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The Outlook

Dedicated to the Exposition and Defense of the Reformed Faith



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• We Confess • Celebrating the Lord's Day (II) • Looking Above

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

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The Way, The Truth, and the Life

It was the night before the Passover Feast, an evening in which every Jewish family commemorated the exodus from Egypt. It was a time when gaiety, laughter, and thankfulness prevailed. Such was not the case, however, in the upper room where Jesus and His disciples had gathered together for the Last Supper. There hung a solemn atmosphere. The disciples of Jesus had become greatly troubled and perplexed. They were at a loss because of what their Master had done and said.

Everything was different from the other times they had eaten the Passover meal. It started already when they had entered the room and Jesus washed their feet. After that, He had shown them what it meant to love the brotherhood: do not always seek your own way, nor force your opinion upon others. Instead, you are to serve them. You must help to them, deny yourself, and be the least among men.

After that, Jesus instituted the Holy Supper. Even though John does not mention it, we learn that from the other evangelists that Jesus spoke of His body and blood. He spoke of how His body would be broken and His blood poured out as a sacrifice that would procure reconciliation and communion with God and each other.

Jesus went on to mention that one of them would betray Him. Just imagine! Someone would betray their Master? He was the One

whom they had come to love and to whom they were committed, even if it would cost their life. But there was more! Their Lord spoke to them of His imminent departure in terms that were far from clear to the disciples. What did He mean? To what was He referring? Was He going to die? Would He be speaking of His death, perhaps, as He had done before?

The Words of Peter

Peter — the always impetuous Peter — blurted out, “But I will lay down my life for you,” meaning as much as: whatever you refer to, Lord, I will see to it that nothing comes of it.

Jesus had answered, “Will you lay down your life for me? No, Peter, before the morning dawns, you will deny me! You will have nothing to do with me. You will only be concerned about your own safety.”

Is it any wonder that the air was filled with apprehension and fear? What did the future hold? What was going to happen? The disciples were at a loss. They just did not understand. Oh, they knew that terrible things were bound to take place. They felt that the actions and words of Jesus were of such a solemn nature that they had reason to fear the worst.

But they did not know exactly what would happen. Even less, they did not know why! No wonder their hearts were troubled! It does not surprise us that their minds were

confused. What did their Master mean? To what was He alluding?

How did Jesus react? Did He lose His calm? Was He annoyed because of their blank stares and lack of understanding? No, He was not. He sympathized with them and used the opportunity to elaborate on the difficulties with which they were struggling.

“Let not your hearts be troubled,” He said! Not troubled, we ask? Were there no reasons for it? Was everything that transpired during this evening not mysterious, to put it mildly? Did the disciples have no cause to be concerned? Was Jesus’ imminent departure not something they rightly dreaded? “No,” says Jesus!

He continues: “Just as you believe in God, so also believe in me.” He means as much as, “Don’t you understand? Are you afraid that my mission is coming to an inglorious end? But why? Am I not your Master? Have I ever let you down? I am not just a man but the Son of God at the same time! Oh, you of little faith. Why don’t you trust me? Why don’t you believe in Me? Why can’t you safely leave the future in my hands?”

“I am going to my Father soon! I am leaving you for a purpose! That purpose is to prepare a place for you and to see to it that one day you will also be in My Father’s house. Have I not told you this before? Have I not made it very clear that my death is an absolute necessity? You can not enjoy God’s blessed presence unless your sins are forgiven. Heaven remains forever out of bounds unless I suffer the

penalty that your iniquities deserve.”

Jesus adds, “I will not leave you permanently. I am coming back to take you to Myself that you may be forever in My presence. The grave will not have the last word! My death will be completely different from any other death. I will not remain in the grave. I am going to my Father. I came from Him and once My work on earth is finished, I will return to Him! I go to Him not to idle My time away, not to leave you to yourselves, not to forget about My church! No, I go to My Father to be busy for the church. I will make everything ready so that all My disciples will enjoy the blessings of salvation in the presence of their God!”

“You know the way I am going,” Jesus continues! He had informed His disciples about it more than once. They could have known! And yet, they did not know because they were so hard of hearing and so dull of understanding. They expected Jesus to become an earthly Messiah who would restore the fortunes of Israel by reestablishing the kingdom of David. That is why they were at a loss and why they could not follow their Master. That is why they failed to understand the deeper meaning of what Jesus had done and said.

The Words of Thomas

Thomas, the man we know as the Doubter, becomes their mouthpiece. The disciple who would not believe unless he first saw with his own eyes and felt the wounds of Christ with his own hands, says to Jesus, “Lord, we do not know where you are going. How then

can we know the way?” If you do not have a clue about someone’s destination, it make perfect sense that you are also at a loss about the road that leads to that destination.

The answer that the Lord gives is full of comfort and rich in teaching. He addressed directly the core problem of the disciples--and also of us, I may add. We, too, are often at a loss when it comes to the Bible’s teaching. We often get sidetracked when we struggle to understand God’s Word. We ought not to elevate ourselves above these men! We must be careful not to get annoyed at their ignorance. They were children of their time. They did not have the complete word of God as we have it today. The Holy Spirit had not yet been poured out. His presence and activity enables us to see and understand the Scriptures in a far more comprehensive manner than the men of our text.

Do you want some examples? How often have we been privileged to celebrate the Supper of the Lord? How many sermons have we heard about its meaning? It has been drilled into us, that Jesus’ death is our life and that His love assures us of His ever present care and protection. But how do we live up to that? We must confess that all too often we think far too little of Jesus’ assurance. The troubles of life often make us forget about Christ’s love so that we become

depressed and lose the joy of our faith.

Look at the sins we struggle with and the temptations we face. How often those sins get the better of us! How often we must admit to our shame that we let the Lord down! Yes, how often we flirt with temptation and toy with sin instead of living holy lives in the power of Christ’s Spirit. We attend church and endeavor to live for the Lord, but the day is not finished before our sins make their presence felt. Our good intentions dissipate and we know too well that we have failed our God again.

Imagine if our Lord ran out of patience as quickly as we do! Consider for a moment if Jesus would deal with us as we often deal with Him and our neighbor! Where would our comfort be? Where could we find the assurance that God keeps loving us despite our many shortcomings and failures? Let us thank our faithful Savior for His great love and mercy! Let us go to Him with all our doubts and uncertainties! Let us seek to be instructed by His mouth and trust that He will never leave us.

The Words of Jesus

Listen how Jesus answers the objection of Thomas. See how He puts the fear of His first disciples to rest. Jesus says, “I am the way and the truth and the life!” What a profound statement! What an affirmation of His divinity! What an assur-

They failed to understand the deeper meaning of what Jesus had done and said.

*It is when you renounce all that you are and go
to Him as a miserable sinner in humble faith
that you may find the way.*

ance for restless hearts! Christ, so to speak, takes Thomas by the hand and in Thomas He addresses all his disciples. He says: Thomas, do you not know yet? Thomas, are you still in doubt why my Father accepts you? Look at me, Thomas! Look at Me, not just as a man but as the Son of God, not as a person whose life finishes up in the grave but as your Savior! Look at Me as the One whose death opens the way to life; whose blood covers all your sins; and whose sacrifice is the only payment that can satisfy God's justice. I am, therefore, the way to the Father's heart and house where you will enjoy a communion of life and joy that lasts forever. This will come to its fullest manifestation when I return to take all My elect to Myself.

First, Christ is the Way! In Him, God demolishes all the barricades that our sins have erected. And, mind you, He is the only Way! There are not half a dozen or more different ways. Your good intentions do not count. Your good works will not do it. Even your covenant membership and church attendance will not assure you of God's loving communion. It is Christ and Him alone! It is when you renounce all that you are and go to Him as a miserable sinner in humble faith that you may find the way.

Second, He is the Truth! All that is opposed to Him is not true; even more, everything the Bible teaches finds its fulfillment in Him. During

the Old Testament everything was still provisional. A person could only approach God via elaborate sacrifices and rituals and other stipulations. Even then, it was only from a distance and only for a certain time.

In Christ, all these shadows have been fulfilled. In Christ we may draw near to God the Father twenty-four hours a day. When we believe in Christ, we may enjoy God's communion all the time. He must be our All and Everything. Our faith must be built on a solid foundation. Our faith must rest on nothing else but the Truth; otherwise, it serves no purpose. That truth is personified in Jesus Christ. The Bible makes no sense and has no value unless you discover Him and recognize that it speaks of Christ from Genesis to Revelation.

Third, He is the Life! That is where the Truth leads, and its results. Only the Truth sets us free, says the Bible, free from the stifling weight of our sins and free from the haunting whispers of the devil. Only the Truth sets us free from the wrath of God so that we live again in the sunshine of God's love and in communion with the Father. When our death draws near, that communion will change from faith into sight until it is perfected on the day of Christ's return! Then the Father's house will be occupied by all His children who staked their life on Jesus Christ as the Way, the Truth, and the Life.

We have seen so much more than those first disciples. They could have said, "Jesus is the Way? What a way! Hanging on a cross, of all things. Jesus is the Truth? What a truth, when the lies and the slander seemed to be victorious on Golgotha's hill. Jesus is the Life? What a life! Look at Him when they laid his body in the tomb!"

But how these words of Jesus shine forth in all their comfort and glory! When Christ uttered the words: 'It is finished,' the way to the Father was opened, never to be closed again. The truth of which the gospel witnesses was manifested when God raised His Son on the third day, giving us the incontestable proof that Jesus' work of reconciliation was accepted by the Father. Life burst forth on Easter morning, proclaiming that sin had been conquered and death been overcome!

O, yes, it is still a matter of faith, but it is a faith that is founded on the Scriptures, which find their focal point in Jesus Christ, who is the Way, the Truth, and the Life.

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Baptism

The Debate Behind the Debate

One of the reasons why baptism is such a difficult issue has to do with the fact that there is a debate behind the debate. Often baptism is discussed without a proper understanding of this debate behind the debate. The issue of baptism is more about what is the proper reading of the Scriptures than it is about which position is biblical. There is a baptistic reading of the Scriptures and there is a paedobaptistic reading of the Scriptures. As a result, there is value in both sides understanding their position and in both sides understanding the position that they reject.

I know what it is like to stand on both sides of the aisle. I was raised a Baptist. As a result I know what it is like to think as a Baptist. I can still remember thinking to myself, as a Baptist, "How can anyone believe in infant baptism?" But now that I have been on other side of the fence for some time, I will sometimes think to myself as a paedobaptist, "How can anyone be a Baptist?"

No matter what side of the fence you stand on regarding baptism, that particular side makes sense if that is all you know. I will be the first one to admit that it is very difficult for a Baptist to get their head inside the argument for infant baptism. I have met very few, if any, Baptists that really understand the biblical case for infant baptism. In fact, I can already

hear their response: what biblical case? This attitude on the part of many Baptists prevents them from even considering the possibility that paedobaptism is biblical.

I have had many opportunities to discuss the issue of baptism with people who hold a different view from my own. A number of these men have been Baptist ministers. Over time, I have become familiar with all the objections regarding infant baptism. In fact, there was a time when I made many of the same objections. Many Baptists fail to distinguish between a Roman Catholic view, a Lutheran view, and a Reformed view of infant baptism. All paedobaptists are lumped together. This is problematic because there are important distinctions between the Roman view, the Lutheran View, and the Reformed view.

Judging by the objections that many Baptist critics make regarding infant baptism, it is apparent that many of them do not understand the Reformed paedobaptist position. At some level, most Baptists argue against a straw man that they construct and then set ablaze.

Baptismal Regeneration

The Calvinistic view of infant baptism does not teach baptismal regeneration. In agreement with my Baptist critics, I do not hold this view. In agreement with my critics, I maintain a distinction between the external sign and seal and the internal reality that the external sign and seal symbolizes. In agreement with my critics, I would also emphasize that salvation is by faith alone in Christ alone. The work of regeneration is a work performed by the Spirit. This work was depicted in the Old Testament through the external sign and seal of circumcision.

Likewise, in the New Testament with the coming of Christ, this work is depicted through the external sign and seal of water baptism. Both circumcision and water baptism are external signs and seals of covenant membership, and both depict the internal working of the Spirit. It is not my desire to be polemical or offensive with this next statement, but typically Baptists do not understand what people like me mean when we speak of signs and seals. This is one reason why it is difficult to discuss this issue with most Baptists. It is very difficult to address an argument against a position when the person arguing against the position does not understand what he is arguing against.

The issue of baptism is more about what is the proper reading of the Scriptures than it is about which position is biblical.

Continuity in Scripture

The issue of infant baptism is determined more or less by a debate behind the debate. Baptists read their Bibles differently than do paedobaptists. Baptists generally emphasize the difference between the Old Testament and the New Testament. They typically emphasize the discontinuity between the old and the new. As a paedobaptist, I recognize a level of discontinuity, but I am also much more comfortable with the continuity that exists between the old and the new than are our Baptist brothers.

Instead of seeing the Bible as essentially two books, Calvinists read their Bibles as one book. It is my conviction that the Bible is fundamentally one book about Jesus Christ. The Bible seeks to demonstrate how Jesus Christ is the fulfillment of everything that God has promised throughout redemptive history, from the beginning to the end. From the first page to the last page, the Bible is about Jesus Christ. Immediately after Adam fell into sin and God pronounced the covenant curse, God also pronounced for the first time the promise of redemption (Genesis 3:15).

Genesis 3:15 teaches that there are essentially two seeds. First, there is the seed of Satan and, second, there is the seed of the woman. The seed of the woman is a reference to Christ. He will come from the woman (Mary) and, through Jesus Christ, Satan will receive a mortal wound to his head. Christ will overcome Satan. In the process of inflicting the fatal wound upon Satan,

Christ will also receive a wound. He will, however, overcome this wound as if it was only a wound to His heel. This verse serves as a lens for understanding the unfolding of redemptive history. In this verse, God has promised to bring salvation through the seed of the woman. As we read our Bibles we look for the fulfillment of this promise.

For example, in the conflict between David and Goliath, we see the two seeds in conflict. Goliath, representing the seed of the serpent, is physically impressive, but he is no match for a shepherd boy who attacks Goliath on the basis that salvation comes from the Lord. David was trusting in the Lord alone for his salvation. Is the story of David and Goliath teaching us to be like David, or is this story teaching us that salvation comes from the Lord Almighty?

The baptistic reading of this passage teaches us to be like David. Dream big dreams; you can do anything that you set your mind to; do not let your youth hinder you from accomplishing your goals. Go out into the land and slaughter the giants. This is a very horizontal reading of this text. It almost sounds like an ad for the Army.

The Reformed reading of this passage teaches us that salvation comes from the Lord. God is the only one who can save man from

the seed of the serpent. The impetus to be like David is a message to trust in God as David trusted in God. David did not pull himself up by his bootstraps and save Israel. No, he confronted Goliath in the name of God.

When a Reformed Christian reads the Bible, he is sensitive to the promises that God has made. Likewise we are equally as sensitive to the way that these promises are fulfilled. As Calvinists, we read the Bible from the perspective of promise and fulfillment.

“For no matter how many promises God has made, they are “Yes” in Christ. And so through Him the “Amen” is spoken by us to the glory of God” (II Corinthians 1:20). When Paul made this statement the New Testament had not yet been written. He was preaching Christ from the Old Testament. All the promises that God has made in the Old Testament are fulfilled in Christ. If we read the Old Testament in the same way that the apostles understood the Old Testament, then we should have no problem preaching Christ from the Old Testament.

The Covenants

The most basic promises of the Bible are expressed through the various covenants that God made. Ultimately these promises

As Calvinists, we read the Bible from the perspective of promise and fulfillment.

are fulfilled in Christ. As a result, we interpret the Bible and redemptive history through the lens of Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ is the fulfillment of all that God has been doing from Genesis through Revelation. All of redemptive history points to Jesus Christ. Before the fall, God made a covenant with Adam (In the day that you eat of this fruit you shall surely die). Adam lived under a covenant of works in the garden. If he had been perfectly obedient he would have merited eternal life for himself and all his posterity, but instead he brought about the fall and its consequences (curse) on all his posterity.

In Romans 5:12-22 Paul teaches that Jesus is the second Adam. Unlike the first Adam, Jesus is perfectly obedient. He has satisfied the covenant curse in our place, and he has satisfied the righteous demands of the law. This is an example of how the Bible interprets the Bible from the perspective of promise and fulfillment. All that God has promised is fulfilled in Christ. What the first Adam failed to accomplish the second Adam, Jesus Christ, accomplished for everyone that God has chosen.

Prior to the flood, God covenanted with Noah. Following the flood, God made a more general covenant with creation. Next, God covenanted with Abraham, then Moses, and David. Jesus came as the fulfillment of all that God had promised in the Old Testament. This is how Jesus interprets the Old Testament. In Luke 24 Jesus was on the road to Emmaus. He was walking with

Cleopas and another man. They were troubled and discouraged about the recent death of Jesus. Consider Jesus' response to their concerns. "He said to them, 'How foolish you are, and how slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken! Did not the Christ have to suffer these things and then enter his glory?' *And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he explained to them what was said in all the Scriptures concerning himself*" (Luke 24:25-27, emphasis added).

If you want to understand what the Bible teaches about baptism or any other subject, you should begin your study in the Old Testament.

Jesus proclaimed Himself to be the fulfillment of all the Old Testament Scriptures.

In the same chapter, while Jesus was teaching His disciples, He made a similar claim. "He said to them 'This is what I told you while I was still with you: Everything must be fulfilled that is written about me in the Law of Moses, the Prophets and the Psalms. Then he opened their minds so they could understand the Scriptures'" (Luke 24:44-45). Their minds were not opened until they understood how Jesus was the fulfillment of the Old Testament.

If this is the way that Jesus used the Old Testament when He taught and preached, then maybe we should do the same. In harmony with Jesus, I would argue that this is the way that we should read and understand our Bible because this is the way that the Bible interprets the Bible.

As a result, if you want to understand what the Bible teaches about baptism or any other subject, you should begin your study in the Old Testament. This represents a major difference between Baptists and paedobaptists. If you begin the exegetical process in the Old Testament from the perspective of promise and fulfillment, then you will likely end up a paedobaptist. In contrast, if you stress the newness of the new covenant to the point that the new covenant is cut off from the covenants in the Old Testament, then you will likely end up a Baptist. Fundamentally, this is the debate behind the debate, or at least one important debate behind the debate.

A Starting Point

Related to this issue is the issue of our starting point. Baptists believe that unless the New Testament explicitly commands believers to baptize their children, then baptism should be withheld from their children. This position is based on an assumption that should be scrutinized. Why is this assumption solid ground? Maybe we should assume the opposite. This assumption makes a lot of sense to some one who reads his Bible as a Baptist with certain preconceived ideas. For example, Baptists are comfortable beginning

the exegetical process in the New Testament; they generally begin by emphasizing the discontinuity between the Old and the New Testaments. For this reason, it seems perfectly acceptable for a Baptist to begin with the assumption that unless the New Testament commands believers to baptize their children, then baptism should be withheld from their children. But is this starting point really as solid as the Baptist assumes? At this point I caution you, it is very difficult to get a Baptist to examine their assumptions regarding this starting point.

In contrast, if the Bible does not forbid believers from placing the sign and seal of baptism upon their children, then why would believers withhold the sign and seal of Baptism unless the New Testament explicitly forbids such a practice? As a starting point, this position assumes a level of continuity between the Old and New Testaments instead of assuming radical discontinuity. If it is true that the New Testament is silent on this matter, then why is the silence of the New Testament in favor of withholding the sign and seal of baptism when we already have an Old Testament precedent that establishes the opposite? Why is it safer to assume discontinuity with the Old Testament instead of assuming continuity?

The first converts to the Christian faith were Jews, and Jews were certainly accustomed to applying the sign and seal of the covenant to their children. Did Jewish converts assume a radical discontinuity as do Baptists, or did Jewish converts assume a level of continuity?

The New Testament provides the answer to this question in many different places. In the book of Hebrews, for example, the author tries to convince Jewish converts to leave behind the types and shadows associated the Mosaic Law. His argument is based on the fact that Jesus Christ is the fulfillment of the types and shadows. “The law has only a shadow of the good things that are coming—not the realities themselves. For this reason it can never, by the same sacrifices repeated endlessly year after year, make perfect those who draw near to worship” (Hebrews 10:1). They do not need a priest after Aaron, because they have Jesus as their Highpriest. The sacrifice that Jesus offers takes away their sins, and it never has to be repeated again.

According to the writings of Paul, there was an impulse among Jewish converts to impose circumcision on gentile converts. There was reluctance among Jewish converts to leave behind the types and shadows of the Old Testament. In the book of Galatians the apostle Paul publicly confronts Barnabas for falling into this trap. In light of this Biblical evidence I find it extremely unlikely that Jewish converts would have held the same assumptions as a modern day Baptist. To this day I have never heard a good response to this objection from a Baptist theologian. Is it really possible that Jewish converts would have withheld the sign and seal of covenant membership from their children without explicit New Testament instructions to do so? From the time of Abraham Jews had ap-

plied the sign and seal of the covenant to their children.

Conclusion

If it is true that baptism in the New Testament has replaced circumcision as a sign and seal of covenant membership, then how is it possible that Jewish converts would have withheld the sign and seal of covenant membership from their children without explicit apostolic instructions to do so?

Rev. Mark J. Stromberg is the pastor of the United Reformed Church of Belgrade, Montana.

We Confess

An Exposition & Application of the Belgic Confession

Article 33: Of the Sacraments

The Church of Christ is known by three distinguishing marks: the pure preaching of the Gospel, the pure administration of the sacraments, and the exercise of church discipline (Belgic Confession, Article 29). When she practices these three, she is true; when she does not, she is false.

We come now to Articles 33-35 of the Confession, where the second of these three marks is explained. Besides explaining baptism (art. 34) and the Lord's Supper (art. 35), there is also a brief article on the sacraments in general (art. 33). This article explains the Reformed understanding of what a sacrament is, what a sacrament does, and how many sacraments there are in Scripture.

The Necessity of the Sacraments

What need is there of sacraments if all that Articles 20-26 of the Confession are true – that God's wrath toward us has been satisfied in Christ, that we are justified before Him freely by grace alone, that His Spirit is continually sanctifying us, and that Christ Himself is interceding for us at the right hand of God? In a word, we need the sacraments because we are sinners. The great Protestant slogan that we as Christians are simultaneously justified and sinful (Latin, *simul iustus et peccator*), saints and sinners, is

true. Recall from Article 15 of the Confession that the original sin we received from Adam's sin is not "altogether abolished or wholly eradicated even by baptism." Because this original sin causes in us actual sins "as water from a fountain," this "corruption should make *believers* often sigh, desiring to be delivered from this body of death" (emphasis mine).

Article 33 opens: "We believe that our gracious God, taking account of our weakness and infirmities, has ordained the sacraments for us..." Our God, the eternal, omnipotent, holy One of Israel, is gracious towards us: "I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious, and I will have compassion on whom I will have compassion" (Exodus 33:19). And because "He is terribly displeased with our inborn sin as well as our actual sins" (Heidelberg Catechism, Q&A 10), He is under no obligation to show us any grace. The wonder of His grace is that despite our not meriting any favor with Him, but in fact demeriting all hope of grace, He comes to be gracious to us in Christ in the preached Word and in the sacraments.

In the sacraments, our gracious God accommodates Himself down to us. Accommodation is one person coming down to the level of another in order to communicate, help, and relate to him. It is because of our weaknesses and sinfulness that

God accommodates Himself to our level and for our benefit. In Baptism and the Supper, the eternal, incomprehensible, invisible, immutable, infinite, and almighty God (art. 1) comes to the aid of our weaknesses.

Article 33 evidences a dependence upon John Calvin, who said,

And here, indeed, our merciful Lord, with boundless condescension, so accommodates Himself to our capacity, that seeing how from our animal nature we are always creeping on the ground, and cleaving to the flesh, having no thought of what is spiritual, and not even forming an idea of it, He declines not by means of these earthly elements to lead us to Himself, and even in the flesh to exhibit a mirror of spiritual blessings.

The main effect of our ongoing struggle with sin is upon our faith. On the one hand, the New Testament says our faith "is the victory that has overcome the world" (1 John 5:4). On the other hand, we must continually pray, "I do believe; help me overcome my unbelief" (Mark 9:24). God in His tender, fatherly grace has given us "pledges" of His grace toward us. The sacraments, then, "nourish and strengthen our faith" as they "better ... present to our senses both that which He declares to us by His Word and that which He works in our hearts."

This is evidenced all throughout redemptive history with even those whom we would see as the godliest

of saints. They, too, needed the sacraments. To Noah, God made that wonderful promise: “Never again will all life be cut off by the waters of a flood; never again will there be a flood to destroy the earth” (Genesis 9:11). But because of the fallen nature of man and our tendency to doubt even a promise from the very mouth of God, He gave an accommodating sacramental sign and seal of His promise with creation: the rainbow in the sky (Genesis 9:12ff.).

Later, God Almighty made covenant promises to Abraham in Genesis 12. There He called out Abram from Ur of the Chaldeans, a place that would later be known in history as Babylon. He called him in order to create a people for His name’s sake.

His gracious promises to Abram are many: 1) I will make you a great nation, 2) I will bless you, 3) I will make your name great, 4) I will make you a blessing, 5) I will bless those who bless you, 6) I will curse those who curse you, and 7) I will bless all the families of the earth through you.

Even with this sovereign act of salvation and amazing promises, God then accommodated Himself and gave a sign and seal to confirm His promises in the sacrament of circumcision (Genesis 17:10). Our forefathers had need of even greater assurance that God was their God and they were His people.

We are no different. Although we live after Christ has come in the age of fulfillment, the remnants of the old man still affect us. We still doubt that the Lord’s promises are for us when our lives hit a little turbulence.

We do not completely take Him at His word, as sure as it is! Therefore, in the same way, the same God comes to us as His covenant people to our level and gives us signs and seals of His fatherly benevolence towards us. We are sinners; our faith is not perfect, but is weak. God is perfect and strong. We hear this truth of our Confession every time we celebrate the Lord’s Supper in the beautiful words of invitation, which say,

This solemn warning is not designed, however, to discourage penitent sinners from coming to the holy sacrament. We do not come to the supper as though we were righteous in ourselves, but rather to testify that we are sinners and that we look to Jesus Christ for our salvation. Although we do not have perfect faith and do not serve and love God with all our hearts, and though we do not love our neighbors as we ought, we are confident that the Savior accepts us at His table when we come in humble faith, with sorrow for our sins, and with a will to follow Him as He commands.

The Nature of the Sacraments

As we turn to ask what exactly the sacraments are, the first thing our

Confession says about them is that they are *means of grace*. As we said above, because of our weakness and infirmities, God has stooped down to give us His grace in a tangible way. While it is true that the sacraments are also *law*, that is, they bring judgment to those who do not use them rightly (cf. 1 Corinthians 11:27ff.), Article 33 of the Confession puts the emphasis squarely on the fact that the sacraments communicate the grace of God.

This is why the article says that the sacraments “seal unto us His *promises*” and are “pledges of the *good will and grace of God*.” And as they are “joined to the Word of the *gospel*” they “better present to our senses both that which He declares to us by His Word and that which He works in our hearts, thereby confirming in us the *salvation* which He imparts to us.” Finally, they are gospel because “Jesus Christ is the true object presented by them.” As means of grace, then, the sacraments feed faith; as the Confession says, they “nourish and strengthen” it.

Throughout the history of redemption, the Lord used means to communicate His grace to His people, which were intended to feed their faith. For example, with our forefathers in the wilderness, the LORD gave life-giving water by means of a rock. Paul masterfully exegetes

Because of the fallen nature of man, (we have a tendency to doubt even a promise from the very mouth of God.

this Old Testament event writing that the physical rock from which they drank was a visible sign and seal of “that spiritual Rock that followed them, and that Rock was Christ” (1 Corinthians 10:2).

As *means* of grace, the sacraments must be united with faith in order for what they signify to benefit us. We must not stop at the visible sign, but by faith go beyond to that which is signified, Jesus Christ and all His benefits. Without faith, Baptism and the Lord’s Supper are not signs of grace, but of judgment. We must embrace God’s covenant blessings given to us in Baptism and the Supper, as well as teach our children that they, too, must believe in Christ, who is portrayed in them, for He is the reality or substance of the sacraments.

The sacraments are also visible signs: “For they are visible *signs* and seals of an inward and invisible thing.” Here the Confession follows the teaching of the North African church father, Augustine, who said the sacraments were the “visible word.”

This is the language of Scripture, in which the LORD Himself said to Abraham about circumcision, “...it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and you” (Genesis 17:11). The word “sacrament” (from the Latin, *sacramentum*) originally meant the oath that a Roman soldier took in loyalty to his commander. This was the meaning that the Zurich Reformer gave to the sacraments – our oath of allegiance to the Lord.

In contrast, our Confession

makes the point that the sacraments are not our oath to God, but God’s oath to us! Here the Belgic follows the Augsburg Confession in saying that the sacraments are “pledges” of God’s good will and grace to us (cf. Augsburg Confession, art. 13).

As if God’s Word were not enough, in the sacraments God comes to us and says, “Look! I will show you My grace.” In baptism, it is as if God were saying, “Feel My grace pouring down your filthy head,” and in the Supper, “Taste My grace pouring down your throat.” Signs get at

***The sacraments are
not our oath to God,
but God’s oath to us!***

the heart of our covenantal religion, since covenants always have tangible signs of what is promised or agreed upon. Thus when God the Father *says* that He will make an everlasting covenant of grace with us, that He will wash us in the blood of Jesus, and that He will nourish us with Christ’s body and blood, He *shows* us this in the sacraments.

The third thing the Belgic Confession says about the sacraments is that they are seals: “to seal His promises to us.” A seal is an assurance or confirmation. This is why the Confession goes on to say that by the sacraments, God “confirm[s] in us the salvation

which He imparts to us.” Again, this is biblical language. In Paul’s discussion of Abraham’s justification by faith alone, he said that God gave him circumcision, which was “a seal of the righteousness that he had by faith” (Romans 4:11). This seal of the righteousness of faith shows us, says Paul, that salvation is God’s work alone. Abraham, nor we, have done nothing, nor can we do anything to make us right with God. Since the righteousness God imputes to us is by faith, it is not by our works of righteousness. Our righteousness, then, is from God alone. In baptism and communion, the righteousness we have by faith is sealed unto us.

This “sealing” aspect of the sacraments is emphasized in Heidelberg Catechism question and answer 65:

Since, then, we are made partakers of Christ and all His benefits by faith only, where does this faith come from? The Holy Spirit works faith in our hearts by the preaching of the Holy Gospel, and *confirms* it by the use of the holy sacraments (Emphasis mine).

Finally, the sacraments are appendices: “He has added these to the Word of the gospel to represent better to our external senses both what He declares to us in His Word and what He does inwardly in our hearts.” Baptism and the Lord’s Supper do not communicate anything different than the preached Word, but communicate the grace of God through different means. Our Confession

even goes so far as to say that the sacraments do this better because they do so to our external senses. Again, we hear the words of Calvin echoed in our Confession:

But sacraments bring with them the clearest promises, and, when compared with the word, have this peculiarity, that they represent promises to the life, as if painted in a picture . . . But the believer, when the sacraments are presented to his eye, does not stop short at the carnal spectacle, but by the steps of analogy which I have indicated, rises with pious consideration to the sublime mysteries which lie hidden in the sacraments.

The Power of the Sacraments

Rome places the efficacy of the sacraments in the sacraments themselves with the doctrine that by doing the sacraments the work of the sacraments is done (Latin, *ex opere operato*). Lutheranism also has a doctrine of the objectivity of the sacraments in which the thing signified is so tied to the sign that all who partake receive Christ, even unbelievers. Finally, Zwingli placed the efficacy of the sacraments in the remembrance of the one partaking of them.

The Reformed doctrine of the sacraments ascribes the power of the sacraments to the Holy Spirit. This is why the Confession says that it is “by means [of the sacraments] . . . God works in us by the power of the Holy Spirit.”

Although in contrast to Eastern Orthodoxy, which believes that the bread and wine are the body and

blood of Christ, albeit mysteriously, Calvin and our Confession find a common strand with the ancient Eastern Church with their emphasis on the Holy Spirit in the Lord’s Supper. In what we would call the “prayer of consecration,” the priest prays, “Once again we offer to You this spiritual worship without the shedding of blood, and we ask, pray, and entreat You: send down Your Holy Spirit upon us and upon these gifts here presented.”

The Number of the Sacraments

One final note on the sacraments

The Reformed doctrine of the sacraments ascribes the power of the sacraments to the Holy Spirit.

that distinguished the Protestants from Rome and Constantinople was the number of the sacraments. As the Confession concludes: “Moreover, we are satisfied with the number of sacraments which Christ our Lord has instituted, which are two only, namely, the sacrament of baptism and the holy supper of our Lord Jesus Christ.”

While Rome and Eastern Orthodoxy confess seven sacraments (baptism, confirmation, communion, confession, marriage, ordination, last rites), some modern Eastern Christians confess the potential for anything to be sacramental because of the goodness of creation as redeemed by Christ.

Yet why do we follow the Protestant teaching in celebrating only two sacraments? Because, these alone are what “Christ our Lord has instituted” (cf. Heidelberg Catechism, Q&A 68). This means that a sacrament is only something that the Lord instituted by His word as well as attached a sign thereto. In addi-

Study/Application Questions for Article 33

1. Define what the “sacraments” are in your own words. How would you explain biblically to someone that they are not “Catholic?”
2. What do the sacraments do better than the preached Word? How do they do this?
3. How are the sacraments “God’s drama” to us in worship? How could seeing them as God’s action add a sense of awe and wonder to our worship?
4. Why do we speak of the sacraments as “means of grace?” Explain how they give us this grace.

tion, the New Testament is clear that Jesus gave His Church the Lord's Supper to celebrate in His remembrance until He comes again in the fullness of the kingdom (Luke 22:14-23 cf. 1 Cor. 11:26) in the signs of bread and wine, and baptism in the sign of water, which the Church is to administer as it goes out to the nations with the Lord in its midst (Matthew 28:16-20).

The sacraments of baptism and the holy Supper, then, are the physical, tangible elements that Christ has given us as the vehicles of His spiritual blessings. Our faith is strengthened not in thunder coming down upon us from heaven, not in fiery angels bringing messages to us, nor in an ethereal way that only a few elite people can understand. Instead, Christ graciously gives common elements to be used in a special way – water, bread, and wine. In doing so, He comes down to our level for the benefit of our faith!

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Celebrating the Lord's Day (2)

A great deal of ink has been spilled discussing what Jesus and Paul taught about the Sabbath. If Jesus has fulfilled the law, why not abolish the Sabbath? And didn't the apostle Paul teach that we are no longer bound by the law?

Jesus and the Sabbath

When Jesus addressed the Sabbath question, He had in mind the legalism that had been developed over the centuries. The Pharisees based their case against the Lord and His disciples on the fact that He was allowing His disciples to transgress some of the traditional teachings on Sabbath keeping. The Pharisees had made salvation a matter of merit, of righteousness earned by the manner in which the law, according to their interpretation was to be kept. After the time of Ezra and Nehemiah the rules pertaining to the Sabbath became stricter. In our Lord's time, there were 1521 things one could NOT do on the Sabbath--including rescuing a drowning man. The Sabbath had become a prison of prohibitions which had turned a day of joy and hope into a day of sullenness and fear. In fact, the fire taboo, among others, is still law. Even today orthodox Jews may neither kindle nor quench a flame on Saturday.

Since legalism had completely suppressed the true intent and joyous character of the Sabbath, Jesus openly defied the leaders of Israel in respect to their attitude toward the Sabbath. Jesus lived and acted according to the true spirit of the Sabbath. Thus when Jesus saw the

people burdened by man--made laws, He called out, "Come to me, all you who are burdened, and I will give you rest" (Matthew 11:28). Thus Jesus was not breaking the Sabbath. In fact, He placed it in the proper perspective again. He declared lordship over it. He said that man was not made for the Sabbath (Mark 2:27). This text is often quoted by those who wish to free themselves from Sunday observance. But this declaration by Christ arose from the context of His controversy with the Pharisees and their legalistic interpretation the Sabbath.

Our Lord taught that the Sabbath was made for man for his highest good, that he might enter into God's fellowship and rest. Far from abolishing the Sabbath, He pointed to God's original intent for that day. The Sabbath was made for man that being in the likeness of God he too should have a day of feasting and enjoyment in God and in His work, and that he should have it at regular intervals.

Jesus kept the Sabbath. He went to the two "devotional" services in the synagogue. He also went about doing good. The scope of His doing good ranged from walking through the fields, the streets, and the public places to having dinner with His friends. He allowed His disciples to pluck ears of grain because they were hungry. He also healed the sick on the Sabbath. He healed Simon Peter's mother-in-law after he had left a synagogue service. Jesus clearly shunned legalism. Fur-

thermore, He taught by word and example that works of necessity, either for the preservation and protection of human and animal life, as well as works of mercy, and works required for public worship, are lawful on the Sabbath.

Paul and the Sabbath

The apostle Paul never contradicted Jesus, who said “till heaven and earth pass away, not an iota, not a dot, will pass from the law.” The same Jesus also threatened with severe punishment anyone who “relaxes one of the least of these commandments” (Matthew 5:18,19). It is evident, therefore, that the fourth commandment is included among “these commandments.”

Paul faced the same legalism as His Lord did. Hence he addressed the Judaizers, who accused Paul of not keeping the Jewish pharisaic Sabbath. Paul told them that their false gospel of legalism directly opposed the gospel of salvation by grace through faith. From this perspective his writing to the Galatians and the Colossians must be interpreted.

In Galatians 4:9-10 Paul condemns the observance of sacred seasons as a means of salvation. In Colossians 2:16-17 Paul combats the Judaizers’ legalism by pointing out that the Old Testament ordinances connected with meat and drink, holy days, new moons and Sabbath were only a shadow of things to come. But now that Christ has come, these shadows have been replaced by the reality, Christ, so that their observance is no longer necessary. As Paul therefore makes clear, the Judaizers have completely misunderstood the purpose and place of the Old Testament ordi-

nances in the economy of God’s grace.

Those who use Romans 14: 5 in their attempt to prove that Paul abolished the Sabbath observance have no leg to stand on. This text says nothing, one way or another, about the question of the abiding validity of the fourth commandment, nor of Sabbath observance. Nowhere does Paul say that the Sabbath is now done away with.

When a Christian works on Sunday, he uses time that does not belong to him, but to the Lord.

Sabbath Rest

Sabbath rest is one of the great themes in the letter to the Hebrews. The author urges the believers in the early church to be faithful to Christ. He uses the example of Sabbath rest to explain the development and outworking of God’s plan of salvation. He reminds his readers that some of the chosen people living in Old Testament times were not able to enter into God’s rest due to their unbelief and sin (Hebrews 3:18,19). This rest is the promised land which was a type, a symbol, of God’s rest intended for man.

In Hebrews 4, the author points out that those who die in Christ re-

ceive a foretaste of this rest. He says that there remains a Sabbath rest for the people of God; for whoever enters God’s rest also ceases from his labors as God did from His. Meanwhile already in this life, before the inauguration of the new heaven and earth, the true child of God enjoys the peace which passes all understanding (Philippians 4: 7).

Sunday points to Christ’s entry into His rest on His ascension day and points forward to the believer’s full entry into his rest on the Day of the Lord. The rest that is promised Revelation 14:13. The writer’s aim is to show that Jesus has provided the rest of salvation for His people. The weekly Sabbath, therefore, points to the final rest that God now already enjoys and that is His gift to His people in heaven and the new heaven and earth. As the Heidelberg Catechism puts it, the believer may “all the days of his life, rest from his evil works, let the Lord work in him by His Spirit, and thus begin in this life the eternal Sabbath.” With these truths in mind, we can understand why the author of the Hebrews exhorts Christians to keep the Lord’s day holy. Furthermore, they are to encourage each other “not to give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing -- and all the more as you see the Day approaching” (Hebrews 20:25).

This Biblical view of rest has practical implications. When a Christian works on Sunday, he uses time that does not belong to him, but to the Lord. Sunday is a spiritual oasis in a desert of worldly cares. On Sunday, believers rest from their daily activities, which are temporal, and are engaged in spiritual matters,

which are eternal. God never meant that His people should toil endlessly, day after day. This no-work obligation still stands (cf. Leviticus 23:25). One day a week Christian may taste a measure of relief from the toil of the ground which was cursed because of Adam's fall into sin. Christians are not slaves to their work. Through Christ, they are kings over their daily work, and they use and give expression to this kingly freedom by resting the first day of the week. By observing this day in honor of Christ, they testify to the fact that they live out of the accomplished work of Christ.

As God rested after His work of creating the world, Christians should rest from their labors. In our restless, frantic, fast-paced society, we need our rest. Our labor-saving devices may make our tasks easier, but fax-machines, cellular phones, computers, and home entertainment centers do not give us much time for solitude. Genuine rest is rooted in faith. We are saved by faith, and not by works (Ephesians 2:8-10). Yet we act as if everything depends on our works. We are God's children by God's grace. We do not seek to earn, we receive salvation. Our Sunday rest, therefore, should reflect our spiritual rest.

The Sabbath and the Reformation

The reformers and their heirs went to the Scriptures and the teachings

of the early church fathers to get a deeper understanding of the Sunday as the Lord's day. Why keep all the Saints' days and other special "holy" days, when the Scripture refers to only one day for celebration -- the Sunday?

Martin Luther believed that Christ fulfilled the ceremonial aspect of the fourth commandment. But he did not mean to say that Sunday observance should be set aside. Luther wrote in his Address to the German Nobility (1520) "All festivals should be abrogated except Sunday." He taught that Sunday should be kept as a day of rest to give physical respite to all workers, so that everyone might attend the worship services in order to hear the Word of God." In his Larger Catechism of 1529 he stated in his article on the Fourth Commandment that "nature teaches that the working classes ... who have spent the whole week in their work ... absolutely require a day in which they can ... rest and refresh themselves." However, Luther never taught a strict Sunday observance. "The believers must live in accordance to the Scriptures," Luther said. "But Christian freedom in respect to Sunday finds its origin in an unrestricted conscience which relies on God's Word."

Calvin's view of the Lord's day was stricter than Luther's. He pointed to the order of creation in his discussion of Sabbath keeping. In the

year 1554, Calvin wrote in his Commentary on Genesis (2:1-3) that God "first rested, then blessed this rest, that in all ages it might be sacred among men." "Moreover," he concluded, "it is to be noted that this institution has been given not to a single century or people, but to the entire human race."

For Calvin the Christian Sunday is not a simple continuation of the Jewish Sabbath "changed into the first day of the week." He taught that the rest that Israel was commanded to observe was a ceremonial rest, and together with the other ceremonies of the Mosaic law, it was fulfilled and abolished by the accomplished work of Christ. But this does not mean that the fourth commandment has been entirely dismissed; it demands from us that we observe the order of creation in taking one day off for worship and physical rest. We must give relief from servile labor to others and ourselves. "God instituted" the day of rest, said Calvin, and "we, created in God's image, must follow His example." And Calvin made a point that today's Christian retailers should take to heart. In one of his sermons on the Ten Commandments he said, "If our shop windows are shut on Sunday, when we travel not after the common order, this is to the end that we should have more liberty and leisure to attend to that which God commandeth..."

Calvin had the people of Geneva come together for worship services in the morning hours and for instruction in the Christian faith during the afternoon of the Lord's Day. This practice, with slight modifications, has continued. Many Calvinistic churches have, in addi-

For Calvin the Christian Sunday is not a simple continuation of the Jewish Sabbath "changed into the first day of the week."

tion to the regular morning worship service, an afternoon or evening service in which the Heidelberg Catechism or the Westminster Catechism is explained.

When the Reformation churches discussed the Sabbath observance during the Synod of Dort (1618-19), they declared: "This day is thus consecrated for divine worship, so that in it one might rest from all servile works (with these excepted, which are works of charity and pressing necessity) and from those recreations which impede the worship of God." We must conclude, therefore, that the historic Reformed position on the subject of working on Sunday is that only works of mercy and works of necessity are permitted.

In North America the Reformed churches of Dutch descent were strongly influenced by the Calvinist traditions as taught and practiced in the Netherlands. Abraham Kuyper looked upon the Sabbath as a creation ordinance. He stated: "The institution of one of the seven days as (the) day of rest is thus no specifically Christian institution, but one of mankind in general, which falls not under particular grace but under general grace."

According to Kuyper even the unbeliever is blessed by the institution of the Sabbath. Every week the Sabbath grants the unbeliever a much needed physical rest. In 1890, Kuyper, who later became the Dutch Prime Minister, insisted that the state should hallow the Sabbath in public life by limiting the Sunday employment of its public servants to necessary mili-

Instead of seeing the fourth commandment as a burden to bear, it should send a flash of heavenly joy surging through our hearts.

tary activities and upholding legislation to procure silence during public worship and to ensure cessation of normal worldly business; and he insisted, too, that private citizens close their business. In practice, today it seems that his views on the Sabbath have become wishful thinking. Klaas Schilder held that already in paradise the Sabbath was symbolic for the rest that remains for the people of God. G. Brillenburg Wurth spoke up for the Lord's Day as the central feast day of the Christian life. The day is meant to be a day of freedom and enjoyment for every worker; a day of sanctified feasting.

A Day of Gladness

Our Lord transformed Sunday into a day of joy and gladness (cf. Psalm 118:24). But how many view it instead as a day to endure? Before his conversion under the ministry of D. L. Moody, Charles T. Studd (1862-1931) said he used to think that religion was a Sunday thing, "like one's Sunday clothes, to put away on Monday morning. We boys were brought up to go to church regularly, but, although we had a kind of religion, it didn't amount to much. It was like having a toothache. We were always sorry to have Sunday come, and glad when it was Monday morning. The Sabbath was the dullest day of the whole week, and just be-

cause we got the hold of the wrong of religion."

But from the Biblical perspective, each Lord's day is a celebration of hope. A great many disputes about how to keep the Sunday as a holy day would disappear if we cared more to look from that perspective upon the Lord's Day. In the fourth commandment Christians hear God's jubilant declaration that Christ has borne the curse resting upon creation (Galatians 3). The resurrection of our Lord on the first day of the week is one of THE great events in God's plan of salvation. The Lord is Victor! He overcame Satan, suffering, death, and hell. The door to God's heavenly home is now open. With this in mind every Sunday becomes a feast day. Each Lord's day is a day of celebrating our new creation in Christ through the Spirit.

Our life is now filled with purpose. Through our Savior all the days of our week are now holy to the Lord. Instead of seeing the fourth commandment as a burden to bear, it should send a flash of heavenly joy surging through our hearts. When we remember who we are in God's sight as we gather on the Lord's Day for worship, a church service will not be a horrible bore. It will give it beauty and delight beyond all other delights; if it is truly celebrated in His name. The Lord's

The value of work lies not in itself nor in the worth it gives us, but in the worship of God that takes place in it.

Day, therefore, is not the dullest day of the week as Charles T. Studd experienced it before his conversion. On that day, man does as his Creator did, he ceases from his daily labors.

If we keep in mind that from the beginning of creation God meant the Lord's day to be a feast for man to enjoy, we will think twice before we desecrate it. The practice of keeping the Lord's day holy does not mean running away from the multitude of problems our world experiences. It gives us, instead, the opportunity to receive the grace to face them. Let us call the Lord's day a delight and by our behavior on that day show that we really rejoice in this day of rest and fellowship with the Lord and His people. Worship is a feast, a delightful experience, a holy time in the presence of God.

In *Keeping The Sabbath Wholly: Ceasing, Resting, Embracing, Feasting*, Marva Dawn points out that the Sabbath is a sign of liberation. In our culture, which attaches so much value to work and productivity, our weekly ceasing reminds us that the value of work lies not in itself nor in the worth it gives us, but in the worship of God that takes place in it.

Even the way we dress for worship makes a statement regarding Sunday observance. Dawn argues

that we should dress with particular care on Sundays. We do not dress to show off one's finery to others, but to be duly respectful before God and to honor Him. This, of course, rebukes the seeker services' "come-as-you-are-attitude." Dawn rightly says that you should not go to church dressed ready to go to the beach, or give the impression you have just rolled out of bed. Reverence should be restored to contemporary worship.

When do we prepare for the Lord's day? When we still lived in the Netherlands, I vividly recall how my parents began preparing for the Lord's day on Saturday. At our home, the Sunday was always a "feast-day," never a joyless burden. This Saturday preparation has also spiritual significance. Karen Burton Mains, author of *Making Sunday Special*, emphasizes that our Saturday habit of getting ready for Sunday is "the discipline of getting ready for the Lord's final coming."

What is the task of the church? Many churches are increasingly limiting their acts of worship to the Sunday morning service, thus reflecting the pressures of the world. They are rapidly converting the Lord's Day into the "Lord's Half-day." To accommodate the preferences of some "worshippers," some seek a day

that will suit these people. But we may not shift our worship to an alternative day of the week to suit seekers or ourselves. The celebration of the Lord's Day is also part of the Gospel. The church should not surrender to the secularization and consumerism of our times. She should oppose the godless tendency to make the Lord's Day a normal working-day with continuous labor. In any way possible the Christian should avoid such labor, in protest against the increasing profanation of the Christian Sabbath. The church may not remain silent. It is her task to proclaim the will of God expressed in the fourth commandment and to protest, privately and publicly, against profaning the Lord's Day. The correct understanding of Scripture passage like Genesis 2:2,3 and Colossians 2:16, 17 with emphasis on the difference between the Jewish and Christian Sabbath should be preached from the pulpit and taught in catechism classes.

As we study God's Word, we are shown where to find our spiritual rest. When we are genuinely freed from the bondage of sin by the grace of God, we have found rest for our soul. Consequently, we will become deliberate about our choices about the Lord's day observance in order to live truly as we want to live in response to the grace of God. We are then committed to Biblical principles and, therefore, live in accordance with them as fully as we can. By keeping the Lord's day holy, we are making it clear that we are not going to do what everybody else does.

Each Lord's day reminds us of God's rest. The latter offers a foretaste of eternal life. Someday we shall know God's rest in its fullness. The celebration of the Lord's day is one way to anticipate our going to our heavenly home and, in part, to experience its joy now.

Why celebrate the Lord's day? In *The Covenantal Sabbath* Francis Nigel Lee gives this thoroughly biblical answer: After all, it is the Lord's Day, not ours! It is His day, and it must be hallowed. Like St. John the Divine, we too should be in the Spirit on the Lord's Day (Revelation 1:10) - and not in the flesh! For like the apostle John, on the Lord's Day we too must not only look back to the Day of God's Creation rest (John 5:17-18), but also forward to that Day to which all Lord's days point - the Day of the Lord! (Revelation 1:7,10, 17-20). "Amen, even so, come, Lord Jesus!"

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Looking Above

A Series on The Revelation of Jesus Christ

Revelation 6:9-11

The Souls Under the Altar

What did you expect? Did you think Christianity would be a life of ease? Did you think it would be a walk in the park? Did you think this vile world would be a friend to grace? Did you think this world would help you on to God?

What did you expect? A "health and wealth" gospel? A "name it and claim it" promise? A "power of positive thinking" outlook on life? A "feel-good" religion? A religion that gives you "warm fuzzy" feelings? A religion that consists of little more than everyone joining hands and singing "Kum-ba-yah"?

What did you expect? A pre-tribulation rapture, sparing you from any form of persecution? A golden-age, sparing you from any form of suffering?

What did you expect of the Christian life? Revelation 6:9-11 sets before us a most sobering and realistic picture, as it answers that question. Do you want to know what you can expect in the Christian life? Read Revelation 6:9-11.

As we make our way through the book of Revelation, we find that the imagery intensifies. The images become more horrific; the scenes more terrifying; the issues more pressing. We have come to expect that. We see it here once again. If you thought the opening of the first four seals was disturbing, wait until you see what the fifth seal shows

you! If you thought the riding forth of the four horsemen of the apocalypse was unsettling, wait till you see the unveiling of the fifth seal!

"When He opened the fifth seal, I saw under the altar the souls of those who had been slain for the word of God and for the testimony which they held" (6:9). The fifth seal is opened and we see "souls." The souls are not in possession of their bodies. Their bodies are in the ground, returning to the dust from which they came. We see only souls—these are those who have died.

The Souls of the Martyrs

John tells us as much: "I saw under the altar the souls of those *who had been slain.*" Not only are these the souls of those who have died, these are the souls of those who have been killed; these are the souls of those who have died a violent death; these are the souls of those who have been stoned, who have been beheaded, who have been hanged, and who have been sawn in two. These are the souls of those who have been burned as lamps to illumine the arena, those who have been thrown to the lions, those who have been counted as sheep for the slaughter. These are the souls of those who have been slain.

For what reason have they been slain? *For the Word of God and for the testimony which they held.*

These are the martyrs: those who have died for the faith, those who have died for the Word of God, who have died for the testimony which they held, who have died because they refused to recant, who have died because they held to the Word of God though it cost them their life, who held to the testimony and sealed it with their blood.

These are the souls of the martyrs. These are the souls of all those who have died for the faith from the time of Christ's ascension to this very day. One of those souls is the soul of Stephen, the first martyr; his soul is there. The souls of the apostles are also there. History holds that Peter was crucified head down; James was beheaded at Jerusalem; Andrew was crucified on an X shaped cross; Nathanael was beheaded; Matthew was killed with a sword; Thomas was run through with a lance; the other James was thrown from a tower, stoned, and then sawn in pieces; Judas, not Judas Iscariot, was shot to death with arrows; Paul was most likely beheaded. These are the traditions of history, and though we cannot prove the accounts, they are by all means likely and probable. The souls of the apostles are there.

The soul of Polycarp, who died a martyr at the age of 86, is there. He was brought into the arena and commanded to say of the Christians, "Away with the Atheists." He replied by waving his hand toward the spectators in the arena and saying, "Away with the Atheists." When he was threatened with wild beasts, he said, "Bring them on!" When he was threat-

ened with fire, he said, "You threaten me with fire, the pains of which last for an hour, but the pains of eternal fire await you!" He was burned at the stake. He did not recant. The soul of Polycarp is there.

The soul of Blandina is there. She was tortured with every torture known to man, and would not recant. She was burned upon a hot iron chair, and she would not recant. She was suspended from a stake as food for the wild beasts, and she would not recant, and the beasts did not touch her. She was finally placed in a net and thrown to a wild bull, which finally killed her. She did not recant. The soul of Blandina is there.

The soul of John Huss is there. The soul of William Tyndale is there. The soul of Guido de Bres, the author of the Belgic Confession, is there. The souls of the martyrs are there.

The number of those perishing for the faith is being added to daily. The last century was a century of persecution in which more Christians died for their faith than in all the previous centuries combined. In 1915, Turkish authorities killed over 600,000 Armenians, most of them Christians. The souls of those martyrs are there. Lenin said "there can be nothing more abominable than religion," and he ordered the persecution of the

Russian Orthodox church. Stalin extended that persecution to all believers. The souls of those martyrs are there. In 1956 the Auca Indians of Ecuador killed Jim Elliot, Pete Fleming, Ed McCulley, Roger Younderian, and Nate Saint. The souls of those martyrs are there. And what of the ten thousand Cambodian Christians slain in 1975? The souls of those martyrs are there. What of the Christians slain in China? What of the Christians slain in Iran? What of the Christians slain in Indonesia? The souls of those martyrs are there. Such martyrdom continues to the present day.

And where does John see these souls of the martyrs? He sees them "under the altar." This is not the altar of incense that stood in the Holy Place just before the curtains of the Holy of Holies. This is the altar of sacrifice that stood in the outer court and upon which the animals were sacrificed, their blood being poured out at the base of the altar. Do you see the imagery? Where you would see the blood of the sacrifice on the Old Testament altar, you now see the souls of the martyrs! Their blood has been poured out, as they have sealed their faith in death.

That is the scene set before you in the opening of the fifth seal. In view are the souls of all the mar-

Where you would see the blood of the sacrifice on the Old Testament altar, you now see the souls of the martyrs!

As disturbing and unsettling as this passage is, it also hints, in the most tender of terms, at the comfort that is ours.

tyrs who have died for the faith, from the time of Christ's ascension to the time of His return on the clouds of glory.

The Cry of the Martyrs

These martyrs cry out in verse 10: "And they cried with a loud voice, saying, 'How long, O Lord, holy and true, until You judge and avenge our blood on those who dwell on the earth?'"

This is a cry for vengeance! Notice it is the cry of those who have already been slain. It is the cry of the souls in heaven. It is not the cry of the Christian on earth! The soul of Stephen in heaven today cries out "How long, O Lord, holy and true, until You judge and avenge our blood on those who dwell on the earth?" That was not his cry in martyrdom. Then he cried, "Lord, do not charge them with this sin." In his death, he was conformed to his Savior. You remember the cry of Christ on the cross: "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do!"

The cry for vengeance comes only from the souls in heaven, not from those who still dwell upon the earth. Even in suffering, even in persecution, yes, even in death, the cry of the martyr is that of the martyr's Lord: "Father, forgive!"

Why the cry for vengeance from the souls in heaven? Because they

stand in glory, and their cry is based on the character of God. They call Him "Lord", and rightly so, for He has absolute power and authority. They call Him "holy and true", and in His holiness and truth, He must judge sinners. This He will do. He has said, "It is Mine to avenge; I will repay." For this judgment the souls under the altar cry out. They are crying out for the vindication of God.

And you see the Lord's response, verse 11: "Then a white robe was given to each of them; and it was said to them that they should rest a little while longer, until both the number of their fellow servants and their brethren, who would be killed as they were, was completed."

They are given a white robe and commanded to rest. The white robe is the righteousness of Christ. They have been liberated by Christ; they have been consecrated by Christ; they have been crowned by the Lamb in the righteousness of the Lamb. And they rest. Already now they enjoy the eternal Sabbath rest. That is their condition.

Yet justice is delayed. Their blood has not yet been avenged. Final judgment has not yet been poured out upon their enemies, which are also the enemies of Christ. Though they stand clothed in the

righteousness of Christ, and though they already enjoy Sabbath rest, they anxiously await the final judgment.

When shall that judgment come? John tells us: "they should rest a little while longer, *until both the number of their fellow servants and their brethren, who would be killed as they were, was completed.*"

Do you find that phrase disturbing? Do you find it unsettling? You should! This tells you what you can expect of the Christian life. There are many yet to be killed as these martyrs were killed. What can you expect, Christian? Persecution, suffering, torture, even death. You are called fellow servants and brothers of these souls under the altar! Do you get the point? Your blood may very well run with theirs!

The Comfort of the Martyrs

As disturbing and unsettling as this passage is, it also hints, in the most tender of terms, at the comfort that is ours: comfort in the midst of persecution, comfort in the midst of suffering, comfort in the midst of torture, comfort in the midst of death.

Note again the place of these souls: they are under the altar. This is the altar by which you enter the presence of God. This is the altar of sacrifice—the altar of the cross. Christ laid down His life on the altar of the cross. And the blood of the Lamb that was sacrificed upon that cross pours down and it covers those souls under the altar. Yes, dear child of God, you are covered in the blood of the Lamb. Let the

blood of the Lamb—that blood that covers you—let that blood speak to you of how precious you are in the sight of your God!

So precious in the sight of the Lord is the death of His saints, He has ordained that judgment will not come until the number of the martyrs is complete! God knows the number! He knows the number of the elect! He knows the number of His children! He knows every last one of them, and not a hair can fall from their heads apart from His sovereign will! Notice that! God measures the time until the judgment by the blood of the martyrs! As Dennis Johnson has put it: “The days on God’s calendar are marked off, one by one, in the blood of the martyrs.”

As each martyr dies, the cry of the souls under the altar increases. When Stephen died, as the first martyr, it was a lonely cry. But the cry of the apostles soon joined his cry. And the souls of the early Christians soon joined the cry of the apostles. And the cry of the Reformers soon joined the cry of the early Christians. And the cries of those who died in the last century has joined the cry of the Reformers. Think of it! All the martyrs who have died for the Word of God and for the testimony that they held—from the time of the Ascension of Christ to this very day, and to this very moment—are crying out in heaven: “How long, O Lord, holy and true, until You judge and avenge our blood on those who dwell on the earth?”

Do you think that cry falls on deaf ears? Do you think that cry goes unheeded? This is the cry of souls

for whom Christ died! This is the cry of souls for whom the Lamb gave His life! This is the cry of those who have been purchased by the blood of the Lamb! This is the cry of those who have been loved by the Lamb with an everlasting love! Do you think their cry falls on deaf ears?!

How foolish the wicked! How foolish those who would persecute Christians! How foolish those who would put to death the followers of Christ! They stoned Stephen and thought that Jesus Christ, the Cornerstone, would remain silent! They threw the Christians to the lions and thought that the Lion of the Tribe of Judah would remain silent! They burned Christians at the stake and thought that He whose eyes are like flames of fire would remain silent! They thrust Christians through with the sword, and thought that He who will strike the nations with the sword of His mouth would remain silent! How foolish the wicked!

Do you think the cry of the souls under the altar falls on deaf ears? Then look at the opening of the sixth seal. There you have the answer. There, in verses 12-17, you have the answer to the cry of the martyrs. The Day of Judgment is the answer to the cry of the souls under the altar. And don’t be fooled, it is only a “little time” until that day.

This, then, is what you can expect. This is the life of the church. This is the life of the Christian. You can expect persecution. You can expect suffering. You can expect torture. You can expect death. It is a most sobering and realistic picture. Not what you expected? Then you had better study church history. Not what you expected? Then you had better read your Bible. You had better read the Word of God.

And you had better hold to the Word of God. There is a distinction here, a distinction between those who hold to the Word of God and the testimony and those who dwell upon the earth. There is a separation between the sheep and the goats. There is a separation between the wheat and the tares. There are those who claim to be Christian and yet do not hold to the Word of God. There are those who claim to be Christian and yet do not hold to the testimony. There are those who claim to be Christian and yet have no regard for the blood of Christ. There are those who claim to be Christian and yet have no regard for the righteousness of Christ. There are those who claim to have faith, but it is not saving faith.

What is true faith? True faith clings to Christ. It clings to Christ in persecution. It clings to Christ in suffering. It clings to Christ in death. And in clinging to Christ it is conformed to Christ. As Christ was accounted as a sheep before the

***God measures the time until the judgment by
the blood of the martyrs!***

slaughter, and as He was killed, so also the Christian. Paul says, “we are accounted as sheep for the slaughter; we are killed all the day long.”

What then is your comfort, Christian, as you face persecution, suffering, even death? Your comfort is this: “In all these things we are more than conquerors through Him who loved us. For I am persuaded that neither death nor life, nor angels nor principalities nor powers, nor things present nor things to come, nor height nor depth, nor any other created thing, shall be able to separate us from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus our Lord.”

Your enemies may bring you tribulation, distress, persecution, famine, nakedness, or peril. They may bring you the sword and kill you all the day long, but this they cannot do: they cannot separate you from the love of God that is yours in Christ Jesus your Lord!

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

Press Release of the meeting of the combined committees of the Canadian Reformed and United Reformed Churches

to propose a common church order held March 13-16, 2006 at the United Reformed Church of Dutton, Michigan

Present were Dr. Nelson Kloosterman, Rev. William Pols, Rev. Ronald Scheuers, and Rev. Raymond Sikkema representing the United Reformed Churches in North America (URCNA), and Dr. Gijsbert Nederveen, Mr. Gerard J. Nordeman, Rev. John VanWoudenberg and Dr. Art Witten of the Canadian Reformed Churches (CanRC). Mr. Harry VanGurp representing the URCNA was unable to attend due to illness.

Dr. Kloosterman opened the meeting with a brief meditation on Galatians chapter 1, and prayer.

The minutes of the November 1-3, 2005 meeting were reviewed and approved, as were the agenda and timetable for the next three days.

Correspondence was received from five United Reformed and Canadian Reformed Churches and individuals interacting with the committee’s reports and press releases. Feedback from the churches is much appreciated. Comments will be taken into consideration when the committee deals with the relevant articles. Requests for copies of the proposed Joint Church Order (JCO) as completed thus far cannot be accommodated. The work to this point is not a completed product. It remains open to further evaluation

and revision. At each meeting the committee has returned to various articles and made changes reflecting concerns communicated to the committee by the churches. Also again at this meeting various changes were made. Foundational Principles 5, 6, and 10 were revised to improve logical clarity and now reads:

FP 5: In its subjection to its heavenly Head, the universal church is governed by Christ from heaven by means of His Word and Spirit with the keys of the kingdom, which He has given to the local church for that purpose. Therefore, no church may lord it over another church. (Matthew 16:19; 23:8; John 20:22-23; Acts 14:23; 20:28-32).

FP 6: The offices of minister, elder, and deacon are local in authority and function. The Lord gave no permanent universal, national, or regional offices to His church by which the churches are to be governed. Therefore, no office-bearer may lord it over another office-bearer. (Acts 14:23; 16:4; 20:17, 28; Ephesians 4:11-16; Titus 1:5).

FP 10: Member churches

An elder and deacon are always ordained again upon subsequent entry to office.

meet together in broader assemblies to manifest ecclesiastical unity, to guard against human imperfections, and to benefit from the wisdom of many counselors. The decisions of such assemblies are settled and binding among the churches unless they are contrary to Scripture, the Reformed Confessions, or the commonly adopted Church Order.” (Proverbs 11:14; Acts 15:1-35; I Corinthians 13:9-10; II Timothy 3:16-17).

The phrase “commonly adopted” is important to show that the Church Order is not imposed, but is commonly accepted.

Broad Divisions and JCO article 1 were combined and revised for the sake of clarity, consistency, and structural improvement as follows:

1. Article re: Purpose and Divisions of the Church Order - For maintaining proper ecclesiastical order (I Corinthians 14:40), the Church Order must regulate the offices; the assemblies; the supervision of doctrine, worship, sacraments, and ceremonies; and the discipline. Therefore, we order our ecclesiastical relations and activities under the following divisions:

I. Offices (Articles 2 -)

II. Assemblies (Articles)

III. Worship, Sacraments, and Ceremonies (Articles)

IV. Discipline (Articles)

Minor changes in grammar and styling were made to a number of articles without changing the substance in any way. More thought will be given to the article regarding churches with a small number of office-bearers and to what extent the deacons may be involved in work that belongs to the office of elder.

The article regarding the reconciliation of a member was revised. The reconciliation of a member, whose sin is public or has become public because the admonition of the church was despised, shall take place only upon evidence of genuine repentance, and in a manner which best promotes the edification of the church. The consistory shall determine whether, for the welfare of the congregation and the sinner, the member shall be required to confess the sin publicly.

Matters left over from the previous meeting were reviewed. Two brothers have been found willing to edit the proposed church order for style and clarity.

One of the committee members was asked to correlate the pro-

posed church order with the church order of Dort. This document can later be changed to form a three or four column document for usage by the churches in reviewing the JCO.

Regarding Dort art. 18 it was decided to not include reference to Professors of Theology in our Church Order.

A discussion on whether elders and deacons who have served before are installed or ordained, resulted in the understanding that the responsibility and authority of office do not extend beyond a term of ordination. Therefore an elder and deacon are always ordained again upon subsequent entry to office. The title and body of the relevant article were changed accordingly.

Dort article 26 dealing with the involvement of deacons in institutions established for the care of the poor, and article 45 regarding written records and minutes of broader assemblies were deemed outdated and not necessary in a new church order.

Regarding Dort 57 requiring a father to present his child for baptism, it was decided that an equivalent article is not needed in the JCO. It is neither in the URC or CanRC church order. The background for the stipulation of Dort 57 is not male headship, but rather that in the Reformed churches the Roman Catholic practice of using god-parents or sponsors, who acted as spiritual fathers and mothers for the children, could be found. (cf. VanDellen and Monsma, 1941 ed., p 239-240.) The article dealing

with the baptism of covenant children was amended to incorporate the responsibility of parents to present their children for baptism as soon as feasible.

The article about admission to the pulpit once again received considerable attention. After extensive deliberation the following was adopted as an article regarding Admission to the Pulpit.

Consistories shall permit men to administer the Word and Sacraments only according to the following stipulations:

A. The consistory must give its consent before any minister may preach the Word or administer the sacraments in the congregation. Such consent shall be given only to ministers of churches within the federation and to ministers of churches in ecclesiastical fellowship.

B. The consistory must give its consent before any licentiate or candidate may exhort in the congregation. Such consent shall be given only to licentiates and candidates within the federation and to licentiates and candidates of churches in ecclesiastical fellowship.

C. Any exception to either of these requirements shall be granted only occasionally, only to ministers, licentiates, and candidates who faithfully subscribe to the Reformed Confessions, and only with prior approbation of classis.

The committee could complete the proposed wording for an article dealing with the receiving and leaving of members:

A. The Reception of Members

Members from churches within the federation or churches with which the federation has ecclesiastical fellowship shall be received under the spiritual care of the consistory upon the receipt of a testimony attesting their soundness in doctrine and life. Others shall be admitted only after the consistory has examined them concerning doctrine and life. In such cases the consistory shall determine whether a public profession of faith shall be required.

B. The Departure of Members

1. Members departing to a church within the federation or a church with which the federation has ecclesiastical fellowship shall submit a written request to the consistory which shall send a letter to such a church requesting it to accept them under its spiritual care.

2. Members withdrawing to affiliate with a church

with which the federation has no ecclesiastical fellowship shall submit a written request to the consistory. Having urged them to maintain unity in the truth and love of the gospel, the consistory shall acquiesce to their withdrawal.

3. Members resigning from the church shall be warned against this sin. If they persist by giving a signed statement of their resignation, the consistory shall acquiesce to their resignation.

Also an article dealing with property was finalized subject to review by a legal professional.

A. All property, whether real or personal, held by a local church for the benefit of that local church, shall remain the property of that local church in accordance with its own by-laws or regulations and the governing laws of the jurisdiction in which the church is located.

B. All property, whether real or personal, held for the benefit of the federation by a local church, a classis or synod or a committee, trustee or trustees thereof, or otherwise, shall be held

The article dealing with the baptism of covenant children was amended to incorporate the responsibility of parents to present their children for baptism as soon as feasible.

in trust as property in common of all of the churches within the federation, in accordance with the rules and regulations adopted by classes or synods of the federation. In the event a local church withdraws from the federation, unless the rules and regulations of the federation provide otherwise, the withdrawing church shall cease to have any benefit in such property.

C. Notwithstanding the laws of the jurisdiction in which a local church is located, the final authority for any acquisition or disposition of property by a local church, whether real or personal, shall be the council of that church in accordance with the church's own by-laws or regulations, regardless of how the property is held.

D. Any appeals to broader assemblies with respect to property shall be governed by this article.

Regarding the Church's Mission Calling the committee proposes that each church shall fulfill its mission calling, which is to preach the Word of God to the unconverted at home and abroad with the goal of establishing churches. This shall be carried out by missionaries who are ministers of the Word set apart for this labor by being called, supported, and supervised by their consistories for this task. Such missionaries shall proclaim the Word of God, and

administer the sacraments to those who have come to faith. They shall also institute church offices according to the provisions of the Church Order. The consistory shall promote the involvement of church members in labor and service that assist fulfilling this mission calling. If necessary, a calling church shall invite churches within its classis or regional synod to cooperate by agreement regarding the field, support, and oversight of the mission work.

The committee also proposes an article regarding the church's evangelism calling. Each church shall fulfill its evangelism calling according to the Word of God and relying on the Holy Spirit, which is to make known the good news of Jesus Christ to those within its area of life and influence. It shall seek to persuade those who do not know God or are estranged from God and His service to follow the Lord Jesus Christ, which necessarily includes affiliating with His church through profession of faith.

Agreement was also reached for the article on marriage. Scripture teaches that marriage is to be a lifelong monogamous union between a man and a woman. Consistories shall instruct and admonish those under their spiritual care who are considering marriage to marry only in the Lord. The minister, as authorized by the consistory, shall solemnize only marriages that accord with Scripture using the form for the solemnization of marriage adopted by general synod.

The article dealing with the observance and revision of the Church Order was formulated as follows: These articles, relating to the lawful order of the church, having been drafted in accord with the Foundational Principles and adopted by common consent, shall be observed diligently. Only when the good order and welfare of the churches make it necessary, shall this church order be revised. Any revision of the church order can be adopted only by a general synod.

Wording of various ordination examinations was also agreed upon.

The last hour of the third day was used to review the agenda for the next meeting. The next meeting will take place, D.V., August 22-24, 2006 at the Dutton United Reformed Church, MI.

Appreciation was expressed to the Dutton URC for its hospitality and the assistance received from the church's secretary, Beth Bouman. Dr. Kloosterman, in his closing remarks, stated his thankfulness to the Lord for the brotherly manner in which the committee could proceed with its labors and the amount of work that could be accomplished. To God be the praise and glory.

For the committee
Gerard J. Nordeman

The Importance of the Ascension of Jesus

In many of our churches, if not all, the attendance at the Ascension Day Service has become rather slim. It certainly is not what it should be. With the possible exception of Prayer Day, the Congregation is smaller on Ascension Day than on any of the times the Elders of the Church call the congregation to gather for worship. Other religious holidays on the church calendar from Christmas to Good Friday and Easter are better attended, as are the gatherings that meet for the non-holy days of the year, such as New Year's Day and Thanksgiving.

What is the explanation for this? The reason certainly can not be that the ascension of our Lord was an event of minor importance when compared to His birth, death, and resurrection. Two of the reasons given as to why people fail to worship on Ascension Day are insignificant, to say the least.

The first excuse given is that the Ascension Day Service happens to fall on a weeknight, in the spring of the year. The lure of nature with its field work, gardens, and the like, beckon us to be outdoors rather than in church. The second excuse is that there seems to be a total lack of interest in the ascension of Christ on the part of the general public. Unlike Christmas, Thanksgiving, and other holidays, Ascension Day is scarcely mentioned in the

newspapers. In fact, few calendars even list Ascension Day anymore. Those who have to plan services for this day are found counting the forty days following Easter to make certain that the worship service is on the right day. I recall several years ago an elder bemoaning the fact that his church was the only one that had advertised an Ascension Day Service in the newspaper. He regretted that other churches were not honoring the day as they should. I hesitated to point out that the day his church had planned for the worship service was a week early. His immediate reply was, "I suppose then we got Pentecost wrong, too."

If the balmy breezes of Spring and the indifferent attitude of an unbelieving world toward the ascension of Jesus account for our indifference to this important event, then our spiritual life must be at a very low point. How thoughtless we have become toward this holy day! If our estimation of the significance of this day depends upon whether or not Hallmark has latched onto it, we, indeed, are to be pitied! Rather let us return to the real importance of this day and its intrinsic value in light of the Word of God. From a Scriptural point of view Ascension Day is no less important than Christmas Day. Why should the return of Christ into glory be of less interest to us than His coming to us from glory?

The return of Christ into heaven was not a sad event. In Luke 24, when Jesus departed from His disciples and was carried into heaven, they returned to Jerusalem with great joy. The farewell discourses of their Lord on the night of His betrayal had not been spoken in vain. They understood now what He meant when He had told them: "Let not your heart be troubled," "in My Father's house are many rooms," "I go to prepare a place for you." How emphatically and lovingly Christ had reassured them that His departure would be a blessing instead of a calamity. It would be gain, not loss, for then the Comforter could come who would teach them all things.

The benefits of the ascension of Christ are among the most precious gifts of the Savior to His Church. The first of these is His high priestly intercession for His saints. The perfect merits of Christ's sacrifice on the cross must be presented to the Father. In doing this, Christ prepares a place for us. That ceaseless intercession remains necessary for as long as we commit sin. We, who are declared righteous before God, can only be declared righteous through Christ. Since the merits of Christ cannot be detached from His Person, and since He is our merit before God, God can bear with us only through the constant presence of Him who is our righteousness before Him. Without the ascension of Christ there would be no intercession made on our behalf, and therefore, no salvation.

The second benefit of our Lord's ascension is the outpouring of the Holy Spirit. The acceptance by the Father of Christ's sacrifice on the cross resulted in sending forth the Holy Spirit to abide with His church forever. The regeneration of dead souls, the application to our hearts of all the blessings of salvation, the endowment of the Church with all the rich gifts and blessings of the Holy Spirit all hinged upon the ascension of our Lord and Savior. Since, through the Holy Spirit, Christ is spiritually present with all His followers at all times, we may say that Jesus left His Church in order to remain with it and to fulfill His promise: "Lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age."

Our Lord's ascension, in the third place, is also a mighty incentive to heavenly mindedness. In one of its most touching answers, the Heidelberg Catechism explains the advantages of Christ's ascension into heaven and points to the fact that, "He sends us His Spirit as an earnest, by whose power we seek the things which are above, where Christ is seated on the right hand of God, and not things on earth." Christ, our Head, is not on earth, but in heaven. We, His members, should not set our hearts on earthly things but on heavenly things and begin to live the heavenly life while we are still on the earth.

Could it be that the prevailing earthly mindedness in the Church explains to a great extent the lack of interest in the ascension of Christ? There can hardly be a doubt that a lack of spirituality

would lessen a person's interest in this day. Likewise there can be no doubt that an increase in spirituality among those who profess the Lord would heighten their interest in this great event in the life of their Savior.

The ascension of Christ is too vital a subject to be proclaimed from our pulpits before a small audience. Please give careful thought to this subject and make it a point

to be in God's house to celebrate the ascension of our Lord this month.

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

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Finding Happiness in God

In his epistle to the church in first-century Colossae, the apostle Paul expressed his thanksgiving for the faith that the Colossians had in Jesus Christ and for the love which they had for one another. Faith and love are the two indispensable elements found in the heart of every true Christian. But they only stand at the beginning point of the Christian life! That is why Paul immediately went on to say that he prayed for the Colossians that they would be “increasing in the knowledge of God” (Colossians 1:10).

The Greek noun that Paul used—the word *epignosis*, translated “knowledge”—refers to a knowledge that is true, correct, and precise. Clearly, the will of God for all Christians—for all of us who trust in Christ for salvation and who love our brothers and sisters in the faith—is that we advance in our understanding of who God really is and what He is like.

Theologians who spend their lives in the study of the Scripture can help us to understand more clearly the teaching of the Bible on the nature of God. One of the great teachers of the church was Henry Bullinger, the sixteenth-century Zurich Reformed theologian. In the *Second Helvetic Confession* which Bullinger published in 1566—one of the great confessions of the Reformation period that was written by just one individual—we find a biblically-faithful testimony as to what God is like.

Bullinger declared,

We believe and teach that God is one in essence or nature, subsisting by himself, all-sufficient in himself, invisible, without a body, infinite, eternal, the Creator of all things both visible and invisible, the chief good, living, quickening and preserving all things, almighty and supremely wise, gentle or merciful, just and true. (Chapter III).

This indeed is what God is like according to the biblical revelation. But there is more to the witness of Scripture. It is a fundamental truth in the teaching of Paul that God is to be found in the person of Jesus Christ: “In Him all the fullness of Deity dwells in bodily form” (Colossians 2:9). The apostle sets forth this conception as to incarnation of the divine nature in the midst of an epistle dealing with an ancient heretical movement which entailed the worship of angels along with a corresponding depreciation of the pre-eminence of Christ (Colossians 2:18).

Thus, the apostle had to stress that Christ was the creator of all things,

including the angels! It was the Son of God who created everything that exists, “both in the heavens and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities” (Colossians 1:16). Here Paul affirms that every being in the angelic hierarchy of greater or lesser thrones—and their corresponding dominion, rulership, and authority—was actually created by Christ (the very divine person whom the Colossians were losing interest in)!

It is Christ, the creator who in reality is the chief good—that the medieval theologians called the *summon bonum*, the One in whom our happiness is to be found. Paul can say that “all things have been created” not only “through Him,” but also “for Him” (Colossians 1:16). It is obvious from this that Paul would contend that we humans should not expect to find our ultimate happiness in the accumulation of wealth, the acquiring of a famous name, or in the attainment of political power. We have been created, the apostle declares, “for Him.”

The nature of reality is such that only Christ himself can satisfy the longings of the human heart. This Pauline declaration was rooted, of course, in the Old Testament Scripture. In the Abrahamic covenant, the LORD informed Abraham as to where he would find the real pur-

The nature of reality is such that only Christ Himself can satisfy the longings of the human heart.

pose for living: “I am a shield to you; your very great reward” (Genesis 15:1).

Herman Witsius, the great Dutch Reformed theologian of the seventeenth century, aptly remarked that when God “gives Himself to man, He gives him all things” (*The Economy of the Covenants between God and Man*, I.293).

In light of the fact that God the Christ is everything for us (the One in whom we find eternal life and delight), let us remember the exhortation with which the apostle John concluded his first epistle: “Little children, guard yourselves from idols” (1 John 5:21). Surely, this is true wisdom, to keep ourselves from vain attachments and to hold to Him for whom we were made.

Dr. Larson is the home missions pastor at Providence Orthodox Presbyterian Church in Aiken, South Carolina.

Looking Out and About

- On Friday evening, March 24, 2006, Mr. James Sinke, a recent graduate of Mid-America Reformed Seminary, was ordained as the pastor of the newly organized United Reformed Church of Rock Valley, Iowa. The service took place at the United Reformed Church of Doon, Iowa. Rev. John Bouwers, the former pastor of the Sinke family and pastor of the Immanuel Orthodox Reformed Church of Niagara in Jordan, Ontario, preached the ordination sermon. Rev. Larry Johnson and Professor Mark Vander Hart also participated in the service.
- Sunday morning, March 26, 2006, marked the installation of the Rev. John Klompfen as the fifteenth pastor of the North Street Christian Reformed Church of Zeeland, Michigan. Rev. Carl Klompfen of Sioux Center, Iowa, the father of the newly installed pastor, preached the sermon of installation. Rev. David Klompfen and Rev. Mark Klompfen, brothers of Rev. John Klompfen, also participated in the installation service as did several other pastors.
- On Sunday morning, April 2, 2006, Mr. Talman Wagenmaker, who graduated from Mid-America Reformed Seminary last year, was ordained as the pastor of the Grace United Reformed Church of Waupun, Wisconsin. Rev. Wybren Oord, friend and former pastor of the Wagenmakers, conducted the service of ordination.
- Rev. Roger Sparks, who had served the Calvin Christian Reformed Church of Rock Valley, Iowa for fourteen years, has accepted a call extended to him by the Christian Reformed Church of Luverne, Minnesota.
- On March 24 and 25, 2006, over two hundred women from the United States and Canada gathered together at the Cornerstone United Reformed Church in Hudsonville, Michigan for the tenth annual women’s conference. Kathy Arrick and Lora Evans, who served as speakers, developed the conference theme, “Oil in My Lamp.”
- March 19, 2006 marked the organization of the Covenant Reformed Church of Lancaster, Pennsylvania, the newest congregation in the federation of the United Reformed Churches in North America. Rev. Rich Kuiken and Rev. Paul Murphy presided at the service which was attended by almost two hundred people. Rev. Steve Arrick, who on November 29, 2005 had been examined by Classis Eastern United States, was installed as pastor, as were one elder and two deacons. The congregation is presently meeting in the facility of the New Holland United Methodist Church, 120 W. Main street, New Holland, Pennsylvania.

THE LAW OF THE LORD AS OUR DELIGHT

By Dr. Nelson Kloosterman

North American Christianity has been ravaged by the kind of dispensationalism that separates the Old and the New Testaments and prefers the latter. By badly misreading the Bible and seriously misrepresenting the Bible's Author, this error leads far too many believers to be unsure, even downright negative, about the relevance of the Old Testament to modern living and Christian experience. People brought up on a diet of 'the New Testament and Psalms' suffer a kind of spiritual malnutrition that can take years to remedy.

With this as the first paragraph of the introduction from his study guide on the Book of Deuteronomy, Dr. Kloosterman sets both the pace and the tone of his effort to do something about the poor spiritual "eating habits" of many Christians today. Using *The Law of the Lord As Our Delight* to help study this Old Testament book will make a major contribution towards the cure for the "spiritual malnutrition" mentioned above. Here is a study for the serious student of Holy Scripture. Questions are provided after each of the 16 lessons that require much effort, but they will provide your study group much food for thought as well. This book is available from Reformed Fellowship. See the back cover for details.

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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.
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Coming up next month, D.V.

Rev. Ralph Pontier will provide a meditation about the struggles of Paul and Barnabas.

Rev. Mark Stromberg will continue his series on baptism as he writes about "Continuity in the Covenant of Grace."

Dr. J. R. Beeke will present an article on the life of Jonathan Edwards.

Rev. Daniel Hyde will offer a synopsis of Article 34 of the Belgic Confession which concerns itself with baptism. Rev. Hyde has also authored a book on baptism which Reformed Fellowship is in the process of publishing.

Mr. Shane Lems has written an article about Martin Luther and prayer.

Dr. Cornel Venema will present his next installment on paedocommunion.

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