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The Outlook



Devoted to the Exposition and Defense of the Reformed Faith

Jesus, What Are You Doing Now?

Ascension Day does not get nearly as much attention as most any of the other holy days on our church calendars. On Christmas Eve and Easter we can expect the church to be full. We certainly would never think of canceling our Good Friday Service. But on Ascension Day several churches will often combine their services in order to have at least a few people in their pews.

I remember several years ago, when delegates to Classis debated whether or not to have their regular Classis Meeting on the usual Thursday in May in spite of the fact that it was Ascension Day. When one

minister objected, saying that neither he nor his Elder would be able to attend the Classis Meeting because their church has a worship service that evening, another minister muttered, "Well, why?" That seems to be the typical attitude given to Ascension Day. We see it as a lesser holy day.

I would suggest to you that Ascension Day is one of the most important days that the church can celebrate. It is just as important as Christmas, Good Friday, Easter, and Pentecost. I can understand not having a special service for Epiphany, or not gathering for Ash

Wednesday, or All Saints' Day. I could even forgo Palm Sunday except that it always falls on a Sunday and we are all in church anyway. But to give up Ascension Day is to miss a very important aspect of Christ's life. It is to miss His glory and exaltation. It also represents His continual work for us, His people.

Perhaps the reason we fail to celebrate Ascension Day as we should, is because we fail to see what Jesus is doing in heaven on behalf of His people. We focus, rather on the completeness of the atonement of Jesus Christ upon the cross. We speak of His once-for-all sacrifice made on our behalf at Calvary and then we confess that "He ascended into heaven, and sitteth at the right hand of God the



Volume 55, No.5 (ISSN 8750-5754) (USPS 633-980) "And the three companies blew the trumpets...and held THE TORCHES in their left hands, and THE TRUMPETS in their right hands...and they cried, 'The sword of Jehovah and of Gideon'" (Judges 7:20).

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Father Almighty.” What else could this mean but that Jesus has been enthroned victoriously in the heavens and is now resting from His labors?

We certainly would not begrudge Jesus a little vacation time before “He comes to judge the living and the dead.” After living a perfectly obedient life, and after bearing the punishment and wrath of God on our behalf, we expect Him to rest a while.

Our High Priest

The Book of Hebrews tells us otherwise. Hebrews tells us that in heaven Jesus performs for us all the duties of the Old Testament High Priest. In the Old Testament, the High Priest was permitted to enter into the Holy of Holies once a year. Within the Holy of Holies was the Ark of the Covenant with the mercy seat of God. The mercy seat represented the throne of God. In Hebrews 9:24 we are told “For Christ did not enter a holy place made with hands, a mere copy of the true one, but into heaven itself, now to appear in the presence of God for us.”

Did you catch that last phrase? “Now to appear in the presence of God for us.” Jesus comes into the presence of God not for His own sake, but for ours. And He comes not before the Ark of the Covenant, as the Old Testament High Priest did, but before the very presence of God Himself as our High Priest.

You may recall that the Old Testament Priest was one who would represent the people to God. He would be the one appointed by God to make all the necessary sacrifices and say all the necessary prayers

on behalf of the people.

The author of Hebrews tells us, that when we have Jesus Christ as our High Priest, we are a lot better off than the people in the Old Testament were with their High Priest. First of all, our High Priest does not have to make any sacrifices for His own sins, as did the Old Testament High Priest, because our High Priest, Jesus Christ, is sinless. Second, our High Priest does not work out of the temple in Jerusalem; our High Priest is in heaven. Third, our High Priest is not limited to entering the Holy of Holies once a year; the ascended High Priest is in the Holy of Holies every day, all the time. And fourth, our High Priest does not come before the mercy seat, which represents the presence of God; because He has ascended into heaven, He is in the very presence of the Most High God.

So, the truth of the matter is, Jesus did not go on a sabbatical until the Judgment Day. Instead, we have a High Priest who continually, day after day, week after week, year after year, acts out His job as High Priest by representing us to God.

The crucified, risen, and ascended Son of God appears before the Almighty God as a living sacrifice for our sin. Hebrews 7:25 tells us “He is able to save forever those who draw near to God through Him, since He always lives to make intercession for them.” That is something Mohammed cannot offer. Nor

can Buddha, Moloch, Baal, or any other god.

We have the assurance of the forgiveness of sins and the promise of eternal life given to us because the crucified and risen Lord ascended into heaven and performs there the rituals of the priesthood. That is, He represents us to God. When we come into the presence of the Most High God and stand on the scales of His Law, we know that we will be guilty. We have, after all, broken God’s Law and add to our sin and misery every day. However, we also know that our sacrifice for sin, Jesus Christ, will be right there with us! We do not come before the altar of God empty-handed. We come with our sacrifice: our faith in Jesus Christ. In fact, our Perfect Sacrifice has ascended into the heavens before us and prepares the way for us.

For Our Remembrance

The practical value of this is incredible! It means that the sacrifice of Christ is not merely something that happened 2000 years ago. It is something that is eternally in the presence of the Father. Not only are *we* called to remember and believe that the sacrifice of Christ was given for a complete remission of all our sins; but the Father also is constantly called upon to remember that sacrifice made by His Son. How can He forget? That sacrifice, made for our sin, is constantly before Him, seated at His right hand.

***Jesus comes into the presence of God
not for His own sake, but for ours.***

Nothing, Without Love

“If I speak with the tongues of men and of angels, but do not have love...I am nothing.” I Corinthians 13:1, 2

Remember why God put the rainbow in the sky? We usually say that the rainbow is there to remind us that God will never again destroy the world with a flood. Genesis 9:12-16 are very clear in telling us that the rainbow is put in the sky to remind God that He has promised never to destroy the world in such a fashion again. So also, the Son of God, standing beside the Father as our Priest, reminds the Father that the sacrifice was already made for our sin.

Jesus speaks to the Father about every member of the Great Shepherd’s flock. His mediation, intercession, and healing is a continuous work of Jesus. Through grace, this work is done for all of God’s children. And it certainly is cause for celebrating and remembering in worship every Ascension Day.

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It was the great preacher of Ecclesiastes who cried, *Meaningless! Meaningless! Everything is meaningless.* He was speaking about the meaninglessness of life, all of life’s work and riches, all of life’s ambitions, and all of life’s treasures, dreams, and aspirations. He said, “It’s all meaningless unless a man has the fear and knowledge of the Lord God in his heart.”

Knowing God is the only thing that makes life worthwhile!

I Corinthians 13 is the New Testament version of that same truth. The Apostle Paul is crying out *Nothing! Nothing! It’s all for nothing!* He, too, is speaking about life, but he is speaking about life in the church—how one can possess many great gifts, many godly virtues—yet have it all be for nothing unless one has the love of God in his heart.

Love is the only thing that makes our lives of service worthwhile. Without love, it is nothing.

Whether we are talking about gifts used in the service of Jesus Christ in His church, or gifts used in the service of Jesus Christ in the classroom, or in the hallways or in the office, we know that if we do not have love, all our efforts, all our training, and all our hard work is in vain—it means nothing.

The Prerequisite of Love

As we look at the gifts Paul mentions in the opening verses of this

chapter, we notice that these are no small gifts. Paul mentions speaking in the tongues of men and even of angels. From what Paul writes in Chapter 14, it is clear that in the church of Corinth speaking in tongues was a highly valued gift. It made quite an impression on the congregation.

Yet, Paul writes: “If can speak in the tongues of men and of angels but have not love, I am only a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal.” Even if I have the gift everyone wants, but I do not have love it amounts to nothing! In that metaphor of a resounding gong and clanging cymbal we find a reference to the way pagans would often go to the temple and greet their gods (and still do to this day). Upon entering the temple of their deity, priests and worshippers would bang the gong in order to get the attention of their god (perhaps to wake him up).

Psalm 115 reminds us that the idol gods have ears but cannot hear. They are lifeless. So, the banging of the gong and the clanging of the cymbal accomplishes nothing. It is just a loud noise that rings forth in vain. It is meaningless. No one hears it. It amounts to nothing and accomplishes nothing.

Paul’s message to the church is profound. He is saying that if God’s people do not possess love (which is not so much a gift of the Spirit but the fruit of the Spirit), then all their speaking, all their exercising of their gift



means nothing. It is all just a bunch of noise that is not heard by God. It is meaningless. God turns a deaf ear to those who do not have love in their hearts.

Next, Paul speaks about the gift of prophecy. Looking again at Chapter 14, it is clear that Paul exalts the gift of prophecy above speaking in tongues. Paul would rather have everyone prophesy than speak in tongues, because prophecy results in the strengthening and edifying of the church. Prophecy results in the Word of God being revealed to God's people. But even that important gift means nothing if it is not accompanied by love.

The same goes for the ability to fathom all mysteries and knowledge. It is also true for those who possess faith enough to move mountains. If love is not present, it is all for naught. Even acts of charity—helping the poor and needy is meaningless without love. Making the ultimate sacrifice (offering our body to the flames for our faith), even this is for nothing, if we have not love.

Think of how this applies to us in our situations. As a Pastor, I need to be reminded of the need to love all the time. Keep in mind, the Bible does not teach that love is something we simply possess. It is not as if all we have to do is take inventory of our hearts each day before we leave home to be sure we have got love: Briefcase? Check. Greek New Testament? Check. Car keys? Check. Sandwich? Check. Love? Check.

No. Love is not something we merely possess. God's Word teaches us that love is an exercise.

Love as an activity. On a daily basis, we are to show love, demonstrate love, exemplify love, pour out love, and shower love upon others as an offering to God.

That love must form the basis, the motivation, and the foundation for all that we do. As a Pastor, I can work for hours on end in my study, I can know my Bible front to back, I can read every book on my shelves, I can be up to date on all the theological issues of our day; I can write articles for theological journals, I can preach twice every Lord's Day, lead all the Bible studies and societies, I can chair meetings, and make every sick call and shut-in visit, I can be a real superman. But if I have not love, if God's love is not present in my ministry, if God's love is not seen in my actions, if it is not heard by my words, if it is not experienced by the congregation, then all that I do is in vain. It is all for naught.

The same is true whether you teach or study, labor as a staff member or factory worker. You can be the most efficient worker in your field, handling problems with ease; but if you have not love, your actions are all for nothing.

The Challenge of Love

There is something else we need to know about love. Loving is not easy; loving is a challenge. As a Pastor, I can tell you that it is not

always easy to love God's people. They can be a very unlovable bunch. There are people you meet in the church and outside the church that are simply not deserving of your love.

They are unkind, disrespectful, and inconsiderate. They might be stubborn, closed-minded and conservative to a fault. There might be others who are lukewarm and appear to lack any zeal or passion for Christ and His church. Among God's people we also find those who are immoral, ungodly, unsubmitive, and hypocritical.

Yet, the reality is they all need to be loved. God calls us to love not just the people we like, or the people who like us, or who share our passion and zeal, or who happen to agree with us, or the ones who live moral upright and decent lives. The reality is, God calls us to love enemies as well as friends, unbelieving neighbors as well as believing neighbors, and those who are unkind to us in church as well as those who are kind. In short, we are called to love the undeserving as well as the deserving!

That is our duty and calling before the Lord Jesus Christ. We serve Christ and His Kingdom, by loving—by loving the unlovable, by bearing with the unbearable, by suffering the insufferable, and by tolerating the intolerable. That kind

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God.***

of love is something our God sees and hears and also takes pleasure in.

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus said, “If you love those who love you, what reward will you get? Are not even the tax collectors doing that?”

It does not take a Christian to love someone who is lovable. It does not take a Christian to love someone whom you like or who gives you love in return. But it does take a Christian to love someone who does not return your love or to love someone who is altogether unworthy of love.

The Portrayal of Love

The type of love required of us is not from below but must come down to us from above, from our God and Father in heaven. This becomes all the more evident as we consider the portrayal of love.

We are all familiar enough with verses 4-8 of I Corinthians 13 to know that it is widely recognized as one of the most comprehensive and beautiful descriptions of love found anywhere—not only the Bible but also in literary history. Under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, Paul describes love in a positive fashion by saying what it is, as well as in a negative fashion—by saying what it is not.

It is not my intent to go through these virtues one by one, but rather, focus mainly on the first attribute. Paul writes, “love is patient.” The fact that Paul begins with patience simply reiterates what we have said thus far. Our love will be challenged. Our love is going to be tested and tried.

That is all the more reason for our love to be patient. A love that is patient will overcome all trials. Speaking of patient love, James 1:19 says, everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak, and slow to become angry. For man’s anger does not bring about the righteous life that God desires.

As we know all too well ourselves, anger is perhaps the greatest threat, the greatest predator to Christian love. So, James recommends pa-

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tience as a means of counteracting anger, as a way to overcome it and conquer it. Patience protects love; patience insulates love.

If our love is patient, then we will show the quality of righteous restraint. We will not lash out in anger even when our spouse or a fellow worker lashes out at us. We will not seek to settle the score when we have been wronged. Rather, we will be patient. We will be slow to become angry and quick to love, for that is what love does.

This kind of love is not indigenous to us humans here on earth. This is not a love that some are just lucky to be born with, while others go begging. No. The type of love we

are called to exercise and exemplify is supernatural. It comes to us from above, and it is the same love that our Lord Jesus Christ exercised and demonstrated while He walked the earth.

It is the same love that Christ showed to those who were ungodly and unloving and undeserving. Come to think of it, this is the same kind of love that our God showed to us when we were ungodly, unloving, and undeserving. I John 4:10 says, “And this is love, not that we loved God, but that He loved us and sent His Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins.” And Romans 5:8 confirms that love when it states, “God demonstrated His love for us in this: while we were yet sinners Christ died for us.”

Our God loved us even though we were dead in our trespasses and sins, even as He saw our vile hearts, even as He read the thoughts of our corrupt minds. We were ugly and unlovable, yet through Christ His Son, God’s love covered over those ugly blemishes and stains. God’s love saved us and transformed us and made us alive again.

So now, God’s love becomes the standard for our love. We Christians are to have the love of Christ Jesus in our hearts. This is the kind of love that ought to be present in the classrooms, on the job, in our social gatherings, our homes, and our churches.

You have to have love because without it all your labors and all your efforts will be for naught. The same love that changed us and transformed our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus—that won us over



for God—can also be used to change the hearts and minds of others.

God can use our patient love, our understanding words, our kind gestures, and our forgiving spirit as a tool of the Gospel whereby others who are lost in their sin and undeserving of love and mercy, are won over to Him. They are won over even as they see and experience the love of Christ first hand, as we show it to them, and as we apply that love to them.

That is why love is the most excellent way. That is why love is a prerequisite for ministry, for seminary, for marriage, for life in the church, and life in this world . . . because, if we have not love, we are nothing, and all we do is nothing.

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We Confess

An Exposition & Application of the Belgic Confession

Article 23: Of the Justice by Which We Stand Before God

“Justification is just-as-if-I-never-sinned.” This Sunday School definition has become the doctrine of justification for many mature Christians because it is so memorable. This statement is true, but it is only half of the truth of this glorious doctrine. As Protestants, we believe that justification is more than just the forgiveness of our sins. In justification we are actually being given something. The Belgic Confession follows the classic Protestant distinction between the negative aspect of justification (*iustificatio negativa*) and the positive (*iustificatio positiva*) – that is, forgiveness of our sins *and* imputation of Christ’s righteousness.

Justification: Forgiveness

The negative aspect of our justification is seen in the opening words of Article 23, which says, “We believe that our salvation consists in the remission of our sins for Jesus Christ’s sake...”

When we called out to God for salvation, placing our all our trust in Jesus Christ, God our Father remitted, absolved, forgave, and wiped from His memory all our sins, past, present, and future. This is what we are saying when we stand with the catholic Church throughout all times and places, and confess “I believe . . . the forgiveness of sins.” This is our “Amen” to these words, saying that they are true of us de-

spite all appearances otherwise.

We confess the forgiveness of sins not merely for ourselves. We say “Amen” to God’s forgiveness in Christ with David, that murderer and adulterer who prayed, “As far as the east is from the west, so far does He remove *our* transgressions from *us*” (Psalm 103:12; ESV). We believe with Hezekiah, who proudly showed the son of the King of Babylon all *his* glorious treasures, “You have cast all my sins behind your back” (Isaiah 38:17; ESV). We look beyond ourselves to Christ, who says, “I, I am He who blots out your transgressions and for my own sake, and I will not remember your sins” (Isaiah 43:25; ESV).

Who shall bring a charge against us? Who shall condemn us? The world? Our own flesh? The Devil? We stand before them fully acknowledging our sin, our weakness, our unworthiness, our depraved thoughts, words, and deeds. Yet we pray,

Who is a God like you, *pardoning iniquity and passing over transgression* for the remnant of his inheritance? He does not retain his anger forever, because he delights in steadfast love. He will again have compassion on us; *he will tread our iniquities under foot. You will cast all our sins into*

the depths of the sea
(Micah 7:18-19; ESV).

We know this God who pardons, passes over, tramples, and drowns our sins – His name is Jesus Christ, “for He will save His people from their sins” (Matthew 1:21). Thus what was spoken of by our forefathers in the Old Testament finds its ultimate fulfillment for us in the New Testament with our blessed Lord, “in whom we have redemption through His blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses” (Ephesians 1:7 cf. Colossians. 1:14; ESV). And, as the epistle to the Hebrews says, “He has appeared once for all at the end of the ages to put away sin ... and where there is forgiveness of these, there is no longer any offering for sin” (9:26, 10:18; ESV).

Justification: Imputation

But forgiveness is not all there is to our salvation, wonderfully. There is so much more. If God would have merely forgiven us so that we were simply “as-if-I-had-never-sinned,” as the Sunday school line goes, that would mean that we would have, in a sense, been put back in the Garden, as Adam. And in that place we would have needed “perfect and personal obedience” (Westminster Confession of Faith, VII.2), or, as our Confession says, we would have had to use our newfound state of uprightness “to will agreeably to the will of God” (Article 14). In do-

ing so, if possible, we would then have received the blessing of being confirmed as righteous.

Yet, even if it were even possible to be put back in the Garden of Eden, we, like Adam, would have fallen. Thus our heavenly Father, in His wisdom and goodness to us, not only completely forgave all our sins, but replaced them with something else – the righteousness of Christ. Article 23 of our Confession continues, saying,

...and that therein our righteousness before God is implied; as David and Paul teach us, declaring this to be the blessedness of man that God imputes righteousness to him apart from works. And the same apostle says that we are justified freely by his grace, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus.

Forgiveness alone is not salvation. Scripture speaks of justification as consisting of two aspects. Forgiveness (the negative) must be followed up by imputation (the positive). This means that when we trusted in Christ, God the Father also gave us something. We speak with Scripture in saying He “imputed,” or, credited to us all that Jesus Christ did for us in His active obedience to the Law. Through Christ, we are not only just-as-if I-had-never-sinned, we are also just-

just-as-if-I-was-always-obedient. How amazing is that! And to think, from our youth we are privileged to learn and rest in this comfort, which our Heidelberg Catechism speaks of in question and answer 60. There we are taught that Christ’s satisfaction, righteousness, and holiness have been imputed to us so that we are now “as if I had never committed nor had any sins [the negative aspect of justification], and had myself accomplished all the obedience which Christ has fulfilled for me” [the positive aspect].

This is our “blessedness,” as the Confession quotes from Psalm 32. What is it to be “blessed” according to Scripture? It is to be one whom the Lord does not regard as a sinner, but as righteous (Psalm 32:1; Romans 4:6). To be “blessed” is to be one who claims “Jesus Christ the righteous” as his own (I John 2:1).

So just how blessed are we by justification? Is this blessedness the result of our works to justify us, as Pelagianism teaches? Is this blessedness the result of our faith which justifies us, as Arminianism teaches? Is this blessedness the result of God beginning our justification by grace and then completing it after our life-long cooperation with grace, as Rome teaches? Or is this blessedness the result of being justified now by faith, but later by good works at the Last Day?

Read how we as Reformed Christians understand the reason for our blessedness in justification:

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 heavenly Father, in His wisdom and goodness to us, not only completely forgave all our sins, but replaced them with something else – the righteousness of Christ.



Despite my sin, despite my doubt, despite my failures in the Christian life, I stand before a Righteous Judge blameless and righteous!

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 (Belgic Confession, Art. 22; emphasis added).

Our blessedness is grounded in the fact that every single holy, good, and righteous work that Christ did is imputed to us. And how many works is that? Think about it. Whereas we sin in thought, word, and deed continually, every thought Jesus ever had was holy; every word He ever spoke was good; every deed He ever did was righteous. This was not just at one moment, or one single day, or just during His three-year ministry. No – Christ’s entire life of obedience to God and His Law, every single moment He lived, is imputed to my account, reckoned as if I myself had done the work myself! Christ’s merit is infinite, and therefore I have an infinite holiness, righteousness, and goodness before God. “There is therefore now no condemnation to those who are in Christ Jesus” (Romans 8:1; NKJV).

This is exactly what Paul is saying to us in II Corinthians 5:21, when he says, “He [the Father] made Him [Christ] who knew no sin to be sin on our behalf, so that we might become the righteous-

ness of God in Him [Christ].” All that we believe, all that we are in Christ is summed up here: we are the righteousness of God. Despite my sin, despite my doubt, despite my failures in the Christian life, I stand before a Righteous Judge blameless and righteous! Not only does He say, “Not guilty,” He also says, “Righteous!”

The Fruits of Justification

Humility

But if we believe that, won’t we become prideful, arrogant, and careless? Notice that the results of this blessed knowledge of standing as righteous before God in answer to the objections of Rome, the Arminian, and the false piety of our own hearts:

And therefore we always hold fast this foundation, ascribing all the glory to God, humbling ourselves before Him, and acknowledging ourselves to be as we really are, without presuming to trust in any thing in ourselves, or in any merit of ours, relying and resting upon the obedience of Christ crucified alone, which becomes ours when we believe in Him.

We who have been declared righteous bow down in humility before the God who justifies the wicked (Romans 4:5), “ascribing all the glory” to Him, saying, “Not to us, O LORD, not to us, but to

your name give glory” (Psalm 115:1). We join that measureless host of heaven, those who have already been freed from the daily struggle with sin and are clad in white: “Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb!” (Revelation 7:10)

And notice while we bow in reverence this is not a false show of piety. How often we come before God with a show of humility and reverence, as if we were unbelievers who had not been counted as sons, full inheritors of heaven. Notice how the Confession corrects this, in that while we humble ourselves before God, “without presuming to trust in any thing in ourselves, or in any merit of ours,” at the same time we acknowledge “ourselves to be as we really are.” What are we “really?” We are forgiven, righteous, saved! Because of this, we come to Him in humility, for ourselves – who are we that He would love us – and for the matchless gift of salvation.

In my congregation we end our evening service with the words of the “General Thanksgiving” (1662 Book of Common Prayer), which say in part,

Almighty God, Father of all mercies, we, your unworthy servants, do give you most humble and hearty thanks for all your goodness and loving-kindness to us, and to all men. We bless you for our creation, preservation, and all the blessings of this life; but above all, for your inestimable love in the redemption of

Study/Application Questions for Article 23

1. How does article 23 show the relationship between theology and piety, doctrine and Christian living?
2. How does the Protestant doctrine of justification affect worship, preaching, evangelism, and the daily struggles of the Christian?
3. Discuss Paul's words about the two kinds of righteousness, our own and Christ's (Phil. 3:2-9).

the world by our Lord
Jesus Christ...

Confidence

So our attitudes of humility before God are not to be a false humility, which manifests itself in things such as self-excommunicating ourselves from the Lord's Table, because of our perceived unworthiness. With humility is joined confidence, not in self but in Christ, as Article 23 ends, saying,

This is sufficient to cover all our iniquities, and to give us confidence in approaching to God; freeing the conscience of fear, terror, and dread, without following the example of our first father, Adam, who, trembling, attempted to cover himself with fig-leaves. And, verily, if we should appear before God, relying on ourselves or on any other creature, though ever so little, we should, alas! be consumed. And therefore every one must pray with David: O Jehovah, enter not into judgment with Thy

servant: for in Thy sight no
man living is righteous.

As Christians one of the great benefits of the New Covenant is confidence, even boldness to approach God on the basis of the final Temple sacrifice – Christ. Whereas our forefathers “trembled” (Genesis 3:7), were genuinely “afraid” of God (Exodus 20:18), and stood “afar off” (Exodus 20:21), in the New Testament we are called to “draw near” with confidence (Hebrews 4:16, 10:19-22), and to do so with godly fear (Hebrews 12:28).

It is true that we still are called to pray, “Enter not into judgment with Thy servant” (Psalm 143:2), considering ourselves “wretched” because of the effects of the “body of death” which still clings to us (Romans 7:24). Yet, we do this as children to a father, not as criminals to a judge. And we pray these words not in fear. After speaking of the wonderful truth of being called the sons of God by a loving Father (I John 3), the apostle John tells us that we have confidence to stand before God on

Judgment Day, because “there is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear” (I John 4:18). And this love is the love of God, who “first loved us” (I John 4:19).

Our heavenly Father has run out to meet and rescue us in the Person of his Son, cleansing us of our filthy rags and clothing us in the finest robe, the robe of Christ's perfect righteousness. Here is the doctrine of the gospel that we so dearly need and count so dear.

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The Main Issue Before the CRCNA Synod for 2005

What is Latria?

What is Latria? Do you need a few clues? It's not a small country near Estonia. It's not a large tropical rodent. It is an important issue facing the Christian Reformed Church.

The Christian Reformed Synod is currently considering whether to revise question and answer 80 of the Heidelberg Catechism. This Q.&A. deals with the differences between the Roman Catholic Mass and the Lord's Supper. In 1998, Synod received two overtures on the subject. One requested that Q.&A. 80 be removed from the Catechism because the phrase "a condemnable idolatry" should be reserved for the behavior of people who do not believe in justification by faith in Jesus Christ; because Christian love, unity, and understanding demand it; and because Q.&A. 80 was not included in the original text of the catechism. The second overture asked that Q.&A. 80 not be removed from the catechism, as the earlier overture requested, on the ground that the Roman Catholic Church (RCC) has never repudiated its official condemnation of the Protestant doctrine of justification by faith found in the decisions of the Council of Trent (1545-63).

Is this a debate that is better suited for the 16th century or does it have significance today? Is this issue important and, if it is, why? To answer these questions we need to consider the importance of doctrine and dogma. Doctrines are the truths

contained in the Bible. Dogmas are the church's formulations of those doctrines in a systematic form. The Reformed tradition has always placed great emphasis on the truth of God as revealed in Scripture. "We believe that Holy Scriptures fully contain the will of God, and that whatsoever man ought to believe unto salvation is sufficiently taught therein." The church must give clear expression to the contents of her faith. It is only in this way that the church can be an effective witness, lead people to Christ, and teach them how to lead lives that are pleasing to God.

Paul speaks to Titus about, "the knowledge of the truth that leads to godliness," and tells Titus to "teach what is in accord with sound doctrine." Paul also warns Timothy to "Watch your life and doctrine closely. Persevere in them, because if you do, you will save both yourself and your hearers."

We as Christians must master the teachings about Christ so that we can become mature and learn to distinguish good from evil. It is the duty and responsibility of the Christian Reformed Church to ensure that its statements are in keeping with the truth of Scripture. If they are not, we will be leading people astray and doing a disservice to the gospel.

Adding Footnotes To the Catechism

As a result of the overtures of 1998, the synod directed the Interchurch Relations Committee (IRC) "to make an attempt to dialogue with the leadership of the Roman Catholic Church to clarify the official doctrine of that church concerning the Mass." The IRC appointed a subcommittee to carry out this mandate. The subcommittee met with a number of notable Catholic theologians in 1999 and 2001. The Roman Catholic representatives insisted that the Heidelberg Catechism misconstrues in some ways the Roman Catholic understanding of the Mass.

As a result of their study of the issues and their dialogue with the representatives of the RCC, the subcommittee recommended to the Synod of 2004 that it should print Q.&A. 80 in a smaller font and add two footnotes. The first footnote would say that Q.&A. 80 was absent from the first edition (February 1563) of the Catechism but was present in a shorter form in the second edition (March 1563). The translation here given is of the expanded text of the third edition (April 1563/November 1563).

The second footnote the subcommittee proposed would say, "The Synod of 2004 concluded that the Mass, when celebrated in accordance with official Roman Catholic teaching, neither denies the one sacrifice and suffering of Jesus Christ nor constitutes idolatry. The same synod also concluded that Q.&A. 80 still contains a pointed warning against any teachings, attitudes, and practices related to the

Eucharist that obscure the finality and sufficiency of Christ's sacrifice on the cross and detract from proper worship of the ascended Lord. Therefore Q.&A. 80 was not removed from the text but retained in a smaller font.

The Synod of 2004 asked each church council and each classis to review the proposed footnotes and submit their responses to the General Secretary of the CRCNA by July 1, 2005. These will be considered by the IRC along with responses from other denominations and the Reformed Ecumenical Council. The IRC will evaluate the responses and propose recommendations to the Synod of 2006.

In view of the momentum that has already occurred in the direction of

changing a doctrinal standard that has been in place for over 400 years we should consider what Q.&A. 80 says about the Roman Catholic Mass and whether it accurately reflects Catholic dogma and scriptural truth.

The Reformed View of the Sacrifice and Presence of Christ

In the Old Testament there were many types of sacrifices offered by the priests. Some were for the expiation or covering of sins committed and some were offerings of thanks. The Levitical priests never sat down in the tabernacle or temple, as a sign that their work was never done. The sacrifices they offered were imperfect and had to be repeated over and over again. In speaking about the Old

Testament priests, the author of Hebrews writes: "Day after day every priest stands and performs his religious duties; again and again he offers the same sacrifices, which can never take away sins."

The author goes on to say, "But when this priest (*Jesus Christ*) had offered for all time one sacrifice for sins, He sat down at the right hand of God" (Hebrews 10:11, 12). Why does it say, "He sat down"? Because it indicates that His priestly duties were done. Atonement had been made for sin. No further sacrifices need to be made for the forgiveness of sins.

The suffering, death, resurrection and ascension are historical events. They happened and are done. As a result, all who have faith in Jesus Christ are reconciled to God and their sins are forgiven.

Hebrews 9:25-26 says, "Nor did He enter heaven to offer Himself again and again, the way the high priest enters the Most Holy Place every year with blood that is not his own. Then Christ would have had to suffer many times since the creation of the world. But now He has appeared once for all at the end of the ages to do away with sin by the sacrifice of Himself." When Jesus breathed His last on the cross, the curtain in the temple that separated the Most Holy Place was torn in two. This happened because atoning sacrifices no longer needed to be offered.

The Bible never refers to the Lord's Supper as a sacrifice. The eating of the bread and drinking of

Question 80

How does the Lord's Supper differ from the Roman Catholic Mass?

A *The Lord's Supper declares to us that our sins have been completely forgiven through the one sacrifice of Jesus Christ which He Himself finished on the cross once for all. It also declares to us that the Holy Spirit grafts us into Christ, who with His very body is now in heaven at the right hand of the Father where He wants us to worship him. But the Mass teaches that the living and the dead do not have their sins forgiven through the suffering of Christ unless Christ is still offered for them daily by the priests. It also teaches that Christ is bodily present in the form of bread and wine where Christ is therefore to be worshipped. Thus the Mass is basically nothing but a denial of the one sacrifice and suffering of Jesus Christ and [basically nothing but] a condemnable idolatry.*



the wine are done as a remembrance of Christ and our proclamation of His death.

The Roman Catholic View of the Sacrifice and Presence of Christ

To understand the concept of sacrifice in the Mass, we should first consider the Catholic belief of transubstantiation. In brief, this means that once the bread and wine are consecrated in the Eucharist, they actually become the body and blood of Jesus Christ. The Council of Trent summarizes the Catholic faith by declaring: "Because Christ our Redeemer said that it was truly His body that He was offering under the species of bread, it has always been the conviction of the Church of God, and this holy Council now declares again, that by the consecration of the bread and wine there takes place a change of the whole substance of the bread into the substance of the body of Christ our Lord and of the whole substance of the wine into the substance of His blood. This change the holy Catholic Church has fittingly and properly called transubstantiation."

Once the bread and wine have supposedly been changed into the body and blood of Christ, they are worshipped with the worship of Latria. She (The Roman Catholic Church) has at all times given to this great Sacrament the worship known as "latria." Such worship is be given to God alone.

The Catholic Church, however, has always displayed and still displays this latria that it says must be paid to the Sacrament of the Eucharist, both during Mass and outside of it, by taking the greatest possible care

of consecrated Hosts, by exposing them to the solemn veneration of the faithful, and by carrying them about in processions to the joy of great numbers of the people. The Liturgy of the Hours, which is like an extension of the Eucharistic celebration, does not exclude but rather in a complementary way calls forth the various devotions of the People of God, especially adoration and worship of the Blessed Sacrament.

The concept of sacrifice is central

If the Mass is in fact just a reenactment, why does the Roman Catholic Church say that it forgives sins?

to the Mass. The Catholic representatives that met with the IRC said, "Since the sacrifice of the Mass is a reenactment and representation of *the one final, sufficient, and unrepeatable sacrifice of Christ on the cross*, the Mass by its very nature as sacrament of that once-for-all event cannot detract from the one sacrifice of Christ." The Council of Trent and the Second Vatican Council do say that the bloody sacrifice which Christ accomplished once for all on the cross is offered in an unbloody manner in the Eucharist.

The Roman Catholic representatives said that because it is the same sacrifice offered in a differ-

ent way, the Eucharist is not a "denial of the one sacrifice" as Q.&A. 80 makes it out to be. If this is truly an "unbloody" sacrifice, why do Catholics insist that it is Christ's real blood on the altar?

The Mass and the Forgiveness of Sins

If the Mass is in fact just a reenactment, why does the Roman Catholic Church say that it forgives sins?

Communion with the Body and Blood of Christ increases the communicant's union with the Lord, forgives his venial sins, and preserves him from grave sins. If, as often as His blood is poured out, it is poured for the forgiveness of sins, I should always receive it, so that it may always forgive my sins. Because I always sin, I should always have a remedy.

As sacrifice, the Eucharist is also offered in reparation for the sins of the living and the dead and to obtain spiritual or temporal benefits from God. Every time this mystery is celebrated, "the work of our redemption is carried on." The Mass is even capable of forgiving the sins of the dead according to the Catechism of the Catholic Church when it states, "The Eucharistic sacrifice is also offered for the faithful departed who 'have died in Christ but are not yet wholly purified.'" These sins would already have been forgiven if Christ's sacrifice were in fact "once for all" as the Bible clearly states.

The Council of Trent declared, "If any one saith, that the Mass is only a sacrifice of praise and thanksgiving. . . but not a propitiatory sacri-

Propitiation does not make God merciful; it makes divine forgiveness

fice; or, that it profits only the recipient, and that it ought not to be offered for the living and the dead for sins, punishments, satisfactions, and other necessities; let him be anathema.”

To understand what the Roman Catholic Church believes and professes about the Mass, we must understand what propitiation means. Propitiation is something done to a person: Christ propitiated God in the sense that He turned God’s wrath away from guilty sinners by enduring that wrath Himself in the isolation of Calvary. Christ died on the cross to appease the wrath of God so that His justice and holiness will be satisfied and He can forgive sin. Propitiation does not make God merciful; it makes divine forgiveness possible. An atonement must be provided; in Old Testament times, animal sacrifices; now, the death of Christ for man’s sin. Through Christ’s death propitiation is made for man’s sin.

With Humility and Reverence

We should also consider some of the statements that the IRC subcommittee report makes concerning the Mass and the Heidelberg Catechism’s reaction to it. The report refers to Article 35 of the Belgic Confession which states that we must “receive the holy sacrament” with “humility and reverence.” Based on this, the report goes on to say, “It seems reasonable to assert that the difference between the Roman Catholic and

Reformed teaching is not whether the sacramental meal should be treated with reverence but the precise manner in which this reverence is expressed.” To draw any comparison between the worship (latria) that Catholics give to the consecrated host on the altar and the respect with which we should come to the table of the Lord’s Supper is stretching the definition of reverence to the breaking point.

The IRC Report sets up a distinction between the Heidelberg Catechism as a response to the official teaching of the Roman Catholic Church concerning the Mass and the Mass as practiced by the Catholic Church. In the 16th Century the Mass was celebrated in Latin and the people understood little of what was going on. They would run from altar to altar as simultaneous Masses were being celebrated to hear the priest’s pronounce the consecration, “Hoc est corpus meum,” (from which the term Hocus Pocus came) and to witness the “miracle” of transubstantiation. Today the Mass is conducted in the language of the people in most cases, but the Mass is still a sacrifice in which the bread and wine are held up for veneration and worship.

The IRC Report concludes that when the Mass is celebrated as approved by the Roman Catholic Church it does not deny or obliterate the one sacrifice and suffering of Jesus Christ. This conclusion seems unwarranted considering the

evidence already presented. The teachings of the Catholic Church concerning the Mass have changed very little since the Council of Trent. The current Catechism of the Catholic Church confirms this. John Calvin addressed this issue of sacrifice in his Short Treatise on the Lord’s Supper. “While the Lord gave us the Supper that it might be distributed amongst us to testify to us that in communicating in his body we have part in the sacrifice which He offered on the cross to God His Father, for the expiation and satisfaction of our sins—men have out of their own head invented, on the contrary, that it is a sacrifice *by* which we obtain the forgiveness of our sins before God. This is a blasphemy which it is impossible to bear.”

False Worship

The second conclusion the IRC Report reaches is that “it seems inappropriate to charge Roman Catholics with idolatry when they are worshipping Christ through the consecrated elements.” The reasoning of the committee seems to be that even though the Catholic Church is wrong in believing that the bread and wine become the body and blood of Christ (transubstantiation), it is okay to worship the ascended Christ through the consecrated elements, because Catholics believe it is the body and blood of Christ. This conclusion is also unwarranted, not to mention illogical. It is somewhat akin to saying that even though someone is wrong to believe that two plus two equals five, because they believe it, it is okay for them to believe that five plus five equals eight.



Transubstantiation

Transubstantiation has been the official dogma of the Roman Catholic Church since the fourth Lateran Council in 1215 and the final formulation was put forth by the Council of Trent. It is the result of taking Christ's words, "This is my body" and "This is my blood" literally. If this were the proper way to interpret Christ's teaching on the Lord's Supper, we would have to believe we are made out of wood because Jesus said, "I am the vine and you are the branches." This belief is the foundation on which the concepts of the Mass as sacrifice and the worship of the consecrated elements are built. John Calvin said, "this falsehood has no foundation in Scripture, and no countenance from the Primitive Church, and what is more, cannot be reconciled or consist with the word of God. Transubstantiation is an invention forged by the devil to corrupt the true nature of the Supper."

Louis Berkhof says, "It is quite impossible to conceive of the bread which Jesus broke as being the body which was handling it. This view of Rome also violates the human senses, where it asks us to believe that what tastes and looks like bread and wine, is really flesh and blood; and human reason, where it requires belief in the separation of a substance and its properties and in the presence of a material body in several places at the same time, both of which are contrary to reason. Consequently, the elevation and adoration of the host is also without any proper foundation."

A Condemnable Idolatry

The final statement of Q.&A. 80 is

that the Mass is a "condemnable idolatry." This seems to be the emotional heart of the issue. People today are uncomfortable making such a strong and harsh statement. The first question we need to ask is what is idolatry. The Old Testament is filled with accounts of idol worship from the time when Rachel stole her father's household gods. The common conception of idolatry is the worship of statues. Primitive people fashion an image out of wood or stone and then dance around and sing its praises.

This is a misconception. When the Israelites had Aaron fashion the golden calf at the foot of Mount Sinai, they were worshipping the God who had delivered them from Egypt through the idol. Even the worshippers of Baal did not think their idols were really god. "Nor are the heathen to be deemed to have been so stupid as not to understand that God was something else than wood and stone." This is illustrated in II Chronicles 28 where it says that Ahaz, "walked in the ways of the kings of Israel and also made cast idols for worshipping the Baals." The idols clearly were physical representations of the gods behind them.

God forbids any worship through created things. In Romans 1:25 the Bible says, "They exchanged the truth of God for a lie, and worshiped and served created things rather than the Creator—who is forever praised." Jesus told the Samaritan

woman, "God is spirit, and His worshipers must worship in spirit and in truth." Any time we worship any physical representation of God, we are committing idolatry. "For to prostrate ourselves before the bread of the Supper, and worship Jesus Christ as if He were contained in it, is to make an idol of it rather than a sacrament."

Summary

Let us consider what Q.&A. 80 says about the Mass.

"The Mass teaches that the living and the dead do not have their sins forgiven through the suffering of Christ unless Christ is still offered for them daily by the priests." Catholic dogma admits that sins are forgiven and the dead are purified by the sacrifice of the Mass. So this premise is true.

"It (the Mass) also teaches that Christ is bodily present in the form of the bread and wine where Christ is therefore to be worshipped." The fourth Lateran Council, the Council of Trent, the Catechism of the Catholic Church and the Catholic theologians who consulted with the IRC subcommittee all admit to this. So this premise is also true.

The conclusion of Q.&A. 80, based on the first two premises, has two parts. The first part is that "the Mass is basically nothing but a denial of the one sacrifice and suffering of Jesus Christ." The Catholic representatives admit that the Mass

Any time we worship any physical representation of God, we are committing idolatry.

is a continuation or perpetuation of Christ's one sacrifice on the cross. It is offered on an altar. It is, according to Catholic dogma, propitiatory. What does the Bible have to say about this? "We have been made holy through the sacrifice of the body of Jesus Christ once for all." "By one sacrifice He has made perfect forever those who are being made holy." There is nothing more contrary to the true meaning of the Supper, than to make a sacrifice of it.

The ninth chapter of Hebrews makes clear that the Mass is a denial of the one sacrifice of Christ. "For Christ did not enter a man-made sanctuary that was only a copy of the true one; He entered heaven itself, now to appear for us in God's presence. Nor did He enter heaven to offer Himself again and again, the way the high priest enters the Most Holy Place every year with blood that is not his own. Then Christ would have had to suffer many times since the creation of the world. But now He has appeared once for all at the end of the ages to do away with sin by the sacrifice of Himself. Just as man is destined to die once, and after that to face judgment, so Christ was sacrificed once to take away the sins of many people; and He will appear a second time, not to bear sin, but to bring salvation to those who are waiting for Him." (Hebrews 9:24-28). Based on the testimony of Scripture, the first conclusion that Q.&A. 80 reaches appears to be correct.

The second part of the conclusion that Q.&A. 80 reaches is that the Catholic Mass is a "condemnable idolatry." The Catholic Church ad-

mits that they worship the consecrated bread and wine. Just because they believe (contrary to Scripture) that it has been changed into the body and blood of Christ does not excuse the worshipping of God through created things. Worshipping God through created things is by definition idolatry. All idolatry is condemnable. Therefore, the Heidelberg Catechism is correct in making the assertion that the Catholic Mass is a condemnable idolatry.

Conclusions

The IRC Report says that, "a primary consideration of the synod should be to speak the truth in love, not only in our interaction with other Christian communities but also in our official expressions of our faith. We must also deal justly with our Roman Catholic sisters and brothers and do what we can to guard and advance our neighbor's good name (HC Q.&A. 112)."

Q.&A. 112 deals with the ninth commandment and bearing false witness. We need to be sure we are bearing witness to the truth of Scripture even if that means telling our neighbors they are wrong. We need to do this in love, but we do not love our neighbor when we ignore their errors. Paul wrote to Titus that an elder "must hold firmly to the trustworthy message as it has been taught, so that he can encourage others by sound doctrine and refute those who oppose it."

The issues raised by changing Q.&A. 80 are much broader than the proper way to observe the Lord's Supper. They involve justification by faith, the nature of the incarnation, the atonement, the as-

cession, the state of those who die in Christ, and perseverance of the saints among other doctrines. This teaching of the mass as a perpetuation of the sacrifice of Christ, which is propitiatory for sin, was a point of universal opposition by the Reformers. They vigorously objected to this teaching on Scriptural grounds that it made void the cross of Christ. Before we change a Confession for which our forefathers faced fire and sword, we need to give prayerful consideration to what we propose.

The Christian Reformed Church should reaffirm Q.&A. 80 of the Heidelberg Catechism as an accurate formulation of Biblical doctrine. Elders should prayerfully consider the issues and respond to the IRC Report. Each classis needs to discuss the report and respond to it also.

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The Lord's Supper and the 'Popish Mass': Does Q. & A. 80 of the Heidelberg Catechism Speak the Truth?

One of the primary tasks of the church of Jesus Christ, which the apostle Paul calls the "pillar and ground of the truth" (1 Tim. 3:15), is to confess its faith before the world. The church owes its life to the work of Christ, who by His Spirit and Word calls it into existence and preserves it in the way of faith. Because the church is born out of and nourished by the Word of God, there is no task more basic or critical than that of confessing what it believes the Word teaches. Reformed churches, therefore, are always confessing churches. They subscribe to creeds and confessions, which publicly attest their faith before others. Such creeds and confessions are often referred to as "forms of unity," since they join their adherents together in a unity of faith.

Due to the importance of the confessions to the church's testimony and unity, it is not surprising that few changes have been made to them over the centuries. And, when changes have been proposed, these have usually provoked considerable discussion and reflection in the churches. The Christian Reformed Church in North America (CRCNA), however, is presently contemplating a significant change in one of its historic confessions.

Though it is risky to offer generalizations about such things, I have the impression that this change may well be occurring below the "radar

screen" of public awareness or discussion. The change to which I refer is a proposal to place Question and Answer 80 (Q. and A. 80) of the Heidelberg Catechism in a smaller font (print) in future printings of the Catechism, and to declare that this answer "can no longer be held in its current form as part of [the] confession."

Q. and A. 80 offers a sharply worded account of the difference between the sacrament of the Lord's Supper and the "popish mass," declaring the mass to be "nothing but a denial of the one sacrifice and suffering of Jesus Christ and a condemnable idolatry." Accordingly, if the proposed change is adopted by a future synod (2006 is contemplated), the CRCNA will have officially changed its confession and diminished an important Reformation conviction regarding the unbiblical character of the Roman Catholic mass.

Background and History

The proposal to alter the CRCNA's adherence to Q. and A. 80 of the Heidelberg Catechism comes as the result of a recent and relatively brief process of study and reflection dating back to 1998. Synod 1998 received two overtures regarding the Catechism's treatment of the Roman Catholic mass. One overture asked that Q. and A. 80 be removed from the Catechism for three reasons: one, the language of "condemnable

idolatry" should only be used against the behavior of those who deny justification by faith in Jesus Christ; two, the harsh language of Q. and A. 80 does not meet the requirements of Christian love or unity; and three, the original version of the Heidelberg Catechism did not include Q. and A. 80. A second overture, which was formulated in response to the first, argued that Q. and A. ought to be retained in its present form, since the Roman Catholic Church (RCC) had never repudiated the official decisions of the Council of Trent and its statements about the mass.

Though Synod 1998 did not accede to the first of these overtures, which asked that Q. and A. 80 be removed from the Heidelberg Catechism, it did direct the Interchurch Relations Committee "to make an attempt to dialogue with the leadership of the Roman Catholic Church to clarify the official doctrine of that church concerning the mass" (*Acts of Synod 1998*, p. 427). Subsequently, the IRC appointed a special subcommittee to carry out these instructions from Synod. This subcommittee was composed of Dr. David Engelhard, Dr. Lyle Bierma, Dr. Henry De Moor, Dr. Ronald Feenstra, and Dr. George Vander Velde. During the course of the subcommittee's work, two meetings were held with official representatives of the RCC to ensure that the Committee's representation of the Roman Catholic view of the mass was accurate, and that its assessment of the language of Q. & A. 80 was based upon an accurate understanding of contemporary Roman Catholic teaching and practice.

In fulfillment of its mandate, the subcommittee of the IRC presented an initial study report on Q. and A. 80 to Synod 2002. This initial report was also forwarded to the Conferences of Catholic Bishops in Canada and the United States in order to see whether they could concur that it offered an “accurate representation” of the Roman Catholic view of the mass. In addition, the report was sent to churches with whom the CRCNA enjoys ecclesiastical fellowship, to invite their response to its findings. After receiving a favorable judgment from the Catholic bishops, who affirmed that the report accurately summarized the Catholic conception of the mass, the subcommittee made some minor revisions to the report and prepared a second, briefer report that it submitted to Synod 2004.

The actions of Synod 2004 in response to this second report suggest that the CRCNA is poised to alter its confession regarding the Lord’s Supper and the Roman Catholic mass. After adopting a recommendation that calls for the removal of Q. and A. 80 from the Heidelberg Catechism (“That synod declare Q. and A. 80 can no longer be held in its form as part of our confession given our study of official Roman Catholic teaching and extensive dialogue with official representatives of the Roman Catholic Church”), Synod 2004 adopted several motions that will provide opportunity for churches in ecclesiastical fellowship, as well as CRC churches and classes, to respond to the proposed change before its implementation. Barring any significant opposition to what is being pro-

posed, a future Synod (in 2006?) will likely ratify the change in Q. and A. 80.

The Arguments of the IRC Subcommittee Reports

If we may assume that a change in the church’s confession is always a matter of considerable importance, the question that has to be pressed regarding the proposed change in Q. and A. 80 is: has the burden of proof for such a change, one that alters substantially a consensus of the Reformed churches since the sixteenth century on the subject of the Roman Catholic mass, been met? What kind of argument has the subcommittee of the IRC mustered that warrants the removal of Q. and A. 80 from the Heidelberg Catechism?

Both reports begin by observing that Q. and A. 80 registers two principal objections to the Roman Catholic mass. The first objection to the mass focuses upon its nature as an unbloody sacrifice, which is offered daily by priests on behalf of the living and the dead. Because believers enjoy the forgiveness of sins only on the basis of the unbloody sacrifice of the mass, which is offered to God on their behalf as a propitiation for sins, the mass “is basically nothing but a denial of the one sacrifice and suffering of Christ.”

The second objection to the mass focuses upon the way Christ is

worshiped in the form of the bread and wine, which through the miracle of transubstantiation have become the true body and blood of Christ. Though the consecrated elements appear outwardly to be bread and wine, they are the actual body and blood of Christ and are to be venerated accordingly. Q. and A. 80 declares such worship to be a “condemnable idolatry,” because it requires believers to venerate the bread and wine as the true body and blood of Christ. The strong language of Q. and A. 80 is directed against these two elements of the traditional Roman Catholic doctrine of the mass.

In their case for removing Q. and A. 30, the IRC subcommittee reports offer the following arguments:

First, the IRC subcommittee’s two reports challenge the accuracy of Q. and A. 80’s description of the Roman Catholic mass as a sacrifice. Though the subcommittee’s two reports acknowledge the sacrificial character of the mass, they also call attention to other features of the mass that figure prominently in Roman Catholic teaching. They note, for example, that the mass is not only a sacrifice, but also “a meal, spiritual nourishment, offering of thanksgiving, memorial, sign of unity, bond of love, source of grace, and pledge of future glory.” Because the RCC recognizes these various features of the sacrament of the mass, Q. and A. 80 misleads, when it treats the mass primarily, if not

The question that has to be pressed regarding the proposed change in Q. and A. 80 is: has the burden of proof for such a change been met?



There is a great deal of evidence adduced in the IRC subcommittee reports that confirms rather than disproves the accuracy of Q. and A. 80.

exclusively, as a sacrifice.

Second, the IRC subcommittee's two reports insist that Q. and A. 80 misrepresents the Roman Catholic view of the relation between Christ's one sacrifice upon the cross and the sacrifice of the mass. When Q. and A. 80 speak of Christ being offered "daily" in the mass, it concludes that the Roman Catholic view denies the unique and unrepeatable nature of Christ's bloody sacrifice upon the cross. However, the Roman Catholic view, according to the subcommittee and Synod 2002, speaks of "one sacrifice [that] is offered in different manners." The sacrifice of the mass is not another sacrifice, but a sacramental "representation" and "perpetuation" of the one sacrifice of the cross.

Third, the IRC subcommittee's two reports further argue that Q. and A. 80 misstates the Roman Catholic view of the way Christ is to be venerated or worshipped in the mass. Though Christ is "present under the appearance of the consecrated bread and should be worshiped in the adoration of those consecrated elements," this adoration is an adoration of Christ, "not the elements." Q. and A. 80 fails to appreciate the Roman Catholic understanding that the object of the worshipper's adoration is Christ himself, even though the form of worship involves a veneration of the sacramental elements in which Christ is present.

Fourth, in respect to the claim of Q. and A. 80 that the sacrifice of the mass obtains the forgiveness of sins for believers, the IRC subcommittee and Synod 2002 maintain that this reflects a failure to distinguish between what lies "in the area of justification" with what lies in the area of "final sanctification." In the assessment of the subcommittee and Synod 2002, the Roman Catholic view does not "detract from the finality of redemption accomplished on the cross." Since the forgiveness that is mediated through the sacrament of the mass relates to the believer's present and future holiness before God, it should not be viewed as the forgiveness of justification or acceptance with God.

And fifth, in its second report, the IRC subcommittee introduces and appeals to a distinction between "official" Roman Catholic teaching and the "practice" of the Roman Catholic church in some places. Though Q. and A. 80's criticism of the mass may apply to the practice of some Roman Catholics, it does not fairly represent the official standpoint of the RCC, particularly in light of the reforms and improvements introduced by Vatican II.

Evaluating the Arguments for the Proposed Change

Since my summary of the arguments of the IRC subcommittee reports, which have thus far enjoyed the approval of two synods of the CRCNA, is rather skeletal, it might seem improper to evaluate them too

critically. The more I reflect upon these reports and their arguments, however, the more convinced I become that they offer little that approximates a refutation of Q. and A. 80. Indeed, there is a great deal of evidence adduced in the IRC subcommittee reports that confirms rather than disproves the accuracy of Q. and A. 80. Though Q. and A. 80 may speak the truth in language that is more severe than our contemporary ears will allow, it speaks the truth nonetheless, and on a matter of no small significance. To illustrate the weakness and implausibility of the subcommittee's case, I will respond briefly and directly to each of the five points I have identified.

First, though the RCC today and at the time of the Reformation recognizes many different elements in the mass, it continues to view the mass *principally as an unbloody sacrifice*. The statements of the sixteenth century Council of Trent and the more recent twentieth century Vatican II Council fully concur in representing the mass as an unbloody sacrifice that priests offer upon an altar to God. Though Vatican II emphasizes more than the Council of Trent that the whole people of God are joined with the priests in making this sacrifice to God, it remains an unbloody sacrifice, not merely of thanksgiving (a proper Eucharist), but of oblation and propitiation. Q. and A. 80 can hardly be faulted for neglecting the RCC's teaching that the mass is more than a sacrifice, when its interest is to distinguish the true Supper of the Lord from its corruption in the sacrifice of the mass. The evidence presented in the IRC subcommittee reports only confirms

this aspect of what Q. and A. 80 says about the mass, rather than disproving it.

Second, the IRC subcommittee's two reports properly note that contemporary Roman Catholic teaching prefers to speak of the sacrifice of the mass as a "perpetuation" rather than a "repetition" of Christ's sacrifice upon the cross. It is, strictly speaking, not correct to say that the RCC views the sacrifice of the mass as "another" offering. However, the subcommittee reports indulge in a bit of wishful thinking, when they conclude that this protects the RCC against the charge that the mass is a denial of the one sacrifice and suffering of Christ.

The once-for-all sacrifice of Christ upon the cross can no more be "perpetuated" or "prolonged" or "represented" or "enacted" than it can be "repeated." To speak of the mass as an unbloody sacrificial participation in the one sacrifice of Christ is nothing other than a denial of the *finished* work of Christ upon the cross. If I may be permitted an analogy, a mother who has given birth to a child may now enjoy features of motherhood that are a result of her child's birth. But these features of motherhood are in no proper sense to be conceived of as a perpetuation or prolongation of the act whereby she gave birth to her child. In a similar way, Christ, our high priest, having made sacrifice once-for-all for the sins of His people, may continue to apply and communicate the benefits of that sacrifice through Word and sacrament. However, Christ's work of applying the benefits of His unique, indispensable sacrifice should not be confused with the sacrifice itself.

On this point, a comment of Calvin seems as appropriate today as when it was first written: "Nor am I unaware of the tricks by which the father of lies is wont to disguise his fraud: that these are not varied or different sacrifices, but the same one often repeated" (IV.xviii.3). The contemporary RCC claim that the sacrifice of the mass is not "another" sacrifice than the sacrifice of the cross is no more plausible

To say that the Roman Catholic mass does not constitute idolatry because the worshipper believes that the bread and wine are the real body and blood of Christ is a self-defeating argument.

today than it was in Calvin's day.

Third, the claim made by the IRC subcommittee reports (and Synods 2002 and 2004) that the mass does not constitute a form of idolatry is unwarranted and even belied by the evidence adduced to confirm it. According to the IRC subcommittee reports, the RCC mass is not a form of idolatry because those who venerate or adore the consecrated elements are actually venerating or adoring Christ who is mediated through them. If this attempt to defend the veneration of Christ in the mass were plausible, it might equally well be applied to various

acts that are described as idolatrous in the Scriptures. Few are the idolaters who profess to have any other intention than worshipping the true and living God, even though the immediate object or means whereby their worship is offered is a golden calf or some other creature. When the children of Israel worshipped the golden calf, they no doubt intended to worship God alone. To say that the Roman Catholic mass does not constitute idolatry because the worshipper believes that the bread and wine *are the real body and blood of Christ* is a self-defeating argument. If the worshipper venerates the bread and wine *in order to* venerate Christ, he commits idolatry.

Fourth, one of the more unlikely claims of the IRC subcommittee's first report is the claim that the mass does not compromise the finality of redemption accomplished on the cross. To support this claim, the subcommittee report notes that a distinction must be made between justification and final sanctification. Those who argue that the mass compromises the sufficiency of Christ's sacrifice for sin fail to recognize that its benefit relates only to the believer's sanctification, not his justification.

Though one can admire the subcommittee's ingenuity in trying to defend the Roman Catholic doctrine of the mass, this argument fails utterly. Roman Catholic teaching regarding the mass continues to be that it is an unbloody and *truly propitiatory* sacrifice that obtains the forgiveness of sins on behalf of those who benefit from it. The forgiveness of sins that believers enjoy through the offering of the sacrifice



of the mass is *an important part of the process whereby believers are justified and made holy and acceptable to God*. Though the IRC subcommittee and Synod 2002 insist that the forgiveness that is obtained through the mass relates only to a (final) sanctification, this is not the teaching of the RCC. The distinction between justification and sanctification, as it is drawn by the subcommittee and Synod, is a *Protestant, not a Roman Catholic distinction*.

And fifth, the IRC subcommittee reports offer no compelling evidence to warrant the claim that “official” Roman Catholic teaching differs so widely from the practice of some Roman Catholics that the condemnations of Q. and A. 80 only apply to the latter. Q. and A. 80 was most likely written in direct reply to the decrees and canons of the Roman Catholic Council of Trent, which concluded its work shortly before Q. and A. 80 was added to the Heidelberg Catechism. While the IRC subcommittee suggests that Q. and A. 80 might have originally addressed the practice of the medieval RCC more than its official teaching, no historical evidence is provided to support this suggestion. The likeliest explanation of Q. and A. 80 is that it intends to condemn the official teaching and corresponding practice of the RCC. That remains its proper purpose to the present day.

Conclusion

Lest my evaluation of the proposed change to Q. and A. 80 of the Heidelberg Catechism be misunderstood, I wish to note that I have no quarrel with the CRCNA’s desire to ensure that this Q. and A. speak

the truth in the present context. Even though the IRC subcommittee’s studies may not finally warrant their conclusions, they remain fairly thorough and useful treatments of Q. and A. 80 in comparison with contemporary Roman Catholic teaching. Reformed believers who confess Q. and A. 80 should have no objection in principle to a fresh reconsideration of their confession, and to an honest discussion with Roman

Rather than showing that Q. and A. 80 misrepresents the RCC doctrine of the mass, these reports could easily be read to confirm the accuracy of Q. and A. 80.

Catholics whether it properly presents their teaching regarding the sacrament of the mass. Indeed, those who would defend the retention of Q. and A. 80 in its present form owe it to themselves and to the cause of truth to read the two reports of the IRC subcommittee and to study contemporary Roman Catholic teaching on the subject. If a compelling argument can be made to show that the Heidelberg Catechism misrepresents the RCC’s teaching regarding the mass, then the Catechism should be revised accordingly. Since the RCC recently updated in the documents of Vatican II some of its formulations regarding the mass, a reexamina-

tion of Q. and A. 80 is all the more proper.

The problem with the proposed change, however, is that it is not warranted by the kind of arguments presented in the IRC subcommittee reports. Rather than showing that Q. and A. 80 misrepresents the RCC doctrine of the mass, these reports could easily be read to confirm the accuracy of Q. and A. 80. Both of the IRC subcommittee reports provide numerous official RCC statements that the mass is an unbloody sacrifice, which perpetuates the sacrifice of Christ upon the cross and procures propitiatory benefit for those who participate in its offering.

Likewise, ample documentation is provided for the Heidelberg Catechism’s claim that the mass is a “condemnable idolatry.” By the subcommittee’s own admission, RCC teaching continues to affirm the propriety of worshipping Christ in the consecrated elements of bread and wine. Furthermore, though the documents of Vatican II exhibit a tendency to soften the severe language of the Council of Trent, the subcommittee reports also confirm that the position of the Council of Trent was reaffirmed by Vatican II, including the anathemas pronounced against the Reformed view of the sacrament.

When all of this is taken into account, one is left to wonder whether the real objection to Q. and A. 80 is that its language is simply too harsh and condemning. Should we continue to use language like “nothing but a denial” or a “condemnable idolatry,” when speaking of the RCC view of the mass? Is such

language consistent with the requirements of Christian love and unity? Perhaps this is the primary motivation that undergirds the proposed change to Q. and A. 80.

If this were the only reason for the proposed change, would it not be preferable to consider an alternative proposal that retained the substance of Q. and A. 80, while removing the offending language “nothing but” and “a condemnable” idolatry. One could easily imagine a proposal to change Q. and A. 80 that might read: “Thus the mass *in effect denies* ... the one sacrifice and suffering of Jesus Christ and is ... *a form of idolatry.*” However, rather than propose a change in Q. and A. 80 along these lines, the proposal presently being considered calls for a piece of more radical surgery, namely, the removal of Q. and A. 80’s condemnation of the Roman Catholic mass.

Though it may not comport with modern sensibilities, I believe Q. and A. 80 should be retained in its present form. Though the language may be severe, it reflects a Reformed passion to defend the sufficiency of Christ’s one sacrifice upon the cross and to condemn idolatry in whatever form, even if it be born of the most pious of intentions. Real progress toward unity in the faith on the important doctrine of the Lord’s Supper will not come by removing strong, yet true statements like Q. and A. 80 from the Heidelberg Catechism. As it stands, Q. and A. 80 expresses the truth that John Calvin articulated so eloquently in his *Institutes*: “But when it is most clearly proved by the Word of God that this Mass, however decked in splendor, inflicts

signal dishonor upon Christ, buries and oppresses His cross, consigns His death to oblivion, takes away the benefit which came to us from it, and weakens and destroys the Sacrament by which the memory of His death was bequeathed to us—will any of the roots be too deep for this most sturdy ax (I mean the Word of God) to slash and upturn?”

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Looking Above

A Series on the Revelation of Jesus Christ
Revelation 4:4
“The Twenty-four Elders”

We have been taking a rather detailed look at the description of the throne-room of God set before us in Revelation 4. We are spending our time in the details because Revelation 4 is foundational for the rest of the book of Revelation. In the chapters to come, we shall be confronted with the opening of the seven seals—those seals that represent the unfolding history of redemption; we shall be confronted with the sounding forth of the seven trumpets—those trumpets of judgment, harbingers of the great judgment to come; we shall be confronted with the pouring out of the seven bowls—those bowls in which the wrath of God is complete. In the chapters to come, we shall be confronted with horrific and terrible things—things which would leave us unsettled, were it not for Revelation 4.

Revelation 4 brings us back to the throne. There is a throne in the heavens, and it is not vacant. God sits upon the throne. He is there and He is not silent. The scene of that throne-room is for our comfort, for it brings us back to the supremacy of Christ.

We turn our attention once again, then, to the details of chapter 4, and specifically to verse 4 and the twenty-four elders.

We are told that the twenty-four elders sit on twenty-four thrones around the throne of God. We are

told that they are clothed in white robes and have crowns of gold on their heads. But who are they?

Identifying the Elders

Many suggestions have been made in terms of their identification. There are at least six major interpretations. Some have argued that these twenty-four elders are angels. Others have argued that they are angelic heavenly representatives of all the saints. Still others have maintained that they are the Old Testament saints. Others have said that they are the patriarchs and apostles representing the Old Testament and New Testament saints together. And then there are the strange interpretations that see in the twenty-four elders twenty four stars (that’s right, stars!), this interpretation coming from an astrological background. And still others have said that these twenty-four elders are representative of twenty four books in the Old Testament.

None of these interpretations, however, is correct. The twenty-four elders are not angels; they are not angelic heavenly representatives of all the saints; they are not the Old Testament saints; they are not the patriarchs and apostles representing the Old Testament and New Testament saints together; they are certainly not astrological stars; nor are they representatives of twenty four Old Testament books. The twenty four elders are none of these things. Rather, the twenty-four elders are

just that: they are elders!

We take our cue from the number itself. The background is found in I Chronicles 24:7-19; 25:6-31; and 26:12-19. In chapter 24, the Levitical priesthood is divided into 24 divisions, according to the schedule of their service: they were officials of the sanctuary and of the house of God. In Chapter 25, the Levitical priests are further divided into 24 divisions, responsible for the worship of the sanctuary, and in particular the music of that worship. In Chapter 26, the Levitical priests are again divided into 24 gatekeepers for the house of God.

It is noteworthy that in each of these passages (Chapter 24, 25, and 26) the priests are spoken of as having the duty to serve in the house of the Lord, to serve in the sanctuary of the Lord. They are responsible for worship in the house of the Lord; they are responsible for the music of worship in the house of the Lord; and they are responsible to stand as the gatekeepers of the house of the Lord. This is the background of the twenty-four elders in the book of Revelation.

Now if we are correct in finding the background of the twenty-four elders in I Chronicles 24, 25, and 26, we would expect to see in Revelation some degree of correspondence between what we find in I Chronicles and what we find in Revelation. And indeed we do!

Consider the role of the twenty four elders in the book of Revelation. They are described for us first in 4:4. The first time we find them

active in their role is in 4:10, “the twenty-four elders fall down before Him who sits on the throne and worship Him who lives forever and ever, and cast their crowns before the throne saying, ‘You are worthy, O Lord, to receive glory and honor and power; for You created all things, and by Your will they exist and were created.’” The next time we find them is in 5:8, “Now when He had taken the scroll, the four living creatures and the twenty-four elders fell down before the Lamb...” We find them again in 5:11, “Then I looked, and I heard the voice of many angels around the throne, the living creatures, and the elders; and the number of them was ten thousand times ten thousand, and thousands of thousands, saying with a loud voice, ‘Worthy is the Lamb who was slain to receive power and riches and wisdom, and strength and honor and glory and blessing!’” We find them again in 5:14, “Then the four living creatures said, ‘Amen!’ And the twenty-four elders fell down and worshiped Him who lives forever and ever.”

The twenty-four elders appear again in 7:11, “All the angels stood around the throne and the elders and the four living creatures, and fell on their faces before the throne and worshiped God, saying: ‘Amen! Blessing and glory and wisdom, thanksgiving and honor and power and might, be to our God forever and ever. Amen.’” We find them again in 11:16, “And the twenty-four elders who sat before God on their thrones fell on their faces and worshiped God, saying, ‘We give You thanks, O Lord God Almighty,

the One who is and who was and who is to come, because You have taken Your great power and reigned...’”

Once more we find the elders in 14:3, “They sang as it were a new song before the throne, before the four living creatures, and the elders; and no one could learn that song except the hundred and forty-four thousand who were redeemed from the earth.” Finally,

***The role of the
twenty-four elders in
heaven is that of
worship: the worship
of the Lamb!***

we find them in 19:4, “And the twenty-four elders and the four living creatures fell down and worshiped God who sat on the throne saying, ‘Amen! Alleluia!’”

Are you getting the picture? In every single one of these instances, without exception, the role of the elders is that of worship! Again and again, we find them falling before God and the Lamb and singing in worship and praise. The role of the twenty-four elders in heaven is that of worship: the worship of the Lamb!

Remember the role of the twenty-four divisions of priests in the book of Chronicles? They were responsible for worship, in particular for the music in worship. They were also to stand as

the gatekeepers of the house of God. As it was with the twenty-four divisions of the priests in the book of Chronicles, so it is with the twenty-four elders in the book of Revelation. They are responsible for worship, in particular for the music in worship; they also stand as the gatekeepers of the house of God.

The twenty-four elders, then, are elders—elders in the heavenly sanctuary of God—who are responsible for worship, for the music of worship, and as such they stand as the gatekeepers of the house of God.

The Significance of the Elders

We have identified the twenty-four elders that surround the throne as elders, but what is the significance of those elders around the throne? Why are they there? The answer is that the twenty-four elders of Revelation 4:4 are symbolic of the ruling authority in the church. There is a correspondence between the twenty-four elders above and the office of elder below. This means that the government of the church is patterned after heaven itself. As there are elders in heaven above, so there are elders on earth below.

We are concerned here in Revelation 4:4, then, not only with what is going on in heaven, but with what is happening on earth presently! Again, remember where we are in the book of Revelation. Chapters 4-7 cover the entire time period between Christ’s first coming and His second coming. During that time period the seals are being opened,

and shall continue to be opened until Christ comes again on the clouds of glory. The opening of those seals (along with the sounding of the trumpets in chapters 8-11 and the pouring out of the bowls in chapters 15-16) leaves us with unsettling images: war, injustice, conflict, murder, killing, and death, not to mention the very conflagration of creation itself: the moon turned to blood, stars falling from heaven, an earthquake unlike any before. The opening of those seals leaves us with the question: what of the church? What of the people of God?

In Revelation 4, we are brought back to the role of the elders—the elders who must rule according to the Word of God—the elders who must preserve the true worship of God—the elders who must stand as the gatekeepers—the elders who must stand as the watchmen on the walls of Zion—the elders who must guard the flock!

At the outset of Revelation 4, before the opening of the seals, before the blasting of the trumpets of judgment, before the pouring out of the bowls of God's wrath, we have set before us the office of the elder, that office that has been given to us by God Himself to preserve the true worship of God in the midst of a world that is increasingly turning against Him!

In light of all this, the office of elder is a non-negotiable. Satan and his minions seek to destroy the church. He seeks to destroy it with subtlety and deception. He wants to make the church like the world. Where has he won the greatest victory in the church? His greatest victory is in the area of

worship. Consider how successful he has been: when the worship of the church becomes man-centered rather than God-centered, Satan has won a victory! When we no longer come to glorify God in worship, but to see what we can "get out of it," Satan has won a victory! When the music of the church is patterned after the entertainment of Hollywood rather than the songs of Zion, Satan has

If your goal is to recast the church into the image of this generation, you will thereby make the church feeble in the next generation.

won a victory! When "thus saith the Lord," is replaced with "let me tell you a story," Satan has won a victory! When the preaching of the Word is replaced with drama and dance, Satan has won a victory!

To be sure, all of these things are done with the best of intentions. These things are done to bring the people in! The premise is this: make the church inviting and the people will come. Water down the distinctives, and the people will come! Sugar-coat the gospel, and the people will come! Make the church like the world, and you will win the world!

In his subtlety and deceit, Satan has caused the church to forget

the cross, and in forgetting the cross, to forget the glory of God! How easy it is for the church to forget the throne in heaven! How easy it is for the church to lose her anchor in heaven! And once she forgets the throne, once she loses her anchor, her worship reflects this world rather than the world to come, and then her man-centered, feel-good, Hollywood-driven, story-studded, entertainment-driven, watered-down, sugar-coated worship becomes a stench in the nostrils of God! Let us not forget that the God whom we worship is holy! Let us not forget that He invites worship on His terms, never on ours!

Do you understand now why we find the elders here at the outset of Revelation 4? The elders are responsible for the God-centered, Christ-glorifying worship of the church. The elders are responsible for keeping the eyes of the congregation upon the cross and the holiness of God. The elders are responsible for keeping the eyes of the congregation upon the throne and the One who sits on that throne. The elders are responsible for keeping the worship of the congregation centered upon the things of heaven.

To paraphrase one author: If the elders allow the church to become like the world, she will be of little use in the world. If your goal is to recast the church into the image of this generation, you will thereby make the church feeble in the next generation. The role of the elders is to make sure that the church is the church—that she is what she is called to be—for that is what the world needs most!

The world needs a church that boldly proclaims that God is on the throne! The world needs a church that proclaims without compromise that God is holy and we are not! The world needs a church that loves the Lord Jesus Christ and is not ashamed of the cross! The world needs a church that worships God as God calls us to worship! The world needs a church that does not give her more of what can be found in the world; the world needs a church that is centered upon the things of heaven!

Implications for Elders

The biblical elder, like the twenty-four elders, is centered upon the throne. He is oriented to the throne and specifically to the One who sits upon the throne.

The biblical elder guards the holiness of God, particularly in terms of worship. He does not presume to invent new ways of worship. He does not presume to bind the conscience of God's people by submitting them to worship that is not expressly commanded in God's Word. He remembers Nadab and Abihu, who sought to offer to the Lord unauthorized fire—who sought to worship the Lord as they saw fit—and were struck down on the spot. The biblical elder remembers that God is holy, and seeks to guard the holiness of God in worship. He is oriented to the throne and specifically to the One who sits upon the throne.

The biblical elder has as his focus, the Lamb who sits on the throne. Therefore, he may never have as his goal the promotion of his per-

sonal agenda. The issue is Christ! The flock must be directed to the Good Shepherd, Jesus Christ, who became a Lamb for us to take away our sins. The biblical elder is oriented to the throne, and to the Lamb who sits upon the throne.

The biblical elder understands that his authority is given to him from Christ, the head of the church. He understands then, that he may not “lord it over the people.” He understands that his authority is not that of dominion, but that of service. He serves the flock, and in so doing, he serves God. The biblical elder stands as a watchman on the walls. He refuses to back down in the face of the wolves. He will even take the attack of the wolves upon himself that he might spare the flock: better the defamation of his name than the injury of the flock.

Implications for the Congregation

The congregation is called to submit to the authority of the elders, not because of the man who holds the office, but because of the office itself.

Even as the elders must remember Nadab and Abihu, so the congregation must remember Korah, Dathan, and Abiram, who rebelled against those called to office in the Old Testament, and the wrath of God came down upon them, and

the earth swallowed them alive. The congregation must remember—and follow—David's respect for the Lord's anointed. On two occasions he had opportunity to kill King Saul, but he refused to do so, saying “dare I touch the Lord's anointed?!” When a man came running to David to tell him he had killed King Saul, David had the man slain on the spot! Would you dare be so presumptuous as to attack the office of the elder? Should you attack the authority of the elder, you are attacking the authority of Christ! Such an attack results in judgment.

What, then, is the role of the members of the congregation concerning the elders? “Obey those who rule over you, and be submissive, for they watch out for your souls, as those who must give account. Let them do so with joy and not with grief, for that would be unprofitable for you” (Hebrews 13:17). It cannot be put any better than that.

The government of the church is not something that we have made up for the promotion of man and his agenda. The government of the church through the eldership is ordained of God Himself. The pattern for the elders of the church of Jesus Christ is found in heaven itself. The pattern is found in the twenty-four elders who surround the throne, never ceasing in

The biblical elder will take the attack of the wolves upon himself that he might spare the flock: better the defamation of his name than the injury of the flock.



their worship of God and the Lamb.

This is the pattern, the God-ordained pattern, for the government of the church. May God grant us congregations that understand, and honor, the office of the elder. May God grant us elders who rule well, and serve well, that the congregation may be built up unto the fullness of the stature of Christ.

May God grant us to see in the office of the elders the supremacy of Christ.

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A Brief History of the Church

Part Two: The New Testament Church and the World

And Jesus led his disciples out as far as Bethany and said to them: “Go ye into all the world, teaching all nations, baptizing them into the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Ghost, teaching them to observe all things what so ever I have commanded you, and, lo, I am with you always” (Matthew. 28:19-20).

Jesus lifted up His hands and blessed them, and it came to pass while He blessed them, He parted from them and was carried up into Heaven (Luke 24:50). The disciples went forth preaching everywhere, the Lord working with them, confirming the word, with signs following (Mark 16:20). Thus, the work of establishing the church of the New Testament began in earnest, and the gospel spread quickly throughout the Roman Empire.

The Lord had given to His apostles a major assignment. They were to establishing His church, in the Roman Empire even though it was a godless, hateful, and hostile environment. Jesus had previously warned them saying: “Take heed to yourselves, for they shall deliver you up to councils, and in synagogues, and ye shall be beaten, and ye shall be brought before rulers and kings for My name’s sake, for a testimony against them” (Mark 13:9).

The Early Church

The Scripture gives us a fairly detailed accounting of the work of the Apostles during the first century.

We can also turn to the pages of history to see how the church managed to survive through the centuries. This is something for the most part we take for granted. However, it is a subject that should be of more than casual interest to all Christians. Such knowledge would help us more fully appreciate the persecutions and suffering that other Christians had to endure, in order that we might have the Bible and through it might come to know the way of salvation. We should be cognizant of the fact that the gospel did not flow down to us like some great river flowing complacently along through the centuries until it arrived in the twentieth century, so that we might drink conveniently of its life giving waters.

Indeed, it was a bitter struggle throughout the centuries and Christians had to endure such cruel persecution as beheadings, crucifixions, burning at the stake, and being thrown to the wild beasts, Martyrdom was a common procedure!

We are reminded that God said at the very beginning that the church would for all time be in a life and death struggle with the world. Satan would do everything in his power to destroy the young church before it could gain a foothold in his domain.

Many Christian were forced to seek refuge in the catacombs, which extended for miles beneath the city of Rome. Yet, with the Lord’s blessing the early church continued to flourish, and continued

to increase throughout Asia Minor. Christ does not promise to take us out of our trials, but He is always at hand to take us through them. And so, in the first century in spite of all the hardships and with the Lord's blessing, the Disciples were able to establish churches throughout Asia Minor.

The Church in Rome

The persecutions continued at various times and places, but in the early part of the third century the church experienced a brief period of rest. A warrior named Constantine claimed to see a heavenly vision and was thereby converted. He later became the Emperor of the Roman Empire. As Emperor, he issued an edict granting Christians and all others (already there were Roman Bishops, numerous sects, and new philosophies being introduced) the liberty to follow their beliefs.

In addition, Constantine issued an exhortation to all his subjects to embrace Christianity. He made the Christian Sunday a day of rest, forbidding all ordinary work. He also favored Christians in every way possible. All in all, it was a victory for the church, and a temporary defeat for Satan.

The succeeding Emperor, named Theodosius, made Christianity a state religion, and made church membership compulsory. He suppressed all other religions, and prohibited idolatry.

Through Theodosius the church became a state institution and, as a political organization, it was ruled by the state. The state began to make the church over into its own

image and membership became compulsory. Many unregenerate people would become members of the church.

The Church enjoyed freedom from persecution and favored status by the Emperor. In order to maintain this status, however, the church began to compromise the truth. During that time, the Church took on a new identity, one much different from the early church in which it had its roots. The Church failed to heed its own teachings, primarily due to the fact that it had been absorbed by the state. This was a failure on the part of the church and a victory for Satan.

The Roman Church

Rome fell in the year 476 A.D. and the power of the state church was greatly diminished. Rome's fall freed the Bishops from civil authority. During the first 500 years the Bishops of Rome were not called Popes, but the word "Pope" was gradually restricted to the Bishop of Rome. Soon thereafter the Bishop was referred to as "Universal Father", ruling over the whole church. This was bitterly contested by the church, to no avail, and weakened as it was, would have to contend with the greater power and authority of the Roman Catholic Church hierarchy.

Many confrontations took place throughout the centuries between

the Roman Catholic Church and the Apostolic Church. There was continual turmoil, persecutions, inquisitions, wars, and conflicts with heathen philosophies.

The Catholic Church remained the dominant power as religion spread into England, Europe, Italy, and Greece. The papacy fought against religious freedom. They wanted tolerance for themselves, but refused it to others. The apostolic church was in the process of losing its way, its spiritual compass broken through worldly affiliations. Soon the church slipped into what is referred to as the Dark Ages. Its candle of light, taken from the early church, burned down to a mere flicker.

We know, however, that the Lord will always have His church, and we know that He is in complete control of all that happens with regards to His church, and over all the world surrounding that church. Nothing in this world happens by chance.

Space does not permit the writing of all the hardships, corruption, brutality, bribery, and bloodshed that the church experienced during those centuries since Constantine.

The Reformation

In the 15th century the Lord used a man named Martin Luther to change the church. Luther, a Roman Catholic by faith, a religious

***The Church failed to heed its own teachings,
primarily due to the fact that it had been absorbed
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man, was quietly studying his Bible on a given day, when he was led by the Spirit to read in the book of Romans: “The Just shall live by faith.”

His spiritual eyes were opened, and he realized that salvation could only be obtained by trusting in God, through faith in Christ, and not by rituals and penances of his church. He came to see the fallacy of the sale of indulgences and the teachings and beliefs concerning purgatory.

On October 31, 1517, Luther posted his 95 theses to the church door at Wittenberg. For this he was eventually excommunicated from the church. He was condemned to die by the Pope for his heresy, but he escaped. Luther went in hiding for a year, and later returned to his work at the University of Wittenberg. His sermons on the Bible attracted students from all parts of Germany and he became known as the founder of the Reformation.

Luther’s teachings were biblical. However, they needed further enlightenment, and the Lord raised up a man named John Calvin (1509-64), a brilliant student, who accepted the teachings of the Reformation and consequently was driven out of France for his beliefs and teachings.

Calvin went to Geneva where he established his own academy. This place of learning became a pivotal center for the Reformation, and Protestantism. Calvin became known as the greatest theologian of all Christendom. Once more the Lord used men, as Calvin brought the Reformed teachings, out of the dark ages into the full light of day.

The Church in the Netherlands

The Netherlands, home of many of our forefathers, received the Reformation early on. They had printed Bibles to educate the people concerning the faith. Unfortunately, the Netherlands at the time was part of the dominion of Charles V, a devout Roman Catholic. He established the Inquisition, which prohibited religious meetings in which the Bible would be read. Later he prohibited the printing or possession of the Bible.

Phillip II, 1566-98, successor to Charles V, reissued the edict of his father, and carried on the persecution with greater fury. More than 100,000 were massacred with unbelievable brutality. Those who attempted to flee the country were intercepted at the border by soldiers and executed.

After years of protest, the people united under the leadership of William of Orange and began a great revolt, (1572). After incredible suffering, they won their independence in 1609.

The Netherlands was a staunch supporter of the Reformation. Through the teaching and preaching of men like Abraham Kuyper, the Reformed Faith was well founded.

There was a problem, however. Holland had followed the tradition of the centuries in making the church a state church. There were those of the Reformed Faith, (1834) who could no longer abide the liberal dictates and persecution of the Netherlands State Church, and leaving relatives and friends under-

took the hazardous journey to America. There the freedom to practice their orthodox Reformed faith was guaranteed.

As we enter a new chapter of the Church in America, we look in retrospect at the church since its inception. The first dispensation of men (2000 years) rejected God and formed a godless society. God destroyed them all with the great flood.

The next dispensation of men (400 years) turned to idol worship, and God left them to their just fate, as He came to Abraham with a covenant, as the base for His Covenant Church. The Lord exercised much patience with His church, and made of them a great nation. However the people remained stubborn, rebellious, and disobedient, finally rejecting the Christ, the very Son of God. God rejected them and dispersed them throughout the countries of the world.

As the church of history failed its test, how will God judge us, the Reformed churches in America. Is she destined to be the final church before His coming again?

Mr. Dow R. Haan, Sr. is a member of the Covenant United Reformed Church in Kalamazoo, Michigan.

The Trinity in the Gospel of John

(Part II)

The revelation of God as three distinct persons is one of the deepest commitments of the Gospel of John. Practically speaking, it means that when the apostles stood face to face with Jesus Christ, they knew that they were in the very presence of the ultimate reality, God Himself. The position of Thomas regarding Jesus became the confession of the catholic and apostolic church of the patristic era: “My Lord and my God” (John 20:28).

Following the period of imperial persecution and its termination with the elevation of Constantine to power, there arose the attack of Arius upon the very heart of the Christian faith. Theodoret identified him as one of the “fit instruments” used by the devil “for the execution of his designs” (*Ecclesiastical History* I.1). For Arius, the Son was merely a highly exalted creature, “made out of nothing” and who “had an origin of creation” (*Thalia*, as quoted by Athanasius, *Against the Arians*, Discourse I.5). “The Word,” he maintained, “is not the very God” (*Ibid.*, Discourse I.6)). His position was fundamentally that of tritheism—affirming that there are three different Gods, to whom adoration ought to be given. “The Father and the Son and the Holy Ghost,” he said, “are separate in nature ... utterly unlike from each other in essence and glory” (*Ibid.*).

Tritheism, however, is not the po-

sition of John’s Gospel. John is no less monotheistic than the Old Testament with its dominant teaching that Jahweh alone is God (Isaiah 44:6-8). What John presents is far from a crude tritheism, a mere variation of the rampant polytheism of the Greek-speaking world of antiquity (I Corinthians 8:4-6). The apostle rather teaches a sophisticated doctrine of monotheism. And since this Gospel is divine revelation, we must recognize that here we have nothing less than the affirmations of God concerning Himself. Surely it is rational to take to heart the exhortation of Hilary of Poitiers: “Let us assume that God has full knowledge of Himself, and bow with humble reverence to His words” (*On the Trinity* I.18).

One Font of Divinity

How can it be that God is three distinct persons, and yet one divine being? John answers this question by presenting three considerations. In the first place, he suggests—at least in seed form—that there is one fountain of divinity. He identifies the Christ as the only begotten Son of the Father (John 3:16) and the Spirit as He who proceeds from the Father (John 15:26). Clearly, begetting and procession—as eternally occurring—convey the idea of derivation. The question then arises: What is derived? The patristic church in contemplating this profound question would answer: Such language refers to the deri-

vation of existence and attributes. John of Damascus put it this way: “Because of the Father’s existence, the Son and the Spirit exist, and ... because of the Father having the qualities, the Son and the Spirit have all their qualities” (*An Exact Exposition of the Orthodox Faith* I.VIII). Thus, John affirms that there is one source of divinity—the Father, who eternally begets and emits two divine persons (the only-begotten Son and the breathed-out Spirit).

Mutual Indwelling

The foundational monotheism of John’s Gospel is also reflected in its revelation of divine persons who are mutually indwelling. There is no question that this teaching goes beyond the power of human understanding. We must, however, keep in mind the wise perspective of Hilary: “What men cannot understand, God can be” (*On the Trinity* III.1). Furthermore, we must take note that Christ admonishes us to respond in faith to this doctrine: “Do you not believe that I am in the Father, and the Father is in me?” If we stumble over the idea that one person can be both within and without another, Jesus urges faith: “Believe me that I am in the Father and the Father is in me” (John 14:10-11). This indeed is mystery through and through, that “One should permanently envelope, and also be enveloped by, the Other, whom yet He envelops” (Hilary, *On the Trinity* III.1).

One Divine Nature

Finally, John assumes with Paul



that God has a divine nature, and that it belongs to the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. While Paul explicitly refers to the existence of the *divine nature* (*theiotis*) to which creation itself bears witness (Romans 1:20), John calls attention to Jesus' teaching which so infuriated the Jews—that this one divine nature is to be found both in the Father and in the Son, with Christ affirming that He Himself was that very Son of God (John 10:30-36). The unbelieving Jews rightly understood the declaration of Jesus: "I and the Father are one" (John 10:30). Jesus here claimed that the divine nature that belonged to the Father likewise belonged to Himself—although the Father and the Son were distinct persons, they were one in terms of the divine nature that each one equally possessed. Paul later reiterated the exact same position: "For in Him all the fullness of deity (*theotes*) dwells in bodily form" (Colossians 2:9). The Trinitarian thought of John Calvin appreciated these perspectives. In the *Institutes*, he wrote, "The essence of the one God is simple and undivided, and ... it belongs to the Father, the Son, and the Spirit." He added that "if we hold fast" to this position, "the gate will be closed ... to Arius" (I.13.22).

Belief in the Word

There are but two responses of the human mind to the revelation of the Trinity in the Gospel of John—faith or unbelief. Mystery pervades the teaching of Jesus, and unfortunately it often met with the response of the grumbling of unbelief. Following the feeding of the five thousand,

Jesus called attention to Himself. He declared, "I am the bread of life" (John 6:35). As a result, "the Jews were grumbling about Him" (John 6:41). He then introduced the subject of the sacramental mystery. He promised, "He who eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life" (John 6:54). As a result, "his disciples grumbled at this" (John 6:61). He then asserted the bondage of the human will and the necessity of prior electing grace: "No one can come to me unless it has been granted him from the Father" (John 6:65). "As a result of this many of His disciples withdrew and were not walking with Him anymore" (John 6:66). Jesus then asked the Twelve if they too would go away. The response of Peter is highly instructive. In the broadest sense, Peter recognized the ultimate value of the totality of Jesus' teaching: "You have the words of eternal life" (John 6:68). But the

ultimate reason for their allegiance—and our commitment as well—is based upon the recognition of who Jesus really is, the ultimate reality, God himself. The church, with Peter, has always affirmed concerning Jesus: "We have believed and have come to know that you are the Holy One of God" (John 6:69).

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

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**Coming Up next
 Issue**

Rev. Eric Pennings, missionary to South Asians in Toronto, is scheduled to write the meditation for next month.

Dr. Bill Dennison has written a beautiful article concerning the wedding of Adam and Eve.

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

Mr. Paul Flodquist has submitted an article about what is missing in most worship services today.

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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