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The Outlook

Dedicated to the Exposition and Defense of the Reformed Faith

precious
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P R O M I S E D
Messiah

• Prepare the Way • Joseph, The Husband of Mary • On Angels: A Flaw in Reformed Practice • Islam vs Christian Concept of Freedom
• Bible Studies on Jacob • Shopping for that perfect Christmas gift? See Book Reviews • Index 2006

Prepare the Way..... 3
 Rev. W. Oord offers a meditation that focuses upon the message and method of John the Baptist.

Joseph, The Husband of Mary.....5
 Mr. Paul Flodquist presents an interesting article on the life of Joseph, the earthly father of Jesus.

On Angels: A Flaw in Reformed Practice.....7
 First Prize in the High School category for this year's Essay Contest goes to Miss Vanessa Rubingh for this article on angels.

Islam Versus the Christian Concept of Freedom.....9
 Rev. Johan Tangelder explains the difference between the concept of freedom offered by the Islamic religion and the Christian religion.

URCNA Classis Michigan Summary..... 13

Bible Studies on Jacob: Lessons 3&414

Book Reviews.....22
 Shopping for that perfect Christmas gift? *The Outlook* offers a variety of book reviews to help you in your quest for that perfect gift.

Index 2006..... 26

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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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Prepare the Way

“And he came into all the country about Jordan, preaching the baptism of repentance for the remission of sins.” (Luke 3:3)

The third chapter of Luke introduces us to the work of John the Baptist. John was a cousin to Jesus, born in the hill country of Judea about six months before his more famous relative.

As the son of a priest, John was supposed to enter into the work of the temple on his thirtieth birthday. God, however, had different plans for John. John grew up to be a rough hewn character who wore strange outfits made of camel's hair. He lived on a diet of locusts and honey.

One day, John began preaching to the people along the banks of the Jordan River. He came as a new sensation to the people of Judea. Everybody wanted to hear him. Upon hearing him they were reminded of the prophets of old—Elijah, who had spoken in sentences that fell like thunderbolts; Isaiah, who spoke of condemnation and hope; and Ezekiel, whose words struck the heart like lightning.

And so, the people came to hear John preach. The priestly came from Hebron; the Pharisees came from Jerusalem. From every city and village the people rushed to the desert sanctuary to hear John the Baptist preach. The long-silent Spirit of God was speaking. The chain of prophecy, which seemed to have ended four hundred years earlier with the prophet Malachi, had again been formed.

They gathered, trembling and awe-

struck, around this strangely dressed man listening to his message. “Can this be the dawn of the Messiah's coming?” they asked one another. “Is this the Messiah who was promised to our fathers?” John the Baptist very quickly renounced their claims saying, “I indeed baptize you with water; but one mightier than I comes, the latchet of whose shoes I am not worthy to unloose: He shall baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire” (Luke 3:16).

John the Baptist was a forerunner, that is, one who runs ahead to announce the coming of the honored guest. His role was a lot like the role of a courier for a king. Whenever a king would propose to tour a part of his dominion, he would send a courier ahead of him to tell the people to prepare for his coming. Upon hearing that the king was coming, the people would fix the roads, clean their houses, plant flowers, and do all that was possible to make everything look pretty for the king who was coming. In a way, John the Baptist is that kind of courier for the King. The Messiah is coming, and John tells the people to get ready. Except that John does not tell the people to clean up their streets and their homes; he tells them to clean up their lives.

A Very Simple Method

John used a very simple, time tested method to get the people prepared for the coming of the Christ, a method proven over and over again through the ages to be effective: he

preached to them. John was a preacher, and a very powerful one, at that.

There are many people today who speak against the power of preaching. They no longer think that preaching is important, nor do they believe that it can have any effect on the lives of people. Some proclaim (yes, ironically, they preach) that the Spirit of God has left the church and preaching is no longer valid. There are those who would like to put a moratorium on preaching and suggest that the evening worship service should be spent doing something else.

I would argue that for preaching that is careless and half-hearted we do not need a moratorium—we need a morgue. But to say that we need a moratorium on all preaching is to have a lack of understanding for the power of the spoken word.

The power of the spoken word is incredible. If you would read about the impact that mighty orators have upon their audiences, you would not doubt the power contained in the spoken word. Winston Churchill inspired people to heroic resistance through his speeches. Who can forget the words of President F. Roosevelt's inaugural address in 1933: “We have nothing to fear, but fear itself”? Adolph Hitler aroused the German people through his speeches and led them to a destructive and demonic nationalism long before the United States and Canada ever became involved in World War II.

Some will argue that that does not happen anymore. Tell that to the people who participated in Promise

The word “repent” has fallen on hard times today. It has become so watered down that we hardly know the meaning of the word anymore.

Keepers or a Right to Life March in Washington, D.C.. Tell that to young people after they return from an RYS convention. Say what you will about televangelists, but you have to admit that they captivate their audience. They know the power of speech and they use it to their advantage.

Add to that power of speech the power of the Holy Spirit, and you will understand the power of John the Baptist’s preaching. People came from far and wide to hear him. The message that he was proclaiming was the message of God: “Repent and be forgiven.” John called the people to repent from their sins and to sin no more.

In repentance the people professed their sins and they would promise to make good all their evil deeds. The rich were called upon to share with the poor; the tax collector was called to be fair; judges were called to be just. All who came were called to return stolen property, apologize for an offense, take back false accusations. John called upon the people to cast away all their transgressions and make new their hearts. He called them to live new lives.

The design of his message was to make people devout and pious; holy and humble; meek and sober; just and honest; generous and kind. To be any of those, they needed to repent. It was the same message Ezekiel had preached some five

hundred years earlier: “Turn yourself away from your transgressions so that your iniquity will not be your ruin!”

A Very Simple Message

That same, very simple message is just as relevant today as it was when John the Baptist preached it so many years ago: “Repent and be forgiven.” The word “repent” has fallen on hard times today. It has become so watered down that we hardly know the meaning of the word anymore.

People applaud preachers who preach about faith and the love of God. The fastest growing church movement today has this to say about God’s love: “God is love. Love is ultimate reality. Love is absolute. Wherever people love, they live in the reality of God. Loving a neighbor, an enemy, or the environment is living in the reality of God” (*Postmodern Liberalism: Repainting a Non-Christian Faith - An Evangelical Critique of Rob Bell’s Velvet Elvis* by Rev. C. Freswick available through Reformed Fellowship). Today we applaud preachers for their quest for truth. Rob Bell, a leader in the Emergent Church, states emphatically that there is no such thing as absolute truth, which, in and of itself, would be false even by his own definition. And yet, he is the minister of one of the fastest growing churches in Western Michigan. This is what people want to hear today.

Preach about sin and the need for repentance and people will say that the preacher is old-fashioned. That may be true, but what needs to be preached today is the old-fashioned gospel! What needs to be preached is the grass that will not wither; the flower that does not fade, that is, the Word of God that stands forever.

That Word calls us to repentance. The sinner must take his stand with God and join God in condemning his own sin and seeking the mercy of the living Triune God. That was the message that John the Baptist was trying to get across; that is the message that needs to be proclaimed today. There can be no real sending away of sin until we recognize our own sin and are repulsed by it.

A Very Simple Meaning

The very simple message of John had a very simple meaning: get ready for the One who is coming. Do not straighten out your roads; straighten out your lives. John was the forerunner of the Christ. He was the voice crying in the wilderness: “Prepare the way for the Lord; make straight the paths for Him.”

That is the message that needs to be proclaimed today, as well. Prepare the way for the Lord. Straighten out your life. Repent, believe, and be saved. Get ready for the divine One who is coming again to judge the living and the dead.

Repentance means a complete turning around of your life. No one can be prepared for the coming of the Lord without repentance. No change of personality is going to

take place unless there is a genuine sorrow in the heart for your sin and a turning to Jesus for forgiveness.

When we repent of our sins we take God's side against ourselves and the wickedness that we have within us. When we reform ourselves by the grace of God and repent of our sins by turning to Jesus Christ, true reformation can take place within us and the joy of Christ will fill our hearts. Then, by the power of the Holy Spirit, we shall know the joy of being cleansed by Christ.

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Joseph

The Husband of Mary

If we were to look closely at Joseph, the husband of Mary, the quality of his life and character would soon reveal themselves. We witness first his compassion, then his obedience to the revealed Word of the Lord, and finally, his faithfulness to the requirements of the Mosaic Law. Compassion, obedience, and faithfulness—all the qualities of a righteous man.

In the Gospel of Matthew 1:18-25, Joseph receives the first of four messages from God, a divine revelation in the form of a dream. An angel informs Joseph that Mary, his bride-to-be, has conceived a child in her womb without human agency, only through contact with the Almighty Himself. To believe the announcement of this miracle, would surely require faith similar to the faith of Abraham, who is honored as the outstanding example in Scripture of a human being exercising faith in the promises of God. We can only wonder, what there was in the background of Joseph, a humble carpenter, which would allow him to embrace a truth that science, reason, and all of nature testified against.

It could be that this special revelation from God was a consequence of Joseph following not merely the letter of the Law, but also the spirit of the Mosaic Law. This is evident when he decided to divorce Mary privately, and not publicly. Such compassionate treatment of his fiancée, reveals the heart of a man

close to the heart of God. As Solomon tells us, "He who pursues righteousness and kindness, will find life and honor" (Proverbs 21:21).

The meaning of the angel's message to Joseph was more than a bare declaration of the Messiah's birth. There is an underlying warning that to divorce Mary, even discreetly, would be a violation of the Law of Moses. After all, his bride-to-be was, in fact, still a virgin, even though the Messiah was in her womb. This divine message was necessary not only to strengthen Joseph's confidence in his beloved, but also to uphold the justice of God.

In Joseph we see a man who was willing to obey the commandment of the Lord in whatever form it came to him. To do this, it was necessary for him to look beyond social customs and religious traditions in order that he might fulfill the unique calling that the Almighty had placed upon his life. That the heavenly vision came in the form of a dream, made it no less real or compelling. This divine communication provided a strong foundation upon which Joseph could rely as a husband and a father when facing trials and difficulties.

In Joseph's pilgrimage upon the earth, as in ours, we are called upon to recognize a reality greater than that which motivates and sustains an unbelieving world. This is only possible if "we fix our eyes not on

There is no way to know to what extent the man Joseph, in his role of earthly father to Jesus, shaped and informed the developing consciousness and self-awareness of Jesus as the Son of God.

what is seen, but on what is unseen...for what is unseen is eternal” (2 Corinthians 4:18).

There is some disagreement among biblical commentators as to whether or not Mary and Joseph were actually married or still engaged when they made the trip to Bethlehem. In either case, they knew that Mary would soon give birth and that the Messiah was to be born in Bethlehem, Joseph’s ancestral home (Micah 5:2).

After receiving a visit from the wise men, Joseph was warned in a dream to flee from his home in Nazareth into Egypt to escape the wrath of King Herod. There was a large Jewish community in Egypt at that time, and it is likely that these refugees found shelter and support among friends or extended family there.

It is significant that God chose the means of angelic visitations in the form of dreams, rather than conscious contact, to communicate the Divine will to Joseph. This the Lord did four times in all (Matthew 1:20, 2:13, 2:19, and 2:22). Dreams are a communication from the subconscious, and in this case, reflect Joseph’s mental struggles and anguish of heart in attempting to understand his role in God’s plan of redemption for mankind, as well as the practical concern of how to protect and provide for his family.

Biblical scholars place the death of

Herod the Great in 4 B.C. It is unclear how old Jesus was at the time of the magi’s visit. The length of time that the holy family stayed in Egypt could have been just a few months, or over a year.

Additional references to the earthly father of Jesus in the New Testament are few. We later find Mary and Joseph in the temple, offering a sacrifice of poverty--a pair of turtle-doves--as they dedicate their first-born son to the Lord.

Next we are told that Mary and Joseph looked for the boy Jesus with sorrow, as he stayed behind at the temple to ask questions of the rabbis and teachers of the law (Luke 2:48). There is some question as to whether or not Joseph was still living at the time of Christ’s public ministry. It seems certain that by the time of Jesus’ death, Joseph was no longer living, since Jesus, on the cross, asked the Apostle John to care for Mary.

The fact that Jesus chose the term “Father,” to address and explain the first person of the Trinity, is significant. Certainly the word father had been used in the Old Testament to refer to the God of Israel (1 Chronicles 29:10, Isaiah 9:6). Yet, as far as describing the relationship between the first and second person of the Trinity, the language of Father and Son is conspicuously absent, unless it might be inferred from Psalm 2. In Psalm 110:1, for

example, the first two members of the Trinity are referred to as “Lord..... Lord.” While in Daniel 7:13, the pairing is “Son of Man...Ancient of Days.”

There is no way to know to what extent the man Joseph, in his role of earthly father to Jesus, shaped and informed the developing consciousness and self-awareness of Jesus as the Son of God, if at all. Yet we can have no doubt through the testimony of Scripture, that this righteous Son of David provided a godly example not only to Jesus, but to his brothers and sisters as well.

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First Place Winner *High School* The Outlook 2006 Essay Contest

On Angels:

A Flaw in Reformed Practice?

When was the last time you had a conversation about angels? No, I do not mean the last time you had a theological discussion about angels as your Sunday School class or Bible Study group came across a Scripture passage dealing with angels. What I mean is a normal, everyday conversation where you mentioned angels. If you are like most Reformed people I know, you probably cannot remember the last time you talked about angels. Sure, we believe that angels exist, but we do not talk about them as a real part of everyday life.

So why don't we talk about angels? There are several reasons. One is the way angels are represented in many Christian books and picture Bibles. They are usually pretty girls with wings and a halo over their heads. Another reason we do not talk about angels is because we are afraid of going overboard. We do not want to give angels priority over God, or make it sound like we rely on them for our only help in trouble. But are these good reasons not to talk about angels? What does the Bible say about angels? What exactly do they do? Should we be talking about them?

The Bible has a lot to say about angels. Angels were created by God (see Romans 8:38-39), yet they

are frightening spiritual beings. Psalm 104:4 says, "[God] makes His angels spirits, His ministers a flame of fire." Angels struck fear into the hearts of those who saw them. Zacharias "was troubled, and fear fell upon him" when he saw the angel (Luke 1:12). The shepherds were "greatly afraid" when the angel announced Christ's birth (Luke 2:9). The angel who appeared to Mary had to say, "Do not be afraid" (Luke 1:30). In fact, most angels begin their message with the words: "Do not be afraid."

Because angels are created beings, we must not worship them. In Revelation 22, John falls down to worship the angel who showed him the new Jerusalem. The angel responds: "See that you do not do that. For I am your fellow servant, and of your brethren the prophets, and of those who keep the words of this book. Worship God" (verse 9). In Colossians 2:18, worship of angels is listed along with false humility and rejecting Christ as something we must avoid.

The Role of Angels

The word angel means "messenger." One of their main duties is to bring God's messages to men. Angels appeared to Joseph in his dreams (Matthew 2:13, 19), appeared to the shepherds, telling

them of Christ's birth (Luke 2:8-15), and appeared to Cornelius, telling him to go find Peter (Acts 10:3-7). An angel told Philip to go to the road where he met the Ethiopian eunuch (Acts 8:26). An angel told Paul before the shipwreck that there would be no loss of life (Acts 27:23-24).

Angels also carry out God's will. Angels rescued Lot from Sodom (Genesis 18-19). God sent an angel to lead the Israelites out of Egypt (Numbers 20:16). When David sinned by numbering the people (2 Samuel 24) God sent an angel to plague the Israelites. An angel rescued Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego from the fiery furnace (Daniel 3:28). When the apostles were imprisoned for preaching (Acts 5:17-21) an angel opened the prison doors and let them out, commanding them to preach again in the temple. An angel delivered Peter from prison and impending death (Acts 12:7-11). An angel struck Herod for not giving glory to God, so that he was eaten by worms and died (Acts 12:20-23).

Angels minister to Christians. Hebrews 1:14 says: "Are they not all ministering spirits sent forth to minister for those who will inherit salvation?" Angels take great interest in man's salvation. They rejoice when a sinner repents (Luke 15:10), and they desire to look into the gospel (I Peter 1:12). Angels also provide bodily protection for the elect. In II Kings 6, the Syrian army surrounded the city where Elisha was. Elisha's servant was afraid, and Elisha prayed that his eyes would be opened: "And behold, the mountain was full of

horses and chariots of fire all around Elisha.” (v. 17). Psalm 91:11-12 says: “For He shall give His angels charge over you, to keep you in all your ways. In their hands they shall bear you up, lest you dash your foot against a stone.”

Angels serve God and Christ. Angels ministered to Jesus after His temptation with the devil (Matthew 4:11) and in the garden of Gethsemane (Luke 22:43). Angels were created holy, and except for the devil’s angels, who will be cast into hell (Matthew 25:41) they are still holy (Matthew 25:31). Thousands of angels surround the throne of the Lamb and sing praises to Him (Revelation 5:11-12).

Angels were also present at the resurrection. Matthew 28 says an angel, whose countenance was like lightning, rolled back the stone from the grave, and told the women that Christ was risen. Mark 16 reports that a young man clothed in a long white robe was sitting on the right side, and the stone was rolled away. He told the women to tell the disciples that Christ was risen. Luke 24 tells us that two men in shining garments stood by the tomb where the stone had been rolled away. They gave the women the message that Christ was risen. John 20 says that Mary saw two angels sitting, one at the head and the other at the feet, where Christ’s body had been. After she spoke to them, she turned and saw that Christ was risen!

Angels will play a big role in the final judgment. Matthew 13:39-43 informs us that angels are the reapers who will gather those who offend, and cast them into the furnace of fire. Jesus said in Matthew

16:27: “For the Son of Man will come in the glory of His Father with His angels, and then He will reward each according to his works.” He also said in Matthew 24:31: “And He [the Son of Man] will send His angels with a great sound of a trumpet, and they will gather together His elect from the four winds, from one end of heaven to the other.”

The Angel of the Lord

The Angel of the LORD is the least understood angel mentioned in the Bible. In some passages he seems to be God, in others he speaks interchangeably as God and as His messenger, and in others he appears as a separate being from God. In Judges 13, the Angel of the LORD appears to Manoah and his wife, and tells them they will have a son, Samson. The Angel will not tell them his name because it is wonderful. However, he says in verse 16, “Though you detain Me, I will not eat your food. But if you offer a burnt offering, you must offer it to the LORD.” When Manoah offered a goat, the angel ascended in the flame of the altar. After this, Manoah says to his wife, “We shall surely die, because we have seen God!” She replies, “If the LORD had desired to kill us, He would not have accepted a burnt offering and a grain offering from our hands.”

In Genesis 22, when Abraham is called to sacrifice Isaac, the Angel of the LORD stops him, and then says in verse 16: “By Myself I have sworn, says the LORD, because you have done this thing, and have not withheld your son, your only son, I will bless you.” It is unclear whether the Angel of the LORD is just communicating God’s message

to Abraham, or whether he is God Himself. I would argue that, for our understanding of God and of angels, it does not matter. If we needed to know the identity of the Angel of the LORD, the Bible would tell us.

Talking About Angels

So now we get to the big question: should we talk about angels? We have seen that they were created by God to glorify Him and to minister to His people. But are they a part of daily life, or at least enough of a part, that we should talk about them?

We have an example in the life of Abraham. In Genesis 24, Abraham sends his servant back to his home country to find a wife for Isaac. Listen to what he says in verse seven: “The LORD God of heaven, who took me from my father’s house and from the land of my family, and who spoke to me and swore to me, saying, ‘To your descendants I give this land,’ He will send His angel before you, and you shall take a wife for my son from there.”

Why did Abraham say, “God will send His angel before you”? Surely it would have been just as easy to say, “God will go before you.” We see that Abraham chose to talk about angels while giving God the glory.

We can and should follow the example of Abraham, and talk about angels in the context of praising God. “But it would be too easy to worship them,” one may argue, “wouldn’t it be better not to talk about angels and avoid the danger?”

It may be true that there can be a danger of going overboard. How-

ever, there is also the danger of going overboard in other things. For example, we praise God for the sun, because it brings us warmth and light. Is there a danger of worshipping the sun? Yes. But we give God the praise and glory instead of the sun, and thus God is more glorified than if we did not talk about the sun. The same holds true for angels. We must always use them to point us to God, but we should be talking about them.

John Calvin wrote, "So, then, whatever is said concerning the ministry of angels, let us direct it to the end that, having banished all lack of trust, our hope in God may be more firmly established." The next time you go on a trip, instead of saying, "God protected me," say, "God sent His angel to protect me." Then follow it with "Thank you, LORD, for ministering to us through your angels." To God be all the praise and glory.

Miss Vanessa Rubingh lives in Ellsworth, Michigan. She recently graduated from Rubingh Home School and attends the Chain-of-Lakes OPC in Central Lake, Michigan.

Islam Versus the Christian Concept of Freedom -- Who Truly is Free?

Most people will agree that freedom is a precious possession. Freedom is said to be worth more than all the treasures on earth. It is of such high value that one must be ready to give his life for it. When we hear freedom so highly praised, you would think that all is well in this world. But reality tells a different story. We live in a dangerous world. Under the slogan, "Liberty, Equality, and Fraternity," nations have been robbed of their freedom and became enslaved by tyrannical powers. There have been many successful revolutions. In most cases what has happened is simply that the oppressor and the oppressed have changed roles.

The question is, "What is real freedom?" Martin Luther once said: "A human being can be compared to a horse which is never without a rider; this rider is either the devil or God." Luther's meaning is clear. A human being is subject to a power, whether he wants to be or not. He tries to rule himself, to be in total control of himself, but history shows that he will never succeed.

When we limit our discussion to the Islamic versus the Christian concept of freedom, we notice that there are vast differences. For example, political pluralism has not taken root in Arab nations. The ideas of parliamentary-democratic multi-party Liberalism were expounded by a few Arab thinkers in the 1920s and the 1930s, mainly in Egypt; but they did not impact the

political scene. The long quest for freedom in the Muslim world has left a string of shabby tyrannies, ranging from traditional autocracies to a new-style dictatorship, modern only in their apparatus of oppression and indoctrination. For Christians, tolerance means a willingness to practice pluralism and peaceful coexistence. But the basic problem with Muslims is their refusal to accept pluralism. They claim sole ownership of the truth, but they also refuse to accept differences of religious opinion and practice.

Islam, a Religion of Peace?

When we let the Koran and the Hadith (traditions) speak for themselves, one can hardly substantiate the claim that Islam is a tolerant religion. Laws and regulations enacted during Muhammad's residency in Medina gave Islam a new legal feel and, in effect, paved the way for the formation of an Arab state.

This state is a theocracy. Allah is the true sovereign of the community, the ultimate source of authority, the sole source of legislation. The state was the church and the church was the state, and God was head of both. For more than a thousand years, Islam provided the only universally accepted set of rules and principles for the regulation of public and social life.

What then is peace? In Islam it means "submission" and resignation to the will of Allah. Submission

constitutes the essence of what Islam is all about. A Muslim is one resigned and obedient to the will of God, and bears witness that there is no god but God, and that Muhammad is his apostle. An unbeliever is someone who rejects God's call to submission, who remains indifferent to God or ignores him. Since it is the will of Allah that Islam will rule the entire world, entering non-Muslims lands to subjugate the population and wipe out their corrupt, infidel culture is not seen by Muslims as "waging war," but as spreading peace.

Modern radical Islam, also called Islamism, has been influenced by pagan Nazi ideology. From 1933 Nazi Germany and its various agencies made a concerted and, on the whole, remarkably successful effort to promote and disseminate European style anti-Semitism in the Arab world. In *What Went Wrong: The Clash Between Islam and Modernity in the Middle East* Bernard Lewis observes that during the 1930s Fascism and Nazism won widespread support. Even after their military defeat in World War II, they continued to serve as unavowed models in both ideology and statecraft in Arab countries.

Since Islam's understanding of peace is vastly different from ours, no politician should parrot the line "Islam is a religion of peace." Such a claim is too serious of a matter. It has to do with our future, and the

future of our children and grandchildren.

Islam and Freedom

The absence of freedom in the Islamic world is related to their religion. A hadith attributed to Muhammad is: "There can be no two religions in Arabia." The second Caliph, Umar ibn al-Khattab, forced all Jews and Christians to leave Arabia during his term, A.D. 634-644. The reign of Caliph Abd al-Malik (685-705) marked the beginning of the Islamicization and Arabicization of conquered territories. Violence was familiar from the very beginning of Islamic political history. Of the four Righteous Caliphs who followed Muhammad in the headship of the Islamic community, three were murdered.

Bernard Lewis notes that westerners have become accustomed to think of good and bad government in terms of tyranny versus liberty. In Middle-Eastern usage for traditional Muslims, the opposite of tyranny was not liberty but justice. Justice in this context meant essentially two things, that the ruler was there by right and not by usurpation, and that he governed according to God's law, or at least according to recognizable moral and legal principles.

Shari'a

Shari'a is the name for the Islamic legal system. It originally and ideally is meant to regulate all spheres

of life without differentiating between civil, criminal, personal status laws etc. The authority of the shari'a is absolute and all legitimacy must be derived from it. It originated in the Koran and the traditions attributed to Muhammad and is regarded as immutable, since it consists in what Muhammad knew by revelation of the divine will.

The Shari'a was not only a "divine" law but also a lawyer's law; for it was built up, directly or indirectly, on their deduction from the sacred texts. It has been partially implemented in a number of Muslim countries. This legal system strongly opposes conversion from Islam to Christianity. In certain nations converts have been sentenced to death. This strict interpretation of shari'a generates fear and inhibits all but the most courageous from any serious investigation of Christian claims to truth.

In Muslim perception, therefore, there is no human legislative power, and there is only one law for believers -- the Holy Law of God, promulgated by revelation. For example, Sheikh Tabtaba'i, the imam of the Kadhimain mosque in Baghdad said recently, "The West calls for freedom and liberation. Islam rejects this freedom. True freedom is obeying Allah."

In an Islamic state, there is in principle no other law than the shari'a, the holy law of Islam. But the reforms of the nineteenth century and the need of commercial and other contacts with Europe led to the enactment of new laws modeled on those of Europe—commercial, civil, criminal, and finally constitutional.

Today radical Islamists want to re-

Entering non-Muslims lands to subjugate the population and wipe out their corrupt, infidel culture is not seen by Muslims as "waging war," but as spreading peace.

“Freedom of religion” for Muslims essentially means the freedom to take away religious freedom from others.

turn to the original purpose of the shari’a. Therefore, Islamist circles inside and outside of governments have been pressing for an enhancement of Shari’a’s influence on legislation.

Women in Islam

From a Western perspective, Islam discriminates against women. In Islamic countries women are still denied many rights that are available to men. The emancipation of women, more than any other single issue, is the touchstone difference between modernization and Westernization. Islamists consider women as “deficient in mind and religion.” The testimony of a woman in the courts is worth only half a man’s testimony. When women appear in public, they must be veiled.

In Saudi Arabia women are even barred from driving an automobile. Islam permits both polygamy and concubinage. According to the late Ayatollah Khomeini allowing women to reveal their faces, their arms, and their legs, and to mingle socially in the school or workplace with men is an incitement to immorality and promiscuity, and a deadly blow to the very heart of Islamic society, the Muslim family, and home.

Second-class Citizens

Since Islam applies to every area of life including the political, non-Muslims are normally considered second-class citizens where Muslims

are a majority. There is no Muslim state where democracy, freedom of the press, and pluralism reign. Christians, Jews, and Zoroastrians have faced clear discrimination in Islamic countries, even though these religious groups happen to be the original inhabitants of the lands conquered by Islam. Muslims regard them as “Dhimmi” who must pay the Jizya (Surah 9:29). This dhimmi option is only available to Christians and Jews, not to Hindus, Buddhists, or others, who have only the choice between embracing Islam or death. It is also a capital offence for converts to Islam to return to Christianity. In other words, non-Muslims are subject to religious apartheid and second class citizenship in their own country under Islamic rule. Since the shari’a requires the subjugation of non-Muslims, “freedom of religion” for Muslims essentially means the freedom to take away religious freedom from others.

Eastern Christians, living under Islam, are deprived of state patronage, a public voice, equality under the law, and of their right to proclaim their message. Christians as dhimmi communities are obliged to maintain a low social profile.

Furthermore, since the refusal to submit to shari’a is considered a rebellion against Allah, the very existence of non-Muslim communities can be viewed as an act of aggression. Opposition to the Gospel has taken extreme forms at

times. In the 1990s in Sudan, the Islamic government burned down a church with Christians praying inside. Only one person survived.

Religious tensions in Egypt between Christians and Muslims have often been marked by the burning of churches, execution of Christians, confiscation of private property and forced conversions to Islam. But what Christians are not allowed to do in Muslim nations, Islamists want to do in Western nations. Contemporary Muslim missions have been organized both to win converts and to counteract Christian missionary efforts. The conferees at the Muslim World League Conference in Mecca in 1974 called for the government takeover of mission hospitals, schools, and orphanages, the banning of Christian literature in Muslim countries, and cutting off financial support from countries allowing missionaries to Muslims. But at the same time the Islamic conference has expended billions for Islamic institutions and propaganda around the world.

The Christian Concept of Freedom

What is the Biblical perspective of freedom? Freedom does not mean anarchy. It does not mean uniformity. Uniformity can only be achieved by power and force. Therefore, uniformity can be achieved by Islam. But for Christians, uniformity clashes with freedom. The tension between freedom and bondage is one of the crucial dual themes of Scripture. Beginning with the Genesis account of the Fall, humanity lost its freedom. It lost the freedom to converse and walk with God and to live in Para-

dise. Human beings became slaves of sin. We live in a fallen world where Satan is hard at work opposing the advance of God's Kingdom. More than ever we must recognize how much of the sickness of this world is due to spiritual causes. We are not wrestling against flesh and blood but against the principalities and powers in the invisible world. We are involved in a spiritual battle (John 8:31-59; Ephesians 6:10-20). Therefore, all human traditions, institutions, and structures are prone to evil.

Freedom, in the real sense of the word, does not exist outside of Christ. Freedom is a gift from God, which we received through faith in Jesus Christ (John 8). Jesus Christ is the Great Liberator, and whoever believes in Him becomes the son of God, God's free child who has found an eternal home. The Truth, Jesus Christ, shall set you free (John 8:31-36). The Cross is central.

Only through Christ's death, resurrection, and ascension we can understand the true meaning of freedom. We serve the living Lord. The early martyrs disobeyed the law of the Empire and accepted death rather than be disloyal to Christ. Their method was not rebellion but martyrdom. Walter Wink reminds us that the victory of the Church over the demonic power which was embodied in the Roman imperial system was not won by seizing the levers of power. It was won when the victims knelt down in the Colosseum and prayed in the name of Jesus for the Emperor.

The apostle Paul is clearly the chief expositor of this Christian concept of freedom (Galatians 5:1). He emphasizes the nature of true freedom as intrinsically associated with the new

relationship of believers with Christ. Through Christ we are no longer slaves of sin (Romans 6:14). Freedom then comes only by the power of the Gospel itself, announced in word and deed.

The freedom we have through faith in Christ is not self-determination nor freedom to do whatever we want. The apostle Paul enjoined responsible behavior (Romans 3:1). Real freedom means that we let ourselves be led by the Holy Spirit (2 Corinthians 3:18).

***From the beginning,
Christians were
taught both by
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between God and
Caesar.***

Christians are free to love and to serve. Augustine wrote about the city of God where power is replaced by service in charity. To be mastered by Christ, who was the pre-eminent servant, is to partake of the benefits of his redemptive death. To base one's behavior on the principle that the Christian leads by serving, is to be a truly free man.

When we put the Triune God first, we can live in true freedom. His supreme lordship is then accepted over every area of life. As Augustine said, "Those who wish to follow God allow Him to go before and they follow; they do not make Him follow while they go before." From the beginning, Christians were taught both by precept and practice to distinguish between God

and Caesar and between the different duties owed to each of the two. Muslims received no such instruction.

All freedom-loving people would do well to recall the words of Malcolm Muggeridge, once a non-Christian but later a staunch defender of the Christian faith. He observed, "We must not forget that our human rights are derived from the Christian faith. In Christian terms, every single human being, whoever he or she may be, sick or well, clever or foolish, beautiful or ugly, every human being is loved by his Creator, who as the Gospel tells us, counted the hairs of his head."

Christianity's accent on the importance of the individual and his freedom demonstrates that God values each and every person. Political freedom and tolerance have their roots in the love of God and Christ's liberating rule. Political, economic, and religious freedom can only exist where there is liberty and freedom of the individual. No wonder individual freedom and rights are most prevalent where Christianity had the greatest impact.

The record of the church reveals the role of those who championed true freedom. Tertullian (d.ca.220) said that "it is a fundamental right, a privilege of nature, that every man should worship according to his own convictions... to which free-will and not force should lead us." Martin Luther noted, "A Christian man is a perfectly free lord, subject to none." But he did not want to manufacture anarchists. To counteract this claim to liberty, he also said: "A Christian man is a perfectly dutiful servant of all, subject to all." He also told the German princes in a letter that it was not the function of government to "forbid anyone to teach or say what he wants -- the Gospel or lies."

The first European country that actually accorded civil rights to non-Christians was Calvinist Holland, followed within a short time by England. Protestant churches in England were all legal, but unequal in right and opportunities, and Catholics were more or less persecuted. Still, the English church and state allowed the publishing of the view that religion should be optional and atheism considered a possible form of belief. The rationale was that argument brings out the truth, no matter what errors are put forward.

As I have shown, the Islamic concept of freedom, both in theory and practice, compares unfavorably with the Western democracies as they have developed under the influence of Christianity during the last two or three centuries. The freedom of the mind from constraint and indoctrination, the freedom to question and inquire and speak, and freedom for women from male oppression are still lacking in the Muslim world. In the light of the Islamist threat to our freedoms, our call is to think with integrity, to speak with courage and work with a vision for true Biblical freedom. We must become aware of suffering Christians and show our solidarity with them. We must publicize in magazines, newspapers, and other media the violations of religious freedom in Muslim countries.

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URCNA Classis Summary

Classis Michigan

On October 10, 2006, the twenty-second meeting of Classis Michigan began. It was a beautiful, sunny, autumn day. For many, the drive to Walker United Reformed Church in Grand Rapids, Michigan was a spectacle of God's work in creation. As the meeting progressed, it was clear that the Lord was also at work in His Church.

The Chairman, Rev. Casey Freswick, welcomed the delegates and visitors; went through the regular opening items on a typical classis agenda with great aptitude, bringing the classis to what would take up the bulk of the day: the candidacy examination of Mr. Steve Postma.

After finding all things in order for the examination and hearing a sermon evaluation of two sermons exhorted by Mr. Postma, several ministers and one elder examined the Mid-America Reformed Seminary graduate in seven different areas: Practica, Bible Knowledge, Biblical Exegesis, Confessional Knowledge, Reformed Doctrine, Church History, and Ethics. Mr. Postma proved himself up to the task and moved diligently through each area giving testimony of his knowledge, his love for the Lord, and his desire to proclaim the Word of God.

After the examination the delegates voted unanimously to recommend that the Consistory of the Dutton URC declare Mr. Postma a candi-

date for the Ministry of the Word and Sacraments. An additional motion was approved that, should Mr. Postma receive and accept a call within our classis, there would be no need for an Ordination Exam. It was with great joy that delegates, Mr. Postma, and his family shared the news of the sustaining of the exam. A prayer of thanksgiving was offered by Rev. Klompfen.

During the lunch break, Rev. Alan Vander Pol of Cape Coral, Florida, spoke of the mission work that he is involved with at the Miami International Seminary.

Three overtures were considered by Classis Michigan. The first, asking Synod 2007 to establish a method for classis to collect and distribute monies for missionaries, was defeated.

The second overture, brought by four churches from classis, sought to overture Synod to make a clear statement on justification by faith alone. It sought, in light of the fact that we are in Phase Two with the RCUS, the adoption of the RCUS' statement on Justification. While delegates seemed in harmony on the need for a clear statement on justification, debate was held over the proper method to bring about such a statement: should the URCNA form its own study committee or should we adopt the forty page document of the RCUS? In the end, the majority of delegates

(continued on page 32)

Bible Studies on Jacob

Lesson 7: The Struggle for Covenant Children

Read Genesis 29:31 – 30:24

Introduction

God's providence led Jacob to his relatives in Paddan-Aram. He comes to a well where the shepherds know his uncle Laban, then his lovely cousin Rachel "just happens" to come along, and soon Jacob is integrated into the household of Laban. Jacob comes to love Rachel. Laban has had other plans for Jacob, and he deceives Jacob into marrying Leah, the eldest daughter, before he can marry his beloved Rachel. In addition, Laban gets Jacob to agree to work for a total of fourteen years, which is a remarkable agreement. Yet Jacob loves Rachel, and he accepts this arrangement.

God loves Jacob, but Jacob hates Leah?

We have referred to God's providence in bringing so many good things together for Jacob. The LORD does keep His word, although the twists and turns of life may not always be what we expect as He brings His promises into reality. In the events of Genesis 29, we have not read explicitly of God being involved, and yet we know all things are "working together for the good" of those who love God, for those who are called according to His purpose (cf. Rom 8:28). The God who stood "at the top" of the stairway in the dream, over "it/him" (Jacob?), is also the same God who promised to go with Jacob. He is

always the "God who is with us," His people.

The text of Scripture now mentions God again, and the reference is to Leah and the birth of children (verses 31ff.). The LORD takes note that Leah was "unloved." The word used here is often translated as "hated," the same verb used, for example, in Malachi 1:2-3: "Jacob have I loved, but Esau have I *hated*." Jacob "hates" Leah, and that sounds rather jarring. What does this mean?

First of all, remember what is said in verse 30. He loves Rachel *more than* Leah. That helps to put the words of verse 31 in context. The very fact that the LORD gave Leah four sons (by the end of this chapter) means that she and Jacob were sexually intimate in order that such children might be conceived and then born. At least it is not the case that Jacob and Leah will have nothing to do with each other! If "to love" and "to hate" are opposites, perhaps we can understand such hatred on the part of Jacob toward Leah, if we understand consider what love means.

The word meaning *love* in the Old Testament can cover many things. It describes God's love toward Israel (cf. Malachi 1:2), our love as commanded toward God (Deut. 6:5), and even what Amnon felt toward his half-sister Tamar in 2 Samuel 13:1 (whom he "loved," but

sexually assaulted!). The word *love* in the Old Testament may cover attitudes, emotions, and actions (or even combinations of all three!). When God loves His people, that reality does not exclude His anger at them from time to time because of their sin. Anger is not equal to hatred. An emotion (as a feeling) is not the same as an attitude or a commitment. Love from God indicates a firm commitment to seek His people's greater well-being, our ultimate good.

By the same token, the word *hate* may also cover attitudes, emotions, and actions (or combinations of these three). Jacob *hates* Leah, but this does not necessarily mean that he was physically abusive, verbally mean, or had dark, cruel thoughts toward Leah. He is married to her, but their relationship is nothing special, and it is likely that there is nothing overly warm and friendly in their dealings together. Jacob's attention and affection is to the far more beautiful and attractive younger sister/wife, Rachel. Perhaps Jacob basically ignores Leah, paying no attention to her presence, her thoughts, or her feelings. This kind of hatred (cool indifference) is certainly felt deep in the heart and soul of Leah.

Leah: a vine made fruitful by the LORD (29:31-35)

The LORD notices all this in Jacob's home. And Leah realizes this as well, as we hear what she says when she names her sons. God's compassion is clearly in evidence in that He will make her a fruitful vine in the household of Jacob. To have two wives is bigamy, and that is not God's ideal for marriage. For

Jacob's household things are complicated by his love for Rachel over against Leah. God compensates for this, so to speak, by blessing Leah with children. In all she is the mother of six sons, plus a daughter named Dinah.

There are several striking things to notice in the naming of these children. First of all, we read that it is Leah who names the boys. We wonder: is Jacob so uninterested in the birth of children to his "hated" wife that he is absent when it comes time to name them? Secondly, Leah provides a kind of explanation for each name, and that is included in the Biblical text for the names of all the sons.

1. Reuben: "Notice, a son!"
(or, He has seen my misery)
Genesis 29:32
2. Simeon: "hears"
Genesis 29:33
3. Levi: sounds like
"attached"? Genesis 29:34
4. Judah: sounds like "praise"
Genesis 29:35

Leah's words are remarkable in that with several sons she mentions the Name of the LORD explicitly (Reuben, Simeon, and Judah). She refers to God again when Issachar (sounds like "reward," Gen. 30:17-18) and Zebulun ("honor," Gen. 30:19-20) are born later on. Leah acknowledges that the LORD God has given her these children. Whether Jacob is greatly pleased with such sons or not at this point, we may not know. But Leah confesses that it was God who blessed her with sons.

At the same time, there is a darker, even disturbing, side to her com-

ments with the birth of her sons. Look again at her words when they are born. With several of her sons (e.g., Reuben, Levi, Issachar, Zebulun) she makes comments that express her hope that maybe now her husband Jacob will love her. Children born to Leah are God's blessing, but they become viewed almost as presents or gifts to win over an unloving husband. We can hear a quiet desperation, maybe a painful frustration, in Leah's words when another son is born, "Maybe, possibly, this son will finally win my husband over." But we never read that it is so.

"Warring" wives (30:1-13)

Rachel's natural instinct towards motherhood is frustrated by her infertility. She can see on a daily basis her own sister's blessings in terms of the sons that God has given Leah. Can we speak of Rachel coveting her sister's children, not in the sense of stealing or kidnapping the boys, but in the sense of being so driven, that she will resort to almost anything to have a son? To her husband she cries out, "Give me children, or I'll die!" (Gen. 30:1). But Jacob is not God. Some have noted a kind of irony in her words as they are a kind of veiled prophecy. Rachel wanted either children or death, and it will be in giving birth to her second son Benjamin, that she herself will die (see Gen. 35:16-19).

Rachel is loved by Jacob, and yet she remains a barren wife. Now

begins the "war of the wives" when Rachel gives her servant Bilhah to Jacob. Something similar had happened earlier in the household of Abram and Sarah (Gen. 16). The barren Sarah gives her Egyptian maidservant Hagar to Abram in the hope that the servant would bear a son, and the child would be adopted as the son of the couple. There is this difference, however: Jacob already has four sons, and thus, he is not childless.

Yet Rachel's desire for a child is so great, that she will use her servant girl Bilhah to have children. We assume that Rachel will get the "credit" for any child to be born. This is what Rachel says in verse 3, "Sleep with her so that she can bear children for me and that through her I too can build a family." Rachel is prepared to use her handmaiden for her own purposes. The maidservant will become a wife for Jacob, but she will be a wife of secondary rank, a kind of concubine. Bilhah bears two sons: Dan ("he has vindicated, judged;" Gen. 30:4-6) and Naphtali ("my struggle;" Gen. 30:7-8). But the text does not give either Rachel or Bilhah the credit for the children. In Genesis 30:5 and 7 the text tells us that Bilhah bears sons *for Jacob*. Rachel thinks that she has a fighting chance, so to speak, in the "war of the wives" to even the score with Leah. But the text tells us that the covenant sons belong to the elect son, Jacob.

Children born to Leah are God's blessing, but they become viewed almost as presents or gifts to win over an unloving husband.

It becomes apparent that Rachel stops bearing children for a period of time. So then it is Leah's turn to make a counter move in this "war of the wives" when she gives her servant girl Zilpah to Jacob as well. Zilpah bears two sons: Gad ("good fortune" or "troop;" Gen. 30:10-11) and Asher ("blessed" or "happy;" Gen. 30:12-13). But even here again, the text points out to us readers in verses 10 and 12 that the sons born to Zilpah are *Jacob's*. If anyone is keeping score in this tragic-comic contest, then it is Leah with six sons, while Rachel gets credit for two sons. In the end, it is Leah who will be the mother of the priestly and the royal tribes. Levi (3rd son) will become the ancestor of Israel's priests, while Judah (4th son) will be the ancestor of David, the messianic king, as well as of the Lord Jesus Christ Himself, the final Messianic King. But for the moment, while the wives are trying to outdo each other in the number of children born, it is Jacob the patriarch who is filling his household with the foundational layer of the Old Testament church community, through his two wives and their two maidservants.

This is a story of struggle, but now it is not between brothers, as we had read earlier in Genesis 25 and 27. This is a struggle between sisters, but who are also competing wives in one household. Fertility and barrenness have become issues, and even the children are drawn in to be used like weapons in the hands of the women. "Now my husband will love me, since I am fertile and can bear him sons," is Leah's thinking.

Rachel, in turn, resorts to some

very questionable tactics in her desire to have a child. She makes a deal with sister (and fellow wife!) Leah to get the mandrakes, a plant that was thought to help make a woman fertile. Jacob had struck a deal earlier to get the birthright from brother Esau. Is this deal between the sisters similar to the deal that Jacob acquired with Esau in Genesis 25?

God remembers Rachel (30:22-24)

In the end, God does *remember* Rachel. "Remember" is an important word. It is used in Genesis 8:1, when Noah is in the ark during the flood. It is used again in Exodus 2:24, when the Israelites cry out to God in their great misery. God remembers His covenant with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. The word returns in 1 Samuel 1:19, when Hannah cries out in her distress of being barren. Our God keeps His covenant, and He always hears the cries of the needy, of those who turn to Him when their backs are to the wall, and we have nowhere else to turn. The Psalms remind us of that great truth. For God to remember does not mean that He forgot (as we humans can easily have the so-called "senior moments"). God remembers, and such a thought (if we may speak that way) is the prelude to Him taking specific action for His people.

In remembering Rachel, God opens her womb. She had viewed her barrenness as a "disgrace" (verse 23), but God's mercy removes the barrenness and dispels the disgrace. Rachel's firstborn son is named Joseph, which name means

"May He add." How shall we understand her comments at the naming? Is she saying, "How wonderful to have a child! May God give me another blessing like it." Or is Rachel saying, "One son is fine, but it is not enough. I want more children!" We might wonder whether this desire for children has become an all-consuming obsession.

Twelve children (11 sons and a daughter, Dinah)! Truly Jacob has a full quiver. Many in modern society would look down on that number of children. But God is building His church, also through the means of covenant children born in the house of a believer. These sons will be the foundational patriarchs for the Old Testament church of God, namely, Israel.

Lesson 7: Points to ponder and discuss

1. The sixth commandment says, "You shall not kill (murder)." Read Heidelberg Catechism, Lord's Day 40 and Westminster Larger Catechism, Q/A 134-136. What is forbidden in this commandment includes also envy, hatred, and the desire for revenge. The essence of hatred is the wish to remove the neighbor from our life, getting rid of that person placed next to us by God. How can that desire to remove a neighbor be a "slow death" for such a person, without anyone ever shooting or stabbing that person? Does Leah sense that hatred? How does she cope with it?
2. Read Psalms 127 and 128. How do these Scriptures view covenant children in relationship to God, to the family itself, and also to the larger society? How do such views relate (in agreement or in disagreement) with Western society?
3. Read Genesis 1:26-28 and Matthew 28:18-20. Population experts tell us that for a society to replace itself numerically, a couple should have, on average, 2.11 children. In many countries, particularly in Europe and in parts of North America, the birthrate has dropped below that number. At the same time, among Muslims (and others) the birthrate is higher than 2.11 children per couple. What will be the long-term effect if such birthrates continue? Is overpopulation also a possibility to consider? How should Christians view the mandate to "fill the earth" with Christian disciples?
4. "God moves in a mysterious way, His wonders to perform!" What is the irony here with regard to Leah and her children? Had Jacob wanted to marry Leah? What is his attitude toward her? What is Leah's importance in the coming of the Kingdom of God through her sons Levi and Judah?
5. Jacob is a polygamist, and this is not God's design for marriage. What kinds of tensions existed in this household? What must it have been like for these children to grow up in such a household? How can our homes create an atmosphere in which the covenant children sense in their hearts and souls that they belong to God?



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Bible Studies on Jacob

Lesson 8: Jacob Acquires Great Wealth

Read Genesis 30:25-43

Introduction

The covenant promise had been that God would be with His people, He would create *seed* (people, a nation) and provide *land* (place to call home) for that seed. But He had also promised to increase the blessings that His people would receive. That was Isaac's blessing to his son in Genesis 27. God has enabled Jacob to acquire a goodly number of children through his two wives and their two maidservants. So is it now time for Jacob to gather his family together and move on?

Jacob asks (!) for his family (30:25-26)

The agreement by which Jacob had acquired his wives required that he serve Laban for a total of fourteen years. Apparently those fourteen years are drawing to a close, and the birth of Joseph to beloved wife Rachel occurs near the end of those fourteen years. Laban had deceived Jacob at the wedding, and he has obtained a great amount of work and service from Jacob. Perhaps Jacob himself senses that he has been used, even taken advantage of by his wily uncle. Jacob now wants to depart from Paddan-Aram with his wife and children (verses 25-26).

The very fact that he must ask for his own family now raises a new set of questions. Is Laban in such control of people that he has not really relinquished his two daughters

to Jacob? If Jacob is truly married, then his wives, Leah and Rachel, are joined to him. One must always love and honor one's parents, as the fifth commandment requires. But in marriage a new social unit in the Kingdom of God has been established. Jacob has left his own father and mother, and he is married. He must cling to his wife (for him it is wives!) that God has brought into his life. Why must he ask Laban for his wives and children? Or, is Jacob simply being overly polite so that the departure from Laban will be on good terms and that there will be no hard feelings when Jacob and his large family set out on the way back to Canaan?

Another question that comes to mind here relates back to the plan that mother Rebekah had given to Jacob. "Go to Laban and wait 'a few days' until your brother Esau's anger has subsided, and I will send you word that it is safe to return here" (Gen. 27:43-45). In Genesis 30 we do not have any indication that Jacob has received that "all-clear signal" that it is safe to return to the family in Canaan. Yet Jacob in Genesis 30:25ff. seems eager to be on his way.

Jacob has received the following: God's promises, his wives, and his children. Now we read how the Lord increased his wealth in terms of flocks. But first, Jacob desires to depart from Laban, and he asks permission to leave. It appears that Laban has some kind of authority over his daughters. How much

authority does Laban have over his two daughters (and their children)? Should a man like Jacob (who probably is in his early 90s by now) have to ask for his own family?

Laban renegotiates with Jacob (30:27-34)

Laban wants Jacob to stay. He is smart enough to realize that Jacob's presence is the source of riches for himself. The NIV in verse 27 says that Laban has learned by divination that his riches are the result of Jacob's presence. In other words, it pays to have Jacob around! The NIV footnote, however, suggests a different translation that does not include Laban's use of divination: "I have become rich (have prospered) and the LORD has blessed me because of you." This second possibility of translation thus leaves unanswered the question of whether or not Laban used divination, that is, any means of discovering knowledge apart from the revelation of God.

If Laban says that the LORD has given him many blessings, would that not suggest that Laban should submit himself fully to that same God? The true God is the source of all blessings. Psalm 104 tells us in a beautifully poetic way that all creatures look to God for their food. Daily bread on our tables as well as sufficient funds in our bank accounts are testimonies to the goodness of our heavenly Father. Prosperity should drive us to prayer, to thanksgiving and joyful obedience. Or, is formal godliness a means of gain, doing the "right things" in order to get something from God? Do we live with God in some kind of mercenary arrange-

ment: we do something for God so that God might do nice things for us?

In any case, Laban gives credit for his good financial situation to having Jacob around. So in an effort to keep Jacob and his family nearby, Laban begins to talk about wages. "What can I pay you so that I can keep you here? Maybe I can pay you more." Jacob is useful to Laban for a good income.

Jacob also realizes this (verses 29-30). In responding to Uncle Laban, Jacob tells us that Laban had far less in terms of possessions when he had arrived about a decade and a half earlier. But that is quite changed now. The gross family income has gone up noticeably. Jacob, like Laban, also gives the LORD the credit for this surge in prosperity. Truly blessing comes from the LORD! But the time has come for Jacob to steer his own course with his family, now away from Laban. Jacob has been "used," and the time for that usage is now over.

Laban and Jacob strike a deal. A financial arrangement is made such that Jacob will receive all the speckled, spotted, and dark-colored sheep, and every spotted and speckled goat. Victor Hamilton (*Genesis 18-50*, pp. 282-283) points out that in the Mediterranean world most sheep are white and most goats are black. "Thus Jacob is requesting the irregular, abnormal parts of Laban's flock." The rest belong to Laban. Such animals will be obvious to the eye of any beholder. Thus, all things being equal, Jacob would have smaller flocks because he would

have the animals that are not the "norm" in appearance. This is the deal to which they both agree (verse 34), and it is a deal in which Laban expected to prosper. Jacob's flock will consist of animals without spots or speckles, and the odds are not in his favor biologically for uni-colored animals to give birth to spotted, speckled, or dark-colored animals.

Jacob, "expert" in animal husbandry (30:35-42)

To achieve success, Laban separates the flocks with a three-day journey between them. This will make it virtually impossible for any mixing of the flocks. More than that, Laban takes away all the spotted and speckled (those with "white") male and female goats, placing these irregular animals in the care of his sons. By all these means Laban (whose name means "white") intends to frustrate any chance that Jacob would profit from this arrangement. But God is with Jacob, and that will be the decisive fact in all this. God had promised Jacob great things in His covenant promises (see Genesis 28:13-15), and God always keeps His word.

Jacob continues to work tending the rest of Laban's flocks (verse 36). This will be a critical factor, but not the most important one. Jacob makes a counter move, namely, placing striped branches

in the water troughs, especially when the stronger females would come to drink. Apparently, some ancient people believed that what an animal saw before she gave birth would determine the look of the animal that was born. There is no scientific basis for this, and such a belief and practice strikes us as bordering on sympathetic magic, or what others would call "maternal impression." But does Jacob believe this? Possibly so, but this is not as clear as some commentators make it. In any case, there is something of a pun going on in this story. Laban means "white." Jacob takes some (white) poplar branches (with other branches), cuts white stripes in them, and he sets them before the female animals when they came to drink at the watering troughs. Jacob earlier got the best of Esau with "red" stuff (Edom means "red"). Now he is going to get the best of "whitey," i.e., his Uncle Laban!

At the same time, he also applies some very shrewd principles of animal husbandry when he placed such striped sticks in front of the stronger female animals (verse 41). Perhaps in his younger years, while twin brother Esau was off hunting animals, Jacob was learning animal husbandry with the flocks of his household, and maybe now he is applying that knowledge with telling effect. In the end, it is God who alone can

Laban intends to frustrate any chance that Jacob would profit from this arrangement.

give the increase and the blessing to Jacob's use of ancient "animal science," such that there is born a significant number of speckled and spotted animals, even to otherwise unspotted female animals. Laban's flocks are filling with weaker animals, while Jacob's animals are the stronger. But God had said back in Genesis 25:23 that the younger son would be stronger and would dominate. God is keeping His word, even in the area of livestock that Jacob was now getting. John Currid (*Genesis, vol. 2*, p. 102) is correct when he writes that "the effort expended by Jacob is not the means by which the results are gained. Success does not come by questionable ancient customs, but only by the hand of Yahweh." There is a miracle here! Whatever we may think of Jacob's methods, the text does not explicitly criticize him.

**And the bottom line is...
(30:43)**

In the end, what is God's intention here, since the increase in these sheep and goats in Jacob's flocks is God's doing? Can we detect the divine "hidden hand" in all this, and, if so, for what purpose?

This increase in Jacob's wealth must be connected with God's promises made earlier to the patriarchs Abraham and Isaac in Genesis. In Genesis 12:1-3 God had said that He would bless His people, even in physical ways, make them a blessing, and through them the nations would experience blessing. Abram's nephew Lot sees his own flocks increase as he is associated with Abram and his flocks (Gen.

Jacob will leave his semi-bondage state with Uncle Laban an incredibly rich man, in terms of his family and his flocks.

13:5ff.). Genesis 15, 17, 22, and 26 give the patriarchs (and us the readers) repeated mentions of God's promises of blessing, specifically in terms of children and land. In Genesis 28:14 God tells Jacob in his dream at Bethel that his descendants will *spread out* in all directions (cf. Gen. 13:14-17).

Now here in Genesis 30:43 we read that "the man grew exceedingly prosperous," literally, "the man *spread out* strongly, strongly (or, very much, exceedingly)." We get a list of what Jacob owned during this new phase of his time with Uncle Laban: large flocks, all kinds of servants, camels and donkeys. Earlier Abraham had entered Egypt during a time of famine, but he left a wealthier man (see Gen. 12:16-20). God is not afraid to bless His people, also in very physical ways. Just as Abraham will leave Egypt a richer man, despite his misleading of Pharaoh, so too Jacob will leave his semi-bondage state with Uncle Laban an incredibly rich man, in terms of his family and his flocks.

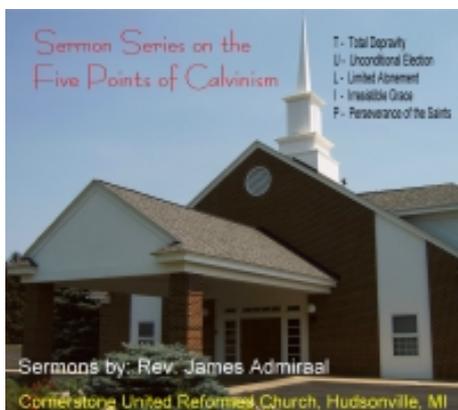
The covenant of God's sovereign grace continues to march on here. Jacob is not getting younger in this story, but he is getting richer. God has blessed him with a large family, and when Laban had tried to squeeze more works and longer service out of Jacob, God has blessed Jacob with larger flocks

and great physical blessings. How this is all playing itself out in Jacob's heart and soul, is hard for us to determine. Time will tell as we await more of this story to play itself out.

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Lesson 6: Points to ponder and discuss

1. Haran is not the Promised Land to which God had brought Abraham. How does God use and direct the circumstances that Jacob faced to make him want to desire to leave Laban and return to Canaan?
2. Jacob and Laban appear not to have had the best of relationships. We often joke about friction with our in-laws. Can such joking be overdone and even be needlessly cruel? What are several ways that we can be an encouragement to our extended family, without meddling and trying to control them?
3. Laban has “used” Jacob in several ways. Identify these ways. How easy is it also for us to use other people? When does such use become, in fact, abuse? Are we even always aware of what we are doing with other people? How does Philippians 2:1-5 point us to a different way in God’s Kingdom?
4. What Jacob does with the animals leads to an increase in his own flocks, both in terms of quantity and quality of animals. Were Jacob’s husbandry tactics an instance of wisdom, or of trickery, or of both? What does the text say? What is God’s purpose here in increasing Jacob’s flocks?
5. Read Psalm 144, especially verses 12-15. Is this a picture of God’s blessings in the Kingdom of His Son, Jesus Christ? Does the Kingdom consist only in spiritual blessings, or are physical blessings also part of the picture? Are such blessings experienced in this life, or are we to look for such blessings only in the life to come?
6. God often blesses His people with physical blessings. But read Hosea 13:4-6. What are the dangers to our own souls when we prosper? Are we able to focus on the things that really matter in God’s Kingdom when we are “blessed” with success?



This series of messages on the Five Points of Calvinism was preached by Rev. James Admiraal, in the Cornerstone United Reformed church of Hudsonville, Michigan, during the summer of 2006.

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Book Reviews

...just in time for Christmas

Alcock, Deborah. *By Far Euphrates: a Tale on Armenia in the 19th Century.* Neerlandia, AB, Pella, IA: Inheritance Publications, 2002. 274 pp. \$14.95CN, \$12.95 US, paperback. Reviewed by Rev. J. Julien.

Recently a copy of an essay by Rev. A. A. Kayayan came into this reviewer's hands—an essay concerning the 87th anniversary of the Armenian genocide engineered by Ottoman Turkey. That story in itself is absolutely horrifying. Christian Armenians suffered in an unspeakable way. Long before this horror, Armenian Christians were suffering for their faith. This novel gives an account of the sufferings by means of massacres 1894-1896. The author writes in the preface: "Every instance of faith or heroism given in these pages is not only true in itself, but typical of a hundred others." More than 309,000 died for their faith in the 19th century!

This story is developed around a young English boy, Jack Grayson, who traveled with his father to Armenia. Very soon both travelers are kept from moving on due to malaria, and, sadly, the father did not recover. From this point on the adventures of Jack develop. The struggles of faith experienced along with the believers, the struggles against the Muslims. The story line as a whole, all contribute to adventure and interest. Anyone who desires to know the struggles and the joys of Christ's Church—and every Christian should—will find this a beneficial read.

Comrie, Margaret S. *The Heroes of Castle Breton.* Neerlandia, AB, Pella, IA: Inheritance Publications, 2003. 229 pp. \$12.99 US paperback. Reviewed by Rev. J. Julien.

Here is just the book you have been looking for! Adventure, mystery, history (though it does not take over) are all part of this story. You want a book to read during Christmas vacation? Here it is! In fact, you may have a difficult time putting it down. Young people and even their grandparents will enjoy it.

Set in Europe in the century and a half following the Reformation, it lays out some of the intense family struggles that developed out of the Reformation. Sadly, family struggles and tensions often develop as a result of struggles for the faith.

In this story, Lady Eleonore, the Catholic Chatelaine mistress of the chateau, is cut off from her friends and supporters because of her nephew's lies about her. A young Protestant comes to live at the castle and, together with several friends he makes there, comes to her aid. The story has other twists and turns, some of which will utterly amaze the reader.

This is one of many reprints of historical fiction books that Inheritance Publications is reissuing. The publisher is to be thanked for this gift to the churches.

Tucker, Charlotte Maria. *Driven into Exile: a Story of the Huguenots.* (Huguenot Inheritance Series #5) Neerlandia, AB, Pella, IA: Inheritance Publications, 2003. 141 pp., paperback. \$8.90 US. Reviewed by Rev. Jerome Julien.

Even royalty experienced the pressure of persecution from the Romans Catholic Church in the late sixteen hundreds. If you were somehow part of the royal family in France, but a Huguenot, you knew the handwriting was on the wall. You and your family knew that you would have life and freedom only if you fled from France.

Even though the Marquis la Force was given time to recant his Protestant faith, the result would be banishment. But neither he, nor his family, could turn from the truth of God. Most of the family went into exile in England, but one member was not able to go with them. He was in the control of the church and he had to be educated in Roman Catholicism.

Three within the family made the trip to England, arriving there in poverty. Living in a strange land in poverty was very difficult for them. In addition, they were

burdened by the fact that a son and nephew who remained in France were being oppressed. This was a constant burden to them. Will there ever be a reunion? This story opens up the trials believers have when they seek to be faithful to the Lord.

Fiction? Yes. History? Yes. But more! We can learn from these terrible times as we face an unknown future. At the same time, the story is delightful for it demonstrates God's providence.

Cammenga, Ronald and Hanko, Ronald. *Saved By Grace; a study of the Five Points of Calvinism.* Second Edition. Grandville, MI: Reformed Free Publishing Association, 2002. xvii, 245 pp., including indices. \$17.95, hardcover; \$13.95, paper. [Also available: a study guide, \$4.95] Reviewed by Rev. J. Julien.

In the introduction, it is said, "This is not your standard treatise on the 'Five Points of Calvinism...'" This is very true! Succinctly and pointedly the authors deal with each aspect. Beginning with the underlying or overarching truth of them all is a section on the sovereignty of God. Then comes a chapter on each of the well-known Five Points.

Each chapter includes sections in which the subject is defined. Scriptural proofs are given and discussed. Even the difficult passages are discussed. Objections to and denials of the points are dealt with, as well. The practical importance of each point is explained, and how the point is related to the others in the series.

The writers have done a marvelous job of compiling and explaining the information. This is one of those home reference books that will be used often as we seek to be faithful to our Sovereign God.

Vos, Johannes G. *Genesis.* Published by Crown & Covenant Publications, Pittsburgh, PA., 2006. Originally published by the *Blue Banner of Faith and Life* in 1954-1957. 544 pp. \$20.00 pb/\$32.00h/c. Reviewed by Rev. W. H. Oord.

For the last four years, I have been leading our Tuesday Night Bible Study in a study of the Book of Genesis. This year we began with Chapter 17. Needless to say, it has been a very comprehensive study. In prepar-

ing for each lesson, I read as many commentaries as possible—both good and bad. Throughout the centuries, some theologians have dissected Genesis into parts that have become unrecognizable as the Word of God. I recall one commentary that actually blamed God for Cain's anger. After all, the writer argued, if God had accepted the sacrifice of Cain, he would not have lost his temper and killed his brother. And, yes, I did throw that commentary away.

Other writers uphold the glorious truths contained in this Book of Beginnings and offer gems of wisdom to readers seeking to understand the awesomeness of our great God. One such writer is J. G. Vos! J. G. Vos taught at Geneva College from 1954 to 1973, where for many years he served as the chairman of the Bible Department. Recently, I received a copy of his commentary with the very simple title: *Genesis.* J. G. Vos is the son of Dr. Geerhardus Vos of Princeton Seminary. Unlike his father, J. G. Vos writes in very simple, easy to understand language. He takes the book of Genesis and opens up one pearl after another.

J. G. Vos divides the Book of Genesis into three parts, each part containing several chapters, and each chapter containing three to four page lessons. At the end of each lesson there are questions offered to remind the reader of what he has just read. Most of the answers to the questions are found right in the lesson and do not lend themselves to discussion and therefore are not very helpful.

What is extremely helpful, however, is the succinct way in which Vos explains each passage. He often reviews what others have written in light of the Reformed faith. He interprets Scripture according to Scripture, making very certain that he does not read into the text something that it does not say. This aspect of Vos' writing is a great asset to the serious student of God's Word, especially after reading other commentaries who love to interject their "great findings" in the clear Word.

I would highly recommend this book to anyone who has a love for the Word of God and the Reformed faith. I have no doubt that it will be a great asset to any Bible Study.

Hyde, Daniel. *Jesus Loves the Little Children.* Grand Rapids, MI. Reformed Fellowship, 2006. 96 pp. \$9.50 paperback. Reviewed by Rev. W. Oord

If you enjoyed Rev. Hyde's thorough study of the Belgic Confession that appeared in *The Outlook* over

the last three years, you will truly enjoy his new book, *Jesus Loves the Little Children*.

Rev. Hyde, who comes out of the Pentecostal movement, became convinced of infant baptism as he became more and more convinced of the truth of the Reformed faith. His book is divided into eight easy to read and understandable chapters in which he looks at circumcision and baptism; the covenant and baptism; dedication or baptism, and other related issues.

This concise and powerful book is to be recommended to parents who are struggling with the idea of infant baptism as well as those in Reformed circles who do not have a clear understanding of what the Reformed faith teaches concerning this sacrament. It would make a great gift from consistories to new parents as it deals with the promises of God to their children and also the responsibilities that parents take upon themselves as they present their children to the Lord.

Parsons, Burk. *Assured By God*. Phillipsburg, NJ, P&R Publishing Company, 2006. 200 pp. \$18.00 hardcover. Reviewed by Rev. W. Oord.

During my years in the ministry, I have met people who lack assurance of their salvation and also people who have an overconfidence in presuming their salvation. I vividly recall trying to comfort a family who had lost a daughter, acknowledging her Christian testimony in word and deed, and speaking of the joy that was hers because she was now in glory. The eighty year old mother could only respond with the words, "We hope so." What grief must fill a home where there is no comfort in Christ nor assurance of His saving grace.

Burk Parsons has edited a wonderfully pastoral book that ministers to the hearts of those who question their salvation. He has compiled the writings of great, lucid writers such as Sinclair Ferguson who writes on the topic "Assurance Justified," Joel Beeke who writes on "The Fullness of Grace," John MacArthur who writes on "The Glory of True Repentance," R. C. Sproul who writes on "The Anatomy of Doubt and Assurance," and a host of others.

The ten essays contained in this book are easy to read and understand. They weave a wonderfully fine line between bringing assurance to the believer and keep-

ing a person from having a sense of false security. The end result is the humble Christian seeking to live in the fullness of God's grace.

Sproul, R. C. *Truths We Confess VI. 1*. Phillipsburg, N.J, P&R Publications, 2006. \$22.00 hardcover. Reviewed by Rev. W. Oord.

Those brought up on the three forms of unity are often not very familiar with the Westminster Confession of Faith. If you fit into this category, or if you love the Westminster Confession of Faith, I would encourage you to grab hold of a book written by one of my favorite authors, R. C. Sproul. In what will become a three volume exposition of the Westminster Confession of Faith, Dr. Sproul has set out to write a lasting commentary on the eternal truths of the Holy Scriptures.

In Volume One, Dr. Sproul explains the first eight chapters of the Westminster Confession of Faith dealing with the Holy Scripture, the Trinity, the decrees of God, creation, providence, the fall of the human race, God's covenant, and Christ our Mediator. Each chapter brings insights to many current issues, describes different controversies, and explains why Sproul holds the view that he does. For example, in the chapter dealing with creation, Sproul explains the gap theory, macroevolution, the Framework hypothesis, and the literal six day creation. He goes on to explain that, although he once held the Framework hypothesis as a viable theory, he does so no longer.

Throughout the volume, Sproul ties in the significance of each event and how it ties in with God's redemptive plan. He brings in many personal examples as well as examples from Scripture, general revelation, history, and the scientific world. All in all, the reader will find this book a pleasure to read and extremely helpful in the study of our great and awesome God.

Vander Kam, Henry. *Ephesians*. Grand Rapids, MI., Reformed Fellowship. Reprinted 2006. 127 pp. \$8.00 soft cover. Reviewed by Rev. W. Oord

One of the most popular Bible studies by Rev. Vander Kam is back in print. And it looks better than ever! Originally published in *The Outlook* decades ago, this

Bible Study is still relevant, and many of the issues it deals with are still current within the church.

The sixteen chapters in the book begin with the topic, “Our Glorious Redemption” and work their way through the Paul’s letter to the church in Ephesus to the topic of “The Whole Armor of God.” Other topics deal with salvation, redemption, the role of Jews and Gentiles in the church, unity within the church, and the pattern set by Paul for husbands, wives, and children, to name a few. Each lesson begins with an explanation of the passage and ends with questions that help bring about discussion within a group Bible study.

Ephesians is the first of several Bible Studies published by Reformed Fellowship that will take on the new look while still bringing forth the old truths of God’s Word. Other studies that have been in popular demand by Rev. Vander Kam, *Amos* and the long out of print *II Timothy and Titus*, should be available in the autumn of 2007. In addition, Reformed Fellowship is reprinting Rev. Piersma’s Bible Study on the book of *Daniel*, also available next Fall. For more information, contact the business office at (616) 532-8510 or visit www.reformedfellowship.net.

Freswick, Casey. *Postmodern Liberalism: Repainting a Non-Christian Faith (An Evangelical Critique of Rob Bell’s Velvet Elvis)*. Grand Rapids, Michigan, Reformed Fellowship, 2006. 19 pp. \$2.50 each; 10 for \$1.25 each; 50 for \$0.80 each. Reviewed by Rev. W. Oord.

First published in *The Outlook* in the January and February 2006 issues, Rev. Freswick’s booklet sheds the light of the Reformed faith upon the Emergent Church movement. While this pamphlet is a review of Rev. Rob Bell’s book, *Velvet Elvis*, it is in reality a critique of a movement that seems to be sweeping the country — especially the youth of the Reformed churches.

While many seem to be impressed by the music, style, and format of the worship, this new movement is exposed for its lack of sound teaching. Rev. Freswick writes about Rev. Bell’s approach to the truth, the virgin birth, and the Trinity, as just a few examples of the grievous errors that have come out of this church movement.

I would strongly encourage church leaders to pick up a copy of this pamphlet. In fact, it would be wise for youth leaders to pick up several copies for their youth group to use as a study guide, leading the youth of our church to an understanding that not everything that labels itself as “church” is necessarily true to the Word of God.



New Copies of 1976 “Blue” Psalter Hymnal Available

Reformed Fellowship, Inc., publisher of *The Outlook*, has arranged with CRC Publications to publish new copies of the 1976 Psalter Hymnal for a cost of US \$18.00 plus shipping from Grand Rapids, Michigan. Orders may be placed by churches and individuals. Payment will be required when the books are available early in 2007. Please include an e-mail address to help us contact you.

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Index - 2006

Volume LVI

compiled by the Editor

AUTHOR

- Anonymous**
Looking Out and About..1:23; 3:11; 4:31; 5:30; 6:32; 7:28; 9:24
Mid-America Reformed Seminary Commencement..7:29
- Barnes, Doug**
URCNA Classis Report: Central US.....3:19; 7:25; 9:8
- Barr, Abigail**
Indian Idolatry in Every Heart 10:29
- Boekestein, Bill**
God Binds His Covenant 8:3
- Dykstra, Joel**
Bearing the Cross 1:3
- Flodquist, Paul**
Joseph, the Husband of Mary 11:5
- Freswick, Casey**
New Breed of Conservatives, A 8:24
Postmodern Liberalism 1:16; 2:16
- Haan, Dow R., Sr.**
God's Salvation from Eternity to Eternity.....3:15; 4:20
- Holtslag, Andre**
Divine Judge Saves a Devastated People, A.....3:3
Psalm 46 and A Mighty Fortress Is Our God.....9:3
- Hossink, Kevin**
Breadwinner Blessings 10:3
- Hyde, Daniel**
URCNA Classis Report: Southwest US....3:18; 7:27
We Confess.....1:6; 2:5; 3:7; 4:8; 5:10; 6:10; 7:12; 8:21; 9:21
- Julien, Jerome**
Book Reviews11:22
- Kloosterman, David**
Reformed Education: A Doubtful Future.....10:8
Reformed Education: A Glorious Heritage.....9:9
- Larson, Mark J.**
Finding Happiness in God 5:29
Incarnate Word of God, The 4:24; 7:30
True Enlightenment.....2:11
True Worship, Our Response to Grace.....10:11
- Lems, Shane**
Family Visiting: Notes and Observations.....2:12
Two Parts of the Heidelberg Catechism, The.....6:14
- Linden, David**
Why Crucify, Why Not Stone4:4
- Lubbers, Greg**
Ungodly Departure, The9:28
- Miller, Brian**
Preaching the Saints7:5
Tension in Medieval Expositions9:5
- Mulder, Amanda**
Mission Trinidad2:24
- Nordeman, Gerard**
Press Release of the Meeting of the Combined Committees
re Church Order.....1:14; 5:23
- Nymeyer, Bradd**
Proposing Unity: URCNA & CanRC.....1:12
- Oord, Wybren**
Index 2006, VI. LVI.....11:26
Importance of the Ascension of Jesus, The.....5:27
Jeremiah Could Not Keep Still.....6:5
Prepare the Way.....11:3
This Is My Outlook.....2:30; 3:31; 6:30
URCNA Classis Report: Michigan.....3:20; 7:26; 11:13
Victorious Message, A.....4:3
See also: Book Reviews
- Overman, Steve**
Westminster Seminary California Commencement....7:28
- Pereszlonyi, Eikos**
Historical Overview of the Reformed Church in
Hungary.....3:22
- Pontier, Ralph**
Law or Love.....2:3
Meeting of the CEIR of the OPC with the CERCU of the
URCNA.....6:29
Sinful Servants.....6:3
- Rubingh, Vanessa**
On Angels: a Flaw in Reformed Practice.....11:7
- Stromberg, Mark**
Baptism: A Covenantal Sign and Seal.....8:6
Baptism: The Debate Behind the Debate.....5:6
Baptism: The Issue of Continuity.....6:7
Baptism: Should Infants of Believers be Baptized.....7:9
- Tangelder, Johan**
Celebrating the Lord's Day.....4:11; 5:14
Can We Welcome Muslims as Fellow Believers.....10:5
Islam Versus the Christian Concept of Freedom.....11:9

Van Dam, Nicolaas	
Bernardus Smytegelt	10:12
Gisbertus Voetius	3:26
Van der Woerd	
URCNA Classis Report: Western Canada	3:21
Vander Hart, Mark	
Bible Studies in Jacob.....	8:13; 9:13; 10:13; 11:14
Venema, Cornelis, P	
New Testament Evidence Regarding Paedocommunion	8:29; 9:25; 10:21
Old Testament Evidence Regarding the Participation of Children in Covenant Observances.....	4:26; 6:22; 7:20
Paedocommunion and the Reformed Confessions	1:20; 2:26; 3:27
Vos, Brian	
Looking Above	2:21; 3:12; 4:16; 5:19; 6:19; 7:16; 8:9; 10:25
White, J. Wesley	
If You Want to Enter Life, Keep the Commandments...	6:27
What We Should Learn From Hurricane Katrina.....	1:10
Wieske, Garrelt	
City of Love, The.....	7:3
The Way, The Truth, and the Life.....	5:3
Wynia, Dick	
Press Release of the Joint Meetings re Book of Praise/Song Book	2:9

ARTICLES

Baptism: A Covenantal Sign and Seal, M. Stromberg.....	8:6
Baptism: The Debate Behind the Debate, M. Stromberg.....	5:6
Baptism: The Issue of Continuity, M. Stromberg.....	6:7
Baptism: Should Infants of Believers be Baptized, M. Stromberg	7:9
Bearing the Cross, J. Dykstra.....	1:3
Bernardus Smytegelt, N. Van Dam.....	10:12
Bible Studies in Jacob, M. Vander Hart.....	8:13; 9:13; 10:13; 11:14
Breadwinner Blessings, K. Hossink.....	10:3
Can We Welcome Muslims as Fellow Believers, J. Tangelder.....	10:5
Celebrating the Lord's Day, J. Tangelder	4:11; 5:14
City of Love, The, G. Wieske.....	7:3
Divine Judge Saves a Devastated People, A. A. Holtslag.....	3:3
Family Visiting: Notes and Observations, S. Lems.....	2:12
Finding Happiness in God, M. Laron.....	5:29
Gisbertus Voetius, N. Van Dam.....	3:26
God Binds His Covenant, B. Boekestein.....	8:3
God's Salvation from Eternity to Eternity, D. Haan.....	3:14; 4:20
Historical Overview of the Reformed Church in Hungary, E. Pereszlonyi.....	3:22

If You Want to Enter Life, Keep the Commandments, W. White.....	6:27
Importance of the Ascension of Jesus, The, W. Oord.....	5:27
Index, W. Oord.....	11:29
Incarnate Word of God, The, M. Larson.....	4:24; 7:30
Indian Idolatry in Every Heart, A. Barr.....	10:29
Islam Versus the Christian Concept of Freedom, J. Tangelder.....	11:9
Jeremiah Could Not Keep Still, W. Oord.....	6:5
Joseph, the Husband of Mary, P. Flodquist.....	11:5
Law or Love, R. Pontier.....	2:3
Looking Above, B. Vos.....	2:21; 3:12; 4:16; 5:19; 6:19; 7:16; 8:9; 10:25
Looking Out and About ...	1:23; 3:11; 4:31; 5:30; 6:32; 7:28; 9:24
Meeting of the CEIR of the OPC with the CERCU of the URCNA, R. Pontier	6:29
Mid-America Reformed Seminary Commencement.....	7:29
Mission Trinidad, A. Mulder.....	2:24
New Breed of Conservatives, A. C. Freswick.....	8:24
New Testament Evidence Regarding Paedocommunion, C. Venema	8:29; 9:25; 10:21
Old Testament Evidence Regarding the Participation of Children in Covenant Observances, C. Venema.....	4:26; 6:22; 7:20
On Angels: A Flaw in Reformed Practice, V. Rubingh.....	11:7
Paedocommunion and the Reformed Confessions, C. Venema	1:20; 2:26; 3:27
Postmodern Liberalism, C. Freswick.....	1:16; 2:16
Preaching the Saints, B. Miller.....	7:5
Prepare the Way, W. Oord.....	11:3
Press Release of the Joint Meetings re Book of Praise/Song Book, D. Wynia	2:9
Press Release of the Meeting of the Combined Committees re Church Order, G. Nordeman.....	1:14; 5:23
Proposing Unity: URCNA & CanRC, B. Nymeyer.....	1:12
Psalms 46 and A Mighty Fortress Is Our God, A. Holtslag.....	9:3
Reformed Education: A Doubtful Future, D. Kloosterman.....	10:8
Reformed Education: A Glorious Heritage, D. Kloosterman.....	9:9
Sinful Servants, R. Pontier.....	6:3
Tension in Medieval Expositions, B. Miller.....	9:5
This Is My Outlook, W. Oord.....	2:30; 3:31; 6:30
True Enlightenment, M. Larson.....	2:11
True Worship, Our Response to Grace, M. Larson.....	10:11
Two Parts of the Heidelberg Catechism, The, S. Lems.....	6:14
Ungodly Departure, The, G. Lubbers.....	9:28
URCNA Classis Report: Central US, D. Barnes.....	3:19; 7:25; 9:8
URCNA Classis Report: Michigan, W. Oord.....	3:20; 7:26; 11:13
URCNA Classis Report: Southwest US, D. Hyde.....	3:18; 7:27
URCNA Classis Report: Western Canada, W. T. Van der Woerd.....	3:21
Victorious Message, A. W. Oord.....	4:3
Way, The Truth, and the Life, The, G. Wieske.....	5:3
We Confess, D. Hyde ...	1:6; 2:5; 3:7; 4:8; 5:10; 6:10; 7:12; 8:21; 9:21
Westminster Seminary California Commencement, S. Overman.....	7:28

What We Should Learn From Hurricane Katrina, J.W. White.....	1:10
Why Crucify, Why Not Stone, D. Linden.....	4:4

SUBJECTS

ANGELS

On Angels: A Flaw in Reformed Practice, V. Rubingh.....	11:7
---	------

APOCALYPSE

Looking Above, B. Vos	4:16
-----------------------------	------

ANGELS

On Angels: A Flaw in Reformed Practice, V. Rubingh.....	11:7
---	------

BAPTISM

Baptism: A Covenantal Sign and Seal, M. Stromberg.....	8:6
Baptism: The Debate Behind the Debate, M. Stromberg.....	5:6
Baptism: The Issue of Continuity, M. Stromberg.....	6:7
Baptism: Should Infants of Believers be Baptized, M. Stromberg.....	7:9
We Confess, D. Hyde.....	6:10

BELGIC CONFESSION

Article 29 - We Confess, D. Hyde.....	1:6
Article 30 - We Confess, D. Hyde.....	2:5
Article 31 - We Confess, D. Hyde.....	3:7
Article 32 - We Confess, D. Hyde.....	4:8
Article 33 - We Confess, D. Hyde.....	5:10
Article 34 - We Confess, D. Hyde.....	6:10
Article 35 - We Confess, D. Hyde.....	7:12
Article 36 - We Confess, D. Hyde.....	8:21
Article 37 - We Confess, D. Hyde.....	9:21

CANADIAN REFORMED CHURCH

Press Release of the Joint Meetings re Book of Praise/Song Book, D. Wynia.....	2:9
Press Release of the Meeting of the Combined Committees re Church Order, G.Nordeman.....	1:14; 5:23
Proposing Unity: URCNA & CanRC, B. Nymeyer.....	1:12

CHRIST - [See JESUS CHRIST]

CHRISTMAS

Joseph, the Husband of Mary, P. Flodquist.....	11:5
Prepare the Way, W. Oord.....	11:3

CHRISTIAN EDUCATION

Reformed Education: A Doubtful Future, D. Kloosterman.....	10:8
Reformed Education: A Glorious Heritage, D. Kloosterman.....	9:9
This Is My Outlook, W. Oord.....	2:30; 3:31

CHRISTIAN REFORMED CHURCH

New Breed of Conservatives, A, C. Freswick.....	8:24
---	------

CHURCH

Family Visiting: Notes and Observations, S. Lems.....	2:12
Looking Above, B. Vos	8:9

Looking Out and About ...	1:23; 3:11; 4:31; 5:30; 6:32; 7:28; 9:24
This Is My Outlook, W. Oord.....	2:30
We Confess, D. Hyde.....	1:6; 2:6

CHURCH HISTORY

Bernardus Smytegelt, N. Van Dam.....	10:12
Gisbertus Voetius, N. Van Dam.....	3:26
Historical Overview of the Reformed Church in Hungary, E. Pereszlonyi.....	3:22

CHURCH ORDER

Press Release of the Meeting of the Combined Committees re Church Order, G.Nordeman.....	1:14
We Confess, D. Hyde.....	4:9

CHURCH UNITY

Meeting of the CEIR of the OPC with the CERCU of the URCNA, R. Pontier.....	6:29
Press Release of the Joint Meetings re Book of Praise/Song Book, D. Wynia.....	2:9
Press Release of the Meeting of the Combined Committees re Church Order, G.Nordeman.....	1:14; 5:23
Proposing Unity: URCNA & CanRC, B. Nymeyer.....	1:12
Sinful Servants, R. Pontier.....	6:3
This is My Outlook, W. Oord.....	2:30

CONVERSION

God's Salvation from Eternity to Eternity, D. Haan.....	3:14
---	------

COVENANT

Baptism: A Covenantal Sign and Seal, M. Stromberg.....	8:6
Baptism: Should Infants of Believers be Baptized, M. Stromberg.....	7:9
God Binds His Covenant, B. Boekestein.....	8:3

DEACONS

We Confess, D. Hyde.....	2:7
--------------------------	-----

DISCIPLINE

Ungodly Departure, The, G Lubbers.....	9:28
We Confess, D. Hyde.....	1:9; 4:8
What We Should Learn From Hurricane Katrina, J.W. White.....	1:10

EASTER

Victorious Message, A, W. Oord.....	4:3
-------------------------------------	-----

ELDERS

Family Visiting: Notes and Observations, S. Lems.....	2:12
We Confess, D. Hyde.....	2:7

ELECTION

Bible Studies in Jacob, M. Vander Hart.....	8:14
God's Salvation from Eternity to Eternity, D. Haan.....	3:14

FAITH

God's Salvation from Eternity to Eternity, D. Haan.....	3:14
Postmodern Liberalism, C. Freswick.....	1:16
True Enlightenment, M. Larson.....	2:11

FAMILY VISITING

Family Visiting: Notes and Observations, S. Lems.....	2:12
---	------

GLORIFICATION

God's Salvation from Eternity to Eternity, D. Haan...3:14; 4:20

GOVERNMENT

We Confess, D. Hyde.....8:21

HAPPINESS

Finding Happiness in God, M. Laron.....5:29

HEAVEN

Looking Above, B. Vos2:21; 3:12

HEIDELBERG CATECHISM

Two Parts of the Heidelberg Catechism, The, S. Lems...6:14

IDOLATRY

Indian Idolatry in Every Heart, A. Barr.....10:29

INDEX

Index - Volume LVI (2006), W. H. Oord.....11:22

ISLAM

Can We Welcome Muslims as Fellow Believers, J. Tangelder...10:5

Islam Versus the Christian Concept of Freedom, J. Tangelder....11:9

JACOB

Bible Studies in Jacob, M. Vander Hart ..8:13; 9:13, 10:13; 11:14

JESUS CHRIST**ASCENSION**

Importance of the Ascension of Jesus, The, W. Oord.....5:27

DEATH

Bearing the Cross, J. Dykstra.....1:3

Why Crucify, Why Not Stone, D. Linden.....4:4

DEITY

Incarnate Word of God, The, M. Larson.....4:24

OBEDIENCE

If You Want to Enter Life, Keep the Commandments,
W. White.....6:27

RESURRECTION

Victorious Message, A. W. Oord.....4:3

VIRGIN BIRTH

Postmodern Liberalism, C. Freswick.....2:17

JOHN THE BAPTIST

Prepare the Way, W. Oord.....11:3

JOSEPH

Joseph, the Husband of Mary, P. Flodquist.....11:5

JUDGMENT

Divine Judge Saves a Devastated People, A. A. Holtslag....3:3

Looking Above, B. Vos 4:16; 6:19

We Confess, D. Hyde.....9:21

What We Should Learn From Hurricane Katrina, J.W.
White..... 1:10

JUSTIFICATION

God's Salvation from Eternity to Eternity, D.
Haan..... 3:14; 4:20

Tension in Medieval Expositions, B. Miller.....9:5

KNOWLEDGE

Divine Judge Saves a Devastated People, A. A. Holtslag....3:3

True Enlightenment, M. Larson.....2:11

LAW

If You Want to Enter Life, Keep the Commandments, W.
White..... 6:27

Law or Love, R. Pontier.....2:3

Two Parts of the Heidelberg Catechism, The, S. Lems..6:14

LORD'S DAY

Celebrating the Lord's Day, J. Tangelder.....4:11

LORD'S SUPPER

Old Testament Evidence Regarding the Participation of
Children in Covenant Observances, C. Venema

..... 4:26; 6:22; 7:20

Paedocommunion and the Reformed Confessions, C.

Venema.....3:27; 4:26; 6:22

We Confess, D. Hyde.....7:12

We Confess, D. Hyde.....1:6

LOVE

City of Love, The, G. Wieske.....7:3

Law or Love, R. Pontier.....2:3

LUTHER, MARTIN

Psalm 46 and A Mighty Fortress Is Our God, A. Holtslag....9:3

Tension in Medieval Expositions, B. Miller.....9:5

MARTYRS

Looking Above, B. Vos5:19

MEDITATIONS

Bearing the Cross, J. Dykstra.....1:3

Breadwinner Blessings, K. Hossink.....10:3

City of Love, The, G. Wieske.....7:3

Divine Judge Saves a Devastated People, A. A.
Holtslag.....3:3

God Binds His Covenant, B. Boekestein8:3

Law or Love, R. Pontier.....2:3

Psalm 46 and A Mighty Fortress Is Our God, A. Holtslag....9:3

Prepare the Way, W. Oord.....11:3

Sinful Servants, R. Pontier6:3

Victorious Message, A. W. Oord.....4:3

Way, The Truth, and the Life, The, G. Wieske.....5:3

MID-AMERICA REFORMED SEMINARY

Mid-America Reformed Seminary Commencement.....7:29

MINISTERS

We Confess, D. Hyde.....2:6; 3:7

MISSIONS

Indian Idolatry in Every Heart, A. Barr.....10:29

Jeremiah Could Not Keep Still, W. Oord.....6:5

Mission Trinidad, A. Mulder.....2:24

NADERE REFORMATION

Bernardus Smytegelt, N. Van Dam.....10:12

Gisbertus Voetius, N. Van Dam.....3:26

ORTHODOX PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

Meeting of the CEIR of the OPC with the CERCU of the URCNA, R. Pontier6:29

PAEDOCOMMUNION

New Testament Evidence Regarding Paedocommunion, C. Venema.....8:29; 9:25; 10:21
Old Testament Evidence Regarding the Participation of Children in Covenant Observances, C. Venema.....4:26; 6:22; 7:20
Paedocommunion and the Reformed Confessions, C. Venema.....1:20; 2:26; 3:27

PAUL, THE APOSTLE

Law or Love, R. Pontier.....2:3

PENTECOST

Jeremiah Could Not Keep Still, W. Oord.....6:5

PREACHING

Looking Above, B. Vos7:16
Preaching the Saints, B. Miller.....7:5
We Confess, D. Hyde.....1:8

POSTMODERN LIBERALISM

Postmodern Liberalism, C. Freswick.....1:16

REFORMED FAITH

God's Salvation from Eternity to Eternity, D. Haan.....3:14
This Is My Outlook, W. Oord.....3:31

REGENERATION

God's Salvation from Eternity to Eternity, D. Haan.....3:14

REPROBATION

God's Salvation from Eternity to Eternity, D. Haan.....3:14

SACRAMENTS

Paedocommunion and the Reformed Confessions, C. Venema.....2:26
We Confess, D. Hyde.....5:10
We Confess, D. Hyde.....1:6

SALVATION

God's Salvation from Eternity to Eternity, D. Haan.....3:14

SANCTIFICATION

God's Salvation from Eternity to Eternity, D. Haan.....3:14; 4:20

SEMINARY

Mid-America Reformed Seminary Commencement7:29
Westminster Seminary California Commencement, S. Overman.....7:28

SMYTEGELT, BERNARDUS

Bernardus Smytegelt, N. Van Dam.....10:12

SYNOD

New Breed of Conservatives, A, C. Freswick.....8:24

THANKSGIVING

Breadwinner Blessings, K. Hossink.....10:3

TRINITY

Postmodern Liberalism, C. Freswick.....2:16

UNITED REFORMED CHURCHES IN NORTH AMERICA

Meeting of the CEIR of the OPC with the CERCU of the URCNA, R. Pontier.....6:29
Press Release of the Joint Meetings re Book of Praise/Song Book, D. Wynia.....2:9
Press Release of the Meeting of the Combined Committees re Church Order, G.Nordeman.....1:14; 5:23
Proposing Unity: URCNA & CanRC, B. Nymeyer.....1:12
This Is My Outlook, W. Oord.....2:30
URCNA Classis Report: Central US, D. Barnes....3:19; 7:25; 9:8
URCNA Classis Report: Michigan, W. Oord....3:20; 7:26; 11:13
URCNA Classis Report: Southwest US, D. Hyde..3:18; 7:27
URCNA Classis Report: Western Canada, W. T. Van der Woerd.....3:21

VOETIUS, GISBERTUS

Gisbertus Voetius, N. Van Dam.....3:26

WESTMINSTER SEMINARY

Westminster Seminary California Commencement, S. Overman.....7:28

WORLDLINESS

This Is My Outlook, W. Oord.....6:30

WORSHIP

Celebrating the Lord's Day, J. Tangelder.....4:11
True Worship, Our Response to Grace, M. Larson.....10:11
We Confess, D. Hyde.....4:8

BOOK REVIEWS

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Bell, Rob. *Velvet Elvis, Repainting the Christian Faith*. Reviewed by Rev. C. Freswick.....1:16; 2:16
Cammenga, Ronald and Ronald Hanko. *Saved By Grace; a study of the Five Points of Calvinism*. Second Edition. Grandville, MI: Reformed Free Publishing Association, 2002. xvii, 245 pp., including indices. \$17.95, hardcover; \$13.95, paper. [Also available: a study guide, \$4.95] Reviewed by Rev. J. Julien.....11:23
Comrie, Margaret S. *The Heroes of Castle Breton*. Neerlandia, AB, Pella, IA: Inheritance Publications, 2003. 229 pp. \$12.99 US1 paperback. Reviewed by Rev. J. Julien.....11:22
Freswick, Casey. *Postmodern Liberalism: Repainting a Non-Christian Faith (An Evangelical Critique of Rob Bell's Velvet Elvis)*. Grand Rapids, Michigan, Reformed Fellowship, 2006. 19 pp. \$2.50 each; 10 for \$1.25 each; 50

for \$0.80 each. Reviewed by Rev. W. Oord.....11:25

Hyde, Daniel. *Jesus Loves the Little Children*. Grand Rapids, MI. Reformed Fellowship, 2006. 96 pp. \$9.50 paperback. Reviewed by Rev. W. Oord.....11:23

Monsma, Timothy M. *Hope for the Southern World: Impacting Societal Problems in the Non-Western World*. CCW Books, Loveland, CO. Reviewed by Rev. T. Vanden Heuvel.....10:24

Parsons, Burk. *Assured By God*. Phillipsburg, NJ, P&R Publishing Company, 2006. 200 pp. \$18.00 hardcover. Reviewed by Rev. W. Oord.....11:24

Sproul, R. C.. *Truths We Confess VI. 1*. Phillipsburg, N.J, P&R Publications, 2006. \$22.00 hardcover. Reviewed by Rev. W. Oord.....11:24

Tucker, Charlotte Maria. *Driven into Exile: a Story of the Huguenots*. (Huguenot Inheritance Series #5) Neerlandia, AB, Pella, IA: Inheritance Publications, 2003. 141 pp., paperback. \$8.90 US. Reviewed by Rev. Jerome Julien.....11:22

Vander Kam, Henry. *Ephesians*. Grand Rapids, MI., Reformed Fellowship. Reprinted 2006. 127 pp. \$8.00 soft cover. Reviewed by Rev. W. Oord.....11:24

Vos, Johannes G. *Genesis*. Published by Crown & Covenant Publications, Pittsburgh, PA., 2006. Originally published by the *Blue Banner of Faith and Life* in 1954-1957. 544 pp. \$20.00 pb/\$32.00h/c. Reviewed by Rev. W. H. Oord.....11:22

Galatians 3:13, 14.....4:7

Galatians 3:15, 16.....6:7

Ephesians 4:7.....2:11

Colossians 2:11, 12.....8:7

Titus 3:5.....8:8

Titus 3:10.....2:30

Hebrews 8:10.....6:7

I John 2:3-6.....2:3

Revelation 3:12a.....7:3

Revelation 5:8-14.....2:21

Revelation 5:8-14.....3:12

Revelation 6:1-8.....4:16

Revelation 6:9-11.....5:19

Revelation 6:12-17.....6:19

Revelation 7:1-3.....7:16

Revelation 7:4-8.....8:9

Revelation 7:9-14.....10:25

Revelation 21:3.....6:7

SCRIPTURE REFERENCES

Genesis 3:15.....6:7

Genesis 17:7.....6:7

Genesis 25:19-26.....8:13

Genesis 25:27-34.....8:17

Genesis 27:1-29.....9:13

Genesis 27:30-28:9.....9:17

Genesis 28:10-22.....10:13

Genesis 29:1-30.....10:17

Deuteronomy 21:23.....4:4

Judges 2:10.....3:3

Psalms 46.....9:3

Psalms 128:1.....10:3

Jeremiah 31:33.....6:7

Ezekiel 20:37.....8:3

Ezekiel 37:26, 27.....6:7

Matthew 28:10.....8:6

Mark 15:21.....1:3

Luke 3:3.....11:3

John 12:32, 33.....4:7

John 14:6.....5:3

Acts 2:38-41.....8:7

Acts 4:27.....4:6

Acts 22:16.....8:7

Romans 6:3.....8:7

II Corinthians 6:16.....6:7

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Acts (Chapters 1-13)

Acts (Chapters 14-28)

Nelson Kloosterman

Walking About Zion,

Singing of Christ's Church in the Psalms

Gospel Power Magnified through

Human Weakness (*II Corinthians*)

The Law of the Lord as Our Delight

(*Deuteronomy*)

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Mark Vander Hart

Genesis 1 - 11

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(continued from page 13)

voted in favor of overturing synod to adopt the RCUS report. Three delegates asked that their negative vote be recorded in the minutes of classis.

The third overture also dealt with justification. Classes deemed that the decision made on the second overture was our answer to the third overture.

In other matters, Rev. David Klumpenhouwer and Elder Marv Vander Berg were appointed to the Classis Mission Committee and Rev. Brian Vos was appointed as Church Visitor. Several churches sought and received advice from classis.

We give thanks to our God for the work that was accomplished at classis and pray that it may be beneficial to the churches.

—Submitted by Rev. W. H. Oord
Clerk of Classis

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