

April 2006 • Volume 56 • Issue 4

The Outlook

Dedicated to the Exposition and Defense of the Reformed Faith



• Why Crucify, Why Not Stone? • The Four Horsemen • A Victorious Message • Celebrating the Lord's Day
• The Power of the Church • The Incarnate Word of God • From Eternity to Eternity

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(ISSN 8750-5754) (USPS 633-980)

"And the three companies blew the trumpets...and held THE TORCHES in their left hands, and THE TRUMPETS in their right hands. . .and they cried, 'The sword of Jehovah and of Gideon.'"
(Judges 7:20).

Journal of Reformed Fellowship, Inc.

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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 the writers and do not necessarily reflect the opinions of the members of Reformed Fellowship, Inc.

Subscription Policy

The Outlook (USPS 633-980) is published monthly by Reformed Fellowship, Inc. (except July-August combined) for \$25.00 per year (foreign subscribers please remit payment in US Funds). Unless a definite request for discontinuance is received, it is assumed that the subscriber wishes the subscription to continue without the formality of a renewal order and he will be billed for renewal. Anyone desiring a change of address should notify the business office as early as possible in order to avoid the inconvenience of delayed delivery. Zip Code should be included. Periodicals postage paid at Grandville, MI and an additional office. POSTMASTER: Send address changes to *The Outlook*, 3363 Hickory Ridge Ct., Grandville, MI 49418; OR in Canada to *The Outlook*, P.O. Box 39, Norwich, Ontario NOJ1PO. Registered as International Publications Contract #40036516 at Norwich, Ontario.

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A Victorious Message

The message of the resurrection of Jesus Christ is a message of victory. It is a message that has swept the world for centuries beginning already on that first Easter Sunday when the women ran from the tomb to inform the disciples of the good news they had heard.

This incredible message did not start in New York or St. Catherines, Escondido or Grand Rapids. The wonderful message of victory was first heralded in Jerusalem—the very place where Jesus was crucified.

Jerusalem was the city that one Sunday morning suddenly found itself with an empty tomb. The travelers to Emmaus tell the Stranger who joined them that whole city was abuzz with the news! Any doubters could have gone to the place where He lay and seen for themselves the empty sepulchre.

Were the tomb not empty, it would have been the first place the Sanhedrin and the Pharisees would have checked to renounce the message the disciples started to preach in the synagogue every day. They would have produced to bones of the Nazarene to disprove His resurrection, but they could not. He was not there. He was risen, even as He had said.

It was the Sanhedrin and the Pharisees who insisted that the tomb be made as secure as possible. Guards were to be posted. The governor's seal was to be

placed upon the stone marking the opening of the grave. None would dare come, none would dare disturb the fortress prepared for the One who claimed to be the Christ.

And yet, three days later, the stone had been rolled away. The governor's seal had been broken. That, interestingly enough, was a crime punishable by death. Who would dare break the governor's seal unless it was Someone who was not afraid of death? Could it be Someone who had conquered death?

The guards who fled from the scene of the alleged crime reported that the followers of Jesus had stolen the body. No investigators were sent to the alleged crime scene, no warrants were issued, and no arrests were made. Authorities should have been looking for the twenty or more men that it would have taken to push the huge and heavy stone uphill against the gravity that had rolled it into place.

Had the guards truly been asleep, as they reported, they would have faced severe punishment from their authorities. Falling asleep while on duty was a crime punishable by death. You may recall that it was that kind of punishment the Philippian guard feared when he thought his prisoners had escaped. No punishment was levied, however. Instead the guards were made all the richer for their alleged drowsiness.

The authorities should have been looking for a body, as well. Unfortunately (for them), they could not find one. Perhaps they did not look hard enough. After all, for the next forty days, the body of the One who had lain in the tomb appeared several times throughout Jerusalem. 

The followers of Jesus did not expect a resurrection. Even though Jesus had instructed them to anticipate it, the disciples were not prepared for such news. In fact, they did not believe the women who had been to the empty tomb and heard the voice of the angels. It simply could not be. Not until they saw Him with their own eyes and dined with Him did they know the truth: Jesus is alive!

Their response was like that of anyone who would witness the resurrection—tell everyone! And where else to start but in Jerusalem? If this had been a hoax contrived by the disciples they would have started in the surrounding areas. There the ministry of Jesus had been favorably received. There Jesus had performed many miracles. Certainly the tickling ears of those who believed in Him in the outlying regions would have welcomed the news of a resurrection. Some had even witnessed the Nazarene raise others from the dead.

But the disciples did not begin to tell the victorious message in the regions around Jerusalem. Instead, they begin in the very city that had witnessed His death—even caused His death. They began in the very place where the religious leaders had plotted

against Jesus.

Years earlier, the prophet Isaiah had spoken of the victory of resurrection: “Your dead will live; their corpses will rise. You who lie in the dust, awake, and shout for joy” (Isaiah 26:19). Throughout the Book of Acts that victory message was carried on by the disciples. Now it must be a message that is carried on by each one of us who have met the risen Savior and call Him Lord.

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Why Crucify, Why not Stone?

They stoned Stephen. We read in John that they twice attempted to stone Jesus. After Judas led them to the secluded place where they arrested Jesus, they had a company of soldiers; they could have stoned Him then. They had laid the charge of blasphemy repeatedly; they had an explicit commandment for the mode of execution, and they had opportunity. Why would Jesus’ enemies seek crucifixion? The attempted stonings were rash, not deliberated. The decision to crucify was a more careful decision by the leadership. The demand was not to kill Him or stone Him; they were quite specific in what they wanted. It was “crucify Him, crucify Him.”

Yet crucifixion was not the way in ancient Israel to remove a false prophet. (That was the view His enemies had of Him!) The Sanhedrin said He was guilty of blasphemy, and they said to Pilate, “We have a law and by that law He ought to die!” If Jesus were guilty of blasphemy for calling Himself the Son of God, then the commanded penalty for this crime was stoning. If the Jews were serious about removing blasphemy and so meticulous about keeping the law, why not execute Him that way? Why a crucifixion when the law of God ordered a different kind of execution?

The Bible does not report all the reasoning of Jesus’ enemies. We do know of Caiaphas’ view that they must kill Him or risk a Roman intervention. They saw so many being convinced by His miracles, they

feared losing their following. A certain desperation was building. Judas’ offer of help meant Jesus fell into their hands sooner than expected. Since they had Him, they had to follow through without delay, though they did not want His murder during the Passover. (Such a wonderful opportunity as killing the Prince of Life does not happen every day.) Murder was agreed to – now how to do it.

The Command to Stone

Deuteronomy 13 commands the stoning of deceivers who lead people astray from the Lord. But there is a later word in Deuteronomy 21 that must have sent a tingle of diabolical delight up their spines. Rebellious sons must be stoned, which would leave a corpse under a pile of rock. Yet despicable as it was, the law of God anticipated that some might make a dead body dangle from a tree for all to gawk at. God reminded them that the executed criminal was under His curse, and for that reason the dead offender was to be put out of sight. He could not be left overnight; that body must come down, signifying that evil had been purged from the land. Having a corpse out in the open does not fit purging the evil from their midst. The key phrase to remember is “*Anyone who is hung on a tree is under God’s curse,*” Deuteronomy 21:23.

Would Jesus’ enemies prefer that He be under a pile of stones or hung on a tree? They certainly had sufficient hatred to prefer greater hu-

miliation. They had seen Roman crucifixions. They knew what Deuteronomy said about bodies remaining up on display overnight, and possibly for days till the birds had picked off all the flesh. They had undoubtedly pleaded with the Romans numerous times to take bodies down because leaving them up would desecrate their land! Rome, for its purpose, wanted rebels intimidated and would prefer to leave them up. The Jewish leadership wanted to preserve their law and the sacredness of their land. The significance of crucifixion was not new to them.

The Decision Not to Stone

One day someone came up with the idea that if they could just have Jesus up there hanging on a cross then that text in Deuteronomy would obviously apply to Him. They would have the law of God saying about Jesus, “*anyone hung on a tree was cursed by God.*” I can hear him now, telling his peers that they had in a crucifixion the ultimate argument to repudiate Jesus. After all, how could anyone ever believe in a Messiah who had been cursed by God? What a delicious proof for them that He was an imposter, a deceiver, one who did His impressive miracles in the power of the devil! Surely no one would believe in Him anymore, and they would be finished with this Jesus nuisance forever.

Some said it sounded as good as showing on the fourth day the dead body of the man who said He would rise on the third! Things were looking up for the opponents of Jesus; plus one of His disciples had come to their aid.

Only the Romans Could Do It

There remained one sticky problem. Jews were not allowed to execute their criminals, even if their law called for it. They were allowed much freedom to practice their religion, but Rome retained the execution of criminals as its sole prerogative.

Crucifixion was a patented Roman mode of execution. If Jews did that on their own, they would usurp Roman right – the sort of thing that might lead to their crucifixion! They had better get the Romans to do the job for them.

It took some convincing. The witnesses against Jesus were not well coached or terribly convincing. Pilate saw through their intrigue in a moment. They were seeking to use the authority of Rome as their tool. When they applied sufficient pressure, he gave in, and Jesus was crucified, not stoned.

The Gospel in the Curse

From the angle of the apostate leadership of Israel, a crucifixion paid a tremendous theological benefit. Jesus would be acknowledged as one cursed by God. They evidently missed that this was indeed what Isaiah had said, ... *we considered him stricken by God, smitten by him, and afflicted.*” So while they pursued their agenda, they were unwittingly serving God’s. God had theological reasons, too. The will of God was that Christ should die for

His people, but it was more. In His death Jesus would be cursed for them so that they could have the blessing Jesus deserved. On Friday He took what we deserved, and on Sunday He received what He deserved.

When Adam sinned he, his work, and even the ground he tilled, came under God’s curse. God so loved the world, He sent a replacement Adam, Jesus Christ, the new head of a new human family. He would come under that curse and die as a substitute. If one kind of death shows the curse of God more than another, then that would be the one most fitting.

The Significance of Bloodshed

That Jesus died as a substitute was taught and illustrated in millions of offerings of animals. These sacrifices anticipated the Innocent One dying for sinners. Jesus’ death was the fulfillment.

The ritual that God instituted cannot be fulfilled by every kind of death. A certain kind of death fits, and others do not. The law required bloodshed in the mode of death for the innocent animals. Jesus, too, would have a death of bloodshed. In stoning, one might bleed, but death from the blunt blows of stones does not fit the bloodshed of centuries of Jewish offerings. In those offerings the victim came under the knife. Israel’s priests did not beat the animals to death; they bled them to

***The ritual that God instituted cannot be fulfilled
by every kind of death.***

death, collected the blood, and poured it on the ground. A death by stoning would not fit the ritual that preceded it and was fulfilled by the cross. On the other hand, a crucifixion has no lack of bloodshed to make a clear link to the sacrifices God had commanded centuries before. Such sacrifices anticipated Jesus' bloodshed on the cross. To the ceremonial law, one must add the prediction in Psalm 22:16 of pierced hands and feet. Stoning would not fulfill such a specific prophecy.

The Humiliation Factor

Sin brings humiliation. If Adam had obeyed, all mankind would have enjoyed the dignity of glory and honor. Entering our humanity, Jesus took not only guilt and death, but the full measure of what our sin brought us. He would have sin's indignity too, the opposite of glory. So He did not die from a painless lethal injection. He would be humiliated in the shameful death of the Roman cross.

They cast lots for His clothes. The Son of God died in a way no film or portrait has ever dared to show – naked, with His hands nailed elsewhere so He could not cover His private parts. Thus did Jesus die by crucifixion, with a kind of humiliation we would not have given to Hitler, had we the opportunity to bring him to justice.

The Father was pleased for our salvation to crush the Son (Isaiah 53:10). It was a dramatic infliction of sin's penalty, including personal humiliation. We must not miss that Christ's obedience in going to the cross was a provision of the loving grace of the Father that results in

Jesus' glorification and worship by the entire universe. His offering for sin was not a death of half measures. There was no cheating, no holding back, no pretending this will do, or that's enough, or let's not go overboard! Jesus drank our entire cup. The shame was part of His suffering for our sin. He knew the shame, but that did not stop Him from going to the cross. His death was not like one dying in bed with the family gathered around.

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Roman Complicity

The crucifixion of our Lord had another feature to it. If it had been by stoning, the world could consider it an entirely Jewish event. Crucifixion was a Roman message on Roman letterhead. Jesus was tried in a Roman court and crucified by Roman soldiers. *“Indeed Herod and Pontius Pilate met together with the Gentiles and the people of Israel in this city to conspire against your holy servant Jesus”* (Acts 4:27).

Crucifixion gave Jesus' death genuine Roman involvement, while by means of it the Jews rejected their king. This adds up to a mutual decision. Rome had the innocent Man killed – so much for its vaunted justice! Its worldly glory was corrupt.

A Roman death demonstrates that contempt for the Messiah was a rejection by the world. It was not just “the Jews” but others, *the rulers of this age... [who] did not understand, for if they had, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory* (1 Corinthians 2:8). Scripture teaches a universal rejection of Christ and universal ignorance of Him unless one is born of the Spirit.

It helps us not to love the world when we see its true colors. A Roman death, at the instigation of the Jews, united the world and apostate covenant breakers, whether they liked it or not. They united against Christ, as Psalm 2 shows. Could any other mode of murder have done it so well? Mere complicity by the Romans in a Jewish stoning would not carry the same significance. To show a world against God, the Roman hand was also needed in His death.

Enhancing the Gospel

Bloodshed conveyed substitution, and crucifixion, the divine curse. From the Sanhedrin's perspective the crucifixion was meant to ensure that all would reject Jesus as the promised One to come. Their efforts fulfilled the plan of God perfectly. They enhanced the gospel by the mode of death they yearned for. A cursed death fit in with the truth that our sins were imputed to Him. Later they had the tomb guarded and sealed, thinking that would prevent His body from being stolen. What they prevented was the credibility of their later argument that it had been stolen. Briefly, it appeared that all was going their way – actually, it was going God's way.

Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us, for it is written: "Cursed is everyone who is hung on a tree." He redeemed us in order that the blessing given to Abraham might come to the Gentiles through Christ Jesus, so that by faith we might receive the promise of the Spirit. (Galatians 3:13-14)

After the resurrection, the apostles went on to proclaim Jesus' death and resurrection. They contrasted what men did to Him and what God did. They did not shy away from saying He had been crucified. They showed the humiliation and glorification in sharp contrast. Rather than being suppressed, the very word *crucified* was often in their preaching. For Paul, the gospel was not just that Jesus died; it was *Jesus Christ and Him crucified*." Peter referred to the cross as a *tree*, a choice designed to connect with the text in Deuteronomy 21.

How the Apostle Read Deuteronomy

Paul took Deuteronomy 21 and quoted the very part that must have been in the minds of the Sanhedrin, "*Cursed is everyone who is hung on a tree.*" Watch the order Paul gives:

1. Everyone who does not obey the law is cursed.
2. No one has obeyed the law, so all are cursed. (This is stated in Romans 3).
3. Christ redeemed us from that curse.
4. He did it by being cursed for us.
5. This curse is evident in the mode of Jesus' death.

6. He redeemed by being cursed so blessing would replace it.

What the Death of Christ Means

The death of Jesus was a unique sacrifice that cannot be repeated. It was effective to accomplish all that God intended, and it happened in detail in the way God had decided – death by crucifixion. By His sacrifice, Christ satisfied God and absorbed His wrath against us for our sin. He took the curse from us and

A Roman death demonstrates that contempt for the Messiah was a rejection by the world.

replaced it with the blessing promised to the covenant people. He defeated the devil and set His people free. He removed the guilt of our sin from our record and brought us forgiveness and reconciled God to us.

Bearing our Cross

We are called upon to take up our cross and follow Him. Such carrying is not penance and never atones. Serving Christ will always entail suffering, a privilege we ought never to avoid. It is a way to side with Christ in a world that opposes Him. We cannot be friends with the world. It crucified Christ, and it will reject us too as we are loyal to Him. He was cursed for us so we cannot

be cursed by the Lord Who has forgiven us, but we will be cursed by the world. We must never seek its blessing on us.

The world united against Christ, yet all nations are promised to Christ. Their redemption can only come by the crucifixion the world imposed on the One they rejected. God has turned human treachery to our salvation. Jesus said of the cross, "*When I am lifted up from the earth, I will draw all men to myself.*" He said this to show the kind of death he was going to die" (John 12:32,33).

The cross still repels the world, and its message is still foolishness to it, but for us who are being saved, it is the power of God to salvation. Jesus took our shame; let us never be ashamed of Him, but boast only in Him and all He has accomplished for us. We must be grateful for the grace that planned it all.

Dr. David H. Linden is a member of the Bethel United Reformed Church in Calgary, Alberta.

We Confess

An Exposition & Application of the Belgic Confession

Article 32: Of the Power of the Church in Establishing Ecclesiastical Laws and Administering Discipline

In taking up Article 32 of the Belgic Confession, we ought to recognize that it concludes a large section on the doctrine of the church in particular (art. 27-32), while leading into a discussion of the sacraments of the church (art. 33-35) and the relationship between the Christ's kingdom and the kingdoms of this world (art. 36). It needs to be stressed that in terms of sheer volume (ten out of 37 articles), the doctrine of the church is a defining feature of who we are as Reformed people.

This is so often lost in our debates with the Arminians over the "Five Points, with non-denominational brothers and sisters over why we have creeds and confessions, and with Dispensationalists over our position on eschatology. In such a world as ours, with its detachment from true community and lack of true leadership, we need to emphasize our biblical and confessional identity as Christ's spiritual kingdom while we sojourn here as pilgrims.

The reason for so much material on the Church is that the Church of Rome and its authority was on the one side while the Anabaptists and their denigration of the institutional church was on the other side of the Reformed. This is instructive for us as we continue to delve into this section of the Belgic Confession. In Article 32 the vital question of the

authority of the Church is and taken up in contrast to both Rome and Anabaptism, as well as tyrannical and libertine churches in our day.

Canon Law vs. the Canon

Article 32 begins by balancing the Church's authority in setting up order while stressing its limits in doing so, saying,

In the meantime we believe, though it is useful and beneficial that those who are rulers of the Church institute and establish certain ordinances among themselves for maintaining the body of the Church, yet that they ought studiously to take care that they do not depart from those things which Christ, our only Master, has instituted.

The Authority of the Church

The right and authority of the Church in establishing a church order is found in the fact that it is useful and beneficial for certain rules and regulations to be set up in order to maintain the body the church. In using the metaphor of a body, the Confession draws upon Scripture's picture that the Church of Jesus Christ is made up of real people who come together as one (e.g., Romans 12:3-21; 1 Corinthinans 12:12-31).

All those who call upon the name of the Lord must come together under some structure and form in order for all to be edified. The biblical principle here is the necessity for all things to be done decently and in order (1 Corinthians 14:40). We say this in contrast to the Anabaptist teaching so prevalent in our day of non-denominational, mega-church, and emergent churches, in which the people are "led by the Spirit" or the whims and wishes of the pastor/CEO.

The Limitations of the Church

The Church is also limited in this right by the Word. The rulers of the church (the consistories made up of pastors and elders) must not depart from what Christ has instituted. The church at Colossae was beset with those who went beyond the bounds of the Word in setting up "human precepts and teachings" (Colossians 2:22), which bound the consciences of the faithful. In doing so, they created a "self-made religion," or, as our Reformed forefathers called it, "will worship" (Colossians 2:23). We confess this limitation with Paul, in opposition to Rome and its Canon Law (*corpus canonis juris*).

As we have said before, Scripture does not say everything, yet what it says is sufficient. When we develop an article of church order, we look to direct teachings of Scripture, or we look to principles that may be deduced by "good and necessary consequence" (Westminster Confession, ch. I.6) from general principles. What is important is that these deduced rules and regulations must not contradict Scripture. To use Pauline language, we must see

to it that we do not “go beyond what is written” (1 Corinthians 4:6).

In the history of the Reformation we see this principle of establishing a church order in John Calvin’s *Ecclesiastical Ordinances*, written in 1541 upon his return to Geneva. These regulations became a primary source for various regional and national church orders in France and the Netherlands, which were eventually summarized by Dutch delegates to the Synod of Dort (1618-19), which has passed down to us today in the Church Orders of all Reformed churches of Dutch origin.

Worship

This principle that the Church is authorized to set up basic rules and regulations for the well being of the people is then applied in two areas: worship and discipline. In the area of worship the Confession continues, as it says,

And therefore we reject all human inventions, and all laws which man would introduce into the worship of God, thereby to bind and compel the conscience in any manner whatever.

Here we come across one of the explicit rejection passages of the Belgic Confession (cf. arts. 12, 13, 14, 15, 34, 35, 36). In rejecting “human inventions...[in] the worship of God,” we confess what has come to be known as the “Regulative Principle” of worship.

Our Confession teaches this principle by way of negation: when we confess that we reject man’s laws in worship we are implying, therefore, that we accept only what

Christ has instituted. This is one of the basic principles of who we are as Reformed churches. We also see this taught positively in our Heidelberg Catechism, which says that we are to worship God only as “he has commanded in his Word” (Q&A 96; cf. Church Order, art. 38). This was practically applied by our Reformed forefathers in their rejections of praying to Mary and the saints (cf. Belgic Confession, art. 26) and of bowing in adoration to the bread of the Eucharist, and therefore worshipping it (cf. Heidelberg Catechism, Q&A 80), for example.

We also notice that our Confession gives us reasons for rejecting these practices. First, they are “human inventions.” As was referenced earlier, this means that they are “will worship,” that is, that they originate from the will of man and not the will of God. In the language of our Catechism, these practices show that we are trying to be wiser than God (Q&A 98).

The second reason is that these laws “bind the conscience.” They place burdens beyond the Word, which the people cannot in good conscience perform and obey. The Regulative Principle actually frees the conscience of the faithful to worship God in Spirit and in truth (John 4:24). We were bought by Christ to be freed from being slaves of men and their commandments (1 Corinthians 7:23;

Galatians 5:1; Isaiah 29:13).

When the elders of the church abdicate their authority to insure that everything done in worship is commanded by God, the worship offered turns its focus upon the individual causing the conscientious worshiper to stumble. Examples abound in such things as altar calls, or, even closer to home, in having “Youth Sunday,” in which the young people help lead parts of the service as a way “to get them involved.” When we allow soloists into worship, it is a performance, no matter how well intentioned or biblical the words are. Worship is an offering of the *people’s* praise to the Lord, not the individual’s.

We see a beautiful example of the freedom of the churches to establish order in our Church Order, Article 37. There we read: “The Consistory *shall* call the congregation together for corporate worship...on each Lord’s Day.” This is the biblical commandment. Then we read, “Special services *may* be called...”

Worship services for the purpose of commemorating the saving acts of God in history such as Christmas (Incarnation), Good Friday (our Lord’s sacrifice), and Ascension (Christ’s return to heaven), are not essential to the life of the Church, although they may be beneficial. They are certainly within the bounds of the Word, although not mandatory services for the

The Regulative Principle actually frees the conscience of the faithful to worship God in Spirit and in truth.

Church discipline is essentially the application of the Word and Sacraments.

churches. What this illustrates for us is that those churches that desire to gather on these days may do so, while those that decide against are both able to live under one roof.

Discipline

The second area in which the principle of the church's authority to institute ordinances for the well being of the people is in the area of church discipline. This article of the Confession concludes, saying,

Therefore we admit only of that which tends to nourish and preserve concord and unity, and to keep all men in obedience to God. For this purpose, excommunication or church discipline is requisite, with all that pertains to it, according to the Word of God.

For the Reformers such as Martin Bucer, Peter Martyr Vermigli, and John Calvin, church discipline was essential to the ordering, life, and health of Christ's Church. This was ever so clear, as seen in the lamentable state of the Church all around them. In fact, this area of reform in the Church was so essential for Calvin that he willingly was exiled from Geneva for it in 1538.

These men argued that the Church as a spiritual kingdom must be able to censure its citizens, just as the civil government must punish those who transgressed its laws. Of course the civil magistrates saw this as a loss of their authority, but

in fact, church discipline does not take away from civil punishment. As our Church Order says,

Since Christian discipline is spiritual in nature and exempts no one from trial or punishment by the civil authorities, so also besides civil punishment there is need of ecclesiastical censure, that God may be glorified, that the sinner may be reconciled with God, the church and his neighbor, and that offense may be removed from the church of Christ (art. 51).

Church discipline, as the third mark of the true Church, is essentially the application of the Word and Sacraments by the ministers and elders in the lives of the people of God. In our day and age, "discipline" has a

negative connotation, but the word discipline means not only punishment for disobedience, but training unto maturity in the Christian life (cf. 2 Timothy 3:16-17; Hebrews 12:3-11).

The purpose of church discipline is manifold. First, it is for the glory of God. As in all things, "Whatever you do...[give] thanks to God the Father" (Colossians 3:17), so with church discipline. The elders "promote" the holy reputation of God through discipline (cf. Leviticus 10). Second, it is for the purity of church. As Paul says so poignantly in 1 Corinthians 5, the leaven within the church is to be purged. Third, it is for the peace of the church, as it "preserve[s] concord and unity" as offended and offending are brought together. As well, disrupting members are dealt with for the good of the whole body. Fourth, it is for the sanctification of the church. Discipline helps us stay obedient to God (Hebrews 12:3-11), but it also is the means by which the Holy Spirit re-

Study/Application Questions for Article 32

1. Why is it necessary to have a structure for the church to live within? How would you explain to someone new to the Reformed Faith that this is not legalistic but edifying?
2. Give a general outline of the Church Order of your church. Why would it be beneficial for all the members of a local church to be able to do this?
3. Define the "Regulative Principle." How does our understanding of worship differ from other traditions (e.g., Roman Catholic, Lutheran, Episcopal, modern Evangelical)?
4. What are the benefits of godly church discipline in the local church?

stores offenders against His laws (1 Corinthians 5).

The areas in which the elders are to discipline the people are doctrine and life. Our “Form for the Ordination of Elders and Deacons” describes this, aptly, as “the supervision of the church,” as they oversee all that is done, under the headings of doctrine and life. The elders’ discipline is used positively by ensuring that the minister of the Word preaches the Word only, and by applying the Word through Bible study, catechism, and visitation. The negative aspect is, of course, if someone strays from the Word as expressed in our creeds and confessions (Romans 16:17; 1 Timothy 1:3; Titus 1:13, 3:10). The lives of God’s people are overseen in discipline as the elders know their flocks, visit them, care for them, get involved in their lives, and are diligent to promote godliness through the Word and their own example (Matthew 18:15-7; 2 Thessalonians 3:11-2; 1 Timothy 5:20; 2 Timothy 4:2).

In conclusion, we are reminded that the Scriptures (Galatians 4:26; Ephesians 5:25-32) and our Confession (art. 28) describe the Church as our spiritual mother, by that we are nourished and cared for during our earthly sojourn. Church discipline, then, is a blessing which God our Father has given to his Church as a means of sanctifying us and preparing us for entrance into his celestial kingdom.

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Celebrating the Lord’s Day

Part One

Why is the Sunday, the traditional day of rest and Christian worship in the US and Canada, on the retreat? It has become a day of work, not one of rest. Yet people seldom work on Sunday if they can help it: they use it for their own pleasure instead. Sports events draw greater crowds than churches. Is our culture reverting to a time when it is harder to be a Christian? We can point to the rapid changes in technology, which calls for staggered working days as manufacturers seem unwilling to shut down their plants for one day. In our highly industrialized economy, Christian workers face the demands for more and more shift work, and thus for more Sunday labor. How can they say “no” without losing their jobs? With total disregard for the welfare of employees and the basic rights and needs of families, the unscrupulous desire for profit further contributes to the secularization of the Lord’s Day.

A consumerism shop-until-you-drop mentality also uses the Lord’s Day to its advantage. Unfortunately, the proliferation of secularism and materialism have also infiltrated the church. Some Christians are trying to have it both ways, to serve the Kingdom of God and to surrender to the values of our hedonistic-consumerism age. Even some Christian bookstores are open for business on the Lord’s Day.

A Disappearing Day

The disappearance of the Lord’s day testifies to the horrendous influ-

ence of secularism. In today’s world God can hardly be said to play a vital role in the public square; in fact, He does not even play a role. When you take an honest look at today’s world, you must come to the conclusion that our society has become frightfully unholy. The United States and Canada were never Christian nations, but they had traditions formed by a knowledge of the Bible and its basic teachings. When secularism came to prevail in the mid-twentieth century, Bible reading disappeared among the majority, and with it the background of ideas accompanied by the memory loss of our Christian heritage. Every recent survey demonstrates that there is widespread biblical illiteracy, not only in an increasingly secularized American culture, but even within an apparently successful evangelicalism.

According to Gallup, eight in ten Americans say they are Christians, but only four in ten know that Jesus, according to the Bible, delivered the Sermon on the Mount. Fewer than half of all adults can name Matthew, Mark, Luke and John as the four Gospels of the New Testament. In Canada the lack of Bible knowledge is even worse. Canada is not only a totally secularized nation, anti-Christian prejudice is its last respectable bigotry.

The church should be deeply concerned about the desecration of the Lord’s day not only for their own preservation, but just as much out of concern for the world. Christians

Whether this development is according to the Scriptures, does not seem to be up for discussion. As long as it works, it should be accepted.

should act in it as salt that preserves and purifies, and as a light that dispels the spiritual darkness - that holds many in its iron grip. But what can the church do to reverse the trend? How much has the media influenced Christians?

The current “churchless” Christianity fad is not the answer. Some believe that to listen to a sermon on the radio or watch a church service on television, or Internet, in one’s comfortable living room is “just the same” as attending a church service. But they forget that one of the first necessities of life is a congregation, a physical coming together of God’s people. They do not seem to understand that solitary worship, except for those physically unable to attend, is hardly Christian worship at all. And through the influence of the church growth movement, a much-debated marketing approach to evangelism has been developed to stem the tide of declining church attendance. The gospel is advertised as a commodity everyone needs.

To attract unbelievers from the community to the church, seeker-focused services have become perhaps the most visible and one of the most controversial issues. Even the centuries-old norm for worship services only on Sunday has come under pressure. Some churches are now offering Wednesday or Saturday evening services. The Willow Creek Community Church in sub-

urban Chicago features two services on Saturday night and two on Sunday morning. Whether this development is according to the Scriptures, does not seem to be up for discussion. As long as it works, it should be accepted for the good of the church. In the past, we called this approach “pragmatism.” Today this development is called “the trend of the future.” For a Christian who is deeply committed to his Savior, the increasing deterioration of the Lord’s Day, the Sunday, should be a matter of grave concern.

Why Keep the Lord’s Day?

Why should the church stress Sunday observance? Was the Sabbath of which we read in Exodus 20 and Deuteronomy 5 a temporary Jewish institution? Was the observance of this day not done away with by Christ’s death and resurrection? Or is it an abiding institution, a day for the Lord? Should it be observed to the end of time when all God’s children shall be gathered into His rest? If it is an abiding institution, why is there a change from the Sabbath to the Sunday rest? When did the change occur? If the change is correct, why do we read the Ten Commandments, including the fourth, each Sunday?

The Creation Order

The Sabbath was not invented by the Israelites. It is unique; it is in no way determined by lunar or solar systems. It is a regularly occurring

day, irrespective of moon or sun cycles, irrespective of appointed or special feasts, irrespective of national or natural catastrophes. This cycle of six days of work, one day for joyous worship, is a gift from God. The account of creation reveals the importance of the cycle of time.

Exodus 20:11 is sufficient to establish the fact that the Sabbath originated at creation. It is the only commandment in which there is a specific reference to the example of the Creator, and the order instituted by the creation week. It is referred to in terms of six days work and the seventh day worship, following the pattern of regulation of time set by God in creation. As a creation ordinance, God instituted the Sabbath as a perpetual obligation for all mankind. In keeping the Sabbath as a day of rest, Israel followed the original creation pattern of the cycle of time set by God. Since the order of creation days cannot be changed, Christians are not exempted from Sabbath keeping. God’s unchangeable moral law requires the dedication of one restful day of worship in every seven.

The Fall

Through Adam’s fall into sin, the Sabbath day became distorted. As the consequence of his sin, man became a restless creature, a rebel and a slave of materialism. The worship of God was replaced by man’s worship of self. Man sought to make himself great, to become like God Himself. But instead of becoming godlike, he began to serve the prince of darkness. He does as he wishes on God’s holy day, ignoring all divine injunctions and rationalizing to excuse his own

dishonorable behavior. Even God's chosen people, the Israelites, often departed from God's norm for Sabbath keeping. The prophet Isaiah (Isaiah 58) accused them of trampling God's Sabbath under their feet. They had been dishonoring God's holy day and thereby dishonoring God Himself. They had sought their own enjoyments and made their own decisions as to how the Sabbath should be kept. Their formal and lifeless Sabbath observance had become burdensome to them - and to the Lord, and they had lost sight of its deep significance. And so Isaiah called upon the Sabbath-breakers to repent.

The Fourth Commandment

How are we to understand that the Ten Commandments, which include the call to remember the Sabbath, are of abiding validity and authority throughout the Old and New Testament ages? In 1925, the atheist philosopher Bertrand Russell ridiculed the church when he wrote that in the fourth commandment "we are told not to work on Saturdays, and Protestants take this to mean we are not to play on Sundays." This taunt exposes the quandary that many interpreters sense when they deal with the fourth commandment. This snide remark also forces the church to face up to the fact that her teaching concerning the Sabbath commandment should be totally biblical.

Were the Ten Commandments totally new before God gave them to Moses? They did not BECOME the law of God when they were formulated on Mount Sinai. God's will was known before Moses' time. Disobedience to authority, murder, stealing, and adultery are referred

to as the basic reasons for the Flood. The truths in Scripture were revealed progressively to mankind.

Some were revealed before Moses' time. When the Old Testament believing community was organized as a nation, then God, through Moses, gave the record of His previous revelations to Israel as well as additional aspects. The commandments were addressed specifically to Israel. But this does not limit the moral law to Israel. After the fall, God did not remove the Sabbath. He did not close the door to the worship intended for His holy day of celebration. As God worked out His plan for recreation, He reminded man of the time cycle; He called man to enter regularly into fellowship with Him. The first biblical reference to the Sabbath occurs in Exodus 16:23-30.

Moses told the Israelites that on the sixth day the Israelites were to gather twice the usual amount of manna because the following day would be a holy Sabbath to the Lord. From this passage we may infer that the custom of some sort of Sabbath predated the Ten Commandments given by God to Moses on Mount Sinai.

The name Sabbath comes originally from the Hebrew verb *shabbath*, which means primarily "to cease or desist" (Exodus 31:16-17). Genesis 2: 2 literally says that God "ceased" on the seventh day. The

seventh-day Sabbath as day of rest has a vital place in the history of redemption. It pointed Israel to the Sabbath that was to come. Through the weekly celebration of the Sabbath day, which kept the memory of the rescue from Egypt alive, the Israelites were reminded of the greatest rescue yet to come, the redemption through the Redeemer who would give them salvation.

Through this obligatory Sabbath rest, imposed upon Israel at Sinai, God promised them that some day they would enjoy perfect rest, similar to the rest their God enjoyed after He had completed His creative activity. For that reason the Sabbath may be characterized as a sign of God's grace to Israel. Israel's keeping of the Sabbath was made a sign guaranteeing to them the coming of true rest. The Lord their God would deliver them from sin, and thereby set them free from the curse and its consequences (cf. Ezekiel 20:12). The whole law was placed in the context of redemption. Israel's exodus from Egypt is the great type of mankind's exodus from the slavery of sin. The Sabbath rest is ours through Christ. On the basis of the atoning work of Christ on Calvary's cross, believers in Christ have their sins forgiven and have peace with God (Romans 5:1). Believers in Christ thus enjoy the rest of God. Gratitude for this deliverance should motivate a reverence for and obedience to God's will.

***After the fall, God did not remove the Sabbath.
He did not close the door to the worship intended
for His holy day of celebration.***

The call to Sabbath rest was not intended for people to sit down with their arms folded, forgetting about the world.

The call to Sabbath rest was not intended for people to sit down with their arms folded, forgetting about the world. It did not mean the neglect of animals and fellow-men, or even one's own body. Rather the call to rest was to enhance everyone's physical and spiritual well-being. Creative, productive labor, including commercial transactions, should be avoided. Activity that is enjoyable and not undertaken for the purpose of accomplishment qualifies as acceptable for Sabbath time. The fourth commandment covers a wide range of people, and even domestic animals. In Deuteronomy 5, the ox and donkey (beasts of burden) are mentioned separately with the cattle.

In this passage God's concern for servants is also clearly expressed. Everyone, even the animals, is to abstain from doing any work "in order that your servants, male and female, may rest as well as you." God provided rest for all, even for travelers. The institution of the Sabbath was, therefore, intensely practical. The creature might rest on the Sabbath day and be refreshed, even as God had rested on the seventh day and was refreshed (Exodus 1:17). The Sabbath was intended as a day for gaining new spiritual strength and for physical relaxation. That purpose was to be accomplished by resting from one's ordinary work--but not refraining from doing good (Luke 6:9)--and by dedicating the day to God.

A Sign of the Covenant

The Sabbath is not only a day of rest, but also a sign of the Covenant. In Exodus 31:16-17, the Sabbath is described as a perpetual covenant (agreement), a sign forever between God and Israel. The Sabbath has survived the Fall, survived the Flood, survived slavery in Egypt and exile in Babylon. The prophet Ezekiel charged Israel not to defile herself with ungodly behavior. He urged them to observe God's ordinances and hallow His Sabbath as a sign between Him and Israel so "that you may know that I am the Lord your God." (20: 20) The deeply abiding spiritual relationship, which is the heart of the eternal covenant, is the dominant element in Sabbath observance. This is the only possible meaning of the emphatic phrase: "I am the Lord your God."

The Sabbath is meant for enjoyment of this fellowship, this living communion between God and man.

God took the initiative when He established His people in a covenant relationship. But the line of the covenant did not stop with Old Testament Israel. It stretches all the way from Genesis to the close of age (Revelation 21:3,7). The apostle Paul shows that Abraham is the "father of all who believe, whether Jew or Gentile. The latter is included in the "nation of

Abraham" (Romans 4:18). To the Galatians Paul wrote that "those who believe are children of Abraham. (Galatians 3:8; cf. 3:29)

The Change from Sabbath to Sunday

Why the change from Saturday to Sunday observance? There is no mention of God's people keeping the Saturday Sabbath as a weekly ordinance after the resurrection, but there is considerable evidence of the first day of the week, i.e. Sunday, being kept, thus preserving the sevenfold weekly cycle. Christianity reinterprets and gives a true exposition of the Sabbath. Observance of this day was an entirely new custom, not in any way a substitute for the Jewish Sabbath. Our covenant God chose the Sabbath as a memorial of the original creation, but also as a sign of redemption. Our Lord inaugurated the New Covenant, early Sunday morning before sunrise.

The Saturday Sabbath was past forever, and the New Sunday Sabbath had arrived. The Sunday is the sign of the New Covenant. When the Lord was raised from the dead on the first day of the week, Sunday replaced Saturday and was henceforth to be kept as the new day of rest. When Christ had finished His redemptive work in His death, it signaled the end of the Old Testament Sabbath as an obligation.

With His resurrection from the dead, by which He finished His work of redemption and entered into His rest, we see Christ as the Lord of the Sabbath, introducing a change as to when the Church is to keep the Sabbath. On the evening of the first Easter, the risen Christ

appeared to His assembled disciples (John 20:19). When the disciples gathered again on the first day of the week, and a full week had passed, “doubting” Thomas was with them when the risen Jesus made Himself known (John 20:26). In I Corinthians 16:2 the apostle Paul says, “On the first day of every week, each one of you should set aside a sum in keeping with his income, saving it up, so that when I come no collections will have to be made.” Revelation 1:10 speaks of the apostle John being in the Spirit on the Lord’s day. The implication is clearly that the first day of the week has become the Christian Sabbath, a day to be kept holy unto Him who is the Lord. Therefore, the use of the “Lord’s Day” in the New Testament points to the apostolic practice of observing Sunday as the day to commemorate the resurrection of Christ and to celebrate communion.

Various writings from the second century reveal that Christians followed the practice of observing the Lord’s Day as taught by the apostles. Ignatius exhorts: “Let every friend of Christ keep the Lord’s Day as a festival, the resurrection day.” Justin Martyr, who lived at the close of the first and the beginning of the second century, says, “But Sunday is the day on which we all hold our common assembly, because it is the first day on which God made the world; and Jesus Christ on the same day rose from the dead.” In a letter written by Dionysius of Corinth addressed to the church of Rome and dated A.D. 170, we have clear evidence of Christians meeting together for worship on Sunday. He wrote: “Today we have passed the Lord’s holy

day, in which we have read your epistle.”

How should Christians understand the law, including the fourth commandment? We read it as God gave it, but it must be understood through and in Christ. The law is for us a divine guide to show us how to live in gratitude in our daily walk and talk before the Lord. To put it in the words of Lord’s Day 38: “What is the will of God in the fourth commandment? A. First, that the gospel ministry and education for it be maintained, and that, especially on the festive day of rest, I regularly attend the assembly of God’s people to learn what God’s Word teaches, to participate in the sacraments, to pray to God publicly, and to bring Christian offerings for the poor. Second, that every day of my life I rest from my evil ways, let the Lord work in me through his Spirit, and to begin in this life the

eternal Sabbath.” (*...to be continued.*)

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

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

For more information, phone 269-375-8455.

Looking Above

A Series on The Revelation of Jesus Christ

Revelation 6:1-8

The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse

We have spent considerable time in Revelation 4 and 5. We have stood, as it were, in the very throne room of God, and there we have witnessed glory such as eye has not seen, nor ear has heard, nor has entered into the imagination of man. We have stood in the very throne room of God, and there we have set our eyes upon the Lamb in the midst of the throne. We have joined our voices with the heavenly chorus in singing a new song: “Worthy is the Lamb that was slain!” Indeed, we have basked in the effulgence of God’s glory!

We come to Revelation 6, and we are confronted with horrific and very disturbing images. Here we read of the four horsemen of the apocalypse. We read of the souls under the altar, who have been slain for the word of God and for the testimony which they held. We hear them crying out with a loud voice: “How long, O Lord, holy and true, until You avenge our blood on those who dwell on the earth?” We read of a great earthquake, of the sun becoming black as sackcloth, of the moon becoming like blood, of the stars of heaven falling to the earth, of the sky receding as a scroll, and every mountain and island being moved out of its place. We read of the inhabitants of the earth running to and fro and crying out to the mountains and rocks, “Fall on us and hide us from the face of Him who sits on the throne

and from the wrath of the Lamb! For the great day of His wrath has come, and who is able to stand?”

The Setting

Before we delve into these images, we do well to remember the time frame in view. Revelation 4-7, like the other sections of Revelation, spans the entire time period between Christ’s first coming and His return on the clouds of glory. This section, like the others, is describing for us the history of the church in the world as she lives between the first coming of Christ and His return. That history is under the control of the Lamb, for the Lamb that was slain holds the scroll in His hand.

By virtue of His death, resurrection, and ascension, He is worthy to open the scroll and to loose its seven seals. The Lamb opens the first four seals in verses 1-8; the Lamb opens the fifth seal in verse 9; the Lamb opens the sixth seal in verse 12; the Lamb opens the seventh seal in 8:1. That means that whatever proceeds from the opening of the seven seals proceeds from the throne of the Lamb! It is Christ Himself who opens the seals. It is Christ Himself who sends forth the judgments that proceed from the opening of those seals. Judgment originates from the throne of the Lamb that was slain! The opening of the scroll is under the control of the Lamb, and that scroll is in the

process of being opened even now.

This means that what is going on in Revelation 6 is our history. We are not spectators in the stands watching the events unfold before our eyes; we are participants in the arena. This history is our history. The seals are being loosed and the scroll is being opened even now.

Furthermore, the four living creatures are intimately involved in the opening of the first four seals. The Lamb opens the first seal, one of the four living creatures says “Come!” and the first horseman of the apocalypse rides forth. The Lamb opens the second seal, the second living creature says “Come!” and the second horseman of the apocalypse rides forth. The Lamb opens the third seal, the third living creature says “Come!” and the third horseman of the apocalypse rides forth. The Lamb opens the fourth seal, and the fourth living creature says “Come!”, and the fourth horseman of the apocalypse rides forth. The four living creature are intimately involved in the opening of the first four seals. The horsemen ride only at their command.

Finally, notice that it is horses that are being ridden. The background of these horses is found in Psalm 68 and in Zechariah 6.

In Psalm 68, we read of the God of Sinai who went forth from His holy habitation: “O God, when You went out before Your people, when You marched through the wilderness, the earth shook; the heavens also dropped rain at the presence of God; Sinai itself was moved at the presence of God, the God of Israel”

(Psalm 68:7,8). God is further pictured as One who goes forth from His holy mountain riding upon the clouds in verse 4: “Sing to God, sing praises to His name; extol Him who rides on the clouds, by His name Yah, and rejoice before Him.” He is pictured as One who rides upon the clouds amid thousands of chariots in verse 17: “The chariots of God are twenty thousand, even thousands of thousands. The Lord is among them as in Sinai, in the Holy Palace.”

This God, who goes forth from His holy habitation, riding upon the clouds amidst thousands of chariots, has revealed Himself as a God who destroys His enemies: “Let God arise, let His enemies be scattered; let those also who hate Him flee before him. As smoke is driven away, so drive them away; as wax melts before the fire, so let the wicked perish at the presence of God” (Psalm 68:1,2). This same God has also revealed Himself as the Savior of His people in verses 19-20: “Blessed be the Lord, who daily loads us with benefits, the God of our salvation! Our God is the God of salvation; and to God the Lord belong escapes from death!”

We find similar imagery in Zechariah 6:1-8. Again we find the Lord coming from His holy habitation, riding upon the chariots, bringing judgment upon the wicked, and at the same time salvation for His people. This is the background of the four horsemen of the apocalypse as they appear in Revelation 6.

The First Horseman

We read of the first horseman in verses 1-2: “Now I saw when the Lamb opened one of the seals; and I heard one of the four living crea-

tures saying with a voice like thunder, ‘Come and see.’ And I looked, and behold, a white horse. He who sat on it had a bow; and a crown was given to him, and he went out conquering and to conquer.”

What we have in the first horseman of the apocalypse is the sending forth of the gospel of Jesus Christ. That gospel is the aroma of life unto life for those who believe, even as it is the aroma of death unto death for those who do not believe. The sending forth of that gospel is unstoppable, for the Word of God cannot be bound (2 Timothy 2:9). God’s Word does not return to Him void; it accomplishes the purpose for which He sends it forth (Isaiah 55:11). The Word of God goes forth conquering and to conquer; it is victorious in its aim.

In view here is the proclamation of the gospel, from the time of Christ’s ascension to the time of His return, from the first sermon preached on Pentecost to the sermons being preached even in this day. The Word goes forth to believer and unbeliever alike. It brings salvation to the believer, even as it brings judgment to the unbeliever. Such is the riding forth of the first horseman of the apocalypse: it is the proclamation of the gospel to the ends of the earth.

The Second Horseman

We read of the second horseman in verses 3-4: “When He opened the second seal, I heard the second living creature saying, ‘Come and see.’ Another horse, fiery red, went out. And it was granted to the one who sat on it to take peace from the earth, and that people should kill one another; and there was given

to him a great sword.”

Clearly, the second horseman has in view warfare: nation rising up against nation, and kingdom against kingdom. It has in view wars and rumors of wars. Peace is taken from the earth; people kill one another.

In view here is warfare and bloodshed—all the warfare and bloodshed from the time of Christ’s ascension to the time of His return. From the fall of the Roman Empire to America’s war on terrorism. Peace is taken from the earth. Who can forget the unsettling image of planes slamming into the World Trade Center? Who can forget the bombs over Nagasaki and Hiroshima? Who can forget the pictures of those freed from concentration camps: men so emaciated, they scarcely looked like men? Who can forget the staggering statistics of those brutally murdered in Hitler’s extermination camps, in Stalin’s gulag, in Pol Pot’s killing fields? How often the earth has tasted the blood of those slain in battle and warfare!

War claims the lives of Christians and non-Christians alike. There is some evidence, however, that this horseman has especially in view the slaughter of Christians. The verb that is translated “kill” is used eight times in the book of Revelation, all of which, with the exception of one, refer to the slaughter of the Lamb and His followers. Peace is taken from the earth, warfare and bloodshed consume the world, especially Christians, and yet God’s people have peace, for they belong to the Lamb that was slain, the Prince of peace. Such is the riding forth of the second horseman of the apoca-

lypse: it has in view warfare and bloodshed.

The Third Horseman

We read of the third horseman in verses 5-6: “When He opened the third seal, I heard the third living creature say, ‘Come and see.’ So I looked, and behold, a black horse, and he who sat on it had a pair of scales in his hand. And I heard a voice in the midst of the four living creatures saying, ‘A quart of wheat for a denarius, and three quarts of barley for a denarius; and do not harm the oil and the wine.’”

The Third horseman has in view the devastation of famine. The rider holds scales in his hand. Food is distributed by ration; the prices listed are about eight to sixteen times the average prices in the Roman Empire at the time. Though the famine is severe, it is limited, the oil and the wine are not affected. But this only increases the torment, for the victims of the famine will not be able to afford these products, even though they are available.

Such famines have devastated the earth from the time of Christ’s ascension, and they shall continue to devastate the earth until the time of His return. Famines have claimed thousands of lives in Ethiopia, Sudan, Rwanda, and other places. Think of the disturbing pictures of malnourished children: their ribs easily numbered; their bellies bloated from lack of food; their mouths and eyes covered with flies; you’ve seen the images. How can you forget?

Famine is no respecter of persons. It claims the Christian as well as the non-Christian. And yet God’s people have comfort, for they know

that they live not on bread alone, but on every word that proceeds from the mouth of God. Such is the riding forth of the third horseman of the apocalypse: it has in view the devastation of famine.

The Fourth Horseman

We read of the fourth horseman of the apocalypse in verses 7-8: “When He opened the fourth seal, I heard the voice of the fourth living creature saying, ‘Come and see.’ So I looked, and behold, a pale horse. And the name of him who sat on it was Death, and Hades followed with him. And power was given to them over a fourth of the earth, to kill with sword, with hunger, with death, and by the beasts of the earth.”

Notice that the fourth horseman has been given a name: Death. And Hades follows with him. The horse is a gruesome color—it is a pale yellowish-green, depicting death and decomposition—set before us in all its abhorrence. Death rides forth, and Hades claims the slain. Death and Hades claim their slain by the sword, by hunger, by death, and even by the wild beasts.

In view here is the death of all those who have lived from the time of Christ’s ascension to the time of His return. From the death of Stephen to the recent death of your loved one. Death is gruesome in spite of the mortician’s best efforts. There is no death with dignity, whether it comes by gunshot, knife,

noose, stoning, or by the failure of the body’s organs. Death is no respecter of persons; it comes to believer and unbeliever alike. Yet for the believer, there is comfort in knowing that we belong to the One who holds the keys to Hades and Death. Such is the riding forth of the fourth horseman of the apocalypse: it has in view death in all its horror.

The Message of the Horsemen

What are we to make of all this? To begin with, it is significant that there are four horsemen; the number four represents the four ends of the earth. The four horsemen correspond to the four corners of the earth; the number four stands for that which is universal. These four horsemen ride forth to the ends of the earth; no part of the earth is left untouched.

These horsemen ride forth to the ends of the earth. As these horsemen ride forth, there is peace and comfort for the believer: he hears the Word and believes; he has peace with God even as peace is taken from the earth; he lives by the Word of God even as famine ravages the earth; he is comforted in death even as death claims its slain.

These horsemen ride forth to the ends of the earth. As these horsemen ride forth, there is horror and terror for the unrepentant: he hears the Word of God and he does not believe; peace is taken from him, his blood is shed; he is ravaged by fam-

The Word goes forth to believer and unbeliever alike. It brings salvation to the believer, even as it brings judgment to the unbeliever.

ine; he is slain by death and gathered into Hades.

The horsemen of the apocalypse proclaim to us the activity of God! They proclaim to us that God has roused Himself from His holy habitation. They proclaim to us the fact that God is active: He is active in the salvation of His people and in the judgments He pours forth upon the unrepentant.

In that connection recall what we have already observed: namely, the connection between the Lamb opening the seals and the four living creatures commanding the horsemen to ride.

We have already established the fact the four living creatures are symbolic of the office of the preaching of the Word. The preaching of the Word is connected with the opening of the seven seals; it is connected with the progressive history of redemption. The preaching of the Word, while bringing about—in God’s grace and by His Spirit—the salvation of the elect, at the same time ushers in God’s judgments upon the wicked and unrepentant.

The horsemen of the apocalypse are connected with the preaching of the Word. To be sure, it is the Lamb who opens the seals. But it is the preaching of the Word that summons the horsemen of the apocalypse to ride forth! It is the four living creatures who proclaim with a loud voice like thunder “Come!” and only then do the horsemen ride!

Do you see the point? Ministers of the gospel must proclaim the judgments of God upon the unrepentant and unbelieving world! They must

The verb that is translated “kill” is used eight times in the book of Revelation, all of which, with the exception of one, refer to the slaughter of the Lamb and His followers.

proclaim that as long as one is outside of Christ, he remains under judgment and the wrath of God hangs upon him! A minister who fails to do that is not worthy of the name! A minister who fails to do that has no correspondence to the four living creatures! A minister who fails to proclaim God’s judgment upon the wicked has not understood the holiness of God so vividly pictured in Revelation 4-5! Such a minister has no place in the pulpit!

It is in the preaching of the Word that God Himself is at work! The Word sounds forth and the earth is visited with judgment. The Word sounds forth, and God accomplishes the purpose for which He sends it. The Word sounds forth, and we know that God is active. The Word sounds forth and we know that God has roused Himself from His holy habitation. The Word sounds forth and the horsemen of the apocalypse ride. The Word sounds forth and God’s people are saved. The Word sounds forth and the unrepentant are judged.

This means that as you sit under the preaching of the Word, hearing the proclamation of Christ and Him crucified, one of two things happens: either you are brought to salvation, or you are judged! There is no middle ground! That preached Word works either to your salvation or it works to your condemnation!

We see it illustrated at Calvary, where Christ hung between two thieves; the one was saved, the other damned! The same Christ hung between them—the same cross stood between them—to the one He was the aroma of life unto life; to the other the aroma of death unto death.

Christ and Him crucified is set before you in the preaching of the Word. Is He to you an aroma of life unto life, or an aroma of death unto death? The Word is preached; the rider of the white horse goes forth conquering and to conquer—do you know that you are more than a conqueror in Christ? The Word is preached; the rider of the red horse goes forth to take peace from the earth. Do you know that you have peace in belonging to the Prince of peace? The Word is preached; the rider of the black horse goes forth ravaging the earth with famine—do you know that you live not on bread alone, but on every word that proceeds from the mouth of God? The Word is preached; the rider of the pale horse goes forth bringing death. Do you know that you belong to Him who holds the keys of Hades and Death?

These four horsemen of the apocalypse are intended to point us to another Horseman. These four horsemen are only harbingers of the Horseman to come. We read of Him in Revelation 19:11-16.

Are you ready for the final Horseman? It's a question you ought to ask yourself each Lord's Day for as the Word of God is preached, the horsemen of the apocalypse ride forth bringing you salvation or judgment, blessing or cursing, life or death. God's Word is preached, and the horsemen ride! Let them warn you! Let the judgment they bring awaken you to the judgment that is yet to come!

"Wake! Awake! For Night is Flying" the watchmen on the heights are crying!

God has roused Himself from His holy habitation. Now the horsemen of the apocalypse ride; now the Word of God is preached, summoning you to repentance. The day will come when God will rouse Himself one last time. Then the horsemen of the apocalypse will ride no more; then the Word of God will be preached no more; then there will be no more time for repentance. Then the great Rider of the White Horse will come. He Himself will tread the winepress of the fierceness and wrath of Almighty God.

Are you ready for Him to ride?

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God's Salvation from Eternity to Eternity

Part Two

Justification

Justification is another part of God's orderly plan of salvation for man. It follows the preceding parts, namely, the calling, regeneration, conversion, and faith.

The apostolic church of the New Testament was enthusiastically following the instructions of their Master. As a consequence, the gospel spread throughout Asia Minor and beyond, and, as a result, many converts were brought into the Church. However, by the sixteenth century, many false conceptions of the Truth had entered the church. The truth of the gospel had been watered down to the point that the true Church was about to lose its way if that were possible. The church was in serious need of a revival of the truth. Historically, God has used men to fill that purpose. We have examples of that in men of the Old Testament such as Enoch, Moses, and Abraham.

In the 16th century, God once more used a man to restore the truth. Martin Luther was a faithful member of the Roman Catholic Church, yet he was uncomfortable with its teachings on the subjects of indulgences and purgatory. He could find no comfort for his soul with regard to such teachings. He diligently searched the scriptures for answers to his spiritual dilemma. God revealed this scriptural truth to Martin Luther: "The just shall live by Faith" (Romans 1:17).

Over and over, this truth kept repeating itself to the troubled heart of Luther. He was afraid to speak or publish this truth because he feared excommunication and a loss of the blessing of the Church. Still, he continued to study the Scriptures and was spiritually fortified by two other great truths of scripture: "Therefore being justified by Faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ" (Romans 5:1) and "For by grace are ye saved through Faith and that not of yourself, it is a gift of God, not of works, lest any man should boast" (Ephesians 2:8,9).

Here at last was an answer to Luther's prayers. He was overjoyed, for now he knew that faith was the vehicle by which we obtain righteousness and justification. This replaced the teaching of the Church that one was justified by good works. When these truths were applied to Luther's heart by means of the Holy Spirit, Luther could no longer remain silent. At the risk of his own life, he posted his ninety-five theses to the cathedral door, and the Reformation was born. The truth of the Reformation spread rapidly in that part of the world, as God prepared and used Luther to bring a revival and rebirth to His Church.

Faith is the doorway through which we must travel if we are to be justified. Bavinck wrote: "Regeneration, conversion, and faith are but

conditions which pave the way by which we are justified.”

Our faith may be expressed in different ways, but it must be a sincere faith. Some will express their faith with the impetus of a Peter. Christ said to Peter, “If I do not wash thy feet thou hast no part in me.” Peter responded, “Lord wash not my feet only, but my hands and head also.” Others will embrace Christ in a more timid manner, but in positive belief as did the woman with an incurable disease. Unable to approach Christ due to the multitude, she reached through the pressing crowd, saying to herself, “If I may but touch the hem of His garment I shall be made whole.” When Jesus saw her, He said, “Daughter, be of good comfort, thy faith hath made thee whole.”

Justification by Faith Alone is the doctrine of faith by which the Church stands or falls. All of the great reformers of the sixteenth century subscribed to this doctrine of justification with heart and soul. We must recognize that we are sinners and have no merit within ourselves to obtain righteousness. Without righteousness, heaven can not be attained. God’s justice will demand that our guilt be absolved, and only the righteousness of Christ is able to meet this demand.

Righteousness as a result of justification is more than a mere pardon of sins. Forgiveness of sins by themselves does not equate to righteousness. When Christ healed the sick and the maimed He often said, “Thy sins be forgiven thee, go thy way and sin no more.” This does not necessarily mean that they were saved. Recall, for example, the leper who returned to give

thanks for Christ’s cleansing. Jesus asks him about the others saying: “Were there not ten that were cleansed, but where are the other nine?” These did not return to give thanks, the implication being that their sins were forgiven, and yet they went their way unsaved.

To further illustrate the point, if you had accumulated a very great debt that you could not pay, you would have nothing but debts. If some benefactor paid all this debt for you then your debt would be paid indeed, but you would still have nothing, even though your debts were paid. So it is with the sinner whose debt is paid. He needs more. He needs to have the righteousness of Christ, which alone will satisfy God’s justice.

So justification is a two-fold action in which our penitence obtains for us the forgiveness of sins and our faith obtains for us the righteousness of Christ. Jesus must not only forgive your sins, but He must also pay the penalty of your guilt before you can be acquitted. God acts in full accord with the demands of His justice, and therefore He does not recognize satisfaction of His justice without the atonement and righteousness of Christ. His righteousness must be given in your stead, for He alone is able to give it, having earned the right with His life of perfect obedience and His death on the cross. Justification means that Christ, as our substitute sin-bearer,

has paid our debt in full. God, in accordance with the promise of the gospel, imputes to those who believe in Christ the righteousness that Christ alone can give.

Now we begin to understand how it is possible for a righteous God to be just and yet to be able to justify the ungodly sinner. God is a God of unimpeachable righteousness, He must acquit believers of all guilt and free them of punishment because they stand before Him clothed with the righteousness of Christ. God could not do otherwise, for in doing so, He would deny Himself and thus God could not remain God.

Sanctification

Sanctification is a matter of the highest importance with regard to our salvation, as proven from Scripture: “Jesus Christ was made unto us from God, sanctification as well as wisdom, righteousness, and redemption” (I Corinthians 1:30)

When we are justified by God from the guilt of sin, God just as surely declares that He will free us from the power of sin. This is exactly what God does when He sanctifies us. God progressively makes the sinner righteous by renewing the sinner’s nature and removing the unclean state of sin.

Sanctification, like all the other steps of our salvation, is the work of God and not of man. This theme can never receive too much em-

Jesus must not only forgive your sins, but He must also pay the penalty of your guilt before you can be acquitted.

phasis when we consider our salvation. The Bible teaches emphatically that salvation is of grace, that God may receive all the glory. Is it not true that the whole purpose of creation is the glorification of God?

There are those who teach and would have us believe that sanctification is a cooperative venture, the co-responsibility of both God and man. Nothing could be further from the truth. If man could give himself some credit for his arrival in heaven, it would mean that the sacrifice of Christ was not complete in itself, but was contingent on what man would do to assist in the process. God, and God alone, removes the evil that is in the believer's heart and undermines its power. God, and God alone, causes the believer to walk the road of obedience and engage in good works. God, and God alone, conforms the soul of the believer to the image of Christ. We must maintain that it is God who saves man and not man who saves himself.

God sanctifies the believer by employing the believer as His agent in this saving process. The Belgic Confession Article 24 states: "We are indebted to God for the good works that we do, and not He to us."

Faith is the most basic factor in the operation of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit works directly upon the believer's heart with His renewing power. Faith is not only the receiving organ by which we are justified, but it is also a positive power for good, and plays a pivotal part in the process of our sanctification. Faith works through love and excites men to practice the works that God has commanded in His word. There-

fore, Reformed teachers say that faith is indispensable for sanctification, and that it is the instrumental cause of sanctification, since it keeps us in touch with Christ, who is the source of our progressive sanctification.

If we are to be sanctified, the window of our soul must always be open through faith toward the Grace of God. Much as a TV antenna must be pointed in the direc-

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himself.***

tion of the sending station if we are to receive the picture, so too, we must have the window of our soul turned in the direction of God through the use of the effective means of the study of God's Word and a sincere prayer life. We should be faithful in placing ourselves under the preaching of the Word and in partaking of the sacraments that we may receive the Grace that is communicated through them. We should have a family altar in our homes, where the discussion of spiritual things can take place together with family prayer. We should take advantage of good reading. All these are the arms of the antenna which must be continually pointed toward the Christ. Failure to do so will create a blurred picture and a starving

faith in our spiritual life.

Sanctification demands that we shall live more and more for Christ and die more and more to the things of this world. The problem with the human nature is that we are not willing to do this. We want Christ but we want the world also. We try to keep that antenna pointed in two directions at the same time. Needless to say, that this will not work and results in Church members who are spiritually weak. They have no interest in cultivating the spiritual things to promote the welfare of their souls. They are like the sick man who has lost his appetite for food. If he allows this lack of appetite to remain uncontrolled, he will not get well and may die. On the other hand, if he forces himself against his will to eat, he will gain the necessary strength to get well.

We are sinners by nature and thus we lean to the things of this world. We have no appetite for the spiritual things. However, we must force ourselves by the grace of God to cultivate these desires. Thus, God promises to bless us with the things Spiritual.

Glorification

Salvation is a work of God. God's plan of salvation began at the Counsel of God in eternity before the worlds were framed, stretching across time, and reaches into eternity at the end of time. What then is contained in God's plan of salvation? The Apostle Paul wrote, "Whom he (God) did predestinate, he also called, and whom he called them he also justified, and whom he justified he also sanctified." Thus, we see how God in His mercy has set forth His plan for the

salvation of man (the elect). The question remains, how can the sinner become part of God's plan and thus be saved? The scripture gives an answer to that question: "He that believeth on the Son hath everlasting life, and consequently will be saved." Needless to say, believing on the Son of God implies that you will be obedient to His word.

However, we must remember that as long as we are in this life, we have a dual nature with which to contend. We have a new nature born of the Spirit, and at the same time, we must deal with the corrupt nature that we inherited at birth. That old nature is not only slow to die, but it remains with us until we die. Thus, we are beset with many temptations and problems with sin in our life.

At Regeneration, the new life in the soul began, but it was not a sinless life. In Justification, a sinner's legal position before God is changed. Before, he was guilty and worthy of death. By the righteousness of Christ, which he accepted in faith, he is now free from guilt and condemnation, but he is not free from the power of sin in his heart and life. A constant struggle will result in the life of the Christian. The old nature must be conquered and the new must grow in conformity unto obedience to Christ. It is the Holy Spirit who sanctifies, and by His power, we are to sanctify ourselves. Now

we will find ourselves on the road to glorification, and as we mentioned, the old nature remains with us until our life comes to an end. When we die, the Soul is separated from the Body, and the Body with its corrupt nature is returned to the dust from which it originated.

The soul, having departed the corrupt body, is freed from the ravages of sin, for no sin would be tolerated in the realm of the heavenly. It is the sanctified soul with the new nature and the life that never dies, that enters the portals of heaven and into the very presence of God, together with all the saints who preceded it. This for the soul is glorification, as it enters the glorified state, in the presence of his Lord.

Even so, the state of glorification has not reached its zenith. The bliss of the soul cannot be complete as long as the body is in the power of death, and cannot share in the glory of the soul.

In the meantime, the souls in Heaven join the Angels in singing praises to God, as they look forward to the second coming of the Lord Jesus.

The Scripture assures us that Christ will come again. He will visibly appear, as all shall see Him, and He will be attended by angels, and with power and great glory (Matthew 24:30).

Then shall come the resurrection of the dead, as the sanctified bodies shall arise at the sound of the trumpet of God. These bodies shall be reunited with their souls, and the glorification of soul and body will be complete to serve God for all eternity, living in the mansions that our Lord had promised and prepared for them.

"Marvel not at this for the hour is coming in which all that are in the graves shall come forth," "for the Lord himself shall descend from heaven with a shout, and the voice of arch angel, and with the trumpet of God, and all the dead in Christ shall rise first" (John 5:28; I Thessalonians 4:16).

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We should be faithful in placing ourselves under the preaching of the Word and in partaking of the sacraments that we may receive the Grace that is communicated through them.

The Incarnate Word of God

Holy Scripture maintains the fundamental doctrine that God takes the initiative and speaks to the human race in a number of ways. Two of the principal channels of the divine communication are mentioned in the opening sentence of the epistle to the Hebrews. The apostle here calls our attention to a progression in the revelation from God, a movement from the lesser (the prophets) to the greater vehicle of revelation (the Son of God): “God, after he spoke long ago to the fathers in the prophets in many portions and in many ways, in these last days has spoken to us in His Son” (Hebrews 1:1-2a).

The biblical writer draws our attention in this statement to the fundamental importance of the Old Testament prophets, that long succession of men of God beginning with Moses and going all the way to the time of the prophet Malachi. God, he assumes, did not speak *directly* to the Jewish fathers. Rather, He spoke through His chosen intermediaries, the prophets who were sovereignly chosen to convey the Word of God to the people. The prophetic revelation was not given all at once or on one specific occasion. The disclosure of the mind of God came little by little, to one generation after another. In addition, God did not use just one method in unveiling truth to His prophetic spokesmen. He used a variety of ways to communicate what He had to say — including the divine voice alone, visible

manifestations, visions, and dreams.

Revelation by the Son

There is no question that the prophets were crucially important as channels of the mind of God as it was revealed to man. The point of the writer to the Hebrews, however, is that revelation has made a significant advance with the appearance of Jesus Christ. The arrival of the Messianic era means that God has now spoken in a way that is unprecedented in comparison to His previous ways of granting revelatory truth. In these last days, God has spoken to us in His Son, “whom He appointed heir of all things, through whom also He made the world” (Hebrews 1:2b).

The very person who created the world is now the one who has become the spokesman of God, *the* great prophet anticipated in the Old Testament. But even more than this, the Son is “the radiance” of God’s glory and “the exact representation of His nature” (Hebrews 1:3). The Son, as the Greek text states, is the *character* of God’s nature. Just as the impress made by a seal exactly represents its original, so likewise does the Son precisely reflect the divine nature of the Father.

Who Is God Himself

Because the New Testament insists upon the supreme dignity of the person of Christ, the true church throughout its history has refused to compromise on the is-

sue of the identity of her Lord. The Creed of Nicea (AD 325) reflects the exegetical brilliance of the church fathers in its assertion that “the catholic and apostolic church” believes in “one Lord Jesus Christ” who is both “God of God” and “of one substance with the Father.” These three crucial Greek terms—*homoousion to patri*—accurately summarize the central New Testament message that the Son of God has the same divine nature that is possessed by God the Father. It is indeed the case that the *homoousion* formulation—that the nature of the Son is identical to the nature of the Father—was a decisive step in the church’s deepening understanding of the gospel message.

This perspective regarding the ultimate dignity of Christ lies at the heart of the New Testament. John, for example, began his Gospel with the affirmation: “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God” (John 1:1). The Logos (the revelatory Word of God), declared the apostle, was existing at the moment of creation, at the very beginning when God created the heavens and the earth. In addition, the Logos existed in a close relationship with God the Father. He was “*with God*.” And the Logos was much more than an exalted creature such as an angel. “The Word *was God*.”

Furthermore, this pre-existent divine person was instrumental in bringing the creation into existence: “All things came into being *by him*” (John 1:3). But even

more remarkable in terms of the gospel is the statement that He came *into* the creation that He had made: “The Word became flesh and dwelt among us” (John 1:14). The revelatory Word took to Himself that which He was not. He became flesh, adding to Himself a fully human nature in all of its weakness, except for sin.

Exegeting the Father

Why did the Logos enter into human history? By presenting the testimony of John the Baptist, the apostle John directs our attention to the redemptive purpose of the incarnation: “Behold, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world” (John 1:29). But even before he refers to the salvific intention of the coming of Christ, John calls our thinking to the revelatory purpose of the Word becoming a man. “No man has seen God at any time,” John asserts (John 1:18a). God is incomprehensible—incapable of being fully grasped by human understanding. But there is one person who has fully understood the Father, and He has even shared that understanding with us: “The only begotten Son, who is in the bosom of the Father, He has explained Him” (John 1:18b).

Since the Son was embraced within the loving arms of the Father from all eternity, there is no question that He fully knows who the Father is. The incarnation

then makes it possible for the Son to share His knowledge of the Father with man who stands in such desperate need of that knowledge. The Son has done this very thing and has, quite literally, exegeted the Father. He has led the Father out before us so that we may come to know who the Father is. This was the very point that Jesus made in response to the request of Philip that he and the other apostles be allowed to see the Father: “Have I been so long with you, and yet you have not come to know me, Philip? He who has seen me has seen the Father” (John 14:9).

Disclosing Pity and Grace

As we look into the face of Jesus, we look into the face of God. Jesus is the window through which we see God Himself. As we see Jesus in action in the Gospels, we behold the love of God. Abraham Kuyper rightly stated that in the revelation provided in the incarnation, God does not reveal Himself to the sinner “antipathetically in His anger, but sympathetically...in His pitying grace” (*Encyclopedia of Sacred Theology*, 280). This indeed is the point made in John 3:17: “For God did not send the Son into the world to judge the world; but that the world should be saved through him.”

The crucial question in response to this divine revelation of mercy

in the Son of God relates to every person’s individual response. There are, in reality, only two possible responses: faith (*pistis*) or unbelief (*apistia*). In unbelief, “the faith life of the sinner is turned away from God.” It “attaches itself to something creaturely, in which it seeks support against God” (Ibid, 280-281).

Such unbelief is often reflected in trust placed in one’s own intellectual prowess or in a personal history of benevolence and good deeds. In this situation, the sinner essentially dares God to condemn the achievements of human reason or the excellence of moral conduct. To challenge God in such a way is surely the height of arrogance and folly, for fallen human beings are “darkened in their understanding” (Ephesians 4:18) and “there is none righteous, not even one” (Romans 3:10).

In the response of faith, the heart of the believer embraces the Christ, His cross, and His righteousness as they are freely offered in the gospel. This is true wisdom: to recognize one’s own desperate condition in the presence of the infinitely Holy, and then to reach out to Christ and to embrace Him and His mercy.

The vital importance of each individual’s personal response is underscored in the Johannine declaration: “He who believes in Him is not judged; he who does not believe has been judged already, because he has not believed in the name of the only begotten Son of God” (John 3:18). Until this very hour, mercy and forgiveness are offered to the one who turns to Christ in faith. How do you re-

The sinner essentially dares God to condemn the achievements of human reason or the excellence of moral conduct.

spond to Him through whom God has spoken in these last days?

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"The Old Testament Evidence Regarding the Participation of Children in Covenant Observances"

Part One

So far in our study of the question of paedocommunion, we have primarily focused upon the historical evidence for and against the practice of admitting children to the Lord's Supper. We have argued that the evidence from church history is ambiguous, and cannot be cited as a sufficient basis either for embracing or rejecting the practice of paedocommunion. Though significant sectors of the eastern and western church have admitted children to the sacrament of the Lord's Supper, it is not possible to establish with certainty that this was the earliest practice of the church. Moreover, where the practice of paedocommunion has become normative, as in the eastern church, the justification for the practice often includes an appeal to a sacramental doctrine that includes some unbiblical assumptions that are incompatible with key features of the Reformed confessions. For example, the historic advocacy of paedocommunion is often defended on the basis of the conviction that the sacrament of baptism effects the regeneration or new birth of its recipients. Since baptized children are presumed to have been born again by the Spirit, it is only fitting that they should receive the Lord's Supper, which further nourishes and strengthens baptized Christians in their new life as members of Christ and recipients of His life-giving Spirit.

In our summary of the teaching of the Reformed confessions, we noted that the practice of requiring children of believing parents to profess their faith before being admitted to the Lord's Supper follows from their understanding of the nature and use of the sacraments. In the Reformed confessions, the sacraments are viewed as visible signs and seals of the promise of the gospel. The Holy Spirit produces faith through the preaching of the gospel and confirms faith through the administration of the sacraments. Just as the Word requires the Spirit-authored response of faith to communicate the grace of Jesus Christ, so the sacraments, which are a visible confirmation of the gospel Word, require faith on the part of their recipients in order for them to serve effectively as means of grace. In the Reformed confessions, all believers and their children receive the sacrament of baptism, which is a sign and seal of their incorporation into Christ and His church. However, baptism does not confer the grace of Jesus Christ regardless of the response of its recipients. Those who are baptized enjoy the privileges that belong to the reception of the sacramental sign of incorporation into Christ. But they simultaneously are placed under the obligation to embrace the gospel promise that was signified and sealed to them in their baptism. The instruction of children of believing parents in the Christian faith is

undertaken in order to prepare them to respond appropriately to their baptism in the way of faith and *thereby* be admitted to the Table of the Lord. What distinguishes the Lord's Supper is that it is a sacramental means of nourishing faith that requires, in the nature of the case, the attestation (through public profession) of the kind of faith that can properly remember, discern and proclaim the death of Christ. Because the Lord's Supper is designed to nourish faith, it requires the presence of faith on the part of its recipients.

Having considered the historical and confessional arguments for and against paedocommunion, we are now obliged to turn to the biblical evidence that may bear upon this practice. What biblical evidence is there to support or to oppose the practice of admitting the children of believing parents to the Lord's Supper? Though the teaching of the New Testament is of decisive importance for determining who should be admitted to the Table of the Lord, we will begin with a consideration of the Old Testament evidence. Advocates of paedocommunion often appeal to the inclusion of children within the covenant in its Old Testament administration as a point of departure for interpreting the teaching and practice of the New Testament. Since in the old covenant children received the sign and seal of covenant membership in the rite of circumcision, and since they were granted the privilege of participation in many of the covenant observances, including the important rite of the Passover, we should proceed from the conviction that a similar circum-

stance will likely obtain in the new covenant. When we take note of the way the new covenant frequently enlarges the privileges of covenant inclusion in comparison to the old, we may expect, according to paedocommunion advocates, that this would likely include their participation in the sacraments of the new covenant. Though Reformed churches have historically recognized this with respect to the baptism of the children of believers, they have inconsistently refused to reckon with its implications for their participation in the Lord's Supper.

In order to evaluate these claims of paedocommunionists, we will begin with a review of the kinds of Old Testament evidence that they frequently adduce. Since the principal component of the argument from the Old Testament for the admission of children to the Lord's Table is an argument from the analogy between the Passover and the Lord's Supper, this will occupy most of our attention. In the first part of our consideration of the Old Testament evidence, we will be content to set forth the common form of the argument of advocates of paedocommunion. After this argument has been summarized, we will evaluate its strength to determine whether it can sustain the weight that many paedocommunionists place upon it.

The Paedocommunion Argument from the Old Testament

The argument for paedocommunion from the analogy with the Old Testament Passover is a well-known and common feature of the case for the admission of children to the Lord's Supper. However, this argument does not stand alone. Though it plays an important role in the case for paedocommunion, it only does so within the context of a broader argument that appeals to the precedent of the inclusion of children within the life and privileges of the Old Testament covenant community. The incorporation of children within the covenant community, which was signified and sealed to them by means of circumcision (Gen. 17:7-14), is an essential feature of the administration of the covenant of grace in the Old Testament. The children of the covenant community, no less than their parents, were regarded as recipients of the covenant promises and obligations. They enjoyed, consistent with their status as members of the covenant community, many of the privileges and benefits of covenant communion with the Lord and those who belonged to the people of God.

The Participation of Children in Covenant Observances

Of particular interest to the paedocommunionist is the way children in the old covenant partici-

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pated in various covenant ordinances, including covenant meals and rites that find their fulfillment in Christ. The participation of children in these covenant observances illustrates their place within the covenant community. They also suggest that it would be inconsistent with Old Testament precedents to prohibit children in the new covenant from enjoying the privilege of participation in its rites, including the sacrament of the Lord's Supper. Though we will not treat all of these observances, several are of special interest to the case for paedocommunion.

Among the important covenant observances in which children participated were the "wilderness meals" (Ex. 16:13-20). During the period of Israel's wilderness wandering before the entrance into the land of promise, all the people of Israel enjoyed the Lord's provision of daily manna from heaven. The children of Israel participated in these meals together with their parents. The importance of the participation by children in these meals is highlighted by the way the apostle Paul describes them as a means of participation in Christ in 1 Corinthians 10:1-13. According to Paul, the children of Israel "were all under the cloud, and all passed through the sea, and all were baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea, and all ate the same spiritual food, and all drank the same spiritual drink. For they drank from the spiritual Rock that followed them, and the Rock was Christ" (vv. 1-4). In the argument for paedocommunion, the fact that Paul describes the people of Israel, including the children, participating spiritually in Christ by means of these "wilder-

ness meals" is an important precedent for their spiritual participation in Christ by means of the Lord's Supper. Remarkably, after this description of the wilderness meals at the outset of 1 Corinthians 10, the apostle Paul goes on to speak of the Corinthians participation in the body and blood of Christ through the bread and cup of the Lord's Supper (vv. 14-17). The Old Testament participation in Christ through the wilderness meals parallels in an important way the New Testament

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participation in Christ through the Lord's Supper. The implication of this is that the wilderness meals represent an Old Testament precedent for the admission of children to the Table of the Lord.

Next to the precedent of the participation of covenant children in the wilderness meals, advocates of paedocommunion also appeal to the great feasts of the Old Testament, particularly the annual observance of the Feast of the Passover, the Feast of Weeks, and the Feast of Booths or Tabernacles (Deut. 16). Since we will consider the Feast of the Passover in the next section, we will restrict our discussion at this point

to the Feast of Weeks and the Feast of Booths.

In the book of Deuteronomy, which provides detailed instructions for the worship of the people of Israel in the land of promise, the observance of these feasts, together with the presentation of various offerings and sacrifices, is to take place at the centralized place of worship where the Lord has put His name and that He has chosen as His dwelling place (Deut. 12:4-6). The people of Israel are commanded to worship the Lord in accordance with the provisions of the covenant, which emphasize that the sacrifices are to be presented at the altar in the temple in Jerusalem. Specific instructions are also given for keeping the three annual Feasts in Jerusalem. What is especially significant about these instructions is that they expressly speak of the participation of children in the meals that accompany some of the sacrificial offerings and the annual festivals (Deut. 12:7,12,18). Though there were some restrictions upon the participation of the Israelites and their children in the meals that accompany the guilt and sin offerings (e.g. Lev. 6:29; 7:6-9), these restrictions do not apply to the Feasts of Tabernacles and of Booths. The Feast of Weeks, which celebrates the Lord's provision for the people in the land of promise, required the presentation of a "tribute of a freewill offering" to the Lord in gratitude for His blessings. The celebration that accompanied this freewill offering called all the children of Israel, young and old alike, to rejoice before the Lord for His goodness and bounty (Deut. 12:11). In the provisions for the Feast of Booths, the

children of Israel are commanded to celebrate the harvest by rejoicing in the feast before the Lord. This Feast, like the Feast of Weeks, expressly enjoined the participation of all the people—parents and children, the Levites, the sojourner, the fatherless, and the widow (Deut. 12:14). Even though only the males in Israel were required to keep these feasts on an annual basis (Deut. 16:16), the provisions of the covenant make it clear that all the Israelites, men, women, and children, were permitted to take part and join fully in their celebration. The requirement that males participate in these feasts does not mean that other members of the community, younger children and women for example, were not permitted to participate.

While advocates of paedocommunion acknowledge that covenant children did not participate in all the Old Testament rites and meals associated with the various sacrifices stipulated in the Levitical legislation, they claim that the participation of children in these old covenant observances and meals constitutes an important line of evidence for the admission of children to the new covenant Table of the Lord. Since these observances and meals find their fulfillment in Christ, the participation of children in them represents a kind of participation in Christ under the “types” and “shadows” of the Old Testament legislation. At the least, they create a kind of presumption for the admission of children to the Lord’s Table, provided there is no clear New Testament prohibition against such admission.

The Participation of Children in the Passover

The principal piece of Old Testament evidence that is commonly cited by advocates of paedocommunion, however, is the Old Testament rite of the Passover (or the “Feast of Unleavened Bread,” as it is termed in Deuteronomy 16). Among the old covenant practices that have the most direct bearing upon the new covenant sacrament of the Lord’s Supper, the Passover deserves to be given pride of place. Since the Lord’s Supper was insti-

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tuted in the context of the Passover celebration (Matt. 26:17-29), and since the essential elements of the Lord’s Supper were derived from the Passover (the bread and the cup), the Passover represents the most obvious and relevant Old Testament antecedent or “anti-type” for the New Testament sacrament. According to those who favor the admission of children to the Table of the Lord, such a practice alone does justice to the important connections between the Passover and the Lord’s Supper, and particularly to the fact that children were admitted to the Passover Feast. Just as children participated in the Passover remembrance and proclamation of Israel’s deliverance in Egypt

through the blood of the Passover lamb, so children in the new covenant should participate in the remembrance and proclamation of the church’s deliverance through the blood of Christ, who is her “Passover lamb” (1 Cor. 5:7)

In order to make a case for paedocommunion from the Old Testament precedent of the Passover, proponents of paedocommunion usually argue in two ways. On the one hand, they insist that the requirements for participation in the Passover were not such as would exclude children. And on the other hand, they argue that there is positive evidence to warrant the conclusion that children were permitted to participate fully in the Passover.

Among the practices that belong to the Old Testament Passover, several appear initially to exclude the likelihood that infants and younger children participated in the Feast. The description of the first Passover in Exodus 12 includes the following practices that became part of the annual Passover Feasts in Jerusalem: the eating of the Passover lamb “according to what each can eat” (Ex. 12:4) the eating of unleavened bread and bitter herbs (Ex. 12:8); and a kind of “catechetical exercise” in which the children are to ask, “What do you mean by these service?” (Ex. 12:26). Each of these elements of the original Passover seems to require a measure of maturity and spiritual discernment that would exclude full participation in the Passover meal by infants and younger children. Furthermore, the subsequent annual celebrations of the Passover in Jerusalem included several additional features that seem inconsistent with the partici-

pation of all the children: the stipulation that only the males were required to keep the annual Feast (Deut. 16:16); the requirements of “ritual cleanness” on the part of the Passover celebrants (Num. 9:6; John 18:28); and the incorporation of the “cup of blessing,” which involved the drinking of wine (an intoxicant) on the part of the Passover participants. In their response to this kind of evidence against the participation of children in the Passover, paedocommunionists maintain that young children were (and are) capable of eating the Passover elements. They also argue that the “catechetical exercise,” which was an important component of the Passover celebration, would not prevent little children from participating. According to paedocommunion advocates, this exercise was not a “pre-requisite” for participation in the Passover, nor was it substantially different from other, similar exercises in which the Lord made provision for children to be taught to remember His covenant faithfulness (compare Josh. 4:6-7; Deut. 6:20-21). Though paedocommunionists acknowledge that females and younger children were not required to keep the annual Passover, the requirement that males keep the Feast is not tantamount to a prohibition against the participation of the entire community—men and women, young and old. None of these common objections to the participation of children in the Old Testament Passover, therefore, proves convincingly that children were not permitted to join in the celebration.

The argument of the paedocommunionist is not limited to answering these common objections

to the participation of the children in the Passover. Several positive considerations are also cited in favor of the claim that the traditional practice involved the full participation of the children of the covenant. According to advocates of paedocommunion, there is ample evidence for the likelihood that children participated in the Passover at a very early age. If we remember the basic starting point of the Old Testament administration of the covenant, namely, that the children were included as full members of the covenant community (cf. Deut. 29:9-13), this evidence seems undeniable. In the description of Exodus 12, the first Passover is consistently viewed as a “household” rite, which included the active engagement of all who were members of the household, whatever their age (vv. 3,4,21,24,26). In the provisions for the selection of the Passover lamb, consideration is to be given to the size of the particular household (v. 4). Within the contours of this thoroughly covenantal framework of household celebration, the only stipulated requirement for the participation of any household member in the Passover was that all male members needed to be circumcised (12:43-49). The only persons who are expressly prohibited from participation in the Passover feast are those who were uncircumcised. Since the Passover is one of the three great feasts that the children of Israel were to celebrate annually in Jerusalem, it is significant that the general description of these feasts in Deuteronomy 12 specifies the inclusion and participation of children in their observances (12:6-7,11-12). If these kinds of evidences are given appropriate

weight, it seems most likely that the Old Testament Passover was a covenant feast in which the children of the households of Israel fully participated.

Conclusion

No doubt there are other dimensions of the paedocommunionist argument from the Old Testament for the practice of paedocommunion. However, our summary of the most common form of the argument from Old Testament precedents is sufficient for our purpose. In our next article, we will evaluate the strength of these arguments and conclude that, despite their apparent force, they are not a sufficient basis for overturning the historic practice of the Reformed churches, which only admits professing believers to the Table of the Lord.

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

Looking Out and About

• Rev. Robert Heerspink, who is presently serving as the Senior Pastor of the Faith Community Christian Reformed Church in Wyoming, Michigan, has been named director of the Back to God Hour, the electronic media ministry of the Christian Reformed Church. He assumed his duty on April 1, 2006.

• The Illiana Reformed Fellowship of Dyer, Indiana, which recently voted to join the federation of the United Reformed Churches of North America, has purchased property for use as the eventual site of a church building.

• The Belgrade United Reformed Church in Belgrade, Montana is constructing a new church building. A generous gift from a member of another United Reformed Church has enabled the Belgrade congregation to purchase a lot adjoining their construction site so that they now have approximately four acres. Construction is proceeding well and the congregation is looking forward to the use of their own building.

• A retirement open house honoring Rev. and Mrs. Thomas Vanden Heuvel was held on Sunday, February 26, 2006 at the Covenant Presbyterian Church in Holland, Michigan. Rev. Vanden Heuvel is retiring after spending forty-five years in the Ministry of the Word and Sacraments. Rev. and Mrs. Vanden Heuvel were at one time co-editors of *The Outlook*.

• Rev. John Barach, who has served the Covenant Reformed

Church (URC) in Grand Prairie, Alberta since 2002, has accepted a call to the Reformation Covenant Church (CREC) in Oregon City, Oregon to serve in a church plant in the region of Medford, Oregon.

• Rev. Nicholas Vogelzang, prolific poet and longtime minister in the Christian Reformed Church, passed away at his home in Denver, Colorado on Sunday, February 12, 2006. He was 87. The funeral service was held at the Christian Reformed Church in Seattle, Washington on February 18.

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Resurrection Song

When in this cold gray damp of death I sleep,
When o'er my face the moldering mask doth creep,
When down the dark grave lowered deep,
O Lord, remember me!

The snows of somber cold will fall,
The heavy hand of death will crawl
All o'er us in that black dread pall,
O Lord, remember me!

Then in that grave so still and stark
Will come the voice of Him! O hark!
And we will from that tomb embark,
Thou Lord, rememberedst me!

And not alone but thousands more
Will at His footsteps kneel, adore,
And from our hearts the song will soar:
Thou Lord, rememberedst me!

In never ending praises sing
To our Redeemer, Savior, King.
From all the saints their shouts will ring:
Thou Lord, rememberedst me!

To all who serve the Lord below
And that blest Savior fear and know:
Through sovereign grace no debt we owe,
O Lord, remember me!

--Rev. Nicholas Vogelzang

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4. No author may send more than one manuscript.
5. Manuscript must be original material.
6. Author must guarantee that their manuscript contains no copyright material without receiving full permission for its use.
7. Manuscripts must be received by the editor by September 15, 2006.
8. Manuscripts are preferred on disc in Microsoft Works or Rich Text Format or emailed to wymbkath@juno.com. If no computer is available, send manuscript to Rev. W. H. Oord, 7724 Hampton Oaks, Portage, MI, 49024.
9. Manuscripts become the property of Reformed Fellowship and will not be returned.
10. Regular contributors and family of Board members are not eligible.
11. By submitting a manuscript, all contributors accept the rules and conditions of this contest.