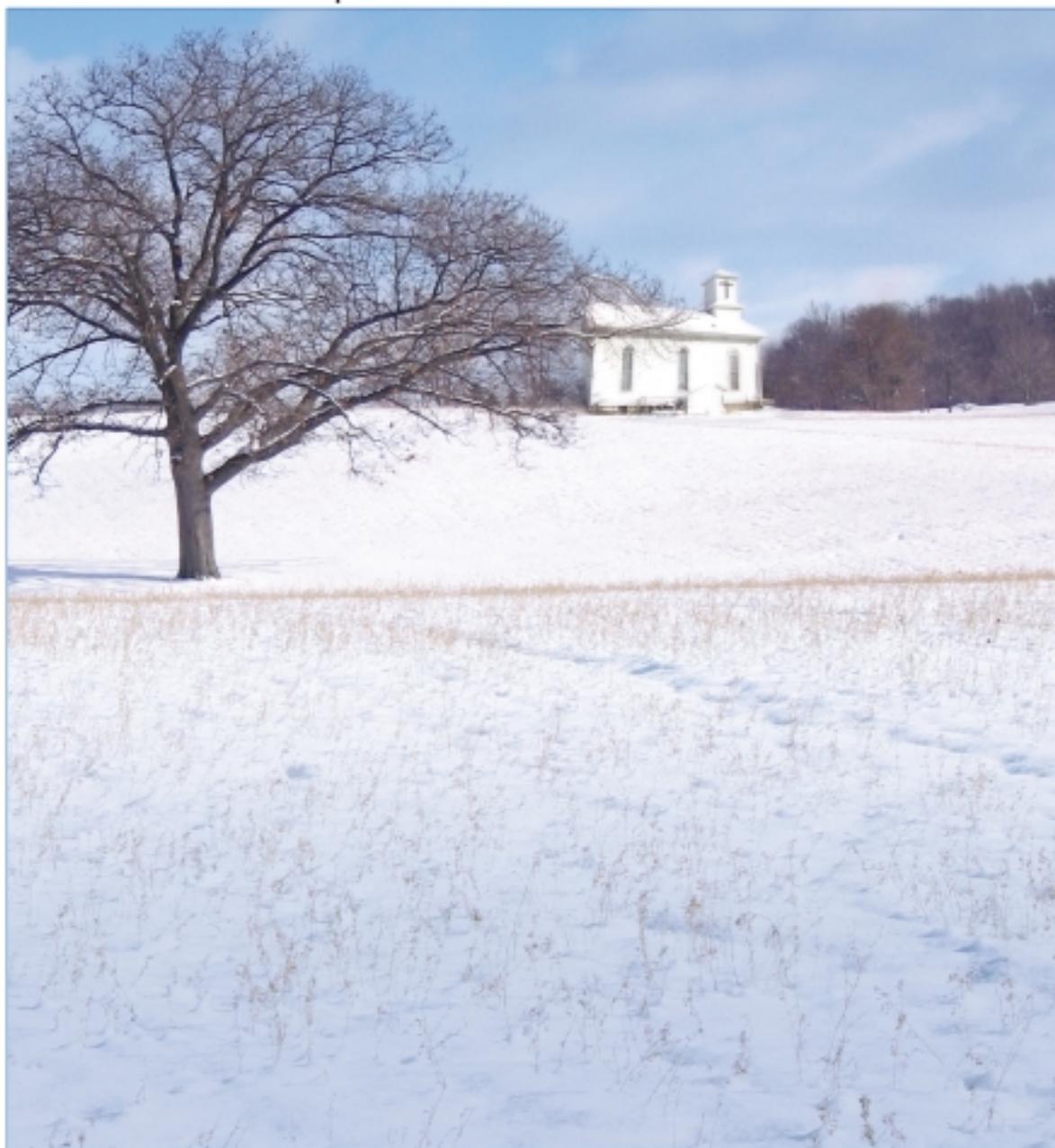


January 2006 • Volume 56 • Issue 1

# The Outlook

Dedicated to the Exposition and Defense of the Reformed Faith



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• Bearing the Cross • The Marks of the True Church • Learning From Hurricane Katrina • Joint Church Order Committee  
• Post Modern Liberalism: Repainting a Non-Christian Faith • Paedocommunion & the Confessions

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January 2006—Volume 56 No. 1

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*"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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# Bearing the Cross

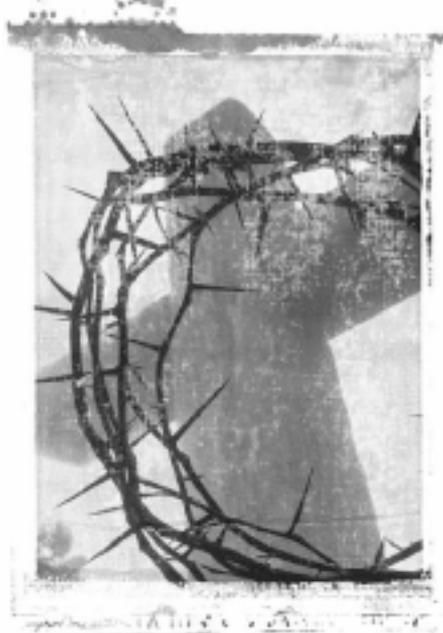
*“If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me.”*

In the telling of Mark’s gospel account, chapter 8 provides a turning point. From chapter 1 to chapter 6 the ministry of Jesus centers on the region of Galilee. As a member of the covenant community, the Lord first declared the good news of God’s promised redemption to His people. Despite this blessing, however, not everyone accepted our Lord’s ministry. Some, in particular the Pharisees and the scribes, resisted the message of the gospel, that is, that salvation comes through Jesus, the Messiah.

The tension this message created between Jesus and the leaders of the Jews grew increasingly strong. In chapter 7, we read of an exchange between Jesus and these men in which our Lord condemns the way they reject the law of God in favor of their own commandments. Quoting the prophet Isaiah, Jesus described these leaders as men who “honor me with their lips, but their heart is far from me.” Denying the radical nature of sin, these leaders of the Jews did not seek a radical redemption from God. Over against this trite view of sin, Jesus proclaimed the true depth of our misery.

In opposition to the superficial piety of the Pharisees, the Lord pinpoints the source of man’s uncleanness in God’s sight. “There is nothing outside a person that by going into him can defile him, but the things that come out of a person are what defile him.” Because sin is so deeply

rooted in us, cosmetic piety cannot resolve our sin. As any gardener knows, the way to remove a weed is by its roots. Only a radical reformation can deliver fallen man from his rebellious ways. In this way, the gospel’s proclamation of redemption in Jesus Christ is quite humbling.



In light of our own struggle with this humbling assessment of our condition, we should not be surprised that the Pharisees persisted in denying Jesus’ claim to be the Messiah. In chapter 8:11 we read, “The Pharisees came and began to argue with Him, seeking from Him a sign from heaven to test Him.” Rather than submitting to the Messiah out of an appreciation for their sinful condition, these leaders of the Jews argued with the Sent One

who alone can save. Yet, before we wag our fingers at the leaders of the Jews, we should be struck by the fact that our Lord also warns His disciples against such presumption.

In chapter 8:15 Jesus says to His chosen disciples, “Watch out for the yeast of the Pharisees and that of Herod.” In order to understand the significance of this warning it is helpful to understand why Jesus unites the Pharisees and Herod in His warning. The equating of these two disparate persons reveals what it is the disciples were to avoid. Herod, as Mark records for us, rejected the command to submit to God in his life. It was Herod who imprisoned John the Baptist after John had condemned Herod’s adulterous marriage. Rather than repent of his rebellion against God’s law, Herod removed the one calling him to repentance. Thus, Herod’s name in Mark’s gospel is associated with a refusal to bow before the Lord in humble obedience. The Pharisees present a similar spirit in their persistent refusal to accept Jesus as the Christ. But was this really something the disciples were in danger of doing?

Soon after this warning Jesus asks His disciples “Who do people say that I am?” The disciples give a number of answers. Then Jesus says, “But what about you? Who do you say I am?” In response, Peter, on behalf of the disciples, makes the good confession. Peter declares, “You are the Christ.” This was the very confession the leaders of the Jews refused to make. Surely then the disciples

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were not in danger of the leaven of the Pharisees.

Yet consider the full significance of this confession. To identify someone as your sovereign is to declare that one ruler of your life. If you identify someone as master, you by that fact identify yourself as servant. If you say, "That is my boss" you also declare, "I am his employee." Describing someone as Lord, therefore, is also a self-description. Thus, not to submit to that sovereign's rule is hypocrisy. It is to be like the son who promised to fulfill his father's request but did not (Matthew 21:28-32). To suggest that Jesus is the Christ and yet fail to bow in submission to Him is a total contradiction (Matthew 7:15-23). Either Jesus is the Christ, and therefore we are citizens of His Kingdom, or we reject His rule and refuse to acknowledge Him as the Christ. It must not be one or the other.

In light of this consider that this same Peter, who made the good confession faith in Mark 8:29, rebukes Jesus in Mark 8:32. The context of that rebuke is the words of our Lord when He "began to teach His disciples that the Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders and the chief priests and the scribes and be killed, and after three days rise again." (Mark 8:31). Because of the humbling description of our Lord's pathway, Peter rebuked Him. The simple explanation for this is that while Peter confessed that Jesus was the Christ, Peter did not yet appreciate the full significance of that confession. And in this Peter is not alone.

If the problem of man is man, that is, if man's sinfulness proceeds from who he is, expressing itself in what he does, then what is the only solution for such a problem? Is it enough to alter such a man's habits? Can salvation work from the outside in? Or, is it enough to alter man's mind and teach him new patterns of thinking? Can the mind of man change the heart of man? Since the problem is man's sinful self, then surely the solution is to do away with this sinful self and replace it with a new man. Radical sin requires a radical redemption. And this is precisely what Jesus teaches.

When Jesus says to those gathered around Him, "If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me," He is describing how radical redemption truly is. Just listen to our Lord's words from the point of view of those who heard these words for the first time.

We have smoothed the rough edges from this declaration of our Lord by identifying 'cross bearing' as the bearing of personal burdens and struggles. In Dutch, there is a saying that "every house has its cross" (it rhymes in Dutch). The meaning is this; each home has its unique burdens and challenges to carry through life. For some it might be the respon-

sibility of caring for elderly parents. For others it might be a sick child. For some it might be a personal struggle. Whatever the case, each home has its burdens. And while this is true, for who can deny it, this is not at all what Jesus is saying. The words of our Lord are far more challenging.

Think of the Electric Chair, the Hang Man's Noose and the Guillotine and you have something of the significance of a Roman cross. The cross was an object of torture, a scandalous death reserved for the worst of criminals, intended to inflict maximum pain and suffering. When we think of the cross, we immediately think of it in terms of Golgotha and the death of Jesus Christ. The cross does not have the same connotation for us as it did for those people. Consequently, we can well imagine those people, hearing Jesus describe the cost of discipleship, would have been shocked. Indeed, they may have thought such a teaching contradictory.

The reason you follow someone is in order to improve your life. A great teacher or a wise leader helps you achieve your full potential. A leader is someone moves you from where you are to where you need to be. The appeal of an inspirational speaker or a dynamic leader is how he motivates you.

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***Since the problem is man's sinful self, then surely the solution is to do away with this sinful self and replace it with a new man.***

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How motivating is a call to experience the awful death of a Roman cross? The call of our Lord to “lose our lives” is more likely to keep people away than to draw them in. Christianity should inspire us to improve our lives, not become depressed about them.

To be sure, all of us know that we are not perfect. No one claims to be without error or defect. Even if we explain away our failings, we are still acknowledging that they exist. But do we appreciate how totally lost we are? When our sinfulness is a series of bad habits, the solution to our problem is a twelve-step program. When our sinfulness is ignorance or failure to consider the whole picture, then learning and instruction is our solution. But what if our problem is so radical, so deeply ingrained, and so bred-in-the-bone that nothing we do can excise it? What if the only way to deal with our sin is through dying to our sinful selves?

Yet even if we accept that this is necessary, that is, that character of our sinfulness is such that we need to be radically reformed in order to be free, how can we possibly achieve such a goal? How can we die to our sinful selves and still live to tell about it? The answer is, we cannot. That is precisely why Jesus came in the flesh; to accomplish what we could not. In His flesh, our Lord has done all that is necessary for salvation. That salvation comes by Jesus’ taking up His cross in obedience to our heavenly Father. By His cross bearing our salvation has come. And for that we give thanks. Not in selfishness,

grateful that someone else (and not we) did this for us, but in thanksgiving that in His death we also find victory over our sin.

The call of faith in Jesus Christ is not a call to some medicine, example, or instruction. The call of faith in Jesus Christ is the call to die to sin and to judgment. The cross we are to pick up in our following of Jesus is the cross of Calvary. Embracing that condemnation of our sins, we are to recognize that only in the cross are we delivered from this body of death. As the Apostle Paul writes, “We know that our old self was crucified with Him in order that the body of sin might be brought to nothing, so that we would no longer be enslaved to sin. For one who has died has been set free from sin.” (Romans 6:6-7). By embracing the cross of Calvary as our redemption, this is what we are embracing. In Jesus Christ we are dead to our old nature, dead to sin, and dead to the way into which we were born. In Jesus Christ we are alive to God and to righteousness and to obedience. A radical problem requires a radical redemption. In Christ, we are radically changed.

In many presentations of the gospel the leaven of the Pharisees has become standard fare. Superficial piety, simple tricks, and external righteousness are accepted and applauded as the way to go. We would have more application, more practical advice on how to live the Christian life, more concrete examples that we can use. The evidence is all around us; in book stores, on Christian TV, and on the pulpits of

our land. Give someone a bit of direction on how to improve their marriage and people are grateful. Call them to radical surrender to the saving power of Jesus Christ and they think you are a little off. Superficial piety is still in vogue. But cross bearing is still the only way to salvation.

**Rev. Joel Dykstra** is the pastor of the Wellandport Orthodox Reformed Church in Wellandport, Ontario Canada.

# We Confess

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

### *Article 29: The Marks of the True Church*

If ever there was one article in our Confession of Faith that was both irrelevant and relevant for our time, surely it would be Article 29 and the marks of the true church. This article is irrelevant if we approach the Confession as a dust-covered relic of times past, but it is eminently practical and relevant when we realize how it guides us in a timeless way. There are so many groups, assemblies, and ministries that call themselves “churches” in our culture. One need only walk or drive down the main street of any city to see that anyone with a new idea on how to make church relevant has done so. So how does the average Christian know which churches are biblical? Is there such a thing as an unbiblical church? Thankfully our Confession of Faith gives us guidance based on God’s Word in finding a church.

#### **We Need to Discern Which Churches are True**

After explaining what the Church is in article 27 and then saying that it is necessary to join it in article 28, article 29 of the Belgic Confession answers the questions, “Which church?” The opening lines begin by stating that it is necessary for believers to examine every “church” to discern if it is true or not, saying,

We believe that we ought diligently and circumspectly to discern from the Word of God which is the true

Church, since all sects which are in the world assume to themselves the name of the Church. But we speak not here of hypocrites, who are mixed in the Church with the good, yet are not of the Church, though externally in it; but we say that the body and communion of the true Church must be distinguished from all sects that call themselves the Church.

It was Martin Luther who was one of the very first during the Reformation to speak of the external signs that identify the Christian church in his 1539 treatise *On the Councils and the Church*. Later, in his treatise, *Against Hanswurst* (1541), he said there have always been two churches, the true and false. This was not novel to Luther or the Reformers, but borrowed from St. Augustine’s *The City of God*, where he traces the two lines of Seth and Cain to show the true and false people of God.

And so our Confession says that we must be diligent and circumspect, that is, careful, in discerning which assemblies are the true and which the false. This is a biblical concept taught to us by John, who instructs us, saying, “Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits, whether they are of God; because many false prophets have gone out into the world” (1 John 4:1). It is a biblical given that not all prophets

are sent by the Lord. Because of this the New Testament warns us against false doctrine (Col. 2:8, 20), false prophets (Gal. 1:7; 2 Peter 2:1-4), and the harlot of Babylon (false religion mixed with the powers of the world; Rev. 18).

First of all, every “church” calls itself some kind of Christian Church, whether it is the Family Church down the street, the Foursquare Church, First Presbyterian Church, the United Methodist Church—the list is endless. All professing Christian groups identify themselves as churches. The context of our Confession was that every “sect” (Latin, *sequi*, that is, something that splits off), whether Roman Catholic, Orthodox, Lutheran, Anabaptist, Hussite, Waldensian, Anglican, and Reformed called themselves by the biblical name “church.” Although we may have a more cluttered view of things with so many denominations, associations, federations, and independent churches, it is nevertheless true that “these two Churches are easily known and distinguished from each other” because the boundary markers we have are themselves clear.

Second, all these multitudes of “churches” say they follow the Bible, say they are Christian, say they are practicing biblical Christianity. The wisdom of the day in finding a Church is going to a “Bible-believing church.” The problem with this is that everyone says this. So what happens is that Christians are taught that they can choose a church based on their personal preference. Some like traditional churches, some like contemporary; some like this kind, and

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some like that kind. We are told today that whichever church best serves the needs of your family is the one you need to attend.

Third, culturally we live in a tolerant society. This means that it is assumed that every church is a true expression of the Church because they are sincere, they believe the Bible, they love the Lord, and they are trying their best to fulfill the Great Commission. Although we may have disagreements at the end of the day, we are all in a church. We need to be aware that we have all been influenced by this mind-set more than we realize. When we speak of the “marks” of the Church and have to draw lines it is not easy; it is offensive; it is not politically correct.

### **What About Hypocrites?**

When we speak of true churches and false churches we are not speaking of individuals, whether in a true church or a false church. Instead, we are speaking of “the body and communion” of the true church versus the false church. Our calling is not to go to a church and determine who is saved and who is not, nor is it to find a pure church with no unbelief or hypocrites within it. When we say a particular “church” is a “false church” we are not saying there are no Christians in that place nor when we say a church is a true church are we saying there are no hypocrites in that place. Our task is to discern the confession of faith of particular churches.

As a side note, it is important to recognize that in this discussion the Confession assumes the distinction between the external/internal, vis-

ible/invisible in its discussion of the Church. The church it is a mixed multitude of hypocrites and “the good,” as the Confession describes those with true faith. Yet, from another point of view, that is, from the Lord’s eternal perspective, these hypocrites “are not of the Church, though externally in it.” Although in the covenant community externally they do not possess the substance of the covenant internally.

### **Marks of the True Church**

In discerning which churches are true and which are false, we are to do so “from the Word of God,” not sentiment. And so, as Reformed churches we speak of there being three marks (Latin, *notae*) by which the true Church is known: 1) the pure preaching of the gospel, 2) the pure administration of the sacraments as instituted by Christ, and 3) the exercising of church discipline in punishing sin. And yet, these three marks may be summarized by one overarching mark above all others, if you will; being governed by the pure Word of God alone:

In short, if all things are managed according to the pure Word of God, all things contrary thereto rejected, and Jesus Christ acknowledged as the only Head of the Church. Hereby the true Church may certainly be known, from which no man has a right to separate himself.

This is testified to in Scripture which says that Christ alone is the foundation of the Church (1 Corinthians 3:11) as well as being the cornerstone of that foundation (1 Peter 2); yet, we are also taught that the apostles and prophets are the foundation of the Church (Ephesians 2) because they testify and point us to Christ. And so a true church is one that is governed itself by the authority of the Word. Practically speaking, though, we say this is shown in the three areas of preaching, sacraments, and discipline. These are the marks of Christ’s Church because these are the means whereby Christ has promised to meet with His people. Where these three marks are found Christ is present in saving grace.

Historically there was debate over how many marks there were. The Augsburg Confession (1530) spoke of the two marks of the preaching of the Gospel and administration of the sacraments. To this conclusion John Calvin was in agreement. In speaking of these two marks Martin Luther so famously said,

The temple is now as wide as the world. For the Word is preached and the sacraments administered everywhere; and wherever these are properly observed, whether it be in a ship on the sea, or in a house on land, there is God’s house, or the Church, and there God should be sought and found.

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***When we say a particular “church” is a “false church” we are not saying there are no Christians in that place.***

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As early as 1544 Peter Martyr Vermigli was the first Reformed theologian to add the “third mark,” church discipline. Soon after others such as Martin Bucer and John Knox, followed suit.

While eventually coming to consensus about there being three marks, church discipline was often said to be “a fruit of the first two.” One of the reasons men such as Melancthon, Bullinger, Calvin, and Viret spoke of two marks was the existence of the Anabaptists. In debating with Rome about the catholicity and apostolicity of the Protestant faith, they felt it necessary to distance themselves from Anabaptism, which was known for its extreme rigor and discipline, in order not to be reviled as Anabaptists themselves.

#### *Pure Preaching of the Gospel*

The pure preaching of the Gospel was understood by our forefathers to refer to the doctrine of justification by grace alone (*sola gratia*) through faith alone (*sola fide*) on account of Christ alone (*solus Christus*). As Peter Martyr Vermigli said in contrast to Rome: “They have undoubtedly corrupted doctrine, since they deny what Scripture affirms: that we are justified by faith alone.” We see all throughout the writings of the Reformers that they understood justification to be purely preached when the Word was “rightly divided” (2 Timothy 2:15) into its two parts: Law and Gospel. The Law was preached in all its terror, while the Gospel was preached in all its comfort as that which the Law could not do (cf. Romans 8:3-4; Canons of Dort, III/IV, 6). In doing this the Re-

formers taught us to preach Christ and Him crucified.

What is important for us to understand is that the Confession is not concerned whether a church has a biblical statement of faith, purpose statement, or even is a member of a federation/denomination with an orthodox Protestant Confession, but whether the Gospel is actually *being* preached. This is a warning to us. Just because we have a Confession does not make us a true church.

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***If we preach any other “gospel,” whether it be explicitly faith plus works or some insidious version of “get in by faith, stay in by obedience,” let us be eternally anathema.***

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We have to preach the Gospel purely. If we preach any other “gospel,” whether it be explicitly faith plus works or some insidious version of “get in by faith, stay in by obedience,” let us be eternally anathema (Galatians 1:6-9). If we come not with the “doctrine of Christ” (2 John 9) but a counterfeit, be it ever so sincere, may we not be allowed in the homes of the faithful for we are antichrists!

#### *Pure Administration of the Sacraments*

The sacraments are purely administered when only the two Christ instituted (cf. Heidelberg Cat-

echism, Q&A 68) are celebrated in the church. This means Rome is not a true church, nor are groups such as the Salvation Army which do not baptize. As well, the sacraments must be administered as Christ instituted them. With baptism this means that the water must be administered in the name of the Triune God and by an ordained minister (Matthew 28:18-20). Whether one is baptized in a church building or at the beach, with a font or a bowl, by sprinkling, pouring, or immersion, and whether the minister sprinkles, pours, or immerses once or three times is indifferent. As well, it was understood that baptism was a covenantal ordinance, that is, that it was administered to believers and their seed (Genesis 17:10-13; Romans 4:11-12).

With the Lord’s Supper the pure administration means that both bread (whether leavened or unleavened) and wine (as Calvin says, no matter the color) are to be given to the people, whether kneeling, sitting, or standing. This is to be done by reciting the words of institution (1 Corinthians 11:23-26), as the example of Paul testifies, along with prayer (“...when he had given thanks...”) over the bread and wine. This means that whether the minister reads a long Form, explains the sacrament in his sermon (*a la* the practice in Strasbourg), or explains it in his own words (he is a trained minister after all) does not make the sacrament more or less purely administered. After all, Jesus and Paul did not prescribe any Forms nor the usage of them.

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### *Church Discipline*

The third mark is the one that defends the Lord's reputation for holiness (Ezek. 36:16-21; 1 Cor. 5:1), protects the Church from infection (1 Cor. 5:6; Heb. 12:15-16; 2 Tim. 2:14, 16-18), and restores the rebellious, making clear the seriousness of their resistance to Christ's Word and Church (1 Cor. 5:5; 2 Cor 2:5-11; Heb. 3:12-13, 10:24-25, 12:11-16).

### **Marks of True Christians**

After listing the marks of the Church, the Confession also lists the marks of Christians. The reason for doing this, again, is because the Reformers taught a distinction between the church as it is invisible to us, yet visible to the Lord, and visible to us. Calvin speaks of the church as the elect; yet, for our sakes, he has accommodated himself to us and given us a church to see. So when the Confession speaks of the marks of Christians being faith, avoiding sin, following after righteousness, loving God and neighbor, neither turning aside to the right or left, crucifying the flesh, fighting against sin, and continually taking refuge in Christ, it is speaking of those who are not only "in the church" but those who are "of the church" as possessors of the benefits of the covenant of grace.

### **Marks of the False Church**

Finally, having explained the marks of the true Church, the Confession explains what the false Church is. The false Church also has three marks, which are the opposite of the marks of the true Church: 1) it ascribes more authority to itself than to the Word of God, 2) it does it not ad-

minister the sacraments as appointed by Christ, but adds to and takes from them, and, 3) it persecutes those who live holy according to the Word of God and rebuke it for its errors, covetousness, and idolatry. Thus the false Church is "the synagogue of Satan," as John calls it (Rev. 2:9; 3:9).

Historically speaking, at least in the Western Church, this refers to the Roman Catholic Church as its Pope and tradition have equal, if not more, authority than the Word of God, as it has added confirmation, penance, marriage, ordination, and last rites to the Christ's ordained sacraments, and it persecutes the true Church, calling it schismatic, sectarian, "separated brethren."

And so this article, which seems so distant, irrelevant, and even intolerant to our ears, offers us sound guidance as to how to find a church which Christ has established and in which He will meet

with His people. It is our duty to pray for the protection and propagation of such churches in our dark times as we pray the words of our Lord: *Thy kingdom come.*

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

### ***Study/Application Questions for Article 29***

1. How can we explain biblically to the myriads of professing Christians in our culture that just because an assembly has the name "church" in its name does not mean that it is truly a "church?" How do we do so without being intolerant in a tolerant society?
2. Why is it the duty of the Christian "diligently and circumspectly" to find a true church?
3. Where in the Gospel narratives does Jesus speak of the three marks of the "true church?"
4. How would you explain in your own words each of the three marks?
5. How does a "false church" denigrate the marks of the church?

# What We Should Learn from Hurricane Katrina

Whenever a disaster like Hurricane Katrina strikes us, people always ask the question, “Where was God?” or “How could God allow this?” One very wrong answer is that God did not do it. It is wrong for us to think that this was brought about simply by natural forces or the devil. No. The Bible tells us that the weather (along with everything else) is in God’s hand. Consider the following Bible verses:

*Whatever the LORD pleases He does in heaven and in earth; in the seas and in all deep places. He causes the vapors to ascend from the ends of the earth; He makes lightning for the rain; He brings the wind out of His treasuries. (Psalm 135:6-7).*

*If there is calamity in the city, will not the LORD have done it. (Amos 3:6)?*

*I also withheld rain from you, when there were still three months to the harvest. I made it rain on one city, I withheld rain from another city. (Amos 4:7).*

Clearly, the Bible teaches that the natural events of the world, including rain and storms, are caused by the living and true God. They are not chance events but actions directed by the hand of God. Why, then, would God send Hurricane Katrina to New Orleans and bring about such devastation and death? One way that people often try to

answer this question is by saying that they were worse sinners than anybody else.

In Jesus’ day, there were tragedies like our own. One of those tragedies was when the Roman governor slaughtered some of the people of the region of Galilee, which is where Jesus lived and worked. Jesus asked them this question, “Do you suppose that these Galileans were worse sinners than all other Galileans, because they suffered such thing” (Luke 13:2)?

Were the people of New Orleans worse sinners than those of San Francisco or Chicago or New York? Is someone who dies in their seventies a worse sinner than someone who dies in their eighties? Is a child who dies a worse sinner than someone who lives to be 100? Jesus gave a direct answer to this question, “I tell you, ‘No.’” Why someone dies in this way and another in that does not give us an occasion to speculate on what type of sinner they were.

Rather, Jesus brings it back to us, “But unless you repent, you shall all likewise perish.” In other words, a disaster is a good time to think about sin and judgment--not the sin of

those who perish, but *ours!* And so Hurricane Katrina should make us think about God’s wrath against sin and God’s judgment, but not about the sin of the people of New Orleans. It should cause us to think about *our own* sin.

Jesus is raising our question one step higher. We are inclined to ask, “Why did they die in this way?” We *should* be asking, “Why is there death at all?” The Bible says, “The wages of sin is death” (Romans 6:23). Death is not something that had to happen to humanity. Man was created good. It is only because man sinned against God that he has to die, and so death is neither normal nor natural.

We *all* have sinned. The first human Adam brought death and sin to us all. “By one man’s offense many died” (Romans 5:15). “By one man’s disobedience, many were made sinners” (Romans 5:19). And we see the sad result today, “All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” (Romans 3:23).

But why do we have to die for our sin? Because God is *just* and *holy*. God is just, and so he must punish sin. “He will by no means clear the guilty (Exodus 34:7). If someone breaks His law, then God will punish that person with death. This is what God promised to Adam, “In the day you eat of it, you will surely

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***A disaster is a good time to think about sin and judgment--not the sin of those who perish, but ours!***

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die.” God said that sin must merit death, and God does not lie.

God’s holiness means that He cannot have sin in His presence. He must be separate from it. That is why there is a hell. God removes sin from His presence. “You are of purer eyes than to behold evil, and cannot look on wickedness” (Habakkuk 1:13). God hates sin and cannot tolerate it. And so let us not think that physical death is the end. Afterwards, there is an eternal hell (Luke 16:22-23). Jesus said, “Fear Him who, after he has killed, has power to cast into hell; yes, I say to you, fear Him” (Luke 12:5)!

But how slow we are to think of physical death, much less what comes after! We go about our lives as if things will always go on the way they have. We would never expect that a flood would come in and totally change our lives forever! That is what Jesus says catastrophes are for. “Unless you repent, you shall all likewise perish.” It wakes us out of our stupor and confronts us with the fact that we must perish.

We are all inclined to ignore that fact. Imagine if everyone lived to a hundred years old and died peacefully. How little we would think about death! But we should. Death should be enough to wake us all out of our mental and spiritual sleep, but we generally ignore it. That is why sometimes God sends death in different ways than what we think of as normal. It wakes us up to what we all should have already thought about, “I am going to perish, if I don’t repent.”

And so what should we do? We should repent. We should not look at the sin of others but our own. We must turn from *our* sin unto Jesus Christ. This means that we should admit the fact that we are sinners and worthy of death. We should commit to turning away from sin. And we should turn to Jesus Christ.

Jesus Christ did what we could not do. He never sinned against God, but He died anyway. Why? Not for His sin but for ours! Even though we were all made sinners and condemned to death in Adam, we can be forgiven in Christ and given eternal life: “By One Man’s obedience, many will be made righteous.” “As in Adam all die, so in Christ all shall be made alive!” And if you receive Christ, though you die physically, it will only be to prepare you for greater glory. Jesus said, “I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in Me, though he may die, he shall live” (John 11:25).

And so what should we learn from Hurricane Katrina? We should learn and be reminded again of God’s wrath and hatred for sin, but not the sin of those from New Orleans. We should learn of God’s hatred and wrath against *our* sin. We should learn that sin brings temporal and eternal death. And we should let this teach us that we need to repent. We need to confess our sin and turn unto God. Finally, we should learn that the only solution to our sin is found in the cross of Jesus Christ.

And so, have you learned this lesson? Are you in Christ? Have you received Him and committed to follow Him and leave the sinful world behind? That is what Jesus is calling you to do today.

One question that is rarely asked but should be is, “Why are we still here at all?” If sin brings death, and we have sinned, then shouldn’t we be dead? The answer to that is found in the word “repent.” God is giving you time to turn from your sin and unto Him. So, do it today and do not delay! Who could have imagined at the beginning of the summer that New Orleans would be completely flooded and abandoned? That all those people would lose their homes and many of them their lives?

In the same way, you don’t know what a few months will bring you. Profit from the time that God has given you to seek Him while you can. And rest assured. If you seek Him, He will surely be found.

**Rev. J. Wesley White** is the pastor of the New Covenant Presbyterian Church in Spearfish, South Dakota.

# Proposing Unity

## URCNA & CanRC

Approximately 100 people gathered from southern California and elsewhere on the evening of August 5, to hear a presentation by the members of the Joint Church Order Committee of the Canadian Reformed Churches and the United Reformed Churches. The meeting was hosted by First United Reformed Church of Chino, California. Rev. Ron Scheuers, minister of the host church and member of the committee, called the meeting to order with the reading of John 17:20-26. He reminded us of the importance of being one in the Lord.

Rev. Scheuers introduced each of the members of the committee (with the exception of Rev. Ray Sikkema, who was absent for health reasons) and then gave a presentation to inform those present about the history of the Canadian Reformed Churches and the work of this particular committee.

Rev. Bill Pols, minister of the Orthodox Reformed Church of Edmonton, Alberta, gave a report about the process toward church unity. He highlighted the important decisions made by various synods of the United Reformed Churches and the Canadian Reformed Churches. He also reminded us that the prospect of greater church unity was part of the original vision of the United Reformed Churches, already back in its root in the Alliance of Reformed Churches in the early 1990's.

Following that, Dr. Art Witten, an

educator within the Canadian Reformed Churches, gave a presentation about the historical background of the Canadian Reformed Churches. In order to acquaint us with the churches, he began with some numerical and geographical statistics. He then spoke of the reason for the existence of the Canadian Reformed Churches, demonstrating that the churches are "a continuation of the reformed church." He traced the history from the Synod of Dort to the present, through the various secessions and mergers in the Netherlands. Dr. Witten reminded us that the Church Order of Dort is a common frame of reference between our two federations.

Next, Dr. Bert Nederveen, pastor of the Ebenezer Canadian Reformed Church of Burlington, Ontario, spoke about the theological foundations of the Canadian Reformed Churches. He traced this back to the *solas* of the Protestant Reformation, affirming salvation by grace alone through faith alone, revealed in Scripture alone. He then spoke of the desire to seek unity with others who share these theological convictions. He told us that the unity of the church is related to the catholicity of the church.

The next presenter was Mr. Gerard Noordeman, also, of Burlington, Ontario. He reported on the missionary endeavors being conducted by the Canadian Reformed Churches. Their mission work

takes place abroad—in places like Brazil, Indonesia, and Papua New Guinea—and locally, with missions in British Columbia to both the native inhabitants and the Chinese immigrants. He went on to talk about their commitment to Christian day-school education for the children and concluded by describing the development of the Theological College of the Canadian Reformed Churches in Hamilton, Ontario, the school for the training of their ministers.

Rev. John Van Woudenberg, minister of the Emmanuel Canadian Reformed Church of Guelph, Ontario, was given the task of covering the various practices in the Canadian Reformed Churches with regard to worship, the Lord's Supper, Sabbath observance, etc. He highlighted that fact that while there may be some Canadian Reformed Church distinctives in these areas, many of the fundamental convictions and practices are the same as those in the United Reformed Churches. He described worship as a covenant dialog between God and His people in which God takes the initiative and the people respond. He explained the use of "attestations" for the movement of members from one church to another, as well as the specific use of travel attestations for the purpose of celebrating the Lord's Supper in a church other than one's home congregation. We can certainly appreciate the high regard for the Lord's table and its proper fencing practiced in the Canadian Reformed Churches.

Mid-America Reformed Seminary professor, Dr. Nelson Kloosterman,

reported specifically on the work of the committee in their progress toward producing a joint church order. He reminded those present, that the mandate for the committee came from Synod Escondido (2001), which is, "That the current Church Orders of the two federations be evaluated in the light of the Scriptural and confessional principles and patterns of church government of the Dort Church Order; that the Church Order committee work together with a Canadian Reformed Church Order committee to develop a suitable and agreeable adaptation of the Church Order of Dort, retaining and maintaining its principle, structure, and essential provisions." He pointed out the challenge of evaluating the church orders of two distinct federations with an eye toward a third church order, that of Dort, having the desire to uphold the principles, but not slavishly follow, the almost 400 year old church order. Dr. Kloosterman reviewed the structure of the new church order and highlighted some of the returns to a more traditional understanding of the reformed system of government.

Finally, Mr. Harry Van Gorp, member of the Bethel United Reformed Church of Aylmer, Ontario, talked about some of the cooperative experiences that are currently going on at the local level between Canadian Reformed and United Reformed congregation, including occasional pulpit exchanges, joint schooling efforts, and the use in United Reformed churches of the Canadian Reformed Churches Heidelberg Catechism curriculum, *I Belong*, by Dr. James Visscher.

The two hours that were taken to give these presentations went by very quickly. The next hour was spent with those present asking questions of the presenters. The questions ranged from church polity to reformed theology to the benefits of moving toward union. Rev. Scheuers answered the third question in three parts. "Unity," he said, "is a good idea because we become more obedient to the command of Christ to be one. Also, we get a great appreciation of each other's heritage. And finally, we can do more together than we can do alone."

Throughout the evening, it became evident that the members of the committee have a great amount of trust and respect for each other. They commented about their appreciation for each other's particular history. Dr. Witten said, "Experiencing the unity of faith which exists among the members of the

committee and developing a high level of trust in working together toward a joint church order has been one of the greatest blessings in working on this committee."

Now, the challenge for the churches will be to develop that same trust and confidence. Hopefully, a joint church order will be one step in the ongoing process of church unity. "The most significant challenge [toward unity]," said Dr. Kloosterman, "is the will to be united, the willingness to recognize that our respective federations are not destinations, but milestones along the route of living faithfully in our generation."

Respectfully submitted,  
Rev. Bradd L. Nymeyer  
Phoenix United  
Reformed Church

The Board of the Reformed Heritage Christian School Association of Kalamazoo, Michigan, is inviting applications for a full-time 7<sup>th</sup>-8<sup>th</sup> grade teacher/administrator beginning in the fall of 2006. Successful applicants must be committed to the Reformed faith, Biblical inerrancy, 6-day creation, male headship, the antithesis between Christianity and the world, and covenantal theology. Applicants should send a letter of application and resumé to:

Steve De Vries, School Board President,  
Reformed Heritage Christian School  
700 N. Fletcher Avenue  
Kalamazoo, MI 49006

For more information, phone 269-375-8455.

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**Press Release of the  
Meeting of the Combined Committees of the  
Canadian Reformed and United Reformed Churches  
to Propose a Common Church Order  
November 1-3, 2005**

Present were: Dr. Nelson Kloosterman, Rev. William Pols, Rev. Ronald Scheuers, Rev. Raymond Sikkema and Mr. Harry Van Gulp, representing the United Reformed Churches in North America (URCNA), and Dr. Gijsbert Nederveen, Mr. Gerard J. Nordeman, Rev. John VanWoudenberg and Dr. Art Witten of the Canadian Reformed Churches (CanRC). Dr. Kloosterman opened the meeting with Scripture reading and prayer.

The minutes of the August 8-10, 2005 meeting were reviewed and approved after some minor corrections were noted. An agenda and timetable for the next three days were circulated and adopted.

Correspondence was received from URCNA and CanRC consistories. The committee is encouraged by and thankful for the comments and reactions to some of the proposals formulated. It is an indication of the seriousness with which the work of the committee is being studied and assessed by the churches. It has also challenged the committee to revisit various matters and revise certain articles based on insights communicated to us in this way. Responding to questions and correspondence may not always be possible because the committee does not see its work to this point as a finished product as it remains open to further evaluation and revision.

A review of the articles thus far adopted resulted in a few modifications. The last paragraph in the article regarding the weekly worship services was modified to read as follows: "At one of the services each Lord's Day, the minister shall ordinarily preach the Word of God as summarized in the Heidelberg Catechism by treating its Lord's Days in sequence, and may give such attention also to the Belgic Confession and the Canons of Dort."

Some thought was given to professional language editing of the proposed church order for consistency of language and style. A qualified volunteer for this work will be sought in the church community. A start will be made to sequence and number the articles completed thus far.

A number of items of old business were handled. The articles on who can preach in the churches and admission to the Lord's Supper were briefly discussed but more study is required. It was decided to leave these matters for now and deal with them at the next meeting.

Under new business, a start was made with the section dealing with ecclesiastical discipline. The first article in this section was formulated as follows: "Ecclesiastical discipline, one of the keys of the kingdom of heaven, is spiritual in nature and exempts no one from trial or punishment by the civil authorities.

The purpose of ecclesiastical discipline is that God may be glorified, that the sinner may be reconciled with God, the church, and one's neighbor, and that offense may be removed from the church of Christ."

In the same section consensus was also reached on articles dealing with consistory involvement, the reconciliation of a member, the discipline of a communicant and non-communicant member, and the re-admission of an excommunicated person. The following will be proposed:

"When a member's sin in doctrine or life is of a private character and does not give public offense, the rule prescribed by Christ in Matthew 18 shall be followed. A private sin from which the sinner repents after having been admonished by one person alone, or subsequently in the presence of two or three witnesses, shall not be brought to the consistory.

When a member does not repent after having been admonished in the presence of two or three witnesses concerning a private sin, or when it is alleged that a member has committed a public sin, the matter shall be brought to the consistory. Only then shall the consistory deal with any alleged sin in doctrine or life."

"The reconciliation of a member, whose sin is public or has become public because the admonition of the church was despised, shall take place only upon evidence of genuine repentance, and in a manner which best promotes the edification of the church. For the welfare of the congregation and the sinner, the

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consistory shall determine if the member shall be required to confess the sin publicly.”

“A communicant or a mature non-communicant member whose sin is properly made known to the consistory, and who then obstinately rejects the repeated and loving admonitions of the consistory, shall, in agreement with the Word of God, be subject to church discipline according to the following stages:

A. Silent Discipline: a member who persists in sin shall be suspended by the consistory from all the privileges of church membership, including using the sacraments and voting at congregational meetings. Such suspension shall not be made public by the consistory.

B. Public Discipline: if the silent discipline and subsequent admonitions do not bring about repentance, and before proceeding to excommunication, the sinner’s impenitence shall be made known to the congregation by indicating both the member’s offense and failure to heed repeated admonitions, so that the congregation may speak with and pray for this member. Public discipline shall be done with the use of the synodically approved liturgical form, in three steps, the interval between which shall be left to the discretion of the consistory.

1. In the first step, the name of the sinner shall ordinarily not be mentioned so that he may be somewhat spared.

2. In the second step, the consistory shall seek the

concurring advice of classis before proceeding, whereupon the member’s name shall be mentioned to the congregation.

3. In the third step, the congregation shall be informed that unless there is repentance, the member will be excommunicated from the church on a specified date.

C. Excommunication: if these steps of public discipline do not bring about repentance, the consistory shall excommunicate the impenitent sinner, using the synodically approved liturgical form.”

“When someone who has been excommunicated repents and desires to be readmitted into the communion with Christ and His church, the congregation shall be so informed. If no lawful objections are presented to the consistory within one month after the public announcement, readmission into the church with all its privileges shall take place, using the synodically approved liturgical form. One who has been excommunicated as a non-communicant member shall be readmitted only upon public profession of faith.”

An article dealing with the suspension and deposition of office-bearers was agreed on: “When a minister, elder, or deacon has committed a public or grievous sin, or when he refuses to heed the admonitions of the consistory, he shall be temporarily suspended from the duties of his office by his own consistory with the concurring advice of the consistories of the two neighboring churches.

Included in the sins requiring suspension from office are these: false doctrine or heresy, schism, open blasphemy, simony, desertion of office or intrusion upon that of another, perjury, adultery, fornication, theft, acts of violence, habitual drunkenness, brawling, unjustly enriching oneself; in short, all sins which would warrant the discipline of any other member.

Should he harden himself in his sin, or when the sin committed is of such a nature that he cannot effectively continue in office, he shall be deposed from his office by his consistory. In each case the concurring advice of classis is required, and in the case of a minister the concurring advice of the deputies of regional synod is also required.

Suspension or deposition in itself does not necessarily require further ecclesiastical discipline.

A man once deposed may be reconsidered for office only after a sufficient period of time, only upon evidence of genuine repentance, and only through the regular procedure for entering office.”

Regarding the article on mutual censure it was agreed that: “The minister(s), elders, and deacons shall conduct mutual censure regularly, whereby they exhort one another in a loving and edifying manner regarding the discharge of their offices.”

The article dealing with Psalms and Hymns received considerable attention. After extensive discussion of the principle of singing only synodically approved songs in the worship services it was

decided to leave this article for a future meeting and reflect on it some more.

It was also decided not to include an article on indigent members (Dort art. 83) since such an article is not currently in either the CanRC and URCNA church orders and the concept is already covered in the article regarding the task of the deacons.

Two brothers were assigned the task to formulate articles on the definition, accountability, and duties of the missionary and the respective tasks of missions and evangelism.

The next meeting will take place D.V. March 14-16, 2006, in the Grand Rapids area. The press release was read and approved for publication. In his closing remarks Dr. Kloosterman stated his thankfulness to the Lord for the brotherly manner in which the committee again could proceed with its work. Appreciation was also expressed to the host church for its hospitality and service. A considerable amount of work could be accomplished.

After Scripture reading and closing prayer by Dr. Kloosterman, the meeting was adjourned.

For the Committee  
Gerard J. Nordeman

## Postmodern Liberalism: Repainting a Non-Christian Faith A Christian Critique of Rob Bell's *Velvet Elvis*

Rob Bell is the pastor of one of the fastest growing churches in the history of America. The church is in Grandville, a suburb of Grand Rapids, MI. He recently published a book, *Velvet Elvis, Repainting the Christian Faith*. His title refers to an old painting in his basement of Elvis Presley. Bell maintains that this painting is not the ultimate work of art that makes all future works of art worthless or unnecessary. Art needs to continue. It needs to develop. In the same way, Rob Bell maintains that even though we have been given many different new paintings of Christianity throughout the centuries, we must continue to paint new pictures of the Christian faith. *Velvet Elvis* is Rob Bell's attempt to repaint the Christian faith.

Rob Bell invites us to his "*Velvet Elvis*", his repainting of the Christian faith with these words, "I am learning that my tradition includes the rabbis and reformers and revolutionaries and monks and nuns and pastors and writers and philosophers and artists and every person everywhere who has asked big questions of a big God."<sup>1</sup>

Bell's attempt at repainting the Christian faith is part of a larger picture. Ron Gleason articulates this in three articles in *Christian Renewal*.<sup>2</sup> He introduces us to the key players in a movement called the "Emergent Church Movement".

Rob Bell is specifically mentioned as a member of this group. Gleason quotes a summary of the broad characteristics of the group articulated by Os Guinness in *Prophetic Untimeliness*, "The 'coming church' and the 'emerging church' are everything. The talk is all of new ways of 'doing church' through reinventing, revising, innovating, borrowing, mixing, and experimenting. ...Ministers are no longer theological authorities but the 'chief storytellers' and facilitators of a new joint spiritual journey'.<sup>3</sup>

Rob Bell's view of the Christian faith is a part of this very broad perspective. A subset of the Christian tradition may be orthodox Christianity but the Christian faith tradition is not limited to this. His repainting is not an interpretation of the text of Scripture but an alteration of the text of Scripture. Ultimately, Rob Bell does not repaint the Christian faith. He paints a picture that is not a picture of the Christian faith or the truth of Christianity. But his new picture of error is not really new at all. It is old error. It is old false teaching. It is the same old errors of the past repainted. Rob Bell forsakes truth. He rejects it. He deceives. He is a false teacher. He repaints the errors of the past.

1. Rob Bell, *Velvet Elvis*, p. 14.
2. *Christian Renewal*, September 24, 28, and October 12, 2005.
3. *Christian Renewal*, Sept. 28, 2005.

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Not everyone will recognize this fact. Sadly, some will view his repainting of error as a great work. They will look at the title, look at the claims that this is a Christian book and then conclude it must be right. They will be wrong. Just because Rob Bell uses brush strokes of Biblical language does not make his painting Christian truth. He uses the language of the Christian faith but he paints a different picture. He repaints error rather than truth.

*The Repainting of the Christian Faith* presents a philosophy of human existence that is inconsistent with the truth revealed in God's Word. There are many pieces of the picture Rob Bell paints that can be looked at. It is important to examine the arms, legs, and other aspects of his repainting. However, I will begin by trying to step back and see the big picture he tries to paint.

According to Rob Bell, we all live in the reality of God, but we do not all realize the reality of the love of God. God is love. Love is ultimate reality. God is absolute. Love is absolute. Wherever people love, they live in the reality of God. Loving a neighbor, an enemy, or the environment is living in the reality of God. People may not be aware of God; they may deny the existence of God; but human love is impossible without living in God. Living in the reality of love is living in the reality of God. Wherever humans love, the wonder of God is present. We invite all people who love to continue to live in love and to experience the joy of loving God. Shame exists where there is an absence of love. Hell is not a place where people experience the wrath of God. Even the reality of Hell is

the love of God. Hell is a place where people continue to live, ignoring the ever present reality of the love and forgiveness of God. People choose to continue to ignore love. The absolute reality of God, the reality of God's love remains constant. This is Rob Bells repainting of the errors of past centuries.

It is essential that we begin by analyzing Rob Bell's false teaching about the nature of TRUTH itself. He rejects the Bible's teaching about truth.

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According to Mr. Bell there are two ways to approach doctrine: as a brick or a spring.<sup>4</sup> The brick approach to doctrine is solid, unmovable and unchanging. It has no life. It is the wrong approach. A spring has life; it is flexible, and it is constantly changing. Rob Bell believes all doctrines are springs. By embracing such a view of doctrine and truth Mr. Bell drives a wedge between reality and doctrinal truth. He creates a paradox where there isn't one. Bell views doctrines as "statements about our faith that help give words to the depth that we are experiencing."<sup>5</sup> He makes a false distinction between the experience of our faith and the truth. The subjective trumps the objective. Experience is the reality. Words

are incapable of conveying absolute truth. There is absolute reality in experience but no absolute reality in words. There is no concept in Rob Bell's teaching that part of the experience of God is knowing, by faith, truth about God and His works revealed in the words of Scripture. He writes, "Our words aren't absolutes. Only God is absolute, and God has no intention of sharing this absoluteness with anything, especially words people have come up with to talk about him."<sup>6</sup> These themes of Rob Bell sound like the anti-Christian philosophical god of Hegel, "The Absolute is infinite life, and love is the consciousness of the unity of this life, of unity with the infinite life itself and of unity with other men through this life."<sup>7</sup>

Of course Rob Bell does what he declares impossible. He declares with words that God is absolute. He describes what has been historically called the incomprehensibility of God, with the word absolute. But he does more than strive to define this truth with a different name. He claims that saying anything absolute with words about the true God is impossible. He writes, "Words aren't absolutes". He has with words declared an "absolute", which he declares impossible.

Rob Bell's repainting of false teaching looks like a merger of the dialectic philosophy of Hegel, the liberalism of Rudolph Bultmann and the

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4. Rob Bell, *Velvet Elvis*, pp. 22-28.

5. *Ibid*, p.22.

6. *Ibid*, p. 23.

7. *A History of Philosophy, Vol. 7 Part 1, Modern Philosophy, Fichte to Hegel*, Fredrick Coplestone, p. 20.

neo-orthodoxy of Karl Barth. Rob Bell has embraced these and other errors and merged them into postmodernism, an anti-Christian philosophy teaching the impossibility of absolute truth. Both postmodern 21<sup>st</sup> century philosophy and 20<sup>th</sup> century “modern liberalism” have influenced Rob Bell. A more appropriate title for Rob Bell’s painting, his “Velvet Elvis”, is “Postmodern Liberalism”. Rob Bell accomplishes what he sets out to do. His painting includes “every person everywhere who has asked big questions of a big God”<sup>8</sup> even when their answers deny the truths of the Bible.

The false teaching that the Christian faith needs to be repainted for every culture has a long history. Sadly, these historic attacks on Christian truth are alive and well. Hegel replaced the Christian faith with declarations about a thesis always having an antithesis that results in a synthesis that becomes the new thesis in a never-ending quest for truth. Truth is redefined as the never-ending quest itself. There is no absolute truth. Truth is a constant experience of paradox. Every time you think you have truth, its opposite enters into your experience of reality.

Rob Bell repaints this error. There are no absolute answers to our questions. Doctrines are springs that must be flexible, for the answers to our doctrinal questions only produce more questions, whether about God’s love or the Trinity. “An answer... raises even deeper questions. ... Truth always leads to more... truth. Because truth is insight into God and God is infinite and God has no boundaries

or edges. So truth always has layers and depth and texture. ... It’s like a pool that you dive into... no matter how hard and fast you swim downward the pool keeps getting... deeper. The bottom will always be out of reach.”<sup>9</sup> He writes, “The very nature of orthodox Christian faith is that we never come to the end. It begs for more. More discussion, more inquiry, more debate, more questions”<sup>10</sup> (Rob Bell often breaks grammatical rules

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to emphasize his point that there are no absolutes). In language close to Hegel’s anti-Christian philosophy of truth, Rob Bell writes, “It’s not so much that the Christian faith *has* a lot of paradoxes. It’s that it *is* a lot paradoxes (sic). And we cannot resolve a paradox. We have to let it be what it is.”<sup>11</sup>

He equates this view of truth with the word “reformed”. He claims the Reformers of Luther’s day knew that what they “did and wrote and decided would need to be revisited. Rethought. Reworked. ... By this I do not mean cosmetic, superficial changes like better lights and music... I mean theology: the beliefs about God, Jesus, the Bible, sal-

vation, the future (sic). We must keep reforming the way the Christian faith is defined, lived and explained.”<sup>12</sup>

This analysis of the Reformation is historical revisionism and denies Biblical truth. First, the reformers did believe the church would always be reforming, but not as defined by Rob Bell. True, the church failed to be perfect, but there was a perfect standard to be measured against. There was truth really discovered. The Reformers never thought that every Biblical-theological doctrine they wrote and decided needed to be reformed, changed and explained. Confessional statements arising out of the Reformation were declarations of truth. The possibility of error always exists. But absolute error exists just as absolute truth.

Second, instead of doctrine needing to be reformed by living, Protestants believed our living needed to be reformed according to doctrine. There is absolute truth about God found in the Bible: truth about how we should live and about the reality in which we exist. Human living is what is fallible and unreliable. Mr. Bell turns this upside down. Living is what is real and true. Words are just attempts to verbalize the truth in which we live.

Third, Rob Bell misuses the word reform. He believes it means

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8. Rob Bell, *Velvet Elvis*, p. 14.

9. *Ibid*, p. 33

10. *Ibid*, p. 30.

11. *Ibid*, p. 34.

12. *Ibid*, p. 12.

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new. But, God forms the church and the form is given in His word. The historical church continues to fail to live up to this perfect standard of truth of what the church should be. So, because we have failed to be what God reveals in His Word, the church and individuals must be reformed into the mold God gives us in the New Testament. But this is not the goal of Rob Bell; he writes, “The goal is not to be a ‘New Testament church’. That makes the New Testament church the authority. The authority is God who is acting in and through those people at that time and now these people at this time. The point is to ask, what is God up to here, now?”<sup>13</sup> For Bell there is no absolute word from God about “now”. New truth must be discovered. Through living we discover the truth for today that will change for tomorrow.

Rob Bell describes all people or groups that claim to have absolute truth as bricks. He judges that all such people are liars. However, the Bible makes that claim. Protestants make that claim. The historic Evangelical consensus of the 20<sup>th</sup> century made that claim. I make that claim. According to Rob Bell we are liars. We are bricks. Rob Bell’s strongest attacks and criticism are against movements, churches, people and pastors like myself who claim truth. Not because what we say may be wrong. That is not the problem. The problem is to claim truth. He writes, “It sounds nice to say, ‘I’m not giving you my opinion; I’m just tell-

ing you what it (the Bible) means. The problem is, it is not true. I’m actually giving you my opinion, my interpretation of what it really says. And the more I insist that I am giving you the objective truth of what it really says, the less objective I am actually being.”<sup>14</sup> He condemns anyone who claims to have an absolute word from God on the matter of truth. Of course this is Rob Bell’s absolute word from God that all truth claims are just interpretations about truth. He then goes on to give Biblical example for his view.

He cites the Jerusalem council of Acts 15 as the Biblical basis for this view of truth. He claims they “don’t claim to have an absolute word from God on the matter.”<sup>15</sup> Therefore, we should never claim to have absolute truth on the teaching of the Word of God. First, assuming there are some matters where we cannot claim absolute truth does not mean that we cannot claim absolute truth on any matter. Second, one wonders why Rob Bell even bothers to cite a Biblical example to tell us what is the truth of how to talk about the Bible, if the Bible is all just a personal interpretation. But to say you are doctrinally WRONG is wrong, except if it is Rob Bell condemning bricks for thinking they are right. He claims to know the truth about truth. But Rob Bell is wrong on the truth about truth. He is outside the orthodox Christian faith about truth. Thus, when he says he agrees with Christian truth, he means something

vastly different from Protestants or Catholics or Presbyterians or Baptists. We have historically disagreed with one another but one thing we agree on is that there is truth.

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13. Ibid, p. 65.

14. Ibid, p. 54.

15. Ibid, p. 57

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# Paedocommunion and the Reformed Confessions

## (Part One)

Though churches of the Reformation are committed to the principle of *sola Scriptura*, which requires that the Scriptures be regarded as the supreme standard for their faith and practice, they are not indifferent to the lessons of church history. Nor are they indifferent to the tradition of Scriptural interpretation that is embodied in the confessions of the church. These confessions have an authority that is subordinate to Scripture, but they nonetheless represent an acknowledged consensus regarding what the Scriptures teach. When it comes to the question of paedocommunion, it is not enough to consider the practice of the churches throughout history. It is also necessary to study what the Reformed churches have confessed regarding who are the proper recipients of the sacrament of the Lord's Supper. Before we turn in our study of paedocommunion to the Scriptures' teaching regarding the proper recipients of the Lord's Supper, therefore, we need to complete our consideration of the history of the church by turning our attention to the Reformed confessions.

In the classic confessions of the Reformed churches, which were written during the period of the Reformation in the sixteenth century and the early seventeenth century, there is compelling evidence that the Reformed churches believe that the Lord's Supper ought to be administered only to professing believers. These confessions express

a comprehensive understanding of the sacraments as an indispensable means whereby the grace of Christ is communicated to his people. They affirm that the children of believers, together with their parents, are recipients of the gospel promise and ought accordingly to receive the sacrament of baptism, which is a sign and seal of their incorporation into Christ and membership in the covenant community, the church. However, they also insist that such children, prior to their reception at the Table of the Lord, require instruction in the Christian faith in order that they might be prepared to receive properly the body and blood of Christ in the sacrament. Advocates of paedocommunion often argue that there is an inconsistency in this practice of admitting children into the covenant community through baptism, while withholding the sacrament of the Lord's Supper until such children have been instructed in and professed their faith before the church. In the opinion of proponents of paedocommunion, the insistence that the children of covenant first profess their faith before they are received at the Table of the Lord denies to them a privilege that ought to be extended to every covenant member.

It will not be my purpose in our consideration of the Reformed confessions to provide a full answer to this paedocommunionist objection. However, in order to evaluate the

claims of advocates of paedocommunion, we need to have a clear understanding of the Reformed confessions' teaching so far as it bears upon the subject of the proper recipients of the sacraments. As we shall see in our summary of the confessions, their position on this subject derives from a more comprehensive view of the sacraments' role as means of grace that accompany the preaching of the gospel. The advocacy of paedocommunion not only touches upon the question of the proper recipients of the sacrament of the Lord's Supper. It also touches upon the more basic issues of the nature of the sacraments and the obligations they place upon those who receive them. Indeed, the notion that children should be admitted to the sacrament of the Lord's Supper, which is the principal interest of those who advocate paedocommunion, has more far-reaching implications than many paedocommunionists often admit. Whether these implications are consistent with essential features of the Reformed view of the sacraments remains to be seen. Here it needs only be observed that we can hardly isolate the question of paedocommunion from the broader framework of traditional Reformed teaching regarding the sacraments.

In order to summarize the Reformed confessions on the subject of paedocommunion, we will begin with a review of their understanding of the nature and use of the sacraments in general. Within this framework of the doctrine of the sacraments, we will then take up the particular question of the proper recipients of the sacraments, especially the Lord's Supper.

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## The Relation of the Word and Sacraments

The doctrine of the sacraments belongs, in the structure of the Reformed confessions, to the doctrine of the church and her ministry. Those whom God the Father elects to save in Jesus Christ become beneficiaries of his saving work in no other way than through communion with the church. Though the ancient dictum of Cyprian, “outside the church there is no salvation” (*extra ecclesiam nulla salus*) is not explicitly echoed in all of the Reformed confessions, they commonly affirm that saving fellowship with Christ does not ordinarily occur apart from the church’s official ministry of Word and sacrament. Christ’s saving presence in the world is mediated through the church and the means of grace entrusted to her. Where the true church of Jesus Christ is manifest, there Christ is present gathering, defending, and preserving for himself a people chosen unto everlasting life. Christ is pleased to communicate himself by the working of his Spirit through the administration of the Word of God in preaching and sacrament. Where the Word of God is faithfully preached and the sacraments rightly administered—the two marks of the true church uniformly stipulated in the confessions—there we may be sure Christ is present by his Spirit imparting his saving benefits to his people. The location of the doctrine of the sacraments in the confessions, therefore, confirms their importance as necessary marks of the presence of the true church of Christ and as indispensable means to communicate God’s grace in Christ to his people.

In their exposition of the “outward means” that Christ has appointed in the church for the purpose of communicating the “benefits of his mediation,” the confessions grant a priority to the preaching of the gospel in relation to the sacraments. The sacraments do not communicate anything other than the grace of God in Christ, the same grace that is primarily and firstly communicated through the preaching of the gospel. Apart from the Word of the gospel, the visible word of the sacrament would be empty and lifeless. In the confessions, there is a clear ordering of Word and sacrament, such that the sacrament follows upon or is “added” to the Word as a kind of auxiliary means of grace. If the sacrament is to be administered properly, it must be preceded by an exposition of the biblical Word and promise which the sacrament signifies and seals. Failure to administer the sacrament in conjunction with the Word, represents a misunderstanding of the nature of the sacraments as “appendices” to the Word. For this reason, it is permissible to speak of the preaching of the Word as the “first” or “preeminent” means of grace, and of the sacrament as the “second” and “subordinate” means of grace. This relative priority of preaching in relation to the sacraments is well expressed, for example, in the Heidelberg Catechism, which affirms that “the Holy Spirit

... works [faith] in our hearts by the preaching of the holy gospel, and confirms it by the use of the holy sacraments” (Q. & A. 65). Faith is *produced* by the Spirit’s ministry through the Word; it is only *confirmed* by the proper use of the sacraments.

This raises a question that has been disputed in the history of the Reformed tradition: Are the sacraments necessary and indispensable to the communication of God’s grace in Christ? Or is the preaching of the Word of God a sufficient means of grace, apart from the sacraments? The best answer to this question, and the one that most faithfully represents the doctrine of the Reformed confessions, must be that ordinarily the sacraments are necessary and indispensable. The indispensability of the sacraments, however, is not absolute, but consequent upon the Lord’s appointment of the sacraments for the believer’s benefit. Because the Lord has appointed the sacraments for the church’s use and added them to the preaching of the Word, it would be disobedience to his will to neglect their use. Furthermore, because they have been added to the Word, in view of the believer’s weakness and proneness to doubt the gospel promise in Christ, neglecting the sacraments would betray an ingratitude and false sense of security on the part of the church. Though it may be necessary to posit (by way

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***The indispensability of the sacraments is not absolute, but consequent upon the Lord’s appointment of the sacraments for the believer’s benefit.***

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of exception in extraordinary circumstances) the possibility of the grace of Christ being communicated apart from the sacraments, the ordinary means Christ uses require the sacraments. To neglect the use of the sacraments represents a failure to appreciate the intimate conjunction of Word and sacraments in the divine economy of grace. For just as the sacraments require the preceding Word, so the Word, by virtue of Christ's appointment, calls for the accompanying sacrament.

### **The Distinctive Nature of the Sacraments**

The typical definition of the sacraments in the Reformed confessions speaks of them as "visible signs and seals" of an "invisible grace." What is peculiar to the sacramental communication of God's grace in Christ is the appointment or consecration of visible elements that represent to the eye of faith the truth of the believer's saving fellowship with Christ. The water of baptism, for example, is a visible representation of the washing away of sins through the blood of Christ and the regeneration of the Holy Spirit. There is a divinely-appointed correspondence between the visible sign and the grace to which it points. Moreover, the sacraments are given by God to confirm and attest the promise of the gospel. Not only are they signs that visibly represent, but they are also seals that authenticate and assure the believer of the truth of the gospel promise. The Reformed confessions are fond of insisting that the believer is assured by the visible sign and seal of the sacrament that the grace of God in Christ is for the one who receives it by faith. Though the sign and seal

do not add anything to the promise, they do constitute a more "full" or "open" confirmation of the gospel so that the believer's faith is fortified.

All of the Reformed confessions grope for words to express simultaneously the most *intimate conjunction* between the sacramental sign and the grace signified, as well as the *necessary distinction* between them. Consistent with the nature of sacraments, the Lord has appointed the sign as a visible representation and confirmation of the gospel. However, the visible representation and confirmation are not to be confused with the spiritual reality to which they point. The water of baptism is not to be confused with the blood of Christ or the washing of the Holy Spirit. The bread and wine of the Lord's Supper, likewise, are not to be confused with the body and blood of Christ. In sacramental language, we may speak of the sign as though it were the reality, so intimate is the divinely appointed connection between them. But lest we fall prey to idolatry, worshiping the sacramental element rather than the mediator, Jesus Christ, to whom the element refers, we must distinguish between them. The "substance" to which the sacramental sign points can only be Jesus Christ himself in all of his saving presence and power.

Furthermore, the confessions con-

sistently teach that the power and efficacy of the sacraments require that they be received by faith. Since the sacraments do not add anything new to the grace of Christ promised in the gospel, and since the sacramental elements are not to be confused with the spiritual reality to which they refer, the sacraments require the same response as the Word. No more than the preaching of the gospel does the administration of the sacrament savingly communicate the grace of Christ, unless the gospel promise is believed or appropriated by an active faith on the part of its recipient. The Holy Spirit who authors faith through the preaching of the Word, also uses the sacraments to confirm and nourish faith. The sacraments function instrumentally to communicate the grace of God in Christ, but only when the Holy Spirit works through them to strengthen the believer in faith. Consistent with this emphasis upon the believing reception of the sacraments, the Reformed confessions consistently oppose any doctrine of *sacramental regeneration* apart from the Spirit's working faith through the Word. The sacraments do not work simply by virtue of their administration (*ex opere operato*), so long as the recipient does not interpose any obstacle (*obex*) to the reception of the grace they confer. Though they do genuinely serve, as means of grace, to *confer* and to *communicate* the grace of God in Christ,

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***The confessions consistently teach that the power and efficacy of the sacraments require that they be received by faith.***

they do so only as the Spirit is working through them and as they confirm the faith required on the part of their recipients.

**Dr. Cornelis Venema** is the President of the Mid-America Reformed Seminary. He also serves a contributing editor of *The Outlook*.

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## Looking Out and About

- The annual Fall Conference of the Seventh Reformed Church in Grand Rapids, Michigan was held on October 20 and 21, 2005. Dr. Sinclair B. Ferguson, Professor of Systematic Theology at Westminster Theological Seminary in Dallas, Texas was the speaker. The theme this year was "Knowing Christ Jesus as Savior and Lord." On Friday evening, Dr. Ferguson spoke on the topic, "Jesus Christ: The Long Promises Savior." On Saturday the theme developed as the speaker chose his topics, "Jesus Christ: The True Seed of Abraham" and "Jesus Christ: The Servant of the Lord."
- The Annual Meeting of the Reformed Fellowship was held on October 27, 2005 at the Trinity United Reformed Church, Caledonia, Michigan. Following the fellowship dinner and business meeting, Rev. Richard Kuiken, Pastor of the Pompton Plains Reformed Bible Church in New Jersey, spoke on the theme, "Those

Who Tremble at His Word" based on Isaiah 66:1, 2.

- On November 17, 2005, two hundred friends and supporters of Mid-America Reformed Seminary gathered for a fellowship dinner at the Brann's Banquet Center in Wyoming, Michigan. The speaker for the evening was Dr. Nelson Kloosterman, who has taught for many years at the seminary. His theme was "Sowing What You Hope to Reap." Several of the students shared reflections on the uniqueness of the education they are receiving at the seminary in preparation for the ministry of the Word.

- Rev. James Admiraal, who had been serving as interim pastor of preaching at the Cornerstone United Reformed Church in Hudsonville, Michigan accepted the call from that church to serve as their senior pastor of preaching.

- Mr. Greg Bylsma, who graduated from Mid-America Reformed Seminary last year, was ordained on October 21, 2005 as pastor of the Woodstock, Ontario United Reformed Church. Participants in the ordination service included Rev. M. Vogel, Rev. M. Vanderhart, and Rev. H. Zekveld.

- Rev. Wilbur Bruinsma, who has served as the Pastor of the Kalamazoo Protestant Reformed Church since 1996, has accepted a call to Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania.

- The consistory of the Grace Reformed Church of Dunnville is announcing that Rev. Ed Korevaar is available for a call. Rev. Korevaar may be contacted by mail at 906 Robinson Rd. RR#1, Dunnville, Ontario N1A 2W1 or by phone at (905) 701-4537 or by contacting the Clerk of Grace Reformed Church, Arthur Struyk P.O. Box 85, Dunnville, Ontario N1A 2X1.

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