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The Outlook



Dedicated to the Exposition and Defense of the Reformed Faith



• City of Love • Preaching the Saints • Baptism (III) • We Confess • Looking Above
• Seminary Commencement • Children in Covenant Observances (III) • Classis Reports URCNA

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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 City of Love

“Him that overcometh will I make a pillar in the temple of my God.”
(Revelation 3:12a)

Philadelphia--the city of brotherly love! What a beautiful name! But was it a fitting name? Not according to the Bible. Brotherly love can only exist and thrive where God is loved first of all, because love comes from Him. True brotherly love can only be found in the church of Jesus Christ where we love the Lord, and, from that love, also love each other.

That was the case in the congregation of Philadelphia. Of the seven letters in Revelation, this is one of the two where no criticism is heard. The Lord Jesus Christ, the Head of the church, praises this congregation. He says: “I know that you have little strength, yet you have kept my word and have not denied my name.” What a beautiful recommendation! What a priceless blessing to hear the Lord speak in such terms about this church.

The goal of the church must ever be to please her Lord, to walk in His ways, to stick to His gospel, and to proclaim His most wonderful name. Only then does the church live up to her holy calling: to glorify God and to be a blessing in a dying world.

We are living in a time of church growth conferences and religious seminars that seek to make the gospel relevant to our modern society. Almost anything is used or advocated to get people interested. More and more we hear of business methods from which the church

must learn. “The bigger the better” seems to be the recipe for a flourishing congregation. Huge churches have become the example of spiritual success. People travel from all over the world to learn how these congregations are able to draw thousands of worshippers to their services. Visitors are encouraged to “come as you are,” “feel free to explore,” “see what we have to offer,” “try what you like.” From day-care facilities and youth entertainment to retreats for battered women and dating services for singles, the modern church seeks to use any world-approved gimmick that comes along.

No, this meditation does not seek to make fun of the desire to have others come and know the Lord. There is always room for improvement. But to measure a church by its size or to claim that bigger is better, is not what we read in the Bible. We must let ourselves be taught by our Lord rather than by the hyped-up expectations and recommendations of a Christianity that no longer believes in the centrality of the Word. Needed today are faithful preaching, the proper use of the sacraments, and the obedient application of discipline as the means Christ uses to gather, preserve and increase His church.

Take the church at Philadelphia, for example. She was small in size and having little strength. Nevertheless she is praised by Christ! That praise comes not because she had a hun-

dred and one programs to cater to everyone’s desires, but because she stuck to His Word. They loved God and each other as the summit of what Christianity is all about. They were not ashamed of Jesus Christ but confessed Him as the source of their whole life.

The result was that doors were opened! Only Christ can do that through His Word and Spirit. He holds the key! When He opens no one shuts, and when He shuts no one opens. It does not matter what you do. It is totally irrelevant how much money you spend and how much advertising you get involved in. Only the Word, only the faithful proclamation of the gospel and the lifestyle that flows from and submits to that gospel, are the means that make a church grow, first of all spiritually, but if God wills, also numerically.

We Christians have no strength in ourselves. We often feel so small and insignificant in this world. We would love to see many turn to Christ. Yet when we cling to the gospel of grace, when we hold on to the Word of God, when we refuse to deny the name of the Holy One, not only on Sundays but also during the week, in politics and social matters, in our work and in our holidays, then we witness that the great majority have no interest in our message. By far, most people do not care for the church, nor do they see it as the bulwark and pillar of the truth.

They are far more interested in having their felt needs met in ways and by means that cater to their own desires instead of by the sword of the Spirit. That sword

cuts deep into our lives and it hurts. It has to hurt before it provides the only comfort that takes care of all our fears and anxieties.

The congregation in Philadelphia was praised by Jesus for having kept His word and not denying His name. This was not a matter of once or twice. This was not reserved for some special occasions, either. This is their way of life. That is how these believers lived. That was how this church presented herself in their unbelieving and idolatrous environment.

Denying yourself, refusing to opt for quick-fix solutions, fighting against your old nature and submitting to the Word of Christ in every facet of life, involves a constant war. But the rewards are glorious: not only is the Lord pleased to use your faithfulness so that others may be joined to His people, but great are the blessings that Christ has in store for everyone who overcomes or conquers.

The gospel of Jesus Christ does not promise you a life of health and wealth. Rather it speaks of suffering and patiently enduring the results of putting Christ and His Word first. You will not win popularity contests. You will not be wined and dined. Often you are only tolerated and sometimes not even that. But Christ says: I will preserve you amidst the troubles and hardships that belong to this life.

The concerted effort of the devil and his cronies is to deceive the elect, if that were possible. Do not worry, says our Lord, it will not happen. He will take care of that. Make sure you hold on to what you have. Fight the good fight of faith; treasure the gospel of grace; and do not be ashamed to confess His name. Society may ignore you and Christianity at large may pity you, but do not forget: when you are weak, then you are strong. When you do not expect it from yourself but live in dependence on His gracious power, then and only then will you overcome. And no one will take your crown.

This does not only apply to the Christians in Philadelphia, but also to the members of Christ's church today. We also have little strength in ourselves. We are weak and often fearful, but by the grace of God, we cling to the Word of Christ and do not deny His Name. By the mercies of the Lord we have no other desire but to hold on to what we have. We treasure what God has given us in the Reformed doctrines of salvation, where His glory comes first, and where we love our brothers and sisters.

That is why we are comforted by the promise of our text. What does Jesus say to all who overcome by holding on to His Word and loving the Lord and fellow believers? "I will make him a pillar in the temple of my God."

In the book of Psalms we read of believing Israelites longing to be in the temple where God dwelled. Jesus Christ says the day will dawn when all who overcome will be living with God in His holy temple. That is the new creation where God will dwell with His children. They will see Him face to face and always be in His blessed presence as pillars. God's name will be on their foreheads as well as the name of the New Jerusalem and the new name of Jesus Christ.

This is obviously symbolic language. To carry someone's name is a mark of ownership. Certainly, Christians already belong to the Lord, to the church, and to Jesus Christ. As yet, that is a matter of faith. As yet, we are constantly assailed by doubts and open to ridicule by those who oppose God and His people. But that will change! It is not going to last, for Jesus is coming. The New Jerusalem is already descending. It is only a matter of time. We do not know how long it will be, but the day will dawn when the heavens will rend, and our Savior will be seen on the clouds. He is not only coming in judgment for the unbelievers and hypocrites, but also to bring His children home, where they may live with God and Jesus Christ forever in the New Jerusalem.

As yet, we are strangers and exiles here on earth for our commonwealth is in heaven. When Christ returns, our pilgrimage will be over, and we will always be with our Lord. Then no one will ever have to doubt that we belong to God.

The redeemed creation has been purchased by the blood of Christ. We can not do without that blood

The concerted effort of the devil and his cronies is to deceive the elect.

for it is that blood upon which everything depends! That blood takes care of all our sins and proclaims that all is forgiven.

Let us glory in the grace of God and endeavor to be like the church of Philadelphia, the church of brotherly love. Let us together hold fast to what God has given us and accept all who rejoice with us in the gospel of Jesus Christ. Let us fight the good fight of faith. We remain weak in ourselves. We can not build the church, least of all open doors that others may come with us. Christ will do that. Only He has the key to the kingdom of God, but He uses that key in and thru our faithfulness to His word.

Christ does not measure His church by her size, but by her holding on to the Word of God. That Word not only needs to be preached, but lived as well. May that Word, that gospel of grace, bind us ever closer to the Lord and each other. May it cause us to long for the future, for we do not have an enduring city here, but we are looking for the city that is to come. Maranatha! Come, Lord Jesus! Amen.

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Preaching the Saints

Scripture establishes that Christians should follow the example of the biblical saints. The author of Hebrews, for example, explained Christian faith by pointing to the example of Abraham among others. Urging believers to imitate such faith, the author explained that “the world was not worthy” of them.

James also appealed to the example of Abraham: “Was not Abraham our father justified by works when he offered up his son Isaac on the altar... ‘Abraham believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness’—and he was called a friend of God” (James 2:21-23).

In the same manner, Paul asserted that Christians are justified by faith alone by appealing to the example of Abraham: “for if Abraham was justified by works, he has something to boast about, but not before God. For what does the Scripture say? ‘Abraham believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness’” (Romans 4:1-3).

Paul went on to explain who the children of Abraham are: “know then that it is those of faith who are the sons of Abraham,” and again, “in order that the promise may rest on grace and be guaranteed to all his offspring—not only to the adherent of the law but also to the one who shares the faith of Abraham, who is father of us all.”

Preachers should admonish their congregations to take the positive examples not only of Abraham, but other Old Testament saints as well: “As an example of suffering and pa-

tience, brothers, take the prophets who spoke in the name of the Lord.” These texts show clearly the Scriptural mandate to preach the examples of the biblical saints.

Abuses abound, however, in how the lives of the saints are exemplified. As a representative of the popular postmodern, uncertain worldview, Soren Kierkegaard struggled to understand how Christians were to take Abraham’s example. Kierkegaard wrote “in a certain crazy sense I admire (Abraham) more than all men... though he at the same time appalls me.”

What Kierkegaard found admirable in Abraham came from his apparent success in facing God’s difficult test of obedience. Yet Kierkegaard was also completely appalled at Abraham’s apparent willingness to commit such an atrocious deed as child sacrifice. Baffled at the wickedness and righteousness surrounding the same deed, Kierkegaard asked, “is it possible that this could be anything less than a temptation?”

After a thorough philosophical, psychological, and historical sweep through literature in attempt to unlock Abraham’s decision-making process, Kierkegaard concluded that Abraham’s example for us could only be understood as paradox. “Here again it appears that one may have an appearance of understanding Abraham, but only in the same way as one understands a paradox... there was no one who could understand him.” The only other suggestion Kierkegaard could give was that be-

For Gonzalez, the trial Abraham passed is the archetype by which all others will be judged.

cause revelation and tradition responded positively to Abraham, doing the same made sense. Abraham apparently pleased God with his actions, but the principles behind those actions were so mysterious that Kierkegaard claimed such principles could never be discovered.

The Roman Catholic theologian Angel Gonzalez believed Kierkegaard did not leave every stone unturned. Writing partly in response to Kierkegaard, Gonzalez presented a different approach to unlocking Abraham's example. While Kierkegaard tried to learn about Abraham's mind in the immediate moment of trial, binding himself to know only that which he believed Abraham to know, Gonzalez preferred assuming the whole context of Abraham's actions. In doing so, Gonzalez lost sight of Kierkegaard's goal to dive deeply into Abraham's isolated thought processes. Gonzalez instead approached from a systematic theology from which he was able to interpret all the saints' examples. In this system, Abraham's test not only neatly fit, but supremely reigned; "Abraham's action is an ideal and model."

Gonzalez's method claimed that the normal system by which Scripture functions is by trial of faith. For Gonzalez, in "the pages of holy Scripture we often come upon testings." He explained the purpose of Genesis 22 "is found in the 'testing' of Abraham's fidelity." These "testings" are trials that all men experience but only the saints, the true sons of

Abraham, pass. "Abraham was primordial among believers, and the risk he took requires an equal willingness in his heirs." For Gonzalez, the trial Abraham passed is the archetype by which all others will be judged.

In stark contrast with Kierkegaard's mixed view of Abraham, Gonzalez boldly claimed Abraham as super-example. This father of the faithful faced the trial with a "super-rational order of values," approached the test exercising the "extreme limits of rationality." From Gonzalez's perspective, Abraham was nearly deified by his example, "Abraham was greater than a real man." "Psychological (explanation) is audacious," Gonzalez said as Abraham's faith is "far beyond that of the rational world." This allows him to "perform the superhuman act" of this test of faith. Since all the children of faith must walk in his example, "Abraham's action is an ideal and a model" for believers, "binding and obliging... in which the sons of Abraham must walk."

This is not only how people are made sons of Abraham, but Gonzalez also concluded that men are justified by obedience through trial. "Every positive response forever defines a 'just' man." In high praise of Abraham, Gonzalez claimed "Abraham had ceased to be... Abraham was faith." In saying this, Gonzalez demonstrated the heart of Rome's views on justification.

For Gonzalez, Abraham is a clear and necessary example for Christians to follow, one of pure moralism; with man essentially becoming God with no

apparent need for Jesus' propitiation, and even no mention of Christ is made at all.

Rather than allowing the methods of Kierkegaard and Gonzalez to dominate the preaching of saints, a proper method exists. This method takes exhaustive analysis of the text at hand, the context, related passages; conclusions synthesized together and put under the submission of a biblically construed systematic theology. Graeme Goldsworthy gives a similar idea when he writes that "we need both because we must accurately describe the details and at the same time allow the big picture to contextualize the details."

This "big picture" centers around the idea of justification by the propitiation of Christ received through faith alone; the main theme developed in the Bible. The propitiation of Christ for justification stands in direct opposition to justification by moralism.

Longing better to understand Abraham's decision-making process, Kierkegaard quickly moved to examine philosophical, psychological, non-Christian religious and even fictional literary sources. Assuming the search for answers within Scripture alone to be insufficient, Kierkegaard displayed a close similarity to modern, mainstream liberal preaching by pursuing an outward-focused expansion from the text. In this manner, the liberal preacher can extrapolate from the unclear, mysterious text any kind of moral lesson, social concern, or philosophy he desires. Making sure the interpretation of the text synthesizes with a biblically construed systematic theology, where propitiation stays central, safeguards against inappropriate extrapolations.

Conservative preachers, looking for relief from the sometimes confusing examples of the saints, have also resorted to an outward-looking trend in the form of illustrations. Sometimes, preaching illustrations are more helpful to the puzzled minister than to the congregation, who would like the text explained—if possible. It is far easier for the minister to preach that Genesis 22 contains “the same lesson that the minister learned after cleaning fish with Aunt Sophie” than for the preacher to study carefully the text, context, related texts and synthesize the results with a biblically construed systematic theology.

Not far removed from these mistakes is the “allegorical” approach, where spiritualized projections meaning anything are not found in but thrust upon a text. Chapell wrote that modern resurrections of the allegorical method regularly occur when preachers assume that the Holy Spirit will enable them to discern something more or different in the text than what was meant by the biblical writer, or what we can demonstrate that the divine Author makes evident within the canon of Scripture.

Moralistic sermons can make their recipients susceptible to cults who very intentionally preach justification by works and challenge their hearers that they are guilty for failing the examples that Scripture has commanded. One such cult is the International Church of Christ, who especially targets the college campus and the typical Christian student. Typical evangelical students prove easy prey when their attempts to be a Daniel or an Abraham meet with honest, accurate, harsh, and seductive evaluation for the first time.

Such moralistic accountability could

easily derived from Genesis 22 as a proof-text: If one is not as immediately willing as Abraham was to give to God whatever God (or the church) asks; then one will not receive the promises of God because one has not proved oneself nearly perfect. Christ as Savior through His moral teachings replaces the propitiation of Christ as the center of such systematic theologies, and the results are frightening.

Calvin, on the other hand, made thorough exploration of the current text, context, and related texts; and realized that Christ’s propitiation is the central thrust of Scripture. Calvin instinctively noted the tone through the type of language with which God commanded Abraham to sacrifice Isaac.

Through Calvin’s careful study of the context, he observed that “Abraham reasons from the nature of God; that it is impossible for Him to do anything unjust... yet (Abraham) retains this principle, that it was impossible for God, who is the Judge of the world, and by nature loves equity, yea, whose will is the law of justice and rectitude, should in the least degree swerve from righteousness.”

No objection was verbalized by Abraham when he was commanded to sacrifice his son. The context shows that God promised progeny through Isaac, that Abraham knew the character of God to be good, and a related text shows that God had formed an intimate friendship with

Abraham. Calvin carefully observed from the context, (Abraham) had come to the conclusion, that (God) could not be his adversary... reconciled the command with the promise; because, being indubitably persuaded that God was faithful, he left the unknown issue to Divine Providence... with him the promise always flourished; because he both firmly retained the love with which God had once embraced him.

Abraham’s intimate history with God gave him hope. God had personally told Abraham to leave Ur so that God could bless him, God graciously spared Sarah twice while protecting Abraham from Pharaoh and Abimelech, God listened to Abraham’s humble request to spare Lot, and God promised Abraham four times that Isaac would have offspring prior to Genesis 22. From these promises, Calvin was able to note that Abraham was unwilling to measure, by his own understanding, the method of fulfilling the promise, which he knew depended on the incomprehensible power of God.”

Calvin noted that Abraham’s act of faith should be imitated, but realized the sinfulness inherent in all men. Denying Abraham’s example superstar status, Calvin preached “let us think that Abraham was no more made either of Iron or Steel than we are.” Abraham had been faithless prior to this trial. Even if it meant losing his wife, Abraham demonstrated selfishness and faithlessness by of-

Sometimes, preaching illustrations are more helpful to the puzzled minister than to the congregation, who would like the text explained — if possible.

fering Sarah for adultery twice to the rulers of the land, rather than putting himself in jeopardy. Abraham further presumed upon the Lord to sleep with Hagar to fulfill God's promise. Abraham would have already voided his hopes of pleasing God. Calvin preached, "That which is here set down of him is written for our instruction, to the end we might know, that although Abraham was even as weak a man as we are, yet he still strove and overcame whatsoever was contrary unto his faith, through the assistance of God."

Scripture presents a situation where the need for the righteousness of Christ is precisely because all mankind have failed their trials in Adam and in themselves, for Abraham "was even as weak a man as we are." Thus propitiation is desperately needed before a holy God.

Synthesizing all his biblical research with his biblical, faithful systematic theology, Calvin considered the purpose of Abraham's trial. "Let us, therefore, learn from his example, by no means, to pursue what our carnal sense may declare to be, probably, our right course; but let God, by His sole will, prescribe to us our manner of acting and of ceasing to act. And truly Abraham does not charge God with inconsistency, because he considers that there had been just cause for the exercising of his faith."

Abraham slowly learned that despite the fears, uncertainties, and dangers in this world, God's actions have "just cause for the exercising of his faith." At times Christians, like Abraham, must temporarily suffer because God has inscrutable and glorious designs in mind. Faithful submission to God in trial ultimately will result in eventual

blessing, already promised. Therefore, like Abraham, Christians come to know God's character as just, faithful, gracious, trustworthy, good and salvific. These assuring attributes of God further motivate Christian faithfulness and obedience.

All these examples consummate in the central example Abraham delivers in Genesis 22. Abraham believed in such a way that he was credited with the righteousness of Christ. Calvin recognized God's provision and propitiation inherent within these

***Abraham would
have already voided
his hopes of pleasing
God.***

events: "Here we see the right conflict of Abraham's faith, which is, death is set before his eyes—which was enough to confound him; but he extolled the power of God far beyond all this and said, 'yet will God overcome and be a mighty Conqueror herein.' ... God will so bring this matter to pass, as that I shall be astonished to see it. But it is not for me to ask how and which way he will do it: for I must keep me within compass, until such time as God show me that, which I before knew not."

Calvin centered his conclusion on Abraham's example which—far from Gonzalez and Kierkegaardian moralism—shows great faith in the hope that God would provide. Despite the looming presence of death, Calvin

preached that Abraham hoped for grace, hoped for God's provision of another kind of sacrificial propitiation made manifest in the ram, and therefore hoped for God's propitiation for his sin. This is the heart of a biblically construed systematic theology. This faith is the ultimate example that all the saints display, with all their works, good and bad, secondary to it. Calvin reached the heart of the example of Abraham only after following the proposed method.

A proper method to preach the example of the saints exists. Prayerful, exhaustive exploration of the content of the Biblical text, the surrounding context, and directly related passages is hard work, yet absolutely necessary in order to properly preach the example of the saints—without which no preaching is complete. When the Word of God is assumed to be incomplete to preach from, it becomes an easy habit for anyone to look for answers elsewhere, as Kierkegaard and many modern preachers do. The result of extra-biblical research will never produce more revelation, only frustration. Preaching morality without the propitiation of Christ as central to the Scriptures will ever obstruct the Spirit from changing hearts in the churches. The Holy Spirit has given difficult texts and the example of the saints purposefully, for the rich edifying and building of His Church.

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Baptism (III)

Should Infants of Believers be Baptized?

In the Old Testament circumcision was the sacrament of initiation and reception into the covenant community. Circumcision defined the covenant community; it was the sign and seal of covenant membership. In this article, I will argue that baptism has replaced circumcision as the sacrament of initiation and reception into the covenant community. Just like circumcision was applied to the male children born in this community, likewise baptism should be applied to all the children born in the new covenant community, the church.

In order for this to be true, there are at least two points that must be demonstrated from the Scriptures. First, it must be demonstrated that the new covenant is the fulfillment of the Abrahamic covenant. Circumcision had its beginning in the formal establishment of the Abrahamic covenant. If the structure associated with the Abrahamic covenant continues at some level into the new covenant, then it is necessary that we establish a relationship between the two covenants. Second, it is necessary to demonstrate from the Bible that there is a relationship between circumcision and baptism.

If these two premises can be established from Scriptures, then there should be no doubt that the baptism of children born in the church is biblical unless the Bible explicitly forbids such a practice. This is very compelling if you understand

that the new covenant is the fulfillment of the Abrahamic.

The New Covenant As Fulfillment of the Old

In Galatians 3:6-9, Paul writes: “Consider Abraham: He believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness. *Understand, then, that those who believe are children of Abraham.* The Scripture foresaw that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, and announced the gospel in advance to Abraham: ‘All nations will be blessed through you.’ So those who have faith are blessed along with Abraham, the man of faith” (emphasis added).

If we had no other Scripture to support the thesis that the new covenant is the fulfillment of the Abrahamic we would need to go no further. This passage provides us with all the biblical evidence that we need to establish the connection between the Abrahamic covenant and the new covenant. For example: God, “...announced the gospel in advance to Abraham.” In addition to this Paul, says, “...those who believe are children of Abraham. So those who have faith are blessed along with Abraham, the man of faith.” This is all the evidence that we need to demonstrate the connection between the Abrahamic covenant and the new covenant.

Paul goes on to write in Galatians 3:14-16 “He redeemed us in order that the blessing given to Abraham

There is no doubt that converted Jews would have applied the covenant sign and seal to their children.

might come to the Gentiles through Christ Jesus, so that by faith we might receive the promise of the Spirit. Let me take an example from everyday. Just as no one can set aside or add to a human covenant that has been duly established, so it is in this case. The promises were spoken to Abraham and to his seed. The Scripture does not say “and to seeds,” meaning many people, but “and to your seed,” meaning one person, who is Christ.”

In this passage Paul states explicitly that just as a human covenant can not be set aside or added to, so it is with the covenant that God established with Abraham. The promise established with Abraham is eternal, it is fulfilled in Christ, through the church.

Modern day dispensationalists believe that the Abrahamic covenant is eternal as well, but they reject the idea that the Abrahamic covenant is fulfilled through the new covenant. Since they reject this idea, they also reject the idea that baptism has replaced circumcision.

From Paul’s teaching it should be explicit that the promise made to Abraham is realized through Jesus Christ and the new covenant. The Abrahamic covenant and the new covenant are one and the same covenant. The new covenant is the fulfillment of the covenant made with Abraham and his seed, “meaning one person, who is Christ.”

Therefore the church is the new Israel.

Galatians 3:29 “*If you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham’s seed, and heirs according to the promise.*” There should be no doubt what Paul teaches about this subject. Paul sees everyone belonging to Christ as Abraham’s seed and heirs according to the promise. One might ask, heirs according to what promise, the promise made to Abraham? (Refer back to 3:8, “All nations will be blessed through you” and then again in verse 14 the promise of the Spirit.)

“Understand, then, that those who believe are children of Abraham. If you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham’s seed, and heirs according to the promise.” Could it be any more clear? The promise made to Abraham was fulfilled in Christ. If you believe, then you are an heir to Abraham. The new covenant is the fulfillment of the Abrahamic covenant.

The Relationship Between Circumcision and Baptism

The apostle Paul makes an overt connection between baptism and circumcision in Colossians 2:11-13. In this passage, Paul goes from circumcision to baptism back to circumcision.

In Him you were also circumcised with the circumcision made without hands, by putting off the body of the

sins of the flesh, by the circumcision of Christ, buried with Him in baptism, in which you also were raised with Him through faith in the working of God, who raised Him from the dead. And you, being dead in your trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, He has made alive together with Him, having forgiven you all trespasses.

There is no doubt that Paul sees a relationship between circumcision and baptism in this passage. The relationship between the two extends to their role as a sign and seal. Just as circumcision involved the cutting away of the flesh, which portrayed an internal cutting away of the sinful nature by the Spirit of Christ, likewise baptism signifies the washing away of our sin, a burial of the old sinful nature and a resurrection unto new life. Both sacraments signified the promise of internal washing and renewal unto new life. Both sacraments were conditioned by faith; the promise was received through faith.

If the new covenant is the fulfillment of the Abrahamic covenant and baptism replaces circumcision as the covenant sign and seal, then it is important that the covenant sign and seal be applied to the children of believers as it was in Abraham’s day. The Scriptures prescribe the biblical practice for administering circumcision. Likewise the only change associated with baptism is the fact that baptism is not gender specific. Unlike circumcision, baptism is intended for both males and females.

Given the fact that the first century church was overwhelmingly Jewish, it would have been necessary for Peter and the apostles to restrain the Jewish converts from baptizing their children. Imagine a Jew who claimed Abraham as his father, realizing that the promise made to Abraham was realized through faith in Christ, and the sign and seal of circumcision had been replaced by baptism. The Jewish convert would have applied the sign and seal to his children. There is no doubt that converted Jews would have applied the covenant sign and seal to their children unless otherwise instructed to withhold the sign and seal from their children. If the application of the covenant sign and seal changed this dramatically then there should be no doubt that the New Testament would not be silent on this matter. Just because modern day Baptists assume discontinuity does not mean that Jewish converts would have assumed discontinuity.

Acts 2:38, 39 “Peter replied, ‘Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. *The promise is for you and your children* and for all who are far off--for all whom the Lord our God will call’” (emphasis added).

There is nothing in Peter’s instructions that would have persuaded Jewish converts to withhold baptism from their children. It was commonly understood that God had worked through family units. The family unit was the main way that the faith had been passed on in the Old Testament; this pattern continues into the New Testament. As a result any objection made against

infant baptism could also be made against infant circumcision!

In conclusion, we see how God continues to work through households in the New Testament, and we see how baptism has replaced circumcision as the covenant sign and seal of initiation and membership in the covenant community. Acts 16:13-15:

On the Sabbath we went outside the city gate to the river, where we expected to find a place of prayer. We sat down and began to speak to the women who had gathered there. One of those listening was a woman named Lydia, a dealer in purple cloth from the city of Thyatira, who was a worshiper of God. The Lord opened her heart to respond to Paul’s message. When she and the members of her household were baptized, she invited us to her home. “If you consider me a believer in the Lord,” she said, “come and stay at my house.” And she persuaded us.

There is no mention that the members of Lydia’s household believed; yet they were all baptized, because this was the long-established pattern from the time of Abraham. God continues to work through households, even as new people are grafted into the church from outside the covenant community. This long-standing pattern has continued into the New Testament and into this age. Any objection made against infant baptism could also be made against infant circumcision.

This should cause objective people

to reconsider their objections. If the New Covenant is the fulfillment of the Abrahamic Covenant, and if baptism has replaced circumcision as the covenant sign and seal of membership in the covenant community, then it would only make sense that the New Testament would have to forbid the application of baptism to children born in the covenant, if this was God’s intent. But the New Testament never forbids the application of the covenant sign and seal to children born in the covenant community; therefore on what basis would you withhold the sign and seal of membership to the children born in the church?

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We Confess

An Exposition & Application of the Belgic Confession

Article 35: Of the Lord's Supper

A Great Controversy

One of the greatest controversies during the Reformation was over the Lord's Supper. The doctrine that divided the Protestant churches from the Roman Catholic Church was Rome's doctrine of "transubstantiation." This doctrine became official dogma at the Fourth Lateran Council in 1215, and taught that the substance of the bread and wine are transformed into Christ's flesh and blood. Later, this doctrine was supplemented by the Council of Trent's decree in 1562 that the Eucharist was a propitiatory sacrifice, that is, it was meant to turn away the wrath of Almighty God. To these doctrines, all Protestants objected. Even the Eastern Orthodox Churches, while believing the bread and wine are the body and blood by the mysterious work of the Holy Spirit, rejected Rome's doctrine of transubstantiation.

This controversy also divided Protestants from Protestants. Early in the Reformation, Martin Luther met with Ulrich Zwingli at the Marburg Colloquy in 1529 to unite Wittenberg and Zurich. They agreed on fourteen points of doctrine but disagreed on "whether the true body and blood of Christ are bodily present in the bread and wine." Whereas Luther vehemently believed Christ's words to be literal, even writing the words, "This is my body," upon the table in

front of him, Zwingli believed them to be symbolical only, and thus, the Lord's Supper was only a memorial of Christ's past work.

These two opposing camps of Protestants were sought out for reconciliation over a period of decades by the mediating positions of Phillip Melanchthon, Luther's successor, and Martin Bucer, the great Strasbourg pastor. Later Zwingli's successor, Heinrich Bullinger, moved closer to the center with a position described as parallelism, which meant that as surely as a communicant ate and drank bread and wine he also fed upon Christ. John Calvin brought the two camps closer with his view described as instrumentalism. This meant that not only did a communicant eat bread, on the one hand, and partake of Christ, on the other, *a la* parallelism, but also that the bread and wine were the means by which the Holy Spirit mysteriously communicated Christ to His people.

Yet all the work of Melanchthon, Bucer, and Calvin came to nothing with the publication of the Book of Concord by the *gnesio*-Lutherans ("true" Lutherans as opposed to the followers of Melanchthon) in 1580. In this book of Lutheran confessions the view of Zwingli was condemned as crass "sacramentarianism." Since Zwingli so emphasized the linguistic root of the Latin word *sacra-*

mentum ("oath") in his theology of the sacraments, emphasizing that they were our oath of allegiance to the Lord, the Lutherans used his words to create a derisive term. The "high" sacramental views of Calvin, and our confessions, fared no better as they were condemned as crafty "sacramentarianism," that is, although Calvinists spoke about the real presence of Christ they were only playing words games and were really Zwinglians deep down inside.

While being saddened by this division of the Protestant movement down to our day, we should also look to these debates as eminently relevant for us. We live in a time in which the myriad of evangelical churches dotting the landscape of America teach essentially Zwingli's view that the Lord's Supper is, in the words of one, "a memorial for a dead friend." As we seek to exposit Article 35 of our *Confession* and apply its teaching to our efforts at bringing the riches of the Reformed faith to our communities, we will see that we follow the teachings of Calvin who taught that the Lord's Supper was both simple and mysterious.

The Sacrament of Nutrition

While Article 34 of our *Confession* describes baptism as the one-time sacrament of *initiation*, Article 35 describes the Lord's Supper as the ongoing sacrament of *nutrition*. We can see this in the biblical terms used for this sacrament, which communicate the biblical imagery of a covenant meal. It is called the *breaking of the bread* (Acts 2:42), the *Lord's Supper* (1 Corinthians 11:20), the *Lord's Table* (1

Corinthians 10:21), *communion* or *fellowship* (1 Corinthians 10:16), which is what occurs around a table, and the *Eucharist* or *thanksgiving* (1 Corinthians 10:16) because it is a festive meal. In the same way the *Belgic Confession* opens in Article 35, saying,

We believe and confess that our Savior Jesus Christ did ordain and institute the sacrament of the holy supper to nourish and support those whom He has already regenerated and incorporated into His family, which is His Church.

Following this is a lengthy paragraph explaining the language of nourishment for both our bodies and souls. The “regenerated” have a twofold life. One the one hand they have a corporal (“bodily”) and temporal life described as the result of their “first birth” and which “is common to all men.” This life is supported and nourished by God who uses the means of bread, that is to say, food.

On the other hand, the “regenerated” have a spiritual and heavenly life described as the result of their “second birth.” This life was “effected by the Word of the gospel, in the communion of the body of Christ,” and therefore is not common to all, as earthly life is, but is “peculiar to God’s elect.” This line in our *Confession* is not only biblical, as Peter told his readers, “...you have been born again, not of perishable seed but of imperishable, through the living and abiding word of God...And this word is the good news that was preached to you” (1 Peter 1:23, 25), but also was relevant in polemics against both

Rome and Lutherans who taught regeneration was effected by baptism. It is also relevant to our day in which even some “Reformed” ministers teach that baptism is efficacious to regenerate.

Like the earthly life, the heavenly life is also supported and nourished by God, who sent the bread from heaven, our Lord Jesus Christ (John 6). He “nourishes and strengthens the spiritual life of believers when they eat Him, that is to say, when they appropriate and receive Him by faith in the Spirit (i.e., Holy Spirit).” What is so important in these words is that in contrast to Zwingli, both Reformed and Lutheran Protestants taught the necessity of sacraments for our faith. This is what the *Confession* goes on to say in these words: “Christ has instituted earthly and visible bread as a sacrament of His body, and wine as a sacrament of His blood” to represent to us himself, the true food and drink of our souls. The purpose of this sacrament is that,

As certainly as we receive and hold this sacrament in our hands and eat and drink the same with our mouths...we also do as certainly receive by faith (which is the hand and mouth of our soul) the true body and blood of Christ our only Savior, in our souls, for the support of our spiritual life.

Manner of Partaking

The *Confession* states that we receive Christ in the Lord’s Supper. We notice the way the Supper is explained that the key to navigating through the “Supper strife” of the Reformation is the relevance of the Holy Spirit and faith, which is the gift of the Spirit.

We can speak of the bread as the body and the wine as the blood of Christ because the signs and thing signified are united by the incomprehensible work of the Holy Spirit. To use a human analogy, think about a wedding. At a certain part of the ceremony the man and woman both say, “With this ring, I thee wed.” Yet the ring itself does not make marriage, but because the sign (ring) and thing signified (unending love), are so united we use this language in our ceremonies. This is precisely what God does in Scripture when He speaks of the rainbow (Genesis 9), circumcision (Genesis 15), and the cup as His covenant (1 Corinthians 11).

This is the background to the *Confession’s* language about not eating the body and drinking the blood of Christ by the mouth (*manducatio oralis*). We do not eat the bread and wine in the same manner as we eat the body and blood. One mouth eats the outward signs, while the other, faith, eats the inner thing signified:

Like the earthly life, the heavenly life is also supported and nourished by God, who sent the bread from heaven, our Lord Jesus Christ.

We err not when we say that what is eaten and drunk by us is the proper and natural body and the proper blood of Christ. But the manner of our partaking of the same is not by the mouth, but by the spirit through faith. Thus, then, though Christ always sits at the right hand of His Father in the heavens, yet does He not therefore cease to make us partakers of Himself by faith. This feast is a spiritual table, at which Christ communicates Himself with all His benefits to us, and gives us there to enjoy both Himself and the merits of His sufferings and death: nourishing, strengthening, and comforting our poor comfortless souls by the eating of His flesh, quickening and refreshing them by the drinking of His blood.

Our Reformed fathers saw this understanding of the Supper as a return to the theology of the ancient church. After all, the Reformation was about reforming the Church, not restoring it. And so we as Protestants are the true catholics. The greatest evidence of the teaching that Christ is fed upon by faith through the work of the Holy Spirit is from the ancient Eucharistic liturgy, in which the minister calls out to the congregation, “Lift up your hearts,” and the people respond, “We lift them up to the Lord!” It is by lifting up our heart to heaven and by being elevated by the Spirit that we feed upon Christ’s true and natural body and blood by faith, the mouth of our souls (cf. John 6:35, 51, 56).

Athanasius, the great defender of orthodox doctrine, wrote:

For how many bodies of Him would be sufficient for eating, that there might be food for the whole world? But on this account He made mention of His ascension into heaven that He might draw them away from a corporal understanding and they might understand that the flesh of which He had spoken was the heavenly food and the spiritual nourishment to be given by Him from above.

Finally, the Canons of the Council of Nicea express the focus on the Holy Spirit and faith, saying,

Let us not childishly cleave to the bread and the wine set before us, but let us, lifting our minds to heaven by faith, consider that on the holy table is placed the Lamb of God which takes away the sins of the world, who of-

fered himself as a sacrifice without being slain by the priests.

What lies behind such an idea, in the teaching of the Reformed, is the doctrines of the person and work of Christ. After He came to earth in the Incarnation, lived a perfect life, “was crucified, dead, and buried,” our Lord rose again and then ascended back into heaven. The *Confession* mentions this when it says “though Christ always sits at the right hand of His Father in the heavens...”

Furthermore, the reason such a statement about his work in the ascension is so relevant to the Lord’s Supper is what we believe about the person of Christ. He is one person with two natures. Reformed theologians have always been mindful of confessing the catholic creeds, especially the Athanasian Creed and Definition of Chalcedon, which so mysteriously confess this ineffable doctrine: “it is necessary to everlasting salvation that [we] also believe

Study/Application Questions for Article 35

1. What does the analogy between ordinary bread and the bread of the Lord’s Supper tell us about the purpose of the Lord’s Supper?
2. What is the sign of the Lord’s Supper? What is the thing signified by the Supper? (Matt. 26:26)
3. How do we receive and eat the body and blood of Christ?
4. Can we comprehend how we commune with the “true, proper, and natural” body and blood of Christ? Is it Roman Catholic to say, “what we eat and drink is the true, natural body and the true blood of Christ?” (1 Cor. 10:16) Why or why not?
5. Where is Christ’s human nature? (Heidelberg Catechism, Q&A 46-49) Why is that important for our understanding of the Supper?

rightly the incarnation of our Lord Jesus Christ” (β29). In the Athanasian Creed we confess as catholic Christians that our Lord is God and man (β30) – “God of the substance of the Father, begotten before the worlds; and man of the substance of His mother, born in the world” (β31). Furthermore, he is “equal to the Father as touching His Godhead, and inferior to the Father as touching His manhood (β33). Finally, he is “One altogether, not by confusion of substance, but by unity of person” (β36).

What Do Unbelievers Eat?

Because of its doctrine of the presence of Christ in the Supper, Lutheranism confesses that all who partake, including unbelievers, partake of Christ. This is the doctrine of the *manducatio indignorum* (“eating by the unworthy”). In contrast, because Christ is only received by faith by the elect of God, we confess in *Belgic Confession* Article 35 the following:

Further, though the sacraments are connected with the thing signified nevertheless both are not received by all men. The ungodly indeed receives the sacrament to his condemnation, but he does not receive the truth of the sacrament, even as Judas and Simon the sorcerer both indeed received the sacrament but not Christ who was signified by it, of whom believers only are made partakers.

Liturgical Setting

Another polemical issue was that

of private Masses in the Roman Catholic Church. The Reformed churches rejected this practice and therefore confessed a strong doctrine of the corporate nature of the Lord’s Supper, following the language of Paul, who says that the church “came together” to partake of the Supper (1 Corinthians 11:17-22). The *Confession* follows suit, saying,

Lastly, we receive this holy sacrament in the assembly of the people of God, with humility and reverence, keeping up among us a holy remembrance of the death of Christ our Savior, with thanksgiving, making confession of our faith and of the Christian religion. Therefore no one ought to come to this table without having previously rightly examined himself, lest by eating of this bread and drinking of this cup he eat and drink judgment to himself. In a word, we are moved by the use of this holy sacrament to a fervent love of God and our neighbor.

This paragraph also refers to the participants in the Lord’s Supper. Those who have “rightly examined” themselves are invited to come to this spiritual feast. This “right examination” is described in terms of humility, reverence, remembrance, thanksgiving, and confession of the Christian religion.

Rejection of Errors

Finally, the *Confession* ends with a brief rejection of the errors of Rome on the doctrine of the Supper, saying,

Therefore we reject all mixtures and damnable inventions which men have added unto and blended with the sacraments, as profanations of them; and affirm that we ought to rest satisfied with the ordinance which Christ and His apostles have taught us, and that we must speak of them in the same manner as they have spoken.

As one writer says “a simple celebration of our Lord’s supper in a barn is richer than a pontifical high mass in a cathedral.” We seek to follow the basic descriptions of the Lord’s Supper as written in the New Testament – nothing more, nothing less.

The doctrine of the Lord’s Supper in the *Belgic Confession*, as we have seen, seeks to be biblical, catholic, and mysterious. It seeks to say only what Scripture says and not be diverted by theories overly influenced by Aristotelian philosophy (i.e., Rome and transubstantiation, and Lutheranism and the natures of Christ) – Christ has ascended, Christ has promised to feed us, the Holy Spirit unites us to Christ by faith alone through the means of a meal. It seeks to be catholic by drawing upon ancient witnesses and liturgies. Finally, it seeks to be mysterious and let the Holy Spirit do his work without delving into the secrets of God.

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Looking Above

A Series on The Revelation of Jesus Christ

Revelation 7:1-3

“Till We Have Sealed the Servants of God”

The opening of the first six seals sets before us scenes that would shake our souls. The first seal is opened and the gospel goes forth conquering and to conquer; it goes forth and it kills, even as it makes alive. The second seal is opened and much blood is shed upon the earth. The third seal is opened and the earth is ravaged with famine. The fourth seal is opened and death visits the earth, with Hades in its wake. The fifth seal is opened and we learn the lot of the church as we hear the cry of the martyrs, “How long, O Lord, holy and true until You judge and avenge our blood on those who dwell on the earth?”

Those martyrs are told to rest and wait until “both the number of their fellow servants and their brethren, who would be killed as they were, was completed.” The sixth seal is opened and we read of the conflagration of creation itself as the Day of Wrath comes. The opening of the first six seals sets before us scenes that would shake our souls.

So horrific and terrible are the scenes of the first six seals we hardly dare consider the opening of the seventh seal. If the first six seals leave mankind crying out for the rocks and the mountains to fall upon them, what will the seventh seal bring? If the first six seals leave man with the terrifying question, “Who is able to stand?” what will the seventh seal bring? If the first

six seals would shake our souls, what will the seventh seal bring? We hardly dare consider the opening of the seventh seal. We expect to have set before us new horrors and terrors that would shake us so profoundly, they would leave us undone.

Instead, we come to an interlude. While the sixth seal is opened at the end of Chapter 6, the seventh seal is not opened until the beginning of Chapter 8. Chapter 7 then is interposed between the sixth seal and the seventh seal. Chapter 7 is a break in the action—an interruption in the drama.

In this article we want to consider the first three verses of that interlude. In those three verses we read of four angels, verse 1; of another angel, verse 2; and of the command given to the four angels by the fifth angel, verse 3.

The Four Angels

Consider first the four angels of verse 1. “After these things I saw four angels standing at the four corners of the earth, holding the four winds of the earth, that the wind should not blow on the earth, on the sea, or on any tree.” Who are these four angels? What is their significance? What are we to make of them?

The number four, we have seen, corresponds to the four corners of the earth, the four winds of the

earth. In fact, such things are mentioned here in verse 1, “I saw four angels standing at the four corners of the earth, holding the four winds of the earth.” In view, then, is that which is universal—that which affects the entire earth. Whatever we make of these angels, at the least we must understand that they have significance for the whole world. They stand at the four corners of the earth, and they hold the four winds of the earth.

The four winds which they hold in their hands have in view judgment. That is confirmed from verses 2 and 3. In verse 2 we are told that the four angels have been granted the power to harm the earth and the sea. In verse 3 they are expressly told not to harm the earth, the sea, or the trees.

These four angels have the power to harm the earth. They have the power to bring God’s judgments upon the earth. That is the significance of the wind. And what an apt description! Think of the destruction wind has brought upon the earth. You have heard of the damage caused by tornadoes sweeping through Midwest towns, destroying homes, claiming lives. You have seen the footage of hurricanes in the Caribbean claiming thousands of lives. The wind signifies judgment. The four angels, standing at the four corners of the earth, hold in their hands the four winds of the earth. They have been granted the power to bring God’s judgments upon the earth.

All of this should sound somewhat familiar. Consider it: four angels corresponding to the four corners of

the earth and associated with judgment. Where have we seen such imagery before: four creatures, described in angelic terms, corresponding to the four corners of the earth, and associated with judgment? Where have we seen such imagery before?

The four living creatures! Remember the four living creatures described in angelic terms? Remember Revelation 4:6-8, where the four living creatures correspond to the four corners of the earth? Remember Revelation 6:1-8, where the four living creatures are associated with judgment, even the riding forth of the four horsemen of the apocalypse?

There is a correspondence between the four living creatures and the four angels of Revelation 7:1-3. They share the same number: there are four living creatures, there are four angels. They share the same significance: both correspond to the four corners of the earth. They share association with judgment: the four living creatures with the horseman of the apocalypse, the four angels with the four winds. While not identical with one another, there is, nevertheless, this correspondence between the four living creatures and the four angels of Revelation 7:1-3.

We have been insisting all along that the four living creatures are symbolic of the office of preaching. Preachers are messengers; they are heralds; they are emissaries; they are ambassadors; they are sent not with their own message, but with the message of God. What are angels? They are messengers; they are heralds; they are emissar-

ies; they are ambassadors; they are sent not with their own message, but with the message of God.

Are you beginning to see the correspondence between the four angels of Revelation 7:1-3 and the four living creatures, symbolic of the office of preaching? As there are heavenly messengers (the four angels of Revelation 7:1-3), so there are earthly messengers (the four living creatures)! As there are heavenly heralds, so there are earthly heralds! As there are heavenly emissaries, so there are earthly emissaries! As there are heavenly ambassadors, so there are earthly ambassadors! As it is in heaven, so it is on earth!

The four angels, then, have in view the company of the preachers. The gospel goes forth to the ends of the earth, and as it goes forth to the ends of the earth, the earth is visited with judgment.

The Fifth Angel

Consider now verse 2, "Then I saw another angel ascending from the east, having the seal of the living God. And he cried with a loud voice to the four angels to whom it was granted to harm the earth and the sea." Who is this angel and what is his significance? We know two things about him. We know his origin and we know his activity.

First, his origin. He ascends from the east. The Greek says literally, that he ascends "from the rising of

the sun." This angel is magnificent in his description. He ascends. As he ascends from the rising of the sun, so he shines like the sun. His description is Christ-like. As Christ ascended, so this angel ascends. As Christ was risen as the sun of righteousness with healing in His wings, so this angel ascends from the rising of the sun. His description is Christ-like. It is an angel overlaid with the image of Christ. To be sure, he is not the Christ, but he is in the likeness of Christ.

Second, his activity. We are told that he has the seal of the living God. It has been granted to him to seal the servants of God. This angel, then, is magnificent in description. He stands out above the four angels. He is unique. He is special. In fact, we meet him in his unique activity in several other places in Revelation. We read in chapter 22:6, "And the Lord God of the holy prophets sent His angel to show His servants the things which must shortly take place." We read again in chapter 22:16, "I, Jesus, have sent My angel to testify to you these things in the churches." We read in Revelation 1:1, "The Revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave Him to show His servants—things which must shortly take place. And He sent and signified it by His angel to His servant John."

All of this seems to be indicating that there is, in the angelic realm, a hierarchy of angels. There is the common company of angels, repre-

The four angels, then, have in view the company of the preachers.

*The company of angels in heaven have their
correspondence in the company of preachers on
the earth.*

sented by the four angels of verse 1. And then there is the angel that stands out over and above the company of angels in verse 2.

We have already seen with the four angels that as it is in heaven, so it is on earth. As there are heavenly messengers, so there are earthly messengers. As there are heavenly heralds, so there are earthly heralds. The company of angels in heaven have their correspondence in the company of preachers on the earth. As it is in heaven, so it is on earth.

Now take that one step further. There is this correspondence between the angels in heaven and the preachers on earth. Does it follow, then, that as there is a hierarchy among the angels in heaven, so there is also a hierarchy among the preachers on earth? Indeed, there is! There is a hierarchy among the preachers on earth! What is that hierarchy? Look again at 1:1-2, “The Revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave Him to show His servants—things which must shortly take place. And He sent and signified it by His angel to His servant John, who bore witness to the word of God, and to the testimony of Jesus Christ, to all things that he saw.” To whom does the special angel match up? To whom does the unique angel match up? He matches up to John. And who was John? He was an Apostle!

In heaven you have the common company of angels, and then you have the special angel! On earth you have the common company of preachers, and then you have the Apostles! In heaven the special angel stands out over and above the common company of angels! On earth the Apostles stand out over and above the common company of preachers! As it is in heaven, so it is on earth!

The Implication of the Angels

Let us draw out some of the implications of this. What is it that set the apostles apart? They were those who had seen Christ, and more specifically, they were those who had seen the risen Christ. They were also sent by Christ to bring His message. “But what of the Apostle Paul?” you ask. “He never saw the risen Christ.” Yes he did. Remember the road to Damascus? Remember what Paul says in 1 Corinthians 15? In speaking of the risen Christ, he writes, “After that He was seen by James, then by all the apostles. Then last of all He was seen by me also, as by one born out of due time.” Paul saw the risen Christ. To be sure, he did not see Him as the other apostles saw Him, but he did see Him. Paul saw Him after He ascended into heaven, that is why Paul says “I am one abnormally born.” Paul is the last one to see the risen Christ. Thus Paul is the last of the apostles. After Paul, there are no more apostles. When

Paul gives instruction to his young friend Timothy, he makes no mention of Timothy being an apostle; he simply calls him a preacher.

What was the apostolic ministry? Very simply, their ministry was to preach Christ. What does Peter do on Pentecost? He preaches Christ. What does Paul say in Romans 1:16? “I am not ashamed of the gospel of Jesus Christ!” What does he say in 1 Corinthians 2:2? “I determined not to know anything among you except Jesus Christ and Him crucified!” What does he say in 1 Corinthians 9:16? “Woe is me if I do not preach the gospel!” What does he say in 2 Corinthians 4:5? “We do not preach ourselves, but Christ Jesus the Lord!” What does he say in Galatians 1:9? “Even if we, or an angel from heaven (very interesting connection there!), preach any other gospel to you than what we have preached to you, let him be accursed!” The ministry of the apostles was the ministry of Christ! They preached Christ!

What, then, is the role of the common company of preachers? Theirs is the ministry of the apostles. Theirs is the ministry of Christ. They are called to preach the Word! Paul commands Timothy to preach the Word! They are called to preach Christ! Preachers must preach Christ if the church is to be built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ Himself being the Chief Cornerstone (Ephesians 2:20). A preacher who does not preach Christ may be many things—he may be a fine story teller, he may be a fine entertainer, he may be a polished speaker—but he is no preacher! He does not stand in the line of the

apostles. He does not proclaim the gospel of Christ.

The Servants of God Sealed

All of this, then, brings us back to the command of verses 2b-3: “And he cried with a loud voice to the four angels to whom it was granted to harm the earth and the sea, saying, ‘Do not harm the earth, the sea, or the trees till we have sealed the servants of our God on their foreheads.’”

The common company of preachers cannot proclaim the Word of God—that Word which brings judgment upon the earth—until the servants of God have been sealed. The question, then, is, “when are the servants of God sealed?”

In a very real sense, the servants of God were sealed at the cross. There our sins were paid for! There our sins were removed! There the wrath of God was placated! There the justice of God was satisfied! There the payment was made! There it was said, “It is finished!” There our redemption was purchased! There we were sealed! Redemption has been accomplished! We were sealed at the cross.

But in another sense we are sealed as redemption is applied to us. We are sealed as God effectually calls us, regenerating our hearts, granting us the gift of faith and repentance, declaring us not guilty, adopting us as His sons and heirs, sanctifying us in holiness, and preserving us through union with Christ even unto glory itself! We were sealed at the cross, but that seal is then applied to us in time by the Holy Spirit through the Word. In that connection, I remind you of Ephesians 1:13-14, “In

Him you also trusted, after you heard the Word of truth, the gospel of your salvation; in whom also, having believed, you were sealed with the Holy Spirit of promise, who is the guarantee of our inheritance until the redemption of the purchased possession, to the praise of His glory.”

Do you see now how it all fits together? The Apostles proclaimed Christ—they were eyewitnesses of the risen Christ, sent by Christ Himself with the message of the cross. The Apostles passed on their ministry to the common company of preachers—they are called to proclaim the message of the cross; they are called to proclaim Christ. And as Christ is proclaimed by the common company of preachers, God’s Word works, bringing judgment upon the wicked even as it seals the people of God.

Our Catechism puts it most beautifully in Question and Answer 54, “What do you believe concerning the ‘Holy Catholic Church’? I believe that the Son of God, through His Spirit and Word, out of the entire human race, from the beginning of the world to its end, gathers, protects, and preserves for Himself, a community chosen for eternal life and united in true faith. And of this community I am, and always will be, a living member.”

It is the ministry of the Word, in line with that of the Apostles, that seals the people of God. The Son of God gathers, protects, and preserves for Himself a community chosen for eternal life, this He does through His Spirit and Word.

Do you see what confidence is yours?! Through the ministry of the

Word—that ministry that stands in line with the ministry of the apostles—you are gathered, you are protected, you are preserved! Through the ministry of the Word you are sealed!

The opening of the first six seals sets before us scenes that would shake our souls. We can only imagine what the opening of the seventh seal will bring us. If the first six seals would shake our souls, what will the seventh seal bring? The opening of the seals would shake our souls.

They would shake our souls, except for the fact that we are given this interlude in Chapter 7. Here we are told, as the children of God, the church of Jesus Christ, that we are sealed! We are sealed in the face of present judgment. We are sealed in the face of the judgment to come. We are sealed in the blood of the Lamb. We are sealed by His Word.

How firm a foundation, ye saints of the Lord, is laid for your faith in His excellent Word! What more can He say than to you He has said, to you who for refuge to Jesus have fled? The soul that on Jesus has leaned for repose, I will not, I will not desert to his foes; that soul, though all hell should endeavor to shake, I’ll never, no never, no never, forsake!

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

“The Old Testament Evidence Regarding the Participation of Children in Covenant Observances” (Part Three)

In our consideration of the Old Testament evidence for paedocommunion, we noted that the appeal to the precedent of covenant children’s participation in the Old Testament Passover is a key part of the paedocommunionist argument. Though paedocommunionists appeal to a variety of Old Testament examples of the participation of children in covenant observances, the most important leg supporting the argument for paedocommunion is the appeal to the analogy of the Passover.

When we take up the New Testament evidence pertaining to the admission of children to the Lord’s Table, we will have occasion to consider the important differences between the Old Testament Passover and the New Testament Lord’s Supper. These differences are significant for determining whether the Old Testament Passover is truly a precedent for the participation of children in the Lord’s Supper. If we assume that the Lord’s Supper is simply a New Testament form of the Old Testament Passover, the paedocommunionist insistence that children should partake of this sacrament may appear to have a measure of plausibility. But if the Lord’s Supper is not simply a New Testament form of the Old Testament rite, the appeal to the analogy with the Passover loses much of its persuasiveness. Consequently, in our

consideration of the New Testament evidence in subsequent articles, we will have to give special attention to the uniqueness of the Lord’s Supper as a new covenant sacrament in our evaluation of the case for paedocommunion.

Our primary purpose at this point, however, is to evaluate the evidence for the admission of children to the Lord’s Supper that is allegedly derived from the Old Testament Passover. We will restrict our treatment of this evidence in this article, accordingly, to what we know from the Old Testament. In keeping with our earlier observation about the priority of the New Testament’s teaching for the question of the participation of children in the Lord’s Supper, our evaluation of the paedocommunion argument from the Passover will not permit us to draw anything more than a tentative conclusion. Only after we turn directly to the New Testament evidence will we be able to reach any firm conclusions regarding the practice of paedocommunion.

The Limitations of the Passover Analogy

One of the immediate problems that confronts any student of the Old Testament Passover is that there is no indisputable evidence for or against the claim that all of the children of the covenant participated fully in its celebration. Despite the claim of some paedocommunion

advocates that all children of the household fully participated (with the exception, perhaps, of unweaned infants) in the Passover feast, the relevant Old Testament passages do not warrant this kind of unqualified claim.

Not only are there some biblical restrictions upon participation in the Passover rite, but there are also limitations in the traditional practice of Israel upon the participation of some members of the covenant community. In order to determine what were the most important features of the Old Testament Passover, there are several considerations that need to be borne in mind. Before we draw a tentative conclusion on the basis of the available evidence, we will summarize these considerations in the form of several observations about participation in the Passover feast.

First, any consideration of the precedent of the Old Testament Passover must keep in mind the important distinction between the first and subsequent celebrations of the Passover. Whereas the first Passover in Egypt was clearly a household celebration, the stipulations for later celebrations of the Passover require that it and the other two pilgrim feasts (Feast of Tabernacles, Feast of Weeks) be kept only by the male members of the covenant community (Deut. 16:16; Ex. 23:17; 34:23). Though the stipulation that only circumcised men of the covenant community keep the Passover at the centralized sanctuary in Jerusalem does not expressly exclude the participation of women and young children, it does represent a significant change in the way

Any consideration of the precedent of the Old Testament Passover must keep in mind the important distinction between the first and subsequent celebrations of the Passover.

the Passover was to be celebrated. While the women and children were to eat the unleavened bread in all Israel's borders, the men were to go up to Jerusalem in order to fulfill the obligations of the Passover "to the Lord your God" and "at the place that the Lord your God will choose, to make his name dwell in it" (Deut. 16:2, 5-7, 16ff.). These Deuteronomic provisions for the annual celebration of the pilgrim Passover do not require, nor do they seem to anticipate, the participation of the women and younger children of the covenant community.

Indeed, it is possible to view these requirements for the participation of the men of the covenant community as a kind of Old Testament "public profession of faith." Participation in the Passover is no perfunctory rite, but places a considerable responsibility upon its participants to prepare for and keep the feast in accordance with all of the stipulations of the law of the covenant. Once we acknowledge that these stipulations were normative for the annual feast of the Passover in Israel, the paedocommunionist argument that all of the children in Israel participated in the Passover becomes rather unlikely. Moreover, the assumption of the paedocommunion argument, namely, that non-participation in this covenant meal is tantamount to a kind of exclusion from full covenant membership and

its privileges, is not valid. It is a gratuitous assumption to insist that enjoyment of the privileges of the covenant requires that all members of the covenant community participate to the same extent in the Feast of the Passover. Were this assumption correct, we would expect the Old Testament provisions for the Passover to *require* the participation of all members of the covenant people.

Second, the insistence on the part of advocates of paedocommunion that all the children of the Israelite households ate the Passover meal is a possible construction of the Old Testament evidence, but it is not a likely one. Even the most ardent paedocommunion advocates acknowledge that unweaned infants could not eat some of the elements of the Passover meal (for example, the meat). While acknowledging this restriction upon the participation of unweaned infants, proponents of paedocommunion appeal to the language of Exodus 12:4, "according to what each can eat you shall make your count for the lamb," to argue that the only requirement for eating the Passover was the capacity to consume the meal. Since a similar phrase is used in Exodus 16:16,18,21, to refer to the manna that the children also ate, paedocommunionists maintain that this language implies the participation of all members of the household, the only exception being the infant children.

But as the English Standard Version of this phrase suggests, this passage does not mean simply what our expression, "so many mouths to feed," means. Rather than referring to the number of persons in the household, the language of this text refers to how much each member of the household was capable of eating. Whether infants and very young children were able to eat all the elements of the Passover meal remains, so far as the meaning of this phrase is concerned, undetermined. These elements of the Passover meal included roast lamb, unleavened bread (a kind of dry biscuit), and bitter herbs (Ex. 12:8ff.; Num. 9:11).

While newly weaned infants and younger children might possibly be able to eat the unleavened bread, it is implausible that they could digest the roast lamb and particularly the bitter herbs. All of the stipulated elements of the Passover meal, even on the occasion of its first celebration by the households of Israel in Egypt, were not likely to have been eaten by infants and the younger children of the household.

In connection with the question whether infants and very young children were able to consume the elements of the Passover meal, it should also be noted that subsequent Passovers included an additional element, namely, the cup of blessing. This cup of blessing added wine to the elements that typically belonged to the traditional Passover meal. Even though it is not clear how this element came to have a prominent role in the celebration of the Passover—it is not stipulated in the Old Testament legislation regarding this rite—its addition to the

elements of the Passover meal adds a further obstacle to the claim of paedocommunionists that all the children of the household shared fully in the Passover meal. Since wine is an intoxicant and not suited to consumption by infants and very young children, it hardly seems to be an element of the Passover meal that they would be permitted to consume.

Third, in our previous discussion of the paedocommunionist appeal to the Old Testament Passover, we observed that the Passover feast included, as one of its prescribed features, a kind of “catechetical” exercise. At a certain point in the Passover rite, the children of the household were to ask, “What do you mean by this service?” (Ex. 12:27). In reply to this question, the head of household was to declare, “It is the sacrifice of the Lord’s Passover, for he passed over the houses of the people of Israel in Egypt, when he struck the Egyptians but spared our houses.” The presence of this catechetical exercise in the context of the Passover rite does not by itself argue conclusively for or against the participation of infants and younger children. Advocates of paedocommunion will observe that an intelligent participation in this feature of the Passover celebration is not a prerequisite for keeping the feast. All of the children of the household could share the Passover meal, even if only the older children could express this question and fully understand their father’s answer.

However, when this feature of the Passover rite is interpreted in the light of the common practice within Judaism, it does suggest that the children of the household partici-

pated in a different manner, depending upon their maturity and age. The spiritual significance and benefit of the Passover feast embraced all of the children of Israel, men and women, mature and immature, old and young. No one was excluded from an enjoyment of the covenant privileges that the Passover signified and commemorated.

Nevertheless, in order for all members to benefit from the Passover rite, it was not necessary or obligatory that all directly participated in every aspect of the Passover celebration. Just as the women and younger children were not required to keep the Passover in Jerusalem, though they benefited from its spiritual significance, so the younger children might not have participated in some features of the Passover celebration without being denied their proper place in the covenant community. The fact that some members of the covenant community did not partake of all elements of the Passover meal, or share in every feature of the ritual, would not compromise their place in the covenant community.

And fourth, the historic practice of Judaism does not support the claim of paedocommunionists that all members of Israelite households ordinarily participated in the Passover Feast. Even though there are some features of this practice that are difficult to determine, the main

lines of traditional Jewish practice are clear enough.

In the period of the Old Testament history that follows the first Passover in Egypt, there is no clear biblical evidence that women or children attended the pilgrim Passovers, which were initiated and regulated by the Deuteronomic legislation. Whatever the extent of the participation of children in the first household Passover in Egypt, there are no undisputed examples of women and younger children attending the pilgrim Passovers until about the first century A.D. As we have noted, it is not that women and children were explicitly denied permission to celebrate the Passover.

The stipulation of Deuteronomy 16, that only the men go up annually to Jerusalem to keep the Passover Feast, however, appears to have encouraged a practice in Israel that did not include the participation of women and younger children. The only exceptions to this traditional practice may be the Passovers that were celebrated during the first year of king Hezekiah and the eighteenth year of Josiah (2 Kings 23:21-23; 2 Chron. 30:1-27).

Josephus, the first century A.D. Jewish historian, claims that the women and children accompanied the men of Israel and attended these Passovers, which were celebrated upon the occasion of the

Whether infants and very young children were able to eat all the elements of the Passover meal remains undetermined.

return from exile. The problem with this claim is that it is not corroborated by the sources Josephus uses (Ezra 6:19-22; 1 Esdras 7:10-15), and it may reflect Josephus' own preference, as a member of the party of the Pharisees, for the inclusion of women and children in the Passover feast. We have no undisputed evidence of the participation of women and younger children in the pilgrim Passovers prior to the intertestamental period.

Only during the intertestamental period do we find any explicit comments about who may properly participate in the Passover Feast. The author of the Book of Jubilees, which was cherished by the Qumran community and written in the late second century A.D., describes a practice in which men from twenty years of age and older participated in the Passover in Jerusalem (Jubilees 49:17). The description of the Passover practice in Jubilees probably reflects the traditional practice of Judaism until at least the end of the second century B.C.

In the post-exilic period, there was considerable emphasis upon the need for the children of Israel to keep scrupulously the requirements of the law of the covenant. Questions were raised regarding which laws were to be kept by men in distinction from those that were to be kept by women. Within the framework of reflection upon Israel's obligations under the law of the covenant, the view prevailed that the commandments became binding upon men at the age of twenty, the age of maturity in terms of particular covenant obligations (cf. Lev. 27:1-7; Num. 1:3,20,22,24; 26:2; 1

Chron. 27:23; Num. 14:19-21; Ex. 30:14; 38:26). Since the law did not obligate women and younger children to keep the Passover feast, the practice of Judaism in this period did not include their participation.

In the period of the second Temple and post-exilic Judaism, a change of practice is discernable some time after the end of the second century B.C. With the emergence of the sect of the Pharisees, whose teaching is reflected in the Mishnah (c. 180 A.D.), the age at which a member of the covenant community could "keep the commandments" was determined to be thirteen. This was the age of discretion at which children of the covenant could partake of the Passover for the first time. In Luke's account of Jesus' going up to Jerusalem with his parents for the first time at the age of twelve (Luke 2:41,42), this change in practice (from the age of twenty to thirteen) is likely reflected.

At the age of twelve, a child of the covenant would begin the fast in preparation for eating the Passover meal for the first time at the age of thirteen. During this period, some controversy arose within different parties of Judaism regarding the permissibility and the extent to which women and children could participate in all the elements of the Passover feast. By the end of the first century A.D., after the destruction of the second Temple and the return to a household celebration

of the Passover, the participation of women and children in the Passover appears to have become more common, though not altogether uncontroversial.

What this brief summary of the history of Jewish practice teaches us is that the inclusion of women and younger children in the Passover feast was not the characteristic pattern in the Old Testament economy. The practice of Israel during the Old Testament era was largely shaped by the provisions in the law for keeping the pilgrim Passover annually in Jerusalem, not the household Passover in Egypt. Only circumcised males were required to keep the Passover Feast, and preparations for the Feast included fasting and the ceremonial cleansing (cf. Num. 9:6; John 18:28) of the pilgrim celebrants.

In the traditions of Judaism, an "age of discretion" was stipulated for those who kept the Passover. Whether that age was twenty, as in the period prior to the first century A.D., or thirteen, as in the period that coincides with the New Testament's writing, it was not the practice of Judaism prior to the destruction of the second Temple to encourage the participation of younger children who were not yet "sons of the commandment" or obliged to keep all of the laws of the covenant. While it appears that the participation of women and children began to be encouraged after the destruction of the temple and a re-

Only during the intertestamental period do we find any explicit comments about who may properly participate in the Passover Feast.

turn to a household celebration of the Passover, this was not the typical practice of Israel during the Old Testament era.

Conclusion

If our observations about the Old Testament Passover are given their proper due, the typical appeal that advocates of paedocommunion make to the alleged precedent of the participation of children in this Old Testament rite is not persuasive. Even without considering the differences between the Old Testament Passover and the New Testament Lord's Supper, the Old Testament itself does not teach what some paedocommunionists allege that it does. So far as the participation of younger children in the Passover Feast is concerned, the best that a paedocommunionist can argue is that they may have been permitted to partake of some elements of the Passover meal. In the Old Testament legislation regarding the annual pilgrim Passovers, women and children are not expressly forbidden to keep the Passover feast. But the implicit permission granted to women and perhaps younger children to participate in the Passover hardly constitutes a strong precedent for the kind of bold claims that often characterize the writings of paedocommunionists.

There is nothing in the teaching of the Old Testament that would warrant the claim, for example, that non-participation in the Passover meal on the part of a covenant member is tantamount to a loss of full communion with the Lord of the covenant or a form of spiritual malnourishment. Though the spiritual benefit of the Passover feast extended to the entire covenant com-

munity, this does not seem to have required anything like the paedocommunionist insistence that all members of the covenant community (with the possible exception of unweaned infants) ought to participate in all elements of the Passover meal.

Even on the most congenial reading of the Old Testament evidence, therefore, the case for paedocommunion is hardly supported by an appeal to the analogy of the Passover. As we have seen, the likeliest reading of the biblical and inter-testamental evidence within Judaism, is that only "mature" members of the covenant community kept the Passover feast.

For most of Israel's history prior to the New Testament epoch, only mature males of a specified age participated in the Passover practices that were shaped by the Deuteronomic legislation. Nothing in this history comes close to setting a precedent for a new covenant practice that would require the immediate participation of every covenant member in the Lord's Supper, regardless of their age or maturity in faith. And yet this is the kind of claim that paedocommunionists are apt to make.

A more likely reading of the traditional Passover practice in Israel shows that it may actually provide a precedent for the Christian church's communion practice. Just as those who participated in the Passover were expected to prepare themselves for a responsible keeping of the feast (a kind of Old Testament "profession of faith"), so those who participate in the Lord's Supper are expected to prepare themselves for the kind of communion with Christ that it represents.

Of course, this still leaves open the question whether the Lord's Supper should be viewed on such close analogy to the Passover. In our treatment of the New Testament evidence respecting paedocommunion, we will argue that this analogy, though valid, can easily be overdrawn. So far as our tentative conclusion here is concerned, we may even grant the paedocommunion emphasis upon the close analogy between the Passover and the Lord's Supper. What we may not grant is that this analogy provides a strong argument for the admission of all covenant children to the Lord's Table. A more plausible reading of the evidence would conclude that the Passover sets a precedent for the historic insistence that Christian believers profess their faith in order to be properly received at the Lord's Table, which has been given for the strengthening of such faith.

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

Classis Central US of the URCNA

March 21, 2006

In just a shade more than eight hours, delegates to a recent meeting of Classis Central US approved the addition of one church and two ministers, as well as addressing requests for advice in more than a dozen discipline or pastoral matters.

On Tuesday, March 21, Classis Central US convened in the sanctuary of Grace URC of Waupun, Wisc. Topping the day's agenda were two ordination exams for men called by churches of the classis.

Mr. James Sinke was called by a newly established congregation in Rock Valley, Iowa. A Mid-America Reformed Seminary graduate, he was declared a candidate in Classis Southern Ontario.

Although he initially thought to enter a career in accounting, Mr. Sinke was convicted of the great need for the preaching of the Gospel while still an undergraduate. As a student at Mid-America, he served as an intern in the URC congregations in Thunder Bay, London and Strathroy, Ont.

James and his wife Andrea have two daughters: Leah, 3, and Rebekah, 1.

Mr. Talman Wagenmaker was on home ground for his examination, having been called to serve the Waupun congregation. He, too, is a graduate of Mid-America Reformed Seminary, having been declared a candidate in Classis Michigan.

With two brothers in the ministry, Mr. Wagenmaker had considered the ministry before earning a degree in chemical engineering. However, he later reconsidered, earning an MA degree from Westminster Theological Seminary in California and an a Master of Divinity degree from Mid-America. During his time at the latter, Mr. Wagenmaker served as an intern at Covenant URC in Kalamazoo, Mich., and at a church in Momence, Ill., which recently left the CRC and joined the OPC.

Talman and his wife Sarah are expecting their first child.

Examined concurrently, the men demonstrated sound knowledge in every section of the examination, with each man testifying to the centrality of sound preaching, the importance of wise elders, and the need to rely on God's Word and His Spirit. Each man was unanimously declared eligible for ordination.

Mr. Sinke was ordained on Friday, March 24, at Doon URC; and Mr. Wagenmaker's ordination was Sunday, April 2, at Grace URC of Waupun.

With the examinations behind them, delegates turned their attention to a pair of overtures.

The first overture, submitted by Doon URC, sought concurring advice for the organization of the Rock Valley URC, in accordance with Church Order Art. 22. Prima-

rily comprising individuals who recently left the Christian Reformed Church, the Rock Valley Church was established in October 2005 under the leadership of Doon URC's elders. Rev. Larry Johnson and Mr. Sinke have been working with the group to educate them about the Church Order and practices of the URC. The group currently includes 20 families comprising 45 communicant members and 30 children, with attendance ranging from 90 to 100 per service.

Well before Rev. Johnson brought the matter to the floor of classis, delegates had to opportunity to learn about the new congregation from its elders, who had traveled to Waupun with their wives for the meeting. After hearing the testimony of Rev. Johnson, delegates unanimously concurred with Doon's decision to organize the group as a distinct congregation.

A second overture was less favorably received. Oak Glen URC wished to overture Synod 2007 to adopt changes to Church Order Art. 6 and Appendix 3 which would have allowed a calling church to waive the ordination examination of a man who was declared a candidate for the ministry in a different classis. The waiver would be allowable on the basis of the recommendation of the candidate's consistory and the concurring advice of the classis where the man was declared a candidate.

Rev. John Vermeer of Oak Glen explained that the change would increase efficiency, would make for a more equitable system, and would promote trust among the churches. The measure presumes confessional unity among the

churches, he said.

However, several delegates spoke against the motion, noting that it would create a rule from the exception currently permitted by our Church Order – namely, the waiving of ordination exams for those called to a church within their home classis. Others noted that ordination exams increase our trust in our ministers, allow us to get to know our young ministers better, and offer a system of checks and balances whereby the churches of different classes hold one another accountable.

After a time of discussion, delegates decided not to approve the overture.

One other matter which engendered much discussion was brought by Covenant Reformed Church of Kansas City and its church plant, Springfield United Reformed Fellowship. Those brothers requested discussion about the advisability of receiving into their membership those who profess Christ, but who continue to struggle with particular doctrines set forth in the Three Forms of Unity.

Delegates offered a number of insightful comments concerning this question. Noting that this question is one with which many of our churches must wrestle, several delegates suggested that our churches as a whole should begin to discuss this question.

In other matters, classis received fraternal greetings from Rev. Charles Brown of the Great Lakes-Gulf Presbytery of the RPCNA and from Rev. James Bosgraf, a home missionary of the OPC. Rev. Todd

Joling updated delegates of the ongoing work of CERCU committees who are meeting with committees of the Canadian Reformed Churches. And the delegates offered concurring advice to proceed in nine discipline cases, along with feedback on pastorally approaching long-delinquent baptized members in one of our congregations.

Classis Central US plans to meet again at 1 PM. on Tuesday, June 13, for a two-day meeting to include four candidacy examinations. Redeemer URC of Orange City will serve as convening consistory, and

delegates tentatively agreed to hold the meeting in Pella, Iowa, pending approval of the consistory of Covenant Reformed Church of Pella.

Classis wishes to express its sincere thanks to the Consistory and members of Grace URC in Waupun for their hospitality during our most recent meeting!

For further information, contact Rev. Doug Barnes, pastor of Hills URC & Stated Clerk of Classis, by telephone at 507-962-3254 or via e-mail at hillsurc@alliancecom.net

Classis Michigan of the URCNA

June 6, 2006

The Delegates of Classis Michigan met at the Covenant United Reformed Church in Kalamazoo on June 6, 2006. Chairman for the day was Rev. Art Besteman, with Rev. Brian Vos serving as Vice-Chairman and Rev. Wybren Oord serving as Clerk.

After the chairman led the delegates in singing and prayer, the business of the day began with several reports. The Clerk's Report and the Treasurer's Report were approved. The Health Insurance Report was received for information. Rev. Derrick Vander Meulen presented the Missions Committee Report in which he gave a summary of the biannual Mission Rallies and distributed information regarding the Missions Support of the local churches.

During the lunch break, Rev. Steve Arrick gave a presentation of the

Covenant United Reformed Church near Lancaster, Pennsylvania. Delegates rejoiced with Rev. Arrick in the increased interest that the Reformed faith has gained in the east.

As is policy in the classis, three churches reported on activities taking place in their midst. The pastors of Trinity of Caledonia, Dutton, and Cornerstone of Hudsonville gave positive reports about the Lord's work within His Church as represented in the respective locations.

Following these very positive reports, the classis was saddened to receive a request from the Elders of the Eastmanville URC seeking to depose their pastor on the grounds of breaking both the seventh and the ninth commandments. After hearing from the Elders and the Church Visitors, Rev. B. Vos offered prayer that the Lord would

grant wisdom to the delegates concerning the solemn decision that lay before them. The delegates then voted by ballot in which a unanimous decision was granted to depose Rev. Steve De Boer from office on the grounds that he had sinned against the seventh and ninth commandments. Prayer was offered for the Eastmanville Elders, the Congregation, and Mr. and Mrs. De Boer and their family.

A special motion was approved to thank Church Visitors, Rev. Casey Freswick, Rev. Ed Marcusse, and Rev. Wybren Oord for their work in assisting the Elders of Eastmanville in the above matter.

In closing matters, the next meeting of classis will be October 10, 2006 at the Walker URC; the host church was thanked; and Rev. B. Vos closed in prayer.

Respectfully submitted,
Rev. Wybren H. Oord
Clerk of Classis Michigan

Classis Southwest US of the URCNA

June 26, 2006

The 17th meeting of Classis Southwest U.S. was held in Ripon, California, "The Almond Capital of the World," June 26, 2006. Delegates from nineteen organized churches came together as the broader assembled to examine a man for ordination, candidacy, deal with an overture, as well give concurring advice to several churches in their labors to maintain the three marks of a true church.

The first order of business were two successful examinations. Mr. Steve Oeverman, whom the Escondido URC called to be an Associate Minister of the Word and Sacraments, sustained his ordination exam, and Mr. Nollie Malabuyo sustained three sections of the candidacy exam in which Classis requested re-examination in June 2005.

The growth of Classis SWUS was again on the agenda. The consistory of the Escondido URC overtured Classis to give its concurring advice according to Church Order article 22 in the organization of the Christ URC (Santee, CA). Since its inception as a Bible study in July 2003, the Christ URC has grown to over 40 families under the leadership of Rev. Michael Brown.

Classis also received for information that the Coram Deo Reformation Church (Denver, CO) has applied for membership in Classis SWUS and is now under

the oversight of the Calvary United Reformed Church (Loveland, CO). Classis looks forward to Coram Deo's pastor, Rev. Carl Heuss, undergoing his *colloquium doctum* in January as well as the official reception of this church. Furthermore, Classis welcomed the pastor and an elder from the Reformation Church of Montague, CA as guests seeking a federation with which to affiliate.

An *ad hoc* committee of four ministers also presented their report on various questions concerning two worship services that a consistory presented to Classis in January. Finally, Classis gave its advice to two congregations in discipline matters and gave advice and counsel to another congregation that has only one active elder.

The next meeting of classis will be hosted by the Grace Evangelical Church (Torrance, CA), on January 16-17, 2006.

Respectfully submitted,
Rev. Daniel R. Hyde, Clerk

Looking Out and About

- Rev. Harold A. Miller, Jr. of the United Reformed Church of Wellsburg, Iowa has declined the call to the Grace Reformed Church of Leduc, Alberta.
- Rev. Al Bezuyen of the Trinity Orthodox Reformed Church in St. Catharines, Ontario has declined the call to the Faith Reformed Church of Telkwa, British Columbia.
- Rev. Gerard Dykstra, who has been serving as Director of Denominational Ministries for the Christian Reformed Church, has been appointed by Synod to serve as the Executive Director of the denomination.
- Several young women from Michigan churches have gone to India for a five week service project to assist Rev. Steve Poelman with the conducting of Daily Vacation Bible School in two different locations.

If you have an item of interest to the churches to be placed in Looking Out and About, please email the editor at wymbkath@juno.com.

Westminster Seminary California Commencement 2006

Westminster Seminary California gives thanks to God for Commencement 2006 and its 25th graduating class of 25 graduates, who now join over 700 alumni who serve around the world as pastors, missionaries, and teachers.

Commencement events began on Friday, May 26, as WSC hosted the annual BBQ picnic for its alumni along with their families and friends. That afternoon various faculty delivered the “Homecoming Lectures,” a lecture series of exegetical, systematic, and practical theology (for select audio files visit www.wscal.edu/resources/audio). That evening the Westminster California community gathered for the graduate reception, where individuals mingled, enjoyed sweet treats, and listened to speeches from graduates. President Godfrey also gave a charge to the graduates. Commencement was held Saturday morning with Dr. Marvin Olasky, a professor of journalism at the University of Texas and the editor-in-chief of *World*, who spoke concerning Christian compassion—a call to remember our duty of love to the poor and needy, of both the church and society.

Of special note was the announcement of a newly endowed chair—the J. Gresham Machen Chair of Systematic Theology and Apologetics—awarded to the Rev. Dr. Michael S. Horton.

We thank God for His abundance of grace and mercy over the past

twenty-five years of service to our Reformed and Presbyterian churches. Though our student body is diverse, our graduates leave with a clear understanding of confessional Reformed theology. Though unique in upbringing and ecclesiastical experience, they leave with remarkable unity and zeal to minister the Reformed faith. Today our alumni serve in over thirty denominations, in over thirty countries around the world—most of them with the URC, OPC, PCA, and Korean Presbyterian Church of America—for Christ, his Church, and His Gospel.

When you think of WSC, please pray for our graduates. Many of them may be in your own community—maybe your own church! Pray for us, too. Pray that each of us would be kept from the errors of men and that we would grow together “in the grace and knowledge of Jesus Christ.”

To God along be the glory for great things He has done.

Mr. Steve Overman has recently been called to be an Associate Minister of Escondido URC and serves as a Vice President at Westminster Seminary California.

Mid-America Reformed Seminary Commencement 2006

This year Mid-America Reformed Seminary is celebrating its 25th anniversary, and the annual commencement in May was the 21st year the Seminary has been sending messengers into the world to bring the good news. On May 19, 2006, seven seniors graduated from Mid-America Reformed Seminary at a ceremony held in Calvary Community Church of South Holland, IL. Receiving Master of Divinity degrees were: Nick Alons, John Bopp, Anup Hiwale, Steve Postma, Nick Smith, Jeremy Veldman and John Westendorp.

Alons, Postma, Smith, Veldman, and Westendorp are seeking calls within the URCNA. Bopp is seeking a call within the PCA, and Hiwale plans to return to his work with Ministry of Peace Making in India.

Rev. Christo F. Heiberg, pastor of Zion URC in Sheffield, ON, addressed the graduates with the question, “Who has the last word?” From 1 Thessalonians 2, he demonstrated that the minister preparing a sermon should ask himself if it is God or man who has the last word. Rev. Heiberg encouraged the graduates to study and communicate not only what the text says, but also what the text does. He warned against common pitfalls and perils that may obscure the voice of the Spirit.

“Of all the public speakers in this



Participants in Mid-America’s 21st annual commencement were: (L to R) front: John Bopp, Jeremy Veldman, Anup Hiwale, Nick Alons; middle: Prof. Alan Strange, Rev. Christo Heiberg (speaker), Dr. J. Mark Beach, Prof. Mark Vander Hart; back: John Westendorp, Dr. Cornelis P. Venema, Nick Smith, Dr. Nelson Kloosterman, Steve Postma, Rev. Charles Telfer.

world,” he said, “the minister of the gospel is the only one who always is bound by a written text. He should, therefore, take care to honor that text.” Rev. Heiberg noted that Reformed pastors may approach the important task of sermon preparation with confidence, since the inspired Word of God is clear and because God promises to make preaching the Spirit’s instrument to bring sinners to Christ, edify the saints, and build the church.

About 250 of the guests attending graduation enjoyed refreshments during a time of fellowship following the ceremony.

The Incarnate Word From God

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

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

Revelation by the Son

There is no question that the prophets were crucially important as channels of the mind of God as it was revealed to man. The point of the writer to the Hebrews, however, is that revelation has made a significant advance with the appearance of Jesus Christ. The arrival of the Messianic era means that God has now spoken in a way that is unprecedented in comparison to His previous ways of granting revelatory truth. In these last days, God has spoken to us in His Son, “whom He appointed heir of all things, through whom also He made the world” (Heb. 1:2b). The very person who created the world is now the one who has become the spokesman of God, *the* great prophet anticipated in the Old Testament. But even more than this, the Son is “the radiance” of God’s glory and “the exact representation of His nature” (Heb. 1:3). The Son, as the Greek text states, is the *character* of God’s nature. Just as the impress made by a seal exactly represents its original, so likewise, does the Son precisely reflect the divine nature of the Father.

Who Is God Himself

Because the New Testament insists upon the supreme dignity of the person of Christ, the true church throughout its history has refused to compromise on the issue of the identity of her Lord. The Creed of Nicea (AD 325) reflects the exegetical brilliance of the church fathers in its assertion that “the catho-

lic and apostolic church” believes in “one Lord Jesus Christ” who is both “God of God” and “of one substance with the Father.” These three crucial Greek terms—*homoousion to patri*—accurately summarize the central New Testament message that the Son of God has the same divine nature that is possessed by God the Father. It is indeed the case that the *homoousion* formulation—that the nature of the Son is identical to the nature of the Father—was a decisive step in the church’s deepening understanding of the gospel message.

This perspective regarding the ultimate dignity of Christ lies at the heart of the New Testament. John, for example, began his Gospel with the affirmation: “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God” (Jn. 1:1). The Logos (the revelatory Word of God), declared the apostle, was existing at the moment of creation, at the very beginning when God created the heavens and the earth. In addition, the Logos existed in a close relationship with God the Father. He was “*with* God.” And the Logos was much more than an exalted creature such as an angel. “The Word *was* God.” Furthermore, this pre-existent divine person was instrumental in bringing the creation into existence: “All things came into being *by him*” (Jn. 1:3). But even more remarkable in terms of the gospel is the statement that He came *into* the creation which He had made: “The Word became flesh and dwelt among us” (Jn. 1:14). The revelatory Word took to Himself that which He was not. He became flesh, adding to Himself a

fully human nature in all of its weakness, except for sin.

Exegeting the Father

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

Since the Son was embraced within the loving arms of the Father from all eternity, there is no question that he fully knows who the Father is. The incarnation then makes it possible for the Son to share his knowledge of the Father with man who stands in such desperate need of that knowledge. The Son has done this very thing and has, quite literally, exegeted the Father. He has led the Father out before us so that we may come to know who the Father is. This was the very point that Jesus made in response to the request of Philip that he and the other apostles be allowed to see the Father: “Have I been so long with you, and yet you have not come to know me,

Philip? He who has seen me has seen the Father” (Jn. 14:9).

Disclosing Pity and Grace

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

The crucial question in response to this divine revelation of mercy in the Son of God relates to every person’s individual response. There are, in reality, only two possible responses: faith (*pistis*) or unbelief (*apistia*). In unbelief, “the faith life of the sinner is turned away from God.” It “attaches itself to something creaturely, in which it seeks support against God” (Ibid, 280-281). Such unbelief is often reflected in trust placed in one’s own intellectual prowess or in a personal history of benevolence and good deeds. In this situation, the sinner essentially dares God to condemn the achievements of human reason or the excellence of moral conduct. To challenge God in such a way is surely the height of arrogance and

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(continued from pg. 31)

folly, for fallen human beings are “darkened in their understanding” (Eph. 4:18) and “there is none righteous not even one” (Rom. 3:10). In the response of faith, the heart of the believer embraces the Christ, his cross, and his righteousness as they are freely offered in the gospel. This is true wisdom: to recognize one’s own desperate condition in the presence of the infinitely Holy, and then to reach out to Christ and to embrace him and his mercy.

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

Dr. Mark Larson is the home missions pastor at Providence OPC in Aiken, South Carolina. He is a regular contributor to *The Outlook*.

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