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# The Outlook

Dedicated to the Exposition and Defense of the Reformed Faith



• An Old Testament Romance • The Ten Plagues: A Foreshadowing of What is to Come • Looking Above • New Work for MINTS

• Bible Studies on Jacob • Trust and Obey • The Power of Language • Baptism, Election, and the Covenant of Grace • Authority of Jesus

**An Old Testament Romance.....3**  
*Rev. Oord* examines a tender love story that pictures God’s great love for His people.

**The First Plague: A Foreshadowing of What is to Come.....6**  
*Rev. Stromberg* delves into the first plague to strike Egypt and the meaning it had for the Egyptians.

**Looking Above.....8**  
*Rev. B. Vos* begins his review of Revelation 8 as he explains the half hour of silence before the throne of God.

**Allen Vander Pol’s New Work for MINTS.....11**

**Bible Studies on Jacob.....12**  
*Rev. Vander Hart* supplies readers with his next installment of studies on the life of this Patriarch.

**Trust and Obey..... 18**  
 Winning Second Place in the Adult Division of *The Outlook’s* Essay Contest, *Mrs. Glenda Mathes* recalls some songs from her youth.

**The Power of Language..... 21**  
*Rev. J. Tangelder*, writes an article warning readers about the dangers of inclusive language.

**Baptism, Election, and the Covenant of Grace.....25**  
*Dr. R. S. Clark* provides his view of Federal Vision and the dangers it presents to the Reformed faith in this first article of a series.

**The Authority of Jesus.....28**  
*Mr. Bryan Miller* presents an intriguing article about the view the Pharisees had of Jesus.

(ISSN 8750-5754) (USPS 633-980)  
 “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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 Send all copy to:  
 Editor, Rev. Wybren Oord  
 7724 Hampton Oaks Dr.  
 Portage, MI 49024  
 Phone: (269) 324-5132 Fax: (269) 324-9606  
 Email: editor@reformedfellowship.net  
 Website: www.reformedfellowship.net

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**Editor:** Wybren Oord  
**Contributing Editor:**  
 Dr. Cornelis P. Venema  
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**Editorial Office**

7724 Hampton Oaks Dr.  
 Portage, MI 49024  
 (269) 324-5132 Phone  
 (269) 324-9606 Fax  
 editor@reformedfellowship.net  
 or wybath@juno.com Email

**Circulation Office**

3363 Hickory Ridge Ct.  
 Grandville, MI 49418  
 (616) 532-8510 Phone

**Business Mailing Address**

3363 Hickory Ridge Ct.  
 Grandville, MI 49418  
 Email: reffellowship@iserv.com

# An Old Testament Romance

*When the Lord first spoke through Hosea, the Lord said to Hosea, ‘Go take to yourself a wife of harlotry...’ (Hosea 1:2)*

Valentine’s Day is not a religious holiday. There are no special services in the church; no Hallmark cards with biblical scenes; no special hymns dedicated to this day being considered for inclusion in the new URC Psalter Hymnal or Can RC Book of Praise. It is a holiday filled with love stories, and one of the greatest and perhaps strangest of all true love stories in the history of the human race is found within God’s Word. It is the account of the prophet Hosea and his marriage to the unfaithful Gomer.

## Hosea and Gomer

There was a time in the history of Israel when God came to one of his servants, a prophet named Hosea. God told Hosea that he was to illustrate through his own life the relationship that God has with His people. To make this illustration compelling, God told Hosea to marry a prostitute—someone he knew would be unfaithful to him.

Some commentaries claim that Hosea was the son of the High Priest. That, along with the fact that he was a prophet, made him very well known to the Israelites. His marriage to anyone would have made headlines. Now it was scandalous! The Israeli National Enquirer must have had a field day with this marriage. You can almost see the Headlines: “Prophet Marries Porn Star” or “Hosea Hitches Up With Harlot.”

God told Hosea that his marriage would be a dramatic pageant played out before the nations of Israel and Judah. Hosea would play the role of the loving and faithful God. The erring wife, Gomer, would be cast in the role of the perverse nation. She would play the harlot with many lovers, even as Israel had left the one true God and gone after a multitude of strange gods. At the very heart of this pageant was the fact that through all of her unfaithfulness, Hosea would remain faithful. In spite of Gomer’s greatest disloyalty, Hosea would remain loyal.

## Gomer and Her Lovers

Not long after the vows were exchanged, Gomer no longer felt satisfied with her faithful, loving husband. She left her husband and began living with other men. Each lover Gomer had was poorer than the previous one and brought her lower and lower into degradation and filth. It became so bad that Gomer’s lover could no longer support her.

In such times, Hosea would provide for Gomer even in her run-away life. When she reached the very lowest point of her folly in the very depths of her sin, even then, she would find her husband ready to take her out of her misery and restore her to the joy of faithfulness and righteousness. In that way, the couple would

provide a dramatic display of Jehovah’s faithfulness. Hosea, the loving husband would come and leave food and clothes on the doorstep so that Gomer could eat and be presentable.

Gomer’s lover thought that was great! “No fool like an old fool,” he must have thought to himself as he gathered up the things Hosea left on the doorstep and took credit for them himself. We can almost visualize Hosea lurking in the shadows to catch a glimpse of the one whom he loves and making sure that she was well provided for. How he must have wept as he saw Gomer embrace her lover and thank him for the gifts that he had brought.

“Now,” God says to Israel, “this is how I treat you—like Hosea treated Gomer; and you treat Me like Gomer treats Hosea.” The account of Hosea and Gomer is a picture of God and us! God is the faithful husband and we are the adulterous wife. God pays all our bills, giving us the ability to work and accomplish our tasks. God gives us the sun and the rain, the seasons as they follow their course. God fills our pantries, our freezers, and our homes. He gives us all that we could ever ask for—and more. Yet, in our sinful nature we run away from God. We turn to other gods such as the gods of materialism, self-centeredness, complacency, and a host of others, each one worse than the previous one. But God says, “I still love you. I will still provide for you.”

We, like Gomer, run away from the One who loves us. “We say

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***“Go, Hosea,” says Jehovah. “Love her as the Lord loves the Israelites.”***

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“I have gotten away from Him! I have no need of Him!” The same words Gomer must have said of her husband, Hosea. Then Jehovah touches us on the arm and says, “No, you have not gotten away from Me. I am right here and I am telling you that I love you and that I am providing for you.

Still, we pull away from God and run. We try to hide our faces from God just as Adam and Eve did in the Garden of Eden. We enjoy living in our sin. Yet, wherever we go, God says, “I am there already.”

There are those who would argue that God does not love us when we run away from Him. But He does! Have you ever run away from God, and didn't God give you the strength to do it? Didn't the prodigal's father give his son his rightful inheritance, thereby allowing his son to squander it? And didn't he love his son despite his son's running away from him? Didn't Hosea's heart go out to Gomer as he saw her sell herself to those who cared nothing for her? Are these not examples of God's great love for us even while we are in our sin? For while we were yet sinners--living like Gomer--Christ died for us!

#### **Gomer the Slave**

Hosea is the perfect example of God's great forgiveness and the great example of God's immeasurable love. He kept on loving Gomer

even as she sank lower and lower into the depths of her degradation. She sank so low that, in Hosea 3, she has become a slave put upon the auction block.

We know a great deal about the slave market in ancient times. Almost half the population was in slavery to the other half. Hardly a day would go by when, in any given city, human beings would be sold on the open market. Ancient writers have left terrible and grotesque pictures of the sale of human souls. The life of the slave was utterly worthless. He or she would be at the mercy of the highest bidder, whoever that bidder might be.

It is to a scene such as this that Hosea arrives. Jehovah had told him to go a purchase the wife that he has loved for so long but now was being sold on the auction block. Suddenly, before his very eyes appears his wife. She is stripped and exposed to the crowd. Through the cat-calls and the scorn came the bids: three pieces of silver...now five...now eight...do I hear ten?

Hosea bids fifteen pieces of silver. The market is tense. The low bidders have all dropped out. Someone shouts “Fifteen pieces of silver and a bushel of barley.” Hosea responds, “Fifteen pieces of silver and ten bushels of barley.”— an outrageous price for a slave! The auctioneer looks around and unable to get another

bid announces that the woman has been sold to Hosea.

Hosea? Isn't that the slave girl's husband? The curious onlookers watch in amazement as the husband goes up to his wife, takes her from the auction block and leads her into the anonymity of the crowd.

Does the Lord love like that? Before sending Hosea to the slave auction, God told Hosea, “Love her as the Lord loves Israel” (Hosea 3:1). “But Lord, she's a prostitute sold on the auction block as an adulterous slave!”

“Go, Hosea,” says Jehovah. “Love her as the Lord loves the Israelites.”

Under ancient law a person could do as he pleased with any slave he had purchased. Can you imagine the thoughts that must have run through Gomer's mind as she realized it was Hosea who had purchased her--the very one to whom she had been unfaithful? If Hosea had taken this woman and told her that she was going to be punished for all her infidelities, if he tortured her to within an inch of her life, he would have been free to do so.

Although that may have been what Gomer expected and what she deserved, it is not what Hosea does. Remember, Hosea is reflecting the love that God has toward His own and God never acts that way toward the ones whom He has bought with His own precious blood.

Instead, Hosea says: “You shall stay with me for many days. You

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shall not play the harlot, nor shall you have a man; so I will also be toward you” (Hosea 3:3). Understood properly, those words jump out at our heartstrings. They are words filled with emotion. What Hosea could not receive from the free will of his wife, he now has every right to demand of her because he has bought her.

She was to remain with him in faithfulness. This was her place because for this reason she had been purchased. No longer could she be a plaything passed from one man to the next. She belonged body and soul to Hosea. He bought her and she was to be faithful to him.

Sound familiar? Remember, dear Christian, that Gomer represents you! What God could not receive from us from our free will, He now has every right to demand of us since He has bought us—not with silver or gold—but with His own blood. We are to remain faithful to Him. This is our place because it is for this purpose that we have been purchased. No longer can we be playthings bouncing from one false god to the next. We belong body and soul to our faithful Savior, Jesus Christ.

### **God’s Faithfulness**

Even more extraordinary than the words that Hosea has for Gomer are the words that Hosea adds for himself. After his commands for her, he adds: “so I will also be toward you.”

Here the love of Hosea truly shines through. He is demanding of Gomer faithfulness. He has every right to do so because it was for that purpose that he

bought her. But he adds that he will also be faithful toward her! He does not have to do that. She is his slave.

In our salvation we are married to Jesus Christ. He took the vows first. When He brings us into the church He says: “I, Jesus, take you, sinner, to be My bride.” In that vow He promises, “I will betroth you to Me forever; Yes, I will betroth you to Me in righteousness and in justice, in loving kindness and compassion. And I will betroth you to Me in faithfulness. Then you will know the Lord.” (Hosea 2:19, 20).

The symbol of the vow that the Bridegroom made with us was not a gold band to wear around our finger, but it was the body pierced upon the cross, His blood shed for our lives.

Jesus Christ has shown His love to us. We have slipped into flirtation and allowed ourselves to be seduced by others. Even so, Jesus remained faithful. He loved us even though we were unlovely; He was true to us even while we were filled with lies to Him; He fed us and nurtured us even while we fled from Him and gave thanks to our other lovers for the gifts that He provided.

Jesus followed us through every step of our wandering and bought us back when we were on the auction block. As Jeremiah noted, “He has loved us with an everlasting love.” John wrote in John 13, as the disciples entered the Upper Room before the Last Supper, “Having loved His own who were in the world, He loved them to the end” (John 13:1).

Our response should be complete devotion to our Savior, seeking to be faithful to Him in all that we do. He has brought us out of our degradation and sin and promised His faithfulness to us.

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

# The First Plague:

## A Foreshadowing of What is to Come

In the book of Exodus there is a conflict between Jehovah and Pharaoh. The conflict is really between Jehovah and the false gods of Egypt. The ten plagues as they are recorded in the book of Exodus represent ten mighty acts of judgment against Egypt and her false gods. The ten acts of judgment serve as a mere foreshadowing of the plagues that God will impose on the followers of Satan at the end of time. At the end of time God's judgment on the earth will far exceed the ten mighty acts that God imposed on Pharaoh and all of Egypt. The plagues associated with the end of time are symbolically portrayed in the book of Revelation.

Likewise, the salvation that Israel experienced portrays the salvation of God's people. This salvation was secured by Jesus Christ at the time of His first coming and will be experienced in fullness when Jesus Christ returns in glory and power. As we consider Exodus 7 and the first plague, we should ask ourselves about the significance of this plague. Why did God begin to judge Egypt by first striking the Nile river?

### The Nile River

The ancient Egyptians considered the Nile river to be the primary source of life. As a result, the Egyptians worshiped the Nile. They personified the Nile River as a god with the name Hapi. This is illustrated through a hymn to the god of the Nile:

*Hail to your countenance, Hapi,  
Who goes up from the land, who*

*comes to deliver Kemit (Egypt).  
Who brings food, who is  
abundant of provisions,  
Who creates every sort of his  
good things.  
Who is enduring of customs, who  
returns at his due season,  
Who fills Upper and Lower Egypt.  
Everything that has come into  
being is through his power;  
There is no district of living men  
without him.*

From this hymn it is clear that the Egyptians considered the Nile to be the source of life and the source of all that was good in Egypt. By striking the Nile, Jehovah was demonstrating that He was sovereign over the Nile River. Ultimately, all of Egypt was dependent, not on Hapi, but on Jehovah. Jehovah was the source of life in Egypt, and likewise Jehovah was the source of everything good in Egypt. The turning of water into blood was an act of judgment against Pharaoh and the false gods of Egypt, particularly the false god, "Hapi" who represented the Nile.

However one might seek to understand the significance of the first plague, it is clearly a significant moment! It is completely wrong headed to say, as one Bible commentator does, that the first three plagues were little more than a softening up process, a major nuisance but little more.

This plague follows the event in which Aaron threw his staff to the ground and it became a snake. His snake

then consumed the snakes that Pharaoh's magicians had produced through their magic arts. The fact that Aaron's snake destroyed all the snakes that Pharaoh's magicians produced was a sign portraying the destruction of Egypt and the supremacy of Jehovah. This first plague marked the beginning of Egypt's demise. Judgment has come upon the house of Pharaoh.

### Judgment by Water

There is a parallel between this plague and the death of the Egyptian army in the Red Sea. Both the beginning and the end of Israel's deliverance involve water. Both events are mighty acts of God and both events use water as a source of judgment. In other words, the first plague and the Red Sea frame the story of deliverance. This is certainly consistent with the New Testament concept of baptism as an act of judgment and an act of salvation. The waters of baptism are the waters of judgment for everyone that dies in unbelief. But for everyone that believes, they are the waters that purify. The same waters that portray judgment are the same waters that portray salvation. This is also consistent with the Genesis flood. The same waters that destroyed evil men purified the earth. The difference was where you stood, whether you were in the ark or outside the ark.

Another reason why this was the first plague has to do with what has already taken place. In Exodus 1, Pharaoh commanded all the Hebrews to cast their infant sons into the Nile. He tried to turn the Nile into an instrument of death against the Hebrews. But now, by the command of God, the Nile had been turned against Egypt.

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When Jehovah turned the waters of the Nile into blood, all the fish died and the water was no longer fit for human consumption. This was a great hardship for the Egyptians. They depended on the Nile for food, irrigation, and drinking water. The very thing that had been a source of life was now a source of death.

Ironically, the very instrument that Pharaoh had tried to use against God's people was now turned against Egypt. And Pharaoh remained powerless to change this; he did not have the ability to undo what God had put in place.

Judgment begins with the Nile because Pharaoh had already used the Nile as an instrument of judgment against God's people. Since Pharaoh had already used the Nile in this manner, it seems fitting that God would first strike the Nile and use it as an instrument of judgment. By so doing, God would demonstrate His sovereignty over the Nile and over Pharaoh. The Nile is the servant of Jehovah, not the servant of Pharaoh.

The first plague was both a retribution for the previous attempt to kill the infant males of Israel, and it was a preview of Egypt's ultimate fate. The waters of the Nile will no longer bring security and prosperity to Egypt. Through the instrument of water, the Red Sea, the elite males of Egypt will perish. Their bodies will wash up on the shores of the Red Sea just as Pharaoh had intended for the infant males of Israel to wash up on the banks of the Nile. Judgment and deliverance begin and end with the use of water.

### **Judgment by God**

By way of application the entire plague account is a mere foreshadowing of the plagues that will strike

the followers of Satan at the end of time. This first plague is prominent in the description of the judgment associated with the end-times. The apostle John makes use of this plague in Revelation 16:3-4 when he describes the second and third bowls as an act of judgment.

“The second angel poured out his bowl on the sea, and it turned into blood like that of a dead man, and every living thing in the sea died. The third angel poured out his bowl on the rivers and springs of water, and they became blood” (Revelation 16:3-4). The similarities between this description and the account in Exodus are obvious. The only real difference is the extent and the intensity of the plagues in Revelation are much greater than the plagues in Exodus. The second and third bowls in Revelation includes the sea and all the waterways of the earth. Just as all of Egypt was covered in blood, in the end-times all the earth will be covered with blood, but the devastation will be much greater than what Egypt experienced.

Still another angel, who had charge of the fire, came from the altar and called in a loud voice to him who had the sharp sickle, “Take your sharp sickle and gather the clusters of grapes from the earth's vine, because its grapes are ripe.” The angel swung his sickle on the earth, gathered its grapes and threw them into the great winepress of God's wrath. They were trampled in the

winepress outside the city, and blood flowed out of the press, rising as high as the horses' bridles for a distance of 1,600 stadia.

(Revelation 14:18-20).

At the end of time, God's wrath will be poured out on the earth. Every man will experience either God's judgment or His salvation. Just as the turning of water into blood in Exodus was a just retribution because Pharaoh had commanded the Hebrews to destroy their infant sons, likewise John describes the turning of the Sea and the waterways into blood as a just act of retribution against the seed of the serpent for shedding the blood of God's people and His prophets.

Satan has been conquered. He was cast down from heaven with a third of the angelic host, but Satan continues to be active in this age. The conflict between the two seeds continues in this age, but the conflict takes place according to the will of God. We should never think that God is any less sovereign now than He was in the book of Exodus. We can rest in the knowledge that this world is never outside of God's control. We can also rest in the knowledge that God's judgment is just.

Then I heard the angel in charge of the waters say: “You are just in these judgments, you who are and who were, the Holy One, because you have so judged; for they have shed the blood of your

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*The very instrument that Pharaoh had tried to use against God's people was now turned against Egypt.*

saints and prophets, and you have given them blood to drink as they deserve.” And I heard the altar respond: “Yes, Lord God Almighty, true and just are your judgments.

(Revelation 16:5-7)

In conclusion, you can be assured that God rules over the earth just as he ruled over Egypt in the book of Exodus. It is a mistake to think of the Exodus as a historical fact that has no bearing on your life. If you call upon Jesus Christ as your Lord and Savior, then you know what it is to be led out of sin and darkness. You can rest in the knowledge that your salvation has already been secured by the finished work of Christ. You can be assured that you will know the salvation of your God in its perfected form when he returns in glory as the great Judge and as your Savior.

Your life ultimately will be defined either by God’s judgment or by God’s salvation. Peter wrote “Since everything will be destroyed in this way, what kind of people ought you to be? You ought to live holy and godly lives as you look forward to the day of God and speed its coming. Therefore, dear friends, since you already know this, be on your guard so that you may not be carried away by the error of lawless men and fall from your secure position. But grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. To him be glory both now and forever! Amen” (2 Peter 3:17-18).

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

## Looking Above

### A Series on The Revelation of Jesus Christ

Revelation 8:1-2

“A Half-Hour of Silence”

*He is There and He is Not Silent* is the title Francis Schaeffer gave to his book in 1972. Did Francis Schaeffer get it right? Are you sure God is there? Are you sure God is not silent?

Fire rages across the plains of the West destroying thousands of acres of land, incinerating homes, claiming lives—people simply going about their ordinary business, caught off-guard and consumed in the searing heat. Fire ravages the earth, destroying the land, killing thousands. Where is God? Are you sure God is there? Are you sure God is not silent?

Hurricanes sweep across the Southeast, bringing high winds and tidal waves, destroying communities and homes, claiming lives—people simply going about their ordinary business, caught off guard and consumed in the torrent. Where is God? Are you sure God is there? Are you sure God is not silent?

Flooding consumes the South, burying homes and businesses in a watery grave, claiming lives—people simply going about their ordinary business, caught off guard and drowned in the ever-increasing waters. Where is God? Are you sure God is there? Are you sure God is not silent?

Storms thunder across the Midwest—thunder, lightning, tornadoes—destroying homes and communities at random, claiming the

lives of many—people simply going about their ordinary business, caught off guard and killed by these onslaughts of nature. Where is God? Are you sure God is there? Are you sure God is not silent?

What about the work of Satan and his minions? Is he not prowling about like a roaring lion seeking whom he may devour? Is not he not masquerading as an angel of light with the purpose of deceiving many? How many does he sweep into his traps: alcoholism, pornography, abuse, divorce, and on and on the list could go? Does he not torment many a soul? Does he not ruin many lives? Where is God? Are you sure God is there? Are you sure God is not silent?

What about wars and rumors of wars? What about the thousands who lose their lives every year in battle and war? War ravages the earth leaving untold carnage and destruction in its path: bodies charred and strewn across the land, blood flowing in the streets. Where is God? Are you sure God is there? Are you sure God is not silent?

At times, we must confess, it seems there is no purpose to this world. It seems that everything has become chaos and that history continues to march forward with no rhyme or reason. At times, we must confess, it seems that God is not there. It seems that God is silent.

It is that silence that Revelation 8:1

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*Everywhere in the book it seems, there has been activity! But now there is silence...*

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sets before us. “When He opened the seventh seal, there was silence in heaven for about half an hour.” That verse introduces and sets the context for all that follows in chapters 8-11. Chapters 8-11 are set in the context of heaven’s silence. They are set in the context of the silence of God.

Before we consider that silence and delve into chapters 8-11 (which constitute the third section of the book), it is fitting to remind ourselves of the structure of the book. Revelation is divided into seven sections: chapters 1-3, 4-7, 8-11, 12-14, 15-16, 17-19, and 20-22.

It has been our position that these seven sections are parallel. That is to say, each of these seven sections deals with the same period of time, namely the time between Christ’s first coming and His second coming. Each of these seven sections (1-3, 4-7, 8-11, 12-14, 15-16, 17-19, and 20-22) set before us the life of the church, as she lives in the midst of the world between the first coming of Christ and His return.

These seven sections, furthermore, are progressive in nature. They do not merely repeat themselves; there is progress as you move from section to section. Each section is to be thought of as a variation on the theme—each variation bringing us closer to the climax—each variation building up to the conclusion. Each section becomes more intensive, more alarming, more disturbing,

more horrific. Did you think chapters 1-3, with their seven letters to the seven churches, were intense? Did you think chapters 4-7, with the opening of the seven seals, were disturbing? Then wait till you hear the blasts of the seven trumpets in chapters 8-11!

Ironically, however, you will have to wait to hear the seven trumpets, for when the seventh seal is opened, there is silence!

That silence is remarkable. Everywhere in the book, it seems, there has been activity: from the Spirit setting before John the vision of the glorious Christ in chapter 1, to the writing down of the words of the Spirit in chapters 2-3; from the worship surrounding the throne in chapters 4 and 5 to the opening of the seals in chapter 6; from the sealing of the 144,000 in the first half of chapter 7 to the worship of the great multitude in the second half of chapter 7. Everywhere in the book it seems, there has been activity! But now there is silence...

In addition, everywhere in the book, it seems, there has been speech: from the voice of Christ Himself, likened to the sound of a trumpet, in chapter 1, to the words which the Spirit speaks to the churches in chapters 2-3; from the individual songs of the four living creatures and the twenty four elders in chapter 4 to the blending of their song in chapter 5; from the cry of the souls under the altar in chapter 6 to the

song of the redeemed in chapter 7. Everywhere in the book it seems, there has been speech! But now there is silence...

“There was silence in heaven for about half an hour.” What are we to make of that half hour of silence? Certainly, that silence sets the context for all that follows in chapters 8-11. Chapters 8-11 are set in the context of heaven’s silence. Chapters 8-11 are set in the context of the silence of God. That silence, though depicted only in terms of a half hour, spans the entire time period between the first and second coming of Christ. Revelation 8-11 characterizes that time period as a time of silence. Heaven is silent. God is silent. To be sure, He has spoken once in the coming of His Son, the Word made flesh, and He will speak again when Christ, called by the Name, “The Word of God”, returns. But now, between Christ’s first coming and His return, there is silence.

And that is where we live. We live between the first coming of Christ and His return, the very time period that is characterized in our text as a time of silence. Indeed, that is the way it seems, does it not?! At times it seems that God is not there! At times it seems that God is silent! At times it seems as though the whole scene at Golgotha is being repeated: we cry out to God, and there is no answer! We cry out to God, and there is no reply! We lift up our voice to heaven, and heaven is silent! Or so it seems.... Or so it seems....

But things are not always as they seem... We cannot read Revelation 8:1 and leave matters there. We cannot read Revelation 8:1, and

end with the apparent inactivity of God. We cannot read Revelation 8:1, and end with the apparent silence of God. We must move on to Revelation 8:2: “And I saw the seven angels who stand before God, and to them were given seven trumpets.”

We must understand the relationship between the half hour of silence and the blasting of the trumpets. These things are not to be read chronologically as though the trumpets blasts follow the half hour of silence. We have already said that the half hour of silence sets the context for the entirety of chapters 8-11, even spanning the entire time period between Christ’s first coming and His return. But now, breaking into that silence comes the blast of the trumpets! The trumpets sound, shattering the silence! The trumpets do not follow the half hour of silence, they shatter the half hour of silence! The trumpets blast into the silence—erupting in the silence—shattering the silence—and yes, even bringing that silence to an end!

Do you see what is going on here?! While it may seem that God is not there, while it may seem that God is silent, the trumpets tell you otherwise. The trumpets blasting into the silence proclaim that God is anything but inactive! The trumpets blasting into the silence proclaim that God is anything but silent! *He is there, and He is not silent!*

The first trumpet blasts, “And hail and fire followed, mingled with blood, and they were thrown to the earth. And a third of the trees were burned up, and all green grass was burned up” (8:7). The second trum-

pet blasts, “And something like a great mountain burning with fire was thrown into the sea, and a third of the sea became blood. And a third of the living creatures in the sea died, and a third of the ships were destroyed” (8:8-9). The third trumpet blasts, “And a great star fell from heaven, burning like a torch, and it fell on a third of the rivers and on the springs of water. The name of the star is Wormwood. A third of the waters became wormwood, and many men died from the water, because it was made bitter” (8:10-11). The fourth trumpet blasts, “And a third of the sun was struck, a third of the moon, and a third of the stars, so that a third of them were darkened. A third of the day did not shine, and likewise the night” (8:12).

And those are only the first four trumpets. Things will get worse. So terrible will be the sounding of the fifth, sixth, and seventh trumpets, an angel flies through the midst of heaven, saying with a loud voice, “Woe, woe, woe to the inhabitants of the earth, because of the remaining blasts of the trumpet of the three angels who are about to sound!”

These trumpets, you see, are harbingers. They are warnings. They are meant to sound the alarm. It may seem that God is inactive. It may seem that God is silent. But for those who have eyes to see, and for those who have ears to hear. God is there, and He is not silent. These trumpets have been sounding from the time of Christ’s first coming, and they will continue to sound—with ever increasing loudness—until the time

of Christ’s return. And then, the warnings will be over. These trumpets will fall silent, as they give way to the sounding of the last trumpet. Then all will know that He is there. Then all will know that He is not silent.

*He is there and He is not silent.* Francis Schaeffer heard the trumpet blasts. Francis Schaeffer got it right.

How about you? Do you hear the trumpet blasts? Do you take to hear their warning? Are you ready for the sounding of the last trumpet? From heaven’s perspective, it is only a half hour until it sounds!

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

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# Allen Vander Pol's

## New Work for MINTS

My purpose for this brief article is to ask you to consider the valuable ministry which Miami International Seminary (MINTS) is doing and to consider to support the work that I hope to do for the seminary.

Many of you know about the work of Rev. Neal Hageman. Rev. Hageman is an experienced missionary, and he has learned both from his experience and his studies in missiology what are some of the better ways to conduct education with church leaders overseas. In the past ten years the Lord has used him to establish Spanish study centers throughout Latin America. The number of students being taught by MINTS-supervised study centers has reached 2,000 students. The courses are Reformed in theology.

The workload has become so great that Rev. Eric Pennings, another URC minister, has taken some of the work over to lighten the burden for Rev. Hageman. Spanish studies are written for the Internet, and students who wish to study the material in a supervised way can join a MINTS study center.

Besides this expanding Spanish program, there are other MINTS teachers conducting studies in French and Turkish.

In the last twelve to eighteen months an increasing number of requests has come to MINTS from groups seeking studies in English.

These requests come from groups living in a great range of countries, including China, Belize, countries in Eastern Europe and Africa. There are at least twenty-one countries in all. I have been asked to supervise that English program.

My duties will include writing courses in English, giving supervision to the study groups, traveling to some of the study groups each year to make sure the work is being managed well, and assisting MINTS as it pursues accreditation at home and abroad.

When I was invited to consider working with MINTS, it seemed to me that this was the work I have been training for. After seminary I taught Bible and theology in Nigeria for two years. I loved the work of teaching church leaders cross culturally, and my interest in it has not diminished. But there were questions I was not able to answer. Since that time, as I studied in sermon preparation, I have learned how to answer many of the questions I was asked then. It seems to me that my work since seminary has trained me for this work.

Since MINTS has no denominational support for its mission program, my support will come from individuals and churches who contribute to my work. Gifts should be sent to my calling church, Pompton Plains Reformed Bible Church in Pompton Plains, New Jersey. They have established a committee that

will supervise my income and supervise my work. Since most of the work is conducted through the Internet, I plan to continue to live in Cape Coral, Florida. When a portion the my funding has come in, I will begin to work for MINTS and my work for the Cape Coral congregation will diminish. We would like my work to become fully funded as soon as possible.

Thank you for considering the work of MINTS and the part I hope to play in its work.

**Rev. Allen Vander Pol** currently serves as the pastor of the Trinity United Reformed Church in Cape Coral, Florida. In addition to teaching Bible and theology in Nigeria, Rev. Vander Pol has also served in New Zealand.

# Bible Studies on Jacob

## Lesson 11: Jacob Wrestles with a “Mysterious Stranger” at Peniel

Read Genesis 32:22-33

### Introduction

Jacob faces his brother Esau who, he learns, is coming to meet Jacob with four hundred men. Jacob’s response is typical of those who feel their back is to the wall: he becomes physically defensive, sends great gifts to Esau, but most importantly, he is thrown back to prayer to the living God. Jacob has nowhere else to go except to God. Only God has the words of everlasting life; only God has the power to save us alive.

### Jacob is left alone (32:22-24a)

The action in this story occurs at night. The sun will rise at verse 31. But before the sun rises, Jacob will send all of his family ahead of him by crossing the fords of the Jabbok. This is identified as the Wadi Zerqa (Zarqa), a dry-stream bed in which water flows only during the rainy season. It is located over 20 miles (about 32 km) north of the Dead Sea on the east side of the Jordan River. In other words, Jacob stands at the edge of the Promised Land of Canaan, but he is not quite there yet.

Sending his family and all his possessions over this brook at night would be a very cumbersome and even dangerous venture. This is something that almost certainly could not be done without moonlight and torches. But once all are across the stream, we read that Jacob was “left alone” (verse 24a).

It reminds us of the night spent 20 years earlier at Bethel when he was fleeing Esau and leaving the Promised Land. Once again Jacob, despite all his wealth in family and earthly goods, is totally vulnerable and defenseless.

### Who is the Stranger in the night?

Jacob is not a young man anymore, and yet we read that he engages in a wrestling match until daybreak. But who is his wrestling opponent? The text gradually reveals the identity, and both the reader and Jacob himself eventually recognize who this “mysterious Stranger” is. By the time dawn breaks, it has dawned on us all who He is.

Yet in the history of interpretation there have been a variety of explanations. Nahum Sarna (*Genesis*, p. 228), a Jewish commentator, says that Jacob struggled with “the celestial patron of Esau”! Some commentators in the higher-critical tradition say that Jacob’s opponent was a “Canaanite river god”! But what does Genesis 32 itself say? As the wrestling match begins, he is identified as a *man* (verse 24). But by daybreak, when the “man” tries to break off the match, the Stranger says that Jacob has wrestled with *God*. Jacob himself acknowledges this in verse 30 when he says that he had seen *God* face to face.

Read Hosea 12:2-5. There it says that he wrestled with an angel and

prevailed. So the Scripture calls the “mysterious Stranger” a man, God, and an angel. We have met this kind of identification combinations before. Three strangers come to meet Abraham in Genesis 18, and one of them is the LORD Himself and the other two are angels. Later on in Joshua 5:13ff, Joshua will meet a “man” with a drawn sword, but he turns out to be the Commander of the armies of heaven, the LORD (cf. Joshua 6:1). In Judges 13, the “angel of God” is the “man of God.” Many of these occasions are understood to be an appearance of the Lord Jesus Christ Himself, centuries before He is born in Bethlehem.

### Jacob under attack?

One question that comes to mind is this: why does this divine Being wrestle with Jacob? Is He attacking him? Perhaps this suggests a later encounter in Exodus 4:24, where Moses is going back to Egypt, at the command of the LORD, but God “attacks” Moses, indeed He tries to kill Moses! Is the LORD trying to prevent Jacob from returning to Canaan? Or, is the wrestling a kind of test, one similar to the LORD’s test of Abraham in Genesis 22, when He tells Abraham to sacrifice his only, beloved son? In the Bible to meet someone “face to face” can be an encounter that may be hostile, or it can be friendly. Is this just a “friendly wrestling match?”

Further head-scratching things come up later. If this being is divine, superhuman, an Old Testament appearing of Christ, then how do we understand verse 25, “When the man saw that he could not over-

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power him...”? Is this something that God could not do? Certainly if God is able to create all things by the power of His Word, surely He can defeat this elderly man, Jacob, even if he is in really good shape! God has come to Jacob in the form of a man, and He has even allowed Jacob to wrestle Him “successfully.” This is an instance of God’s merciful condescension: He comes down to our level to reveal something of Himself and of His purposes with mankind in the covenant of grace. But what is God revealing here?

At the same time, notice that Jacob has his hip dislocated (or made numb) by the simple touch of the Man’s hand. This suggests the superhuman strength and power of the Stranger. The Stranger does not “win” the wrestling match, and yet He can apply a single touch and wrench Jacob’s hip socket out of place.

#### **Jacob asks a blessing... and gets a new name**

The “mysterious Stranger” wants to break off the wrestling match as the dawn appears. It is not clear why He wishes to stop at that point. Perhaps it is because in the full light of the day, Jacob will “see” God, but that is a sure sentence of death. No one can see God and live.

Jacob has the strength to hold onto the Man. “I will not let you go unless you bless me!” To be sure, human beings in the Bible can bestow blessing, but certainly God alone can make any blessing effective. In any case, the greater blesses the lesser, and Jacob by now senses that he is holding onto a divine Person. Yet he is not so

much afraid as he is bold to ask for the blessing. Jacob sees that only God can give him a blessing. No more tricks or human cleverness will work now.

Rather than immediately giving Jacob a blessing, the Stranger asks for his name. Jacob, the name based on the word for “heel,” is his name. The Man says that his name will no longer be “Jacob,” but it will be “Israel.” Earlier God changed the name Abram (“exalted father”) to Abraham (sounds like a “father of a multitude”), and Sarai becomes Sarah (both names mean “princess”). The new name indicates something of the place and purpose the person will have in the unfolding of God’s redemptive program.

The name *Israel* means literally, “God struggles,” but not in the sense that God has trouble getting to His goal. Rather, this new name points out the nature of living in the covenant with the true God. Jacob has indeed struggled with two sets of opponents: with God and with men (e.g., Esau, Laban). Yet Jacob has overcome. In all these struggles God has been with Jacob. This is what He promises His own whom He has always loved. God’s presence with Jacob is not to endorse everything Jacob has done to other people. It is to carry him along so that God might establish a people of His own, so that they

might be the light of the world, so that the Christ would come in our flesh.

Jacob wants to know the name of his wrestling opponent. Fair is fair, after all: Jacob surrendered his name. Verse 29 reads, “Please tell me your name.” But the Stranger will not give it. He grants a blessing, but He remains closed-lip about His own name. He will leave that night, before the day breaks, and Jacob will have no name by which he can identify the Man.

#### **A blessing won at a price**

The Man blessed Jacob (verse 29c), just as Jacob had wanted. But the blessing comes at a price: Jacob limps as he walks, for he has been wounded in his thigh. The Man has yielded nothing, not even His name. Jacob must learn something in this night of wrestling. He—and God’s people today—must know that our covenant God is also tenacious, long-suffering, patient, to a people whose sins and sinful nature make them, in fact, worthy of eternal hell. God has committed Himself to His Word for the sake of the Christ and all the elect. Why does God even bother? The answer is because He has committed Himself to this, and it is all for His grace and glory. He will not break His Word. But that is the nature of divine, electing love.

Who won this wrestling match? If Jacob “won” against God, then meeting Esau will be no match at

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***The new name indicates something of the place and purpose the person will have in the unfolding of God’s redemptive program.***

all! “If he has survived meeting God, he will survive his meeting with Esau” (Wenham, *Genesis 16-50*, p. 297). Now Jacob knows something, not so much about his strength, but he knows something about his God. This is reflected in the name that Jacob gives to the place. “Peniel” means “face of God,” for Jacob makes a confession of faith, “I saw God face to face, and yet my life was spared.” As the morning dawns, it dawns on him that the God who will wrestle with him all night, the God who can dislocate his hip, is the God who is not poised to destroy him. He is the God who is really on his side. He is, after all, Immanuel (“God is with us”).

We have come full circle in a sense: when Jacob arrived at Bethel in Genesis 28, the sun set and it was night. Then the LORD God appeared to Jacob in a dream, and He gave him the promises of the covenant of grace. Twenty years of blessing pass. Now, in this chapter God comes at night as a Man to Jacob, blesses him especially in the gift of a new name. And now the sun rises over Jacob, re-named Israel, as he limps back to his family.

## Lesson 11: Points to ponder and discuss

1. One commentator says that the “two most significant events in the life of Jacob were nocturnal theophanies,” that is, God appears to him at night. The first was at Bethel (Gen. 28:10-22) and now here at Peniel. Each appearance (theophany) was life-changing. Why were these significant, and how were they life-changing?
2. Christ appears in the Old Testament before He is born at Bethlehem as the “Word made flesh.” Some of those appearances were already mentioned in the lesson. Can you think of others in the Old Testament? Think of those places where the “Angel of the LORD” is mentioned.
3. Jacob will not let the Stranger go until He gives Jacob a blessing. Why does Jacob want this blessing? He has been blessed before by his father Isaac (Gen. 27), and God has not only promised blessings to him, but also delivered in terms of family and possessions. Does Jacob want a blessing simply to be successful in meeting Esau? If so, is this a true act of piety?
4. How do we receive God’s blessings today? Why do we want His blessings—for ourselves, or for the coming of His Kingdom?
5. How, do you think, would Israelites hear and understand this story, especially what is revealed about the source of their national name? Why do we need to hear and meditate on this story today?
6. Sometimes Christians speak of periods of deep discouragement as the “dark night of the soul,” a time of depression and setbacks. Are we really ever abandoned by God? How can our faith hold onto God? What role can the Christian community play for brothers and sisters who go through such a period of darkness and discouragement?
7. The holy Trinity is three Persons. The Father does not appear, and the Holy Spirit is like the wind (cf. John 3), whose effects we can experience, but whose Person we cannot see. The second Person of the Trinity appears from time to time, supremely in the birth of Jesus in Bethlehem. But what does John see of Christ when he sees Him in Revelation 1?

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# Bible Studies on Jacob

## Lesson 12: Jacob and Esau

### Meet Again as Brothers

Read Genesis 33

#### Introduction

Jacob has met a “mysterious Stranger,” and they wrestled through the night. It becomes apparent that this Man is no ordinary human being. He gives to Jacob a new name—Israel—since he has struggled with God and won. Jacob has become the “winner” by sovereign permission and divine appointment. With this new name, this elect child of God now moves on in redemptive history. God has been with him during all these years of struggle, and God will continue to be with Israel (Jacob), even if He needs to struggle with him from time to time. The night of wrestling and struggle sets us up for the next great challenge that Jacob will face, namely, he must meet his twin brother Esau again. Jacob has met one Man; now he faces 400 men!

#### *How good and pleasant is the sight... (33:1ff)*

During these past twenty years, it appears that Esau also has become powerful and successful. He has four hundred men with him. Jacob, for his part, divides his household into groups such that his beloved wife Rachel and son Joseph are last, placed in the safest part of the party. The maidservants with their children are the vanguard of the entire clan, with Leah and her children following afterward. In other words, the (presumably) least loved group goes first, with the best loved

at the end. At the very least, Jacob is being cautious because he does not know in what mood or with what spirit his brother Esau is approaching him.

Jacob sets the tone for the meeting with Esau. He comes ahead of his family, showing at least external bravery, and he bows down seven times to his brother. One full prostration on the ground would have been enough in that culture, but seven times is a “perfect” demonstration of absolute submission and full honors to Esau. Earlier Jacob prayed for the LORD’s help (Gen. 32:9-12), and he has recently wrestled with the divine Stranger at night, emerging with success. God is responding to His chosen “son” to increase his faith and confidence in a situation that is potentially deadly.

The text tells us in verse 4 that Esau *ran* to meet Jacob. Although both men are well on in years, Esau retains some physical vigor. Jacob is clearly at a physical disadvantage as he limps along. Here is where he must trust again upon the goodness and protection of God because Esau has the manpower to attack and devastate Jacob and his household.

The meeting goes much better than what Jacob had anticipated. Jacob’s concerns appear to be groundless. It is indeed a tender moment after 20 years of separation. It reminds the student of the Scriptures of other tender moments of greeting: Joseph greets his brother Benjamin (Gen.

45:14) and later his father Jacob (Gen. 46:29). In the New Testament the father in the story of Luke 15:20 runs to meet his prodigal son, even after the son had left the father’s house in a rather dishonorable manner. Family members meet each other with warm embraces and freely-flowing tears. We might well sing Psalm 133!

Notice the *words* and the *actions* of Jacob as he interacts with Esau. This is a fascinating study of how the two twin brothers relate at this reunion. Jacob refers to himself as “your servant” (see verses 5, 14), while he calls Esau his “lord” (see verses 8, 13, 14 [twice], and 15). In the ancient world, that kind of language suggests a relationship of superiority for the one, servanthood and humility for the other. At one level, it is designed to put Esau into a “kinder, gentler” mood, if he is in fact still harboring some of the anger and bitterness that he had two decades earlier.

Esau, on the other hand, addresses Jacob as his “brother” (verse 9). For Esau, it appears that he is ready to let “by-gones be by-gones.” Or, is this a very clever trick on the part of Esau? In any case, Esau has a number of questions: “who are these?” and “what do these gifts mean?” Jacob uses this to testify about *favor* and *grace*. The family is God’s gracious gift, His favor, to Jacob, and the gifts that Jacob has so generously sent ahead to Esau (see Gen. 32:13ff) were to win Esau’s favor. Jacob has received blessings, and he passes on a generous portion to sweeten the mood of his brother, if he needed that.

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### **Jacob insists on giving Esau a gift (33:8-11)**

It may be that Jacob feels some guilt in taking the blessing away by deception in Genesis 27. God has showered him with abundance, and he shares some of it Esau. The word sometimes translated as gift is literally “blessing” in verse 11. Jacob had obtained the blessing pronouncement from his father by means of deception in Genesis 27. Now he is ready to give Esau a generous portion of blessing in the form of these many valuable gifts. Perhaps it is Jacob’s way of making amends.

But Esau tries to dissuade him. He claims that he has been blessed; he has plenty (verse 9). What is the source of these blessings? We are not told. If Jacob is somewhat thrown off balance, we readers almost certainly are. What has happened in Esau’s heart? There have been tears from both of these elderly men. Either Esau is a great actor, or he is much different from the person we saw at the end of Genesis 27, when he was fully determined to kill Jacob.

A further irony is Jacob’s remark about Esau and the “face of God.” See Genesis 32:24-32, where Jacob had seen the face of God in the person of the mysterious Stranger with whom he had wrestled through the night. As a divine Person, He could have destroyed Jacob, but He does not. Now in Genesis 33, Jacob meets a powerful brother,

one whose 400 men could have destroyed him. But Esau does not do so. Jacob is experiencing the protecting power of God. Earlier as well, it was God who intervened by means of a dream to tell Laban to leave Jacob alone, and Laban did not attack Jacob. Laban barked loudly, but there was no bite. But we do not read that Esau has received any night vision or dream to tell him to deal kindly with his brother. Yet clearly Esau has changed. God’s Spirit blows where He wills.

### **Jacob insists on going in separate ways (33:12-16)**

Esau wants his forces to go with Jacob and his household, perhaps as a kind of armed force to escort his brother, his family, and his belongings into Canaan. Jacob declines this offer, giving the excuse that the children and the female animals are too weak to make this trip at a vigorous speed. We find this excuse of Jacob not convincing, seeing that Jacob and his retinue had traveled away from Laban in very good time. It may very well be that Jacob is suspicious about his brother’s motive in making this offer: can Jacob fully trust Esau? Jacob tells Esau that he can just travel on ahead. Eventually Jacob and his household will arrive in Mt. Seir. (This is the region south of the Dead Sea where the Edomites, the descendants of Esau, will live). But Jacob apparently never goes there. Has he deceived his brother one

more time? Does Jacob simply become “too busy” with living in the Succoth region that he just never gets around to traveling down south to Mt. Seir?

Esau and Jacob will separate as brothers again, if not actually friends. No boundary stones are needed to mark a border, a kind of “fence,” between them (as in the case of Laban and Jacob; Gen. 31:51-54). Will this good will between the twin brothers last during their lifetime? How will their descendants relate to each other? Time will tell, but that story will not be as pleasant as the story told here in Genesis 33.

### **Jacob begins to move in (33:17-20)**

Esau travels to the Seir region, while Jacob settles at Succoth (which means “booths, tabernacles”). The text tells us that he has safely come back home. He eventually comes to live at Shechem in the central part of Canaan. It is here that “Jacob’s Well” would be dug (cf. John 4:5-6). Jacob is coming home, as he is settling in with his household. Remember that this is the land God has promised to him and his forefathers! See how this is an answer to his prayer in Genesis 28:21. Later he moves on to the Shechem region (about 30 miles or 48 km distance).

This is the Promised Land, to be sure, and yet Jacob must purchase land from the Shechemites. But see what he does with it: he sets up an altar. The significance is that this spot of worship serves as a kind of outpost for the kingdom of God. In the midst of Canaanite idolatry and paganism, here is a

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*Jacob is experiencing  
the protecting power of God.*

place where the true God might be worshiped and honored. The NIV tells us that Jacob calls it “El Elohe Israel,” i.e., God, the God of Israel.

What does this say about Jacob, with regard to his attitude toward God and his attitude toward his own new name? Perhaps it tells us that God’s Spirit is further sanctifying the heart and life of Jacob. This is wonderful to see in other people in God’s great story: they never stand still, so to speak, but God moves them from one glory to another glory as they undergo many experiences in their lives. Their faith deepens, their hope becomes more secure, and their love matures. Biblical saints still have many flaws, and the devil keeps seeking to trip them up, but God begins a good work in Abram, in Isaac, in Jacob, in David, and in many more, and He will bring that good work to completion (cf. Phil. 1:6).

**Rev. Mark Vander Hart** is Associate Professor of Old Testament Studies at Mid-America Reformed Seminary in Dyer, Indiana.

## Lesson 12: Points to ponder and discuss

1. Jacob arranges matters to gain Esau’s favor and also to place his most loved family members (Rachel and Joseph) in the better defensive position. Is this cowardice on Jacob’s part, or is it wisdom and simply being shrewd?
2. Read Genesis 27:26 and 29. What is the irony of this kiss in the light of earlier events? Why does Jacob bow seven times? Is this a kind of “overkill” on Jacob’s part, too much humbling of himself?
3. What accounts for Esau’s change of heart toward Jacob? Is it his “own good nature” that “acts as a check on him,” as one commentator puts it (cf. Hamilton, *Genesis 18-50*, p. 345)? Or, do God the Father and His Spirit have a very important role to play here? Apart from regeneration, what is the heart attitude of human being toward God and the neighbor? See Heidelberg Catechism, Q/A Lord’s Day 3.
4. Why was Jacob so fearful of Esau? What things had God said and done earlier that should have removed Jacob’s fears? There are many places in the Bible where we read, “Don’t be afraid!” And yet God’s children are so often afraid. Why is this so? What is it that can drive away our fears?
5. What was the purpose of the many gifts that Jacob presses upon Esau? What is the purpose of gift-giving, whether in ancient times or in our times? How often do we give in order to get? Can gift-giving become a subtle form of manipulation? How is God’s giving so different from our practices?
6. By changing Esau, what has God brought about that will advance His kingdom through Jacob? Or, to put it in a different way, what would have happened if Esau had come out to annihilate Jacob and his family? What does all this say about our God and the outworking of His saving plan?
7. Jacob sets up an altar for the true worship of God, even in pagan Canaan. Christian congregations also form as worshiping centers in the midst of a wicked culture. How can the presence of a church (even the church’s name!) serve as a light, a grace-bearing outpost, in your community?



## Second Place Winner Adult *The Outlook* Essay Contest

### Trust and Obey

Some of the childish things I put away when I became an adult were the songs I sang as a little girl. But lately they have been on my mind. I realize that, although many were of questionable value, some—like “Jesus Loves Me” and “Trust and Obey”—were pearls of great price.

When I was young, church education was *Sunday School* with double capitals. Our class was not called “threes and fours” or even “pre-schoolers” since that was long before the word or even the concept of “pre-school” came into use.

I wriggled with other little children on small wooden chairs, in a room that shimmered with diffused morning light and hummed with suffused infantile energy, singing ditties like “Jesus Bids Us Shine”; “Behold, Behold!”; “Happy All the Time”; and treasured favorites like “The B-I-B-L-E” and “Jesus Loves Me.”

Action songs from one of the “Singspiration” volumes (with covers featuring wide-mouthed young singers dressed in 40s fashions) were popular since they allowed us to rambunctiously move muscles stiff from being reluctantly still during a long church service. Understandably, such songs were limitedly implemented.

Reviewing the lyrics from those

childhood songs, I recognize and finally appreciate that some convey biblical truths of genuine value. But I also wonder how some came to be taught in the Sunday school of a Reformed church. Some may convey a wrong perception of Reformed belief and some seem to lack a Reformed basis.

Perhaps something of the charges occasionally leveled against Reformed believers as being the “frozen chosen” or having a “fortress mentality” stem from deeply ingrained lyrics of “Jesus Bids Us Shine.” After all, the song calls each singer to singularly shine “in this world of darkness” like a “little candle burning in the night”: “You in your small corner, And I in mine.”

I am sure that E. O. Excell, the song’s composer, intended to stress that we are Matthew 5’s “light of the world” and must exhibit the love of Christ in whatever position God places us. Even children can shine in their small corners by living for Jesus.

But the song brings to my mind a different and vivid image: A child cowers on the corner of a wooden floor, a trembling finger hooked in the circular handle of a pewter chamberstick that holds a flickering candle weakly bathing the scene in a feeble pool of light. Far across the dark expanse of a large room filled

with frightening shadows, another solitary child hunkers down in a corner under the pale illumination of his candle. Hardly an image that inspires evangelism or ecumenicity!

Other children’s songs I once sang with youthful zest seem to reflect an Arminian theology. “Behold, Behold!” serves as an example, seeming to imply that it is all up to the child to open the door of his or her heart to Christ.

Mrs. N. R. Schaper arranged the words of Revelation 3:20 into “Behold, Behold!” with Jesus as an unnamed narrator who stands at the door to “knock, knock, knock.” Admirably based on Scripture, the lyrics are nearly identical to Christ’s words to the lukewarm Laodicean believers, whom He is about to spew out of His mouth in disgust. But removing the words utterly from context changes the implication from repentance to regeneration. The song seems to depict an impotent Christ knocking at the door of every little child’s heart, helplessly waiting for someone—anyone—to hear His voice and “open, open, open” the door so He can come in.

Still other childhood songs have a Charismatic bent. “Happy All the Time”? Even my three-year-old brain recognized the fallacy of that song title. I certainly was not happy all the time. I was not very happy with myself when I pretended not to hear my mother calling me to come in while I kept playing in the sandbox. And I definitely was not happy with my older brother and sister when they grabbed the drumsticks before the Sunday plate of fried chicken came around to my end of

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the table, or when they walked down our gravel road to play with the neighbor boys without me, or *especially* when they splashed water out of the stock tank to completely drench me.

Total depravity and original sin were ingrained into my consciousness long before I began to understand the five points of Calvinism.

The lyrics to other childhood songs stand up well from my adult Reformed perspective. Teaching little children that the only foundation for life is the Word of God and that they should stand fast on it alone is highly commendable. More adults should hark back to the lyrics of “The B-I-B-L-E” and embrace that simple philosophy in the face of the myriad of modern ideologies that set themselves up in opposition to God’s Word.

And it is difficult to think of a more succinct summary of the Christian faith than the title of that timeless children’s tune: “Jesus Loves Me.”

In Ligonier’s *Foundations* audio series, Dr. R.C. Sproul tells of a conversation with an astrophysicist who complained about how complicated theologians make everything, talking about the fine points of predestination and supralapsarianism. The astrophysicist said that, for him, faith is simple: “Jesus Loves Me.”

Sproul replied that it seemed to him that astronomers discuss at length a lot of complicated theories about black holes and super novas, but, for him, astronomy is simple: “Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star.”

The point, I believe, Dr. Sproul wants to make is that the greater our degree of interest in something,

the more we want to learn about it. And we should all want to learn more about theology, which is, after all, the study of God. Hebrews 5 encourages believers to grow beyond the “milk” of God’s basic principles and desire “solid food,” which is for “the mature, for those who have their powers of discernment trained by constant practice to distinguish good from evil” (verses 12-14).

Still, I understand that the song title, “Jesus Loves Me,” reflects the most basic Christian truth. The only way of salvation is through Jesus Christ and His sacrificial atonement, made—out of His great love—for sinners like me. I am God’s enemy unless Jesus loves me enough to die for my sins. The title alone of that song conveys a world of meaning: “Jesus Loves Me,” indeed!

Written by Anna L. Warner, the lyrics poignantly encapsulate the gospel message: I know that Jesus loves me because “the Bible tells me so,” little ones belong to Him and—even though they are weak—He is strong; Jesus died to open the gate to heaven, wash away my sin, and allow His children to enter; Jesus loves and watches over me even when I am weak and ill; Jesus loves me and will stay “close beside” me “all the way” of my life, and—if I love Him—He will take me home to glory.

“Jesus Loves Me” is profound in its simplicity.

And the older I get, the more I recognize the profundity of the title of another children’s song, “Trust and Obey.”

I learned that song during my early school years, when elementary school was still called grade school. My chair was connected by a bottom bar to a desk with a top that lifted like a lid, behind which I sometimes surreptitiously read books about the “Bobbsey Twins.” Windows figure prominently in my school memories: the snow swirling outside them or the metallic tapping of the flagpole chain in the spring breeze that wafted through them. Our classes sang from the *Let Youth Praise Him!* songbook (whose title appeared in a cloud-shaped blue balloon on its maroon cover). Even at that young age, I understood the song’s call to trust God and obey His commandments.

And life has a way of deepening one’s understanding of things. God uses trials and suffering to purify our faith in His refining fire.

A traumatic moment of my childhood occurred during the annual Mission Fest held in West Market Park. The park was transformed from its empty expanse of grass, bordered on the south with a solitary shelter and on the north with a playground, to a teeming mass of humanity in lawn chairs listening to missionaries from far-flung countries tell of evangelistic exploits. Refreshments were available from a temporary canteen set up in the

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***It is difficult to think of a more succinct summary of the Christian faith than the title of that timeless children’s tune: “Jesus Loves Me.”***

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corner of the park. With my dime, I invariably purchased a box of Cracker Jack (A Prize in Every Box!).

While adults listened to the speakers or sang “From Greenland’s Icy Mountains,” younger children ran free or played on the equipment. The playground featured a contraption, locally dubbed the “witch’s hat,” that consisted of planks fastened together in a circle and suspended by heavy metal cables from a center pole. Children sat with their legs between the wood and a protective bar that clanged with deep resonance against the center pole as the base slowly swung back and forth and around and around. Woe to that unfortunate child whose fingers, clutched to the bar in front of her, did not release quickly enough when the bar connected with the pole!

The playground also contained swings, monkey bars, and slides. One slide was perfectly normal, but the other was a two-humped monstrosity that seemed to tower nearly as tall as the ancient maple beside it. It was for big kids.

The evening I decided I was big enough to try it, I didn’t realize that the big kids had been polishing its surface to a slippery sheen with wax paper. I got into line, but as I slowly ascended the slide’s ladder, one reluctant rung at a time, I realized that I was climbing pretty high off the ground and that this was not really what I wanted to do. When I turned to the big kid behind me and meekly mentioned wanting to go down, she snarled, “Keep going! There’s a long line behind us, you can’t go down now.”

I sailed down the slide and launched into space, landing flat on my back in the dirt. At the time, I didn’t know that what had happened to me was euphemistically called, “getting the wind knocked out” of me. I only knew that I was dying.

I don’t recall when I was able to breathe again or how long I remained flat on the hard ground. I don’t remember getting up, but I do remember slowly stumbling through a sea of pale faces in the deepening darkness, trying to find my mother.

Trauma and tragedy knock the wind out of us. We lie on our backs, overwhelmed by our total helplessness. We long for the comfort and security of a mother’s arms.

But our Heavenly Father sustains us through life’s trials with a comfort and security that surpasses that of any earthly mother. He uses the trials of our lives to shape our simple child-like faith into a robust mature faith. He teaches us to “Trust and Obey.” The older I get, the more I realize the nature of total dependence upon God—the trust part—and the more I learn about submitting my contrary will to His—the obey part.

It is difficult to trust God when chronic concerns drag on for years with no apparent answers to prayer. It is difficult to trust God when things happen that demonstrate no discernible good. It is difficult to trust God when life is turned upside down and the future looks hopeless. It is difficult to trust God in a fog of pain and fatigue.

Yet, it’s at these very times that we must learn to confess our continued trust. And we need to submit our

will to His in humble obedience.

These are not easy lessons. And they are not easily learned. In fact, I believe I must be a slow learner because they are lessons God keeps teaching me.

But I take comfort from knowing that the “heroes of faith” in Hebrews 11 did not possess any extraordinary gifts or strengths. They were ordinary believers, sharing many of my faults and weaknesses, who are listed as examples of faith because they simply trusted God and obeyed Him. That “roll call of faith” serves as a reminder that we demonstrate our trust in God when we obey Him, even when it is not easy.

Like “Jesus Loves Me,” the children’s song “Trust and Obey” conveys profound truth despite its apparent simplicity. The essence of Christian living can really be distilled down to the title of that simple children’s song: “Trust and Obey.”

**Mrs. Glenda Mathes** lives in Pella, Iowa and attends the Pella United Reformed Church.

# The Power of Language

Most police officers of the Greater Manchester (Police) Forces in England are upset by having to walk a political tightrope. In 2000 all the members were given a sixteen-page document to read, to learn and inwardly digest if they were not to risk falling afoul of their superiors. This tract, entitled *The Power of Language*, instructs the officers how to address such groups as homosexuals, feminists, the disabled, and ethnic minorities in such a way as not to cause offence. Examples of terms that must be avoided, and why, include: What is your Christian name? Don't ask, as it might offend other religions. Are you married? It might offend homosexuals or people with a live-in partner. A senior officer dismissed all of it as a waste of time and an insult to common sense, adding: "Police have enough on their plates these days without piling on more problems. We're scared to open our mouth in case we offend anyone."

## The Power of Language

Language is more than a vehicle for communication. The booklet distributed to the Manchester police is only one example of how language is used by politically correct ideologues to change society. Language, claims Dale Spender in *Man-Made Language*, is not neutral; it is itself a shaper of ideas. He argues that through the use of patriarchal language, men deny women their rightful place in our society. He charges that women have not been allowed to construct their own meanings or to name their own experiences. The task for women,

therefore, is to construct a "female reality" to express their own meaning. Consequently, the dominant religious and cultural heritage we have received defines femaleness as inferior to maleness.

Like Spender, many feminist writers have discussed the way in which they think language is often loaded against women. They insist that gender is socially constructed within a patriarchal culture, and serves men. The issues for these feminists, therefore, are replacing the established patriarchal order, and raising the awareness of the adoption of female rather than male guiding principles.

Feminism has also impacted the church. Cultural trends influence the Church more often than the Church contemporary culture. The church, theology, and liturgy became targets of feminist criticism from the start. The modern feminist movement in the Church originated in the US, during the 1960s where the term "feminist theology" was also introduced. It refers to a way of doing theology that takes seriously the criticism and conclusions of contemporary feminism.

The feminist theology central concern is the question of the use of language: the twin issues of inclusive language and, perhaps more critically, of the language chosen to present the images of God. The question is: Do women and men experience, and make sense of, the world in different ways? If so, do they experience God differently, too? Feminists say that church his-

tory is the record only of a male "faith seeking understanding," a patriarchal account of what happened throughout the ages. They fantasize about a non-sexist early Christian culture and a non-patriarchal church gradually being re-discovered through the efforts of feminist research and theology.

The feminists argue that women have been oppressed in the church since the second century and that the language of the church has fostered that oppression. For example, the generic terms such as "man" and "mankind" have come to be seen as the definitions of what it means to be human. In 1974, a World Council of Churches' women's consultation in Berlin on "Sexism in the 1970s" saw sexism not so much as a struggle between the sexes as a struggle within the wider struggle for liberation of the oppressed classes.

Some well known feminists who have gone to the extreme are Mary Dale, Rosemary Radford Ruether, and Virginia Mollenkott. Mary Dale (1928-) abandoned her attempt to reform official Roman Catholic attitudes and became a post-Christian radical feminist. She argues that language is an instrument of oppression, reflected in such obvious cases as the use of the pronoun "he" and the noun "man" when these are supposed to include women. She defines radical feminism as the Cause of causes, which alone of all revolutionary causes exposes the basic model and source of all forms of oppression. By the use of masculine titles and pronouns for God, males have been given the right to rule over females. "Since God is male," Mary Dale says, "the

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male is God.” She even makes the absurd claim that the attempted annihilation of all life is the lethal intent of the patriarchs. Another outrageous statement is the claim that the Incarnation is the “mythic super-rape of the Virgin Mother.”

Rosemary Radford Ruether’s (1936-) books analyze the effects of “male bias” in official Church theology, and seek to affirm the feminine dimension of religion and the importance of women’s experience. For Ruether conversion from sexism means both freeing oneself from the ideologies and roles of patriarchy, and also struggling to liberate social structures from these patterns. In *Sexism and God-Talk: Toward a Feminist Theology* she says feminist theology makes explicit what was overlooked in male advocacy of the poor and oppressed. Therefore, “liberation must start with the oppressed of the oppressed, namely, women of the oppressed.”

### **Inclusive Language**

No aspect of the feminist movement has affected the church’s life more basically than that movement’s attempts to change the language used in speaking to or about God. In *The Divine Feminine: The Biblical Imagery of God as Female*, Virginia Mollenkott writes about the political effects of naming God as exclusively masculine. She says because God is husbandlike, husbands are godlike. Because God is fatherlike, fathers are godlike. She claims that this view of God sets the stage “for exploitation of girls and women.” Consequently, to combat abuse and make language all inclusive, the language

of the Church must be changed.

Marjorie Procter-Smith in *Her Own Rite: Constructing Feminist Liturgical Tradition* charges that traditional liturgies are designed by, approved by, or written by leaders of a religious group or denomination. She claims that they are most likely the product of men or at least reflect male interpretations and support patriarchal interests.

Substantive changes are now taking place in the once traditional language of the church. The triune name of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit is routinely ignored; baptisms are occurring in the name of inclusive substitutes. For example, liturgies are composed that omit references to God as Father or Jesus as the Son, some of which directly address God as mother and other feminine titles; the masculine pronoun for the deity is said to be inappropriate usage. In speaking of God and Christ, some simply use “she” and “her.”

Mainline churches were in the forefront in altering liturgies. Beginning with the National Council of Churches’ (US) *An Inclusive Language Lectionary* in 1983, inclusive language steadily made its way in the Scriptures, prayers, liturgies, hymns, and publications of the mainline churches. The Bible’s use of Father is changed to Father (and Mother), Lord to Sovereign, King to Ruler or Monarch, Son of Man to

Human One, Son of God to Child of God. Most of the changes were imposed by the hierarchies in denominational headquarters, and often to the dismay of the worshippers in the pew.

Mollenkott notes that when the National Council of Churches announced it was recommending an inclusive language lectionary, its Commission on Faith and Order received over two thousand angry letters in a period of several months. But she argues that inclusive God-language in Christian worship might well benefit contemporary men even more than women. She states, “It is quite possible that one reason why so few men attend church regularly is that they are unconsciously repelled by being called toward an exclusively masculine God.”

### **Who is Jesus Christ?**

Feminist theologians give different answers to the question: “Who is Jesus Christ?” Some new politically correct translations of the Bible use inclusive language and refer to Jesus as “child of God” rather than “son of God”, as “human one” rather than “son of man”, on the assumption that Jesus’ humanity is of greater significance than His masculinity. Some claim He is the male disclosure of a male God whose representative can only be male.

Mollenkott sees Christ as our birth-mother in creation, incarnation, and

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*Some tortuous explanation  
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Trinity is feminine.*

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redemption. She says that Christ wants us to know about God's motherhood so that our love will be fully attached to God. Mary Dale calls the worship of Christ a "form of idolatry that functions to mandate and legitimate intolerance, self-hatred, hatred and scapegoating of others."

Ruether says that to believe Jesus as God's "last word" and "once-for-all" disclosure of God, located in a remote past and institutionalized in a cast of Christian teachers, is to repudiate the spirit of Jesus and to recapitulate the position against which He Himself protests.

Naomi Wolf in *The Beauty Myth* charges that the antiwoman bias of the Judeo-Christian tradition left fertile ground for the growth of the new religion. Its hatred for women meant that the latter even more than men had to suspend critical thinking if they were to be believers. This new religion charged women with sin and sexual guilt, and offered them redemption only through submission to a male mediator, Jesus Christ.

### **The Holy Trinity**

Feminist theologians have made several attempts to create alternative images for the Holy Trinity. For the Trinity of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, some substitute Creator, Liberator, and Comforter. The most familiar, arising from within the early feminist liturgical movement,

is "Creator, Redeemer, Sustainer (or Sanctifier). Some tortuous explanation tries to demonstrate that the Third Person in the Trinity is feminine. Mollenkott argues that since the Hebrew word for Spirit is feminine, and the Greek word for Spirit neuter, there is no earthly reason for referring to the Spirit as masculine - "except for the assumption that God is masculine!" In other words, patriarchal language forces the church to believe in a masculine Holy Spirit.

### **The Feminist Goddess**

Feminists, who are consequent in their approach to theology, use the power of language to alter the Biblical doctrine of God. In their search for a female face of God, many feminists began to examine religious traditions that have usually been regarded as being antithetical to Judaism or Christianity, namely, Goddess religions. They insist the church needs to discover new female names for God, including Goddess, Mother, Sister, Lady, Queen, Grandmother.

For example, Marjorie Procter-Smith states that many feminist theologians have recognized that the use of gender-specific language, far from being avoided, rather must be claimed by discovering or constructing female referents for God. Sallie McFague, in her book *Models of God* offers the models of God as mother, lover, and friend. In 2002 the United Method-

ist Church published a supplement to its hymnal called *The Faith We Sing* in which Methodists are to sing praise to "Strong Mother God, working night and day." The United Church of Christ's Book of Worship prays, "You have brought us forth from the womb of your being." But the feminists also suggest to use female pronouns freely to claim "neutral" names for God such as Redeemer, Lover, Liberator, Friend, Judge.

According to Mollenkott in the Protestant evangelical tradition maternal images for God were totally depressed. She says, "Although we proclaimed our absolute devotion to the Bible (the sola Scriptura of the Reformers), obviously there was a great deal of imagery that we missed. Much of it was the warm, intimate, affective imagery of an immanent, maternal God. No wonder we were doctrine oriented - as one wag put it, 'Clear as ice and just as cold.'" She calls the God of Naomi in the book of Ruth as "the God with Breasts," the undivided One God who births and breast-feeds the universe. A feminist goddess has given birth to the world!

Mollenkott can say that "our milieu is "divine." For her the book of Ruth shows the triumph over the barriers of racism, classism, and sexism. She also believes that God should serve human beings. "The Bible teaches not only male-female mutual submission, but also divine-human submission." God is our servant as well as our master. And she argues that Proverbs 31 is a full-scale description of Yahweh as the perfect female homemaker, the perfect wife to humanity.

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## The Bible and the Power of Language

We should be concerned about the inroads feminism is making into the church. More and more evangelical publishing houses and parachurch ministries are pushing feminism. The controversy over inclusive language is not a minor issue. It is a watershed issue for the Church. All of our life is touched. The relationship between men and women, our attitude at work as the Manchester Police force experienced, our view of God and the Bible. It also fosters the feminization of the church and contributes to the secularization of “the male world.”

The ultimate question is: Will we remain faithful to God and His Word or will we surrender to the spirit of our times? The Roman Catholic Church struggled with the issue of the use of feminist language and concluded that it contradicts the historical teachings of the Christian faith. In 1992 the Vatican held off the translation of the Catechism of the Catholic Church into English for two years until the feminist language and, therefore, ideology had been removed. In October 1994, the Holy See disallowed the use of the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV) for use as text in Catholic worship and catechetics for the same reason.

### How Do We Name God?

By attempting to change the biblical language used of the deity, the feminists have in reality exchanged the true God for those deities that are “worthless idols,” as Jeremiah put it (2:11). By insisting on female language for God, the feminists simply continue to emphasize the

nonbiblical view that God does indeed have sexuality. But God is without sexual characteristics. It is universally recognized by Biblical scholars that the God of the Bible has no sexuality. Sexuality is a structure of creation (cf. Gen. 1-2). “I am God and not man, the Holy One in your midst,” God says in Hosea (11:9). God is never called “Mother” in the Bible and is never addressed or thought of as a female deity. That was unique in the Near Eastern world; Israel was surrounded by people who worshipped female deities. And finally, if God is identified with His creation, we make ourselves gods and goddesses - the ultimate and primeval sin, according to Genesis 3 and the rest of Scripture. But “it is He that made us, and not we ourselves” (Psalm 100:3).

The feminists forget that we do not name God. God names Himself. The Christian faith is a revealed religion. If God had not revealed Himself in His Word, we would not have known His identity. Unless God reveals Himself, He remains unknown to humanity. Only God can make Himself known. The Bible uses masculine language for God because that is the language with which God has revealed Himself. The God of the Bible has revealed Himself decisively as the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.

The changes feminists try to introduce lead to an alienation from the Gospel. There is neither a Goddess, nor a feminine Christ, nor a female Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit proceeds from the Father and from the Son and is one with them. To abandon or to reject the

Trinitarian naming is to create a new religion, a new God. The triune God is not a deity of sexism and patriarchy but the God of the gospel who saves men and women from their sin and liberates them for love, discipleship, and joyous fellowship in the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Feminist theology takes away our hope. We look forward to the new heaven and earth where we shall be forever in the presence of our heavenly Father. By faith in Him we shall always be more than conquerors, and nothing shall separate us from the love He has for us through Jesus Christ our Lord. Praise be to God -- Father, Son, and Holy Ghost!

**Rev. Johan Tangelder** is a retired minister in the Christian Reformed Church and a member of the East Strathroy CRC in Ontario, Canada.

# Baptism, Election, and the Covenant of Grace

## (Part One)

On its face, the Reformed understanding of our Lord's command to make disciples and to baptize them and their children (Matt 28:81–20; Acts 2:39) seems clear enough. However, judging by modern discussions in the confessional Reformed and Presbyterian churches, things are more complicated than one might expect.

Over the last thirty years, considerable disagreement has arisen among the confessional Reformed and Presbyterian churches over what happens in baptism, what baptism promises, to whom and under what circumstances. The controversy has intensified in recent years with the rise of the self-described "Federal Vision" movement which says that that baptism confers upon the baptized person a conditional, temporary election, union with Christ, justification, and adoption. As a shorthand, let us call these baptismal benefits. The Federal Vision also downplays or denies the distinction between the church considered as a visible or invisible entity or the distinction between an internal or external relation to the covenant of grace.

Such distinctions are frequently derided by Federal Visionists as the remnants of the Colonial "Halfway Covenant" or even as Baptist. Instead, they argue, the Reformed faith understood properly, teaches that there is only one way to be in the covenant of grace, that it is, "all

or nothing," that every baptized person ("head for head") has the benefits of Christ.

According to the Federal Visionists, having been admitted to the covenant by grace (i.e., by baptism), a Christian is obligated to retain those benefits by cooperating with grace or faithfulness. This is how they define "faith," as trusting and obeying. Those who have faith so defined will retain the benefits given in baptism and will show themselves to have been really elect in the traditional sense of the word. Sometimes the Federal Visionists speak as if there are two kinds of election: the first is an eternal, unconditional election and the second is a historical, temporary, conditional election.

Sometimes, however, it is not clear that they really believe in two kinds of election. Certainly when they speak of election relative to "the covenant" (these writers do not much like the traditional Reformed distinctions between the covenants of redemption, works, and grace) they are most often speaking of the historical administration of what they consider a conditional, temporary election and covenant. Thus, frequently, these writers are not writing about the "the covenant" or "election" as we have traditionally conceived them. Most often they seem to be thinking of a covenant that is both gracious and legal simultaneously, before the fall and after it, in roughly the same way. To

make their point they tend to emphasize the fact that our liturgical forms speak of covenants as having two parts.

This controversy raises the most profound questions for Reformed theology, piety, and practice. After all, the Princeton theologian B. B. Warfield (1851–1921) called the doctrine of the covenant, "the architectonic principle" of Reformed theology, i.e., the thing on which it is built and Herman Bavinck (1854–1921) agreed.

Were the Federal Vision a movement outside the Reformed Churches, its rise and influence might not be so troubling. It is, however, not a movement that has grown up outside the Reformed churches, but within them. The proponents of this new view of baptism, covenant, and election wish to be regarded as confessionally Reformed.

This essay contends that the Federal Vision doctrine of baptismal benefits, their historical, conditional view of covenant and election, is contrary to the Word of God as confessed in the Reformed Churches and worthy of ecclesiastical discipline. In order to take a step toward clarifying the picture, this essay will briefly survey the major views taught in the various historic Christian churches, the teaching of Scripture, the teaching of the Reformed confessions and conclude by offering some pastoral considerations.

### The Roman View

The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* is quite explicit that, to

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***Rome defines faith relative to justification as trusting and obeying, by which process the believer is said to accumulate merit toward final justification.***

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have “faith,” one must “first have been touched by the Holy Spirit.” This touching is said to occur by “virtue of our Baptism, the first sacrament of the faith” in which the “Holy Spirit in the Church communicates to us, intimately and personally, the life that originates in the Father and is offered to us in the Son.”

Quoting Irenaeus, the Catechism teaches that baptism, “gives us the grace of new birth....”<sup>1</sup> This happens because, quoting the Council of Trent, “celebrated worthily in faith, the sacraments confer the grace that they signify.”<sup>2</sup> Baptism does what it does because it works “*ex opere operato*,” i.e., “from the working it is worked.” According to Rome, Baptism necessarily regenerates, washes away original sin, and initially justifies, because God has willed it to do so and endowed baptism with this power.

As wrong as we find this account of baptism, it might not be so bad except for the sting in the tail of the Roman doctrine: “Nevertheless, the fruits of the sacraments also depend on the disposition of the one who receives them.”<sup>3</sup> Suddenly what might have been construed as a mere mistake becomes a pernicious error. Do not miss the force of such language. When Rome speaks of “disposition” she means “the result of one’s cooperation with the grace of the Spirit.” In short, however clothed in the lan-

guage of grace, the Roman doctrine is that baptismal efficacy is dependent upon human cooperation. It is no wonder that the Reformers saw in this doctrine a repetition of the Judaizing doctrine of grace plus works, i.e., “another gospel” (Galatians 1:7–9).

Perhaps even more shocking to Reformed sensibilities is the Roman doctrine that “the fruit of the sacramental life is that the Spirit of adoption makes the faithful partakers in the divine nature.”<sup>4</sup> This is the culmination of the Roman doctrine that creation, from the very beginning, was inherently defective by virtue of being finite and therefore that “grace perfects nature.” In sum, according to Rome, salvation is divinization and that process begins in baptism and continues as we cooperate with grace.

#### **The Protestant View**

As one, the Protestants rejected the Roman doctrine of nature and grace. They rejected the Roman view that the Bible is composed of an “Old Law” and a “New Law,” the difference between which is that, under Christ, God gives Christians more grace to fulfill the New Law. In place of this scheme, the Protestants (including Calvin and the authors of our *Heidelberg Catechism*, *Belgic Confession*, and the *Canons of Dort*) all held that there are two ways of speaking throughout Scripture: law and gospel. The law says, “do this and

live” and the gospel says, “Christ has done for you.” For Rome, justification *is* sanctification so that God can only call one righteous who is, in himself, intrinsically righteous.

For the Protestants, however, justification is God’s free declaration that a sinner is righteous only on the basis of Christ’s righteousness imputed. Whereas Rome defines faith relative to justification as trusting *and* obeying (cooperating with grace), by which process (including acts of penance) the believer is said to accumulate merit toward final justification; confessional Protestants define faith, in the act of justification, as “a certain knowledge and a hearty trust” that “not only to others, but to me also, forgiveness of sins, everlasting righteousness, and salvation are freely given by God, merely of grace, only for the sake of Christ’s merits.” (Heidelberg Catechism, Q. 21).

In our view, the power of faith does not reside in the act of faith itself (contrary to the Arminians and Socinians), but in its object: Christ and his righteousness. This is why we say “by faith alone” or *sola fide*. We also categorically disagree with Rome on the cause and ground of our justification. Rome defines grace as a sort of medicine with which Christians are infused in the sacraments. She even defines it, in some instances, as the divine being itself. By contrast, we define grace as the unmerited, free, *favor* of God. We confess that God’s accepts us *only* for Christ’s sake out of His undeserved favor. This is what we mean by *sola gratia*. The legal ground for God’s acceptance

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of us is the accomplishment of Christ's righteousness and imputation of His merits (a notion widely rejected by the Federal Vision despite its prominence in our standards). This view is in stark contrast to the Roman doctrine according to which, God "bestows merit" on us in view of our cooperation with His Spirit. Thus, confessional Protestants have much in common in our rejection of the Roman doctrine of baptism, covenant, and election.

### The Lutheran View

There are distinctive aspects of the Lutheran doctrine of baptism and election (and implicitly covenant) that we do not accept. Article 9 of the *Augsburg Confession* (1530) teaches of baptism that "it is necessary to salvation," and that the baptized "are received into God's favor." More pointedly, Martin Luther (1483–1546) argued at length in his *Large Catechism* (1529) that though it is true that we are justified by faith alone, the water of baptism, having been joined with the Word of the gospel, becomes a sacrament and so "faith clings to the water, and believes that it is Baptism, in which there is pure salvation and life."<sup>5</sup> He reiterated that "without faith it [baptism] profits nothing."<sup>6</sup>

For Luther, baptism, as a gospel sacrament, has the same power of the Gospel to effect new life. It is God's work, not ours.<sup>7</sup> Whatever

ambiguity there might have been in Luther's doctrine of baptism, was largely removed by the orthodox Lutherans who interpreted Luther (and the *Augsburg Confession*) to teach that baptism is a "means of justification."<sup>8</sup> Further, it "works forgiveness of sins... washes away sin... sanctifies and cleanses... regenerates and saves."<sup>9</sup>

Though orthodox Lutheranism confesses a doctrine of unconditional election, they also deny our doctrine of reprobation and perseverance of the saints. According to them, at the moment of the administration of baptism faith is kindled, and one is not only included visibly into the church, but one is made alive and shall remain so unless and until he resists the grace of the Spirit.<sup>10</sup> Not surprisingly, as a consequence of this view, the orthodox Lutheran theologians were and remain highly critical of our *Canons of Dort*.

### The Baptist View

Though like the Anabaptists (See *Belgic Confession* Art. 34) in their rejection infant baptism (paedobaptism) as contrary to the New Covenant, Modern Baptists are actually descended from the congregational and Presbyterian churches. The Baptists reject paedobaptism on two principal grounds: 1) it is not taught in the New Testament and 2) it is contrary to the Spiritual nature of the New Covenant.

In the confessional Baptist understanding, only those who actually believe are members of the New Covenant. Therefore the *London Baptist Confession* (1689) teaches that those "who do actually profess repentance towards God, faith in, and obedience to, our Lord Jesus Christ, are the only proper subjects of this ordinance" (29.2). In the confessional Baptist view, baptism is not merely a sign and seal of what is true of those who believe, but of categorical statement of what is actually true of the person baptized at the time of baptism (21.1). In the Baptist confession, baptism is not about promises made by God, in baptism, and realized by faith, but only about present realities. If the realities symbolized by baptism are not present, one is not eligible for the ordinance. To Reformed folk, Baptists seem impatient. They expect too much of the heavenly reality in this life.

What seems clear from this survey is that, in their own ways, the Federal Vision, Roman, Lutheran, and Baptist views of baptism all identify too closely the sign (baptism) with the thing signified (the benefits of Christ). Only the Reformed view of baptism confessed in the Three Forms of Unity and the Westminster Standards (1647) avoids either confusing baptism with covenant and election or stripping from it the promises of God which make it a sacrament and a means of grace.

### Endnotes

1. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1997) p. 683.
2. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, p. 1287.

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***In the Baptist confession, baptism is not about promises made by God, in baptism, and realized by faith, but only about present realities.***

3. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, p. 1128.
4. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, p. 1129.
5. *Large Catechism*, part 4, p. 29. See Robert Kolb and Timothy Wengert eds., *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000).
6. *Large Catechism*, part 4, p. 34.
7. *Large Catechism*, part 4, p. 35.
8. J.T. Mueller, *Christian Dogmatics* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1934, p. 491.
9. *Ibid.*, p. 491-496.
10. Solid Declaration, “Free Will” p. 83; “Election” p. 39, 78; Mueller, *Christian Dogmatics*, p. 436.

**Dr. R. Scott Clark** is Associate Professor of Historic and Systematic Theology at Westminster Seminary in California.

## The Authority of Jesus

Attempts to explain the conflict between Jesus and the religious rulers of His day have become so well known that the modern church has learned several cliché answers. Some claim that the religious rulers were more wicked than the sinners who believed in Christ, and thus Christ condemned them. A similar claim is that Christ taught that the spiritual sins of the religious rulers, particularly pride, were really more serious than the physical sins of the tax collectors and prostitutes. Another attempt at explaining Jesus’ anger at the religious rulers is His disappointment at their false Messianic expectations, that He would not be their national earthly Christ. This false expectation led the religious rulers to such disappointment that they ended up crucifying Christ at the climax of their frustration. A final claim is that the religious rulers were legalistic.

### An Examination of Setting and Characters

Matthew 21 begins with Jesus entering into Jerusalem triumphantly and with the crowds shouting praise to Jesus, essentially receiving Jesus as their king. Jesus immediately headed towards the temple and “drove out all who were buying and selling” in the temple. Perhaps Jesus’ primary motive in cleansing the temple was that it had been turned into a den of robbers, or in other words the commercializing of religion where the inspectors would reject any animals not purchased from their concessions, and they were not cheap. This would help explain why Matthew recorded no

hint of doubt or lack of enthusiasm for Jesus from the crowd. After all, no one likes extortion. Yet if profiteering were the issue, then why did Jesus drive out the buyers? Rather than driving out a corrupt money-making franchise, Jesus also drove out the entire system altogether. In its place, after causing this commotion, Jesus then set up camp in the middle of the temple and immediately began to heal the blind and the lame, smack in the center of all the attention. Jesus replaced the sacrificial system with *Himself*. As Jesus miraculously healed the sick, the children sang praise to Jesus again.

In response to “the wonderful things” everyone saw Jesus do, Jesus was only resisted by a select group of individuals, “the chief priests and the teachers of the law.” When these religious leaders showed concern that the children were praising Jesus with words normally reserved for God, they confidently confronted Jesus, certain that Jesus would at least rebuke such apparent blasphemy. Instead, to their shock and horror, Jesus confirmed to them the properness of that praise.

Arriving at the temple for the second time, Jesus encountered the religious leaders, who, after having a day to think over the events of the previous day, confronted Jesus. They had come up with a question with which they had some legitimate ground to ask; they were after all the authorities, appointed by God, to which Israel’s spiritual well-being had been entrusted.

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Jesus Himself recognized their authority, “The teachers of the law and the Pharisees sit in Moses’ seat. So you must obey them and do everything they tell you” (Matthew 23:2-3). Their question was likewise centered on authority “By what authority are you doing these things” and “Who gave you this authority” (vs. 23)? These are critical questions that set the stage for the long discourse of Matthew 21:24 – 24:2. It is in this setting that Jesus then begins to teach with two parables, the parable of the hypocritical/obedient sons and the parable of the wicked tenants.

It should be noticed that the crowd in view in Matthew 21 was not the same hostile crowd who later gathered to crucify Jesus. John 12 validated this view in explaining many in this crowd were those who had seen Jesus raise Lazarus from the dead. This crowd was fully supportive of Jesus. They had also traveled to Jerusalem and had to inform the residents in Jerusalem about Jesus. The residents in Jerusalem were surprised at the very large crowds who knew all about Jesus while they knew little, “When Jesus entered Jerusalem, the whole city was stirred and asked, “Who is this?” (Matthew 21:10). The crowds answered with great familiarity concerning Jesus. The later crowd who crucified Jesus was clearly specified as being hand-picked, “sent from the chief priests and the elders of the people” (26:47).

Matthew went out of his way to explain how afraid the religious leaders were of the pro-Jesus crowds. Matthew wrote the religious leaders “looked for a way to

arrest him, but they were afraid of the crowd” (Matthew 21:46), “they plotted to arrest Jesus in some sly way and kill him. ‘But not during the Feast,’ they said, ‘or there may be a riot among the people’” (Matthew 26:4-5).

### **An Examination of Theological Context**

The religious leaders from Jerusalem were familiar with Jesus at least to some degree. This may be demonstrated by religious rulers

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the Jerusalem  
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from Jerusalem who interacted with Jesus at several points in his ministry (Matthew 15:1, Mark 7:1, and Luke 5:17). One Pharisee of some prominence is of particular interest, Nicodemus. Nicodemus was not only a Pharisee but also “a member of the Jewish ruling council” (John 3:1).

Nicodemus’ report to Jesus in John 3 was most likely the direct thoughts of the Jerusalem religious leaders. That report stated in no uncertain terms that “Rabbi, we know you are a teacher who has come from God. For no one could perform the miraculous signs you are doing if God were not with him” (John 3:2). The miracles that Jesus performed had long ago confirmed

his authority to the religious leaders of Jerusalem. At bare minimum, the Jerusalem religious leaders had sufficient knowledge about Christ to recognize His God-given authority. Even if this previous knowledge were not known, the religious leaders were present on the previous day to see these miracles with their own eyes.

While the miracles were obvious displays of supernatural power, equally as validating was the form and content of Jesus’ teachings. “Authority” is a word of some repetition in the Synoptics—occurring 11 times in Matthew, 12 in Luke, and 10 in Mark—and in almost every instance having direct connection in describing the authority of Jesus. The most pertinent is the manner in which Jesus taught, “the crowds were amazed at his teaching, because he *taught* as one who had *authority*, and not as their teachers of the law” (Matthew 7:28-29).

At the end of the day, the Christ-following crowds were not shaken by the religious leader’s question, even though they were probably calculated to promote suspicion in the crowd by complaining of Jesus’ cleansing the temple and implying Jesus had gone too far. Their remarks were simply politics, a superficial power play, much as their earlier attitudes towards Jesus’ supernatural abilities “It is only by Beelzebub, the prince of demons, that this fellow drives out demons” (Matthew 12:24). As their jealous power play continued into the next chapter, they now *acknowledge His authority* as a point for their argument, “We know you are a man of integrity and that you teach the

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way of God in accordance with the truth” (Matthew 22:16).

Hence it would almost have been ridiculous for Jesus to have answered (any) of the loaded questions of the religious rulers after all they had seen, heard, and experienced. Jesus even said that He would not answer, since the religious rulers would not answer Jesus’ question concerning John’s authority. Yet Jesus did answer the religious rulers’ question. In fact the parable of Matthew 21 “stressed the authority of the son.” “Last of all, he (the landowner) sent his son to them. ‘They will respect my son,’ he said” (Matthew 21:37).

There could be no clearer connection between this landowner and God the Father. The immediate context alone demanded it. The religious rulers understood the parable was against them. Jesus went on to say that the religious rulers were “the descendants of those who murdered the prophets” (Matthew 23:31). They will “kill and crucify” the “prophets and wise men and teachers” (Matthew 23:34). A third time Jesus emphasized this connection, “you who kill the prophets and stone those sent to you” (Matthew 23:37).

Throughout the Old Testament God clearly fulfilled the role of either the landowner or the original planter of the vine. Christ was the son

sent by the landowner, and thus with the authority of the landowner. It was this authority, inherent in the son, which gave the landowner and father confidence to say “They will respect my son” (Matthew 21:37) even though they had beaten and killed the other servants. Jesus’ clear answer to their challenge was that He was the only Son of God sent on authority of God Himself to replace the sacrificial system.

### **A Religious Leader’s Heart Exposed**

Jesus as the fulfillment of the Law and Prophets would officially inaugurate a new covenant and changes for the people of God. The religious rulers met this change with conservative reluctance. However, after such a degree of authoritative signs and teachings had been given, any further hesitance by the religious rulers was no longer an understandable nostalgia, but had progressed from stubbornness all the way into blind rage. They could see His works agreeing with His words, and they could behold His miracles. They could hear the prophet pointing to Him. They could see the children attesting Him in a manner beyond their age (21:15-16). But all this did not persuade them. Instead, ‘they were indignant.’

This desperate attitude to cling to the past is reflected when Jesus explained the insanity of the tenants

within the parable. They believed that they would receive the landowner’s inheritance if they could just murder his son: “When the tenants saw the son, they said to each other, ‘This is the heir. Come, let’s kill him and take his inheritance’” (Matt 21:38). Only the craziest expectations would have had such hopes, and although Jesus was able to expose the religious leaders themselves through their own pronouncement of self-condemnation—“He will bring those wretches to a wretched end” (Matthew 21:41). They were unable to pry themselves from their sins as well as their inherited traditions.

### **The Unrepentant and the Heirs**

Despite all their potential flaws, the religious leaders’ refusal to repent was not due—against the majority of modern church pop culture opinion—to any greater qualitative sin in their life. It was not that (possible) extortion in the Temple, or anything else the religious rulers may have been up to, was so much worse a sin than extortion by taxation or extortion by prostitution. Nowhere was any sin of the religious rulers singled out as clearly as those repeatedly called “tax collectors and prostitutes.” Simply that the religious rulers crucified Christ cannot be appealed to here, for they had not done so yet, even if they had wrongly insulted Him and although their hearts were plotting more evil.

In fact, in spite of their flaws, I would suspect that it would have been far easier to point to all of the religious rulers’ righteousness and obedience than to track down and condemn what subtle sins they did possess. If the religious rulers were

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***Any further hesitance by the religious rulers was no longer an understandable nostalgia, but had progressed from stubbornness all the way into blind rage.***

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not from all appearances righteous, then why did they constantly irritate Jesus for dining with sinners such as tax collectors, prostitutes, and the ceremonially unclean? Rather, they had no patience or tolerance for such blatant sinners. The religious rulers' behavior was justified and defended with a good conscience, with memorized proof-texts from Scripture, and with systematic theology of the Old Covenant. They were the conservative orthodox.

The words of Christ ring true, "If you were blind, you would not be guilty of sin; but now that you claim you can see, your guilt remains" (John 9:41). What Christ wanted from the religious rulers was to admit their sin and failure to live up to the law. This line of reasoning is why Jesus was able to say to them in the very same discourse: "You say, 'If we had lived in the days of our forefathers, we would not have taken part with them in shedding the blood of the prophets.' So you testify against yourselves that you are the descendants of those who murdered the prophets" (Matthew 23:30-31). It was the religious rulers' claim to obedience and righteousness that condemned them, not their sins. They "put their faith in the law and despised repentance from sin."

Because of their refusal to repent, all the religious rulers could do was add to their sin. Christ would soon "rent the vineyard to other tenants, who will give him his share of the crop at harvest time" (Matthew 21:41), or in other words, "I am sending you prophets and wise men and teachers" (Matthew 23:34) implying the disciples. The religious

rulers would respond *even yet again* in such a way that "some of them you will kill and crucify; others you will flog in your synagogues and pursue from town to town. And so upon you will come all the righteous blood that has been shed on earth" (Matthew 23:34-35).

Again, in no way can the issue at stake in inheriting the Kingdom of God be obedience to the law. Jesus did recognize the due authority of the religious rulers. They truly were experts in the law, "The teachers of the law and the Pharisees sit in Moses' seat. So you must obey them and do everything they tell you" (Matthew 23:2-3). True, they did not "practice what they preach" (vs. 3). Yet who can bear such "heavy loads" (vs. 4)?

Has there ever been one who can practice what the religious rulers preached? Only one person, and that person became a curse and was killed outside of the vineyard in the place of the penitent. Those penitent are the ones Jesus praised earlier in Matthew, "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven" (5:3). There was one last commandment that the religious rulers should have preached alongside all the rest of their teaching: the desperate need for perpetual repentance and trust in the righteousness of Christ in place of one's own righteousness.

This was why Christ cleared out the Temple, to make way for a new and final sacrifice, one that would finally atone for all the sins of God's penitent people. This was why Christ spoke of "whoever falls on this stone will be broken; but on whomever it falls, it will grind him to powder" (Matthew 21:44 NKJV).

Therein lay the contrast between the religious leaders and the crowd of sinners, between the unrepentant and the penitent.

### Conclusion

In the end analysis, what kind of people were the religious rulers of the day? They were ordinary people, they were trying to be faithful to their office, but they were not innocent. Their flaws were exposed by Jesus, just as Jesus will expose the flaws of others.

The parable of the wicked tenants in Matthew 21:33-46 explained Jesus' authority, exposed the sin in the hearts of the religious rulers, reminded them of God's love, and contrasted the penitent heirs of the Kingdom of God against its unrepentant enemies. Surely this is a story the church needs to teach and hear continually through the ages.

**Mr. Bryan Miller** is a student at Westminster Seminary in California.

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