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The Outlook

Dedicated to the Exposition and Defense of the Reformed Faith



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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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The publishers of this journal express their adherence to the Calvinistic creeds as formulated in the *Belgic Confession*, the *Heidelberg Catechism*, the *Canons of Dort*, and the *Westminster Confession and Catechisms*.

All contributions represent the personal views of

Law or Love

And by this we know that we have come to know him, if we keep his commandments. Whoever says “I know him” but does not keep his commandments is a liar, and the truth is not in him, but whoever keeps his word, in him truly the love of God is perfected. By this we may be sure that we are in him: whoever says he abides in him ought to walk in the same way in which he walked. 1 John 2:3-6

Is Christianity a religion of law or of love? Is it about doctrine and creeds or is it about relationships? Should we think of Jesus, first of all, as the greatest Teacher who ever lived or should we think of Him as the Lover of lovers?

In the religious community of which I am a part, there has been a long tradition of emphasis on doctrine and strict adherence to God’s law. Presbyterian and Reformed churches have often been characterized as heavy on intellectual content and short on spiritual warmth. Because of this, some have said that we have become Pharisaical and legalistic. Critics say that the religion of the Bible is one of love, affirmation, and encouragement; not rules, regulations or rote learning of catechism answers.

Who is right here? Should we turn away from an emphasis on doctrine? Should we stop worrying about having the right answer and instead just look for ways to build each other up?

I would agree that the churches of my tradition have tended at times to become legalistic and Pharisaical. There have been times when our leaders have given the impression that as long as you follow a strict code of behavior – one that emphasized regular church attendance and

abstaining from worldly pleasures – that you could be assured of God’s favor. That, of course, is not what the Bible teaches.

So, am I in favor of getting rid of the emphasis on doctrine? No, not at all! The answer to the problem of legalism is not to throw out law or doctrine. The question that I posed at the beginning is really a bad question. We should not have to choose between law and love, but rather, fully hold to both. Jesus said, “If you love me, you will obey what I command” He also said, “If you hold to my teaching, you are really my disciples. Then you will know the truth and the truth will set you free” (John 14:15; 8:31,32).

Christianity is a religion of loving obedience and obedient love. A Christianity without love is legalism, but Christianity without law is a religion of moral uncertainty and confusion where everyone does what is right in his own eyes.

Let us think for a moment about doctrine. What is it? The Bible refers to doctrine as “teaching.” For

example, in Acts 2:42, where the King James has “And they continued steadfastly in the apostles’ doctrine,” the NIV has, “They devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching.” Thus “doctrine” and “teaching” refer to the same thing. The teachings of the Bible are also the doctrines of the faith. Statements like the following are both doctrines and teachings: Jesus is the Son of God; Jesus was made man; Jesus is able to save sinners from the power and penalty of sin; Jesus died to pay for the sins of His people; all men are sinners and cannot save themselves; and all who call upon the name of the Lord will be saved.

These doctrines or teachings are very important for salvation. It is the knowledge of them that is the foundation of faith in Jesus. People will not put their faith in Jesus if they do not know these truths. When they hear these doctrines, and the Holy Spirit opens their eyes so that they see that the doctrines are true, then they put their trust in Jesus. Paul writes in Romans 10:17, “Faith comes from hearing the message.” Thus, doctrine is essential to salvation. No one comes to faith in Christ apart from hearing, understanding and believing the truth that God has revealed in the Bible, and this truth is called doctrine – the teaching of the Bible.

However, ever since God first revealed Himself and His will, Satan

Presbyterian and Reformed churches have often been characterized as heavy on intellectual content and short on spiritual warmth.

has been working to contradict God and teach false doctrine. Satan knows that if our faith is based on a lie, our faith is not in the true God, and therefore we are not saved. For example, the Apostle John had to deal with people who believed in Jesus but denied that He had come in the flesh. He warned the church that though such people said they believed in Jesus, they were really of the antichrist, and not true Christians. He commanded the church to “test the spirits” to see if they were really from God, and the test was a doctrinal test.

Down through the ages the church has attempted to be faithful to John’s concern to distinguish true faith from false faith (which is a concern of the rest of Scripture, too). In its attempt the church has recognized that some teachings of the Bible are more essential to salvation than others. For example, a person can be mistaken about the millennium (the thousand year reign of Christ) and still be saved. But a man who says the Bible is not inspired and is full of errors, is on thin ice with regard to his salvation. The creeds and confessions of the church are the church’s attempt to describe those doctrines of the Bible which, if denied or contradicted, call into question a person’s claim to be a true Christian. The creeds and confessions are not man-made rules and regulations; they are a summary of the Bible’s teaching – a summary of the foundations of faith. And they are also a measure of true faith.

Various creeds have served the churches, almost from the beginning, as tools for teaching new believers and for distinguishing be-

tween those who are true believers and those who are not.

In using the confessions, the church is not ignoring the work of the Spirit in people’s lives. The Holy Spirit is the Spirit of truth, and He leads God’s people into believing and confessing the truth. Therefore we can know that the Spirit of God is at work when a man, woman, or child confesses the truth about God. The church is built upon the rock of a good confession of faith in Christ (Matthew 16); a confession shown in both talk and walk. A person who evidences a lively religious zeal for God and a deep piety, yet denies the truths of the confessions, is probably not a Christian. Such is the case of those who are described in Romans 10:1,2: “They have a zeal for God, but not according to knowledge.”

I am not against a fervent love for Jesus – a love that shows itself in deeds of love and kindness; a love that affirms human dignity. I am all for it. But without doctrine I do not know who Jesus is, what He did for me, why I need Him, or how I should serve Him and my fellow man. One of my teachers used to say that anyone who opens his mouth about God is a theologian. The question is then, are we going to be good theologians or sloppy theologians?

I grant you, it is possible to know all about doctrine and yet not know Jesus. But the answer to that problem is not to treat doctrine as the problem. The New Testament church continued steadfastly in the apostles’ doctrine and devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching. Should we do less? Paul says,

“Watch your life and doctrine closely.” He also warns of a time when “men will not put up with sound doctrine” 1 Timothy 4:16 and 2 Timothy 4:3. As an officer of the church, the Bible charges me to “encourage others by sound doctrine and refute those who oppose it” Titus 1:9. Because I love Jesus I may not do less!

Rev. Ralph A. Pontier is the pastor of the Redeemer Alliance Reformed Church in Orange City, Iowa

We Confess

An Exposition & Application of the Belgic Confession

Article 30: Of the Government of the Church

The Church is Jesus' "new creation by water and the Word." As the Belgic Confession has made so clear, to be united to Christ includes being united to his Body, the visible Church. For those not formally belonging to a local manifestation of the catholic Church they are "duty bound" to join it with joy. And so there are no "lone ranger" Christians as article 28 pointed out.

In saying this our Confession in Articles 27-29 uses various biblical terms to describe the Church which our Lord has created, such as *congregation* (Exodus 12:3; Acts 15:30), *assembly* (Exodus 12:6; James 2:2), *body* (Isaiah 1:5-6; Romans 12:4-5), and *communion* (Psalm 133; Acts 2:42). These images teach us that the Church is made up of real people who relate to each other as brothers and sisters. For this reason the local church must have order, structure, and discipline. But how is this to occur when the Head and Lord of the Church, Jesus Christ, is in heaven? This was the question John Calvin sought to answer when he opened Book IV, Chapter 3 of his *Institutes* so famously, saying,

We are now to speak of the order in which the Lord has been pleased that his Church should be governed. For though it is right that he alone should rule and reign in the Church, that he should preside and be conspicuous

in it, and that its government should be exercised and administered solely by his word; yet as he does not dwell among us in visible presence (Matt. 26:11), so as to declare his will to us by his own lips, he in this (as we have said) uses the ministry of men, by making them, as it were his substitutes, not by transferring his right and honour to them, but only doing his own work by their lips, just as an artificer uses a tool for any purpose.¹

As we continue our exposition and application of the Belgic Confession, we continue with the Reformed belief about the Church (arts. 27-36). And whereas in articles 27-29 the Confession is concerned with the "big picture" of the Church, articles 30-32 deal with the practical matters of how the church functions and is governed until our Lord comes again.

The Necessity of Church Government

Although "church polity" is not a topic that is going to sell many Christian books, draw large audiences to conferences, or please the parishioners from the pulpit, it is a biblical and necessary topic of our faith and life. This is why Article 30 opens by saying, "We believe that this true Church *must* be governed by that spiritual polity which our Lord has taught us in His Word" (emphasis added).

It is *necessary* for us to "believe with the heart and confess with the mouth" that the church must need government. The question, though, is why? Recognize from the outset that the Confession states the necessity of church government residing in the fact that it is a topic "our Lord has taught us in His Word." As Protestants we confess the principle of *sola Scriptura*, that is, that Scripture alone is our ultimate source of authority for faith and life. And as a people of the Word, we turn to it for what we believe about how Christ governs his people.

Yet it is also important to recognize that while the Scriptures do give us commands, principles, and examples on how to order the Church rightly, not every issue of church polity is spelled out in Scripture. This is why the Westminster Confession of Faith, written in 1647, in its article on the Scriptures and their sufficiency, teaches that

...there are some circumstances concerning the ... government of the church, common to human actions and societies, which are to be ordered by the light of nature, and Christian prudence, according to the general rules of the Word (I.6).

Issues such as how ecclesiastical meetings are to be run can be solved by using the wisdom of "Robert's Rules," for example, while the matter of appeals to the various ecclesiastical assemblies can be spelled out using general principles of equity. Louis Berkhof stated this issue well when he said,

Reformed Churches do not claim that their system of Church government is determined in every detail by the Word of God, but do assert that its fundamental principles are directly derived from Scripture. They do not claim a *jus divinum* for the details, but only for the general fundamental principles of the system, and are quite ready to admit that many of its particulars are determined by expediency and human wisdom.²

Nevertheless, what our Belgic Confession is saying here is that there is enough in Scripture to give us the basic outline and principles of how Christ wants his Church governed.

So it is necessary for the Church to be governed because Christ has taught us this, but also because of our sinfulness. Left to ourselves – even as Christians – we would either be anarchists in which everyone does what is right in his/her own eyes (Judges 21:25) or we would end up being persuaded to follow some charismatic leader based on plausible arguments (Colossians 2:4; cf. 2 Peter 2).

For at least these two reasons, then, the church must be governed. But by what kind of government? Notice that the Confession makes it clear that the government of the church is a *spiritual* task and *spiritual* government. The Church of Christ is no theocratic, theonomic, or political action group, nor is it to be governed as such; instead, the Church is a spiritual kingdom (Matthew 3:2; 1 Corinthians 15:50; Romans 14:17; 1 Peter 2:5) which uses spiritual weapons (2 Corinthians

10:4; Ephesians 6:17) in a spiritual war (Ephesians 6:12). There is an earthly, temporal kingdom of this world and to it God has given the sword and temporal punishment (Romans 13). This distinction between these two kingdoms, their respective governments and discipline is applied in the Church Order of Dort, which says, “As Christian discipline is of a spiritual nature, and exempts no one from civil trial or punishment by the authorities, so also besides civil punishment there is need of ecclesiastical censures...”³ Here we are dealing with the spiritual government of Christ’s Spirit-created people.

The Basics of Reformed Church Government

So what are the “general rules of the Word” (WCF, I.6) our Lord has taught concerning the government of His Church? Article 30 of the Confession continues, saying,

... there must be ministers or pastors to preach the Word of God and to administer the sacraments; also elders and deacons, who, together with the pastors, form the council of the Church...

These are the three “offices,” that is, the official duties which Christ has given to men to perform in his Church. Generally speaking, we can say that just as Israel had three “offices” by which the LORD led His people (prophet, king, priest), so

too the New Testament has three ordinary offices (pastor, elder, deacon).⁴

Pastors

The Old Testament office of prophet corresponds generally to the New Testament pastors as they are both offices of the Word (Acts 6:4, 13:2; 1 Timothy 4:6, 14). The word “pastor” evokes in us the image of one who is not merely a mouthpiece, but a shepherd. And the pastor shepherds his sheep by feeding them the Word both in its audible form, preaching, and its visible form, the sacraments of baptism and the Lord’s Supper (cf. Belgic Confession, art. 33). The LORD promised such shepherds to His faithless people through the prophet Jeremiah, saying, “And I will give you shepherds after my own heart, who will feed you with knowledge and understanding” (Jeremiah 3:15). And before our Lord ascended, He commissioned His apostle-shepherds, to go out to the nations and feed them with the Word, “teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you” (Matt. 28:20).

This prophetic and apostolic teaching is likened in Scripture to various types of food for the souls of God’s people. The Word is likened to milk (1 Peter 2:2), which gives vital nourishment to newborns. It is described as bread (Deuteronomy 8:3), which is the basic staple of life. It is also described as heavenly

The Confession makes it clear that the government of the church is a spiritual task and spiritual government.

bread, manna (John 6:35 cf. 6:58), which gives us life in this wilderness pilgrimage we call life. It is also described as solid food (Hebrews 5:12), which is what we eat as we begin to mature into childhood and adulthood. And the Word is described as honey (Psalms 19:10), which is sweet and satisfying. Is it any wonder the Apostle commands Timothy, and all preachers, to preach the Word at all times (2 Timothy 4:2)?

What is so amazing about God's grace is that for the further confirmation and nourishment of his people, he has given to ministers the task of administering this Word in its visible form: the water of baptism, signifying the washing away of our sins by the blood of Christ (Hebrews 10:22) and the pouring out of the Holy Spirit upon us (Titus 3:5-6); the bread, signifying the giving of Christ to us as the life-giving bread of our souls (John 6); and the wine, signifying the poured out blood of Christ as our spotless Passover lamb (1 Corinthians 5:7).

Elders

The Old Testament office of king corresponds to New Testament elders as they are offices of rule. The elders are the men⁵ in the congregation who with wisdom rule the church along with the minister (Exodus 18; 1 Corinthians 6) by ensuring that Word and sacraments are purely administered by the minister and that the lives of God's people are in accordance with the Word. This is why it is so vital to the life and future existence of Reformed churches in our land that our elders become serious students of the Word as well as the faithful summaries of that Word in our

three confessional documents. In a word, we need a generation of men who are intimately acquainted with and devoted to the Word and applying it in the life of God's people!

Deacons

Finally, the spiritual polity of our Lord's church also involves an analogous office to that of the Old Testament priest, at least in terms of the priest's service to the poor, sick, and needy among the people (e.g., Leviticus 13-15). The New Testament deacons fulfill this task in the life of the church as they have an office of service (Acts 6:1-6). Our "Form for the Ordination of Elders and Deacons" makes this so clear, linking the deacons' as a continuation of Christ's ministry, saying,

The office of deacon is based upon the interest and love of Christ in behalf of His own. This interest is so great that He deems what is done unto the least of His brethren as done unto Him, thus appointing the needy to represent Himself in our expression of sympathy and benevolent service on earth.⁶

The Reasons for Church Government

This article concludes with a list of the benefits of a biblical church polity of pastors, elders, and deacons, as taught by the Lord, saying, ...that by these means the true religion may be preserved, and the true doctrine everywhere propagated, likewise transgressors punished and restrained by spiritual means; also that the poor and dis-

tressed may be relieved and comforted, according to their necessities. By these means everything will be carried on in the Church with good order and decency, when faithful men are chosen, according to the rule prescribed by St. Paul in his Epistle to Timothy.

Preservation of True Religion

All three offices have a vital interest in preserving true religion. First, the ministers are those who must cultivate true religion in the hearts of God's people by proclaiming the Word so that the church has something to preserve. Second, the elders preserve true religion by guarding the sanctity of the Word and sacraments among the people, keeping watch against wolves from within and without the flock (Acts 20; 1 Peter 2; Jude 3-4). Third, the deacons preserve true religion by stirring up the people to live out this religion in visiting orphans and widows (James 1:27).

The question we must ask ourselves is simply, are we doing this? Are we preserving the Faith or our cultural and personal fancies? May our churches never be those under a famine – "not a famine of bread, nor a thirst for water, but of hearing the words of the LORD" (Amos 8:11).

Propagation of True Doctrine

But preservation is not enough; we must also propagate "the faith once for all delivered to the saints" (Jude 3). Ministers must spread the seed of the Word both publicly in preaching and teaching and privately in visitation (Acts 20:20). The elders and deacons of the church must protect the minister from administration and being over-burdened by

taking significant roles in the life of the church and by scheduling services, Bible studies, classes, etc. which will allow him to fulfill his calling. As well, the propagation of true doctrine must be a constant theme of the life of the church through family worship as well as church planting. After all, we can preserve the Faith wonderfully by never allowing an aberrant voice to speak to our people, but if that Faith is never passed on to the next generation (Psalm 78), there will be no church left to preserve anything.

Punishment of Transgressors

In setting up a “spiritual polity,” the ever-present task of the ministers and elders in church discipline will be existent. Remember that Belgic Confession Article 29 said church discipline was one of the essential marks of a true church. Without it we are a false church in which “anything goes.” Here the Confession mentions the “negative” side of church discipline, namely, punishing transgressors.

Yet, there is also a “positive” aspect to church discipline which is a blessing in the life of God’s people. As they “submit to the government of the church”⁷ they are coming under the care of pastors and elders, who will teach them, pray for and with them, visit them, and encourage them in their Christian walk.

Relief and Comfort of the Poor & Distressed

Another of the benefits of Christ’s spiritual polity is that the work of benevolence through the hands of the deacons will be fulfilled. While caring for the less fortunate must be a concern of every Christian,

the deacons are particularly the Church’s “ministers of mercy.” We would all agree with this as Reformed believers, but what we need to do is apply this principle more effectively in our churches. This means that we need to recapture this Confessional truth about deacons caring for the needy by relieving them of the burden of church finances. As long as we expect our deacons to be financial officers we will not have a robust ministry of mercy in our congregations nor communities.⁸

Good Order and Decency

The end purpose of all of this is, in the words of Paul, that “all things should be done decently and in order” (1 Corinthians 14:40). God “is not a God of disorder but of peace” (1 Corinthians 14:33), and when His people are governed in a way that is biblical, in which the office of Word, rule, and service are present, His people will be built up and He will be glorified.

Endnotes

1 *The Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 1 vol., trans. Henry Beveridge (Eerdmans: Grand Rap-

ids, 1989), 315-6. On the benefits of this translation see Richard A. Muller, *The Unaccommodated Calvin* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 68, 218 n26.

2 Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology* (reprinted 1994; Eerdmans: Grand Rapids, 1941), 581.

3 Article 71. This can be found in the *Psalter Hymnal* (Grand Rapids: Christian Reformed Church, 1934), 124.

4 For an excellent explanation of the offices of Israel and the Church, see Derke P. Bergsma, “Prophets, Priests, and Kings: Biblical Offices,” in *The Compromised Church* (Wheaton: Crossway, 1998), 117-131.

5 Note well that as confessional churches we official believe here in Article 30 that the offices of pastor, elder, and deacon are open to “faithful men.” The French text of the Confession uses the masculine noun *personnage*.

6 *Psalter Hymnal* (Grand Rapids: Christian Reformed Church, 1976), 173.

7 See “Public Profession of Faith:

Study/Application Questions for Article 30

1. How would you show someone that the Bible teaches “organized religion?”
2. In light of so much bad church government which leads to people having bad experiences with the church, how could you explain to someone the *blessing* of Reformed church government?
3. Explain in your own terms how the New Testament offices take over in some way the Old Testament offices. How does this show the unity between the one people of God throughout both Testaments?

Form Number 1,” *Psalter Hymnal* (Grand Rapids: Christian Reformed Church, 1976), 132.

8 On this topic see William Shisko, “Reforming the Diaconate.” *Ordained Servant* 1:2 (1992): 43-5; “Reforming the Diaconate: Part 2.” *Ordained Servant* 1:3 (September 1992): 63-6; “Reforming the Diaconate: Part 3.” *Ordained Servant* (January 1993): 16-8; Idzerd Van Dellen, “How the Deacons May Really Be Deacons.” *The Banner* (December 16, 1960): 6-7; Rand Lankheet, “The De-formation of the Diaconate.” *Christian Renewal* (March 8, 2004): 18; “The Re-formation of the Diaconate.” *Christian Renewal* (March 22, 2004): 12-3.

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

Press Release of the Joint Meetings of the Standing Committee for the Publication of the Book of Praise and the Song Book Committee of the URCNA November 10-11, 2005

Our committees met together Thursday, November 10 and Friday, November 11, in Jenison, Michigan, at the Bethel United Reformed Church. Rev. Douwe Agema, Mr. Chris Nobels, Dr. Christine van Halen-Faber, and Rev. George VanPopta were present from the Book of Praise Committee, while Mrs. Daphne Jasperse, Rev. Ed Knott, Rev. Rand Lankheet, Rev. Dennis Royall, Rev. Derrick VanderMeulen, Rev. Allen VanderPol and Rev. Dick Wynia were present from the URC Song Book Committee. Dr. Niek Gootjes of the Book of Praise Committee was not able to attend.

Since the URC Song Book Committee was acting as host for these meetings, Rev. Knott served as chairman, and Rev. Wynia served as secretary. Rev. Knott opened our meetings with a brief meditation on Psalm 147:7f. We sang from this psalm, as found in #302 of the *Psalter Hymnal*, and Rev. Knott led us in prayer.

After reviewing the minutes of our last joint meeting, in Ancaster in April 2005, we had a brief discussion of the reasons why there is some reluctance among the United Reformed Churches to include all 150 Anglo-Genevan psalms in the proposed song book. We also discussed the question of including psalms in their entirety. The discussion eventually turned to the issues

we expect to face in promoting the new song book in our respective federations. We agreed to set aside some time later in the agenda to address these issues.

We recognized that while each of our committees has its own mandate and responsibilities, as we move into the evaluations of hymns, we have begun to function increasingly as a joint committee. From time to time, the individual committees may be asked to develop position papers to help in the discussion of issues that we will need to deal with. We have decided to produce a common report to our respective synods. There will also be additional matters in our reports to our respective synods, reflecting our particular mandates.

As we look ahead, we note that we will eventually be facing practical issues in connection with publishing a new song book, e.g. investigating copyrights. Rev. Knott and Rev. VanderMeulen will look for people who can give us advice in these matters. We hope to receive a presentation at our Spring 2006 meeting.

Another practical matter that we have to grapple with is whether we ought to update language that may be considered archaic, and making other changes to the hymns, such as dropping stanzas. We adopted a statement that will govern our con-

siderations of these matters: “When changes to texts or music are being contemplated, for reasons such as, to improve clarity, to facilitate congregational singing, or to bring them into line with the previously adopted principles and guidelines, we will take care, as much as possible, to preserve the artistic properties of the text or music.”

In preparation for the work we will be doing with the Psalm section of the song book, and in particular, for dealing with the question, Will we recommend that all 150 Anglo-Genevan psalms from the Book of Praise be included in the proposed song book?, the Book of Praise Committee presented the Song Book Committee of the URC with a position paper explaining the rationale for maintaining the complete Anglo-Genevan Psalter. The Song Book Committee of the URC will prepare a response. This matter will also appear on the agenda of our Spring 2006 meeting.

In a previous meeting, we had agreed that the basic structure of the Hymn section of the song book will be Trinitarian, following the topics of the Apostles’ Creed.

Rev. Lankheet, Mr. Nobels and Rev. Royall collaborated in the compilation of the hymns approved by both committees for inclusion in our “gross list” (called the “Common Song Book Compilation”). These hymns have been gleaned from the CRC “blue” Palter Hymnal, the CRC “gray” Psalter Hymnal, the New Trinity Hymnal, the hymn section of the Book of Praise, the hymn section augment to the Book of Praise, as well as a few other hymn collections. The URC committee is still completing

its evaluation of the New Trinity Hymnal, the hymns in Cantus Christi (published by the “Reformed Evangelicals”), as well as hymns suggested by the churches, and submitted by individuals.

The bulk of our time was spent beginning to work our way through the “Common Song Book Compilation” together. We strive to apply the Principles and Guidelines for the Selection of Music in the Church, adopted in 2004 by our respective synods, to each hymn. We started with a discussion of the hymns in the “Augment to the Book of Praise”. These hymns have been tentatively identified for recommendation to the 2007 Synod of the American and Canadian Reformed Churches by the Book of Praise Committee. Following that, we turned to the hymn section of the CRC “blue” Psalter Hymnal. We were able to make substantial progress, making our way well into the 400’s. These discussions will yield another gross list of hymns, from which the final collection will be chosen.

There were two additional matters that we discussed together. First of all, again looking ahead to the work we will be doing on the Psalm section of the song book, the URC Song Book Committee presented a statement on the inclusion of complete and partial renditions of the psalms in the Psalm section of the song book. We decided “That at least one complete, accurate rendition of the text of each psalm be included, and that accurate renditions of parts of psalms may also be included, in the Psalm section.” We agreed to look for psalm collections which might provide us with com-

plete and accurate renditions of psalms.

Secondly, we also spoke about the need to make the churches familiar with our work. We decided that it would be helpful to the churches if we would publish articles about our work in the Clarion, Christian Renewal, and The Outlook, introducing the Principles and Guidelines adopted by our synods, and describing the struggle and the disappointment and the joy that are involved in trying to faithfully apply these principles and guidelines to the hymns we are reviewing. Revs. Lankheet and VanPopta were asked to write the first in a series of articles which introduce and explain the principles and guidelines, together with their rationale and their implications.

We agreed to schedule our Spring 2006 meeting for April 20-21, 2006, D.V., to be held at the Ancaster Canadian Reformed Church. Rev. VanderMeulen closed our meetings with reading from I Corinthians 15:50-58 and prayer, and we adjourned.

Rev. Dick Wynia

True Enlightenment

Central to the biblical teaching concerning the human condition is the doctrine of the fall of man from an original righteousness into the depths of sin. The Reformed theological tradition has strongly emphasized the pervasive impact of sin upon man in its affirmation of total depravity. This does not mean that every person is as bad as he or she can possibly be. Rather, the idea is that every part of a person's humanity has been tainted by sin—both the body and the soul. Sin has introduced the downward drag of weakness and death into our physical makeup. It has likewise corrupted every faculty of the soul—the mind, the emotions, and the will. Theologians have traditionally referred to the *noetic* effect of sin to describe what has happened to the human mind as a result of the descent of man into moral darkness.

The scriptural position concerning the darkness that has enshrouded the human mind is seen in Paul's epistle to the Ephesians. In this New Testament letter Paul urges the Christian community in Ephesus to maintain a distinctive Christian lifestyle in contrast to the decadent patterns of behavior found throughout the ancient Mediterranean world: "So this I say, and affirm together with the Lord, that you walk no longer just as the Gentiles also walk, in the futility of their mind, *being darkened in their understanding*" (Ephesians 4:17-18). Here, we learn the reason for intellectual futility, the fact that many are "always learning and never able to come to the knowledge of the truth" (2 Timothy 3:7).

Fallen man—by nature, apart from grace—has an understanding that has been darkened by sin.

The Enlightenment movement, which has exercised so much force and influence over the last three centuries, has maintained the exact opposite position. It has continually affirmed the complete sufficiency of human reason, believing that reason provides the light that the human race so desperately needs. *Humanist Manifesto II* reflected the Enlightenment faith in the supreme capability of the human understanding in its fourth proposition: "Reason and intelligence are the most effective instruments that humankind possesses. There is no substitute: neither faith nor passion suffice in itself."

For the Reformed faith, the danger with giving the primacy to human reason is patent: the mind of fallen man—apart from the renewal of the Holy Spirit—is a flawed instrument. It is a mind, Paul contends, that cannot penetrate into the real meaning of Holy Scripture. The apostle declares that for people in unbelief "a veil lies over their heart" (2 Corinthians 3:15). He further adds that for many "the god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelieving so that they might not see the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ" (2 Corinthians 4:4).

Some individuals may scoff at the Pauline teaching on the limits upon fallen human reason. They will continue to be impressed in themselves and their intellectual achievements. With respect to such arrogant people, Jesus said, "I praise you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, that you have hidden these things from the wise and intelligent and have revealed them to infants" (Matthew 11:25). The very thing of which the intellectual elite are oblivious—the reality of a divine judicial act in which God actually hides truth from the mind of the proud—for this Jesus thanks the Father.

But there is hope for fallen man. Jesus rejoiced in the reality that God the Father reveals truth to babes! In the passage in which Paul speaks about the dark veil draped over the fallen human heart and mind, he includes the wonderful truth that "whenever a person turns to the Lord, the veil is taken away" (2 Corinthians 3:16).

Speaking about the believing Christian community, the apostle states that we not only begin to understand the message of Scripture, but we are actually changed by the message: "But we all with unveiled face, beholding as in a mirror the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from glory to glory, just as from the Lord, the Spirit" (2 Corinthians 3:18). The

The danger with giving the primacy to human reason is patent: the mind of fallen man is a flawed instrument.

removal of the veil of darkness means that the believer in Christ becomes more and more like Jesus in his moral nature. We do not stay the same. The passing of time brings greater conformity to the Lord in the mind, the emotions, and the will. This indeed is the real and the true Enlightenment!

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Family Visiting Notes and Observations

The work of an elder in Christ's church is a noble and holy calling from God. The elder has reason to rejoice greatly while overseeing professions of faith, baptisms, and celebrations of the Lord's Supper. It is also, at times, a very distressing and sorrowful task; yet we are comforted knowing that Jesus is the great Overseer of our souls (1 Peter 2:25). Even as God has called the pastor to preach and administer the sacraments in and out of season, so too must an elder rule, admonish, and encourage in and out of season.

Ideally, I think many would agree that all elders, or governors, should go through a short training period before assuming their office in the church. While this may be an excellent goal it may not always be possible. Therefore, the following is a sort of "crash course" on one basic role of an elder. The focus is on family visitation, which is an important part of an elder's work.

The family visitation information has been taken from *Taking Heed to the Flock* by P.Y. DeJong, *With a Shepherd's Heart* by John R. Sittema, and *The Elders Handbook* by G. Berghof and L. DeKoster. I have added some of my own comments as well. Obviously, much more can be said about the office of an elder; this is but a brief study. I have written this study to help the newly appointed elder as he faces family visitations; it may also serve as a reminder or review for an elder who has done many

family visitations.

Huisbezoek: Family Visitation

DeJong notes, "every minister and elder installed in the churches assumes part of the responsibility which rests upon the consistory to contact the families entrusted to it, in an official way." Concerning "official," it is important to remember that Christ has instituted the office of elder (*presbuteros*) for the good of His church. He is working all things together for our good—elders are part of His working, so to speak. The work of the elders is "in a very real sense the work of Christ accomplished by them. They have been officially called and qualified for their task."

Since the church belongs to Christ, she cannot rule and care for herself. Since Jesus has lived and died for His church, Christ "owns" the church, and has authority over her. And for the good of His church, He appoints elders to watch her and care for her—to watch lovingly over the souls of Christ's people. One way of watching over the people of God is family visitation. Although there is not a "proof text" commanding elders to visit families, Paul set the pattern as he taught the Word from *house to house* (Acts 20:20). But family visitation is indeed implied in Scripture, as the elders care for the souls of the people of God (see Hebrews 13:7 & 17). Elders cannot evaluate the spiritual condition of the flock simply by greeting them before or after

the services each Lord's Day.

What better way is there to care for the souls of people than to visit—out of love and concern—the families of the congregation? How can the elders know the spiritual condition and needs of the flock unless intimate contact is made? To put it plainly, family visitation “takes the pulse and temperature of the Body” of Christ.

DeJong lists several purposes of family visitation:

1. *To help develop the spiritual life of the congregation.* When an elder visits a family, he is there to admonish, warn, and comfort when the member needs any of these. For example, if a member struggles with assurance of faith, the elder would find this out during a visitation time, and by God's grace, be able to comfort and encourage. Also, elders must point out enemies of the gospel that may threaten a particular church and its members. Primarily, family visits should be a time where the elders remind believers of the gospel, the riches of Christ. I would submit that an elder must speak the gospel in every family visitation, encouraging the family to “hold fast” their confession of faith in the Lord (Hebrews 10:23). In a word, the elder is concerned about the worship of the triune God in the life of each family.

2. *To challenge the lives of believers to service.* Since works follow true faith, a

Christian will serve people. However, often they need encouragement and guidance; an elder's instructive words to “love thy neighbor,” are spoken to motivate the Christian to service. Elders do have the *official* right to exhort all members to a life of faith as well as obedience. When visiting families, the elder should seek to equip them to serve the Lord, to worship Him with their lives. One way the elder can do this is by encouraging Christians to serve and help others in various ways. Simply put, the elders are to exhort Christians to proclaim the gospel by their actions. Even as elders do family visitations, the congregation is able to see what loving service looks like—the elders are an example for the flock. Just by visiting families of the church, the elder is serving the church in a Christ-like manner.

3. *To Promote the Communion of the Saints.* Family visitation can promote unity in the church, as elders may be able to stop gossip before it becomes deadly, may be able to encourage two quarreling members to seek forgiveness, and the list

goes on. Much prevention is done by visitation—putting a fire out before it burns out of control. Furthermore, family visitations will build up the confidence the congregation has in their elders and bring the flock closer together as they worship the triune God.

Sittema gives other purposes for visitation, which overlap with De Jong's:

1. *To Encourage using Scripture:* See 1 Thessalonians 5:11, 14, 2 Timothy 4:2, and Titus 1:9, 2:15. Face it: the flock is often weary and weak and wrestling with deadly sin. They need the encouragement that God gives His people in Scripture. Bring comfort and hope to families from God's Word!

2. *To Rebuke using Scripture:* See Proverbs 3:11, 9:8, 15:31, 29:1 as well as Luke 17:3 and Titus 1:13. Often, a family will need to be lovingly chided for sinful habits or other actions which are contrary to God's Word. Humbly, do not be afraid to carefully rebuke a family who has unbiblical practices.

3. *To Admonish/Counsel using Scripture:* See Exo-

Elders cannot evaluate the spiritual condition of the flock simply by greeting them before or after the services each Lord's Day.

1 Thessalonians 5:12. Families will need your advice and wisdom. You are called to counsel them, using the Word as your guide. Pray for wisdom as you give instruction from Scripture.

4. *To Guard using Scripture:* See Proverbs 4:13, Luke 12:1, and 2 Timothy 1:13-14. False doctrine is nothing new in Christ's church. As an elder, be sure to recognize and rebuke doctrine that is against Scripture and the Three Forms of Unity. Also included in this heading is *guard yourself* from false doctrine—know the Reformed Standards!

All seven of the above should be centered on the Word of God. Although technically elders do not participate in the ministry of the Word as the ordained pastor does, their office is one that centers on the ministry of the Word. Thus, the elder must govern the church according to the Word of God. God instituted marriage (thus the family as well) before the fall, and He provides “standards or norms” for marriage and family in His Word. It is the duty of the elders to remain within these standards, as well as call for obedience to them in the church. More purposes for family visiting could be listed, no doubt. But these seven are quite central. Doing all of them to the glory of God is the elder's work, a fine but difficult work indeed.

Practical Advice

1. Explain to each family why you

are there—let them know you are not a “policeman,” checking to see if this is a moral family. Even as Christ came not to the righteous but to sinners, you are coming to sinners—saved sinners, but sinners to be sure. Remind the family that you are there not to find fault, but to comfort and encourage, out of love for them and love for the gospel.

2. Relax. Although your visit is important and “official,” you are not preaching a sermon in church (a sermon or “sermonette” should be

It is rare for a family to discuss openly assurance of faith, struggles with sin, the riches of God's forgiveness, etc.

avoided). Neither the elder(s) nor the family should dominate the conversation—it should be balanced. Pray for humility, and remember that you *love* the family that you are visiting, and Christ loves them as well. You may be nervous, but the family is perhaps more nervous!

3. Sittema encourages elders to open up, to be transparent. Let the family know that you are a normal person, briefly let them know of your walk with Christ (this may help with # 4 below). Do not give the impression that you are more spiritual or biblically literate than the family, or you may distance yourself too much from them.

4. Remember that spiritual discussions are difficult for many people.

Unfortunately, it is rare for a family to discuss openly assurance of faith, struggles with sin, the riches of God's forgiveness, etc. Be sensitive to this, yet gently and lovingly keep the conversation on the things of God. Try to ask questions that require more than a “yes” or “no” answer.

5. When you call to set up a visit, be sure to firmly note that the entire family be present. It is important that you see the entire family. Do not set a date until one can be found where the entire family will meet you.

6. How often should you visit? This answer requires prayer and Christian wisdom. DeJong notes that in the context of the Reformation's wake, elders would frequently visit families once a week! Many suggest once a year, which is, in my opinion, a good place to start *at minimum*. I would strongly suggest monthly phone calls, just to say “hello, I've been praying for you.” You would be surprised how effective a ten minute phone conversation can be.

7. Do your homework! Research the family a bit before you visit—know the names of all the members. Perhaps discuss upcoming visitations in consistory. As you do your homework, make it a habit to pray for the family you are visiting. It may not even hurt to tell each family that you have been praying for them. In the prayer that closes the family visit, make mention of the topics covered in the discussion.

8. Sittema also encourages elders to take notes of the visit afterwards. Be mindful especially of the areas where the family needs

prayer, encouragement, and follow-up. Also, add the family to your prayer list, so you can pray for them in the weeks and months following.

9. Encourage fellow elders in their family visitation, and pray for them. Family visitation requires self-discipline, because, unfortunately, we do not always feel like making family visits. Set a realistic visitation goal, perhaps one or two evenings every month, for example. Work on keeping your goals, and encourage other elders along the way.

10. Plan your visit. Berghof and De Koster wisely suggest that elders who are visiting should plan on who will open with prayer, lead the discussion, take the initiative to leave, etc. Obviously you must be flexible, but a well planned out meeting will keep the discussion on the right track and make the most of the short time you spend with each family.

Putting it to Work

What does a family visitation look like? Many have made outlines suggesting the proper method of family visitation. While we cannot set a “rule” for methods, we can glean from what others have taught. Obviously, the elder must recognize the fact that the father is the spiritual head of each home. The conversation must reflect this understanding. Scripture must be emphasized, and prayer must also be a part of each visitation.

Below are several topics DeJong proposes for family visitations. As mentioned above, ask questions on the following topics in a way that requires more than a “yes” or “no” answer.

- How are the family members diligent in attending worship (utilizing the means of grace)?
- How is spiritual growth evident in the family members?
- How is there peace and unity in the home?
- How is the family open about discussing spiritual matters?
- When/where/how is family worship conducted?
- In what ways is the father, as head of the home, a Christian example?
- How are the mother’s actions consistent with Scripture
- How do the children submit to their parents?

In closing, remember the elders duty is to lovingly govern, instruct, rebuke, comfort and build up the church of Jesus Christ. Family visitation is an excellent way to do so. We must never become negligent of this task. It may not always be enjoyable, but it is for the glory of God and the good of His people. You, as an elder, have been called by God to serve Him by being intimately involved with His people. God will give you what you need; keep praying for wisdom!

At the end of the day, remember that even though church leaders are imperfect and only hold office for a time, we have an eternal Overseer of our souls, who *is the same yesterday, today, and tomorrow* (Hebrews 13:8). Both the flock and her leaders are under the government and rule of their loving Shepherd, Jesus Christ. The role of an elder begins and ends with our Savior.

A well planned out meeting will keep the discussion on the right track and make the most of the short time you spend with each family.

- Where do the children receive proper Christian education?
- In what ways does the family have anything against anyone at church?
- How is the family involved in church functions?
- In what ways is the family a Christian witness to their neighbors?
- What are some evidences of true faith in daily life?
- How is the family’s financial situation?
- What are some doctrinal questions the family might have?

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Postmodern Liberalism:

Repainting a Non-Christian Faith

A Christian Critique of Rob Bell's *Velvet Elvis* (Part Two)

Rob Bell, in keeping with the doctrinal declarations of Mars Hill church states, "I affirm the historic Christian faith, which includes the virgin birth and the Trinity and the inspiration of the Bible and much more".¹

Rob Bell's View of the Trinity

Rob Bell teaches about the doctrine—the flexible spring—called the Trinity with the following words.

This doctrine is central to historic, orthodox Christian faith. While there is only one God, God is somehow present everywhere. People began to call this presence, this power of God, his 'Spirit'. So there is God, the then there is God's Spirit. And then Jesus comes among us and has this oneness with God that has people saying things like God has visited us in the flesh (John 1:14). So God is one, but God has also revealed himself to us as Spirit and then as Jesus. One and yet three. This three-in-oneness understanding of God emerged in several hundred years after Jesus' resurrection. People began to call this concept the Trinity. The word *trinity* is not found anywhere in the Bible. Jesus didn't use the word, and the writers of the rest of the Bible didn't use the word.

But over time this belief, this understanding, this doctrine, has become central to how followers of Jesus have understood who God is. It is a spring, and people jumped for thousands of years without it (this fact, of course, doesn't make the doctrine any less true. It's been true all along; people just 'recently' discovered it.) It was added later. We can take it out and examine it. Discuss it, probe it, question it. It flexes, and it stretches.² It has brought a fuller, deeper, richer understanding to the mysterious being who is God. ...Our words are not absolutes. Only God is absolute... The moment God is figured out with nice neat lines and definitions, we are no longer dealing with God. We are dealing with somebody we made up.³

It is clear that Rob Bell's philosophy of reality and truth stand behind his declarations about the truth of the Trinity. His account of the history of the doctrine of the Trinity is wrong. The omnipresent nature of God, according to Biblical truth, is not tied to the Spirit of God. The eternal Father is everywhere present, the eternal Son is everywhere present and the eternal Holy Spirit is everywhere present, but there are not three everywhere presents, there is

but one everywhere present.

In addition, the reality of the eternal Son of God, the second person of the Trinity, was known long before the time of the New Testament. Abraham knew the eternal Son before Jesus was ever conceived. John 8:56-58 teaches "'Your father Abraham rejoiced to see My day, and he saw it and was glad.' Then the Jews said to Him, 'You are not yet fifty years old, and have You seen Abraham?'" Jesus said to them, 'Most assuredly, I say to you, before Abraham was, I AM.'" David knew that his Lord and God would be born in the flesh. Acts 2:34-36 "For David did not ascend into the heavens, but he says himself: 'The LORD said to my Lord, Sit at My right hand, Till I make Your enemies Your footstool. Therefore let all the house of Israel know assuredly that God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, both Lord and Christ.'"

Church councils did not discover the truth of the Trinity; they formulated the truth that was revealed in Scripture from the beginning, a truth revealed clearly in Scripture, not discovered by Church councils. It is a word from God about God. Its denial is idolatry, the worship of a false god, an unholy image of God.

When the Athanasian Creed teaches, "...the catholic faith is this, that we worship one God in Trinity, and Trinity in Unity; neither confounding the persons, nor dividing the substance," it is teaching the true nature of God. It is expressing, in language that is not found in Scripture, the truth about God found in Scripture. It is expressing

a catholic faith, a faith that was a part of all God's people from the beginning of time to the end of time and for all eternity. When we declare, "the Father is God, the Son is God and the Holy Spirit is God; and yet here are not three Gods, but one God" we are stating absolute truth about God. To deny this is to deny God. To deny God is to live in rebellion to God, worshipping, serving and loving a false god instead of the true God.

Truth is more than a flexible spring. Truth about God is essential to Christian life. In declaring that God has "No form, no shape"⁴ and equating this with a declaration that words about God are flexible springs giving us "insight and understanding into the experience of God we're having," makes meaningless Rob Bell's declaration that he affirms "the historic Christian faith, which includes the virgin birth and the Trinity".⁵

He declares many things about the Trinity that reject faith in God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. The fact that Rob Bell never uses the historical, Biblical formulation of Father, Son and Holy Spirit in his book is but one way that he is stretching and denying the truth so clearly revealed in Scripture. He paints a picture of a false god. When Rob Bell affirms the historic Christian faith, he affirms a never-ending process of shedding the old doctrinal statements for new ones that embrace our experience of God, which will need to be re-expressed over and over. This affirmation of the Christian faith is not faith in God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, who reveals Himself and His work in His Word.

Rob Bell's View of the Trinity

Rob Bell writes, "What if tomorrow someone digs up definitive proof that Jesus had a real, earthly, biological father named Larry, and archaeologists find Larry's tomb and do DNA samples and prove beyond a shadow of a doubt that the virgin birth was really just a bit of mythologizing the Gospel writers threw in to appeal to the followers of the Mithra and Dionysian religious cults that were hugely popular at the time of Jesus, whose gods had virgin births? But what if as you study the origin of the word *virgin*, you discover that the word virgin in the gospel of Matthew actually comes from the book of Isaiah, and then you find out that in the Hebrew language at that time, the word *virgin* could mean several things. And what if you discover that in the first century being "born of a virgin" also referred to a child whose mother became pregnant the first time she had intercourse?"⁶

Rob Bell goes on to ask the following questions, "Is the way of Jesus still the best possible way to live? Or does the whole thing fall apart? ...if the whole faith falls apart when we reexamine and rethink one spring, then it wasn't that strong in the first place, was it?"⁷

The virgin birth of Jesus, according to Rob Bell, is not an absolute truth and an essential doctrine of the Christian faith. He claims that de-

nying the virgin birth is not outside the Christian Faith. What matters is how we can best relate to the culture of our day. But the Bible declares, "Now the birth of Jesus Christ was as follows: After His mother Mary was betrothed to Joseph, before they came together, she was found with child of the Holy Spirit" (Matthew 1:18). The angel does declare, "Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take to you Mary your wife, for that which is conceived in her is of the Holy Spirit (Matthew 1:20).

Christians confess in the Apostles Creed that Jesus Christ, the only begotten Son of God, was "conceived by the Holy Spirit" and "born of the virgin Mary."⁸ Rob Bell claims this is a flexible interpretation of the Bible. He teaches that people claiming that Jesus had an earthly father who understand the apostles' words about the birth of Jesus as a cultural myth (lie) to get the followers of Mithra to embrace the Christian faith is not a denial of the Christian faith. We may deny the virgin birth as long as we continue to live in the reality of God's love. Doctrine is not that important. "Doctrine is a wonderful servant and a horrible master."⁹

Rob Bell is absolutely wrong. The virgin birth, like the doctrine of the Trinity, is a doctrine of Christ essential to having God. These doctrines are not horrible masters but blessed truths. The truth of the virgin birth is stronger than Rob Bell's feeble

Truth about God is essential to Christian life.

attempt to distort the nature of Biblical truth. The virgin birth is true because God's Word reveals it as true. This is not an interpretation of Scripture; it is the clear teaching of the Bible. If this makes me arrogant according to Rob Bell, then it makes Paul and John and the Word of God arrogant as well.

Rob Bell's position is the repainting of historic liberal theology. The virgin birth is a doctrine of Christ that divided local congregations and denominations in the U. S. in the early twentieth century into liberal and evangelical. Not all liberals denied the virgin birth. They all denied its significance to "Christian faith" by redefining what the Christian faith was. As liberalism arose out of the ash heap of German idealism in the context of a compromising European Lutheran Church, it should come as no surprise that a new liberalism arises out of the ash heap of a post-modern philosophy of truth in the context of a compromising evangelical church. Where the loss of absolutes is embraced, postmodern liberals will come out of the evangelical tradition.

Bell and Bultmann

Rob Bell repaints the attacks on the Christian faith by German liberal theologians and their subsequent followers. He embraces a liberal world-view that denied the virgin birth because of a faulty view of the relationship between science and scripture. Rudolph Bultmann was the one of the most famous of these men. Bultmann claimed the job of modern (late 19th, early 20th century) theologians was to demythologize the gospels so the Christian faith could be relevant to our culture and learn how to live like Jesus.

Rob Bell claims we may deny the virgin birth as long as we continue to live in the reality of God's love.

Living like Christ was important but doctrine was not.

Rob Bell repaints these false teachings of historic liberal theology. He consciously uses liberal theologians' own words.¹⁰ He declares historic liberal theology to be a part of the Christian tradition he embraces. He is certainly aware of this historic attack on the Christian faith. His response is to accept liberalism as a part of the historic Christian faith rather than expose and condemn its errors. Rob Bell is a part of the historic liberal tradition rather than the historic tradition of the Christian faith.

One key aspect of liberalism embraced by Rob Bell is the false view of the life of Jesus replacing faith in Jesus. For Bell "Christian" describes those devoted "to living the way of the Messiah, who they believed was Jesus. A person who follows Jesus. ...A way of life centered around a person who lives."¹¹ He writes, "I am far more interested in jumping than I am in arguing about whose trampoline is better."¹² What we do is essential, not what we believe.

Bell continues with the thought that we follow the rabbi Jesus to be like Him. Jesus the rabbi chooses us because He has faith in us. "I have been told that I need to believe in Jesus. Which is a good thing. But what I am learning is Jesus believes in me. I have been told that I to

have faith in God. Which is a good thing. But what I am learning is that God has faith in me. The rabbi (Jesus) thinks we can be like him."¹³ This is a postmodern liberal repainting of "modern liberalism".

In his book, *Christianity and Liberalism*, published in 1924, J. Gresham Machen describes the adherent of "modern liberalism" with these words, "Jesus for him is an example for faith, not the object of faith. ...According to modern liberalism, in other words, Jesus was the Founder of Christianity because He was the first Christian, and Christianity consists in the maintenance of the religious life which Jesus instituted."¹⁴ Modern liberalism stands in contrast to the truth, "The Jesus spoken of in the New Testament was no mere teacher of righteousness, no mere pioneer in a new type of religious life, but the One who was regarded, and regarded Himself, as the Savior whom men could trust."¹⁵ Rob Bell repaints "modern liberalism" as "postmodern liberalism". Both pictures distort and deny the truth of scripture.

Other Denials

Rob Bell denies many other Biblical truths. He "repaints" Biblical teaching on the fall, the nature of sin, sovereignty, providence, the significance of the life and death of Jesus Christ, faith, hell and heaven.

He redefines what it means to be a Christian. He finds people living in “ultimate reality” with God who are in rebellion to God. He finds people who trust in Jesus as their only Savior as living outside the “ultimate reality” that is God. These tragic facts are declared clearly in his book. The following are a few examples of these false teachings.

Rob Bell rejects as necessary to experiencing the love of God believing the unique claims of Jesus as the Christ. In 2 John 1:7-9 we read, “For many deceivers have gone out into the world who do not confess Jesus Christ as coming in the flesh. This is a deceiver and an antichrist. Look to yourselves, that we do not lose those things we worked for, but that we may receive a full reward. Whoever transgresses and does not abide in the doctrine of Christ does not have God. He who abides in the doctrine of Christ has both the Father and the Son.” If you deny that Jesus Christ is the Messiah promised in the Old Testament you do not have God. When one abides in the doctrine of Christ that one has both the Father and Son. Rob Bell claims that you can deny the coming of Jesus in the flesh and have God. Second John is clear. If you deny the doctrine of Christ you do not have God. There is no such god as the god of Jew and Christian. There is no Judeo-Christian god. There is only one God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

Mr. Bell encourages people to live in the reality of God, but the reality does not have an essential connection to professing the truth of the doctrine “Jesus is the Christ come in the flesh” or “Jesus is the Lord” or “Jesus is the Savior who died for

sin”. These, like all doctrines, are each bricks used to build walls that limit God and keep people away from God.

Bell wants us to tear down these restrictive walls. “What happens then is that the wall becomes the sum total of the beliefs, and God becomes as big as the wall. But God is bigger than any wall. God is bigger than any religion. God is bigger than any worldview. God is bigger than the Christian faith.”¹⁶ He encourages people to dive deep into the awesome nature of God and his reality.

According to the Bell, a key place to discover God is in a book, *I Asked for Wonder*. This anthology of the writings by Abraham Joshua Heschel is supposed to spark our wonder about God. The problem is that Abraham Heschel, a Jewish rabbi who died in the early seventies, personally denied that Jesus was the Christ, his Lord and Savior. He claimed that any Jew who believes Jesus is the Christ, commits spiritual suicide.¹⁷ Heschel rejected the God of the Bible when he rejected Jesus.¹⁸ There is not one item in the writings of Mr. Bell to indicate that he believes that a rejection of the doctrine, Jesus is the Christ, is a rejection of the true God for a false god. Rob Bell is incapable of discerning the difference between a Christian and non-Christian. He does not know the difference between evangelizing the

unbeliever and disciplining the believer. He comforts the unbeliever where there is no comfort. He gives him a false assurance that all is well with his soul when the judgment of God rests upon him.

Rob Bell has made the historic Christian faith broader than what has been revealed in Scripture. In embracing rabbis and philosophers into his postmodern liberal faith he denies the historic doctrines of Christ revealed in Scripture but repaints the heresies of the past. Rob Bell is a false teacher that must be recognized for what he is. What remains a great tragedy is that a community that has long been identified as an evangelical center should have so many people so easily swayed by a pretty picture of historic lies.

APPENDIX

The following are some more postmodern liberal definitions or denials of historic doctrines taught by Rob Bell.

Inspiration and interpretation of the Bible:

“The Bible is a collection of stories that teach us about what it looks like when God is at work through actual people. The Bible has the authority it does only because it contains stories about people interacting with the God who has all authority”.¹⁹

Rob Bell gives the unbeliever a false assurance that all is well with his soul when the judgment of God rests upon him.

Sola Scriptura:

“...it wasn’t until the 300s that what we know as the sixty-six books of the Bible were actually agreed upon as the ‘Bible’. This is part of the problem with continually insisting that one of the absolutes of the Christian faith must be a belief that “Scripture alone” is our guide. It sounds nice, but it is not true. In reaction to abuses by the church, a group of believers during a time called the Reformation claimed that we only need the authority of the Bible. But the problem is that we got the Bible from the church voting on what the Bible even is. So when I affirm the Bible as God’s word, in the same breath I have to affirm that when those people voted, God was somehow present, guiding them to do what they did. When people say that all we need is the Bible, it is simply not true. In affirming the Bible as inspired, I also have to affirm the Spirit who I believe was inspiring those people to choose those books.”²⁰

Heaven and Hell:

“When people use the word hell, what do they mean? They mean a place, an event, a situation absent of how God desires things to be. Famine, debt, oppression, loneliness, despair, death, slaughter – they are all hell on earth”²¹

“Heaven is full of forgiven people. Hell is full of forgiven people. Heaven is full of people God loves, whom Jesus died for. Hell is full of forgiven people God loves, whom Jesus died for. The difference is how we choose to live, which story we choose to live in, which version of reality we trust. Ours or God’s.”²²

The Fall:

“Once again, the greatest truth of the story of Adam and Eve isn’t that it happened, but that it happens. We all make choices to live outside of how God created us to live. We have all come up short.”²³

Ultimate Reality:

“When Jesus said, ‘No one comes to the Father except through me’, he was saying that his way, his words, his life is our connection to how things truly are at the deepest levels of existence. For Jesus then, the point of religion is to help us connect with ultimate reality, God.”²⁴

ENDNOTES

- 1 Mars Hill Constitution and Statement of Faith, p. 14.
- 2 Rob Bell. *Velvet Elvis*, p. 22
- 3 Ibid., p. 25
- 4 Ibid., p. 23
- 5 Mars Hill Constitution and Statement of Faith, p. 3
- 6 Rob Bell. *Velvet Elvis*, p. 26
- 7 Ibid., p. 27
- 8 Apostles’ Creed
- 9 Rob Bell. *Velvet Elvis*, p. 25
- 10 Ibid., p. 26
- 11 Ibid., p. 84
- 12 Ibid., p. 27
- 13 Ibid., p. 134
- 14 *Christianity and Liberalism*. J. Gresham Machen, p. 85
- 15 Ibid., p. 85

16 Ibid., p. 27

17 *I Asked for Wonder*, A. J. Heschel, edited by Dresner, p. 110

18 Ibid., p. 110

19 Rob Bell. *Velvet Elvis*, p. 65

20 Ibid., p. 68

21 Ibid., p. 148

22 Ibid., p. 146

23 Ibid., p. 139

24 Ibid., p. 83

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Looking Above

*A Series on the Revelation of Jesus Christ
Revelation 5:8-14
“The Song of Heaven”*

The book of Revelation has much to teach us concerning the life of the church. We have seen that already in chapters 4 and 5. These chapters have much to teach us concerning the role of the elders of the church—those elders represented by the twenty-four elders. These chapters have much to teach us concerning the role of the preaching of the Word—the office of preaching represented by the four living creatures. These chapters have much to teach us concerning the power of prayer—that power represented by the golden bowls, held in the hands of the elders and filled with incense, even the prayers of the saints. The book of Revelation has much to teach us concerning the life of the church.

And now we find that the book of Revelation has much to teach us concerning the life of the church in terms of her music and song. We find no less than five songs in chapters 4 and 5.

The first song is found in 4:8, where the four living creatures do not rest day or night, saying, “Holy, holy, holy, Lord God Almighty, Who was and is and is to come!” Here the four living creatures sing to God because He is holy.

The second song is found in 4:11, where the twenty four elders in response to the song of the four living creatures, 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.” Here the twenty four elders sing to God of His worth as the Creator of all things.

Now, in chapter 5:9-14, songs are sung in response to the victory of the Lamb. We have been introduced to the Lamb in verses 5-7, where one of the elders instructed John, pointing him to the Lion of the Tribe of Judah, the Root of David, the One who has prevailed to open the scroll and to loose its seven seals. The Lion of the Tribe of Judah, powerful like a Lion, has prevailed to open the scroll and to loose its seven seals.

We have noted the drama of verse 6, where John turns, expecting to see a Lion, but instead beholds a Lamb, a Lamb as though it had been slain. Here we see that the Lion of the Tribe of Judah is the Lamb that was slain. He conquered in His death. In being slain, He won the victory. Because He has prevailed, He has the right and the authority to open the scroll and to loose its seven seals.

Note the opening words of verse 8, “Now when He had taken the scroll, the four living creatures and the twenty four elders fell down before the Lamb, each having a

harp, and golden bowls full of incense, which are the prayers of the saints. And they sang a new song...” *When He had taken the scroll...* It is only *after* the Lamb takes the scroll that we have the singing of the new song. It is only *after* the Lion of the Tribe of Judah prevails that we have the singing of the new song. It is only *after* the Root of David conquers that we have the singing of the new song. It is only *after* Jesus Christ—the Lion of the Tribe of Judah, the Root of David, now pictured as the Lamb that was slain—only *after* Jesus Christ takes the scroll do we have the singing of the new song.

In Revelation 4, songs are sung because of who God is. He is holy. He is Creator. In Revelation 5, songs are sung because of what God has done in Jesus Christ. Only after the Lamb takes the scroll are the songs of Revelation 5 sung. Only after the Lamb takes the scroll do we find the new song in heaven. The new song is sung in response to the victory of the Lamb that was slain!

Having noted that the songs of Revelation 5 are sung in response to the mighty acts of God in Jesus Christ, we need to note as that there are three songs in Revelation 5. The first song is found in verses 9-10. The second song is found in verses 11-12. The third song is found in verse 13. Let us consider each of them in turn.

The First Song

The first song is that of verses 9-10. It is a new song. It is a song sung to the accompaniment of harps. It is a song sung by the

twenty four elders and the four living creatures. We have been stressing the point throughout our treatment of chapters 4 and 5 that we have in the four living creatures and the twenty four elders the government of the church. The twenty four elders are representative of the ruling office in the church: they are symbolic of the elders. The four living creatures are representative of the office of the preaching of the Word: they are symbolic of preaching. Thus, we have in Revelation 5:9-10, a new song, sung to the accompaniment of harps, sung by the officers of the church. This new song is sung by the elders and the preachers.

Does that mean that the elders must form a choir and sing in the church or that the preacher must be able to sing solos in the church? Perhaps we should add to the list of qualifications for elders and preachers the ability to sing? Many of you (myself included) will be relieved to learn that the fact that this new song is sung by the elders and the preachers does not mean that the ability to sing is one of the qualifications for office. You do not need to be a good singer in order to be an elder or preacher.

It is the content of the song that is to be emphasized. The song is directed to the worth of the Lamb. The twenty four elders and the four living creatures—the elders and the preachers—sing to the Lamb, and they sing of His worth. “You are worthy to take the scroll, and to open its seals; for You were slain, and have redeemed us to God by Your blood out of every tribe and tongue and people and nation, and have made us priests to our God;

and we shall reign on the earth.” In the content of the song, then, you see the role of the elders and the preachers, and that role is this: to extol the worth of the Lamb! In the office of the elder we are called to see the supremacy of Christ. In the office of the preaching of the Word, we are called to see Christ and Him crucified.

Christ, the Lamb of God, is worthy. He is worthy because He was slain. He is worthy because He has redeemed His people to God. He is worthy because He has done this by His blood. Elders must point the flock to the Good Shepherd who laid down His life for the sheep. Similarly, in the preaching of the Word, the flock must hear the voice of the Good Shepherd. Elders may be many things, but if they are not shepherding the flock that Jesus purchased with His own blood, bringing the flock to the Good Shepherd, they are not worthy of the name. Preachers may be many things, but if they are not keeping the eyes of the flock upon the Lamb that was slain, they are not worthy of the name.

Furthermore, in the content of the song you see the role of the elders and the preachers in teaching the flock what it means to be redeemed to God by the blood of the Lamb. It means that you are kings who reign upon the earth. How do you reign

as kings upon the earth? Do you take up the sword? Do you go on crusades? Not at all! You reign through weakness, even the (apparent) weakness of prayer. You reign through the power of prayer: your prayers set in motion the advance of the kingdom of God. You pray and the seven seals are loosed; you pray and the seven trumpets sound forth; you pray and the seven bowls of God’s wrath are poured out. It is through prayer that you reign, even now, upon the earth.

What does it mean to be redeemed by the blood of the Lamb? It means that you have been made priests to your God. How are you a priest to your God? Well, what do priests do? They offer sacrifices. What are you called to do but to present your body a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable to God? This is your reasonable service (Romans 12:1). Such sacrifice may even mean the giving up of your body to the point of death in conformity to the Good Shepherd, being counted as sheep for the slaughter (Romans 8:36).

The Second Song

The second song is found in verses 11-12. Notice who sings this song, verse 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,

In the office of the elder we are called to see the supremacy of Christ. In the office of the preaching of the Word, we are called to see Christ and Him crucified.

and thousands of thousands...”

Notice first of all that you have once more the living creatures and the elders, but this time something is missing: their number. We do not read of the *four* living creatures, but of the living creatures; they are now without number. We do not read of the *twenty four* elders, but of the elders; they are now without number. What are we to make of that? Simply this: the people of God are represented here by the living creatures and the elders. That is to say, in view here are the people of God in terms of her office bearers—those who are called to give an account for the souls entrusted to them. In view here, then, is the church. The second song is sung by the church.

But the church is joined by the heavenly hosts—it is joined by the angels who surround the throne—and the number of those angels is ten thousand times ten thousand and thousands of thousands. The angels of heaven join the church in singing the worth of the Lamb. That the angels of heaven join the church in singing ought to come to us as no surprise. Paul writes in Ephesians 3:10 that the manifold wisdom of God is made known by the church to the principalities and powers in the heavenly places. Peter writes in 1 Peter 1:10 that the gospel has been preached to you by the Holy Spirit sent from heaven, and that gospel contains things which angels desire to look into.

Do you understand, O Church of Jesus Christ, the privilege that is yours in knowing the mysteries of the gospel?! You will teach angels! Angels know not the redemption

that comes by the blood of the Lamb—they rejoice in it to be sure, but they do not experience it. It will be the privilege and the joy of the church to teach the angels the glory of redemption, and the angels will join us in singing praises to the Lamb who is worthy!

The Third Song

We have moved then from the officers of the church singing in verses 9-10 to the church and the angels singing in verses 11-12. We move now in the final song to all of creation singing. “And every creature which is in heaven and on the earth and under the earth and such as are in the sea, and all that are in them, I heard saying, ‘Blessing and honor and glory and power be to Him who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb, forever and ever!’” (verse 13).

Every knee will bow and every tongue will confess that Jesus Christ is Lord to the glory of God the Father. All things will be put under His feet. Christ will be acknowledged and confessed by all of creation as the King of kings and Lord of lords. To be sure, the language of the song is poetic. We are not to suppose that the wicked and the inhabitants of hell will confess Christ as King willingly, but they will confess Him as King. The One who sits on the throne, together with the Lamb, will receive all blessing and honor and glory and power, and that forever and ever! God is glorified both in the redemption of the elect, as well as in the condemnation of the reprobate. God is glorified both in the display of His mercy, as well as in the display of His justice. God is glorified both in the display of His love, as well as in

the display of His wrath. In that sense, all of creation will sing!

But what does all of this have to do with us? What does all of this mean for the life of the church? What does all of this mean for the life of the church as she lives in the midst of this world? What does all of this mean for the life of the church as she lives between the first and second comings of Christ?

We will answer that question, the Lord willing, in our next article. For now, let us be content to lift up our voices in song, singing of the all-sufficient worth of the Lamb!

Rev. Brian Vos is the pastor of the Trinity United Reformed Church in Caledonia, Michigan.



Photo: The Mission Trinidad group meets at Bethany URC in Wyoming, Michigan before taking off for Trinidad.

Mission Trinidad

This summer, traveling to a foreign country was not as foreign an experience. It was wonderful being back in a place that just a year ago I was so afraid I might never see again. But while so much around me was familiar, so much about this year's mission project was different. And it was not just the different people on our team or the different sites we worked at. It was me; I was different.

The difference could be summed up in one word: confidence. As I wrote in my journal on day three: "We went canvassing in Charlieville and everybody had good stories to tell afterward. I have so much more confidence this year. Jon and I re-met our Hindu lady-friend from last year and she loved that we remembered her—you could see it in her whole demeanor." Last year when we first met this woman she was determined that we would not try to convert her. But this year it was she who first said,

"Well, I suppose you want to tell me something about the Bible."

Last year the very thought of knocking on doors (or gates in this case) and asking complete strangers about their beliefs made me nervous. What if I did not have a good answer? What if I said the wrong thing? Why had I not studied my Bible more? How could I know so little about the one thing that validates my whole existence? But this year, my attitude was different. First of all, I tried to better prepare myself by praying and studying God's word. But, as a good friend told me recently, no one is "qualified enough" to be a missionary in the sense that we are all fallible and do not represent Christ as we should. And yet, despite our weaknesses, God still ordained us to be His messengers of the gospel; that His Spirit would work through our witness. This is an intimidating thought until you realize that humbly acknowledg-

ing your complete dependence on God is the key to the confidence you need to boldly tell people about the truth of the Bible.

Our "theme" for this year's project was Ephesians 2:8-10: "For by grace you have been saved through faith, not of yourselves, it is a gift of God, lest anyone should boast." Most of the people we talked to while canvassing (parents of the children who attended the VBS) believe that their only hope of salvation lies in their own good works. They pray to dozens of different gods or adhere to strict ritualistic rules in a vain hope that someone up there might be pleased with their efforts. So our goal during the VBS was to emphasize how the God of the Bible is sovereign over all the affairs of the world including salvation. We did this by showing in the Bible how God was in control and specifically planned the events in the lives of Noah, Moses, Jonah, Daniel, and Paul.

There is a serious lack of comfort among the people in Trinidad. If you were to ask them the first question of the Heidelberg Catechism: What is your only comfort in life and in death? They would say that they have no reliable comfort. They do not know with any confidence that they are saved from their sin. On our last Sunday in Trinidad we were blessed to hear a good sermon on comfort. Brad Lenzner, Rev McGee's summer intern from Westminster Seminary, preached on John 14 where Jesus says, "Let not your heart be troubled; you believe in God, believe also in Me ... I am the way, the truth



Amanda teaching a Bible lesson.

and the life. No one comes to the Father except through Me.” In his sermon, Brad talked about the “so what” of the gospel. So Jesus died to save people from their sins; what does that have to do with me right now? Well, as a sinner saved by grace through Christ, you no longer have to live in fear, but you can be comforted right now in knowing that you have the truth. This is a huge comfort to the unbeliever, because it frees them from a life of doubt. But it is also a comfort to the believer such as myself, because it gives me the confidence to testify to the truth of the gospel. I do not have to be afraid that someone else’s salvation depends on my ability to say just the right thing, because it is Jesus Christ who saves.

My first trip to Trinidad exposed me to the need for Biblical evangelism both around the world and right here in West Michigan. People are living lives of fear because they do not know the truth: that we are miserably helpless sinners, but that Jesus Christ died to save us. My second trip to Trinidad gave me the confidence to challenge someone’s worldview in order to give an explanation for the hope that I have in Christ. As our team continues the work of evangelism in our own neighborhoods, our goal is to have faith that is so natural that we cannot help but talk about it wherever we go.



Jaime and Michelle teaching children in Trinidad.

Bethel URC in Jenison, Michigan wants to recruit more Reformed Christians to answer the call to actively proclaim the gospel right here in West Michigan. If you have noticed that we seem to be either a little shy or a little lazy when it comes to evangelizing, then Bethel invites you to join **THE GROUP**. This Group is about preparing you to live out your calling to be a witness to the gospel of Christ – wherever you are, whoever you are with. It is about making your faith so natural that you can not help but talk about it. The method is simple: study the work of Jesus, the apostles and other Reformed Christians and then **GO DO WHAT THEY DID**. The study part happens every other Thursday at Bethany URC in Wyoming. The doing part is planned and scheduled at all different times. Contact Amanda Mulder at (616) 240-4319 or www.xanga.com/harvestersforchrist for details and dates.



The Vacation Bible School team



Jon teaching a Bible Study.

Ms. Amanda Mulder is a member of the Bethel United Reformed Church in Jenison, Michigan.

Paedocommunion and the Reformed Confessions

Part Two: The Two Sacraments of the New Covenant

The sacraments are, in the nature of the case, visible signs and seals that the Lord alone can appoint for the use and benefit of the church. Because they require divine authorization, the church may not appoint as sacraments any church rite or practice, however useful, that she pleases. Just as in the old covenant, so also in the new, the Lord has appointed only two sacraments for the use of his people, holy baptism and the Lord's Supper. Therefore, the Roman Catholic doctrine that speaks of seven sacraments, represents an abuse of church authority and undermines its claim to be the true church of Jesus Christ. In order to appreciate the Reformed confessions' understanding of the proper recipients of the Lord's Supper, we need to consider each of these sacraments specifically, and to note the differences between them.

1. Baptism – A Sacrament of Incorporation

The first sacrament that Christ has appointed for the church is holy baptism. By the Lord's ordinance and appointment, the sacramental sign of baptism is pure water. Only a lawfully ordained minister of the Word is authorized to administer this sacrament, and he must do so using the words of institution given by Christ in Matthew 28:19. Though the mode of baptism may differ from place to place—whether through immersion, affusion, or sprinkling—the validity of

baptism requires the use of the Christ-appointed sign of water and the gospel Word regarding the baptized member's communion with the Triune God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

The sacrament of baptism, which by its nature may be administered only once, serves to signify and seal to believers their adoption into the household of God and incorporation into Christ. The water of baptism especially represents the washing away of sin through the blood of Christ and the Spirit of regeneration. By baptism, believers are not only visibly distinguished from those who remain "strangers" to God and Christ's church, but they are also assured of the grace of reconciliation with God and purification from the pollution and guilt of sin. Moreover, as those who are distinguished as members of Christ and the household of God, believers are also by baptism enlisted into the service of Christ, engaged to him as those who are his cherished possession, and called to live in love with all others who enjoy communion with Christ. Though the emphasis in the Reformed confessions falls upon the privileges of grace which are signified and sealed to believers in baptism, the Westminster Larger Catechism especially emphasizes these accompanying obligations of baptism. Just as the required response to the Word of the gospel includes repentance and faith, so the required re-

sponse to the visible Word of the sacrament includes corresponding responsibilities and privileges. These purposes of baptism are not restricted to the occasion of its administration. Rather, throughout the entire course of the believer's life, the sacrament of baptism serves powerfully and effectively to confirm faith and stimulate obedience. To use the language of the Westminster Larger Catechism, believers must be vigilant in the constant "improvement" of their baptism, being reminded by this sacrament of their engagement to Christ and enrollment in the company of his people.

Though the Reformed confessions do not teach baptismal regeneration, they do ascribe a real efficacy to the sacrament of baptism in conferring the grace of God in Christ upon believers. A cursory reading of the descriptions of the function and effect of baptism in these confessions indicates that they affirm a real connection between the sacramental sign and the spiritual reality signified. Again and again, the sacrament of baptism is described as that which effects, or brings about, what is visibly represented and pledged. As a divinely appointed instrument for the confirmation of faith, it could not be otherwise. For if the sacrament were of little or no effect as a means of grace—merely a visible testimony to the believer's subjective state and disposition toward God, and not a divinely given sacramental Word signifying and sealing divine grace in Christ—then it would not have been added to the Word as a more full confirmation of God's grace. Because God has been willing to join

the spiritual grace communicated with its sacramental sign, the church must not weaken its understanding of the sacrament's power by "breaking asunder" what God has joined together.

In their handling of the question, who should be baptized?, the Reformed confessions consistently affirm that baptism should be administered not only to believers but also to their children. The affirmation of the baptism of children of believing parents is treated more expansively in the later confessions of the Reformation era, which reflect the continuing and intensifying polemic against the Anabaptist repudiation of infant baptism. According to the confessions, the children of believing parents must be baptized for the same reason as their believing parents: God is pleased to extend the gospel promise to them. The ground for the baptism of children of believers is their divinely promised inclusion in the church and covenant of Jesus Christ. Therefore, as members of Christ and recipients of the gospel promise, their baptism has the same meaning as the baptism of adult believers. Consistent with the Reformed understanding of the divine initiative in election and the communication of God's grace in Christ to his people, the baptism of children of believing parents attests to their adoption into the household of God, and the washing away of their sins through the blood of Christ and the Spirit of regeneration.

Several biblical considerations are adduced in the confessions to support the practice of the baptism of children of believing parents: God's gracious promise to them; their in-

clusion within the covenant people of God; the fact that the kingdom of God belongs to them; the Old Testament precedent of the sacrament of circumcision, which in the New Testament has been replaced by baptism; and the Old Testament practice of offering a lamb of purification at the birth of a child, which was a sacrament of Jesus Christ. No more than in the case of believers are children baptized on the basis of a presumed regeneration or any other subjective condition (such as an "infant faith" or the faith of the parents in lieu of their own). Since the power and efficacy of the sacrament of baptism, as is the case with the sacraments generally, depend upon a believing reception of the sacramentally communicated Word of grace, the baptized children of believers are under the obligations to believe and repent that accompany the privileges of their baptism. Moreover, because the sacramental sign and seal are to be distinguished from the spiritual grace that they confirm, the efficacy of baptism may not be tied to the moment of its administration. This does not diminish the efficacy of baptism, but only acknowledges that its power may not be immediately exhibited.

2. *The Lord's Supper — A Sacrament of Nourishment*

The second sacrament that Christ has appointed for his church is the sacrament of the Lord's Supper.

Unlike the sacrament of baptism, which is a sign and seal of incorporation into Christ and his church, the sacrament of the Lord's Supper is a sign and seal of God's grace in Christ that continually nourishes and strengthens the faith of its recipient.

With respect to the frequency of its administration and reception, the sacrament of the Lord's Supper is clearly distinguished in the Reformed confessions from the sacrament of baptism. Whereas baptism is a rite of initiation or incorporation into Christ and his body, the church, the Lord's Supper is a rite of continual confirmation, nourishment and strengthening of the faith of believers. Baptism is by its nature a one-time ordinance. The Lord's Supper is by its nature a sacrament that needs to be repeated and thereby continually used by believers. Though the Reformed confessions do not explicitly comment on the frequency of the administration of the Lord's Supper, they favor in principle a practice where the sacrament of the Lord's Supper ordinarily accompanies the preaching of the gospel. Stated negatively, there are no clear confessional reasons that the sacrament of the Lord's Supper should not regularly be appended to the administration of the gospel in preaching. The requirements for a proper participation in the Supper—self-examination and the guarding of the Table against its profanation by unworthy participa-

The ground for the baptism of children of believers is their divinely promised inclusion in the church and covenant of Jesus Christ.

tion on the part of the unbelieving and impenitent—might well present practical impediments to the regular, even weekly, celebration of the Supper. But, with the possible exception of the Westminster Larger Catechism, which provides a detailed description regarding the preparation for and use of the sacrament, none of the great confessions of the Reformed churches offers any argument against frequent communion.

In the Reformed confessions the Lord's Supper is variously described and several of its purposes are identified.

Perhaps the most basic metaphor governing the descriptions of the Lord's Supper is that of *a sacred meal*, which was instituted to nourish believers in their communion with Christ. The sacramental elements of bread and wine were consecrated to serve as tokens and pledges of Christ himself, whose body given and blood shed are the spiritual sustenance and life of believers. By sharing this sacramental meal, believers enjoy a rich communion with Christ and with all his members. They commune with Christ under the veil of the sacramental elements, and acknowledge him to be their food and drink unto life eternal. Reflecting this emphasis upon the sacrament as a nourishing meal, the Reformed confessions typically denominate the sacrament as "the Lord's Supper" or "the Lord's table." Even as the physical body is strengthened by bread and wine, so the spiritual life of believers is strengthened by the eating and drinking of Christ, who is the spiri-

tual food of those who belong to him by faith.

Consistent with the understanding of the Lord's Supper as a spiritual meal in which the believer enjoys communion with and is nourished by the Lord, the Reformed confessions also speak of the sacrament as *a memorial* of Christ's death and sacrifice upon the cross. Though the sacrament of the Lord's Supper is not merely a memorial or occasion for thanksgiving to God—the Zwinglian doctrine of the sacrament

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is uniformly, though often only implicitly, repudiated as inadequate—through it the church commemorates and proclaims Christ's death until he comes again at the end of the age. For this reason, the sacrament is also an occasion for thanksgiving and praise—a eucharistic meal whose character is not only one of reverent commemoration but also one of joyful thankfulness. When believers receive the elements as tokens of Christ's body and blood, they do so in gratitude to God for all of the benefits of salvation which are theirs through Christ.

The sacrament, which as a visible sign of an invisible grace serves to confirm and strengthen faith in the

promises of the gospel, also evokes thanksgiving by *assuring* believers of their participation in Christ and his saving work. To use the language of the confessions, as assuredly as believers take the bread and the wine from the hand of Christ's ministers, so assuredly are they given to believe that Christ's work was for them. Indeed, it was for this reason that the Lord graciously and mercifully appointed the sacrament. Knowing the weakness and uncertainty that often characterize the faith of believers, the Lord instituted this sacramental meal as a visible representation of his work on their behalf. Lest the gospel promise, first announced through the preaching of the Word, be doubted, God has graciously condescended to our weakness in appointing this means to aid our faith.

Because the sacramental meal of the Lord's Supper is a *holy communion* with Christ, it also serves the purposes of uniting believers more intimately with him and calling them to a life of loving obedience and holy consecration. Believers, when they commemorate and proclaim the reconciling work of Christ in the sacrament, are reminded of their calling to be united to and reconciled with fellow believers. Those who are joined through the sacrament in communion with Christ are likewise joined with all who are his members. Furthermore, as members who enjoy the most intimate and full communion with Christ, they are engaged to a life that is marked by love and obedience to him. Those who share this meal with Christ are called to live in greater intimacy with Christ and his members. Failure to live in com-

munion with Christ or to love those who share this communion with him is a manifest denial of the nature and significance of this sacred meal.

On the much-disputed question of the nature of Christ's *real presence* in the sacrament, the Reformed confessions typically affirm this presence in strong terms. But they do so with an accompanying denial of the explanations of that presence traditionally offered by the Roman Catholic Church or the Lutheran tradition.

According to the Reformed confessions, those who receive Christ through the sacrament with the mouth of faith genuinely partake of him. Believers enjoy through the sacrament a true participation in and reception of the body and blood of Christ. The sacramental signs of bread and wine, though not to be confused or identified with the actual body and blood of Christ, genuinely communicate Christ to believers. The sacramental acts of eating and drinking are instrumental to a communication of Christ *with* the sacramental signs. In several of the confessions, the language used to describe Christ's presence is quite robust. Believers are said to partake through the sacrament of "the proper and natural body and the proper blood of Christ." The spiritual eating and drinking that takes place in the sacrament involves such an intimate participation in Christ that the believer becomes altogether one with him, bone of his bone, flesh of his flesh.

However, when it comes to providing an explanation of the manner of Christ's presence in the Lord's Supper, the Reformed Confessions ob-

ject vigorously to the Roman Catholic doctrine of transubstantiation and the Lutheran doctrine of consubstantiation. The Roman Catholic doctrine of transubstantiation improperly identifies the sacramental elements with the spiritual reality that they represent. The earthly elements of the sacrament become the actual body and blood of Christ, though remaining under the form or appearance of bread and wine. Whether received by faith or not, the consecrated elements are objectively the body and blood of Christ,

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and remain what they have become until they are properly consumed.

Moreover, in this doctrine the eating and drinking of Christ is a physical act, an "eating with the mouth" (*manducatio oralis*) which is a physical rather than a spiritual participation in Christ. Likewise, though the Lutheran doctrine of consubstantiation does not improperly identify the sacramental signs with the thing signified, nonetheless it teaches that the actual body and blood of Christ are *locally* present in the sacrament. This doctrine also affirms an "eating with the mouth" (*manducatio oralis*) that fails to appreciate the spiritual nature of the believer's participation

in Christ through the sacrament. Contrary to these doctrines of Christ's presence, therefore, the Reformed confessions simply affirm the believers' eating and drinking of the natural body and blood of Christ. This occurs through an inexpressible and incomprehensible working of the Spirit of Christ, who draws believers through the sacrament up to Christ who is in heaven in order that they might be joined in communion with him.

In their criticism of the Roman Catholic doctrine of Christ's presence in the sacrament of the Lord's Supper, the Reformed confessions typically express several key objections to the Roman Catholic doctrine of the mass. The objection to the doctrine of transubstantiation is not only addressed to the problem of the adoration of the consecrated elements, which is a form of idolatry and an inappropriate identification of the sign with the thing signified. But it is also addressed to the idea that Christ's presence in the sacrament is the basis for the unbloody sacrifice of Christ in the mass. The priest who ministers at the altar in the Roman Catholic mass offers Christ himself as a propitiation and sacrifice for sin. Though this sacrifice is an unbloody re-presentation of Christ's sacrifice upon the cross, it obtains further grace and merit for those who participate and even for those who may not be present (the dead).

Furthermore, the administration of the mass includes or permits a number of unbiblical practices: the elevation and adoration of the host, the withholding of the cup from the laity, the communing on the part of the priests or clergy without the

presence or participation of the laity, and private masses for individuals or portions of the whole body of the church. These and a host of additional ceremonies constitute an affront to the exclusive priesthood of Christ, whose one sacrifice is sufficient to the needs of his people, and betray a superstitious and magical view of the working of the sacrament.

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This Is My Outlook

Many within the church — ministers included — have become dissatisfied with the church where they are members. All kinds of battles take place within the church leading to bitterness and often separation between minister and congregation. This appears to be especially true in the URCNA. It took strong-willed leaders to awaken people to the errors that they saw around them. Unfortunately, once the battles were fought and a new federation begun, instead of rejoicing in the newfound peace, some of the strong-willed leaders continued to look for battles to fight. What were once considered small fires were fanned until they consumed the church.

Self-Protection

The task of the church is certainly polemic as well as theological. The church must defend the truth and militate against error! This is so for two reasons. First of all, the truth cannot be clearly understood unless it is stated negatively as well as positively. Dr. Machen wrote: “One cannot preach the truth without explaining what the truth is *not* as well as what it is. One cannot paint white letters on a white board, but one must paint white on black and black on white, if the letters are to stand out.”

Second, polemics is needed because of the ceaseless assaults that are being made on the Gospel and the Church. The Church is called to defend the Gospel. The idea that truth vindicates itself and needs no defense is contradicted by experi-

ence and opposed to the plain teaching of the Bible. The Church is summoned by Paul to “refuse the factious man after a first and second admonition” (Titus 3:10). By factious man, Paul meant the heretic and the schismatic whose false teachings lead to division within the church. The church must expose the false teacher and then expel him. Jude exhorts his readers to “contend earnestly for the faith which was once delivered unto the saints.”

Discussion of different issues is not only permissible; it is the solemn duty of the Church. Without controversy there is compromise and through compromise the Church will perish. Debate does not harm the church as long as the truth is spoken in love. Jude summons not only the officers in the Church but all the members of the church to this task. It is only the apostate church or the lukewarm church that avoids doctrinal controversy. If we do not contend for the faith, we shall lose it to our own destruction, and to that of our children.

Over-Protection

Having said that, it seems today we are looking for heretics not only under every rock but also behind every pulpit. I am a lurker of several email lists in which different topics are debated. Usually most debates begin with the phrase “in my humble opinion.” It doesn’t take very long before the opinion is no longer all that humble and the writer becomes insistent that his opinion is the only correct one.

Then, because no one ever changes anyone's minds on these lists, the argument diverts to name-calling and accusing on another of violating the ninth commandment.

It is one thing to defend the faith against someone who denies the Trinity or the virgin birth—that certainly is necessary. But it is quite another to fight to the finish which Bible translation or song book is acceptable in the pews. Unfortunately, too often our battles deal with the latter than the former. We seem to be so afraid of one another—lest we disagree on some minor point, that we forget the business of the church.

When we do so, we are no longer defending the faith. Instead, we have become stuck defending our hobby horse, our particular shade of truth, and our opinions of non-essential matters. Maybe it is time for us to remember our true calling and, in light of that calling, the business of the church. In general, the business of the church is to serve and glorify God her Designer and Christ her Founder. God declares as much in Isaiah 43:21 where He says, "The people whom I have formed for Myself will declare My praise."

Church Protection

The business of the Church, first of all, is the study of the Word of God—especially by those who are called and equipped for this task. Ministers must study the Word of God in order to bring the glorious truth therein to the flock the Lord entrusted to them. Bible Study leaders must open up the Bible and teach the truths contained therein rather than their own opinions.

Paul declares that the Church is the "pillar and ground of the truth." Many church members fail to attach proper significance to this theological phase of the work of the Church. They skip the evening worship service, complain about catechism sermons, and do not attend Bible Studies offered by their church. They forget that without the preaching and teaching of the glorious truths of Scripture, the believer would not have a clear understanding of the Bible. There will be no spiritual growth in the church that does not seek to (and insist upon) the teaching and preaching of the Holy Scriptures.

A second responsibility of the Church is the training of ministers and missionaries. Jesus taught us to pray that the laborers be sent forth into His harvest. This implies the proper preparation of the laborers. Paul wrote to Timothy: "And the things which thou hast heard from me among many witnesses, the same commit thou to faithful men, who shall be able to teach others also." All Christians are to participate in this work. Without the prayers and financial support of the people in the pews, our seminaries would have to close their doors; our children and grandchildren would not be able to say: "How beautiful are the feet of them that bring good tidings, that publish peace."

There must also be a building up of the saints in faith. Even though we confess that we believe in the com-

munion of saints, all too often we find ourselves criticizing members within our own body of believers. This should not be so! The Christian walk in this secular world is difficult enough without brothers and sisters in Christ tearing each other apart. Let us rather, commend one another to Christ, building one another up, encouraging one another in our desire to serve the One who redeemed us with His own precious blood. If the Second Person of the Trinity could stoop down from the glory of heaven to suffer the shame of the cross in order that we might be forgiven, certainly we need to forgive one another.

The spiritual training of the covenant youth is yet a fourth responsibility of the Church. Elders must insist that the doctrines of the reformed faith are being taught to our covenant youth. Parents must insist that their children learn the lessons assigned by their teachers. Many churches today have forsaken the teaching of the doctrines of the church. Parents do not check the homework of their children and even allow their children to skip catechism. And then they wonder why their children do not have a love for the confessions and why they wander away from the church. Jesus instructed Peter not only to tend His sheep, but also to feed His lambs. If we refuse to teach those whom the Lord has entrusted to us, we are

It is time for us to remember our true calling and, in light of that calling, the business of the church.

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neglecting a major task of the church!

When we keep these goals in mind, the church will be able to be a light in the community, a witness to those who are hungering and thirsting for truth. Rather than contending for our position on a certain matter, let us contend for the faith that the Church of Jesus Christ gives testimony of Him. Instead of jumping into a debate about decorations in the church or wine or grape juice, let us first consider if we can say with Martin Luther, "Here I stand, I can do no other."

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