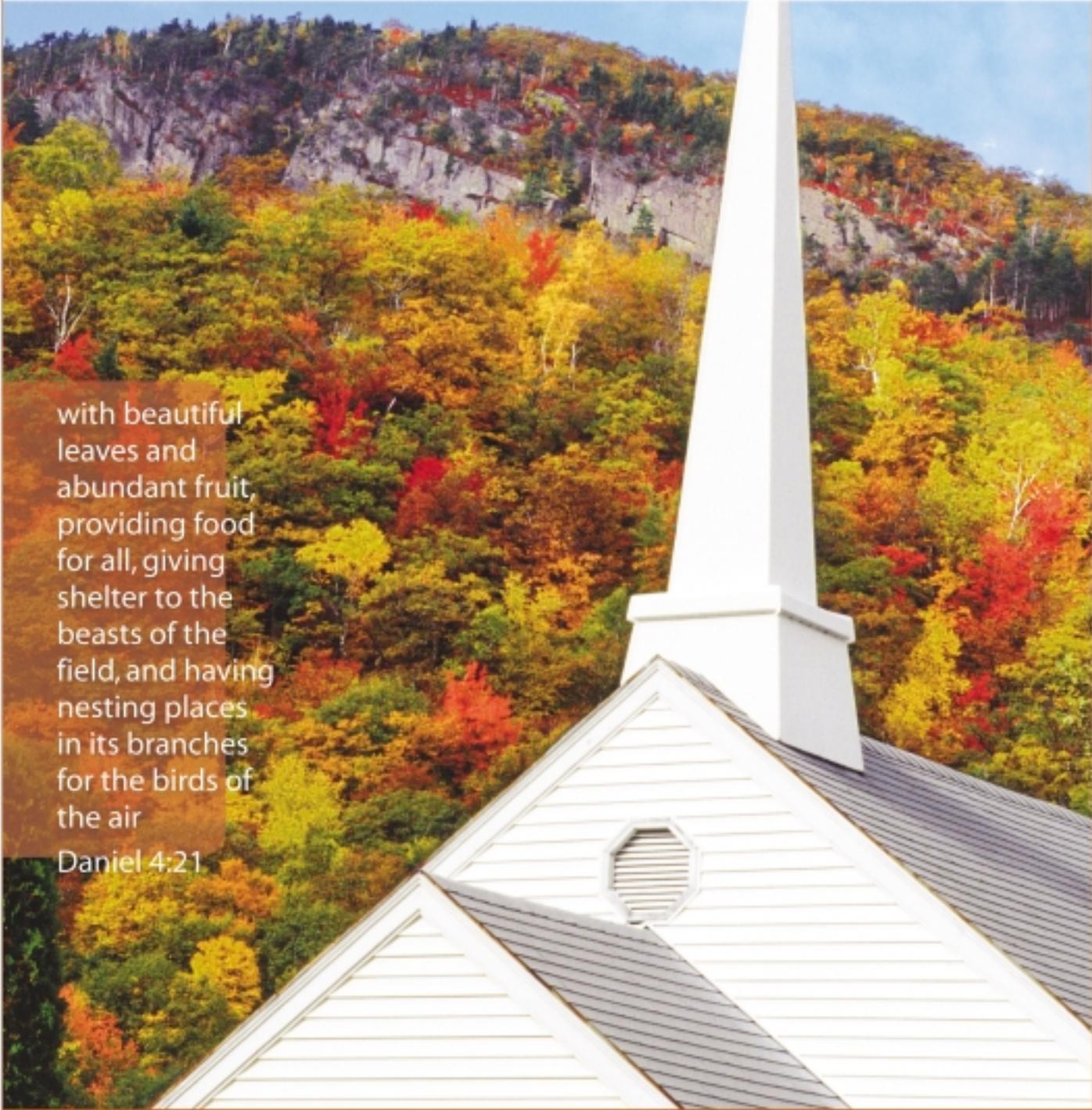


October 2006 • Volume 56 • Issue 9

The Outlook

Dedicated to the Exposition and Defense of the Reformed Faith



with beautiful
leaves and
abundant fruit,
providing food
for all, giving
shelter to the
beasts of the
field, and having
nesting places
in its branches
for the birds of
the air

Daniel 4:21

• A Mighty Fortress • Tension in Medieval Expositions • Reformed Education: A Glorious Heritage • Bible Study on Jacob
• We Confess • Classis Central US • New Testament Evidence Regarding Paedocommunion (II) • Ungodly Departure

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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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Psalm 46

and

A Mighty Fortress is Our God

1527 is held to be the year that Martin Luther suffered the most from his frequent bouts of depression. Luther explains that the content of his depression was always the same, the loss of faith that God is good and that He is good to me. He used a German word to describe these times and that word was *Anfechtung*. He once wrote that “If I live longer I would like to write a book about *Anfechtungen*, for without them no man can understand scripture, faith, the fear or the love of God. He does not know the meaning of hope who has never been subject to temptations.”

Indeed, Luther felt that his depressions were necessary, while at the same time they were dreadful and by all means to be avoided and overcome. After what Luther describes as the frightful *Anfechtung* of 1527, he wrote, “For more than a week I was close to the gates of death and hell. I trembled in all my members. Christ was wholly lost. I was shaken by desperation and blasphemy of God.” “When I go to bed,” writes Luther, “the Devil is always waiting for me. When he begins to plague me, I give him this answer: ‘Devil, I must sleep. That’s God’s command, ‘Work by day. Sleep by night. So go away.’ If that doesn’t work and he brings out a catalogue of sins, I say, ‘Yes, old fellow, I know all about it. And I know some more that you have overlooked. Here are a few extra. Put them down.’ If he still won’t quit and presses me hard and accuses me as a sinner, I scorn him and say, ‘St.

Satan, pray for me. Of course you have never done anything wrong in your life. You alone are holy. Go to God and get grace for yourself. If you want to get me all straightened out, I say, ‘Physician, heal thyself.’”

Remarkably, it was during this same year, 1527, the year of his deepest depression, that Martin Luther penned the words of that great Reformation hymn: *Ein Feste Burg is Unser Gott*, the hymn that is more commonly known to us as *A Mighty Fortress is Our God*. This hymn is drawn from the wonderful words of Psalm 46.

One of the suggestions made as to the provenance of this Psalm is that it was written immediately following a victory of the Israelites over the combined forces of Moab, Ammon, and Edom recorded in 2 Chronicles 20. Whether it was exactly that battle or another is difficult to say, but it seems very clear that this Psalm was written in the context of deliverance from a mighty host. Verse 1 refers to God as an ever present help in trouble. Verses 7 and 11 say that the God of Jacob is our fortress. Verse 9 says He makes wars to cease, He breaks the bow and shatters the spear, He burns the shields with fire.

In 2 Chronicles 20, as Israel faced a mighty host of oppression, a prophet stood up and said to Jehosaphat, “Do not be afraid or discouraged because of this vast army. For the battle is not yours, but God’s.” This is indeed a familiar refrain of the Old Testament. Time after time the Lord would re-

mind His people that the battle belonged to Him, and we see exactly this sentiment reflected in the words of Psalm 46.

The focus of this Psalm is wholly upon God. God as Creator: the one who causes the mountains to quake and the waters to roar. God as protector: the one who is a refuge and strength, an ever present help in trouble. God as ruler: the one who makes wars to cease to the ends of the earth. And God as provider: the one of whom it is said that there is a river whose streams make glad the city of God, for God will help her at the break of day.

The key to this Psalm however, comes in the refrain of verses 7 and 11. There the Hebrew reads “*Yahweh Tsabaoth Immanu*” which is translated “The Lord of Hosts is with us.” The Immanuel principle. I had the privilege of joining other seminarians for the annual trip to a local synagogue where we were able to hear Hebrew read in a worship setting. I felt a terrible burden of sadness listening to those people read these very words of the Old Testament without for a moment understanding of whom it speaks. How many countless times have these people and many millions of other Jews read words such as *Yahweh Tsabaoth Immanu* without realizing that they speak of Jesus? How many times have they read those words and failed to grasp as Luther did in answer to the question, “Dost ask who that may be? Christ Jesus it is He; Lord Sabaoth His name!”

In speaking of the Lord of hosts, the one who is with us, this Psalm does not merely speak of victory in a battle

past, but of the ultimate victory that Christ Jesus gained over sin on the cross, and that will be completed when God subdues the hostile forces of rebellion forever. This is why the Psalmist can record the words of God in verse 10 saying, "I will be exalted among the nations, I will be exalted in the earth." The end of the war that Israel has just experienced is just a foretaste of the time when Jehovah will bring to a complete end the waging of all war such as is spoken of in Micah 4:3ff & Isaiah 2:4 "They will beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks. Nation will not take up sword against nation, nor will they train for war anymore."

As one reads this Psalm attributed to the Sons of Korah, it is not difficult to recall the intensity of Luther's *Anfechtung*, and perhaps to recall some of our own struggles with doubt or the torment of sin and the devil. We can see why this Psalm was such a wonderful encouragement to Martin Luther. He found tremendous solace in being able to pause from the task of ministry; to "Be still and know that God is God" and that the Lord Almighty is with him in Christ Jesus. The battle did not belong to Martin Luther, but to the Lord, and in Him was the ultimate guarantee of victory!

Late last year, George Best died. George Best was perhaps the most skillful soccer player to come out of the United Kingdom. He played professionally for Manchester United as a teenager. Unfortunately for him, he was not able to handle the life of the sports celebrity. He began drinking to excess to the point that later in life he required a life saving liver transplant. Sadly for George, the old battle with alcohol resumed with ferocity.

Unsurprisingly, he lost that battle and eventually succumbed to death. George's death provoked massive outpourings of public mourning and sympathy. He was always viewed as a lovable rogue by the British people and the press. "Poor old George" was the overwhelming sentiment.

At all the soccer games in the week-end after his death, the players wore black armbands. At Manchester United, the players gathered before the game around the center circle with the referees. Part of the crowd of 67,000 raised posters that through strategic positioning painted a picture of George Best's face. The public address system announced that at the blowing of the referee's whistle everyone in the stadium was to observe a moment's APPLAUSE! Not a moment's silence, but a moment's applause! The TV commentators remarked on how much more appropriate this was than a minutes silence, and how this practice was becoming standard in Europe. Maybe I over-psychoanalyzed the situation more than was necessary, but I was rather struck by this. Instead of one short minute to reflect upon mortality, perhaps to pray for mourning family members, or perhaps to quietly reflect on a tragic loss of a wasted life, silence was replaced with applause and noise.

We live in a noisy society. There is nothing more startling to our ears these days than silence. I get into a car, I turn on the radio. We no longer have a car stereo so we can hear music, we have a car stereo so the whole neighborhood can hear our music!

Well in many respects this is a noisy Psalm. There is roaring and quaking

and battle and uproar! But the Psalm speaks of a time when the noise of sin will be quieted by the silence of the Lamb! It calls us equally, to regularly pause in the midst of the noise of life; to close the door on every thing else and to "Be still and know that He is God."

I do not know how noisy life is for you at the moment. I can only surmise that right now some of you are likely to be experiencing a dark and dangerous time, such as those experienced by Luther in 1527. If you are not experiencing such a time right now, praise the Lord! But the fact remains that the Word of God indicates that you will. Those times may be of a greater or lesser magnitude. They will be noisy times. They may come in the form of personal depression, persecution, the torment of the conviction of sin, tension in the council room, strife amongst the office bearers, schism in the church, the sorrow of watching a loved one walk away from the Lord, a sudden death, problems at work or school, a prolonged illness, seemingly unanswered prayer, or difficulties in your marriage. There may come a time when the weight of the world and the very claws of the devil seem to be perched on your shoulders alone.

At that time, one thing is needed, and yet it will be the most difficult thing to find. This is why we must regularly practice the art of learning to "Be still and know that God is God." That is why our worship must be private as well as public. That is why we must make time each day, either in the stillness of the morning or at the close of the day, to "Be still and know that God is God." Church Bible studies, devotions at the family dinner table, all this, as important as it is, is no substitute for

the time spent alone in quiet before the throne of God: time spent contemplating His Supreme majesty; time spent counting the blessings that flow from His Fatherly hand; time spent wallowing in the river of His love; time spent learning to pray the prayers of a forgiven sinner; time spent reading the Word of God, reading a passage such as Psalm 46, and praying it right back to Him! “O God, you are my refuge and my strength, an ever present help in trouble.”

Spend time thanking God for sending us the Lord Jesus Christ, that He may be God with us; thanking Him for revealing that we cannot stand in our own strength, but that we are enabled to stand in the strength of Christ Jesus, established firm in the knowledge that the battle belongs to Him, and that “He must win the battle.”

It is said that during the dark and dangerous times of the Reformation, that Luther would turn to his friend and co-worker Philip Melancthon and say, “Come Philip, let us sing the forty-sixth Psalm.” Maybe you too can find a moment during the business of your noisy life, and turn to numbers 85 and 444 of the blue Psalter Hymnal to be encouraged from the words of this glorious Psalm.

The material regarding Martin Luther was gleaned from the biography of Martin Luther written by Roland Bainton, and called – Here I Stand.

Mr. Andre Holtslag is a senior student at Mid-America Reformed Seminary. He is a member of the Reformed Church of New Zealand.

Tension in Medieval Expositions

The Reformation cannot be isolated from the history that went before it. Even so, certain themes of the Reformation could be difficult to find during long periods of the medieval church. Two such themes were the normative position of the Scriptures and a strongly emphasized soteriology of justification by grace through faith alone. These two themes came together through Luther and pointed him to the book of Romans as a clear explanation of the Gospel. Luther believed justification by grace through faith alone was ‘depicted in masterly fashion’ in Romans. How could such an important doctrine have been left out of medieval exegesis? Taking Romans 3:27-4 as an example passage, two prominent medieval theologians—Peter Abelard (1079-1142) and William of St. Thierry (1085-1148), with different exegetical approaches (even to the point of hostility)—shed some light on this question. These theologians showed an inherent tension in their exegesis of Romans 3:27-24 as they sought to explain justification through infused human love.

Peter Abelard

For Peter Abelard, the main question in exegeting Romans 4:3 was by evaluating the relationship between faith and works. Abelard asked:

So where, O Jew, is now your glorying, that extraordinary boasting in which you

used to indulge concerning the law and its outward observances? Has it been excluded ... excluded by a law of works, that is, of some external deeds? No, but by the law of faith.”

Abelard contrasted “the law and its outward observances” with “a law of works” and with “the law of faith.” Because Abelard consistently combined the terminology of law with that of faith, Abelard failed clearly to separate and distinguish works contrasted against faith.

By “the law and its outward observances” Abelard was referring to “the whole Old Testament... circumcision, sacrifices, keeping the Sabbath, and other symbolic ordinances of the same kind.” By “a law of works” Abelard similarly referred to those who “fulfill the law merely according to the flesh and not according to the spirit... accounted righteous in men’s sight... but not in God’s.” Finally, by “the law of faith” Abelard referred to “the love which comes from faith in our salvation through Christ.” This is the kind of law Abelard believed would make people right before God.

Abelard believed that the ‘law of faith’ meant the internal love flowing out of gratitude at Christ’s death on the cross where penalty for sin was paid. Because of this, Abelard was forced to distinguish ‘love’ from ‘works.’ Contrasted to Paul’s

Abelard tried to reconcile his teachings by wrestling with the possibility that in certain cases, a man may find himself in a situation where “he would have to be both saved and damned.”

words “the one who does not work but trusts Him who justifies the ungodly” (Romans 4:5) immediate tension is felt as ‘the one who does not work’ must not include ‘the work of love’ for Abelard’s interpretation to be consistent. Abelard tried to resolve this problem by choosing the highest virtue of the law, namely love, as being the most important aspect of the law and somehow distinct from ‘works’—the only possible solution for Abelard.

Abelard’s definitions of “faith” and “law” created enormous tension in bringing together as equivalents categories that are polar opposite concepts. Because Abelard projected his definition of “law of faith” as meaning the good work of ‘sanctified Christian love’ into Romans 4, a self-contradictory position arose. Some of the passages that include the imperative to love the Lord include the Books of the Law, which Abelard categorized as the ‘law,’ and through which Abelard criticized the Jews for trying to obtain justification. Abelard’s definition of the “law of faith” failed to differentiate love and faith sufficiently, resulting in an unnatural tension between justification based on one’s own full works and one’s reliance on the full works of Christ.

Abelard recognized the inherent thrust of Romans 3 to some degree because of his insistence in separat-

ing works from faith over the related issue of baptism. Since circumcision “took the place of baptism” before Christ and was clearly Old Testament law, Abelard did not believe that baptism could justify either. While the Roman church taught that baptism initiated the process of justification, acknowledging baptism to be a work that infused a person with justifying grace was directly in contradiction of Romans 4 for Abelard.

Abelard, however, desired to remain at least superficially faithful to the church’s teachings concerning baptism, and this desire resulted in more exegetical tension. To stay true to his skepticism over the justifying power of the work of baptism, Abelard wrote “it would also be possible for a man to die ‘in a state of baptism’ before he was yet baptized, and so be saved.” Abelard tried to reconcile his potential deviation from the teachings of the church by wrestling with the possibility that in certain cases, a man may find himself in a situation where “he would have to be both saved and damned,” for example, if a man were to die before being baptized.

To resolve such a hypothetical situation, Abelard, agreeing that man ultimately must be baptized to be saved, said that the man who is justified “is predestined to life, and will never be overtaken by death until

the Lord shows him what is of obligation concerning the sacraments.” God would see to it that an elect man would accomplish every work needed to do in every circumstance in order to be saved. Abelard seemed content with baptism as a necessary component for salvation, but not necessarily for justification of any sort.

William of St. Thierry

One of Abelard’s greatest opponents was William of St. Thierry, who also wrote an exposition on the book of Romans. For William, Romans 3:27 was not trying to distinguish carefully between two different sets of laws as much as two different attitudes underlying one’s approach to the law. The ‘law of faith’ and the ‘law of works’ referred essentially to the same law, “both of them equally say, ‘You shall not covet’ and under this prohibition are contained all the sins committed through concupiscence.”

When William clarified the differences between the two laws, it was not a matter of content but a matter of approach. For example, “What the law of works commands with a threat” is compared to that same substance which “the law of faith obtains by belief.” Again, the ‘law of works’ is facing God’s law in fear rather than through love, “Do what I command”—while the law of faith rather asks in humility and trust, “Grant what you command.” The question is not what the content of either law is, but that one “may know by whose gift he is able to do it.” As long as the disposition of the doer of the law is cognizant of God’s initiation of the obedience within, the doer of the law has nothing to fear.

Faith defined as ‘how one approaches the law’ is how William understood Paul’s problem with the Jews. Instead of recognizing one’s obedience to the law as the gift of God’s grace, the Jew instead “presumes to appropriate to himself justice by reason of the works of the law, or when a proud man does this in regard to the merits of his works.” William explained Paul’s criticism of the Jews as those “who boasted of the works of the law which they performed not out of love but out of fear, and because they wished to seem just and to be preferred to the Gentiles.” If reward from God is mistakenly thought to be deserved, then William explained Romans 4:4 as describing the way in which God will judge such presumption—“without mercy.”

The right approach to the law, argued William, is one out of love and not fear. This love also has the virtue of refusing to take any credit from any of the obedience causing justification in the believer’s life. Not even the act of faith should try to take any credit for the merit one has received from God, since faith is merely the instrument: “Although it is certain that justice comes to no one except from faith, care must be taken lest this be thought a reward deserved by faith.”

William fearlessly described justification as arriving through the works of the law approached by ‘faith’, meaning “to approach God by trust and love... to offer oneself in obedience.” As long as credit to God is given for your righteousness, you have fulfilled the law of faith according to Wil-

liam. Take credit for your own righteousness, and the law of works will condemn.

Martin Luther

The inherent, unresolved tension in the way two prominent theologians understood Romans 3:27-4 dominated the medieval church. Their view of a works-infused faith was accepted by the church for many years. Luther once aptly summarized the inherent problem with the exegesis of medieval theologians:

They have one and all overlooked the clearest and plainest teaching of Paul as if they deliberately shunned this morning star, or rather this sun, because of the carnal notion they doubtless entertained that it would be absurd to have no place left for merits.

Luther went on to teach that Paul was not trying to reconcile ‘faith’ with ‘law’ by coining the phrase “the law of faith.” Rather, Luther said that Paul was trying to emphasize the fact that faith is a commandment completely separate from the whole of the ethical law including the degree to which people love. Faith is a ‘law’ unto itself and only itself. The reason why the commandment to have faith is not a regular ‘law’ is because no man can achieve justifying ‘faith’ unless it is given to him by God. Of particular importance with respect to Abelard, Luther taught that faith is no ordinary ‘law’ because faith was designed specifically to destroy any notion of human satisfaction before God on the basis of works or law of

any kind, but rather to point to the works of another—Jesus Christ.

It would be difficult for the medieval theologians who lived in a world of a Christian faith that included meritorious works as a vital aspect of justification to commit themselves to stand for such teachings that contradicted the doctrine and practice of the church of their day, especially before the more blatant abuses and immorality present before the Reformation. It was not that Abelard and William were without any notion of what Paul was speaking of, but rather deemed Paul’s words alone as being hard to believe against the great weight of the Catholic tradition before them, and the result was an unresolved tension in their exposition of Romans 3:27-4.

Mr. Bryan Miller is entering his third year as a seminarian at Westminster Seminary in Escondido, California.

United Reformed Churches in North America

Classis Central US

His Christian family and his upbringing as a member of the Covenant – that’s the soil from which Nick Smith’s desire to enter the ministry grew.

His desire became serious when, Mr. Smith said, during his high school years, as he developed a love for Reformed theology. Encouraged by his pastor, he enrolled at Covenant College in Lookout Mountain, Georgia, as a philosophy major in order to prepare for seminary. During college and the years following – when he worked as a computer Web site developer – the Lord cemented his desire by deepening his appreciation for the Church and the centrality of worship and preaching.

Delegates to the 18th meeting of Classis Central US had the privilege of examining how Mr. Smith cultivated that long-held desire for the ministry. After several hours of questioning on June 13, delegates concurred with the decision of Oak Glen URC that Mr. Nicholas Lee Smith should be declared a candidate eligible to receive a call in the URCNA.

A graduate of Mid-America Reformed Seminary, Mr. Smith married his wife Stefanie when both were students at Covenant College. They have a 3-year-old son, with another child due to make his appearance in July.

Although Mr. Smith’s examination was fairly rigorous, an overture approved later in the day would have added one more section.

Proposed by the United Reformed Church of Wellsburg, this overture would add a section on church polity to the candidacy exam detailed in Appendix 2 of the *Church Order*. Currently, the candidacy examination includes seven sections, with church polity (or government) being one item among a lengthy list included in the “practica” section. Guidelines for ordination exams and colloquia docta (exams for those ordained in a different denomination who wish to accept a call from a United Reformed Church) both require exam sections focusing on church polity.

Wellsburg’s overture points out that classes are permitted to waive the ordination exam for candidates who receive a call within the classis that performed their candidacy exam – an occurrence that happens with some regularity. As a result, a number of men have been ordained to the ministry after only a cursory examination in this important area.

That overture will be considered by the Churches during Synod Schererville 2007. To be approved, it would require a two-thirds vote of the synodical delegates and the ratification of two-thirds of the Consistories prior to the next synodical meeting. It would take effect after that next synod.

Two other overtures met with less favor by Classis Central US.

One, submitted by Lynwood URC, would have replaced articles 52-58 – a significant chunk of the discipline section of our *Church Order* – with five articles reflecting the language developed by the Joint Church Order Committee of the URC and Canadian Reformed Churches.

The new language was proposed primarily as a way to make our Church discipline process more understandable. Indirectly, Lynwood’s Consistory noted, it could ease the transition to a new *Church Order* at a later date.

Several delegates expressed concern with the proposed articles’ wording at various points. Others objected that although the language of the new articles was clearer, the change was not substantial enough to justify a relatively major amendment to the *Church Order*.

Another overture, submitted by Doon URC, sought to divide Classis Central US at the Mississippi River.

Currently, the classis comprises 15 Churches plus three Church plants, with another one or two Church plants being considered. The overture argued that dividing the classis at the Mississippi would create two sustainable classes that would have fewer geographic limitations, thereby encouraging the Churches to meet more often and work together more closely.

However, a number of delegates spoke against the proposal, noting that Classis Central US has not been shy about meeting as regularly

as necessary and emphasizing the value of the insights provided by the greater number of delegates. While holding out the possibility of revisiting the matter in future years, delegates said they were unwilling to lose the breadth of fellowship, wisdom and resources made available by the current arrangement.

In addition to these matters, delegates received greetings from Rev. Alan Strange of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church's Presbytery of the Midwest. Emphasizing our unity of belief and purpose, Rev. Strange invited those able to attend this year's OPC General Assembly, which is to be held June 21-28 at Trinity Christian College of Palos Heights, Ill. He also asked for prayer, noting that some rather significant issues will be brought before that assembly.

The next meeting of Classis Central US is to be convened by the Consistory of Covenant Reformed Church of Pella, Iowa. No date has been set, but two Consistories have noted that they expect to request a meeting to perform candidacy examinations this fall.

Rev. Doug Barnes
Stated Clerk

Reformed Education: A Glorious Heritage

Four hundred years ago the Dutch Reformed were strongly committed to providing Reformed Christian education for their covenant children and youth. Up to the mid-twentieth century this commitment thrived in North America among those of Dutch extraction who held the Reformed faith dear. These Reformed Christian schools, in turn, were a great blessing to the North American churches that fostered them.

Article 21 of the Church Order adopted by the Synod of Dort (1618-1619) evinces this commitment: "Everywhere Consistories shall see to it, that there are good schoolmasters who shall not only instruct the children in reading, writing, languages and the liberal arts, but likewise in godliness and in the Catechism." Van Dellen and Monsma comment that "this particular article was already adopted by the Synod of 1586."¹

This commitment to Reformed Christian education was maintained strongly among those who seceded from the State Church of the Netherlands in the 1830's (i.e., the Afscheiding). This is actually one of the reasons many of our forefathers emigrated to North America rather than to Indonesia or some other Dutch colony:

Among the complaints lodged by the Seceders [i.e., the Afscheiding of 1834] against the state church and government of the Nether-

lands was the fact that Seceders were not allowed to establish their own schools. Whereas the government schools in the Netherlands once had considerable Christian content in their teaching, this was no longer the case in the early nineteenth century. ... In a pamphlet entitled 'Emigration: Why we favor Emigration to North America and not to Java,' Brummelkamp and Van Raalte stated that they also wanted freedom to establish Christian schools.²

The Seceder immigrants acknowledged this reason not only among themselves, but openly professed it to all. Henry Beets notes that:

...a letter written by Brummelkamp and Van Raalte, dated May 25, 1846, addressed 'to the believers in North America' ... stated that the Dutch immigrants, soon due on our [American] shores ... desire[d] to enjoy the great privilege of having their children taught in Christian schools, 'a privilege that we lack here, since in the public schools a general moral instruction is given which may offend neither Jew nor Romanist, while free schools are barred.'³

Given this aim, it may seem odd that Van Raalte's congregation in America at first relied on public

schools for instruction of their children. However, it is clear that due to the isolated nature of the Dutch settlement in the Michigan wilderness that “the early Holland settlers [in America] had the right to give religious instruction – and even to employ the Holland language – in the public schools.”⁴

Even with such freedoms as this, within a decade it was recognized by many that reliance on public schooling could not continue:

[T]hose [among the Dutch Reformed immigrants to America] who retained their connection with the Reformed Church [the RCA denomination] ... sadly lost sight of their ideals concerning [Christian] primary schools. Not so, however, those who withdrew [from the RCA] in 1857 [to form the CRC]. The Grand Rapids [Christian Reformed] Church maintained a Christian school from the very beginning of its existence, and the Graafschaap [Michigan] consistory as early as April 30, 1857, took the matter up.⁵

The zeal of the members of the fledgling CRC to accomplish their educational goals can be seen in their rapid progress. As J. Schaver chronicles:

Then [in 1870], when the delegates of the two existing Classes were gathered in the second Synod of our Church [i.e., the CRC], it was recorded that the whole gathering was convinced that the primary school is the

nursery of and for the Church, and that it is therefore the calling as much as possible to attend to it that they get a free school, and if they could not do this, that they as much as possible provide for Holland and reformed instruction; pointedly this is urged upon every congregation.⁷

By the CRC Synod of 1875 there were five such “Holland Christian Congregational Schools” established: 1st Church of Grand Rapids, 1st Muskegon, 1st Grand Haven, 1st Kalamazoo, and 1st South Holland.⁸

This commitment did not abate at all in the closing decades of the 19th century. Nor were our Reformed forebears content to establish schools that were merely Protestant or “broadly evangelical” in nature. The CRC Synod of 1898 agreed that:

Not generally but definitely reformed instruction is requisite for our children. The recognition of the need of regeneration and the recognition of the covenant relation wherein God has placed our children are the principles from which their instruction should proceed. The need of such instruction is earnestly urged upon all

our members, and especially upon all our Consistories.⁹

Note Synod’s “earnest urging” of the cause of Reformed Christian education both to *all church members* and to *all Consistories*. As the children and grandchildren of the 1834 Afscheiding were beginning to build Christian schools and churches in North America, Abraham Kuiper led a second major secession of conservative Reformed people out of the Netherlands State church in the late 19th century. This group, referred to as the Doleantie, was equally committed to Reformed Christian education. They joined together with the earlier Seceders, both in the Netherlands and in North America but they had different perspectives on certain matters.

Under the influence of the thought of Kuiper and his followers, the organization of the Christian school changed somewhat:

Towards the close of the nineteenth century ... a change took place as to the *auspices* under which the primary schools labored. Up to that time they were under congregational [i.e., ultimately consistorial] control. Since then they have been maintained in nearly all cases by ‘Societies’ of Christian parents and others, on the principle that education in its

Under the influence of the thought of Kuiper and his followers, the organization of the Christian school changed somewhat.

various stages is primarily the duty of parents as such rather than that of the church or the state.¹⁰

This change led the CRC in 1914 to revise Article 21 of the Church Order to the following: “The Consistories shall see to it that there are good Christian Schools in which the parents have their children instructed according to the demands of the covenant.”¹¹

Though the responsibilities of the church [as organization] with respect to the governance of the school were viewed differently, the practical commitment to the ideal of Reformed Christian education had not diminished one iota. Several years later Henry Beets was able to boast of the continued growth of the Reformed Christian schools:

... in 1922 there were 75 Free Christian Primary Schools of our people in at least 15 states of our Union, besides Canada, enrolling 11,000 pupils, taught by 300 teachers, at an annual expense [in 1922 dollars] of \$275,000.¹²

This success did not escape the notice of others; nor was it missed that the success of the schools was closely connected with the spiritual prosperity of the churches. J. Gresham Machen was still a professor at Princeton Seminary when he remarked in 1925:

There is no trouble about Church attendance in the Christian Reformed Church. The reason is that the children do not go to the public schools but to the ‘Christian

schools’ of the Church, where they get a real, solid education with a sturdy Calvinism at the very centre of it. There is nothing like it elsewhere in America. I wish it could leaven the whole lump.¹³

The CRC was self-conscious of the importance of the Christian schools to its own spiritual health. In one of several addresses that he gave at annual teachers’ conventions of the National Union of Christian Schools in the 1920s and 1930s, Calvin Seminary president Louis Berkhof remarked:

As the years roll by and conditions change, the conviction is growing on us that we need the Christian school and need it very much. ... It has ... been a boon for the Reformed circles in our land and may by the grace of God help us to contribute something worthwhile to the life of our nation. Experience taught us to appreciate this school. Other Christians have frequently congratulated us on its possession, described it as one of the mainstays of our churches, and exhorted us to guard, to continue, and to develop it.¹⁴

It is just because we regard the Christian school as a real blessing that we are so solicitous about it. We have been willing to finance it, even though we also had to pay our share for the maintenance of the public school. We resent the expression of opinions in our circles which might dampen the ardor for

the Christian school and put it in jeopardy. We are anxious to see this school continue and to bless us with its fruits in the future as it has done in the past.¹⁵

Schaver provided in his book extensive tables surveying percentages of covenant children attending Christian Schools in the year 1940 for 137 of the 297 congregations that then comprised the CRC.¹⁶ Though the percentages varied considerably from church to church, across the denomination roughly two-thirds of families with children appear to have relied on Christian schooling, with many congregations showing percentiles in the 80s and 90s. And Schaver’s survey did not count congregations of the conservative Protestant Reformed Churches and Netherlands Reformed Churches in America – in which commitment to Reformed Christian education might be expected to have been even more marked.

The continuing strength of the conservative Dutch Reformed churches’ commitment to the Christian school may also be seen in Monsma and VanDellen’s influential and well-accepted *Church Order Commentary*. Discussing the implications of Article 21 with respect to qualifications for consistory membership, they wrote in 1949:

Can one who is opposed to Christian schools serve as Consistory member? Not very well. Those who serve in Consistory pledge themselves to uphold the doctrine and government of our Churches. (Cf. Form of Subscription.) Now, the Church

Order, according to which they help to govern the Church, requires that they promote and sponsor Christian schools. Therefore one who is opposed to these schools cannot serve in the Consistory. He cannot do what is expected of him. Even those who assume a lukewarm attitude toward the Christian school movement are not desirable candidates for the Consistory.¹⁷

As the Reformed Christian school movement prospered, so did the churches. In the first five decades of the 20th century the CRC roughly tripled in size, significantly outstripping the growth of the RCA (in terms of percent) during the same period.¹⁸ God richly blessed church and school together! In sum, from 1586 to the 1950s, the spiritual children of the Afscheiding and Doleantie in North America can trace a glorious and God-blessed heritage of a staunch commitment to provide truly Reformed Christian schooling for covenant children and youth.

What has happened since the 1950s, and what our prospects are for the future will be the topic of next month's article: "Reformed Christian Education: a Doubtful Future?"

Endnotes

1. I. VanDellen and M. Monsma, *The Church Order Commentary*, 2nd Ed., (Grand Rapids, Zondervan, 1949), p. 92ff.
2. T. Monsma, "The Educational Ideals of 1834 in the Michigan Colony," in *The Reformation of 1834*, ed. P. Y. DeJong and N. D. Kloosterman (Orange City, Iowa, Plum Publishing/Mid-

America Reformed Seminary, 1984), pp. 61-2.

3. H. Beets, *The Christian Reformed Church*, (Grand Rapids, The Eastern Avenue Bookstore, 1923), pp. 30-31. Their other stated aims were to "improve the social condition of the immigrants" and "to have an active part in the propagation of God's truth among the heathen."

4. J. L. Schaver, *The Polity of the Churches*, Vol. 2, 4th Ed., (Chicago, Church Polity Press, 1947), p. 213.

5. H. Beets, op. cit., p. 140.

6. Note that the Dutch Reformed in America often referred to the Christian Schools they established as "Free" schools - free not meaning "no tuition" or "no expense," but in the sense of free from control by the government.

7. J. L. Schaver, op. cit., pp. 213-4. Schaver references the CRC Acts of Synod from the following years: 1870, Art. 36, 1873, Art. 8, 1874, Art. 10).

8. Ibid. p. 214.

9. CRC Acts of Synod of 1898, Art. 49; as reported by Schaver, op. cit., p. 215.

10. H. Beets, op. cit., p. 141.

11. 1914 CRC revision of Church Order Article 21.

12. H. Beets, op. cit., p. 142.

13. J. G. Machen in 1925, as recorded by N. B. Stonehouse in *J. Gresham Machen: a Biographical Memoir, 3rd Ed.* (South Holland, Illinois; Park Press/The Banner of Truth Trust, 1987) p. 438.

14. L. Berkhof, "Being Reformed in our Attitude Toward the Christian School," in *Foundations of Christian Education: Addresses to Christian Teachers*, ed. D. E. Johnson (Phillipsburg, New Jersey: Presbyte-

rian and Reformed Publishing Co., 1990), p. 25. This book is a collection of essays by L. Berkhof and C. VanTil which were originally delivered as addresses to national conventions of the National Union of Christian Schools (now CSI), in the 1920s and 1930s.

15. Ibid.

16. J. Schaver, op. cit., pp. 21-9.

17. I. VanDellen and M. Monsma, op. cit., p. 99. It should be noted that the Church Order Commentary authors go on to nevertheless caution that "every case must be judged on its own merits. A general rule in this matter should never be made."

18. J. D. Bratt, *Dutch Calvinism in Modern America*, (Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 1984), pp. 222-3 (see data in Table 1 in the Appendix). This is true despite the CRC losing several thousand members during this time interval as a result of the formation of the Protestant Reformed Churches.

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Bible Studies on Jacob

Lesson 3: Issac Blesses God's Covenant Heir

Read Genesis 27:1-29

Introduction

We were introduced to the twins Esau and Jacob in Genesis 25. The story told there shows that the two boys are in conflict. But the conflict has not yet broken out into the open. Prophetic word (Gen. 25:23) has assigned Jacob over Esau the firstborn. Jacob purchases the birthright from Esau, and Scripture tells us that Esau has despised his birthright (Gen. 25:34).

Genesis 26 is something of a “detour” in the story of Jacob, such that Isaac comes across as a kind of valley or lower plateau between the “taller mountain peaks” of Abraham and Jacob. Yet even in that chapter we may read with gratitude to God that He keeps His covenant words to the godly patriarchs. Isaac clearly hears an echo of Genesis 12:1-3 as he too is promised God's presence, His blessing, the land, and many descendants, through whom blessing will go to other nations (see Gen. 26:2-5).

Genesis 26:34-35 brings Esau back into the story, and the topic here is his marriage to two Hittite women. It is interesting to note that he will marry a third wife, Mahalath (an Ishmaelite), in Genesis 28:8-9. In this way, brief notices about his wives serve as a kind of “bookend” that surrounds the story of Jacob receiving the blessing from his father Isaac in Genesis 27.

*“I think I'm going to die soon”
(27:1-4)*

Genesis 27 has been called “a chapter saturated with intrigue, suspense, and agony” (J.J. Davis, *Paradise to Prison*, p. 236). The subjects of food and death, death and food, are fascinating ones, subjects that come together in these stories. Esau had come back from hunting, exhausted, and he talks as if he is going to die. So he sells his birthright to get some good soup (Gen. 25:29ff.).

Isaac now is old, and he senses that death cannot be too far away. But he would love to eat Esau's food before he pronounces his blessing. Both men exaggerate the prospects of their deaths. Esau eats the stew and walks away. And Isaac does not die until Genesis 35:29! “Reports of their deaths have been greatly exaggerated!”

In any case, Isaac tells his son Esau to hunt for some wild game. With success in the hunt, Esau can cook up some really tasty food. This will be the occasion for patriarch Isaac to give his blessing to the firstborn son, a kind of reading of his “last will and testament” before he dies. It may very well be that the game caught in the hunt would provide the food for a kind of private feast that would enhance the blessing presentation.

But there is something wrong in all this. The granting of a blessing was not a secret affair between a father

and his son. If anything, it was a public event, a cause for community acknowledgment and celebration. What is more, would it not be expected that Isaac should include the whole family—his wife Rebekah and his other son Jacob—in this granting of the blessing? Is the momentous occasion of pronouncing a blessing, a private matter?

Furthermore, the normal practice of giving a double portion to the oldest son means that there is some blessing left for the remaining son(s). But what portion does Isaac give to the son in front of him? Read verses 27-29 and 38-40. It sounds like Isaac gave virtually the entire blessing away, with little left for the other son. In other words, Isaac was not intending to give a double portion to Esau with another portion to Jacob (let's say, two-thirds for Esau, with one-third to Jacob, so that Esau gets “double”). It appears that Isaac planned to give Esau the near entirety of blessing to Esau; Jacob perhaps could get the scraps.

Whose god is their belly

On one level, we are not completely surprised by this. In Genesis 25:28 we read that Isaac loved the taste of the wild game that Esau hunted. By now his twin sons are in their late 70s (perhaps 77 years of age, when figured according to all the verses that give us ages). Yet Isaac is still motivated by his taste buds and stomach. Has Isaac learned nothing? But much more significant: can he not bring his actions in line with God's revealed Word? It is very difficult to believe that Rebekah had not told Isaac

what God had said in Genesis 25:23, perhaps almost immediately after the LORD had revealed the future. “The older will serve the younger.” It is quite likely that the text would have read, “Rebekah kept the matter in her heart,” or something similar, if she in fact had kept the prophecy all to herself. Thus it is reasonable to believe that Isaac knew that God’s covenantal election rested with Jacob, not Esau. But Isaac’s love for Esau and his tasty venison outweighs what God has said. Is this one reason why Rebekah is not invited to the blessing ceremony? Does Isaac think that his wife would have protested vigorously the proceedings?

Another factor to be taken into account has already been mentioned in Genesis 26:34-35. Esau had married Hittite wives, and “they were a source of grief to Isaac and Rebekah.” Isaac is not happy with his daughters-in-law! When Esau marries at age 40, he has shown no godly wisdom in the choice of his wives. Does this reality not say anything to father Isaac as to what really lives in the heart of his son Esau? Will Isaac, in effect, continue to enable Esau to prosper in this direction of covenant rebellion by giving him the blessing?

It could be argued that Isaac’s decision to bless Esau puts Isaac at enmity with God. God’s will is that younger Jacob have dominion over the older Esau. Through this arrangement the Christ would come to save all God’s people. Isaac’s fatherly choice is not God’s choice in election. In this way, Isaac’s plan for a private party to give the blessing to Esau is an action that is opposed to the Christ. This does not

mean that Isaac has become an unbeliever or that he would not be saved by God’s grace. We think here of Peter boldly saying that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the living God (Matt. 16:16). But a few verses later he is rebuked (“Get behind me, Satan!”) when he speaks against what Christ says would happen to Him in Jerusalem (Matt. 16:21-23). How easily we can blind ourselves to God’s will in certain areas of life. Isaac, like Esau before him, is here thinking with his stomach and acting out of his fondness toward his firstborn. Isaac loves the son whom God does not love in His covenant. Isaac thus plans to strengthen God’s “enemy” at the expense of God’s chosen son, Jacob.

Rebekah’s reaction (27:5-17)

Ancient Near Eastern tents did not have sound-proof curtain walls, and it is easy to imagine the conversation between Isaac and Esau being overheard. Rebekah (and you the readers, of course!) knows what is going on, and she now moves into action. She does not have a confrontation with her husband about this plan to bless Esau in private. Would a discussion (or even an argument) at this point have made Isaac change his mind?

Rebekah takes charge. She tells Jacob what to do, saying, “Listen to my voice” (or, “Do what I say;” see verses 8, 13, 43). Jacob should kill two choice goats so that Rebekah can cook up some delicious meal for Isaac. The goal in this plot is *to get Isaac’s blessing* before his death (verse 10).

Jacob’s response in verses 11-12 is interesting. He does not question

the morality of this plan, but rather its feasibility. “Can we get away with this?” Physically, the boys are different: Esau is hairy, while Jacob is smooth-skinned). Their voices differ (verse 22). If Isaac uncovers this trick, he will curse Jacob, and then all will be lost.

But Rebekah is resourceful: Esau has some clothes still in his parents’ tent, they fit Jacob suitably, and some hairy goatskins on the exposed parts of Jacob’s body will give Isaac the impression that he is touching Esau. Without further question, Jacob gets the goats, and Rebekah cooks up a great meal.

Whom can you trust?

It was one thing for Jacob to buy the birthright from Esau. Ancient practices allowed that possibility. But the blessing was another matter. Only Isaac could give it, and it was not for sale. Jacob must acquire it by deception. To use a modern idiom: Jacob was a “smoothie.” And we wonder what Esau is thinking: having sold his birthright earlier to Jacob, does he think that he still retains the right to receive the covenantal blessing? Doesn’t Esau realize that the earlier sale means he has now forfeited his right to this blessing?

Without doubt Rebekah and Jacob engage in deception here against Isaac. Commentators have generally condemned Rebekah and Jacob for this deception of Isaac, and the language used to condemn the mother and her son range from strong denunciation, as if it were the greatest evil, to language that rebukes them somewhat more mildly. Calvin also says that their actions were not right, describing this as a

lie, “not a legitimate method of acting.” But he also says that they acted from a strong faith. Both believe, says Calvin. Rebekah’s faith was “mixed with an unjust and immoderate zeal,” he writes. In other words, she had a proper goal in mind, but her means were not right. After all, does God need human help to achieve His purposes? Do believers have to take matters into their own hands to “help God along?”

At the same time, we might consider this as well: Rebekah knew God’s selection of Jacob. Esau had forfeited all claim to the blessing. Isaac was acting improperly in this regard. To argue with Isaac would be fruitless, at this point. Time is wasting, and so she, as a mother with some authority, comes up with this clever strategy. She is working here not against a man whose actions were holy and blameless, but a man who is acting against God’s revealed Word. In any case, what a sad situation now unfolds before us!

Questions and answers (27:18-26)

The story now becomes something of a nail-biter, as Jacob brings the food before his blind father. Yet Isaac is not unobservant, although his eyes do not recognize who is before him. “You’re back awfully soon, my son.” Jacob uses the LORD’s Name to say that God gave him game quickly. “You sound like Jacob, but you feel like Esau.” Isaac wants to be sure. “Are you really my son Esau?” he asks in verse 24. Why is he so concerned about it being the son he intends to bless? Because once he pronounces the blessing (verbal oaths

were legally binding), then the deed is done. Once Isaac has blessed, the “ink is dry,” and there is no recall of his words. So Isaac needs proof of identity, for he is determined to bless Esau, but he must be sure it is Esau. On that point, he has no second thoughts.

“By faith Isaac blessed...” (27:27-29)

The occasion is momentous, and father Isaac seeks a kiss from his son. Jacob is misleading a blind man (his father), and he seals the deal with a kiss. Although he has little or no sight, Isaac relies on his other senses: hearing, touching, tasting, and smelling. His doubts are set aside as he proceeds to pronounce the blessing.

The blessing contains important features, and we do well to consider them:

1. “... the smell of a field that the LORD has blessed.” These opening words remind us that the blessings we experience around us are from the Creator God and from Him alone.
2. “May God give you of heaven’s dew... grain and new wine.”

Here are blessings that come from creation itself. Dew is singled out in Isaac’s statement. Dew, especially heavy dew, is very important in parts of the world that have dry, rainless seasons. As the temperature plummets at night, moisture can form on plants and soil to provide just enough sustenance for vegetation that might otherwise dry out and die. See Deuteronomy 33:13 (blessing for Joseph). This is

why Elijah’s prayers held back both dew and rain during the time of Ahab’s apostasy (1 Kings 17:1). God even compares Himself to dew in Hosea 14:5a (cf. Zech. 8:12; Prov. 19:12; Job 29:19). Isaac also speaks of abundant grain and new wine. Food and drink are needed to sustain a people; famine was a curse from God.

3. “May nations serve you ... bow down to you.”

This part of the blessing takes us to the realm of social relationships, specifically the dominion that God’s people will be given. This blessing, in fact, recalls what the LORD had said to Rebekah in Genesis 25:23, “One people will be stronger than the other.” It recalls those words but only in part. Isaac believes that he is blessing Esau in such a way that Jacob and all his descendants will serve Esau. As such, as far as his intentions are concerned, Isaac is speaking in direct contradiction to God’s Word. Yet his words are being spoken to God’s chosen covenant son Jacob.

We cannot neglect noting that these words will ultimately be fulfilled in a later chosen covenant Son, the Lord Jesus Christ. He will experience shame and a hellish death, but then He will be highly exalted, given a Name above every name. He will be given all authority in heaven and on earth, and through the preaching of the gospel, He will draw all people to Himself. At the Name of Jesus Christ, every knee shall bow in all created reality (see Phil. 2:5-11).

4. “May those who curse you be cursed and those who bless you be blessed.”

These words repeat the similar covenant promises spoken many years before to father Abram in Genesis 12:3. So we note God's faithfulness from generation to generation. The content of His promises are not diminished over time, but rather He underscores them as valid when Isaac blesses his son. Hebrews 11:20 says, "By faith Isaac blessed Jacob and Esau in regard to their future." Although Isaac has unrighteously favored Esau, at least it can be said that Isaac believed God's promise was true and that its content was substantial. Everyone who curses the favored son will experience God's curse, but blessing will come to anyone who blesses that son.

We also must not fail to observe that Isaac ascribes all blessing as coming from God (see verse 28, literally, "the God"): "May God give you..." There are no blessings apart from the true Lord of heaven and earth. "This is my Father's world," and from His Fatherly hand alone come the blessings that truly enrich the gifts of His creation. From our Almighty God we receive all the vast benefits of creation and re-creation.

Lesson 3: Points to ponder and discuss

1. Isaac is blind; he has great difficulty seeing physical things around him. How is he "blind" in other ways in this story? How do Christians have "blind spots" in their own lives?
2. Isaac says he does not know the day of his death (27:2). None of us really do. What does the Scripture say about our life spans (see Ps. 49 and Ps. 90:9-12, for example)? Why do younger people typically think and live as if they are invincible? Is it morbid to think about your own death? How should we think about it?
3. Paul says some people make their belly (appetite) a god (see Phil. 3:19). Various kinds of pleasures can be addicting to some people, although not to others. Some things become idols, false gods. How can we spot such idols in our own hearts and lives? How can such idols be broken and our lives be delivered?
4. Read Colossians 3:9-10; Heidelberg Catechism, Lord's Day 43 (Q/A 112); Westminster Larger Catechism, Q/A 143-145; and Shorter Catechism, Q/A 76-78. The 9th commandment forbids bearing false witness against our neighbor. Yet there are instances in the Bible of people who engage in deception against God's enemies (e.g., the Hebrew midwives in Egypt, Rahab in Jericho, and Jael in Judges 4). Are there times when deception may be legitimate (e.g., spying in time of war, battle strategies)? How do we resist "situational ethics" in this area?
5. Where is God in all these events of this story? What is His particular purpose in these events? Read Romans 8:28. What perspective can this verse (or other verses) give to what has happened here?

Bible Studies on Jacob

Lesson 4: The Beloved Son Must Flee From His Own Brother

Read Genesis 27:30 – 28:9

Introduction

In the first part of Genesis 27 we read of events in a covenant home where no one seems to trust the other members, where parental favoritism sets into motion some very ungodly actions, and where we are embarrassed to think of these people as our spiritual ancestors. Again, we must wonder: why does God even bother with such? Yet He does, because He is rich in mercy. When Isaac had planned to give the covenantal blessing to Esau, his favorite son, Rebekah then counters this with a plan of deception in which Jacob brings the goat-meat dish to his father. Once a suspicious father Isaac has the reasonable assurance that it is Esau who is before him, he pronounces the rich blessing upon his son... Jacob! Isaac believed that this blessing would truly bear its intended fruit as God would fulfill His own word through the blessing.

Deception revealed (27:30-33)

Rebekah and Jacob had to work quickly to prepare their meal of goat meat and to camouflage Jacob with Esau's clothes and goat skins. What if God had given Esau quick success in the hunt (as Jacob would claim for himself; verse 20)? Indeed, Jacob has barely left his father's presence when Esau returns from his own hunt. The story reads almost like a soap opera and a cliff-hanger at that. We can only

imagine what a scene that would have erupted if Esau had come back even earlier and entered father Isaac's tent, only to discover twin brother Jacob dressed in disguise!

Esau cooks up a delicious venison dinner (does goat taste like venison, if probably cooked with spices?). He invites his father to the dinner table, so to speak, as he enters the tent. But now comes a tremendous shock to father Isaac as the deception becomes known. Verse 33 says that he trembled violently. It hits Isaac with great force as this reality dawns upon him: he, as covenant head and father, has given the blessing, so full and rich, to someone not his favorite firstborn son, Esau. The deed is done; the word has been spoken, and that oral contact was now legally binding. No turning back now! Isaac tells the equally surprised Esau, "I blessed him—and indeed he will be blessed."

It may very well be the case that Isaac (and Esau as well) are stunned back into reality, God's reality, at this point. If we may safely assume that Isaac had become aware of the Lord's prophetic word in Genesis 25:23—although to this point he has acted contrary to it—yet now he must face this stark reality: Jacob, the younger son, has received the great covenant blessing. There is nothing that Isaac can do about it, for in those days one could not say on such an occasion,

"Oops! I made a mistake." Isaac's words are valid, as today we would say, "That is his signature; it is his handwriting." Isaac believed that the promised blessing of God would go to the son he blessed. Only, Isaac meant it for Esau, but God's will is done here: Jacob will receive the blessing. The truth of Proverbs 19:21 is seen in this story: "Many are the plans in a man's heart, but it is the LORD's purpose that prevails." Both Isaac and Esau have now been stunned into seeing God's reality, His truth. But can they handle the truth? How will they handle this truth?

"Though he sought the blessing with tears" (27:34)

If Isaac is stunned by these events, so is Esau. This 77-year old man now bursts into tears. He had wanted this blessing as a lasting confirmation of his father's love but also as a means to prosper in the future. Esau too was going along with his father's ungodly scheme, but the news that their plan had ended in ruin brings about this pathetic scene as the enormity of his loss becomes clear to him. Esau sobs because he realizes his dreams for a prosperous future via the blessing were gone.

Read Hebrews 12:16-17. The Word of God warns us to reject immorality and godlessness. Esau is a prime example of godlessness, such covenantal carelessness. He sold his birthright, despising it, rejecting his high calling, privilege, but also his important responsibility. Yet he wanted the material prosperity. In other words, he wanted all the benefits of God's Kingdom but none of the serious effort. Does this

sound familiar in our day as well? Esau had forfeited his claims to the blessing, but he retained a strong sense of entitlement. “Bless me—me too, my father!” he cries.

God’s covenantal rule of His world does not operate this way. All Esau’s sighs and tears will not change this situation. These are not the tears of repentance, a sorrow that leads to godliness. These are the bitter tears of sad disappointment that sweep through the soul of one who has just lost a great fortune.

Esau is left with leftovers (27:35-40)

Isaac sees Jacob’s actions as deceitful (verse 35), and Esau readily agrees. In fact, Esau sees in the meaning of Jacob’s own name (“heel”) the innuendo of deception. The brother who had grabbed the heel at birth, has obtained both the birthright and the blessing. Esau calls his loss of the birthright earlier a deception, but we argued in lesson 2 that there was no deception then. For a bowl of soup, Esau sold his birthright, a foolish deal indeed. Jacob did not deceive him then. But this latest stunt was deception, not of Esau first of all, but of father Isaac.

We should not forget that Esau could enjoy God’s blessing if he now submitted to God’s will as that became apparent in this episode. Jacob has the great patriarchal blessing. If Esau had submitted to Jacob, thanked the Lord for His guiding hand, and lived in obedience to God’s will from now on, he could have enjoyed the Lord’s

goodness in the ascendancy of Jacob. Throughout the Old Testament we see again and again that when people keep themselves joined to God’s chosen man or His people, they may share in those blessings. Recall that Lot prospered when he and his herdsmen were close to Abram, but when they separated in Genesis 13, Lot made his way toward the wicked city of Sodom.

Esau begs for whatever blessing his father may have left to give. In his blessing to Esau (verses 39-40), Isaac uses many phrases from his earlier blessing to Jacob, but now they have a slightly different nuance. The land of Edom would not be as fertile as Canaan would be. The Edomites would be forced to submit to the Israelites, but they would fight back, often revolting against Israel and living in enmity with the Israelites. This “blessing” indicates that the Edomites, Esau’s children, would not be a weak nation, but in the end they would always be a restless nation.

Beware the root of bitterness (27:41)

It appears that neither Isaac nor Esau find out that Rebekah was the instigator of Jacob’s actions. Isaac does not confront his wife or denounce her, but neither does he blame his younger son or denounce him in anger. In fact, it seems that Isaac submits to the situation, and by Genesis 28 he appears ready to move on. Esau as well does not ask his mother why she did such a thing. Both the reader and Jacob know it, but it may very well be that Isaac and Esau do not know that the deception was Rebekah’s idea.

Instead, Esau holds a grudge against Jacob. But he does not need to act with haste. He can bide his time. He is prepared to wait until his father is dead (which will not occur for 43 more years!). At least Esau wants to spare his father the emotional devastation that would surely follow when brother kills brother. Isaac has shown favoritism to Esau, and Esau is prepared to repay such love by waiting. Ironic, isn’t it: even a cold-blooded murderer can have a streak of kindness, provided it is for a mutual friend or ally.

Bitterness and disappointment can grow roots that sink into the soul. Weeds are easy to uproot when they first appear, but if weeds are neglected and are allowed to grow, the roots sink deeper into the soil, and weeds become more difficult to uproot. The same is true with the roots of bitterness.

Esau hates Jacob. Notice in verse 41 that Esau does not identify Jacob as “my enemy” (which he is in his wicked heart), but he calls him “my brother.” We clearly hear an echo of the Cain and Abel story (and even an echo of Ishmael and Isaac’s conflict in Gen. 21:9). In Genesis 4 we read that two brothers are divided by God’s righteous favor as well as unrighteous jealousy and hatred against the other. Cain killed righteous Abel in cold blood. Esau prepares to do the same to Jacob, the man whom God loves in His covenant. God loves Jacob, not on the basis of Jacob’s actions, but on God’s own sovereign choice, His own mercy.

“Life really is all about *me*,” is a confession and religious worldview that lives in the hearts of many people, even people who sit in Christian church pews week after week. That attitude of the soul will inevitably lead to disappointment, frustration, and then hatred, especially when events do not go our way, or someone else has something that is just a little better, a little nicer, than what we have. Hatred need not express itself as emotional raging and loud outbursts all the time. Hatred can show itself in a very cool, low-key way that looks for the opportunity to insult, harm or belittle someone. Or, maybe even kill him. Think of how hypocritical Pharisees plotted to attack and destroy our Lord Jesus Christ at an opportune moment. Guard your hearts lest any root of bitterness appear in your soul (cf. Eph. 4:22, 31).

Mother knows best (27:42-26)

Rebekah is informed of Esau’s murderous plot, perhaps by a servant, although we cannot be sure. She moves into action. Her actions here show her again taking the initiative to seek protection for her beloved son Jacob. Earlier Rebekah sprang into activity to enable Jacob to obtain the covenantal blessing, and now again she must strategize in such a way to protect Jacob from her older son Esau, who is seething with hatred. Her words in verse 42 suggest that Esau will not be content (“consoled”) until Jacob is dead. Does Esau think the blessing will then automatically fall to him if Jacob is dead? Does he imagine that he is the “first runner-up” in some kind of covenant bless-

ing contest? Or, does Esau harbor the idea that, “if I can’t have it, then nobody may have it”?

In any case, Rebekah takes charge, and again she tells Jacob to do what she says (verse 43; cf. vv. 8, 13). Jacob must flee to her brother, Uncle Laban, in the Haran region, at the northern part of the Fertile Crescent. Her aim is to allow Esau a “cooling off” period. In her mind, time will heal Esau’s hurt feelings, he’ll forget the whole episode, and then he will be willing to move on. You know: “forgive and forget.” After all, “out of sight” (Jacob gone) will lead to “out of mind” (Esau changing his thinking). If only conflict resolution were that easy.

Rebekah is afraid of losing two of the men in her life (verse 45). It is likely she means that soon after Isaac dies, then Esau will carry out his murderous plot and kill Jacob. Another understanding is that if Esau were to kill Jacob, then the “avenger of blood” would have to execute Esau. Either view seems possible, although I favor the first interpretation.

Rebekah tells a “white lie” to her husband Isaac. She brings up the matter of Esau’s Hittite wives to him. On the surface, her complaint is believable. Genesis 26:35 already told us about the irritation that Esau’s Hittite wives brought to the parents. Yet Rebekah only mentions her own disgust, allowing Isaac to draw the proper conclusion and to give the appropriate directions. Rebekah had said nothing to Jacob about going away to get a wife, but that will be

the operative story for anyone who asks why Jacob has left. The presenting story will be, “Jacob is gone to get the proper wife,” but the real story is, “Jacob is fleeing for his life.”

Rebekah has used her wiles to advance Jacob so that he will get both: his life and his wife (actually two wives!). But she will never see Jacob again. Too much time will elapse before an “all-clear signal” can be given, but by then Rebekah will have passed away. That signal in fact will never come.

Jacob sent away with blessing (28:1-9)

When we read these verses, we are struck with the impression that Isaac has come around to accept God’s will in this matter. Jacob is God’s beloved choice. We do not hear any tone of anger or recrimination. True, the issue of getting an acceptable wife is not the real reason that Jacob must leave. Yet he takes his leave with rich words of blessing (again!). Read how many times in verses 1-5 the idea of blessing appears. Jacob receives an even richer expression of blessing here, words embodying the great content of fruitfulness in terms of descendants and possession of the land, “the land God gave to Abraham.” See similar promises in Genesis 15, 17, and 22. Isaac has come around to God’s will.

Esau, on the other hand, thinks that if Jacob is out to get a wife that will please his aged parents, he will take a third wife, one from Ishmael’s family. Has he learned nothing yet? Esau just does not

seem “to get it.” He remains spiritually stunted at this point.

Thus this story ends here on a mixed note. Jacob has the blessing, but he also has a brother who hates him, whose anger stews in his heart, as Esau waits for the moment to kill him. Jacob leaves for his family in Paddan-Aram. He has God’s blessing, and thus he is a rich man indeed. But he is fleeing his own brother.

Lesson 4: Points to ponder and discuss

1. Some modern commentators have used the word “dysfunctional” to describe Isaac’s family. What is meant by that kind of language? And would you agree that this accurately depicts Isaac’s family? What is the source of this family’s internal struggles and troubles? How does each character contribute, either willingly or unknowingly, to the problems this family experiences?
2. In the Lord’s Prayer we pray, “Thy will be done.” What was God’s will for Esau and Jacob with regard to the blessing? How do we understand this prayerful petition today? Does God’s will in this prayer refer to His secret (decretive) will, or to His revealed will? See Deuteronomy 29:29; Heidelberg Catechism, Lord’s Day 49 (Q/A 123); WLC, Q/A 192; WSC, Q/A 103.
3. Is Esau’s response to Jacob’s actions understandable? Is this reaction justifiable?
4. God’s word in Ephesians 4:22, 31, is that we take care not to allow the root of bitterness to develop among us. But he is addressing the church, God’s holy temple, the body of Christ. Do these admonitions from the Apostle Paul even need to be said to Christians? How can disappointment lead to frustration, and even to bitterness? What does God’s Word say about how to deal with this?
5. Esau is angry with his brother Jacob, but he controls its expression—for the time being. How do you handle angry people? What does the Bible say should be our response if we know that somebody has something against us?
6. Hebrews 2:1-3 warns against ignoring a great salvation. Older translations say *neglect* salvation. Many people would not openly *reject* salvation. They want it, in fact! But they *neglect* it by ignoring the means of God’s grace. Is Esau an example of such an attitude? How can such a spiritual indifference show up in Christian churches, and how can we address this as Christians?

We Confess

An Exposition & Application of the Belgic Confession

Article 37: Of the Last Judgment, Resurrection of the Body, and Eternal Life

Eschatology, the doctrine of the “last things,” is one of the most divisive topics among evangelical Protestants today. While today there is Amillennialism, Postmillennialism, Theonomic Postmillennialism, Historic Premillennialism, Dispensational Premillennialism, Progressive Dispensationalism, and Preterism, whether Partial or Consistent, the early Protestants all agreed in their Confessions of Faith that this life was one of suffering and that Jesus would come again to save us while judging the world. So while modern-day Christians emphasize eschatology as the essential doctrine, as evidenced by the myriads of best-sellers on this topic, the *Belgic Confession* has one simple, yet triumphant, article on the “end times.” This reminds us to keep our discussion of what will happen at the end of human history in its proper perspective.

What our *Confession* does is bring some clarity into our otherwise confusing contemporary context. To confess the “blessed hope” of Jesus’ return (Titus 2:14) is to unify all who are weary and heavy-laden in lifting up their eyes to heaven, expecting the consummation of their redemption to draw nigh. Along with other Protestant Confessions, the *Belgic Confession* expresses that the Church is a pilgrim people in this age, a spiritual kingdom awaiting the coming of its

King who will usher in the final state of His eschatological kingdom.

Historical Perspective

In confessing that we are persecuted people awaiting relief by our Lord, the Protestant Confessions rejected outright all forms of what they called “chiliasm.” We know this idea today as Premillennialism, which is the doctrine that teaches that Christ will return before (*pre*) the millennium (*mille annum*, thousand years) and establish an earthly kingdom for one thousand years, ruling over the world in justice and equity.

The simple confession concerning the Second Coming of our Lord Jesus Christ and the events associated with it in our *Confession* echo throughout both Lutheran and Reformed Confessions and Catechisms in rejecting all forms of Premillennialism. For example, in the 1530 Lutheran *Augsburg Confession*, which Reformed theologians followed until writing their own confessions, we read,

...They [the Lutherans] condemn others also, who now scatter Jewish opinions, that, before the resurrection of the dead, the godly shall occupy the kingdom of the world, the wicked being every where suppressed, the saints alone, the pious, shall

have a worldly kingdom, and shall exterminate all the godless.” (Article 17)

This “Jewish opinion” condemned by the *Augsburg Confession*, that before the end Christians shall have a worldly kingdom is also expressed in the *Second Helvetic Confession*, written by Heinrich Bullinger in Zurich, sometime around 1561 and published in 1566:

...We further condemn Jewish dreams that there will be a golden age on earth before the Day of Judgment, and that the pious, having subdued all their godless enemies, will possess all the kingdoms of the earth. For evangelical truth in Matthew chapters 24-25 and Luke chapter 18, and apostolic teaching in 2 Thessalonians chapter 2 and 2 Timothy chapters 3-4 present something quite different. (Chapter 11)

These “Jewish dreams” of a “golden age” receive a more irenic refutation in Zacharius Ursinus’ *Smaller Catechism* (*Catechesis minor*), when it asks, “What do you believe about his return to judge the living and the dead?” The answer is

That just as he ascended into heaven, he will again in his human nature truly descend from there on the last day in his Father’s glory, and after all unbelievers are cast down into eternal punishment, he will deliver me and all the elect from all evil and take us to himself in the eternal and heavenly

kingdom, which he has already taken possession of in my name (Q&A 38).

An earthly reign and occupation of the kingdoms of this world by Christians is not mentioned. Ursinus' *Larger Catechism* (*Catechesis maior*) expands upon this further:

What is the meaning of these words: "From there he will come to judge the living and the dead?"

That on the last day Christ will visibly return from heaven with divine power and majesty, just as when the disciples saw him ascending, and that he will judge all people who have lived from the beginning of the world and who are then left upon the earth, so that he might take to himself into the fellowship of heaven all who have truly believed in him, but cast out the rest into eternal fire along with the Devil and his angels. (Q&A 102)

What does it mean, then, to believe in Christ who will return as judge?

It means to be sustained by this comfort: that after a little while Christ will return so that after all the wicked have been cast out into eternal punishment, he might deliver us from all evil in body and soul, show before all creatures that in him we are innocent, and take us to himself to be with him forever. (Q&A 103)

The Reformation vision of the "end times" was eminently more simple and comforting to the believer than

the doctrines of Premillennialism.

He Shall Come Again

As we turn to the last article of our *Confession*, we notice that it begins with a short statement concerning the return of Jesus. It explains the phrase in the Creeds, "He shall come again" (*Apostles' Creed*), and, "He shall come again, with glory" (*Nicene Creed*), saying,

Finally, we believe, according to the Word of God, when the time appointed by the Lord (which is unknown to all creatures) is come and the number of the elect complete, that our Lord Jesus Christ will come from heaven, corporally and visibly, as He ascended, with great glory and majesty to declare Himself Judge of the living and the dead, burning this old world with fire and flame to cleanse it.

Our confession of hope about Jesus' return is "according to the Word of God," and not based upon the speculations so rampant in church history, whether by the Montanists of the ancient church, the Anabaptists of the Reformation period, or the science-fiction like theologies of our day. This speculation is entirely cut off because Jesus will return at "the time appointed by the Lord (which is un-

known to all creatures)." The Lord shall return "like a thief in the night" (1 Thes. 5:2; 2 Peter 3:10) on the day and at the hour no man knows (Matt. 24:36-37). What we and the saints in heaven who cry out, "How long," do know, is that this time of our Lord's coming will be when "the number of the elect [is] complete" (cf. Rev. 6:9-11).

When our Lord does come, He "will come from heaven, corporally and visibly, as He ascended." This is verbatim what the angel said to the disciples about our Lord in Acts 1:11. This little line is so relevant in our discussions with Premillennialists, as we point out the simple truth that Jesus will not come secretly or invisibly, but bodily and "with great glory." Our *Confession* not only follows Scripture in making this confession, but also catholic doctrine in echoing the words of the *Nicene Creed*: "He shall come again, with glory." Jesus himself taught this to his disciples, saying that he would come "in his glory...with the clouds" (Matt. 25:31; Rev. 1:7), evoking in us the imagery of the fire and cloud that signified the glory of the LORD in the Old Testament.

This coming has a redemptive result, as our Lord will burn "...this old world with fire and flame to cleanse it." Here the language of 2 Peter 3:7 is used: "the heavens and earth that now exist are stored up

Our confession of hope about Jesus' return is "according to the Word of God," and not based upon the speculations so rampant in church history.

for fire.” This illustrates an important truth for us. Eschatology is not so much about “last things” as it is about “ultimate things.” It deals with the big picture of God’s plan for his creation. The creation that God pronounced “very good” and which we turned evil will be cleansed. Unrighteousness will be turned to righteousness (2 Peter 3:13), the curse will be ended (Rev. 22:3), and thus “all things will be made new” (Rev. 21:5). This means that grace does not replace nature, but grace restores nature. In other words, the purpose of redemption and consummation is to renew creation. Paradise lost will become Paradise regained – only greater!

The Resurrection

The first aspect of that recreation of all things is the resurrection of the bodies of all men, as the *Confession* says, “Then all men will personally appear before this great Judge, both men and women and children, that have been from the beginning of the world to the end thereof, being summoned by the voice of the archangel, and by the sound of the trump of God.”

The *Confession* uses the apostle Paul’s words of comfort from in 1 Thessalonians 4 to prove the Second Coming and general resurrection. Note this well, in the face of the Premillennial doctrine of the *rapture* of the Church. This doctrine teaches that before the Millennium Jesus will secretly return and those who believe in him will be “raptured” up and taken to heaven. Yet, what we learn from 1 Thessalonians and our *Confession*, is that the rapture of the Church is the Second Coming of our Lord.

Grace does not replace nature, but grace restores nature.

Paul clearly states that the Lord “will descend from heaven” and describes this with three metaphors: a cry of command, the voice of an archangel, and the trumpet of God. These are all climactic, military terms that speak of a visible coming, not a secret one.

On that climactic occasion “all the dead shall be raised out of the earth, and their souls joined and united with their proper bodies in which they formerly lived.” The souls of the dead, both the righteous and unrighteous, shall be reunited to their bodies, which lie in the grave. In the same way that we saw that God shall take what exists in the earth, purge it, and thus renew, so too with the “proper bodies” of all who have died. As Paul teaches in 1 Corinthians 15, the resurrection body will be the same, but qualitatively different. What will happen to those who are alive at Christ’s coming? The *Confession* goes on to say that “they shall not die as the others, but be changed in the twinkling of an eye, and from corruptible become incorruptible,” citing 1 Corinthians 15:51-52.

To Judge the Living and the Dead

After Christ’s return, the resurrection of the dead, and the transformation of the living, comes the final judgment before the righteous Judge of all the earth (e.g., 96:13), in which

...the books (that is to say, the consciences) shall be

opened, and the dead judged according to what they have done in this world, whether it be good or evil. Nay, all men shall give account of every idle word they have spoken, which the world counts amusement and jest; and then the secrets and hypocrisy of men shall be disclosed and laid open before all.

The Eternal State

Because of this opening of the books of all men before the Lord, the “consideration of this judgment is justly terrible and dreadful to the wicked and ungodly.” Revelation so vividly describes this judgment, in which all the people of the earth, especially the great, the rich, and the powerful, will hide themselves in caves and among rocks. Then they will say to the rocks and mountains, “Fall on us and hide us from the face of him who is seated on the throne, and from the wrath of the Lamb, for the great day of their wrath has come, and who can stand?” (Rev. 6:12-17)

Surprisingly, to our natural inclination, this judgment is “most desirable and comfortable to the righteous and elect.” The *Confession* has already proclaimed that in Christ we have already passed the final judgment. Christ satisfied the justice of God and the punishment due our sins, despite our being “guilty and worthy of damnation” (art. 20). Christ appeased the wrath of God on our behalf, suffering hell itself in

order to reconcile us to God (art. 21). Therefore, by faith alone we are justified. This means all Christ's merits are ours and we have full salvation in him. Because of Christ's works imputed to us, we are freed from fear, terror, and dread in approaching God (art. 22).

On the last day, then, we shall rejoice, "...because then [our] full deliverance shall be perfected," we "shall receive the fruits of [our] labor and trouble," and our "innocence shall be known to all." While we "shall see the terrible vengeance which God shall execute on the wicked," who will be "tormented in *the eternal fire which is prepared for the devil and his angels*," we "shall be crowned with glory and honor." We will hear "the Son of God...confess [our] names before God His Father and His elect angels." We shall feel Jesus' compassion because "all tears shall be wiped from [our] eyes." Our "gracious reward" will be possession of "such a glory as never entered into the heart of man to conceive." For these rea-

sons the last Day is not to be feared, but expected "with a most ardent desire, to the end that we may fully enjoy the promises of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. AMEN."

As we conclude our study of the *Belgic Confession*, I would like to thank the Reformed Fellowship for its willingness to take a chance with an unproven writer, Rev. Wybren Oord for his ceaseless encouragement, and to the readers, for your feedback via e-mail and conversation. May all of us as God's people be confident of what we believe and why as we live as pilgrims in these dark days, always being prepared to give an answer to those who ask. In addition, may our hearts be lifted homeward as we pray, *Amen, come, Lord Jesus*.

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

Study/Application Questions for Article 37

1. How important is the topic of "eschatology?"
2. How is the *Belgic Confession's* explanation of the "last days" different from what you may have previously learned?
3. Do Reformed Christians believe in a "rapture?" Explain.
4. What will happen to the heavens and earth when Christ returns? (2 Pet. 3:5-7, 10-13; Rev. 21-22)
5. What does the Second Coming cause in us?

Looking Out

Canadian and American Reformed Churches

- Rev. P. Aasman of Grand Valley, Ontario has accepted call from the church of Ancaster, Ontario to work as a missionary for Streetlight Ministries
- Rev. R. Ijbema, pastor of the Reformed Church of the Netherlands (Liberated) at Voorburg, the Netherlands has accepted the call to serve the Canadian Reformed Church in Chilliwack, British Columbia.
- Rev. R. A. Schouten of Abbotsford, British Columbia declined the call he received from Redeemer CanRC in Winnipeg, Manitoba.
- Rev. J. VanWoudenberg of Guelph, Ontario declined the call to the Canadian Reformed Church in Hamilton, Ontario.
- Classis Ontario West extended Brother Dong Woo Oh's permission to speak an edifying word in the churches for one year, until June 14, 2007.
- Classis Ontario West examined and declared eligible for call: Student Hendrik Alkema. Classis wholeheartedly recommends him to the churches, and has granted him permission to speak an edifying word.

and About

United Reformed Churches in North America

- The consistory of Covenant Reformed Church of Pella, Iowa, endorses Spencer Aalsburg, a graduate of Mid America Reformed Seminary, as a candidate available for call. Spencer may be contacted at 724 10th Place SW; DeMotte, IN 46310; Ph: (219) 987-7091; email: spencera@netnitco.net
- Rev. Brian Vos, pastor of the Trinity United Reformed Church in Caledonia, Michigan, has declined the call to Redeemer United Reformed Church in Dyer, Indiana.
- Mr. Matt Nuiver, graduate of Mid-America Reformed Seminary, is available for call. He can be contacted by mail at 6358 36th Ave., Hudsonville, Michigan 49426 or by calling (616) 669-1842.

Protestant Reformed Churches in America

- Rev. Audred Spriesma, who has served the church as a missionary to the Philippines since 2002, has accepted the call to the Protestant Reformed Church in Kalamazoo, Michigan.

The New Testament Evidence Regarding Paedocommunion

(Part Three)

The Institution of the Lord's Supper: Some Observations

The accounts of the institution of the Lord's Supper in the Synoptic Gospels are of particular importance to our understanding of the sacrament. Though there are several slight differences in the respective Gospel accounts, these differences do not materially affect our understanding of the sacrament's institution, constituent elements, or manner of administration. A brief examination of these passages in the Synoptic Gospels will allow us to form a general understanding of the nature and significance of the sacrament. Although they do not directly address the question whether children should participate, they do reflect an understanding of the sacrament that may be suggestive as to how this question should be answered. For our purpose, it will be sufficient to quote and take as a point of reference the account in Luke 22:14-22, which is perhaps the most complete of the Gospel accounts of the institution of the Supper:

And when the hour came, he reclined at table, and the apostles with him. And he said to them, 'I have earnestly desired to eat this Passover with you before I suffer. For I tell you I will not eat it until it is fulfilled in the kingdom of God.' And he took a cup, and when he had given thanks he said, 'Take

this, and divide it among yourselves. For I tell you that from now on I will not drink of the fruit of the vine until the kingdom of God comes. And he took bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and gave it to them, saying, 'This is my body, which is given for you. Do this in remembrance of me.' And likewise the cup after they had eaten, saying, 'This cup that is poured out for you is the new covenant in my blood. But behold, the hand of him who betrays me is with me on the table.'

There are several observations that may be made on the basis of this account of the institution of the Lord's Supper.

First, the occasion for the institution of this sacrament was undoubtedly Christ's meal with His disciples, which was part of their celebration of the first day of the Passover feast (cf. Matt. 26:17). We will evaluate the significance of this connection between the Lord's Supper and the Passover below, but it cannot be denied that the historical setting for the initiation of this sacrament was the annual celebration of the Passover. Whether this occasion has the significance and implications for the subject of paedocommunion that is often alleged remains to be seen. However, there is an undeniable historical link between the Old Testament Pass-

over and the New Testament Lord's Supper.

Second, the account of the institution of the Lord's Supper clearly shows that this sacrament enjoys the kind of *divine authorization* that is a necessary prerequisite for the existence of a sacrament. In the sixteenth century, the Protestant Reformers insisted that Christ only instituted two sacraments for the new covenant community, the church: baptism and the Lord's Supper. The church does not have the power on its own to institute a sacrament. In the case of the Lord's Supper, the biblical testimony to Christ's appointment of the sacrament is incontestable. The Gospel accounts of this institution explicitly identify the historical occasion and setting for the appointment of this sacrament as an integral part of the life and ministry of the church of Jesus Christ.

Third, if a sacrament is a "visible sign of an invisible grace," to use an ancient definition of the church that goes back at least to the time of Augustine, the Lord's Supper clearly qualifies as a sacrament. In His words of institution, the Lord consecrates the bread and wine as visible signs or tokens of His body and blood. Without going into the intricacies of historic church debates about the relation between the sign and the thing signified, it is enough for our purpose to acknowl-

edge the obvious fact that Christ appointed the bread and the sign to be representative of Himself, particularly of His body given and His blood shed for the sake of His people. Unlike many of the rites of the Roman Catholic Church that are regarded as sacraments but do not have clear Scriptural warrant to confirm that they are divinely authored, the sacrament of the Lord's Supper was incontestably instituted by Christ Himself.

Fourth, the language Christ uses in the institution of the Lord's Supper suggests that the sacrament is to be a regular part of the worship of the church and a means of communion with the crucified and risen Lord. Until Christ comes again and His disciples eat and drink with Him in the kingdom of God, the Lord's Supper is to be celebrated in remembrance of His atoning sacrifice for the sins of His people. Even though the words of institution do not specify the precise frequency of the celebration of the sacrament, they unmistakably warrant the conclusion that the Lord's Supper will differ from Christian baptism in this respect. Whereas baptism is, in the nature of the case, a sacrament of initiation or incorporation that is administered but once, the Lord's Supper is to be regularly celebrated in the context of Christian worship and the ministry of the Word of God until Christ comes again. For this

reason, when the apostle Paul quotes the Lord's words of institution, he includes the language, "Do this, *as often as you drink it*, in remembrance of me" (1 Cor. 11: 25; emphasis mine). The obvious implication of this language is that the Lord's Supper is to be frequently celebrated by the church in remembrance of Christ's death and in anticipation of His return.

And fifth, the words of institution place those who celebrate the Lord's Supper under the obligation to take or receive the sacramental elements, and to do so "in remembrance" of Christ. Participation in the Lord's Supper occurs in response to a command, "do this," and calls accordingly for a *responsible engagement* on the part of those who take and eat the bread and drink the wine. The act of taking or receiving the sacramental signs and tokens of Christ's body and blood is to be performed as a means of *remembering* and *believing* that Christ's death was an atoning sacrifice for the sins of His people. In this respect, the communicant's reception of Christ through the sacrament of the Lord's Supper is different from the way the sacrament of baptism is received.

Though the language is not altogether satisfactory, the Lord's Supper requires the active participation of its recipient in a way that is not required of the recipient of baptism, who in a manner of speaking is the *passive* recipient of the sacramental sign and seal of the gospel promise. The requirement of an active, believing reception of the sacrament is particularly significant for the question of whether children

The Lord's Supper requires the active participation of its recipient in a way that is not required of the recipient of baptism.

should be admitted to the Lord's Table. It would be premature and unwarranted to argue at this point that this feature of the sacrament's institution forbids the practice of admitting children to the Lord's Table. But it does indicate that the church's practice should conform to the principle that those who participate in the sacrament are to do so in active and responsible obedience to the Lord's command to "do this in remembrance of Him."

Conclusion

In our introduction to the New Testament evidence for or against the practice of paedocommunion, we have seen that there is little explicit evidence in any of the relevant passages that speaks to this precise question. Though there is ample evidence to support a number of general emphases regarding the nature and purpose of the sacrament of the Lord's Supper, the passages we have considered thus far do not elaborate upon who may participate. However, there are several aspects of the New Testament's teaching that remain to be considered, and that do have implications for our understanding of the sacrament and its proper reception. These aspects of New Testament teaching, which we will treat in subsequent articles, include some indications of differences between the Old Testament Passover and the New Testament Lord's Supper, as well as key passages like John 6 and 1 Corinthians.

It would be improper, therefore, to conclude at this point that the practice of paedocommunion has to be determined by a broad appeal to Old Testament precedents or the simple fact that children of believ-

ing parents belong to the new covenant community, as they did formerly in the old covenant. We will see in our forthcoming articles that there are good biblical reasons to uphold the historic practice of the Reformed churches, which require that those admitted to the Table of the Lord profess their faith prior to doing so.

Despite the apparent absence of any explicit New Testament evidence that would clearly favor or oppose the admission of children to the Lord's Supper, there are, even in the passages we have considered thus far, some hints that favor the historic view of the Reformed churches. In those passages that describe the early church's celebration of the sacrament or make apparent allusions to its celebration, it seems that those who participated in the Lord's Supper were believers who had responded or were responding properly to the gospel Word that had come to them (cf. Luke 24:30-31; Acts 2:42). Likewise, the privilege of enjoying a reception at the Lord's Supper is granted only to those whose Christian profession and conduct meet with the Lord's approval (cf. Rev. 3:20). In the most important evidence that we have considered thus far, the account of the institution of the Lord's Supper, it seems evident that Christ commands those who receive the sacramental signs of His body and blood do so in active, believing appropriation of the gospel of the forgiveness of sins on the basis of His atoning sacrifice. Nothing in this evidence argues for the admission of non-professing children to the sacrament of the Lord's Supper. The only argument for such admission that presents itself would

have to go to Old Testament precedents and the presumption of a continuation in its practice in the context of the new covenant. At the very least, the evidence we have considered coheres well with the practice of admitting to the Table of the Lord those who have publicly attested their believing response to the gospel of Christ and Him crucified.

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



First Place Winner

The Outlook 2006 Essay Contest

Greg Lubbers

The Ungodly Departure

The several men seated around the table have worked hard on the case in the past months. Prayers, ponderings, discussions, meetings, phone calls, and letters have all been agonizingly employed in an attempt to regain the erring brother or sister by means of Christian Discipline. The steps have not been taken lightly, nor has the action been performed impeccably; however, the elders have acted faithfully. Nevertheless, within God's sovereignty, repentance has not been forthcoming; rather there is demonstration of an apparent hardening of the heart. Now the letter is opened and the contents read: "I, John Doe, do hereby resign of my church membership."

Amidst the sorrow and disappointment of the men who have labored so tirelessly, is the dilemma of how to respond to resignations. While the responses may be varied within Reformed denominations, it cannot be denied that an all too common occurrence in consistory rooms is the reception of resignations from individuals of the church while under official ecclesiastical discipline. The 2006 *Directory of the United Reformed Churches in North America* indicates that forty families resigned from URC churches in the past year. While all may not have been cases including ecclesiastical discipline, it is a safe assumption that most were employed

as imagined avenues of escape from the God-ordained practice of Church Discipline.

In an attempt to begin correcting the current trend of the practice of resigning, it is imperative that individuals take another look at the very nature of resignation, critiquing and evaluating it in light of Holy Scripture and the Reformed confessions.

The word "resignation" indicates "a formal statement, document, etc., stating that one gives up an office or position." In the case of church resignation, the term "resignation" would indicate a voluntary action made by an individual whereby he forfeits or gives up his church membership. More simply, resignation from a church is an action wherein a person "quits" the church. In the essence of this action, the person resigning makes an official request that he no longer desires to be considered a member of the church thereby interrupting the discipline process and forfeiting his rights as a member of the church.

A Vow Made

At the time of one's public profession of faith, the practice of Reformed churches is that the professing individual answers several questions publicly. One of the questions that is presented to the professor is "Do you promise to submit to the

government of the church and also, if you should become delinquent either in doctrine or in life, to submit to its admonition and discipline (*Psalter Hymnal*, "Form for the Public Profession of Faith)?"

With the expression of the expected affirmative answer, the professor stands in the public assembly of the Church of Jesus Christ and solemnly takes a vow upon his lips in the presence of the Head of the Church, Christ Himself. The vow is that he promises, if need arises because of doctrinal or moral delinquency, to submit himself to the operation of the key of Christian Discipline. Nevertheless, in the act of resignation while under ecclesiastical discipline, an individual brashly breaks this vow. In this act of resignation, an individual rejects the authority of Christ in the operation of Christian discipline through the human instrumentality of lawfully appointed and qualified elders (cf. Mt. 16:19; 18:18; HC Q. #85).

In essence, the act of resignation is an action that is in exact opposition to the vow one took at their profession. Therefore, it is impossible to validate the action of resignation by one who is under discipline within a faithful church based upon the vow made at one's profession of faith.

The Fifth Commandment

Furthermore, in resignation while under discipline, the vow of profession is broken as one commits sin against the fifth commandment by refusing to submit to the God-ordained authority in the realm of the church. According to the Heidelberg Catechism, the fifth commandment requires of the Christian

to “submit myself with due obedience to their [all in authority over me] good instruction and correction (Q. #104).” Indeed, Hebrews 13:17 instructs the Christian to “[O]bey those who rule over you, and be submissive, for they watch out for your souls....”

In contrast, the action of resignation while under Christian Discipline is a blatant refusal and obstinate rejection of the authority of the elders of the Church and therefore an obstinate rejection of the authority of Christ Himself (cf. Mt. 18:18). In this context, it must be understood that the authority of the elders is not a self-derived authority of dictatorial rule. Rather, it is an authority derived from Christ.

Christ delegated this authority to various individuals in various spheres of life. One body of individuals and one sphere of authority is the consistory, which has authority over the ecclesiastical life of the members of the church. This delegation of authority to the Church is seen in Matthew 16:19 where Christ says to Peter, as a representative of the Church, “And I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.”

Biblically acting elders of the Church of Jesus Christ do not exer-

cise their own authority in matters of Christian Discipline, but the authority delegated to them, the authority of Christ. John Calvin states this truth powerfully when he writes, “Therefore, that no one may stubbornly despise the judgment of the church, or think it immaterial that he has been condemned by the vote of the believers, the Lord testifies that such judgment by believers is nothing but the proclamation of His own sentence, and that whatever they have done on earth is ratified in heaven (*Institutes*, 4.9.2).”

The objection is often raised by resigning individuals that the elders did not perform their action of discipline perfectly. This fact can be humbly admitted by all consistories and elders. What person in authority, apart from Christ, ever exercised their authority impeccably? What parent would ever discipline a child if he first had to prove his perfection in parenting? The *Heidelberg Catechism* realizes the existence of infirmities in individuals of authority and therefore exhorts those under authority to “bear patiently with their weaknesses and shortcomings, since it pleases God to govern us by their hand (Q. #104).” The question is not if the discipline was enacted in an impeccable manner, but rather if the discipline was enacted in a biblically faithful manner.

In addition, if the actions of the elders are deficient to the point of being an unbiblical exercise of authority, reformed church polity provides avenues of appeal to the broader assemblies. For instance, the *Church Order of the United Reformed Churches in North America* states that “if any church member complains that he has been wronged by the decision of a narrower assembly, he shall have the right to appeal to the broader assemblies. Until a decision is made upon such appeal, the church member shall conform to the determination and judgment already passed (Art. #31).”

The process of appeal and the action of conforming “to the determination and judgment already passed” is ignored when one hastily exits the church in an attempt to “escape.” Therefore, a resigning member who has not exhausted all avenues of appeal and demonstrated the unbiblical nature of his discipline to the broadest ecclesiastical assembly should not be granted the opportunity of the ears of others in his expression of frustration with the actions of the elders of the church. Nevertheless, often the resigning individual finds several eager meddlers who are more than willing to listen and negatively critique the elder’s actions. Such actions are clearly contrary to the fifth commandment.

The Nature of the Church

Furthermore, another common misunderstanding is the mindset whereby one pretends that he may simply join another local church after resigning from under discipline at a local church. This belief and practice reveals a serious ignorance

The question is not if the discipline was enacted in an impeccable manner, but rather if the discipline was enacted in a biblically faithful manner.

concerning the nature of the local and universal church on both the individual's and the receiving church's side.

The *Belgic Confession* states that "we believe and profess one catholic or universal Church" (Art. 27). It continues by affirming that "men are in duty bound to join and unite themselves with it...and to join themselves to this congregation, wheresoever God has established it" (Art. 28). The section which indicates "wheresoever God has established it" refers to the local manifestation of the Church of Jesus Christ in a particular congregation or church.

The one Church of Christ finds multiple manifestations of particular local churches all comprising the one universal Church of Christ. This truth shows how foolish it is for an individual to resign his membership from a true, local church, which is a manifestation of the one Church of Christ, and think he can join another true local church, which also is a manifestation of the one Church of Christ. Christ has only one body, or one Church. It is the folly of ignorance for an individual to think he can freely withdraw from one manifestation of that body by rejecting the authority of the Christ-appointed elders and simply join another manifestation of that body with the Head's, Jesus Christ, smiling approval.

The *Belgic Confession* rightly testifies in article twenty-eight that "all those who separate themselves from the same [the Church of Christ as manifested in a local church]...act contrary to the ordinance of God." Resignation while under discipline is nothing less than

Imagine the Apostle Paul's reaction if the man in Corinth who was living in sin merely resigned before his excommunication and moved north to join the church at Thessalonica.

a separation from the Church of Christ as manifested in a true, local church.

Imagine the Apostle Paul's reaction if the man in Corinth who was living in sin merely resigned before his excommunication and moved north to join the church at Thessalonica. Would that man have been received and accepted by the church at Thessalonica? Would Paul have understood and legitimized this elusive endeavor on the part of the disciplined individual? Would he have commended the church at Thessalonica if they received the resigning brother?

Furthermore, the practice of some churches accepting individuals who have resigned, or even those who have been excommunicated, with little investigation into the matter, reveals a grievous denial of the unity of the Church of Christ. Relating to this practice, John Murray reminds the church that "we must also take into account the whole church and we must be as jealous for the discipline exercised by other bodies as well as our own denomination (*Collected Works*, 2.384)."

An individual who has resigned his membership from one local church has made a grievous declaration that he does not wish nor desire to belong to the Church of Jesus Christ as manifested in that local congregation. Based upon the truth of the unity of the body of Christ con-

trasted with the nature of the grievous declaration of resignation, there is no biblical validity to accept a member who has resigned from another congregation without that individual's public confession of guilt.

An Antidote

We can faithfully summarize our present age as one that is antiauthoritarian. This antiauthoritarian view seeps into and pervades the minds of the church members if not counteracted with faithful instruction and exhortation. Sadly, we can often look in the churches and find relationships between wives and husbands, children and parents, employees and employers that provide conclusive evidence that the antiauthoritarian mindset of the world has partially seeped through the walls of Zion. To counteract this mindset the Church needs faithful and powerful expositions from the pulpit concerning the nature and delegation of authority, both in how it is exercised and submitted to. Not simply the steps of Christian Discipline, but also the authority behind and in Christian Discipline must be clearly set forth from the pulpit and the classroom.

In addition, the delegation of authority in all of its realms must be rediscovered. If one operates upon the principle that authority can easily be neglected, one will most likely practice rebellion against authority

in several of its realms. It is only logical that an individual who disregards the civil magistrate's dictates also disregards the ecclesiastical authority. Likewise, a child who has fostered a spirit of rebellion against authority through years of parentally rewarded tantrums will most likely revolt against the concept of submitting to the authority of the elders in the Church.

The Church must actively exercise herself in training her covenantal youth, along with her adults, about the nature and necessity of living with authority--both in exercising and submitting to it. Only such faithful, continual instruction blessed by the Spirit of Christ will reproduce a spirit of submission that echoes the sentiment of a former minister in the Netherlands, Rev. Smytegelt, who said he would rather be hung from the gallows than be excommunicated from the Church of Jesus Christ.

Conclusion

The issue of resignation while under Christian Discipline is a branch of practice that grows off of the root of the principle of failure, or refusal, to live underneath the Lordship of Jesus Christ. Ultimately, resignation while under Christian Discipline is a demonstration of rebellion against Jesus Christ. It is this truth that saddens the elders and the congregations at the reception of such resignations. However, it is also this truth that explains the reason for resignations while under Christian Discipline. Therefore, the great duty of the Church of Jesus Christ is again brought to our attention, also as it relates to resigning individuals who are under Christian Discipline. The Church must stand

upon the Word of God as the "pillar and ground of the truth" and implore men, "on Christ's behalf, be reconciled to God."

The duty of the men gathered around the consistory room table is seriously to warn the resigning individual concerning that person's action of rebellion against God by setting the act in its biblical perspective along with highlighting the implications of church resignation. The resignation may not be received with a spirit of relief that the name can be scratched off of the district survey list. The elders must not simply believe that their hands are

tied and they have no possible avenues of action--even though further official discipline has been interrupted. Rather, the elders must stand on the watchtower of Zion and sound the alarm distinctly that church resignation while under discipline is rebellion against Christ and therefore the resigning individual must be "reconciled to God."

Rev Greg Lubbers is the pastor of the Covenant United Reformed Church of Byron Center, Michigan.

Reformed Fellowship Annual Meeting

The Annual Meeting of the Reformed Fellowship will be Tuesday, October 31 at the Trinity URC in Caledonia, Michigan.

Punch is at 6:00 PM. Dinner is served at 6:30 PM. There is a cost of \$8.50 per person for the dinner.

Please call the office at 616-532-8510 or e-mail office@reformedfellowship.net for reservations.

Everyone is welcome to attend the 8:00 PM address by Rev. Daniel Hyde. The topic will be *The Pentecost Church in an Age of Pentecostalism: What is the Role of the Holy Spirit in Reformed Churches?*

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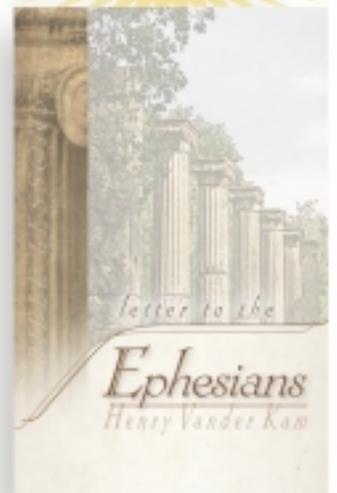
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