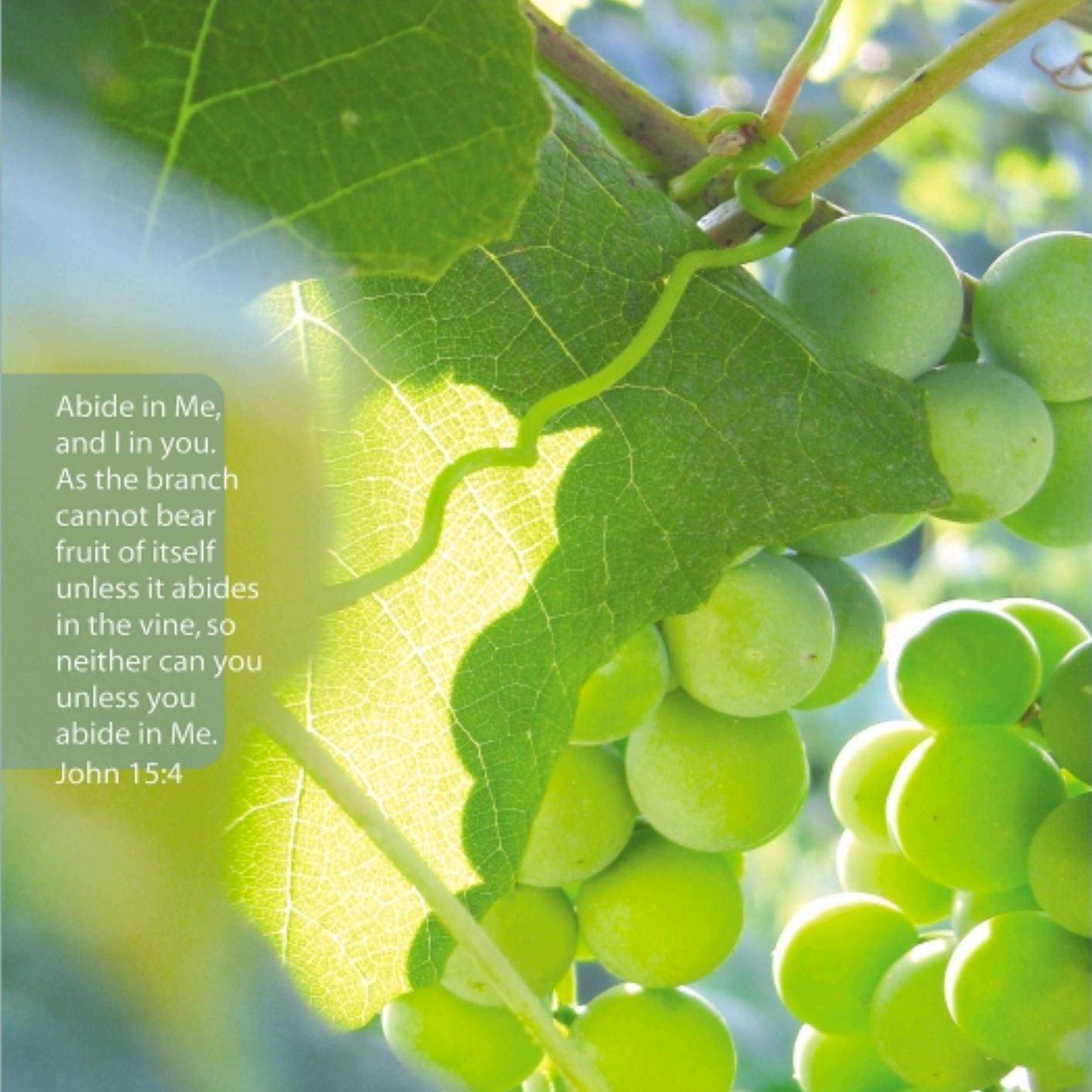


September 2006 • Volume 56 • Issue 8

The Outlook



Dedicated to the Exposition and Defense of the Reformed Faith



Abide in Me,
and I in you.
As the branch
cannot bear
fruit of itself
unless it abides
in the vine, so
neither can you
unless you
abide in Me.
John 15:4

• God Binds His Covenant • The Life of Jacob • Baptism (IV) • We Confess • Looking Above
• New Testament Evidence Regarding Paedocommunion (I) • New Breed of Conservatives

September 2006—Volume 56 No. 8

God Binds His Covenant..... 3
Mr. Boekestein writes about the responsibility of being in the covenant.

Baptism (IV) 6
Rev. Stromberg concludes his series on baptism by explaining it as a sign and seal instituted by Christ.

Looking Above 9
Rev. B. Vos explains the meaning of the 144,000.

Bible Studies on Jacob..... 13
Rev. Vander Hart begins the Bible Study Season with two studies on the life of Jacob. The Outlook *plans to provide two Bible Studies each month on the life of Jacob.*

We Confess 20
Rev. Hyde explains Article 36 of the Belgic Confession.

A New Breed of Conservatives..... 23
Rev. Freswick evaluates the decisions of the 2006 Synod of the Christian Reformed Church.

The New Testament Evidence Regarding Paedocommunion (I)..... 29
Having looked at the Old Testament evidence regarding the participation of children at covenant observances, *Dr. Venema* begins to review New Testament evidence.

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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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God Binds His Covenant

"I will take note of you as you pass under My rod, and I will bring you into the bond of the covenant." (Ezekiel 20:37)

One of the distinctives of the Reformed Faith is its emphasis on the covenant of grace. We believe that God has graciously initiated an agreement between Himself and believers and their children. In this covenant, God promises to be the God of His people, and His people promise to live a life of faith and obedience.

In Ezekiel 20, the prophet is confronted with a serious question. It is also a question that confronts us practically. Is this covenant breakable? Can the disobedience of man nullify God's hold on his people? Can a covenant boy or girl or man or woman walk away from God's covenant?

During the time of Ezekiel the people had violated God's covenant and had been exiled from the covenant land as punishment. A group of elders from Israel had come to the prophet Ezekiel to question God regarding His covenant faithfulness. The Lord turns their questions around against them. They are, in fact, the ones who have been covenantally unfaithful. God forbids them to inquire of Him. Instead he will do the inquiring.

The Need for Covenant Binding

At this point in redemptive history, the covenant between God and His people *appears* to be in jeopardy. That covenant, which was to be a never-ending relationship between God and His people, *seems* to be

unraveling. It seems as if God has let His people go, sent them into exile, and canceled out His covenant. That is exactly what some of the Israelites want: *"We want to be like the nations, like the peoples of the world, who serve wood and stone"* (32).

Israel is expressing her *desire* to be released from the bond of the covenant. They were already living in violation of the covenant terms and now they wanted it to be canceled, like an unfaithful spouse who sues to cancel the marriage covenant. They yearned for the covenantal cords to be severed so that they would be free of its obligations. They are saying, "We want to be rid of this covenant. We do not want its responsibilities; we do not care for its blessings. We want to be just like the other nations who serve a god of their own choosing on their own terms.

Why would God's covenant people want the bond of the covenant to be broken? Perhaps they wanted to worship a god that they could see, a "real" god. They may have felt that Jehovah was too hidden, especially since they were away from the visible objects of their religion; the land, the temple, and its priests. Jehovah's requirements are too intrusive, they thought. They did not want to submit to the covenant obligations. In their opinion, this covenant was not very beneficial: "look at us, we are in exile." But the main reason they wanted out was be-

cause they wanted to live like the world, to fit in with their neighbors.

There were indeed real pressures to fit in, as there are now. Think about what happened to God's covenant keeping people in the midst of the Gentiles. Daniel kept covenant with God throughout the exile. He continued to pray, as he always had done, even though he was in Babylon. Because of his faithfulness, the king threw him into the lions' den. Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-Nego kept covenant, and they were thrown into the fiery furnace. You can see why many of the people told God "we want to be like the rest of these people."

It is no different today. There are social and personal consequences for keeping God's covenant. Christian teenagers are ridiculed by the world today for keeping sexual purity. Christian business men are called legalists or fundamentalists for refusing to profit on the Lord's Day. People who take firm biblical stances before synodical meetings are labeled as hard liners or schismatics. It is much easier to accept a compromise that will enable the church to remain united.

The reasoning then was the same as it is today: "It is not beneficial for us to stick out, or to be different. We do not want to be thrown into lions' dens or into fiery furnaces. We do not want to be the objects of ridicule or scorn for being different, for being wholly committed to the Lord our God. We want to blend in. We are in Babylon now, and we want to be like the Babylonians."

Does this sound familiar? There are children of the covenant today,

both young and old, who effectively say the same thing: “We want to be like the nations, like the people of the world who serve wood and stone.” Some of us have aunts and uncles who have walked away from the Lord. Some of our classmates are trying to live outside of the covenant relationship with God. Some of our baptized children have rejected the covenant and said that they want to be like the nations.

The Process by which God Binds His Covenant

The people have said, “We want to be like the world.” But God says, “You will never be like them. You cannot be like them.” God’s language is emphatic, “What you have in mind will never happen!” God’s initiative in binding the people to His covenant is shown in the rest of Ezekiel 20 by nearly twenty statements of what *He* will do: “I will rule over you...I will bring you out from the people...I will gather you...I will bring you into the wilderness...I will exercise judgment upon you...I will cause you to pass under the rod, and I will bring you into the bond of the covenant...” What you have said will not happen; you will never be like the world. But what I have said, I will surely do; I will rule over you.”

Covenant breakers cannot simply walk away from the covenant and think that it is canceled. They can break covenant in terms of their responsibility, they can reject the covenant blessings, but they cannot

break covenant in terms of God’s ruling over them.

We need to understand the way in which God describes this process of exerting His covenant rule. Both physical and spiritual language are being used in Ezekiel. In one sense, God is speaking to *physical Israel*. And so He describes the process by which He applies the bond of the covenant in *physical* terms. Israel was living among the world in Babylon. God says that He will separate them from the nations and deal with them face to face. He will bring them back to the land of Israel, binding them to the covenant. But this is also a *spiritual* description of how God will deal with all covenant members including those of our day.

The first thing that God will do is to *gather the people from the nations*. These words remind us of the exodus where God’s people were distinguished from the nations around them. God is beginning to prove that His people are different. In order to gather one thing from among other things, there has to be a difference between them. Imagine a pasture filled with several hundred head of black and white Holstein cattle. Mingled among them are a few dozen brown Herefords. These cows may be eating the same things, mooing the same words, walking the same paths. These Herefords may think that they are mingled among the masses, the cows themselves may

not even know the difference but the farmer can easily pick them out. This is the idea here. Covenant people may think that they are blending in with the world. To the average person, their lives may be indiscernible. Humans cannot see that Trinitarian “water-mark” on the foreheads of covenant people, but God can. So God will separate His people as the farmer separates the Herefords from the Holsteins. He will gather them from the nations.

From there, Ezekiel 20 says that *God will judge His people in the wilderness* (35,36). Again, this is compared to the exodus. There, in the wilderness outside of Egypt, the people were judged according to the covenant promises and curses. The covenant people of Israel were distinguished from the Babylonians. Now God begins to separate those within the covenant and to deal with them in covenantal terms.

As we continue the movement of the passage, we see that the result is that the people *pass under the rod into the bond of the covenant* (37). Here is God’s answer to His people who say, “we will be like the nations; we will be done with God and have nothing to do with Him anymore.” God rages against this thought. He is the shepherd, and He rules over the entire flock that is called by His name. God is addressing all of us who have been baptized into His covenant. Christ is the ruler of His whole church, the invisible church and the visible church. God will make the entire covenant community to pass under the rod.

Covenant breakers cannot simply walk away from the covenant and think that its cancelled.

The Result of the Lord Bringing Israel into the Bond of the Covenant

When God brought Israel into the bond of the covenant He demonstrated that they all belonged to Him. He has a claim on them. He will rule over them. But He will rule over each person according to their true covenant relation to Him.

First we see how God will deal with hypocrites in the covenant. They will not enter the land. How should we understand this threat of God? We know that when exiled Israel returned to Canaan toward the end of the sixth century, there *were* unbelievers in the midst. They *did* enter the land.

It is evident that we must make a distinction between the physical and spiritual character of this prophesy. When the reprobate Israelites were released from physical exile and re-immigrated back to Israel, they had not entered the land in the truest sense of the word; that is, they did not enter into the rest of the Lord, or enjoy the fruit of His promises (Hebrews 4:1-8). In this sense it is true that they did not enter the land. Calvin says of these covenant hypocrites that “wherever they might dwell, their station was in the wilderness; and even in the very bosom of the land of Canaan they were exiles.”

Covenant breakers, while they might enjoy some limited physical blessings from God, will not enter His promised land in their unbelief. The covenant that you entered into, even if it was without your knowledge, is binding. If you break covenant you will not enter into the rest of the Lord. Let no one say, I am in

Covenant breakers, while they might enjoy some limited physical blessings from God, will not enter His promised land in their unbelief.

the covenant so I am okay. If you have any desire of reaching the promised rest of the Lord then you must repent and turn to Christ in faith.

The physical restoration of purified Israel symbolizes the spiritual union of believers to Christ by the bond of the covenant. Christ is the mediator of this covenant. He is the surety and God’s covenantal pledge of love to us. Believers are brought into the bond of the covenant by Christ Himself. When God contended with unbelieving Israel in the wilderness He contended with the wicked face to face. Their dead bodies were scattered in the wilderness as a result of this striving (Numbers 14, Hebrews 3:17). But He contends with the elect through Christ. He charges Christ with all our sins. It was His body that was scattered in the wilderness for us. It is one’s relation to Christ that determines his essential relation to the covenant.

The redeemed church is in the bond of the covenant. They will be gathered, separated from the profane and made holy. They will be brought to the land of Israel, into that rest of the Lord. We have fellowship with God and rest with Him now as we look to that eternal rest that is to come. God says that Israel will serve Him on His holy mountain. The elect are chosen to glorify God. And finally, they will be penitent. The fruit of being accepted by God in all His majesty is to loathe the

sins from which you have been rescued. To sum this all up, when the elect are brought into the bond of the covenant, that promise of God where He says, “I will be a God unto you, and you will be my people” will be truly realized in the fullest sense. Tell your children that if they abide in Christ the result of the covenant for them is a perfect, blessed, eternal relationship with God.

The great problem of Israel’s covenant disobedience was that they were profaning and polluting God’s great name among the nations. God had placed His name on His people in order that He might be exalted in them. But they did not exalt the Lord by their conduct. In fact, Ezekiel says that Israel was more wicked in her exile than the nations around her. Israel had taken God’s name upon her and had dragged it through the mud.

God could not tolerate this. If you read through the first half of Ezekiel 20, you will find God was on the brink of wiping out His people. But He stopped because He needed to preserve the sanctity of His name. He could not destroy them before the watching eyes of the world. He had made a promise that they were His people. Instead, God says that He will bring the covenant promises and curses to bear upon His people in order that He might be “*shown holy among the nations... for His own name’s sake.*”

The Lord's name will be sanctified by all of us. We and our children are in the covenant. God promises to rule over us and be gracious to us. But if we resist God's gracious rule of love, then we will be forced to submit to the rule of His "mighty hand and outstretched arm and outstretched wrath." When we pass under the rod of God's omniscient wisdom, everything will be laid bare and our true relation to the covenant will be revealed. A few drops of water sprinkled on the forehead will not be the deciding factor.

All of us are tempted in our hearts to want to be like the world. We are all a little embarrassed to stick out from the world. That is why we must train ourselves and our children from to think covenantally.

Teach your children from before they can understand, that they are not like the world. Teach them that they "*are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a peculiar people*" (I Peter 2:9). Teach them that they cannot "*be like the nations, like the people of the world.*" God will not allow it. God's covenant cannot be broken. He will bring His people into the bond of the covenant.

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Baptism (IV)

A Covenantal Sign and Seal

In its most basic sense, baptism has to do with washing by water. The washing by water signifies an internal washing by the blood and the Spirit of Christ. There is in baptism a double washing: an external washing with water, and an internal washing with the blood and Spirit of Christ.

Jesus added His promise to this washing: just as the water externally washes our bodies from filth; likewise, the blood of Christ washes our souls internally from the filth of sin, and by the Spirit we are renewed to new life when we accept this promise by faith. This internal washing by Christ's blood and the renewal by the Spirit are conditional. They are received only by faith.

The spiritual blessing received by faith is signified through the holy visible sign. Just as water is sufficient to wash away dirt and filth, likewise the blood of Christ is sufficient to wash away the pollution of sin from our souls, and the Spirit of Christ is sufficient to renew you and set you apart as member of Christ.

The Sign of Baptism

Jesus Christ instituted baptism as a sign in Matthew 28:10 "*Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.*" The words of institution testify that the individual being baptized belongs to the Father, the individual is received into

favor by the Father on account of the Son, and the individual is sanctified by the Holy Spirit. By the act of baptism an individual is given over to God the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, and declared to be God's property.

In the garden, Adam named the animals as an expression of his authority (dominion) over the animals. Likewise, God's name is expressed over the baptized in its Trinitarian form, as an expression of God's authority over the individual being baptized. The baptized bear God's name; they have been marked out as God's possession. Through the act of baptism an individual is identified as holy; he has been set apart for God.

Water baptism replaced circumcision as an identifying mark of church membership. Of the two New Testament sacraments, water baptism is the sacrament that initiates one into the church. For this reason Jesus specifically refers to baptism in the context of making disciples. Water baptism is the mark that all disciples bear as a mark that identifies them as a disciples of Christ and as members of His church.

The testimony of the apostles validates baptism as the mark of church membership. "*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.” With many other words he warned them; and he pleaded with them, “Save yourselves from this corrupt generation.” Those who accepted his message were baptized, and about three thousand were added to their number that day” (Acts 2:38-41).

If baptism identifies us as the property of God, then it is not hard to see how baptism is a declaration of our duty to God. As members of the church, through baptism, we are obligated unto faith and repentance. “Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved, but whoever does not believe will be condemned” (Mark 16:16). The external washing of baptism alone does not save, faith is required. God has declared that he will save everyone who believes and is baptized. Through baptism you are identified as a disciple of Christ, and true disciples believe in the one that they follow. The benefits signified through baptism are yours only by true faith.

The Seal of Baptism

As a covenant sign, baptism declares the gospel promise; it signifies the substance of this promise. The outward washing by water signifies the internal washing by Christ’s blood and the internal renewal by the Spirit. This internal washing is again two-fold; it includes a washing with the blood of Christ and a washing with Christ’s Spirit. Both, the washing by the blood, and the washing by the Spirit are mentioned in the Catechism.

“And now what are you waiting

for? Get up, be baptized and wash your sins away calling on his name” (Acts 22:16). In this passage baptism signifies the washing away of our sins. “Get up, be baptized and wash your sins away.” This is in reference to the washing that takes place by the blood of Christ.

“Or don’t you know that all of us who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death” (Romans 6:3). In this passage baptism signifies the death of our old man. Just as Christ died on the cross, likewise we died on the cross with Him. This is a spiritual reality that is applied to us by the internal work of the Spirit. This death is pictured through baptism; this death is spiritually applied to the believer by the Spirit of Christ. “**Or don’t** you know that all of us who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into His death.”

‘In Him you were also circumcised, in the putting off of the sinful nature, not with a circumcision done by the hands of men but with the circumcision done by Christ, having been buried with Him in baptism and raised with Him through your faith in the power of God, who raised Him from the dead’ (Colossians 2:11-12). The same idea of being buried in baptism is repeated in this passage. This time the idea is connected with the spiritual application of circumcision. In connection with the covenant established with Abraham, there was an external circumcision that was limited to the flesh, but there was also an internal circumcision that resulted in the putting off of the sinful nature. According to Paul, this internal cir-

cumcision was performed by the hands of Christ; it was performed internally by the Spirit of Christ.

“A man is not a Jew who is only one outwardly nor is circumcision merely outward and physical. No, a man is a Jew who is one inwardly; and circumcision is circumcision of the heart, by the Spirit.” In this passage Paul makes explicit reference to both the external and the internal. There was an external circumcision performed by the hands of men; it was outward and physical. Likewise there was an internal circumcision performed by the Spirit; it was inward and spiritual. The same is true of baptism; there is a baptism that is outward and physical, a baptism performed by the hands of men, but there is also a baptism that is spiritual; this baptism is performed by the Spirit.

The outward physical reality of both circumcision and baptism signify a deeper internal reality accomplished by the Spirit. The outward reality pictures the internal reality. Circumcision and baptism both picture the cutting off of the old man, or the burial of the old man, but baptism extends the image to include the resurrection. “Having been buried with Him in baptism and raised with Him through your faith in the power of God, who raised Him from the dead.” The imagery of baptism is fuller and richer than that of circumcision, because it signifies not only the death of Christ but it also signifies in a fuller and richer way, the new life associated with the resurrection.

Both the death and the resurrection

There is a baptism that is outward and physical, a baptism performed by the hands of men, but there is also a baptism that is spiritual, this baptism is performed by the Spirit.

of Christ are signified through baptism. Baptism signifies the work of Christ in its redemptive historical fullness, picturing both His death and the resurrection. Added to baptism is the promise that, if you believe, then that which is pictured through baptism is yours by faith. The outward reality is internalized by faith. The work of Christ that baptism signifies is received by faith through the working of the Spirit.

“He saved us, not because of righteous things we had done, but because of His mercy. He saved us through the washing of (regeneration) rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit” (Titus 3:5). This verse makes reference to the two-fold internal washing. It refers to the second internal washing of the Spirit; it refers to the new birth that is associated with the washing of the Spirit. The Spirit produces the miracle of regeneration, which is described as a new birth. This new birth is defined by a complete reorientation. There is a change from evil inclinations to those that are good. The Holy Spirit continues to work in the believer a hatred of sin and a desire to live according to the will of God.

This double washing from sin is signified by the sacrament of baptism. The Scriptures verify this view.

John’s baptism and the baptism that Jesus instituted are similar in sub-

stance with one difference. John’s baptism looked forward to the completed work of Christ; in contrast our baptism looks back at the completed work of Christ. There is also a difference in that we are baptized according to a trinitarian formula.

The baptism of John anticipates the work of Jesus, whereas the baptism of the apostles looks back to the work of Jesus. Both the baptism of John and the baptism that Jesus instituted signified the work of Christ. One could argue that the baptism of Jesus is fuller and richer than the baptism of John, but this is largely due to their place in redemptive history. The baptism of John took place before Pentecost and the giving of the Spirit. The baptism that Jesus instituted includes the washing of the Spirit.

This double washing is made explicit in Romans 6 whereby the believer is dead to sin, but alive in Christ.

Or don’t you know that all of us who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into His death? We were therefore buried with Him through baptism into death in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life. If we have been united with him like this in His death, we will certainly also be united with Him in His resurrection. For we know that our old

self was crucified with him so that the body of sin might be done away with, that we should no longer be slaves to sin—because anyone who has died has been freed from sin. Now, if we died with Christ, we believe that we will also live with Him. (Romans 6:3-8).

Baptism is, therefore, the sign of both these forms of washing, which include the forgiveness of sin and the renewal of our nature. The washings are interconnected. It is impossible to have one without the other. To be baptized into Christ’s death is to partake in all the benefits of His death and resurrection, just as if we ourselves had died and been raised to new life in Christ. This death includes a death of the sinful flesh and its lusts. Just as we died with Him we have also been raised with Him to new life. As a new creation in Christ we have been accepted into His body. For this reason baptism is to be the sign of our entrance and reception into the *visible* church. It is for this reason also that the Lord’s Supper is given only to such as are baptized: for they alone have been received into the church. The fellowship meal is reserved for the members of the body of Christ.

Therefore, baptism is a covenantal sign and seal that identifies an individual with the covenant community, the visible body of Christ (the church).

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

Looking Above

A Series on The Revelation of Jesus Christ

Revelation 7:4-8
“The 144,000”

How do you view the Church?

Do you see her primarily as powerful and mighty? Do you see her role as one of conquering and conquest? Do you see her role as one of seizing control of the political and social realms in order to make our nation a Christian nation? Do you see her role as one of taking up the sword, and in the name of Christ, conquering the infidels? Perhaps we should run another crusade?

How do you view the church?

Do you see her primarily as weak and humble? Is her role to simply sit back and be conquered? Is her role to withdraw from the political and social realms as areas that are inherently evil? Is her role to humbly submit to the sword of her enemies, perhaps even being forced to go underground?

Revelation 7 has much to teach us concerning the Church. In this article we turn our attention to verses 4-8, where those who are sealed in the blood of the Lamb (vv. 1-3) are registered as the 144,000.

We begin with the most obvious question: “Who are the 144,000?” Verse 4 says, “And I heard the number of those who were sealed. One hundred and forty-four thousand of all the tribes of the children of Israel were sealed.” We go on to read in verses 5-8 that 12,000 from each tribe were sealed. At first glance it

would seem that a remnant of Jews is in view. Israel is specifically mentioned and the number taken from each tribe is mentioned.

The New Israel

We must, however, allow Scripture to interpret Scripture. When we do so, we find that throughout the pages of the New Testament the Church is referred to as the true Israel. Consider Romans 2:28-29, “For he is not a Jew who is one outwardly, nor is circumcision that which is outward in the flesh; but he is a Jew who is one inwardly; and circumcision is that of the heart, in the Spirit, not in the letter; whose praise is not from men but from God.” Circumcision in the flesh does not make one a Jew. Circumcision of the heart is what makes one a true Jew.

Paul says in Galatians 5:15-16, “For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision avails anything, but a new creation. And as many as walk according to this rule, peace and mercy be upon them, and upon the Israel of God.” He calls the Church the “Israel of God.” He writes in Philippians 3:3, “For we are the circumcision, who worship God in the Spirit, rejoice in Christ Jesus, and have no confidence in the flesh.” The Church is the circumcision. Paul consistently speaks of the Church as the New Israel.

Such language is not unique to Paul.

Consider James 1:1, “James, a bondservant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ, to the twelve tribes which are scattered abroad.” Who are the “twelve tribes scattered abroad” but the Church of Jesus Christ. Consider also 1 Peter 2:9, where Peter addresses the church and says, “But you are chosen generation, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, His own special people...” Peter takes descriptions that were given to Old Testament Israel and applies them to the Church.

The Church, then, is the New Israel. This is further seen in the book of Revelation itself, where John applies them to the Church. Consider 1:6, “...and has made us king and priests to His God...” Consider also 5:10, “And have made us kings and priests to our God.”

Many other Old Testament images applied to Israel are now taken and applied to the Church. Revelation 2:17, “To him who overcomes I will give some of the hidden manna to eat.” Revelation 3:9, “I will make those of the synagogue of Satan, who say they are Jews and are not, but lie—indeed I will make them come and worship before your feet, and to know that I have loved you.” Revelation 3:12, “He who overcomes, I will make him a pillar in the temple of My God, and he shall go out no more. I will write on him the name of My God and the name of the city of My God, the New Jerusalem.”

The Great Number

All of this leads to the conclusion that the Church is the New Israel (we shall see further support for this position in chapter 14, where we

meet up with the 144,000 once more and are told that these are the redeemed of the Lord). We do not have to throw out our eschatology and become Dispensational Premillennialists, holding to a Pre-tribulation rapture! The Amillennial position stands and makes perfectly good sense. The 144,000 sealed out of the tribes of Israel have in view the Church as the New Israel.

Notice that there are 144,000 sealed; 12,000 from each of the 12 tribes. The number is clearly symbolic. It is the number of completeness. In view are all the elect of God—the complete and perfect number of those redeemed and sealed by the blood of the Lamb. None can be added to this number, nor can any be taken away. The elect of God are numbered and listed. We have a roll call numbering and listing the people of God. We have a census numbering and listing the people of God.

There is a particular background for such numbering and listing; it is found in Numbers 1, where God commands Moses to “take a census of all the congregation of the children of Israel, by their families, by their fathers’ houses, according to the number of names, every male individually.” Notice that the census of Numbers 1 is a military census, “all who are able to go to war in Israel” (v. 3). This phrase is repeated near the end of the census in verse 45, “all who were able to go to war in Israel.” Furthermore, in the census itself, Moses repeats again and again that this census is for the purpose of war. Notice the end of verse 20, the children of Reuben were numbered, “all who were able to go to war”; the end of

verse 22, the children of Simeon were numbered, “all who were able to go to war”; the end of verse 24, the children of Gad were numbered, “all who were able to go to war”; the end of verse 26, the children of Judah were numbered, “all who were able to go to war”; the end of verse 28, the children of Issachar were numbered, “all who were able to go to war”; the end of verse 30, the children of Zebulun were numbered, “all who were able to go to war”; the end of verse 32, the children of Joseph were numbered, “all who were able to go to war”; the end of verse 34, the children of Manasseh were numbered, “all who were able to go to war”; the end of verse 36, the children of Benjamin were numbered, “all who were able to go to war”; the end of verse 38, the children of Dan were numbered, “all who were able to go to war”; the end of verse 40, the children of Asher were numbered, “all who were able to go to war”; the end of verse 42, the children of Naphtali were numbered, “all who were able to go to war.” The census is a military census.

The numbering of the elect here in Revelation 7:4-8 is a military census. It is a numbering of the Church militant—those prepared for war. Do not miss the imagery! The Church of Jesus Christ in the world is pictured in terms of an army numbered and prepared for battle, numbered and prepared for war.

Do not miss the significance of that

census. The Church is numbered and listed in heaven—a roll is kept in heaven. If the numbering and listing of the members of the Church is kept in heaven, so also it should be on earth. Here is the basis for church membership. As a roll is kept in heaven, so a roll is kept on earth. As the members are listed in heaven, so the members are listed on earth. As the members are numbered in heaven, so the members are numbered on earth. As it is in heaven, so it is on earth.

Our confessions recognize the importance of church membership. Article 28 of the Belgic Confession states: “We believe, since this holy congregation is an assembly of those who are saved, and outside of it there is no salvation, that no person of whatsoever state or condition he may be, ought to withdraw from it, content to be by himself; but that all men are in duty bound to join and unite themselves with it; maintaining the unity of the Church; submitting themselves to the doctrine and discipline thereof; bowing their necks under the yoke of Jesus Christ; and as mutual members of the same body, serving to the edification of the brethren, according to the talents God has given them. And that this may be the more effectually observed, it is the duty of all believers, according to the Word of God, to separate themselves from all those who do not belong to the Church, and to join themselves to this congregation, wheresoever God

If the numbering and listing of the members of the Church is kept in heaven, so also it should be on earth.

has established it, even though the magistrates and edicts of princes were against it, yea, though they should suffer death or any other corporal punishment. Therefore all those who separate themselves from the same or do not join themselves to it act contrary to the ordinance of God.”

The church today would do well to reflect much upon this article of the Confession! The church today would do well to reflect much upon the fact that even as we have the numbering and the listing of the people of God in heaven, so we have the numbering and listing of the people of God on earth! The church today would do well to consider the importance and weight of church membership!

The Confession reminds us of the importance and necessity of church membership when it states: “outside of it [the church] there is no salvation.” There is no salvation outside of the church because God has ordained the means of grace for use in the church! That is to say, you find the means of grace in the church! You find the preaching of the Word—that means of grace by which God creates faith in our hearts, and then strengthens that faith week after week in the church! You find the sacraments—those sacraments that proclaim to us the gospel of Jesus Christ, thereby strengthening an already present faith in the church!

That is why the Confession teaches: “all men are in duty bound to join and unite themselves with it [the church].... It is the duty of all believers...to join themselves to the church.” It is your duty—your re-

sponsibility—to join yourself to the church! It is not something we may take lightly nor something we should treat as a trivial thing. Church membership is important. God has set the pattern for us in heaven itself: as there is a numbering and listing of the people of God in heaven, so there is a numbering and listing of the people of God on earth. As it is in heaven, so it is on earth.

The Limited Number

Now to be sure, we cannot place our trust and our faith in our church membership. It is not as though being a member of the church on earth guarantees that you are also a member of the true Church. To be numbered and listed among the church on earth in no way guarantees that you are numbered and listed among the church in heaven. To belong to the visible church is no guarantee that you belong to the invisible church.

What we saw in Old Testament Israel is true of the Church as well. Of Old Testament Israel we read, “They are not all Israel who are of Israel” (Romans 9:6). In other words, there are those who belonged to the nation of Israel, but nevertheless were not part of the true Israel. Esau was of Israel, but he was not Israel. Ishmael was of Israel, but he was not Israel. So it is also true of the church. They are not all Israel who are of Israel; “they are not all the Church who are of the church.”

In that connection you might notice something quite interesting about the listing of the tribes of Israel.

Notice in the first place that 12,000 of each tribe are taken. Not the entire tribe, but a portion of the tribe. This comes through all the more clearly in the Greek, where no less than 13 times in these verses do we read the phrase “out of,” reminding us that only a portion out of the whole is saved. Indeed, they are not all Israel who are of Israel.

Notice in the second place that entire tribes are missing from the list. Dan and Ephraim are missing from the list. Why are these tribes missing? The answer is found in the history of these tribes as it is recorded for us in Judges 17-18. Micah, we are told in Judges 17:1, was from the mountains of Ephraim. Micah had a carved image made for his house. He also set up a shrine in his house and consecrated a priest for himself in his house. Micah said, ‘Now I know that the Lord will be good to me, since I have a Levite as priest!’” So ends Judges 17. Judges 18 then begins by telling us that in those days the tribe of Dan did not yet have its inheritance, and as they were going through the land, they came to the house of Micah. They took the carved image, the household idols, and the molded image, and the priest. They then proceeded to set up a city for themselves, and they named it Dan, and there they

The church today would do well to consider the importance and weight of church membership!

Those churches that are most faithful suffer the greatest persecution and the greatest attacks.

set up the carved image.

All of this foreshadows what happened when Jeroboam becomes king in Israel. Jeroboam did not want the people of the northern tribes to go to Jerusalem, and so he set up golden calves in Bethel and in Dan, and said, “these are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of Egypt.” He revived the false worship and idolatry of the golden calf! The tribe of Dan was a willing partner in such sin. Consequently, the tribe of Dan was one of the first to be exiled. Does that tell you something of the importance of worship? It should! It is not enough to worship the true God (the 1st commandment), we must also worship Him with true worship (the 2nd commandment).

Dan was one of the first to engage in idolatry and to accept false worship of God through the golden calf. Consequently, Dan was one of the first to be exiled. After the exile the tribe of Dan is not mentioned again! Dan is omitted from the list of Revelation 7. They are not all Israel who are of Israel.

These things remind us that the Church on earth is the Church militant. She is a Church that is attacked by Satan and his minions. She is a Church attacked by the wolves on the outside. She is a Church attacked by wolves dressed in sheep’s clothing on the inside. The gates of hell have been set against her. The Church is in the midst of a war. If you doubt that,

read the seven letters to the seven churches. Those churches that are most faithful suffer the greatest persecution and the greatest attacks. Faithless churches, compromising churches, are no threat to Satan, and so he leaves them alone. Faithful churches, uncompromising churches, are a great threat to him, and so he does not leave them alone. The true and faithful Church is a Church under attack!

It is necessary, then, for the people of God to gather together as the people of God, the body of Christ, the fellowship of the Holy Spirit, to feed regularly upon God’s Word and to be nourished with the visible Word in the sacraments. The Church is the Church militant! A soldier cannot fight the battle alone; a soldier is strengthened when he stands shoulder to shoulder with another soldier. So it must be in the army of God, the Church militant.

Revelation 7:4-8 has in view the Church pictured as an army. Don’t let the picture mislead you. This is not some tribulation force made up of converts of those who were left behind. This is not some holy crusade, equipped with swords and weapons to slay the infidels. This is an army that marches forth with the Word and Sacraments. This is an army that marches forth, remaining faithful to the Word of God and the testimony.

This is an army that assumes the posture of her King, even the Lamb that was slain. How does Paul put

it? “For Your sake we are killed all the day long; we are accounted as sheep for the slaughter.” The Church is a persecuted Church; she is the object of the world’s scorn and hatred. She appears weak and humble.

Yet precisely in that apparent weakness and humility lies her strength and power. Her posture is that of her King, even the Lamb slain who now stands on Mt. Zion! Do you remember the next words of Paul? “Yet in all these things we are more than conquerors through Him who loved us.” The Church belongs to her King. She has been sealed in the blood of the Lamb, and nothing can ever break that seal!

How do you view the church? Powerful and mighty? Or weak and humble? The Church of Jesus Christ, conformed to the Lamb slain, finds her power in weakness, her might in humility. She conquers as the Lamb conquered.

And so the question is left for you: are you a soldier of the cross, a follower of the Lamb; are you numbered and listed in the census of the Church militant?

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Bible Studies on Jacob

Lesson 1: It's Twins!

Read Genesis 25:19-26.

The account of Isaac: an introduction

The book of Genesis is put together in a very deliberate way to show to the readers, members of the community of the Christian faith, how God's redemption moves along. We travel from the grand story of the creation down to the point where the family of Jacob would journey from Canaan to Egypt to be kept alive by God through the work of Joseph. Throughout the book we read the phrase, "This is the account..." or "These are the generations of..." (cf. Gen. 2:4; 5:1, etc.). We meet just such another section again in Genesis 25:19, the account of Abraham's son Isaac.

As is true of several of the other accounts that make up the book of Genesis, this section (which covers Genesis 25:19 – 35:29) does not focus in great detail upon the man Isaac. In fact, Genesis 26 is really the only major chapter that is devoted to God's story in the life of Isaac. For the rest of this portion of Genesis, much more is devoted to Jacob and, to a lesser extent, to Esau. These accounts are focused on "what became of..." Like so much in Biblical history, there is a forward-looking concern. These accounts move us ahead from one point to another point, from one figure to another figure in redemptive-history. Thus the account of Isaac is going to tell us, in the main, what became of Isaac, what happened in his family.

The opening verses (25:19,20) quickly tie us into material from the past before moving us ahead to the new story. The great patriarch Abraham, the father of all believers, has two sons: Ishmael and Isaac. Yet it is Isaac who is the son of the promise, the carrier of all the redemptive-covenant promises (Gen. 21:10,12). Ishmael gets a brief account (25:12-18) to tell us that indeed God fulfilled His promise to make a nation from Ishmael, a nation that would live in hostility with its neighbors (see Gen. 16:11,12; 21:13). Once Ishmael's account can be nicely rounded off, then the inspired text turns us back to the main storyline.

Several things are noted: Isaac is Abraham's son, a son of his father's very old age, one who is born when his human parents are as "good as dead" (Rom. 4:19). But God is the God who works redemptive miracles to bring His promises into the world. Salvation is through miraculous and amazing grace!

Isaac marries Rebekah (see Gen. 24). Isaac is forty years old, and he loves Rebekah very much (Gen. 24:66). Furthermore, Genesis 25:20 underlines the fact that Rebekah is an Aramean, very closely related to her husband Isaac. The issue of marriage and whom one marries will come back again and again in this story of Jacob. Abraham had not wanted his son to marry any of the Canaanite women, and so he had sent his servant back to the northern area of the Fertile Cres-

cent, to the region of Paddan-Aram, in order to seek a wife from among his relatives. Later on, of course, Jacob will return to this same region. Already now, the reader hears Laban mentioned, Rebekah's brother and Jacob's uncle, the man who will play an important role in the wives and the wealth that Jacob will acquire. One might say that the text is "looking ahead" for us at this point.

Another barren wife (25:21)

Students of the Bible are well aware of the fact that Sarah, Abraham's beautiful wife, was barren and unable to have children. Yet God gave the miracle of a baby boy when she was very old! This is amazing, enough to make people smile and laugh (Gen. 21:6). But now we read of another beautiful wife, Rebekah, who is barren. This raises the question of what God is doing. Will every generation of the promised line have a barren wife? Of course, we may remind ourselves of other women unable at first to have children in redemptive-history (Rachel, the wife of Manoah, Hannah, and Elizabeth in Luke 1). The miracle of life stands out more clearly in the lives of these women when we see how God comes at the right time and in the right way to make the barren woman the joyful mother of children (see Psalm 113:9).

Isaac intercedes for his wife by praying to the Lord for a child. As so many psalms recount that the Lord hears the cries of the needy and those in distress, so the Lord hears Isaac's prayers. Isaac and Rebekah had to wait 20 years before she bears her children (see

verses 20 and 26). Our God gives more than enough in that Rebekah becomes pregnant with twins! And this was not a “quiet” pregnancy! The two children in her womb jostle each other. The word in the original suggests “smashing” or “crushing.” Are the twins engaged in a kind of pre-natal wrestling match? Certainly the readers know that the younger one will wrestle, years later, in the dark of night with a “mysterious stranger”... and will prevail.

Some Jewish rabbis later would interpret this jostling not as sibling rivalry, but rather as Esau trying to kill his twin brother Jacob. Thus the rabbis would say that a person could commit sin *before* one was born. This apparently lies behind the disciples’ question in John 9 about the man who was blind from his birth (see John 9:2ff.). But that rabbinical interpretation suggests that God was opposed to Esau because he attacked Jacob in the womb, and God loved Jacob. In other words, God was right to reject Esau because Esau had attempted murder. We might well ask the question: how do we know that it was Esau that attacked Jacob? Could it have been Jacob who attacked Esau? After all, when the boys are born, Jacob has grabbed hold of his brother Esau’s heel (verse 26). But perhaps we should not even talk of “attack” here, lest our imagination go too far afield. In

any case, God richly blesses the loving couple, Isaac and Rebekah, with twins who vigorously interact with each other already in the womb.

Prayer answered by prophecy (25:23,24)

Rebekah goes to the Lord for answers about her very active pregnancy. “Why is this happening to me?” This has likely been an emotional roller-coaster: barrenness, followed by prayer; then pregnancy involving two fetuses struggling together, followed (again) by prayer. “Why barren?” is followed by “why this battle?” In fact, Rebekah’s question literally reads, “If so, why am I...?” It is an incomplete sentence. Perhaps the thought here is, “We’ve prayed for pregnancy, but have I received more than I expected?”

The Lord’s answer is very specific in terms of making a clear distinction between the children and the destiny of their descendants. Although these are now only two boys in the womb, they will become the fathers of two nations. The younger will come to prominence as the older will serve him. The younger will in fact be the stronger and will prevail. In saying this, the LORD is setting aside the normal practice of giving the oldest (or older) son the firstborn privileges. The firstborn son is the sign of the father’s “strength,” and that son

would normally inherit the double portion of his father’s possessions. That was his birthright. Additionally, he would have both privileges and responsibilities to carry on the family’s standing, its faith and commitments, and its position in the surrounding society. The firstborn had to be aware of his past (where he came from) and the future of the family (where his descendants, by God’s grace, should be).

In this particular family, the firstborn had an even greater calling since this was no ordinary ancient Near Eastern household. This was a family created by the covenant of God’s grace in Jesus Christ! The twin boys are not the sons of a concubine or slave girl (cf. Ishmael, born of Hagar). Both boys are born of the legal and rightful wife, Rebekah. And the father Isaac is the son of the free woman, Sarah, born miraculously when she was barren and her body was “as good as dead.” But the Word of the LORD sets that aside in this case, and we are not told why this is so. God’s plan is carried on out of His inscrutable wisdom and good pleasure.

Election revealed in history

Read Romans 9:1-13, especially verses 10-12. The Apostle Paul makes reference to two important verses from the Old Testament, both dealing with Jacob and Esau. He is in the midst of a line of thought that reveals God’s good pleasure in election. Paul first draws attention to Abraham’s children, and there it is clear that Isaac is the child of the gracious promise, while Ishmael is the child “by nature.” But the argument must be sharpened with Isaac’s children: both Esau and Jacob are children born after bar-

The Lord’s answer is very specific in terms of making a clear distinction between the children and the destiny of their descendants.

renness is removed following prayer. Both boys have the same father and the same mother (cf. Rom. 9:10), and Rebekah is a free woman, not a handmaiden or slave woman. Yet the truth of election is already heard as Paul recalls Genesis 25:23, “The older will serve the younger.” The second verse is from Malachi 1:2,3: “Jacob I loved, but Esau I hated.” Not the child by nature and not the eldest son, who by social custom was entitled to the privileges of the firstborn son.

The point that the inspired Apostle is driving home here is that nothing *we* do can merit God’s electing choice. The works of the law cannot earn credit with God for our salvation. But this is truly an abiding comfort for believers. Since the law of God is a constant reminder of just how far we have fallen short of the glory of God, yet salvation is rooted in God’s love for us, not our performance of love for God. We love because He first loved us. When Paul writes in Romans 9:11 that God’s purpose in election was announced “before the twins were born or had done anything good or bad,” the force of that statement is that God’s choice is not because of foreseen goodness later on in Jacob’s life. If God chooses Jacob because He saw later goodness in Jacob, then human performance and our merit do lie in the foundation of our salvation. But such an idea is thoroughly repugnant to the believing Christian. When all of humanity deserves condemnation, it is to the praise of God’s love and grace that He has elected us to salvation in Christ, through Him alone who died to take away our sins and rose again for our justification.

The second son “makes a name for himself” by his actions during his own birth.

What is in a name? (25:24-26)

The time arrives for the birth, and just as the Lord had revealed, there are twins. Two boys are born to Isaac and Rebekah, but they are not identical twins, given the fact that their descriptions differ. The firstborn is ruddy in his complexion and covered with hair (the technical term is *hypertrichosis*, if you want a big word!). Later on David will also be described as ruddy (1 Sam. 16:12; 17:42). The firstborn receives the name Esau, but how that name is related to “hairy” is very unsure. The word for ruddy (red), on the other hand, is closely connected with Esau’s other name, which is Edom. This draws our attention to the reason why parents pick particular names for their children: is it to honor a particular relative (grandfather or grandmother)? Is it because of some trait noticed already at birth? Or, is a name chosen for a child because it is currently popular and sounds “nice?” What are some reasons in Biblical history why particular individuals receive their names (think of Samuel, Isaiah’s sons, and our Lord Jesus [Matt. 1:21]).

We cannot be completely sure what Isaac and Rebekah are thinking as they pick the name Esau for the oldest son. But the second son “makes a name for himself” by his actions during his own birth. He emerges from the womb grasping the heel of his older brother. This

interesting incident almost suggests that the struggle in the womb during Rebekah’s pregnancy is not over, and the second boy is ready to chase his slightly older brother down. Of course, Jacob as a baby would not be conscious of such a conflict as he grabs his brother’s heel. The word for “heel” in the Hebrew language lies at the root of the name the younger twin receives, Jacob. Furthermore, just as his older brother will get another name (Edom, “red”) later, so the younger will also receive a second name (Israel) later on. But that story is ahead of us.

The name “Jacob” requires some comment. As a personal name, it is known from extra-biblical sources as “Jacob-el,” which likely means, “May God be at (my) heel,” that is, “May God protect me.” Such a name in fact has quite a positive meaning. So Kidner (*Genesis*, p. 130) sees the name as a kind of prayer: “May God be your rearguard.” But the name is also given to irony or a second, almost hostile, meaning. To be at someone’s heel implies that one is dogging another’s footsteps, trying to trip, to trick, or to deceive someone else. It may very well be that the parents intend a positive spin on the name that they give to Jacob. Yet we should note that the ironical sense of Jacob’s name will certainly emerge later on in the lives of the two boys. Protection (from God)

as well as deception (by Jacob) will be often seen in Jacob's life.

Read Hosea 11:12 – 12:4. In this covenant indictment of God's people the prophet Hosea draws attention to the sins of the south (Judah) and the north (called Jacob in verse 2). Israel (i.e., Ephraim) is Jacob, full of lies and deception. He has been a struggling nation, even as he emerged from the womb.

Clearly, God's election is not based upon the goodness of Jacob and his descendants, the people of Israel. God's election is rooted in His own loving purposes in Christ. The Bible's teaching about original sin (we are both guilty and polluted from the womb) humbles us, only to make us see the amazing nature of God's grace to save us apart from any merit of our own.

Lesson 1: Points to ponder and discuss

1. In several places we read that God describes Himself as the "God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob." Then why does the patriarch Isaac get much less textual attention in the book of Genesis? What role does Isaac play in redemptive-history?
2. Redemptive-history in the Bible has a number of barren women who play a very important part in the story. Why are there (apparently) so many of them in redemptive-history? What point is God making with us?
3. Psalm 113 is noted in the lesson above. Read through this entire psalm. What several things does it say about God? How are these truths about God shown to us in the story of the birth of the twins, Esau and Jacob? How are these same truths revealed to us in the stories of Abraham and Isaac earlier?
4. Isaac prays for his barren wife, and Rebekah goes to seek out an answer from the Lord during her rather turbulent pregnancy. Prayer plays an important part in the parents' lives here. God answers these petitions with pregnancy and then with prophecy. How does God answer prayers today? Does He ever not answer our prayers? What does the Bible teach us about prayers that appear to us to go unanswered?
5. God reveals the future to Rebekah concerning her sons. Can we believe that she then told this prophecy to her husband Isaac? To her sons Esau and Jacob as they were growing? Why or why not? What difference might it have made whether she told or did not tell the prophecy to her husband and/or her sons?
6. Verse 23 says that "one people will be stronger than the other, and the older will serve the younger." Does this word from the LORD mean that conflict was inevitable between the two nations? Why or why not? From where do conflicts and fighting come?

Bible Studies on Jacob

Lesson 2: Selling the Future for Food

Read Genesis 25:27-34.

Introduction

Already at birth it becomes apparent that these twin boys are quite different. The slightly older boy (Esau) emerged from the womb covered with hair (a physical thing that makes him clearly a fraternal twin to his slightly younger brother Jacob). Identical twins they are not! Furthermore, the Lord had revealed that the relationship of these children would not be friendly. As the heads of nations, their future and that of their descendants would not be that of equals. The one nation would be stronger than the other; the “older will serve the younger” (Gen. 25:23).

Separate developments (25:27-28)

These two verses are something of a transition that bridge the story line from the birth and naming parts to the separate developments that occur in these two lives.

Twins often grow up close to each other, even physically close. But this does not appear to happen in the tent of Isaac. Esau develops into a skilled hunter, while Jacob is content to remain around the tents of his semi-nomadic family. Furthermore, we note that there is the reality of parental favoritism: Isaac loves Esau because he hunts, and when successful, that means delicious wild game to eat. Rebekah, on the other hand, loves

the younger son Jacob, but the text does not give us a reason why. It may be because of the LORD’s word during her pregnancy. But readers know that when parents show favoritism to particular children, the end result is almost always not pleasant.

In the description of what these two sons are like, it is easy for our cultural stereotypes to take over as we read this very familiar story. A common way to read this story is to think that Esau is “all-boy,” a regular guy who loves to play football, baseball, and rugby. He is not afraid to go out on the hunt to kill and prepare game. Jacob, on the other hand, is a kind of “momma’s boy.” While twin brother Esau is outside doing “guy things,” Jacob is back with mother Rebekah, baking cookies, perhaps. In other words, Jacob is soft, maybe a kind of sissy. If that is the picture that we see as we read this story, then Jacob comes off quite unfavorably. As he grows up, we already don’t “like” Jacob.

But let us consider this story again. Earlier in the story of Genesis, we met a great hunter before the Lord, Nimrod. While there is nothing wrong with hunting for game in order to eat, Nimrod is not noted for his godliness. Furthermore, father Isaac does not admire or show his love to son Esau for his godliness. It is his stomach that is satisfied by the delicious game that Esau is able

to bring back from his hunts. Favoritism in family relationships based on self-satisfaction is a minefield of dangers. Trouble brews before trouble breaks out.

As for Jacob being a dweller in tents, there is nothing unusual about that. In fact, that is what semi-nomads do: they live in tents! Thus Jacob is living in a manner not unlike his own father and grandfather before him. In addition, Jacob is described in verse 27 as a “quiet man” (NIV). Other translations say “perfect” or “complete.” Currid (*Genesis*, vol. 2, p. 19) says that Jacob was “a man of peace.” The word used here is usually translated in a moral sense, i.e., perfect. See Job 1:1 and 8, as well as Genesis 6:9. Both Job and Noah are described as “perfect.” This does not mean that they were free from original sin. Rather it refers to the fact that they were godly men who lived before the Lord God with integrity, seeking to serve God in faithfulness.

Is this the sense that this word has in Genesis 25:27? Hamilton (*Genesis 16-50*, p. 177) thinks that the moral sense as descriptive of Jacob is “inappropriate” here. He interprets the sense here as “complete,” meaning that Jacob is “a self-contained, detached personality complete in himself, hence ‘quiet.’” Others disagree in order to maintain that Jacob is a morally upright man as he grew up, and that understanding must be used to judge, in the main, his actions in the rest of his life. What does his later life show? Is Jacob “soft?”

Swearing away the birthright (25:29-33)

There are a number of ways of reading what happens in this part of the story. How you read this will influence how you think of the two characters, especially Jacob. It is often read in the following manner: brother Esau comes back from a hunt, but he is so very hungry (apparently he caught and killed nothing for food), that he is truly on the verge of death. He asks for a bowl of red soup from his twin brother, but his brother drives a very hard bargain. Esau is somewhat trapped: either sell the birthright and live (by eating the soup), or, refuse to sell the birthright but then risk his own life since, in his mind, “I am about to die” (verse 32). In this way of reading and hearing the story, Jacob comes across quite unfavorably. Even if Esau is not really about to die from hunger, Jacob should have done the “nice” thing, the Christian thing: he should have given his brother a bowl of hot red soup and a second helping, if he asked! Some writers even say that Jacob here “steals” the birthright away from his very hungry brother.

But there is another way to hear the story if we think our way through the details. First of all, we will learn later in Genesis 27 that Esau also is able to cook. When Isaac sends him away on

the hunt, Esau will be successful then, and he will come back, cook his catch, and present it to his father Isaac. Second, can we really believe that Esau is on the verge of dying of starvation? How long does it take for a person to die of starvation, if he or she is deprived of food (assuming that such a person has water to drink)? Normally starvation takes several weeks. Plus, a person on the verge of death from starvation is so weak that they cannot move without assistance. In addition, such a person does not take red stew (lentil soup?) for his first meal on the road to recovery. It would be too great a shock to the starving person’s system. Fruit juices usually start the starving back to health.

Okay, let’s say that Esau was very hungry. Indeed, when have we not heard our children say—or said it ourselves—“I’m starving! When are we going to eat?” It is very believable to think that Esau has not had much if anything to eat while he was away on the hunt. But when he says that he is about to die, we find that to be very hard to believe. Esau is exaggerating his growling stomach.

But to the more difficult question, we ask this, “Was Jacob being an oppressor, a cheat, when he drove this bargain with his brother?” Commentator Baldwin (*Genesis 12-50*, p. 106) thinks so. “Jacob was ruthless in his

scheming to outwit his brother, who, as the elder of the two, was in a specially privileged position.” Again, we must ask ourselves whether this is true. How is Esau outwitted? Jacob’s proposition is fairly straightforward: “I’ll give you some of this red stuff, and you give me the birthright.” That is the deal: take it or leave it. No small print; no unseen or unspoken clauses, amendments, or modifications.

What was the birthright, in any case? Why would Jacob want it? We know from later in the story of Genesis 27 that the birthright and the blessing are separate things. The birthright was the privilege that belonged to the firstborn son. This was the favored gift that the firstborn son was to receive, namely, that he would receive the double portion from his father. Read Deuteronomy 21:15-17, where the law requires that the firstborn son receive just such a portion, even if he is not the son of the beloved wife. Such a double portion would put the son in a favored spot for the future, and he naturally would be the leading figure in the family’s future, all things being equal.

This was in Esau’s future prospects, and it is this birthright that Jacob wishes to acquire. Why? Here we might speculate. Perhaps Jacob is a selfish man, a person who sees his twin brother at a slight disadvantage and then he goes in “for the kill.” But, on the other hand, if he is a “perfect” man in a moral sense, it is more likely that he sees in his brother a lifestyle, a spiritual direction, and a moral personality that cares

Some writers say that Jacob here “steals” the birthright away from his very hungry brother.

little for the things of God's covenant. Jacob and Esau are the sons of the same two parents, but they are headed in different directions spiritually and covenantally, at least at this point in the story. If Esau really values the birthright for all the right reasons (or, for that matter, for any reason at all!), then he would refuse to sell the birthright. But the smell of the red stew is enticing, and it is ready to eat now, and what good is a birthright (a future thing) now when one is about to die (present predicament)? He sells the birthright, even sealing the deal by swearing an oath at Jacob's insistence (verse 33).

Jacob serves his brother a very delicious meal (hunger makes for a good appetite, after all!) of bread and soup. The original text in verse 34 is rather blunt in the use of four words (all verbs): "(he) ate... drank... got up... left." Some commentators say that in the ancient Near East the hairy person is considered to be boorish and crude. In this case, Esau seems to live up to the stereotype! But there is one more verb in verse 34: (he) despised. Esau has just sold his birthright, confirming the sale with a solemn oath or vow, and the Bible tells us that this means he despised his birthright.

Esau despised his birthright (25:34)

Despise. Sounds so harsh, does it not? Does Esau ever say anything mean and nasty about the birthright? It does not seem so. The word "despise" has the idea of thinking little of something, treating something with little or no

When the story began, Jacob had lentil soup, while Esau had the birthright. When the narrative closes, it is reversed.

honor. What we love and value, we protect and hold onto. We would not let something go, but we would think about it often, and we would consider it very valuable. But to despise something is like wiping our dirty shoes on a doormat. We probably don't hate the doormat, but we don't highly value it either. When David sinned with Bathsheba, God tells David that he has despised the Word of the LORD (2 Sam 12:9). Esau faces a far-reaching choice: a bowl of soup versus the birthright? Esau here thinks with his stomach.

What has he just done? Does he have any idea what it means to sell his birthright as a covenant son for a bowl of red stew? Genesis 25:34 closes this account with the somber statement: "So Esau despised his birthright." What Esau has done is to seek a short-term solution to a growling stomach and physical weakness due to his great hunger. But this indifference and apathy to his great privilege as the firstborn son is equivalent to hostility. It is interesting to note that we do have ancient texts that tell us that it was possible for a person to sell his birthright. Yet we may not evaluate Esau's actions here merely in the light of ancient traditions and customs. The text of Scripture says that Esau's actions were in reality a despising of his birthright.

Jacob, on the other hand, has

looked ahead to obtain the blessing that accompanies the covenant promises. Jacob is often treated harshly for what he did, but this should be re-examined. Did Jacob sense in his brother that the things of God and of His covenant were not important to Esau? Did Jacob think that perhaps rather than have the covenant responsibility fall to a man who was largely indifferent to the coming of the Kingdom of God, he would "step up to the plate" and try to secure this birthright with all its privileges but also its responsibilities as well? If that is the case, who then is the wiser man?

When the story began, Jacob had lentil soup, while Esau had the birthright. When the narrative closes, it is reversed: Jacob has the birthright, while Esau is satisfied with a nice square meal. Hours later Esau will be a hungry man again. Who is now the richer man?

Read Hebrews 12:16-17. In the context of this passage (Hebr. 12:14-17) the inspired text is urging us readers to live in peace and in holiness, to avoid allowing little sinful weeds to pop up, such as bitterness and sexual immorality. In that context he refers to Esau who is described as godless or profane because he sold his inheritance rights as the eldest for a single meal (12:16). Paul rightly describes such people as enemies of the Cross of Christ, people

whose god is their stomach, folks who mind earthly things (Phil. 3:18,19). Are such people with us today? Is such a warning for us as well?

Esau and Jacob were both covenant sons. They both were called to seek God's rule over all things in their life. Spiritual wisdom opened Jacob's eyes to the future, the long-term future, in fact. But Esau sold his future for some tasty food, and thus he lost it all.

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Lesson 2: Points to ponder and discuss

1. Why does Rebekah love Jacob? Are there some hints or suggestions in the story that may explain why she loves him more than Esau?
2. Genesis 3:15 tells us that there is a history-long battle and struggle going on between the Seed of the woman and the seed of the serpent. How is such a struggle evident in the story of these two brothers as they grow up in the family of Isaac and Rebekah?
3. Christians are under no obligation to assist the wicked in their agenda and program of working against the Kingdom of God. Yet Christians are required to feed our enemies when they are hungry and give them drink when they are thirsty. Read Romans 12:20. How can we sort this out? Talk about those times when you have (or could have) shown Christian charity to those who were your enemies.
4. We are baptized into the Name of the Triune God. That is our Christian birthright in the covenant of grace. What do we have as Christians in such a birthright? What privileges and responsibilities now fall to us with the name "Christian?"
5. What parallels are there, if any, between the first temptation in the Garden of Eden (food that could make one wise), what the first woman and first man did, and this action of Esau? Both stories deal with food as a kind of temptation. What did our first parents lose, and what did Esau lose?
6. The third commandment deals with misusing God's Name. How can Christians themselves sometimes despise God's Name, besides cursing and blaspheming? Can we treat God's Name lightly? How does heresy (false teaching, unbiblical doctrine) belong to the area of despising God's Name?
7. Esau had a "felt need," namely hunger. We all have real and pressing needs, including physical needs. What does our Lord Jesus Christ press upon us about His Kingdom and our "needs" in Matthew 6:25-34?

We Confess

An Exposition & Application of the Belgic Confession

Article 36: Of the Magistrate

The historical context in which de Brès and his colleagues of the Reformed churches in the Lowlands ministered was one where the Roman Catholic authorities continually reproached them as revolutionaries. Because of the Anabaptists and their rejection of the civil government as legitimate authorities over them, Reformed Christians were associated with these revolutionaries as a political ploy to marginalize the Reformed, leading to their eradication. In this situation, the ministers of the Reformed congregations in the Lowlands felt it necessary to respond.

The *Confession* describes the Church in Articles 27-35 as a spiritual kingdom. This kingdom exists in the midst of the kingdoms of this world. Here the Reformers' doctrine of the "two kingdoms" is clearly in the background. The Latin term that is used in the title of Article 36, *magistratus*, shows this. This word speaks of the "civil office," in contrast to the "spiritual polity" of the Church described in Article 30.

The Source of Government

Article 36 begins by explaining the source from which the civil government comes. Just as the spiritual kingdom, as manifested in the Church, comes from God, so too civil government exists by His appointment. In the words of the *Confession*, "We believe that our gracious God, because of the deprav-

ity of mankind, *has appointed kings, princes, and magistrates*; willing that the world should be governed by certain laws and policies."

Here the Reformed Church strikes at the root of the Roman slander that we are Anabaptists by honoring the civil rulers as God's ministers. This language of "appointment" comes directly from the Scriptures, in such texts as Proverbs 8:15-16: "By me kings reign, and rulers decree what is just; by me princes rule, and nobles, all who govern justly."

Later in redemptive history, Daniel dramatically impressed this upon Nebuchadnezzar in interpreting his strange dream, saying, of Nebuchadnezzar,

You, O king, the king of kings, *to whom the God of heaven has given the kingdom, the power, and the might, and the glory, and into whose hand he has given, wherever they dwell, the children of man, the beasts of the field, and the birds of the heavens, making you rule over them all* – you are the head of gold." (Daniel 2:37-38; emphasis mine).

Just as God appointed Nebuchadnezzar, Daniel went on to say that after him three more kingdoms would rise and fall by the appoint-

ment of God (vv. 39-43). In contrast, Daniel concluded, there would be an eternal kingdom appointed by God:

...in the days of those kings *the God of heaven will set up a kingdom* that shall never be destroyed, nor shall the kingdom be left to another people. It shall break in pieces all these kingdoms and bring them to an end, and it shall stand forever (v. 44).

That God appoints the civil magistrate Paul clearly explains in his epistle to the Romans, calling his readers to submit to them because "there is no authority except from God, and those that exist have been instituted by God" (Romans 13:1). In fact, "whoever resists the authorities resists what God has appointed for he is God's servant."

Our English translations speak of government as coming from "our *gracious* God." In fact, the Latin text approved by the Synod of Dort speaks of God as the *Optimum Maximum*, that is, the Highest/Greatest Good. This is classic language used by the Roman philosophers Lucretius and Cicero and used in Christian polemics by Augustine, for example, to speak of God as the "highest good" (*summum bonum*). In the opening words of his work, "On the Nature of Good Against the Manicheans," Augustine said, "The highest good, than which there is no higher, is God." By speaking in this way, the *Belgic Confession* grounds the civil government in God's goodness, not his grace, in creation, not redemption.

The problem of basing one's exegesis of the *Confession* upon the English translation "gracious" confuses the two kingdoms. This is seen in P. Y. De Jong's *The Church's Witness to the World*. In this work De Jong says "the *Confession* connects this gift [of government] with God's grace rather than His sovereign will. Civil authority derives from *our gracious God*." He then marshals two quotations from Calvin, to show that our *Confession* follows Calvin in this matter. He is correct that the *Confession* is following the doctrine and language of Calvin, but his grounding of government in the grace of God is not what the quoted words from Calvin actually teach. In fact, Calvin speaks of government coming from God's "benevolent provision," "wonderful goodness," and "power and providence" (Institutes 4.20.10).

In locating civil government in creation, not redemption, the point the *Confession* makes is that it is out of God's benevolence for mankind as created in His image, that He has given government, in whatever form, "because of the depravity of mankind."

The Duties of the Magistrate

This institution given in the goodness of God for His creation has the purpose of restraining wickedness in society. The *Confession* expresses this in this way: "That the dissoluteness of men might be restrained." God desires to curb our proclivity to anarchy despite our effacing His image by rebelling in sin against Him. In the Garden, God gave Adam the charge to "rule" over creation. The Fall of Adam consisted in rebelling against God

and seeking to free himself from God's rule. Yet after the Fall, despite our rebellious nature and actions, God cares enough for us to put a check on our rebelliousness by using civil rulers. In using government to restrain lawlessness "all things [will be] carried on among them with good order and decency."

The "proof" from the Word of God comes from a quotation made up of several phrases in Romans 13, where Paul says God "has invested the magistracy with *the sword for the punishment of evil-doers and for the protection of them that do well*."

It is clear from Romans 13 that the main duty of the civil kingdom is to punish with the sword (while the spiritual kingdom uses the keys). Yet in punishing is implied protection. And because the *Confession* is a confession of the Church, it speaks particularly of the protection the magistrate is to give to the spiritual kingdom, saying,

Their office is not only to have regard unto and watch for the welfare of the civil state, but also to protect the sacred ministry, that the kingdom of Christ may thus be promoted. They must therefore countenance the preaching of the Word of the gospel everywhere, that God may be honored and worshipped by every one, as He commands in His Word.⁸

It is not as if this protection is to be distinguished from all other groups within society, but again, the *Confession* is speaking of the Church to the Church, and so it has particular concern for this aspect of the civil magistrates protecting function. The spiritual kingdom exists within the realm of the civil kingdom, as one concentric circle within another.

Because the Church exists within the world and under the protection of the sword, when the "sacred ministry" is protected, as all others, the kingdom of Christ is promoted. This does not mean the magistrate is to exclude all others, only that it is to allow the Church to worship and preach according to the Word. The civil government, then, is to "countenance the preaching of the Word of the gospel everywhere." This means that it is to look favorably upon and not legislate against and persecute. The result of this is "that God may be honored and worshipped by every one, as He commands in His Word."

An example of this "countenancing" of the gospel found is in the account of Moses and Pharaoh (Exodus 3-4). The purpose of Moses' approaching Pharaoh was that Israel would be able to go out and worship her LORD. Pharaoh did not "countenance" this request, but forbade it and persecuted Israel even more harshly (Exodus 5).

While the civil kingdom is not religious, it is also not morally neutral.

The Belgic Confession grounds the civil government in God's goodness, not his grace, in creation, not redemption.

This means that it is morally accountable to God as His minister. This does not mean, though, as one commentator says, “The government shall preserve the Sunday as day of worship” or, “The Government is called to regulate public life in accordance with God’s Law.”

Our Duties

The civil authorities have their duties and so do those under their protection. Notice how the *Confession* speaks of the people of God along with all other people, saying, “Moreover, it is the bounded duty of every one, of whatever state, quality, or condition he may be...” In contrast to the Anabaptists or any other idea that believes Christians are exempt from submitting to government, we confess that we are in the same situation with all others.

What exactly are we to do, along with everyone else? We are to “subject [ourselves] to the magistrates.” Paul says we are to submit because the government is from God. If you resist the governing authority then you resist God’s order for your life. Verse 4 even calls the government “God’s minister.” We are “to pay tribute.” This means that we are not to cheat on our 1040’s during tax season. “Why, though, should Uncle Sam get what I’ve worked so hard for?” Because God calls you to do this. Thank God that you live in a land wherein you are able to protest this as a citizen of this nation. We are “to show due honor and respect to them,” speaking highly of our magistrates even more so as Christians. We are also “to obey them in all things which are not repugnant to the Word of God.” In things that do not contradict the Word of God, you

are forbidden to refuse and required to obey. If, though, something is required of us that clearly contradicts the Word, we have the duty to resist as our allegiance is to Christ (e.g., Acts 4).

Finally, We are “to supplicate for them in [our] prayers that God may rule and guide [us] in all [our] ways.” Paul tells Timothy to pray for the king that we may live quietly and peaceably in this life, and this is pleasing to God. This means we pray for all those over us, whether or not we agree with their policies or like their person. The blessing of this is “that we may lead a tranquil and quiet life in all godliness and gravity.”

Why should we do all this? This is a part of our laying down our lives as living sacrifices in view of God’s super-abounding mercies and grace (cf. Romans 3:21-11:36). Because of this great mercy, Paul pleads with us to lay our lives on the altar and sacrifice ourselves, our pride, our covetousness, and our sins that we might be a sweet smelling aroma of sanctification to Him. And we

are to be transformed, changed from death to life, from self-seeking sinner to Christ-seeking worshipper, not be conformed to this sin-torn world. And one aspect of this service that we perform as priests is submitting ourselves to our government.

Rejection of Errors

This article of the *Belgic Confession* ends in a similar way as others (arts. 7, 9, 12, 13, 14, 15, 18, 33, 34, 35), rejecting various errors, saying,

Wherefore we detest the Anabaptists and other seditious people, and in general all those who reject the higher powers and magistrates and would subvert justice, introduce community of goods, and confound that decency and good order which God has established among men.

Sedition is forbidden, on the grounds mentioned above that the civil magistrate is ordained by God. As well, those who subvert justice, introduce a community of goods, and confound

Study/Application Questions for Article 35

1. Prove from Scripture that God appoints the civil government.
2. Why is it important that the civil magistrate is grounded in God as Creator and not as Redeemer? How should this cause us to think about the limits of civil government?
3. How does government restrain sin and lawlessness in society?
4. Based on Romans 13, what do we believe about the civil magistrate’s use of capital punishment?
5. How far are we to go in submitting to the laws of the land?

decency and order. The rejection of community of goods is particularly relevant as it leads, in reality, not to a sharing of goods with all, but only the select few in a particular community.

As Christians, we are in the world, but not of the world (John 17:11, 14). This means that our ultimate citizenship is in heaven (Philippians 3:20). Nevertheless, we belong to the particular regions in which we live and are subject as its citizens. It is in this setting that Christ calls us to be salt in an unsavory age, light in a world of darkness, and prophets of the LORD in a word devoid of his voice.

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A New Breed of Conservatives

An Evaluation of the Decisions of the CRC Synod of 2006

Synod 2006 of the Christian Reformed Church finished its work but the implementation of its decisions will impact the CRC for generations to come. For over ten years I have written nothing about the CRC. I have followed its activities over the years but have not been engaged in evaluating its decisions. This year I did something I have not done since I was a delegate to Synod 1995. I observed and evaluated the decisions of Synod. I had the opportunity to do this by seeing and hearing a live web broadcast of the Synod itself.

What struck me were the significant differences between the points of debate at the 2006 Synod compared to the 1995 Synod. In many instances the topics were the same. The parameters of the debate, however, were very different. Bob De Moor, editor of the official magazine of the Christian Reformed Church, *The Banner*, believes this difference is because of “a new breed of ‘conservative’ gaining a stronger voice in our denomination” De Moor describes this new breed, “They think with their guts as well as their heads—they represent a warmer, caring kind of conservatism that replaces rock-hard doctrinalism with a deeper piety and a stronger sense of mission. They’re not about to leave—they value the unity of the Body as much as their “progressive” counterparts do; they don’t insist that everyone agrees with them, just that the church leaves room for them in

matters of conscience.”

The difference between the conservatives of the last decades of the twentieth century and the “new breed conservatives” of the first decade of the twenty first century is significant. This is illustrated by comparing the debates between the 1995 and the 2006 Synods. In general, the Biblical-conservative positions on the topics debated in 1995 were not even mentioned at Synod 2006. The liberal or “progressive” positions of 1995 became the “new breed conservative” positions of 2006. The alternatives to the “new breed conservative” positions were even more liberal and deviated even further from Biblical truth and the Reformed heritage of our forefathers than the progressive agenda of 1995.

The Women in Office Debate

The most obvious debate to exemplify this deviation was the debate on women in office. The issue arose at this Synod from an overture from Classis Grand Rapids East following a year in which a majority of Classes in the CRC approved making the word “male” inoperative in the CRC Church Order. Like all matters at Synod, this overture was given to an advisory committee, which would make recommendations to Synod. The advisory committee moved a proposal that contained four parts relating to changes in the Church Order. First, the word “male” would be deleted from the church order, removing

the current Church Order restriction against women's ordination. Second, a new article in the church order would state that women could not be delegated to Synod. Third, a church order article would state that women could not serve as synodical deputies (Synod's representatives) at classis meetings. Fourth, that there would be a seven-year sabbatical rest on any official ecclesiastical debate on this issue.

Support for this proposal began by delegates describing it as illogical, making no sense, and a clear moving of the Holy Spirit. A woman advisor to Synod argued in its favor. She claimed it honored all members and the great variety of positions they held. To publicly demonstrate their mutual honor of one another she requested that all delegates stand and bow to one another. Almost all delegates bowed, but they failed to bow to the truth of the Word of God given by the Spirit whose truth is not illogical but clearly revealed in the Word of God.

This proposal and perspective was radically different from the issues debated at Synod 1995. Synod 1995 was once more addressing the issue of women in office because Synod 1994 failed to ratify the change to the church order approved by Synod 1993. Synod 1994 voted to keep the word "male" in Church Order Article 3 because "the clear teaching of Scripture prohibits women from holding the offices of minister, elder, and evangelist." At Synod 1994 clear lines remained between Biblical and unbiblical positions on women in office. Since Synod 1994 did not

approve women in office, the debate continued to rage. No seven years of rest were requested.

The 1995 minority report continued to argue forcefully using numerous scriptural references that it would be a violation of Biblical teaching to allow women in any authoritative office of the Church of Jesus Christ. However, while opposing women in office, the minority report also criticized Synod 1994 for declaring the issue clear. The 1995 minority report stated, "Synod 1994, in stating that 'Scripture was clear' failed to recognize that both sides had faithfully sought to interpret Scripture on this issue." This weakened language became the door through which the final decision of Synod 1995 was made. Synod 1995 built on this wording and officially declared that "there are two different perspectives and convictions, both of which honor the Scriptures as the infallible Word of God, on the issues of whether women are allowed to serve in the offices of elder, minister, and evangelist." This post-modern approach to truth should have no place in the Church of Jesus Christ. Even where we do not agree, we ought to acknowledge absolute truth on every Biblical doctrine.

Applying this approach to truth to the issue at hand, Synod 1995 violated its own Church Order and approved the following compromise:

"A classis may, in response to local needs and circumstances, declare that the word "male" in Article 3-a of the Church Order is inoperative and may authorize the churches under its jurisdiction to ordain and install women in the offices of elder, minister, and evangelist". This unbiblical approach to the questions of doctrine and practice, applied to women in office, became the new conservative approach in 2006.

The debate at Synod 1995 focused on true and false doctrine and its consistent application in life. Many delegates in 1995 continued to argue the position of 1994, that the Bible is clear on the nature of women in office. This historic position was not advocated at Synod 2006. I heard no one at Synod 2006 argue to retain the word "male" in the church order AND drop the practice of declaring the word "male" inoperative. No one stated that allowing the ordination of women to authoritative office was itself an unbiblical and unfaithful practice that should be stopped. The conservative Biblical position adopted by Synod 1994 and advocated by a significant minority in 1995 was not clearly defended by any delegates at Synod 2006. Instead, after a lengthy debate, Synod 2006 overwhelmingly approved the proposal moved by their advisory committee rooted in the same unbiblical principles of compromise on this issue.

***The liberal or "progressive" positions of 1995
became the "new breed conservative"
positions of 2006.***

There were only a small number of men opposed to this plan. A few delegates argued it violated the Biblical requirement that males exercise headship in office. A few other delegates opposed it because it failed to allow women to fulfill their office in all its dimensions. Those agreeing with these two opposing perspectives represented a very small minority of the delegates voting against the proposal. There were a few delegates hot for the truth of “male” headship, a few delegates who were cold to this truth, but most delegates were lukewarm, swayed by breezes blowing from all directions.

Synod 2006 overwhelmingly approved the first step. They officially approved deleting the word “male” from Article 3 of the church order of the CRC. Synod 2007 must now ratify this action. However, Synod 2006 overwhelmingly defeated other details of this “Spirit inspired plan.” Synod refused to place in the Church Order of the CRC the provisions prohibiting women ministers and elders from being delegated to Synod and serving as synodical advisors. Does this mean all those who approved the “Holy Spirit’s plan” and its first step rejected the leading of the Spirit on steps two and three? Although the logic of any answer to this question may be lost to the delegates of Synod 2006 it should be clear to those attuned to the Word of God that this Synod rejected the Spirit’s leading and logic revealed in Scripture.

Synod 2006 overwhelmingly defeated other details of this “Spirit inspired plan”.

Synod did vote not to allow women to attend Synod or be Synodical deputies. The difference is that they did not put these provisions in the church order as proposed. They did not follow through on their original Spirit Inspired and initially approved solution. A few delegates noted how this might be interpreted as a stab in the back to those who had already voted to delete the word “male” from the church with the assumption that the other restrictions would also be placed in the church order. But, according to the Banner and my observations the new breed of conservatives “showed themselves to be more than willing to overturn centuries of Reformed church practice with respect to ...Church Order regulations concerning women in church office.” However, from the perspective of the “traditional conservatives” at Synod 1995 the Biblical confessional position was abandoned. In fact, the Biblical position was never seriously considered. The liberal position of 1995 became the “new conservative” position, and the CRC moved one step closer to the full implementation of women participating in all functions of office in the CRC. In 1995 the debate was between allowing women in office and forbidding women in office. In 2006 the debate was between having women in office in violation of the Church Order and having women in office in harmony with the Church Order. There was no conservative position.

Interchurch Relations

The second major issue Synod 2006 faced with roots in the Synod of 1995 was the question of the nature of ongoing relations with the GKN, the historic Dutch mother church of the CRC. In May of 2004 the GKN merged with two other denominations forming the PCN, the Protestant Churches of the Netherlands. Rev. Peter Borgdorff, the Executive Director of the CRC, argued in favor of the motion of the Interchurch Relations Committee to remove the restriction on the CRC’s fraternal relationship with the PCN. Restricted fraternal relations continued with this new denomination. Restrictions limiting table fellowship and pulpit exchanges of ministers had been in place since 1984.

At Synod 1995 the nature of continued ecclesiastical relations with the GKN were vigorously debated. The Interchurch Relations Committee of the CRC recommended that Synod 1995 not break fellowship with the GKN, but maintain restricted relations. A minority report drafted by the committee of pre-advice recommended breaking all fraternal relations with the GKN. The reasons for this were epitomized when the fraternal delegate from the GKN addressed Synod 1995 commending them for their “progress” on the women in office issue by stating, “there is neither slave nor free, neither male nor female, neither homo nor hetero.” Still, Synod 1995 rejected the minority conservative report to break all relations with the GKN and approved the ICRC’s

recommendation to continue restricted relations. The “conservative” perspective was to break relations and the “liberal” perspective was to maintain “restricted relations.”

At Synod 2006 the “new breed of conservatives” sought to maintain restricted relations. The liberal position came from the ICRC. They recommended “... to Synod 2006 that the PCN be restored as a church in full ecclesiastical fellowship.” This recommendation was not grounded in any objective recognition that the PCN had moved closer to Biblical truth or that the reasons restricted relations were put in place had changed. In fact, all indications are that the merged denomination is even further from Biblical truth than the GKN was in 1984. However, because of changes in the CRC this new Dutch denomination is today closer to the CRC in both doctrine and life.

The 2006 committee of pre-advice concerning ecumenical relations with the PCN came with a majority and minority report. The majority recommended restricted relations and the minority recommended removing all restrictions. No one recommended breaking relations with PCN. Rev. Peter Borgdorff argued that Synod should remove the restrictions to demonstrate that the CRC would not follow the pattern of Ecclesiastical relations exemplified by NAPARC (North American Presbyterian and Reformed Council), which terminated the membership of the CRC in 2002. He claimed that ecclesiastical fellowship based on the stan-

In 2006 there was no conservative position.

dard of doctrinal similarity had never been the basis of the ecumenical relations of the CRC. This revision of the history of the Christian Reformed Church’s ecumenical history went unchallenged by any delegate of Synod.

The CRC was a charter member of NAPARC. The basis of the ecumenical dialogue of participating denominations in NAPARC is stated in its historic constitution, “Confessing Jesus Christ as only Savior and Sovereign Lord over all of life, we affirm the basis of the fellowship of Presbyterian and Reformed Churches to be full commitment to the Bible in its entirety as the Word of God written, without error in all its parts and to its teaching as set forth in the Heidelberg Catechism, the Belgic Confession, the Canons of Dordt, the Westminster Confession of Faith, and the Westminster Larger and Shorter Catechisms. That the adopted basis of fellowship be regarded as warrant for the establishment of a formal relationship of the nature of a council, that is, a fellowship that enables the constituent churches to advise, counsel, and cooperate in various matters with one another and hold out before each other the desirability and need for organic union of churches that are of like faith and practice.” The CRC was historically clearly united with other denominations based on a common confessional conviction.

Synod 2006 was urged to avoid the errors of NAPARC, remove the

restrictions placed on the GKN in 1985 and once again establish full ecclesiastical relations with the PCN. Synod 2006 voted to keep the restrictions in place. Just over 50% of the delegates supported this position. The 1995 debate was between restricted relations and breaking relations with the GKN. The 2006 vote was between restricted relations and full ecclesiastical relations with the PCN.

Many may see maintaining restricted relations as a conservative victory. Such a view would be wrong. Synod 2006 failed to deal Biblically with the PCN. Both Synod 1995 and 2006 should have broken ecclesiastical fellowship with the GKN/PCN. The conservative position of breaking relations was not even considered by the Synod of 2006. The liberal position of 1995 became the “new breed of conservative” position of 2006. The 2006 progressive-liberal position, not even considered at Synod 1995, was to return to full fellowship.

Paedocommunion

The third major issue dealt with an overture concerning paedocommunion. Paedocommunion is distinct from child communion. Paedocommunion maintains that covenant children have the right to receive the bread and the wine at the table of the Lord based on their baptism and membership in the covenant. So a baby of six months or six days could be given and par-

take at the Lord's Table. No profession of faith of any kind would be required for participation at the Lord's Supper.

The CRC Synod 1988 was the first Synod to endorse young children participating at the Lord's Supper. Synod 1995 upheld the decision of Synod 1988. Both these decision retained an aspect of the historic perspective, "Covenant children should be encouraged to make profession of faith as soon as they exhibit faith and are able to discern the body and remember and proclaim the death of Jesus in celebrating the Lord's Supper."

These Synods redefined the historic understanding of these words. The historic practice of making no distinction between the rights and privileges of "professing" membership and the rights and privileges of adult membership was changed. Yet, both these Synods at least maintained the requirement for some type of profession of faith prior to participation at the Lord's Table. Some at the Synod of 1995 still held that profession of faith demanded a mature understanding of God's word and opposed lowering the standard of an informed adult profession.

Synod 2006 approved beginning the process necessary to change the historic practice of Protestant churches since the time of the Reformation. They did see this as a major change to the Church Order.

Therefore, Synod 2007 is required to ratify the proposed changes to the Church Order before they go in effect. Synod 2006 mandated the Board of Trustees to formulate all necessary changes to the Church Order to allow for paedocommunion. The historic practice of the church is to be changed. One delegate to Synod epitomized the discussion on this matter, "Rev. Stanley Groothof, Classis British Columbia North-West, cited his own experience as a new father as a reason for supporting children joining the Lord's Supper. 'Young children learn through touch and taste. If I give my 10-month-old a toy, where does it go? Into her mouth,' he said. 'The part of the service that is especially tuned to touch and taste is the part children are excluded from.'" Synod 2006 abandoned the Biblical requirement and historic practice of Presbyterian and Reformed churches requiring a profession of faith prior to participation in the Lord's Supper.

Additional Matters

In addition to these points of contact between Synod 1995 and 2006 other new issues were addressed. Synod 2006 officially changed the confessions of the Christian Reformed Church. They deleted part of Heidelberg Catechism question and answer 80 exposing the errors of the Roman Catholic Mass. Synod 2006 also approved the use of the TNIV in local congregations. Conservative commentators from

many denominations have uniformly condemned the principles of this gender-neutral translation as denying the inerrancy of God's Word. In moves that did not seem to honor the conscience of some, delegates were only allowed to approve or disapprove the combined group of candidates for ministry, male and female. In addition women elders served at every station at a communion service attended by Synodical delegates prompting a few delegates to refrain from partaking. Synod 2006 opened communion to babies and closed it for some of its own delegates.

The 2006 CRC Synod consistently ignored and abandoned the truth of Scripture, the Three Forms of Unity and the practices of its Reformed heritage. In an alarming description, Banner editor Bob De Moor was encouraged that the "new breed of conservatives" in the CRC "showed themselves to be more than willing to overturn centuries of Reformed church practice with respect to children and communion, 'fighting words' within the Heidelberg Catechism against Catholic teaching, and Church Order regulations concerning women in church office." One might ask if the description "conservative" should be used at all in this context. Sadly, there is some legitimacy to the term conservative here, but only in so far as it compares to the liberal progressive views becoming more and more prevalent in the CRC. This is clearly a denomination where Biblical teaching may be tolerated but not promoted, where the liberal of today will be identified as the newest new breed of conservative tomorrow and

This revision of the history of the Christian Reformed Church's ecumenical history went unchallenged by any delegate of Synod.

where truth is compromised for the sake of unity without confessional content.

I would encourage all who believe they are conservative to test what they see in the CRC with those federations and denominations like the URCNA and the OPC who strive to hold to the faith once delivered and take seriously the doctrines confessed in our respective standards. There are still those who believe that the current answer to the misery of the world is the bold proclamation of the gospel of yesterday, today and tomorrow.

“Moreover, brethren, I declare to you the gospel which I preached to you, which also you received and in which you stand, by which also you are saved, if you hold fast that word which I preached to you — unless you believed in vain.” (1 Corinthians 15:1, 2).

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The New Testament Evidence Regarding Paedocommunion (Part One)

During the course of our examination of the Old Testament evidence for the practice of admitting children to the Lord’s Table, we had occasion to observe that the ultimate norm for the practice of the new covenant community of faith must be the teaching of the New Testament. Though it is common among advocates of paedocommunion to rest a large part of their case upon the analogy with the Old Testament Passover, this tends to create a presumption for paedocommunion that predetermines the way the testimony of the New Testament is interpreted.

As we take up the relevant evidence that can be derived from the New Testament, we do so from the conviction that the norm for the confession and practice of the church, particularly as it relates to the question of the proper recipients of the sacrament of the Lord’s Supper, must be based upon a careful study of the New Testament passages that address this sacrament. Since the Lord’s Supper is a new covenant ordinance, which Christ himself instituted for the purpose of commemorating and proclaiming His saving death upon the cross, our understanding of its spiritual meaning and proper recipients should be based primarily upon New Testament teaching. This is a rule of interpretation that needs to be honored in any evaluation of the arguments for or against the practice of admitting children to the Lord’s Table.

Just as is the case with the Old Testament evidence, the New Testament does not speak as directly as we might prefer to the issue of the participation of children of believing parents in the sacrament of the Lord’s Supper. Indeed, one of the remarkable features of the New Testament’s teaching is that it does not provide a great deal of information that is specifically addressed to who ought to partake of the sacrament of the Lord’s Supper. Though the New Testament offers some important testimony regarding the institution and meaning of the sacrament, it does not expressly address the question of paedocommunion in the form in which it is often raised by its contemporary advocates. Our procedure in considering this evidence, therefore, will have to begin with an identification of some of the basic themes of New Testament teaching. Only after we identify these themes will we be in a position to ask about their implications for the particular question of the propriety of children being admitted to the Table of the Lord.

Our review of the New Testament evidence will begin with a short, introductory survey of the most important passages that address the subject of the Lord’s Supper. Among these passages, we will see that those passages that describe the institution of the sacrament are of particular importance. In our treatment of this evidence, we will also give special attention to the

question whether the Lord's Supper is primarily to be viewed as a new covenant fulfillment of the old covenant Passover, or whether it differs in important respects from this Old Testament observance. Since the argument from the alleged analogy between the Passover and the Lord's Supper is such a prominent feature of the paedocommunionist argument, any evidence of a significant difference between these two rites is relevant to evaluating this argument.

After considering these general features of the New Testament evidence that bears upon the question of paedocommunion, we will treat two passages that are of special importance to the question of the proper recipients of the sacrament. The first and less important of these passages, John 6, is often overlooked in discussions of the subject of paedocommunion. However, since this passage describes in some detail what it is to eat and drink the body and blood of Christ, it has significant implications for the question of what it means to sacramentally receive and participate in the body and blood of Christ. The second of these passages, 1 Corinthians 11, is the most important and extensive New Testament passage that addresses the manner in which believers should partake of the sacrament of the Lord's Supper. Since this passage has often been a linchpin in the historic argument against the permissibility of admitting non-professing members of the new covenant community to the Table of the Lord, it will occupy an especially prominent part of our treatment of the New Testament evidence.

An Introductory Survey of the Types of New Testament Evidence

In order to ensure that our consideration of the New Testament evidence is complete, it may be helpful to begin by identifying all of the passages that have a bearing upon a proper understanding of the Lord's Supper and its recipients. A survey of the New Testament passages that address the subject of the Lord's Supper indicates that they are relatively easy to identify and place in distinct categories. For our purpose, we will treat these passages as belonging to four distinct kinds.

The first kind of passages includes the accounts in the Synoptic Gospels of the institution of the Lord's Supper. Each of the Gospel writers records the event of the institution of the sacrament on the night in which Christ was betrayed, shortly before His crucifixion and death. These accounts are found in Matthew 26:20-30, Mark 14:17-26, and Luke 22:14-23. In addition to these passages in the Gospels, the apostle Paul provides an extensive statement of the institution of the Supper in 1 Corinthians 11:23ff., a passage that deserves to be placed in a category by itself.

In addition to the accounts of the institution of the Lord's Supper,

there is a second kind of New Testament passage that refers or alludes generally to the new covenant community's celebration of the Lord's Supper. These passages do not tell us a great deal about the nature of the sacrament, but they do confirm its importance as a regular feature of the life and ministry of the church. In Luke-Acts, there are two passages that may describe examples of the new covenant community's celebration of the Lord's Supper. The first of these is the account in Luke 24:30-31, which describes Jesus' post-resurrection appearance to the two men on the road to Emmaus. According to Luke, when he reached the home of these men, Jesus shared a meal with them, during which He "took the bread and blessed and broke it and gave it to them" (v. 30). Though this meal did not occur as part of an official, public church service, some commentators argue that Luke's use of the same language for the institution of the Lord's Supper (cf. Luke 22:19) suggests that this was a kind of celebration of the sacrament. Luke also notes that, after receiving the bread and sharing the meal, the two men "recognized" the risen Lord. Another of these passages may be the description of the early church in Jerusalem, which Luke provides in Acts 2:42 (cf. also Acts 20:7): "And they devoted themselves to

Participation in the sacramental meal is clearly placed in the context of an active reception of and continuance in the teaching of the apostles.

the apostles teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers.” The phrase in this description, “the breaking of bread,” may also be an allusion to the regular celebration of the Lord’s Supper on the part of believers in Jerusalem. If this passage describes the celebration of this sacrament, it is noteworthy that those who participated are expressly described as those who “received” the Word preached by the apostle Peter and the other apostles. Participation in the sacramental meal is clearly placed in the context of an active reception of and continuance in the teaching of the apostles.

In addition to these possible allusions to the celebration of the sacrament, there are two passages in the book of Revelation that likely refer to the sharing of this meal (cf. Rev. 3:20; 19:1-8). In the first of these passages, Christ appears to allude to the Supper as a means of fellowship with Himself, when He warns the church in Laodicea that its lukewarmness and self-satisfaction may require the discipline of the withdrawal of table fellowship. The second passage speaks of “the marriage feast of the Lamb,” which will be the eschatological fulfillment of the Lord’s Supper as a meal of remembrance and hope for a future, more immediate fellowship with Christ at His return.

Though none of these first two kinds of passages addresses directly who may rightly receive the body and blood of the Lord in the sacrament, there are two New Testament passages that do speak more directly to this question. For

our purpose, these two passages constitute the third and fourth kinds of New Testament texts.

The first of these passages is the extended discourse in John 6, which describes what it means to eat the body and drink the blood of Christ. Although this passage does not explicitly speak of the sacrament of the Lord’s Supper, it has traditionally been regarded as the passage in the Gospel of John that alludes to the sacrament and its spiritual significance. Because this passage provides a general account of what it means to participate by faith in Christ, it has implications for any sacramental participation in Christ and His saving work.

The second of these passages is 1 Corinthians 11:17-34 (in the context of 1 Cor. 10:14-22), which offers the most extended New Testament discussion of the meaning of the sacrament of the Lord’s Supper and what is required of those who participate in Christ by means of the sacramental bread and wine. Since this passage has always played a principal role in the biblical argument for only admitting professing believers to the Lord’s Supper, it constitutes the most important piece of New Testament evidence that is relevant to the debate regarding paedocommunion.

This brief survey of the New Testament passages that address the subject of the Lord’s Supper illustrates the relative paucity of evidence for determining who are properly to be admitted to the sacrament. Though we shall see that there are several implications in these passages for the issue of who should be received at the Table of the Lord, an answer to the specific question posed by

advocates of paedocommunion is not explicitly provided in any of these passages. As we consider these passages and their implications for the question of paedocommunion, it will become evident that a final resolution of the debate can only be achieved upon the basis of an argument that considers general features of the New Testament doctrine of the Lord’s Supper and its relation to the Word of the gospel.

In next month’s article, we will begin our examination of the New Testament evidence by considering what we can learn about the sacrament of the Lord’s Supper and its proper reception from the Gospel accounts of the institution of the Lord’s Supper. In subsequent articles, we will take up the question of the Lord’s Supper and its relation to the Old Testament Passover, as well as the important testimony of John 6 and 1 Corinthians 11 regarding the manner in which believers should sacramentally participate in Christ’s body and blood.

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