beginning of the gospel. We assume that Adam and Eve believed the promise with the hope of salvation through obedience and trust.

God would reveal more of His plan of grace from the church from time to time as He did through Enoch, Noah, Melchizedek, Abraham, and others. All mankind was called to walk in God’s way, and all who did were blessed with the mercies of God.

We should keep in mind that as a result of the curse unregenerate man is spiritually dead in trespasses and sin and has become a spiritual corpse. Unregenerate man is left with a perverted will and this will acts contrary toward God and His Word. Man has become like the person who stumbles into quicksand. The more he struggles, the deeper he sinks into the mire of his own sins. This most certainly will be a problem for the church as it progresses over time.

Evidence of man’s corrupt nature could be seen already in the first dispensation of men upon the earth. Between the period of Adam and the flood “men began to multiply upon the earth and their numbers greatly increased.”

Archeologists have been able to establish that in the years before the flood, people of that dispensation had formed an astonishingly

advanced civilization. Yet, due to the corrupt nature of man, they were only able to create a society of unspeakable wickedness, which God, in His hot displeasure against sin, destroyed with the flood.

One man, Noah, found grace in the eyes of the Lord, and God saved him and his family in the ark. They represented a remnant to keep the flame of God’s church alive.

Alas, in four hundred years between the flood and Abraham’s time, dynasties were established. The people once more rejected God as they lapsed into wickedness and idolatry. It appears that God had abandoned His people and given them over to their sinful desires.

But God called Abraham out of these evil surroundings, instructing him to go to the land that God would show him. God used Abraham not only to keep the flame of the church alive, but also to make him the founder and the father of His people.

God made a covenant with Abraham saying, “I will establish My covenant between Me and thee, and thy seed after thee in their generations for an everlasting covenant to be a God unto thee and thy seed after thee” (Genesis 17:7). It should be noted that this same covenant is relevant to the doctrines of the Reformed churches of today.

God went on to explain to Abraham that He would make Abraham the father of many na-



tions. The extension of this covenant was carried on to Isaac and Jacob, through whom God would bring into being the covenant church of the Old Testament. It was eight hundred years later that God freed the descendents of Jacob from slavery and our of the hands of Pharaoh. The legacy God had promised to Abraham was fulfilled.

An angel of God led His covenant people, the church, to freedom. The people had lived in Egypt for four hundred years. The church, then, was in need of spiritual directives. God came to them in Exodus 23:20, 21 and said "Behold, I send My angel before you to keep you in the way which I have prepared for you, beware of him and obey his voice. Provoke him not, for My name is in him. Then you shall be a peculiar people unto Me, above all peoples of the earth." Indeed, this was a very auspicious beginning for God's covenant people, the church of the Old Testament.

God had kept His covenant promise to Abraham. He had made of his people a great nation, for kings were born from the seed of Abraham. However, they were still a people and a church bearing the corrupt nature inherited from the Fall. They often strayed from the way God had given them and were found to be disobedient. They resorted to idol worship and opposing the Law of God. Most of the people lost sight of the true spiritual meaning of the various ordinances of this period in the life of the Old Testament Church. They failed to see that the ceremonies of their religion was to

lead them in faith to the promised Messiah. They imagined the outward duties of their religion would be sufficient to make them acceptable and pleasing in God's sight.

No doubt, some New Testament believers will make that same mistake. We are not made members of the true Church of Christ through the use of outward means, nor by joining the visible church on earth. God must make us members by calling us into a living union with Jesus Christ. He must give us the faith to believe.

The fall of the Old Testament Church could be summed up in a few words: Fraternalization with the heathen nations which surrounded them; unbelief; rejecting God and falling into idol worship; and finally, they committed the cardinal sin of rejecting the cornerstone of the Church, Jesus Christ, by crucifying Him on Calvary's cross.

Israel, the covenant church, rejected the Son of God and God rejected them. They were stripped of their nationality and dispersed among the nations where they remain to this day, continuing in their rejection of God's Son as their Messiah.

While the church of the Old Testament dispensation came to an inglorious end, it had completed its task. That task was to keep, guard, conserve the special revelation that had been entrusted to them. In spite of their dismal ending, it was nevertheless, a glorious church of the Lord Jesus Christ. The Church of the Old Testament had laid the foundation for the New Testament Church.

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The Trinity in the Gospel of John

(Part 1)

John begins his Gospel with a glimpse into the life of the Godhead. It is an indication of what he intends to do in his book—to unveil significant truth concerning the mystery of the Trinity. The apostle in his prologue invites us to leave the humdrum thoughts and concerns of everyday life to fix our minds upon the contemplation of God. He presents *God in himself* (John 1:1-2, 18a-b) and *God for us* (John 1:14, 18)—what theologians often call the immanent Trinity and the evangelical Trinity. At the very outset of his gospel, we are given the opportunity (in the language of Anselm) to put aside our “weighty cares” and to leave our “wearisome toils” in order that we may seek God, find Him, and come close to Him (*Proslogion*, Chapter I).

We must come, however, with an appropriate posture, marked by two characteristics. There must first be humility. John the theologian of the Trinity informs us at the beginning of his gospel that God is beyond human comprehension: “No one has seen God at any time” (John 1:18a). In the fourth century, Gregory Nyssa would make the same point: “The simplicity of the True Faith assumes God to be ... beyond the reach not only of the human but of the angelic and of all supramundane intelligence, unthinkable, unutterable, above all expression in words” (*Against Eunomius*, Book I). We must, in the second

place, pursue moral integrity if we would even come to a little understanding of the mystery of the one God in three persons. In order to understand and assess the teaching of Jesus (indeed, the teaching of John as well), we need one qualification above all else—the willingness to do the will of God the Father (John 7:17). Gregory Nazianzen picked up on this biblical perspective and answered the question as to who is allowed to ponder, meditate, and think about God. “It is permitted,” he said, “only to those who ... are being purified” (*The First Theological Oration* III).

After his opening reference to the plurality of divine persons that have existed from the beginning (John 1:1-2), John explicitly teaches in his gospel the mystery of the three distinct persons, each of whom is fully God. The Father, the Son, and the Spirit are revealed in God as he is in Himself. They are set forth in their distinct actions, and they are manifested in salvation.

God in Himself

Through the biblical revelation, we learn that God as He exists in Himself is three persons, each one distinct from the other two. Jesus Christ, John writes, is the “only begotten Son” of God the Father (John 3:16). As Athanasius explained so well, the fact that the Son *is begotten* shows that He is a distinct person from the Father. And the fact that

He is the Father’s *Son* means that He must have the same essence as the Father—that is, full divinity (*Contra Arianos*, I.15). While the Father eternally begets the Son, he eternally emits the Spirit. “The Spirit of truth,” Jesus said, is the one “who proceeds from the Father” (John 15:26). As to the Father, we must speak by way of negation—He is neither begotten, nor does He proceed. Is there anything in creation comparable to this? John of Damascus suggested that there is: “We have an analogy in Adam, who was not begotten (for God Himself molded him), and Seth, who was begotten (for he is Adam’s son), and Eve, who proceeded out of Adam’s rib (for she was not begotten)” (*An Exact Exposition of the Orthodox Faith* I.VIII).

God in Action

The truth of the three-person God is further declared by their actions which differ one from the other. This is a valuable insight provided by the contemporary German theologian Wolfhart Pannenberg (*Systematic Theology*, vol. 1). The Father is the person who confers authority upon His own Son, specifically the authority to execute judgment on the Last Day (John 5:27-29). It is the Father who determined that every human being who ever lived will give an account of his ways to the very Son of God. The Son is the person who freely submits Himself to the plan of God, declaring, “I do not seek my own will, but the will of him who sent me” (John 5:30). At the conclusion of His life before the crucifixion He could say, “I glorified



You on the earth, having accomplished the work which You have given me to do” (John 17:4). The Spirit is the person who calls attention to the Son, rather than to Himself. Of this Spirit of truth, Jesus said, “He will glorify me” (John 16:14). The work of the Spirit would be to call attention not to Himself, but to the Son of God. Clearly, the actions of the Father, the Son, and the Spirit in the flow of history underscore the mystery that the God whom John had come to love was three persons.

God for Us

Finally, God as Trinity is seen in the gospel itself—that the Father gave what the Puritan Thomas Goodwin called “two grand gifts,” both His Son and his Spirit (*Works*, vol. 6, p. 9). The beneficial intention of the Father in the gift of the Son is expressed in the declaration: “For God did not send the Son into the world to judge the world, but that the world might be saved through Him” (John 3:17). Here, we find, as John Calvin affirmed, that God is “favorable to the whole world when He calls all without exception to the faith of Christ” (*Commentary on John*). While divine favor toward all the world is expressed in the Incarnation, the favor of the Father and the Son toward the church was manifest on Pentecost in the gift of the Spirit. Jesus comforted His disciples with the promise: “I will ask the Father, and *He will give you another Helper*” (John 14:16). And he added, “If I go, *I will send Him to you*” (John 16:7). These evangelical gifts may further be regarded as the very hands of God—the Son effecting the plans

of the Father, and the Spirit giving the power for the plans to be effected (Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* IV.xxxviii.3). The hand of the Son accomplished redemption, and the hand of the Spirit applies redemption to the elect.

God Is Love

Perhaps the most outstanding characteristic about the Godhead is that it is a three-person society of supreme love. The medieval theologian Richard of St. Victor wrote, “Each of those who love gives love, and from this each undoubtedly draws those delights of love, flowing with honey” (*Of the Trinity*, Book Three, Chapter II). Already in the prologue we are given an indication of the love that permeates the Trinitarian life in the statement that “the Word was *with God*” (John 1:1) and in the declaration that “the only begotten Son” is the one “who is in the bosom of the Father” (John 1:18). Just as a human father cradles his infant son tenderly holding him in his bosom, so likewise the heavenly Father embraces His only begotten Son in His own bosom. Later, John explicitly calls attention to this reality of inter-Trinitarian love both before creation and afterwards. In Jesus’ address to the Father, He acknowledged, “*You loved me before the foundation of the world*” (John 17:24). And in creation itself, as the incarnate Son,

He informed the apostles, “But so that the world may know that *I love the Father*, I do exactly as the Father commanded me” (John 14:31).

Children of God

What is utterly remarkable—and what is at the very heart of the gospel—is that this Trinitarian God embraces the creature, even man fallen in sin. We who believe and receive the Christ are given the grace of adoption, “the right to become children of God” (John 1:12). By nature, Christ is the only begotten Son; by grace, we become a great host of adopted sons. Our place and acceptance in heaven’s family is such that the risen Christ announces, “I ascend to my Father and your Father, and my God and your God” (John 20:17). The love that is extended to us in the household of God is even comparable to the love that the divine persons have for one another. Jesus said, “Just as the Father has loved me, I have also loved you” (John 15:9). The adoption of the needy, the lost, and the outcast came at great cost. Our inclusion as sons of God meant the exclusion of *the Son of God* in the crucifixion. It is the reason for His cry of dereliction, “My God, my God, why have You forsaken me?”

As we contemplate what has been given to us in the gospel, we

What is utterly remarkable — and what is at the very heart of the gospel — is that this Trinitarian God embraces the creature, even man fallen in sin.

No More Silence

can see the appropriateness of the question of Jesus addressed to Peter—if it were to be directed to us—“Do you love me?” If we can answer in the affirmative, then we must remember our duty to endeavor to live under the authority of the Word of God. For Jesus said, “If you love me, you will keep my commandments” (John 14:15).

Rev. Mark J. Larson is the pastor of the Providence Presbyterian Church (OPC) in Lenoir, North Carolina.

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Some time (years) ago I wrote some critical comments about the Committee for Ecumenicity of the URC with regard to its contacts with the Canadian Reformed Churches. The point of what I said was this: We should strive for unity with the Canadian Reformed Churches *short of federative unity*. That was not taken kindly of me. Nevertheless, I want to broach the subject once more.

Let me begin by saying: I am all in favor of doing things together with our Canadian Reformed brothers: pulpit exchange, acceptance at the Lord’s Supper (pulpit & table fellowship), membership recognition, working together for Reformation rallies, youth activities, working together in mission endeavors (M.E.R.F., Christ for Armenia, Come Over & Help, etc.).

What I object to is *merger* of the two federations. Not only do I see trouble ahead, I think the ‘cure’ will be worse than the disease: think of Lord Supper policy, song book, seminary, etc.

What is more, I don’t believe the Bible demands this kind of unity. In a small booklet written some years ago by Dr. Sid Greidanus, he wrote that the Bible knows not a trace of such (federative) unity. That may be putting it a bit strongly, but the point is well taken. All the Bible really knows is local autonomous churches (congregations) who seek fellowship with each other (in the true faith) where that is possible. That’s all. No independent-

ism, but neither rule from the top (hierarchy).

Our Church Order puts it this way: “Federative relationships do not belong to the essence or being of the church . . . Entrance into and departure from a federative relationship is strictly a voluntary matter.” (No 7 of Foundational Principles).

It seems to me that there has been a “conspiracy of silence” about this whole thing. It’s time we do some talking, especially with the man in the pew. We might be in for a surprise. And we must also talk with our URCs south of the border. They know very little about our Canadian Reformed brothers. Let’s have some dialog on this. No more silence.

Rev. Jelle Tuininga is an emeritus pastor in the United Reformed Churches of North America. He lives in Lethbridge, Alberta and is a member of the Trinity Reformed Church (URC) in that city.



Sonship

Our catechism poses a very natural question for those who call themselves children of God. Why is Jesus referred to and confessed as “the only begotten Son” since we, too, are children of God? The Word of God leaves no doubt as to the unique relationship that Jesus, the Second Person of the Trinity, has with God the Father. The testimony is great that Jesus is very God of very God. We have seen in the last two Lord’s Days the importance of Jesus as our Savior and Jesus as the Anointed One. He is our Prophet, Priest, and King. We are reminded that there is no other name under heaven and earth whereby we can be saved but the name of Jesus. But once we are saved are we not also to be considered as sons of God?

Yes we are. The difference is this: Jesus *is* the Son of God and, through Him, we *become* children of God. Notice the difference: Jesus is - we become. By our very nature we are like orphans. We are without God. The Bible tells us that we are conceived and born in sin. God, however, draws us unto Himself by His marvelous grace.

While we were still dead in our trespasses and sins, God illustrated His love for us in this, that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us. We must clearly understand that it is not because of anything that we say or do that God shows His favor upon us. It all His marvelous grace that moves Him to bring us into His family.

God adopts miserable, dead in their trespasses and sins, people like you and me, for Christ’s sake. It is for the sake of Him who is the only begotten Son that we are made sons and daughters. That Son, Jesus Christ, gave Himself on the cross of Calvary a ransom for our souls so that we might be adopted into the family of God. That wonderful Son left His home in glory, took upon Himself human flesh and dwelt among us.

We responded to this wonderful miracle of the second Person of the Trinity dwelling with us by rejecting Him. We beat Him. We spit upon Him. In the end we placed Him upon a cross and watched Him die a most cruel death. We simply could not stand to listen to what He had to say.

That, however, was not the end of the story. This same Jesus, whom we crucified, rose again from the dead. He now sits at the right hand of God the Father Almighty. To Him is given all power and all authority.

Instead of seeking revenge for the horrible things that we did to Him, Jesus poured out His love upon us. He gave us the Comforter so that we could understand that through His death on the cross we can now be called children of God. Those who believe in Him as the Son of God anointed to be our Prophet, Priest, and King taste the joy of forgiveness and experience peace with God. We are made children of God, adopted into His family through Christ.

Rev. Wybren H. Oord is the pastor of the Covenant United Reformed Church in Kalamazoo, Michigan. He also serves as Editor of *The Outlook*.

Q *Why is He called God’s Only begotten son, since we also are children of God?*

A *Because Christ alone is the eternal, natural Son of God; but we are children of God by adoption, through grace, for Christ’s sake.*

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Coming Up next Issue (D.V.)

Dr. Cornel Venema will take a look at Question and Answer 80 of the Heidelberg Catechism and explain why it can not be relegated to a footnote.

Mr. Shane Lems will provide an overview of Martin Luther's personal battle with the devil.

Mr. Dow Haan, Sr. will continue his overview of the history of the Church, looking in May at the New Testament Church.

Rev. Mark Larson will complete his two part series on the Trinity.

Rev. Daniel Hyde and **Rev. Brian Vos** will continue their series of articles on the Belgic Confession and the Book of Revelation, respectively.

The Outlook welcomes writers to submit articles that promote the spiritual welfare of our readers and promote the Reformed faith to editor@reformed_fellowship.net

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