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The Outlook

Dedicated to the Exposition and Defense of the Reformed Faith



♦ Everything is Achan ♦ What is Reformed Worship (III) ♦ The Seventh Plague ♦ Dr. Wentsel: Pastor, Theologian, Author, Apologist ♦ Looking Above: The Fifth Trumpet
♦ Longing for Salvation Restored ♦ Book Review ♦ Christian Response to Physician-Assisted Suicide ♦ URCNA Classis Reports ♦ Looking Out and About

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"And the three companies blew the trumpets...and held THE TORCHES in their left hands, and THE TRUMPETS in their right hands. . .and they cried, 'The sword of Jehovah and of Gideon.'" (Judges 7:20).

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Everything is Achan

“When I saw among the spoils a goodly Babylonian garment, and two hundred shekels of silver, and a wedge of gold of fifty shekels weight, I coveted them, and took them; and, behold, they are hidden in the earth in the midst of my tent, and the silver under it.” (Joshua 7:21)

Achan was one of Israel’s soldiers in the battle of Jericho. He was on the right side of the conflict but on the wrong side of the wall. God had given the command that the entire city of Jericho was to be destroyed. Anything that was taken out of the city, be it gold, silver, bronze, or iron, was to be taken to the treasury of the Lord as the first-fruits of the conquest. Everything else was to be consumed by fire.

Achan had heard the command along with everyone else, but when he entered the city and actually saw some of the forbidden spoil, he coveted and took some of it. The very fact that Achan hid what he had taken shows that he knew what he was doing was wrong. Because of this willful sin against the direct command of God, the judgment of God came upon the entire nation in the defeat at Ai.

Achan’s Dissatisfaction

Achan’s disobedience came because he was unhappy with the Lord’s leading in his life. Isn’t that amazing? Here was this Israelite who had been wandering thru the desert for forty years. During that time he ate the manna and the quails. He drank the water from the rock. During that time, neither his clothes nor his shoes wore out—not for him nor his family. Can you imagine never having to buy clothes for your children because God saw to it that their clothes never wore

out no matter how hard they played?

In addition, there was the promise that one day they would arrive into a new land and live in homes they did not build, drink from cisterns they did not dig, and harvest grapes from vines they did not plant. On and on came the promises from God.

Just a few days earlier, they had crossed the Jordan on dry ground. How much closer could you get to the fulfillment of the promise! And yet, here was a man who looked at all that God had done and saw them not as blessings, but as curses. Always manna! Always the same clothes! Never so much as a dime to spend or save up for the future. Then he walked into the city of Jericho where his dissatisfaction gave birth to disobedience.

Isn’t that usually the case? When Satan sinned by rebelling against God it was dissatisfaction with the position that God had given to him. God was the Creator; Satan was the creature. But Satan was dissatisfied with that position and wanted to be like God.

It was the same in the case of Adam and Eve when sin first entered the human race. God made Adam and Eve perfect in all respects. But Satan called attention to the fact that Eve and her husband were not like God, knowing good

and evil. He told them all they had to do become like God was eat from the forbidden tree. Satan had sown the seed of dissatisfaction in the hearts of our first parents and they ate from the tree.

Not only was Achan dissatisfied, but once he entered into the city of Jericho he coveted that which was not his. Can you imagine the sight of a beautiful garment after wearing the same thing for almost forty years? When Achan saw that shiny mantle from Shinar, he saw a chance to be like the world with all its visible success and fashion. The internal dissatisfaction and covetousness of Achan led to sinful actions. He stole that which he could not have.

Achan’s fall is too often our own. Materialism and worldliness are our society’s greatest temptations and most apparent sins. Dissatisfaction with what the Lord has provided leads to a desire for that which God has not yet given or that which He has given to someone else. Nothing will destroy your life quicker than dissatisfaction with God’s arrangement for you in your life.

All too often we are not satisfied because someone has more than we do. They have nicer things than we have; they are able to do more than we are; and so on. Such dissatisfaction leads us into sin. Paul wrote, “I know how to get along with humble means, and I know also how to live in prosperity; in any and every circumstance I have learned the secret of being filled and going hungry, both in having abundance and in suffering need” (Philippians 4:12). Paul’s

secret was not to look at the things of the world but to always strive for Christ's glory rather than his own.

Sin Exposed

Jehovah explained to Joshua that the loss at Ai was a direct result of sin in the camp of Israel. At God's command, lots were drawn by the leader of each tribe. Eleven tribes were eliminated. One from each clan within that twelfth tribe came forward and selected a lot. Again, the majority of clans were eliminated. Then the head of each family came forward and finally one person was left standing with the lot pointing directly at him--Achan.

We do not know what was going on in Achan's mind as those lots were being cast—every time eliminating another group of people—every time drawing closer and closer to him. We do know, however, that Achan did not fall on his knees in repentance. He did not have the brains to escape nor the grace to confess. His heart has been hardened by his own dissatisfaction and deceitfulness and it proved to be his own destruction.

Once his sin was exposed, Achan confessed using words very similar to those found in Genesis 3: "I saw; I coveted; I took." And then what? "I hid." Just like Adam and Eve hide themselves in the very place where God had put them—the Garden of Eden—so Achan takes the forbidden items and hides them in the very ground that was God's promised land to Israel.

Then came what may well be the most chilling words of the account. Not the punishment itself, but in

verse 23 we are told that the stolen objects were displayed before the people. They all knew the ban. They all knew the defeat at Ai came upon them because the ban had been violated. They knew the thirty-six men that had died in battle because of this one man. It was all because Achan was not satisfied with his position in life. He could not wait to possess the land. He wanted it now! So he stole some of it now.

Even more frightening point is made in this verse. The stolen booty was spread out before the Lord. They

Achan wanted all the benefits of the eschaton before the eschaton.

were spread out before the eyes of the holy God, as all sin one day will be exposed for what it really is. Can you imagine the anger of the living God upon this man and his sin? Here God was in the process of giving them everything: a land flowing with milk and honey, houses they did not build, vineyards they did not plant, livestock they had not raised, and more. It was all going to be theirs. But the first-fruits were to be kept for the treasury of the Lord in the temple.

Achan was not stealing from Jericho; he was stealing from God. He wanted the benefits of the eschaton before the eschaton. It would be

like God giving to us every blessing that is ours as Christians: forgiveness of sins and eternal life. Then He adds to that, the beautiful home you live in, the car that you drive, the food you have in the oven and in the cupboard, your health, your job, every good gift that you have. It all comes from the hand of God. And all God asks in return is the first-fruits. "Return to me a tithe."

And you don't. You are not stealing from whoever it is that holds your mortgage, or some bill collector, or your boss, or anyone else. You are stealing from God that which He has declared is rightly His. That is what Achan did. If we are to learn anything at all from the defeat at Ai and the sin of Achan it is that God does not and will not tolerate sin.

Return of God's Favor

Even though this is an account of judgment, it is also a proclamation of hope. The blessing will come again when sin is repudiated. Once the sin has been dealt with, God gives the orders to go up to Ai and capture it, and Israel does so without a hitch.

Jehovah's anger did not cool until judgment was duly meted out against the one who transgressed the covenant of God. Once that punishment was meted out, Israel could receive the blessings God had promised. They could continue conquering the Land God had promised them.

Achan, his family, and all his possessions were destroyed in the Valley of Achor. Since that day, the site became known as the Valley of Disaster. It was a place of fear; a

pile of stones reminding the people of the intense punishment of God upon those who disobey Him. Jesus, the Messiah, went down into that dark valley and made it a resting place for all who seek Him. He turned earth's most dismal valley into a point of uplifting hope by taking Achor's disaster—our sin—upon Himself. By His blood He would set in place the unconditional covenant in which the Lord declares: "I will forgive their wickedness and remember their sins no more."

After the punishment of Achan, "the Lord turned from the fierceness of His anger" (:26). This points to the propitiation and expiation of God's anger against the sin of humanity by the execution of the sinless Christ, who was made sin for us that we might become the righteousness of God. Jesus Christ was numbered among the transgressors and died as if all the sins of all His chosen people had been committed by Him.

And in that He makes us free to enter into the Promised Land.

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What is Reformed Worship? (III) It is Covenantal

As a community of faith, the Church is in a relationship with her Triune God of grace. Scripture describes this relationship as a marriage (Eph. 5). As such, it is both legal and intimate. What draws these different spheres of thought together is that our marriage relationship is a covenant. In this covenant, our purpose, as the bride of the Lord, is to give our loving God all our worship in thought, word, and deed.

A Biblical Category for Worship

To fully appreciate this covenantal aspect of our worship, let us first ask where we as Christians in the Reformed tradition place ourselves in the "worship spectrum." Are we "contemporary" or "traditional?" These are the two categories everyone is familiar with in our day. Unfortunately, these categories are neither biblical nor helpful.

We must reject the labels of "contemporary" and "traditional" as a false dichotomy and unhelpful in pursuing dialog with those outside of our circles of influence. These labels for styles of worship, by definition, are rooted in a particular time, culture, and preference. The "contemporary" worship movement has cornered itself into being hip, modern, up to date, relevant, and therefore more audience appealing. It is also, from a historical perspective, a modern-day novelty. The "traditional" worship movement suggests that it is not neces-

sarily biblical, but based only upon what our past traditions did.

This Protestant belief in the sufficiency of Scriptures cannot, and does not, exclude the area of worship. In fact, when it comes to worship, more than any other area, we need to go back to the pages of the sacred text. We do this because we are not devising a way for us to draw people to God based on what our culture enjoys, but we are seeking to do what God Himself commands and is pleased by in our worship. Thus, we are to be contemporary as we communicate the Gospel to sinners in the vernacular of the day. We are to be contemporary as we seek to set the inspired words of the Psalms to tunes that we can sing and enjoy. All the while, we are not to forsake the catholic and Protestant tradition that has gone before us.

"Covenantal" Worship

The story of the Bible, from Genesis to Revelation, is about the unfolding of God's covenant with His people. Scripture reveals that God is a sovereign, covenant-making God. When He created man, He created him in a covenant relationship with Himself. After Adam broke that original covenant, God did not abandon what He had made, but came to the rescue in mercy and grace by making another covenant—what we call "the covenant of grace." This covenant of grace, which began in principle in Genesis 3:15, continued with Noah, reached a

How we worship God is a reflection of what we believe about God.

formal status with Abram in Genesis 15, and developed throughout the history of redemption until its climax in Jesus Christ.

The New Covenant Church of Jesus Christ, then, is the continuation of God's covenant of grace from the dawn of redemptive history. We see this in the fact that the titles that the LORD gave to Israel at the foot of Sinai, when He renewed His covenant with them, are also applied to us: "But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for His own possession..." (1 Peter 2:9 cf. Ex. 19:6).

Covenant theology not only defines God's dealings with His people throughout history and unites together all of the Bible as the unfolding account of God's one redemptive plan, but it also dictates our response to God. Because covenants are between two parties, the structure of covenants also informs our worship. Covenant worship is a dialog between God and His people. This means that God speaks to us, and then we respond to Him. God says to us "I will be your God" and we respond, "We will be your people." God calls us to worship and we respond in song. God speaks to us His Law, we respond to Him with confession of our sins, He speaks to us the absolution of our sins, and we respond in prayer. He speaks to us in the Word and sacraments and we respond with gifts of gratitude and doxology. This is the heart of what it means that our worship is *covenantal* worship.

Form vs. Substance

"Well that sounds great, but when it comes down to it, it doesn't matter *how* you worship, as long as you are sincere and it comes from the heart, right?" This popular way of thinking separates the substance of worship from the form of worship. It assumes a division between what we are to do in worship from how we do it.

We can no more divide substance from form in worship than we can divide our theology from its results in our practical lives. Thus, we express the praise we have for God in our hearts in words and acts (Pss. 29:1-2, 96:8, 99:9, 148:12, 13; Mal. 1:11).

How we worship God is a reflection of what we believe about God. Liturgy is theology in practice. As Christians have long said, *lex orandi, lex credendi*, that is, the law of prayer is the law of belief. In his controversy with the Pelagians, Prosper, a disciple of the great Augustine of Hippo, used a similar phrase in his response. In order to show the sovereignty of God's grace in salvation he appealed to the prayers of the liturgy. This is why "it is impossible to change the form (worship practice) without altering the content (theological conviction)." How we worship actually determines whom we worship.

Modern-day churches follow this principle with praise and worship bands, repetitive songs, mood lighting, etc. When you worship with

such a church, you are participating in their theology as well. Have you ever wondered why most churches today begin their services with 20-30 minutes of singing? Most have not even asked this question. The protracted time of singing before the sermon (the "message," as it is called today) was begun in the nineteenth century American revivals. This long period of time in which singing took place, and which songs had a strong emphasis upon the individual's experience and feelings about God, was meant to "soften the hearts" of the congregation for the sermon and subsequent altar call or call for a decision to believe in Jesus (which were substitutes for the sacrament of the Lord's Supper). The great revivalist Billy Sunday speaks of this in his authorized biography, saying,

[A] half an hour to an hour of this varied music introduces each service. When the evangelist himself is ready to preach, the crowd has been worked up into a glow and fervor that make it receptive to his message.

The reason churches began using this format was because their theology matched it. Most churches were leaving historic Protestant doctrine for Pelagian and semi-Pelagian/Arminian belief about the nature of sin and grace. When you worship in this way you are joining in a theology that says that people are basically good, or at worst, just sick. People are able to reach out to God apart from grace or in cooperation with grace to grab hold of salvation.

As the Reformed historian W. Robert Godfrey relates,

Whereas traditionally music was an important part of the dialog between God and His people, for many it has become the heart of worship, even called the “Praise and Worship” part of the service. Music seems to have become for some a new sacrament, mediating the presence and experience of God, establishing a mystical bond between God and the worshipper. With eyes closed and hands in the air worshippers repeat simple phrases that become Christian mantras.

This is evidenced in the words of Joe Horness, Willow Creek Community Church’s music director, who says, “At the heart of the contemporary worship movement is this longing to connect with God. To that end we use the music that best helps us speak our language.”

Apart from the life-giving Holy Spirit, we would never worship God. It is God who calls us to worship in His grace. Thus, Reformed worship reflects the biblical teaching of God being sovereign and condescending to us in grace, and our horrible blindness in sin.

Worship is a dialog between God and us, and not our offering of praise or our free-will efforts. Our service does not follow the structure of the nineteenth century revival. Instead, we follow the biblical pattern of call and response: God speaks in the call to worship, the greeting, the Law, the absolution, the reading and preaching of the Word, the Lord’s Supper, and the benediction, while we respond in song, prayer, and offering. In bibli-

cal terms, worship is a ceremony in which God renews His covenant promises with us and we respond to Him in faith and praise. He has made a covenant of grace with us in Jesus Christ and He renews it with us every week in the Word and sacraments.

It seems that the spirit of the age, not the Spirit who inspired Scripture, guides churches in our day. Our democratic and therapeutic culture fosters our modern-day, American evangelical religion so that preference of worship style determines whether a church is pleasing to worshippers. If you do not believe me, just ask a friend to describe why he attends the church he goes to. Will he tell you about Christ-centered preaching that shows sin in the light of the Law and the only comfort of Christians in the Gospel? Will he mention godly church discipline, which ensures the purity of Christ’s Church? Too often, what you hear is “my church’s worship style and music is what I want.”

Covenant Renewal Ceremony

This concept of covenant applies particularly to how the people of God worship. Worship is a covenant renewal ceremony. There are many examples in the Old Testament of ceremonies that renewed the original ratification of a covenant (Exodus 34, Deuteronomy 31:9-13, Joshua 24, 2 Kings 23, 2 Chronicles 15, Nehemiah 9–10, and Ezra 9–10).

In Joshua 24, for example, we read the account of the renewal of the covenant before Joshua died. This ceremony followed a very basic form, which we should be very familiar with because of our link to the Christian church: 1) there was a gathering of the people (v. 1), just as we gather; 2) God spoke, recounting His story (vv. 2–15), just as we hear His Word throughout the liturgy, especially in the sermon; 3) the people responded to God’s Word (vv. 16–24), even as we respond in song, prayer, offering, and the creed; 4) the covenant was renewed with a visible sign (vv. 25–27), similar to how it is with us in the Lord’s Supper; 5) finally, the people were dismissed (v. 28), even as we are dismissed from the presence of the Lord with the benediction.

This basic structure was commanded even earlier in the law (Leviticus 1:1–9), where the renewal of the covenant relationship between God and His people came through sacrifice (cf. 1 Kings 3:15; Ps. 50:5): 1) God *called* the worshiper to draw near with an offering from his herd (vv. 1–2); 2) the worshiper *confessed* his sin by placing his hands on the offering’s head, symbolically transferring his guilt to the animal, then the sacrifice was slain and its blood is sprinkled as atonement for his sin (vv. 3–5); 3) the slain animal, symbolic of the worshipper, was then *consecrated* as it was offered to God according to His Word (vv. 6–7); 4) the

Worship is a dialog between God and us, and not our offering of praise or our free-will efforts.

smoke ascended into God's presence where it became "food...to the LORD," as a *communion* meal (vv. 8-9); 5) finally, God *commissioned* the worshiper for service in His kingdom (Num. 6:22-27).

In the New Testament, this is gloriously fulfilled in Christ, who makes us His temple (Eph. 2), His priests (1 Peter 2), as well as His sacrifices in our persons and praise (Rom. 12:1-2; (Heb. 13:15; 1 Peter 2). The concepts of covenant and sacrifice, therefore, lie at the core of biblical worship.

We learn from the covenant renewal pattern and covenant sacrifices how our worship is to be ordered and offered: we are *called* to worship, we *confess* our sin and are *cleansed* by the blood of Christ, we are *consecrated* by the "sword of the Spirit," the preaching of the Word of God, we celebrate *communion*, and God speaks His *commission* to us.

Because worship is a ceremony of covenant renewal, its purpose is not to entertain, to get a thrill, to "get blessed," or to do whatever possible to draw a large crowd, as the philosophies of worship abound in churches today. Instead, the Scriptures clearly teach that worship is a meeting with God to renew our mutual bonds of fellowship.

In saying that biblical worship is covenantal worship, we recognize that in worship we participate in the mystery of communion with the Triune God. He is our God and we are His people, especially in worship. Just as the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit have participated in an eternal bond of love and fellowship, so too, when we draw near for

worship we are caught up in that eternal fellowship with the unbegotten Father, through His eternally begotten Son, in the power and mystery of the eternally proceeding Spirit.

The motivation to worship is not because it brings us happiness, gives us a sense of self-fulfillment, builds family unity, or unites our nation or ethnic group in a common religious identity. It must be the Triune God Himself. God gives Himself to us in a covenant relationship. The Father loves us with an everlasting love by sending His Son to take our broken life to Himself and to give us new lives in the power of the Spirit. Since we gather to "call upon the LORD, who is worthy to be praised" (Ps. 18:3), our motivation in worship is God's worthiness because of who He is in Himself (Rev. 4:8), who He is as Creator (Ps. 19:1; Rev. 4:11), and who He is as Redeemer (Rev. 5:9-10, 12-13). Thus in our worship it is God alone who receives all the "power and wealth and wisdom and might and honor and glory and blessing" (Rev. 4:12). The reasons for our praises are not our desires or feelings, but His mighty deeds of creation and redemption.

We are to worship God because God commands us to praise and glorify *Him!* This is what the first table of the Law commands us to do: we are to have no other gods but Jehovah, we are not to make images of Him, we are not to misuse

Him name, and we are to worship Him on His appointed day.

There is much for which to give praise. For example, in Paul's epistle to the Romans, he develops his defense of the Christian faith by proclaiming that all mankind stands condemned in Adam: "there is none righteous, no not one; there is none who understands; there is none who seeks after God...there is no one good, no not one" (Rom 3:10a-11, 12c). "But God," he exclaims, "demonstrates His own love toward us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us" (Rom 5:8). Through faith alone, God justified us, so that "there is therefore now no condemnation to those who are in Christ Jesus" (Rom 8:1). As if this were not enough to stimulate his heart and mind to praise, Paul goes on in chapters 8-11 to say that God actually loved us before the foundation of the world (8:29); He chose us according to His own mercy (9:16); He sends preachers to gather His fore-loved children (10:14-17); He has engrafted Gentiles, wild olive branches, into the tree of the covenant (11:17).

Because of these amazing benefits of our covenant Lord, Paul responded as a redeemed sinner and member of Christ's spouse, the church:

Oh, the depth of the riches of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are His judgments and His

The motivation to worship must be the triune God Himself.

ways past finding out! ‘For who has known the mind of the LORD? Or who has become His counselor? Or who has first given to Him and it shall be repaid to Him. For of Him and through Him and to Him are all things, to whom be glory forever. Amen (Rom 11:33-36).

This is the redeemed Church’s doxology—this is your doxology! Sing his praises, Church, for “the LORD has done great things for us, and we are glad” (Ps 126:3).

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

The Seventh Plague: God Employs the Firmament

(Exodus 9:13-32)

The beginning of the seventh plague has a familiar ring to it. By way of review, the plagues are organized into three cycles with three plagues in each cycle, and the tenth plague standing alone as the final act of judgment against Pharaoh and the false gods of Egypt. The first plague in each cycle begins the same way: plagues one, four, and seven began with Moses going to Pharaoh in the morning and standing before him. The fact that Moses stood before Pharaoh speaking for God; declaring both God’s demand and the consequences for rejecting God’s demand, should be understood from a military perspective. It is significant that Moses continued to stand against Pharaoh, but the Egyptian magicians were no longer able to stand before Moses and Aaron. The plagues represented the conflict between the one true living God and the false gods of Egypt.

Just as there were similarities between the plagues there were also important differences between the plagues. For example, the first series of plagues originated with the water, the second series originated with the dust of the earth, and the third series originated with the sky. The hailstones of the seventh plague had absolutely no relationship to the boils of the sixth plague. This eliminates any possibility that the plagues can be explained as the result of a natural chain of secondary causes.

The plagues were the result of God’s direct intervention. Through the use of the plagues, Jehovah was confronting Pharaoh and the false gods of Egypt. The conflict was coming to a climax, which was reflected in the extended warning that Moses proclaimed before Pharaoh. For the first time, some of the Egyptians listened to Moses and the warning that he proclaimed in the presence of Pharaoh.

This is the first time that God provided an opportunity for individual Egyptians to avoid the consequences of a plague. “Bring your livestock and everything you have in the field to a place of shelter, because the hail will fall on every man and animal that has not been brought in and is still out in the field, and they will die” (9:19).

Judgment From the Sky

The fact that the last series of plagues employed the firmament against Pharaoh and his people is significant. It is critical to remember that the Egyptians believed that their gods were personified in the elements of nature. The fact that judgment poured down from the heavens made a mockery of the heavenly deities of Egypt. This certainly included Nut, the female representative of the sky; she represents the vault of heaven. Shu was the supporter of the heavens who held up the sky; and Tefnut was the goddess of moisture. All three gods or goddesses were exposed in the seventh plague. We see the folly of

idolatry, and also the bondage of sin and the affects of the fall. It was only reasonable that all of Egypt would acknowledge Jehovah before He destroyed them, yet they failed to do so.

It was not for a lack of evidence. The reason why Pharaoh and his people did not acknowledge Jehovah as the one true God was due to the condition of their hearts. Through the plagues, God made clear that the earth is His, yet Pharaoh and his officials refused to humble themselves, they refused to acknowledge the one true God.

God Shows Less Restraint with the Last Series of Plagues

God threatened to unleash the full force of His plagues against Pharaoh and Egypt. God had restrained Himself, but that was about to change. God would use less restraint in the next cycle of plagues. Moses warned Pharaoh that Jehovah could have unleashed a plague that would have wiped him off the face of the earth, but instead God had raised Pharaoh up and sustained him for this very purpose. The purpose was given: "I have raised you up for this very purpose, that I might show you my power and that my name might be proclaimed in all the earth" (9:16).

On a practical level this means that no one can stand against God, unless God sustains him in his rebellion. It also means that God is able to judge and save according to His sovereign will. We should have no doubt that in God's time the wicked will be judged, and likewise in God's time the elect in Christ will see and experience the fullness of their sal-

vation. One should never doubt God's willingness or His ability to judge the reprobate, and likewise his willingness and His ability to save the elect. There is no power in heaven or on earth that can thwart either His judgment or His salvation. Both are equally ultimate.

The attack against Pharaoh and his people came because God was revealing Himself to all men through His mighty acts. All men would know that there was no one like Him in all the earth, that His name might be proclaimed in all the earth.

This is exactly what the psalmist commands us to do. "Praise the

God is able to judge and save according to His sovereign will.

Lord. I will extol the Lord with all my heart in the council of the upright and in the assembly. Great are the works of the Lord; they are pondered by all who delight in them. Glorious and majestic are His deeds, and His righteousness endures forever. He has caused His wonders to be remembered" (Psalm 111:1-4).

Every time we gather for public worship we are doing what the psalmist commanded us to do. In the assembly of God we are remembering His wonders, His great works, His glorious and majestic deeds. As we reflect upon His great work and His goodness we are sensitized to

the fact, that we too are objects of His great work and His glorious deeds. God has elected us in Christ to be His sons and daughters instead of His enemies. If you know Christ, then you know the Father, and you know the benefit of His saving work, and therefore you should be anxious to acknowledge His glorious work, and likewise you should also be anxious to acknowledge His authority over you.

This stands in contrast to Pharaoh. In the first meeting between Pharaoh and Moses, Pharaoh claimed in defiance that he did not know Jehovah. In time Pharaoh would acknowledge Jehovah, but it would not take place until Jehovah had thoroughly defeated and humiliated Egypt and her false gods, including Pharaoh.

A Warning To Egypt

The seventh plague contains an extended warning. For the first time the Egyptians were told how they could avoid the coming judgment. Some of the Egyptians listened to Moses. They feared the word of God. Up to this point, the only distinction that had existed was between the Hebrews and the Egyptians. But now, God was making a distinction within Egypt between those who feared God's word and those who scoffed at God's word. God was claiming and calling the elect from the world as His own. Everyone that belonged to God feared the Lord. This reminds us of the midwives in chapter one. Pharaoh had commanded the midwives to kill the infant Hebrew boys, but to allow the girls to live, "The midwives, however, feared God and did not do what the King of Egypt had told them to do, instead

they let the Hebrew boys live.”

The reason why the midwives disobeyed Pharaoh’s word and obeyed God’s word had to do with the fact that they feared God. This is also why some of the Egyptians in chapter nine obeyed the warning that Moses had given; they feared the Lord. In contrast, verse 30 tells us that Pharaoh and his officials still did not fear the Lord God. As a result they did not heed the warning; instead, they rejected God’s word in unbelief.

The Psalmist tells us that the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom. The foundation for true wisdom begins with the proper knowledge of God and the proper attitude toward God. In the book of Exodus the fear of the Lord and the fear of God’s Word are associated with reverence, respect, and even worship. The fear of God’s word in this context indicates that God had a people that He was calling out from Egypt. For the first time we see that God is making a distinction within Egypt between His people and Pharaoh’s people. There are Egyptians that Jehovah had claimed as His own; they feared Him and they honored Him.

This plays out in Exodus 12, where Moses describes the hasty departure of the Hebrews. Many other people went with the Israelites. The other people were the God-fearing Egyptians. They identified with Israel and with Israel’s God. In time, many of them would have undergone circumcision, making them members of Israel. The ingrafting of the God-fearing Egyptians into Israel was a foreshadowing of the future ingrafting of the

gentiles that would take place following the ministry of Christ.

“Remember that at that time you were separate from Christ, excluded from citizenship in Israel and foreigners to the covenants of the promise, without hope and without God in the world. But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far away have been brought near through the blood of Christ.... Consequently, you are no longer foreigners and aliens, but fellow citizens with God’s people and members of God’s household, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone” (Eph. 2:12-13; 19-20).

Paul is teaching that Gentiles have been grafted into Israel. Believing Gentiles are now members of the covenants of promise, through Jesus Christ. Believing Gentiles were no longer aliens, but fellow citizens with God’s people and members of God’s household. The ingrafting of the Gentiles is foreshadowed in the seventh plague. Just as God claimed a remnant from Egypt at the time of the Exodus, likewise God has claimed a people from the Gentile nations, and He is actively calling them out.

In summary, through the plagues we see how God is sovereign over the various elements of nature including the water, the land, and the heavens. As the plagues progress from one plague to another we see an intensification of God’s wrath. The plagues will be unleashed on the earth again at the end of this age. This time there will be a further intensification of the plagues. They will be even more severe

than the plagues associated with the Exodus. In the book of Revelation John writes, “From the sky huge hailstones of about a hundred pounds each fell upon men. And they cursed God on account of the plague of hail, because the plague was so terrible” (Rev. 16:21). At the end of the age we will see God’s wrath poured out upon this earth and the reprobate; but we will also see God’s salvation. God will make a distinction between His people and the people belonging to the seed of the serpent.

We should be comforted in the fact that God saves. He did more than just make salvation possible; He actually saves us. Our salvation is definite. In John 6 Jesus says, “For I have come down from heaven not to do my will but to do the will of Him who sent me. And this is the will of Him who sent me, that I shall lose none of all that He has given me, but raise them up at the last day” (John 6:38,39).

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Dr. B. Wentzel: Pastor, Theologian, Author, Apologist

Why write an article about a relatively unknown Dutch theologian in North American Reformed circles? Why choose Dr. Wentzel instead of a well-known Dutch theologian whose works are available in English? This year, 2007, the Christian Reformed Church in North America (CRC) is celebrating its founding year--1857. Ever since her beginning, she has been in a close relationship with the Gereformeerde Kerken in Nederland (GKN). Both the GKN and CRC churches share the same Reformed roots, the same Reformed Confessions, and the same sixteenth century church order. For many years the CRC considered the GKN as her "mother church."

In 1927, the CRC theologian Dr. Louis Berkhof said the Netherlands had a strong Reformed tradition where the Reformed people constitute a much larger percentage of its population. The second World War, however, changed not only the world, but also the church scene in the Netherlands. In 1944, a serious schism took place in the GKN, due to the conflict that centered especially around Professors Klaas Schilder and Seakle Greijdanus. Obviously, the CRC in North America could not closely follow the course of events in connection with this schism and the relationship between the two parties. When the CRC finally became aware of the split in the GKN, she chose to remain loyal to her "mother" church. After the war, a

large number of emigrants left the Netherlands to settle in Canada. The majority of these immigrants came from the GKN, which influenced the CRC on both sides of the border with their Kuyperian background.

The once staunchly conservative GKN went through some traumatic theological upheavals. In the 1960s the GKN's decision to admit women to ecclesiastical offices surprised the CRC. Other causes of concern, included declarations and actions in connection with the doctrines and confessions of the church. Dr. Herman Wiersinga and his view on the doctrine of atonement and Dr. Harry Kuitert's undermining of the Reformed faith attracted special attention. Today, the GKN no longer exists. She united with the Evangelical Lutheran Church and the Nederlandse Hervormde Kerk (Netherlands Reformed Church) to form the Protestantse Kerk in Nederland (PKN).

Dr. Ben Wentzel (1929-) served for 37 years in five congregations of the GKN, (1953-1990) taught dogmatics for twenty-one years at Wittenberg in Zeist (1976-1997) and since 1994 was connected with the Evangelical Theological Academy in Ede. In 1970, he received his doctorate on the basis of his thesis *Natuur en Genade* (Nature and Grace). Besides many articles and books, he wrote a seven-volume dogmatics from 1981-1988, which

are now condensed in the two volume *Hij-is-er-bij. Handboek bijbelse geloofsleer*. (Handbook of Biblical doctrine), published by Kok, Kampen 2006.

When Wentzel's first volume of dogmatics was published, it was the beginning of a phenomenon: a new reformed dogmatics. A.M. Lindeboom remarks that since Bavinck, Wentzel's volumes of dogmatics were the first ones that appeared on the Reformed scene. Wentzel, however, was shunned by the liberal wing of the GKN. At an exhibition in Utrecht, commemorating the Secession of 1834, there were all kinds of displays of memorabilia, including the works of the liberal theologians Kuitert and Wiersinga. Not one of Wentzel's many works was on display. It was as if Kuitert and Wiersinga were the only ones who represented the spirit of the Secession. Upon reading Wentzel's works, one can understand the reason why the liberal crowd shunned him. He is a confessional theologian. He believes the creeds and confessions are a treasured inheritance. They are not relics from the ancient past, but monuments of the faithfulness of God. When new generations think that they must reinvent the truth of the Gospel, they overestimate themselves.

Wentzel the Theologian

Wentzel does not introduce a "new theology." He stands on the shoulders of previous generations of orthodox Christians. He does his theology from the heart of the historic Reformed faith. He mentions his indebtedness to Dr. H. Bavinck (1854-1921), who confronted the

spirit of his time with the Bible in his Reformed Dogmatics. He also refers to Dr. A.D. Polman (1897-1993), author of a four volume commentary on the Belgic Confession and an authority on Augustine and Calvin. Wentsel says that Polman taught him faithful adherence to Scripture, discipline, and self-limitation. Dr. K. Schilder convinced Wentsel that the Bible is not a collection of loose pages in a binder, but it is an organized binder; the sixty-six books bound together by the covenant. The door of history opens on the hinges of the covenant. Without the covenant of grace, Israel and the church would not have existed, and no book of the Bible would have come about. All the books of the Bible are bound together structurally through this covenant.

Wentsel notes we must accept the full inspiration of Scripture. We may not add to God's Word nor subtract from it. The Bible is also remarkably correct in details. There is no Biblical basis for denying the historicity of Adam and Eve as our first parents. The Christian faith does not rest on rumors but on facts, not on myth but on revelation. The author argues that denying Adam as the head of the human race is no small matter. God made a covenant with Adam in paradise. We have our origin in our first parents, Adam and Eve, who were created in the image of God. The historicity of our first parents is clearly demonstrated in the chronological list of ancestors of Noah and his sons (Gen. 5). Furthermore, Luke traces the genealogy to Adam (Luke 3:23-38).

Wentsel also observes that evolution is not an innocent matter. He

calls it a surrogate religion, an ideology. According to the Bible there is no conflict between faith and science. Faith and science form a unit, and unbelief and foolishness is also a unit (Ps. 14). He also points out that the current battle against the deity of Christ is nothing new; it is being fought throughout history. He explains that Satan--precisely through prominent persons--attacks the deity of the Son. Christians are involved in intense spiritual warfare (Eph. 6:10-20). There is a tremendous resistance to the Gospel. But even Satan is not outside of God's reach. In the end (Rev. 5-21), the Lamb of God will triumph over Satan and his demons.

Wentsel rightly states that the church is not a hotel with many rooms, but the household of faith; not a debating club but the pillar and foundation of truth (1 Tim. 3:14-16). When a church allows false teachings, the basis of the church becomes undermined; churches either fold up as they no longer have a message, or turn into sects with selections of truths. He warns, therefore, against false teachers saying that they play with fire and sow discord. They are also intolerant toward those who remain faithful to Scripture and the confessions. When confronted personally or in public of the error of their ways, they make accusations of intolerance and try to silence their opposition.

Coram Deo (Before God)

Theology is not a private hobby for the academic specialist. It is more than gathering information without personally knowing God. It belongs in the household of faith, to those who know God and worship and love His Name. Consequently, a theologian is a servant of the church. Furthermore, there should be a unity of faith, prayer, and knowledge. With a mixture of reverence, trust, obedience, and awe before the grandeur of the Holy Triune God, a theologian must study the Scripture along with some of the classics, such as Calvin's Institutes. Church and theology are both bound by the Word. A theologian may not invent new truths, but shed light on difficult questions raised by the complex issues and challenges of our times. The Holy Spirit leads us into all truth (John 16:13).

Wentsel is a praying theologian. He notes that prayer presupposes the omnipresence of a loving Father, Who is able to concentrate on the millions who call on His Name. Most chapters in his two volumes begin with a prayer, which makes it clear that he thinks through his theology in the presence of God. His intense longing is to see believers deepen their relationship with God with his theological work. He testifies that "only through Him was I able to write this work. *Soli Deo Gloria.*"

The church is not a hotel with many rooms, but the household of faith; not a debating club but the pillar and foundation of truth.

Unity of the Church

Wentzel's dogmatics is not narrowly denominational. He is within the broad Reformed tradition of Calvin. In our world of many denominations, he seeks the unity of the church. It is not man but God Who laid the basis for the unity of all His people out of every nation and tribe in the covenant of Abraham and his descendants (Eph. 2: 11-22). We are the people of God called to serve the Church in the Kingdom of God. We may not, however, seek unity at the expense of essential truths. Liberty of doctrine results in divisions and confusion; it destroys the solidarity of the church, whose hallmark it is to follow Christ in obedience to His Word. But when we stand steadfast in the truth, we can approach believers from other traditions without fear and travel together toward the full understanding of God's truth.

Why seek the unity of the church? Are we not busy enough to keep the flock together, let alone seek unity with other churches? Wentzel argues that for the sake of missions, the churches must become serious about the unity of the visible church. They should seek fellowship with each other and help each other to remain steadfast in the faith, correcting each other when necessary. A divided, quarrelling, church blemishes the Triune God and repels unbelievers. A loving church wins hearts for Him.

The Church and Israel

Does the church still have a special link with Israel? The church is engrafted into Israel and shares its covenant in a spiritual sense (Rom. 4:9-11). After Pentecost believing Gentiles became fellow citizens of

For the sake of missions, the churches must become serious about the unity of the visible church.

the Kingdom and shared in the promises of the covenant. They are heirs of the covenant promises, and belong to the same household of God. Through Christ's sacrifice, God overcame the enmity between both Jew and Gentile (Eph. 2 :16-17). Israel, as the people of the covenant, has rights to the land promised to Abraham. As an ethnic unit it has right to its own territory. The reinstatement of a remnant of Jews in the state of Israel in 1948 is a revelation of God's plan of redemption on the way to the second coming. It is one of the signs of the times. God decided the twentieth century was ripe for the reinstatement of the Jewish nation in the promised land. But what rights do the Palestinians have? The state of Israel ought to consider their rights; Palestinians, in turn, should recognize that the Jews have historic rights to Canaan.

Wentzel is a strong supporter of missions to the Jews. Because of Pentecost, the church must pass on the gospel of salvation to Israel, God's first love. Therefore, there is a special urgency to introduce the Jewish people to their Messiah. There will be a remnant of Jews, who will follow Jesus as the Messiah (Rom. 11:1-10). Messianic congregations play a vital role in proclaiming the Gospel to Jew and Gentile. By the year 2000 there were about fifty Messianic congregations in Israel who confessed Jesus as King.

Wentzel is not an ivory tower theologian. He points to the consequences of holding the truth of Scripture. Do not hide your faith in a closet. Do not privatize the Gospel. We are not from the world, but we may not withdraw from public life. Show your faith through works. The Gospel is for the world. The service of the Lord has social-economic consequences. Our convictions should control what we think and do. Christ is Lord and King over all of life, the state, work, education. Wentzel observes that a secular public school which does not acknowledge God is "strange, peculiar, abnormal." Normal is the Christian school, that confesses man as the image bearer of God and stresses the honor of God and the coming of His Kingdom, in accordance with God's original intention.

Islam

The Middle East issues have strong religious dimensions to which the military and diplomatic efforts must pay attention. Islam is more than a religion of private devotion. Many in the West do not have the faintest idea about the central place the Koran has in public life in the Middle East. For example, all the radio broadcasts in Egypt begin and end with a reading from the Koran.

Wentzel, therefore, believes that a theologian cannot act as if Islam does not exist. Islam, being a theistic religion that proclaims the God of creation and providence, re-

quires a theological approach. But Christians will stumble when they accommodate Muslims by surrendering the content of their faith. Wentsel's dogmatics show his in-depth knowledge of Islam. Throughout his two volumes he constantly engages Islam, compares its teachings with the teachings of the Bible. What does the Koran have to say about Biblical doctrines? Is Allah the same as the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ? How does a Muslim desiring democracy square it with the Islam doctrine of theocracy? Why the persecution of Christians in Islamic nations? Does it make any difference whether someone is a Muslim or a Christian? Why is it so difficult for Muslims to break with Islam?

We should try to win Muslims to the Lord. Islam is spreading rapidly in Europe and in North America. If we want to see Muslims come to Christ, we must know their mindset. We must become acquainted with the teachings of Islam but also know what our own faith teaches. We must also preach the Word. Muslims come to Christ through personal contact, through the Scripture and Christian literature, through a Christian school, or modern communications, such as the internet, TV, and radio. We must demonstrate the Gospel through lifestyle evangelism. Muslims rarely read the Bible, if at all. For them, Christians are the living Bible. They read about God through the love Christians have for fellow Christians; the help they offer when in need; they rejoice with those who are rejoicing and weep with those who are weeping.

Wentsel's discussion of Islam is a marvelous contribution to the ongoing questions raised by this religion since 9/11. Considering the many Muslims in the Netherlands, and also in North America, his apologetic is more than welcome. I hope, therefore, that the sections on Islam will find a translator. They are profound, insightful, and educational. It would be unfortunate if Wentsel's exposition of Islam remains limited to Dutch readers.

Missions

The Sender made Abraham and his people a blessing for all nations. Their election had a missionary purpose. God chooses His own to witness to His name. The Lord of Easter mandated the church through the Trinitarian Great Commission to go into all the world to proclaim that there is only way to God, and to make disciples (Matt 28:18-20). Jesus is not one of the ways; Jesus said that He is the only way to the Father (John 14:6). The Jew Peter proclaimed that whether Jew or Gentile, there is only one way to come to God, the way of Christ (Acts 4:11-12). Truth and falsehood cannot mix into a false synthesis. The Bible teaches the twofold continuation of life—either in heaven and the new earth or in hell and perdition. In other words, the heart of the Gospel is the salvation of believers and the damnation of the godless.

Therefore, witnessing is more than passing on information. It also con-

sists of making an appeal to the heart and conscience; a call to repentance. In our multicultural and pluralistic society, the church as a minority may not withdraw out of fear for intimidation and withdraw into isolation. The Gospel has never been popular. The Trinity, uniqueness of Christ, the cross, and the doctrine of hell are still the greatest stumbling blocks. The proclamation of Jesus Christ as the only way to salvation has always been fiercely resisted in one way or another, often leading to martyrdom.

Evaluation

Wentsel's work is valuable for theological instruction and personal reflection. With brief but pointed summaries, he sketches the positions of various theologians and offers his evaluation. The author inclines to perfectionism. He is so thorough. His bibliography of theological works consulted is phenomenal. He positions himself in the European multicultural society. He touches upon historical events and on contemporary politics as well as social issues. He often refers to current events in the Netherlands, and makes use of statistics to illustrate his case. But this also means that his work is time bound.

I have great admiration for Wentsel's dogmatics and have been blessed by it, but I am disappointed that he accepts women in ecclesiastical office. He states that the spirit of Pentecost breaks down hierarchy and discrimination be-

Wentzel is not an ivory tower theologian.

tween brothers. It does not mean that everyone is qualified for office. Unfortunately, Wentsel does not interact with theologians, who disagree with his position from a Biblical perspective. There are numerous studies both in English and in Dutch, which clearly demonstrate that women may not serve in ecclesiastical office.

Wentsel hopes his dogmatics will be a blessing to many, foster the growth of the church, and the blossoming of theology to the praise and glory of His holy name. He declares that theology is amongst the most rewarding, fulfilling, and genuinely exciting subjects anyone can ever hope to study. And so it is.

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Looking Above

A Series on the Revelation of Jesus Christ

Revelation 9:13-21

The Sixth Trumpet

The statistics are staggering. 10,623 casualties in the Revolutionary War. 6,765 casualties in the War of 1812. 17,435 casualties in the Mexican War. 970,227 casualties in the Civil War. 4,108 casualties in the Spanish-American War. 320,710 casualties in World War I. 1,078,162 casualties in World War II. 136,935 casualties in the Korean War. 211,471 casualties in the Vietnam War. 760 casualties in the Gulf War. And of course the numbers are still growing in the War on Terror. The numbers add up to 2,757,196, and that's just American casualties! Expand those statistics to include the entire world, and the estimates reach over 200,000,000 casualties in the twentieth century alone! Expand those statistics all the way back to the time of Christ, and the numbers are mind-boggling!

When we consider the carnage of war, we begin to understand the statement "War is hell." While we do not want to limit the horrors of hell to that which is experienced in this world, there is, nevertheless, an element of truth in that statement. The fifth and sixth trumpet blasts of Revelation 9 bring hell and war into close connection. The fifth trumpet sounds, confronting us with the unleashing of the hordes of hell, verses 1-12. The sixth trumpet sounds, confronting us with the horrors of war, verses 13-21.

The setting of the sixth trumpet blast is given in verses 13-15.

"Then the sixth angel sounded: And I heard a voice from the four horns of the golden altar which is before God, saying to the sixth angel who had the trumpet, 'Release the four angels who are bound at the great river Euphrates.'" The sixth trumpet is introduced by a voice from the four horns of the golden altar which is before God. The sixth angel is commanded to release the four angels who are bound at the great river Euphrates.

The Four Angels

We have seen the significance of the number four in the book of Revelation: it indicates universality—the four corners of the earth, the four points of the compass. The significance of the four angels here is in the far-reaching sweep of their work. The work of these four angels will affect all the earth. Nothing will be left unaffected. No one will be left untouched. The work of these four angels is as extensive as the earth itself.

These four angels, we are told, are to be released from their bondage. They will come from beyond the great river Euphrates, that river that played such an important role in the history of Israel. The Assyrians came from beyond the Euphrates to rape and pillage the northern tribes of Israel, carrying them away into exile in 722 BC. The Babylonians came from beyond the Euphrates to rape and pillage the southern tribes

of Judah, carrying them away into exile in 586 BC. Both came from beyond the river Euphrates as the implements of God's judgment and wrath. They came as the rod of God to punish and inflict with untold carnage and casualty.

The imagery is clear. War is in view! The sixth trumpet blast has in view wars and rumors of wars—wars and rumors of wars that affect all the earth—wars and rumors of wars that touch all mankind. The sixth trumpet blast confronts us with the bloodbath of war, even the killing of a third of mankind.

Such large-scale butchery requires a vast army, and it is a vast army set before us here. John sees this mighty army, now released, riding forth, and he is astounded—astounded not by what he sees, for it is too vast to comprehend, but astounded by what he hears, for what he hears is the number of the horsemen. "The number of the army of the horsemen was two hundred million!" Note, that is just the horsemen! The cavalry alone numbers 200,000,000! That is only a small percentage of the army as a whole! This army is great! This army is vast! It is the consummate army!

The sixth trumpet has in view the totality of war from the time of Christ's first coming to the time of His return. William Hendriksen writes: "The sixth trumpet describes war; not one particular war is indicated, but all wars, past, present, and future." Here, then, is a composite picture of all wars that have occurred on the face of the earth from the time of Christ's incarnation, and that will continue to occur until the time of His return:

from the Barbarian sack of Rome to the Crusades; from the Hundred Years War between England and France to the Wars of the Ottoman Empire; from St. Bartholomew's Massacre in France to the Spanish Armada; from the wars of Ivan the Terrible in Russia to the wars of Napoleon; from the American Revolution to the French Revolution; from World War I to World War II; from Mussolini to Stalin; from Hitler to Pol Pot; from Osama bin Laden to Saddam Hussein; and on it goes.

***The sixth trumpet
has in view the
totality of war from
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time of His return.***

The War Machine

In war we see the depravity of man's heart. As Hendriksen remarks: "And now the same powers of darkness that carry on the work of destruction in the hearts of men change men into devils, as it were. For in times of war wicked men seem to become incarnate demons." Such a description seems warranted based on the description of the army given in verses 17-19: "And thus I saw the horses in the vision: those who sat on them had breastplates of fiery red, hyacinth blue, and sulfur yellow; and the heads of the horses were like the heads of lions; and out of their mouths came fire, smoke, and brim-

stone. By these three plagues a third of mankind was killed—by the fire and the smoke and the brimstone which came out of their mouths. For their power is in their mouth and in their tails; for their tails are like serpents, having heads; and with them they do harm."

So perfect is this war machine that there is almost complete identification between the horses and the riders. They are united in purpose. They are united as to their intent. They are united to rape, pillage, wound, and kill. This is the bloodshed of war. This is the brutality and the carnage of war.

There is a constant emphasis upon that which proceeds from the mouth: out of the mouths of the horses came "fire, smoke, and brimstone" (v. 17). "By these three plagues a third of mankind was killed—by the fire and the smoke and the brimstone which came out of their mouths" (v. 18). "Their power is in their mouth" (v. 19). Why the emphasis upon the mouth? Because with the mouth they deceive! You know the deception that is war! One War was even dubbed "The War to End All Wars"!

Now of course, there are times when war is necessary and just. The government does not bear the sword for nothing. Yet even when it is necessary it is always horrific! Need we look at the statistics again? The victims may be only numbers to us, but each one had a father; each one had a mother; many had wives; many had husbands; many had children. They marched off to war, and never came marching home again... Such is the horror of war: it wipes out a third of mankind.

The Warning

But then remember, we are still dealing with the trumpets. And what is the role of the trumpets, but to warn? The trumpets have been sounding from the time of Christ's first coming until now, and they will continue to sound until the last trumpet, when Christ returns. We are still dealing with the trumpets; we are still dealing with God's warnings.

That this sixth trumpet blast is intended as God's warning to the world is evident from the result listed in verses 20-21: "But the rest of mankind, who were not killed by these plagues, did not repent of the works of their hands, that they should not worship demons, and idols of gold, silver, brass, stone, and wood, which can neither see nor hear nor walk. And they did not repent of their murders or their sorceries or their sexual immorality or their thefts."

The sixth trumpet sounds forth; it has been sounding from the time of Christ's first coming, and will continue to sound until the time of Christ's return. And what is the result? Man does not repent. World War I was fought, and only a generation later, World War II. World War II was fought, and only a generation later, Korea and Vietnam. Korea and Vietnam were fought and only a generation later the Gulf War. When America suffered through the terrorist attacks of September 11, there followed not only

a renewed patriotism, but also many calls for our nation to return to God. Now, as we continue in the war on terror, not only has the patriotism of our country diminished, but the calls for our nation to return to God have been forgotten! The warning of the sixth trumpet goes unheeded! War does not lead to repentance!

Wars and rumors of wars ravage the earth, decimating mankind. Yet man does not heed the warning. Man does not repent. Could it be that we have simply become too familiar with the words: "terrorist attack", "genocide", "ethnic cleansing", and "war"? Could it be that we have simply become callous to such things? We hear the daily reports of another American serviceman killed in Iraq, and we grieve for the family for a few moments, but then move on with our daily routines, proving that we remain unmoved. Yet each serviceman had a father and mother; many of them had a wife; many of them had children. Now they have become a statistic to add to the ever growing list. Yet each number had a name; each number had a face; each number had a family; each number had loved ones; each number had a life. Now each number lies dead. Do you remain unmoved?

You read the books on war; do you remain unmoved? You see movies depicting the carnage of war; do you remain unmoved? You tour the battlefields of Gettysburg; do you

remain unmoved? You walk the beaches of Normandy; do you remain unmoved?! You run your hand over the countless names on the walls of the Vietnam Memorial; do you remain unmoved? You walk between the tombstones in Arlington Cemetery; do you remain unmoved? You stand with a small crowd at the cemetery on Memorial Day morning, the cold rain causing you to shiver, you watch the officer raise the trumpet to his lips, you hear him sound the plaintive notes of that sorrowful song "Taps"; the notes seem to linger in the air; do you remain unmoved?

You read Revelation 9:13-21 and you learn that each war, each rumor of war, each casualty is God's trumpet blast warning the world of the judgment to come. Do you remain unmoved? Or are you so moved as to repent of your sin and seek your refuge in God alone? May God grant that it be so. For even as we consider this sixth trumpet blast in all of its horror, there is comfort for the saints of God. Remember from whence the voice arises summoning the sixth angel to sound: "Then the sixth angel sounded: and I heard a voice from the four horns of the golden altar which is before God." The voice originates from the four horns of the golden altar which is before God.

The Place of Refuge

In Old Testament times, a person looking for refuge and safety would flee into the tabernacle or temple, lay hold of the horns of the altar, bringing himself under the protection of God. It was as if God Himself were spreading His wings over him for his protection! So we are reminded that in Christ Jesus, we

***The warning of the sixth trumpet goes unheeded!
War does not lead to repentance!***

dwell beneath the shadow of the Almighty. We are reminded that in Christ Jesus, the living God Himself is our strong habitation. We are reminded that in Christ Jesus, "The Lord is my light and my salvation, whom then shall I fear?"

Remember the words of verse 15, "So the four angels, who had been prepared for the hour and day and month and year, were released to kill a third of mankind." The angels are prepared for the hour and day and month and year. In view here is not the hour and day and month and year of one particular battle; rather, the time references here are intended to impress upon you the sovereignty of God, who has ordained not only the year of each and every war, but the month, and not only the month of each and every war, but also the day, and not only the day of each and every war, but also the hour. God is, and ever remains, upon the throne.

The Lord knows those who are His, and should their lives be taken in battle, their death is precious in His sight, and though they die, they continue to live. The sword cannot separate the Christian from the love of God in Jesus Christ. War cannot separate the Christian from the love of God in Jesus Christ. Yes, even in war, the Christian remains more than a conqueror through Jesus Christ!

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- Previous administrative experience preferred

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Contact

Steve DeVries, School Board President
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Longing for Salvation Restored

Psalms 137 begins, "By the rivers of Babylon we sat and wept." In 586 B.C. the southern kingdom of Israel was taken into captivity by Babylon. The Israelites were living as foreigners in a beautiful city; yet, they wept, for they were not home.

The Psalmist writes that they sat and wept when they remembered Zion. Realize that Zion was salvation for the Israelites. It was at Zion where God dwelt. This was where the temple was standing. Zion could not be destroyed. But it was. This is why they sat and wept. The great city of God was destroyed.

The Israelites were not sitting in prison behind metal bars. Babylon was a beautiful city on the Euphrates River. There were rivers flowing through it, with beautiful flowers and gardens. Still, it was not Zion; they were not home.

Singing was also very important to God's people. This is how they would praise God. In verse 2, however, we read, "There on the poplars we hung our harps." They could not play beautiful music because they were not in Zion. The writer of this Psalm wrote in first person plural; leading one to think that he was probably a Levite. Levites were in charge of the music in the temple. Here they are mocked and ridiculed. The Psalmist wrote, "For there our captors asked us for songs, our tormentors demanded songs of joy." However, the songs of Zion were to be sung in the temple and in worship to the Almighty King. How could children of

the Holy God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob sing while in Babylon? For them, it must have been like singing your national anthem in a foreign country. It just did not fit.

The heart of the Psalmist was yearning for the Lord's deliverance back to Zion. This was in their thoughts day after day. We, too, from time to time have a longing to go home. We long to see our Savior. Sure, we thank God and love the good gifts that He has given us on the earth, but something is missing. We as Christians strive to serve God, and over and over again we fail and we fall far short. We long to be made perfectly whole. This vale of tears press down hard upon us. Our hope in future glory. So it was with the Psalmist; this was his sorrow, this is the sorrow of God's children.

Promise

A promise made in this Psalm is not from God, but from the Psalmist who says, if I forget Jerusalem, may two things happen to me. First, May my right hand forget its skill, and second, may my tongue cling to the roof of my mouth.

What was the Psalmist actually saying in this promise? Remember that he was a Musician Priest. He was a player of the harp. He brought his harp with him in exile. He must have had hope. So it was with his tongue. He was a singer of the songs of Zion. What he promised was that his purpose, his work, his vocation, his praise, his hope would be gone. Remembering is important

because in remembering there was hope.

Hope has always been important to the people of God. Paul wrote in Philippians that we eagerly await a Savior. This is our hope---that the Savior will come. So too, with the exiles in Babylon.

The exiles were in distress. There hope was in what was to come. Their hope encouraged them to be patient and wait for the Lord's deliverance. Easier said than done! Yet, their hope remained the same. They were always looking ahead, watching, waiting for their salvation. Most of these exiles went back to Jerusalem and rebuilt the temple. Their prayers were answered, but not in the rebuilding of the temple--there was more. There was the greater hope to be found in Jesus Christ. Christ came and the salvation of God's people was accomplished. The catechism teaches that His righteousness, satisfaction, and holiness are ours (Lord's Day 23).

Our hope is in what happened two thousand years ago, but also in what is happening, and what will happen. We confess that our Redeemer lives. He did not stay in the grave; He arose. Therefore we can have joy in sorrow.

God's people are the only ones who can have joy in a time of sorrow. This is why Christian funerals are joyous occasions. While there may be mourning and sorrow at a funeral, there is joy, as well. We are pilgrim's passing through.

Our hope and joy always have an object. Our joy is Christ, our hope;

and our longing is for Jerusalem. Not Jerusalem, the war-torn city in Palestine, but the New Jerusalem where saints in glory stand. That Jerusalem that will have no more sorrow, no more pain. Just Glory! Glory with our Lord.

Judgment

Verses 7-9 of Psalm 137 are not very popular among many Evangelicals today. You will not find many “praise and worship” songs quoting these verses. In fact, there are some who think that these three verses, and others like them, cannot fit into a Christian framework. Some wrongly say that the God of the Old Testament is a God of anger and of justice, but the God of the New Testament is a God of grace. This is a wrong idea and very displeasing to God. God is the same today as He was yesterday and the same today as He will be tomorrow.

In verse 7 we read: “Remember, O LORD, what the Edomites did on the day Jerusalem fell. ‘Tear it down.’ they cried, ‘tear it down to its foundations!’” The Edomites were blood-relatives of the Israelites. Jacob and Esau, were the fathers of these two nations. Jacob was the elect child of God and Esau was the reprobate. It was through Jacob that God would establish His covenant for generations to come. Esau was cast out and hated by God.

God had commanded Israel not to destroy Edom, yet Edom was involved in the destruction of Jerusalem. These Edomites in verse 7 yelled, “Tear it down.” This meant to lay it bare, show its foundations. Show how it is weak and vulnerable. This is actually a very graphic

word. In the original, it has the connotation to prepare a woman for sexual assault... lay it bare. The wickedness of the enemies of God was seen for what it was worth. You can see the raw carnal humanity of the Psalm writer and the raw carnality of the Edomites. You can almost feel the pain of the writer as he recounts the events of the destruction of Jerusalem.

The Assyrians and Babylonians were a ruthless people and they would have seized the Jewish babies and cast them against the stones. Never underestimate the depravity of man. This same thing happened in World War II to Jewish babies. This is indignation against those who oppressed God’s people and desecrated the city of God. This is the part of the Psalm that makes it an imprecatory Psalm—a Psalm that calls for the judgment of God upon the enemies of God and His people.

Verses 7-9 are not only a curse on the Edomites and on the Babylonians who destroyed Jerusalem. This is a curse on the serpent. This is a righteous outcry against sin and evil.

The Jews were a people that were always looking ahead. They were looking ahead to a fulfillment of Genesis 3:15. We can see where the serpent has struck the heel of the seed of the woman in the destruction of the temple by the Edomites and the Babylonians.

Over and over again the Bible tells us about the Babylonians as a figurative devil. Babylon was the opposite of Jerusalem. The curse was not just against the people who lived along the Euphrates river; the curse

was a judgment against the devil and his kingdom, his angels and his followers.

The Prince of Pride will be defeated. His head will be crushed, his infants seized and dashed against the rocks. The seed of the woman will prevail. The victory is done. Satan is defeated. Death is conquered by the Messiah. This is what we celebrate as Christians.

The children of God no longer need to sit by the waters of Babylon and weep. It is true, we are not home. But we have the victory. We are raised up with Christ as victors over sin and the grave. Now the call comes to live as victors in humble obedience to our Savior. Put away sin and turn to the Lord.

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A Christian Response to Physician-Assisted Suicide

“I just can’t handle it anymore. It’s been six months now since I’ve slept for more than an hour at a time. I can’t eat solid food anymore, and I live in excruciating pain. My family will be forced to watch me wither away. Money which could be used to send my children to college or pay for their weddings will be spent to keep me in this hospital. My doctor mentioned that a number of people in my position have ‘died with dignity’ with the help of a physician. I am planning on requesting a physician-assisted suicide. I know it will be best for everyone.” How does one respond to such a statement? What would you say if a friend or loved one said this to you?

Were the practice of physician-assisted suicide (PAS) advocated solely by non-Christians, perhaps an article on the topic might not seem all that relevant. After all, non-Christians do many things which violate what God has revealed both in nature (natural law) and in scripture. In recent years, however, a number of Christians have begun to advocate PAS as a legitimate practice for Christians who no longer wish to live. Arguing on such grounds as “the right to die with dignity,” “human autonomy,” and “mankind’s God-given dominion over all creation” (which includes one’s own life), some Christians have attempted to make the case that PAS is not a violation of the sixth commandment, and argue instead that Christians may be supported in their desire to end their

lives with the help of a physician.

Thou Shalt Not Murder. . .

Genesis 4 recounts the story of the first murder in history. In his jealousy, Cain rose up and killed his brother Abel. When the Lord confronted Cain, Cain was unable to deceive the Lord and was “cursed from the ground” (Gen 4.11) because of his sinful act. Immediately following, Cain expressed his concern that there would not be justice for him on the earth and that the inhabitants would respond to his sin by killing him. This implies that Cain understood that everyone simply knew murder to be wrong and would therefore seek vengeance on him. The Lord made an oath to Cain, however, that there would be justice in the world, even toward him, a murderer.

After the flood, God made a covenant with every living creature (Gen 9.10, 12, 15-17). A central element is found in Gen 9.5-6: “And for your lifeblood I will require a reckoning: from every beast I will require it and from man. From his fellow man I will require a reckoning for the life of man. Whoever sheds the blood of man, by man shall his blood be shed, for God made man in his own image.” Though one may find instances of legitimate killing throughout the Scripture, the unjust taking of life is always condemned as something sinful.

“Thou shalt not murder,” is perhaps the key passage when considering

the sanctity of life. After all, when Jesus described unrighteous anger as murder (Matt 5.21-22), he did not quote from the Noahic covenant, but from the decalogue. In the case of this commandment, however, we are privy to God’s rationale because of Gen 9.6. Jochem Douma notes that murder is wrong because in taking one’s life “we would be acting as if a person’s life and reputation are of little or no value” (*The Ten Commandments: Manual for the Christian Life*, trans. Nelson D. Kloosterman [Philipburg: Presbyterian & Reformed Publishing Co., 1996], 211). He argues: “Among all God’s creatures, people are unique. They represent God on earth. God wants to live in them and have His own power radiate through them in this world. Man was destined to be God’s temple” (pg. 210). After all, “plants and animals are called creatures of God, but only people have been created in the image of God. . . .” (pg. 210). God’s commandment is given because humans image Him and He, as their creator, is the only one who has control over life and death. Louis Berkhof concludes: “The crime of murder owes its enormity to the fact that it is an attack on the image of God” (*Systematic Theology* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977], 204). Unjust killing defaces the image of God.

The Bible’s condemnation of murder must also condemn suicide as a form of self-murder. After all, in suicide, the image of God is defaced just as it is in murder. Not everyone, however, is convinced by this argument. In a paper advocating the legalization of PAS, Lawrence E. Holst argues that though five sui-

cides are mentioned in the Bible, “the Bible makes no comment about these recorded suicides, and neither condones nor condemns them. Historically, the strong condemnation of suicide has been postbiblical” (“Do We Need More Help in Managing Our Death? A Look at Physician-Assisted Suicide” in *Journal of Pastoral Care* 47, no. 4 [1993]: 341).

When one considers the five suicides mentioned in the Bible (six if one includes the Suicide of Saul’s armor bearer), one hardly finds the text silent concerning the suicides. In the cases of Saul (1 Sam. 31:4/1 Chr. 10:4) and Zimri (1 Kings 16:18), the text shows that they were wicked men whose ultimate defeat in battle was the result of their sin against the Lord. Ahitophel was an ally of Absalom and an opponent of King David. David, in fact, prayed that Ahitophel’s counsel would be turned to foolishness (2 Sam. 15:31). Though Abimelech did command his armor bearer to run him through (his command making this essentially suicide), he had already been dealt a fatal blow. The narrator describes this saying: “Thus God returned the evil of Abimelech. . . .” (Judges 9:56). Judas, rather than repenting of his sin, killed himself (Matt. 27:5). Acts 1:20 cites Psalms 69:25, saying that the camp of God’s enemies shall be left desolate. In each of these cases, those who committed suicide are not model citizens simply “dying with honor.”

Although the case of Samson may be a bit more ambiguous (after all, God granted Sampson the strength he needed to push down the pillars

and Heb. 11:32 lists Sampson among the “heroes of faith”), his entire life was one of disobedience to God, culminating in his suicide which was not in defense of God’s honor, but was done in order to avenge his two eyes (Judges 16:28)! Conversely, it is interesting to note that the Bible does actually record the prevention of a suicide. Paul and Silas cried out for the jailor not to harm himself! Douma explains: “Biblical condemnation of those who took their own lives is possible only by taking into account their entire lives” (pg. 224). From the way Scripture records these cases

***One hardly finds the
Bible silent
concerning suicide.***

of suicide, one can see that the Bible is not silent on the matter, even though not explicit in its condemnation of it.

**Does The Apostle Paul
Contemplate Suicide?**

Arthur J. Droge attempts to muster Paul’s words in as an example of the Bible speaking favorably of suicide. He argues that Paul himself (in line with Seneca, the Roman Stoic who was an instructor of Caesar Nero, and the Socratic principle which allowed for one to commit suicide once God had sent a “necessity” upon him) indicated that suicide was a decisive choice

that a Christian could legitimately make provided that he had completed the task to which God had called him. In Philippians, Paul writes: “For to me to live is Christ, and to die is gain. . . . My desire is to depart and be with Christ, for that is far better” (Phil. 1:21, 23). Droge interprets this (and similar verses in 2 Cor. 5) to be Paul’s expression of a longing for suicide and, in fact, he argues that though it is not known how Paul died, “given his statements in Phil. 1:23 and 2 Cor. 5:8, the possibility of suicide cannot be ruled out” (“Suicide,” in *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, ed. David Noel Freedman [New York: Doubleday, 1992.], 6:229).

Droge’s interpretation of Paul’s words, however, presupposes that Paul does, in fact, hold the same position as does Seneca (and Socrates). In a scholarly article published in *Novum Testamentum*, Droge attempts to connect the views of Paul with Seneca’s stoic position (“*Mori Lucrum: Paul and Ancient Theories of Suicide,*” *Novum Testamentum* 30, no. 3 [1988]: 278-85). Unfortunately for Droge, the only passage which might allow for a pro-suicide reading of Paul is Phil. 1:23. Even within this passage in Phillipians, however, Droge’s alleged link between Paul and Stoicism is exclusively lexical (i.e., they use the same words). Though he proves that Paul used some vocabulary which Stoics used in their defense of suicide, he does not show that Paul uses it in the same way as them. J.N. Sevenster, though writing almost thirty years prior to Droge, nevertheless offers a cogent and destructive critique:

It is plain that fundamental differences emerge between Seneca's estimation of suicide and Paul's preaching of the Gospel. No immediate comparisons can of course be made, since Paul nowhere speaks of suicide or the possibility of it. At the most those places can be compared where Paul writes of a desire to depart. . . . But how vastly different are these texts [2 Cor. 5:8, Phil. 1:23] from Seneca if we read them both in their setting! Even the quoted passages testify to the fact that death is only desired in so far as it holds forth a prospect of being at home with the Lord. Hence Paul does not really long for death; he longs to be with Christ. But if Christ can still use him here on earth, he will of course choose life (*Paul and Seneca* [Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1961], 58.).

Since the Bible both prohibits murder and explains the reason for this prohibition (i.e., humans are created in God's image), it is clear that unjust taking of human life (in all forms) is forbidden by the Bible. Holst's suggestion that suicide only violates a "traditional interpretation" of the sixth commandment fails to see that the traditional interpretation is the Biblical interpretation! Although, one can find the legitimacy of war (which of course involved killing) and the legitimacy of the

magistrate's "bearing of the sword," in each of these cases killing is rightly done as an act of divine justice, being accomplished through the means of his chosen emissaries. The Bible's own implicit condemnation/disapproval of suicide further gives us good reason to apply the sixth commandment to the matter of suicide. This proposed application, in light of the exegetical evidence above, falls clearly within the intent of the commandment.

But Aren't Humans Autonomous?

Lauris C. Kaldjian, in offering a theological response to PAS writes: "Philosophical arguments in favor of PAS rely heavily upon a principle of respect for patient autonomy" ("A Theological Response to Physician-Assisted Suicide," *Theology Today* 56, no. 2 [1999]: 203). To be autonomous literally means to be "self-governed" or to view oneself as the ultimate source of law, not subject to anyone other than oneself. Holst, in his case for PAS, assumes that humans are autonomous, even appealing to this when he defends that physicians cannot be forced to assist in a suicide. He writes: "Neither's autonomy transcends the other's" (pg. 344). It comes as no surprise that non-Christians would argue a case. Greg L. Bahnsen notes: "The non-Christian thinks that his thinking process is normal. He thinks that his mind is the final court of appeal in all matters of knowledge. He takes himself to be the reference

point for all interpretation of the facts." (*Always Ready: Directions for Defending the Faith.*, ed. Robert R. Booth [Nagogdoches: Covenant Media Press., 2006], 46.).

Christians, on the other hand, are called to recognize that they are anything but autonomous. This is not to say that humans, who are intelligent, accountable, and moral creatures, do not possess a true form of freedom. Berkhof writes: "The Bible certainly does not proceed from the assumption that the divine decree is inconsistent with the free agency of man. It clearly reveals that God has decreed the free acts of man, but also that the actors are none the less free and therefore responsible for their acts, Gen. 50:19, 20; Acts 2:23; 4:27, 28" (pg. 106). This freedom, however, cannot properly be called autonomy. Because Christians recognize that it is God who is sovereign, upholding everything according to the purposes of his will, they live according to what *he* has said, something Cornelius VanTil described as "the acceptance . . . of the ultimately self-determinative will of God" (*Christian Theistic Ethics*, in *Defence of the Faith*, vol. III [Nutley: Presbyterian & Reformed Publishing Company, 1977], 35.).

The Call to Suffer

The Apostle Paul affirms the reality of suffering and interestingly does not describe it as something that is optional for the Christian: "For it has been granted to you that for the sake of Christ you should not only believe in him but also suffer for his sake" (Phil. 1:29). Here Paul compares the surety of our suffering with the surety of our election. He also exhorts Timothy:

Christians are called to recognize that they are anything but autonomous.

“Share in suffering as a good soldier of Christ Jesus” (2 Tim. 2:3; cf. 1:8, 4:5). While many people have sought to avoid suffering, Paul has called Christians to face it willingly. Holst, however, disagrees: “While we can, and should, lift up the sanctifying values of suffering, we dare not impose them on everyone. To acknowledge that growth *may* occur through suffering is different than insisting it *must* occur” (pg. 342). Holst understands suffering as something that may shape Christians into the kind of people they want to be. The New Testament, however, indicates that suffering does shape Christians into the kind of people God wants them to be.

Ultimately, one must consider suffering in light of the one who suffered to the utmost, Jesus Himself. In His incarnation, Christ began His suffering—the eternal Word became flesh in the form of a tiny and helpless baby. On the cross, Christ endured the most excruciating suffering imaginable. He suffered the derision of men, but more horribly, He suffered the wrath of God against sin. Though Christ’s suffering differs from Christian suffering in that only His suffering actually atones for sin, Christ and His followers both really and truly suffer. Horton explains: “His suffering was redemptive, whereas ours is a participation in that already-accomplished victory. But our cross bearing is still real” (*Too Good to be True: Finding Hope in a World of Hype* [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2006], 46.). Though Christ dreaded His suffering, He nonetheless embraced it (Luke 22:42), and in this suffering He accomplished the greatest feat

To share in Christ’s sufferings is to also share in comfort.

imaginable, victory over sin and death.

Adele Stiles Resmer describes how Luther’s “Theology of the Cross” is the proper lens through which to understand human suffering. She writes: “On the cross, God participates in the brokenness, despair, and death that is part of human existence. God is not the great knight who comes to save us from our human experiences. God does not deny the dreadfulness of many of our experiences. Rather, God is a humble companion who accompanies us in and through the worst of it all. . . .” (“Physician-Assisted Suicide: What Is the Pastoral Task?” in *Word & World* 16, no. 1[1996]: 35-36).

Not only does Paul call Christians to suffer, he says that he rejoices in his sufferings (Col. 1:24). This is because Paul teaches a full-orbed “theology of suffering.” Though for Holst suffering is something that has only subjective value insofar as it can help people become the kind of people they want to be, suffering for Paul has both subjective and objective elements, making his theology of suffering far more substantial.

Paul praises God as the “God of all comfort” (2 Cor. 1:3). He argues that when we are afflicted, then too we are also comforted. The key phrase in his argument is in v. 5: “For even as we share abundantly in Christ’s sufferings, so thus through Christ we share abundantly

in comfort too.” Paul’s use of the Greek terms translated “even as” and “so thus” strengthen the force of his argument all the more. To share in Christ’s sufferings is to also share in comfort.

The second strand of Paul’s theology of suffering goes beyond the subjective element of comfort, however, and becomes much more objective. In Phil 3:8-11, Paul counts everything he accomplished to be rubbish, and instead counts it gain to be found in Christ. He explains: “That I may know Him and the power of His resurrection, and may share in His sufferings, becoming like Him in His death, that by any means possible I may attain the resurrection of the dead” (Phil. 3:10-11). The Greek participle, translated by the English phrase “becoming like him” (literally: while being conformed to him), shows that as he is sharing in Christ’s sufferings, he is also participating in Christ’s death. This is good news, Paul argues, because it also means participating with Him in His resurrection. Paul makes this explicit in Romans 6:5: “For if we have been united with Him in a death like His, we shall certainly be united with Him in a resurrection like His.” Paul clarifies this all the more in Romans 8:16-17: “The Spirit Himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, then heirs— heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ, provided we suffer with him in order that we may also be glorified with him.” Suffering

leads not only to resurrection, but to glorification!

Paul's theology of suffering is clear. Not only are Christians called to suffer with Christ for the comfort they will receive, but they suffer in order to be conformed to Christ in His death, united to Him in His resurrection, and ultimately to be glorified with Him. Christians who are suffering intensely are not simply encouraged to hold fast so that they might experience a subjective form of accomplishment or pride, but are called to hold fast because here, in this excruciatingly difficult time, they are being conformed to the image of their savior, Jesus Christ. For a Christian to use PAS as a way out is not only to refuse to share in the same sufferings which Christ endured for their sake, but is also to refuse to trust God that this suffering is truly accomplishing the end for which He has ordained it.

Conclusion

This is not to say, however, that the pain of suffering is somehow to be minimized. When a member in Christ is weighed down under immense physical pain and suffering, our response must be that of a grieved friend, one who weeps with them, longs along with them for the age to come when God "will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning nor crying nor pain anymore. . . ." (Rev. 21:4). It is tragic that many who suffer feel compelled to take their own lives because they fear dying alone. They believe that controlling the time of their death will somehow minimize this isolation. If we are convinced that God's word forbids PAS as a legitimate way for a

Christian to end his sufferings, however, we must not simply admonish them to refuse PAS. Instead we must come alongside our suffering brother, sit with him, talk with him, pray with him, be with him in his darkest hours, read scripture with him, and above all, remind him time and time again that God has not rejected him. He is not being punished for his sin because Christ has already been punished in his place on Calvary. Instead we must reassure him that even in the midst of this seemingly unbearable time, God is shaping him into the person He would have him to be. God is conforming him to Christ's sufferings so that he will be united to Christ in his resurrection and ultimately in order that he will be united to Christ in glorification. Though the tunnel looks as though it cannot get any darker, there is not only a light at the end, there is the eternal light, the light of God's heavenly glory. While we are to encourage one another to cherish life by refusing PAS, we must also encourage one another to set our sights on eternal life in our heavenly promised land. There we will find complete freedom from pain and suffering because, as the Apostle John writes, "the former things have passed away" (Rev. 21:4).

Mr. R. Andrew Compton is a graduate of Westminster Seminary in California. He plans to begin Ph.D. studies in Old Testament at Claremont Graduate University in September. He is a member of the Christ Reformed Church in Anaheim, California.

Looking Out and About

- Ascension Day was celebrated by a joint worship meeting with the Bethel Canadian Reformed Church in Thornhill, Ontario and the Covenant Reformed Church (URCNA) in Toronto. Rev. William denHollander from Bethel gave the message.

- Rev. J. M. Van Spronsen of the Smithers British Columbia Canadian Reformed Church accepted the call from the Surrey Canadian Reformed Church to serve as missionary in Brazil.

- The Rev. Clarence Boomsma, who was the pastor of the Calvin Christian Reformed Church in Grand Rapids, Michigan from 1948 until 1983, died Monday, May 28, 2007 at the age of ninety. Rev. Boomsma had served four times as the president of the Christian Reformed Church's Synod.

- The Rev. Jacob Eppinga, a retired CRCNA pastor who recently celebrated his ninetieth birthday, was granted an honorary doctorate degree by Westminster Theological Seminary in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.

- On May 20, 2007, Mr. Steve Postma was ordained as the pastor of the Eastmanville United Reformed Church of Coopersville, Michigan. The Rev. Mark Vanderhart, Professor of Old Testament Studies at Mid-America Reformed Seminary, preached the ordination sermon. Rev. Rich Miller of the Dutton URC in Dutton, Michigan directed the charge to the new pastor. Rev. Art Besteman, who had served

Eastmanville as their interim pastor during their recent vacancy, gave the charge to the congregation.

• The evening service of May 20, 2007 marked the installation of Dr. Tim Trumper as the pastor of the Seventh Reformed Church in Grand Rapids, Michigan. Dr. Samuel Logan, former president of Westminster Theological Seminary in Philadelphia, preached the installation service. Also participating were Dr. David Bast, Dr. John Armstrong, Rev. Bill Fennema, Dr. Joel Beeke, Dr. Peter R. G. Trumper, and Mr. James H. Droge.

• Mid-America Reformed Seminary granted M.Div. degrees to nine men in its recent commencement exercises. The following were graduated at Calvary Community Church (South Holland, IL) on Friday, June 18: Brian John Allred, Andre John Ofrein Holtslag, Nicholas Gerard Lamme, Timothy Lee McClymonds, Lynn Evert Marshall, Valentin Alpuche Martinez, Andrew Timothy Spriensma, Steven Andrew Swets, Joel Richard ten Brinke. The ceremony was well-attended and enjoyed by all. The Rev. Ron Scheuers of the First United Reformed Church (Chino, CA) was the commencement speaker and delivered an address from Acts 20 on "Declare the Whole Counsel of God." Dr. Nelson Kloosterman, Professor of Ethics and New Testament Studies delivered a charge to the graduates from I Corinthians 4:1-2. Both of these addresses spoke pointedly to the graduates, encouraging and challenging them to be found faithful watchmen who would embody and preach the whole counsel of God, as servants and stewards of the mysteries of God. Many family members of graduates were present and a time of refreshment followed, with opportunities for all present to greet and congratulate the graduates.



Book Review

A Biblical Case for Natural Law, by David VanDrunen. Grand Rapids: the Acton Institute, 2006. 69 pages. Reviewed by Mr. Matthew Tuininga.

American Christians intent on calling their nation back to its Christian founding love to quote II Chronicles 7:14, "If my people, who are called by my name, will humble themselves, and pray and seek my face, and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven, and forgive their sin, and heal their land."

For sixty years Evangelicals led by men like Pat Robertson and Jerry Falwell have appealed to the Scriptures to show the path the United States should follow, whether the issue is supporting Israel, opposing homosexual marriage, or fighting abortion. The rise of the Christian right has provoked fanatical cries that Christians are seeking to reinstate an inquisition-bearing theocracy like Old Testament Israel.

Others claim that Christian political efforts are destroying the sacred American separation between church and state. Even thoughtful Christians question whether we have gone too far, whether in the midst of our political efforts we have somehow forgotten the spiritual mission of the church.

I recall discussing with a friend at Covenant College the U.S. Supreme Court's 2003 *Lawrence v. Texas* decision, a decision that

struck down state laws against homosexuality. My friend suggested that perhaps the Supreme Court's ruling was right, since the job of the church is not to impose its religious morality on the world through political campaigns, but to preach salvation to sinners through Christ. Isn't biblical morality, she suggested, supposed to grow out of the work of the Spirit, rather than be imposed apart from the cross?

Despite the apparent confusion among Christians regarding the role of the Bible and the Church in modern America, Christian theologians from Augustine of Hippo to Abraham Kuyper have wrestled with the way thoughtful Christians should seek to promote God's kingship over all of life, while still respecting the unique role of the Church and Scripture. Consciously working within this tradition, David VanDrunen argues that Reformed Christians need to reconsider the biblical teaching on natural law.

In *A Biblical Case for Natural Law*, VanDrunen, a lawyer and theology professor at Westminster Seminary California, argues that God has called all people to live, work, and organize their societies and governments within the framework of His creation order. In light of VanDrunen's careful, brief study, Christians can be confident that they can advocate true justice and morality in the public square without wrongly appealing to Scripture or the authority of the church.

VanDrunen argues that the biblical doctrine of natural law is a by-product of man's role as image-bearer of God, the King of the earth. Since God is a God of righteousness and holiness, He has written upon the hearts of his image-bearers "a law inherent to human nature and directing human beings to fulfill their royal commission in righteousness and holiness." Although man has fallen into persistent disobedience against this law, he remains created in God's image, aware that someday he will be held to account.

VanDrunen appeals to Romans 1 to demonstrate that although human beings ignore God, His identity and attributes have been made "plain" to them, "clearly seen, being understood." Romans 1:32 goes so far as to assert, "Although they know God's righteous decree that those who do such things deserve death, they not only continue to do these very things but also approve of those who practice them."

VanDrunen goes on to consider language both Thomas Aquinas and John Calvin emphasized, Romans 2:14-15. Here Paul writes, "Indeed, when Gentiles, who do not have the law, do by nature things required by the law, they are a law for themselves, even though they do not have the law, since they show that the requirements of the law are written on their hearts, their consciences also bearing witness, and their thoughts now accusing, now even defending them."

Perhaps the most intriguing part of *A Biblical Case for Natural Law* is VanDrunen's presentation of "the Two Kingdoms Doctrine." In this chapter VanDrunen points to the two lines of men we see beginning in Genesis but flowing through the whole Old Testament: the line of the redeemed who receive revelation and salvation from Jehovah, and the line of rebellious men who nevertheless build cities and kingdoms as undeserving recipients of God's common grace.

Living as a member of the first line but within the land of the second, Abraham was not called to reform or conquer the promised land by his own efforts, but to live at peace with his neighbors while waiting for God. Only in the theocratic state of Israel, a unique era in covenant history, did God command his people to establish a state based on his command, and impose his special revelation within its bounds. But when the Israelites were carried into Babylonian captivity, Jeremiah called them to take full part in Babylonian culture while remaining faithful to Jehovah in their hope and religion. With the coming of Christ, Christians remain in a situation similar to that of Abraham and the exiles in Babylon. VanDrunen writes, "They must pursue a common cultural task with the world at large, though always knowing that they have no true home in this world."

At the heart of VanDrunen's argument is the fact that although the commands of God in Scripture presuppose God's gracious works of salvation in those being commanded, believers in Scripture nevertheless interact with the world based on divine morality. VanDrunen goes at length, case by case, to demonstrate that when Abraham, the Israelites, or the prophets dealt with people outside of the covenant community, they operated based on general principles of natural law which flow out of the "fear of God," not based on any shared special covenant relationship with Jehovah. For example, when Abimilech approaches Abraham in Genesis 20, he appeals to general principles of morality in accusing him of doing things that "should not be done." Abraham is shocked to see that Abimilech has a sense of morality since he had thought "There is surely no fear of God in this place, and they will kill me because of my wife."

Another of many evidences VanDrunen provides is the prophecy of Amos 1:3-2:3. Here Amos condemns several of Israel's neighboring nations but not for violating God's redemptive covenant revelation. They are judged for obvious sins against the natural law such as slave trading, rape, and the violation of a "covenant of brotherhood."

A Biblical Case for Natural Law does provoke important questions. VanDrunen could further discuss and clarify. For example, is it even possible to have a cultural consensus on natural law without having a Judaeo-Christian foundation already in place? If not, basing our policy upon clearly perceived natu-

***Believers in Scripture interact with the world
based on divine morality.***

ral law, while certainly legitimate, does not necessarily enable Christians to escape the charge that they are imposing their religion, because they will still be imposing the Christian view of natural law. Abraham Kuyper himself argued that Christians should work politically based on God's "creation ordinances" (his equivalent to natural law), but he believed they should also be shaped by what Scripture has to say about natural law.

In stating that "Scripture is not the appropriate moral standard for the civil kingdom" it is unclear whether VanDrunen is opposed to Christians referring to Scripture's authority in their political arguments or whether he is simply opposed to Christians who do this simplistically, while ignoring biblical context. He seems to mean that the proper purpose of Scripture is to guide God's redeemed community, those who have received grace, while the purpose of natural law is to guide all men, women, and governments. In this sense he is certainly right: it is not simply God's special revelation that calls human beings to account. His law, upon which they are to base all that they do, is written on their hearts.

As a call to base our political involvement on the conscience-born laws of God's natural order, rather than simplistically on Scriptures the world doesn't even accept, *A Biblical Case for Natural Law* is a sobering but insightful voice in the current culture wars. Far too often Christians have politicized the church or the Scriptures in their efforts to Christianize America. The church is the glorious body of Christ and is to be focused on the

vision of Christ and His heavenly city, as Augustine so beautifully articulated in *The City of God*. We must therefore prevent the bride of Christ from wandering after the moth-eaten treasures of a city here below. At the same time, God has powerfully written His law on human hearts, so that all know in their conscience that murder, homosexuality, (unjust) war, and oppression are wrong. Christians can therefore be confident in their efforts to advocate peace and justice even outside the church or Scripture's realm of influence because God calls all

nations to account for violating His law and acting unjustly. As a reminder that we are called to be responsible in a world completely governed by a just God, *A Biblical Case for Natural Law* is a must read for every politically concerned Christian.

Mr. Matthew Tuininga is a student at Westminster Seminary in California. He is a member of the Pantego United Reformed Church in Pantego, North Carolina.

URCNA Classes Reports

Classis Southwest U.S. Report

June 12-13, 2007

Classis Southwest U.S. convened on the afternoon of June 12, for its nineteenth stated time, at the New Covenant United Reformed Church of Twin Falls, Idaho. The weather and scenery were as beautiful as the fellowship enjoyed by the forty delegates attending.

Rev. Alrick Headley, assisted by Dr. Greg Bero, led the delegates through the full agenda. The first afternoon was taken up with the candidacy examination of Mr. Quentin Falkena. Mr. Falkena sustained all the areas in which he was examined and is now eligible to be declared a candidate for the office of minister of the Word by his consistory.

After enjoying a wonderful meal together, the delegates assembled again at night to have an informal discussion about the agenda items

of the upcoming synod. It was profitable to begin some discussion about the various matters that will be dealt with at Synod 2007.

The next day began with greetings from Rev. David Bass of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church. Then classis moved on to conduct a *colloquium doctum* requested by the Cloverdale United Reformed Church of Boise, Idaho, for Rev. Jonathan Van Hoogen. The *colloquium doctum* was sustained, and Rev. Van Hoogen may now be called to serve the Boise congregation.

Several housekeeping matters were dealt with such as the reports of church visitors and the appointments to synodical committees. After lunch on Wednesday, the delegates conducted another partial candidacy examination. This one

was not sustained. Then, Classis once again, affirmed the use of the keys of the kingdom by giving advice to consistories requesting to proceed with church discipline. One overture was adopted, which seeks to clarify the appeals process outlined in the Church Order.

Classis will convene next on January 15, 2008, (D.V.) in Walnut Creek, California.

Respectfully submitted,
Rev. Bradd L. Nymeyer, clerk
Classis Southwest U.S.

Report on meeting of Classis Central US

June 11-12, 2007

Classis Central US of the URCNA convened at Faith United Reformed Church of Beecher, Ill. at the appointed time.

Two recent Mid-America graduates have been declared candidates for the ministry and a proposed Web site was given the green light at a recent meeting of Classis Central US.

Held at Faith URC in Beecher, Ill., under the oversight of the Community URC (Schererville) Consistory, the 21st meeting of Classis Central US was held on June 11 and 12. Delegates devoted the bulk of their time to the examination of Mr. Valentin Alpuche Martinez and Mr. Andrew Spriensma.

Mr. Alpuche and his wife, Beatriz, hail from the southern Mexico town of Nohakal in the state of Campeche and are members of Faith URC. They have one son. As a member of the Independent Presbyterian Church in Mexico, Valentin attended Juan Calvino Seminary in Mexico City to prepare for ministerial work in his hometown congregation. Later, through members of Faith URC, the Alpuches embraced the opportunity to continue his ministerial training at Mid-America Reformed Seminary. Currently, Mr. Alpuche and Faith URC's Consistory are evaluating opportunities for ministering to the Hispanic community in southern part of Chicagoland – a work he began while in seminary.

Mr. Spriensma and his wife, Michelle, also are members of Faith URC. Andrew is the son of a minister who served several Christian Reformed congregations before being called to serve among the Protestant Reformed Churches. Although he already was considering the possibility of pursuing the ministry as a military chaplain, Mr. Spriensma's desire to serve among soldiers was intensified by a seven-month tour of duty in Iraq as a National Guardsman. Returning to Calvin College, he completed his undergraduate work and enrolled at Mid-America. The Consistory of Faith URC is considering calling Mr. Spriensma to serve as a chaplain in the Army. He hopes to be able to enter chaplaincy training later this year.

Another significant act of this meeting of Classis Central US involved the approval of a classis Web site. Grace URC of Waupun, Wisc., had overtured classis to authorize their Consistory to implement a Web site for the storage and dissemination of classis-related materials. In order to demonstrate what they had proposed, the Grace URC Consistory established a trial site at www.ClassisCentralUS.info which contained a limited amount of information. Although there initially were questions about who would make decisions concerning the site's content, the delegates approved the overture without dissension. When updated, the Web site will have public and private sides.

Public areas of the site will offer general information about the Churches of Classis Central US, including locations and contact information. Private areas of the site – accessible only through user names and passwords – will include archived classis material, such as agendas, minutes, classis newsletters, and a calendar of events for upcoming meetings.

Another significant action was occasioned by Rev. Larry Johnson's resignation as classis treasurer. At past meetings, Rev. Johnson had expressed concerns about the lack of accountability and the legal ramifications of the mandate given to the classis treasurer. However, to date, no action had been taken on those concerns. In light of Rev. Johnson's concerns and his resignation, classis voted to appoint the Consistory of Cornerstone URC in Sanborn – which will be the Interim Committee until the next meeting of classis – to fulfill the role of treasurer temporarily. Cornerstone's elders also were asked to examine the current mandate for the treasurer, recommending any necessary changes for the next meeting of classis.

Delegates to this meeting of Classis Central US received fraternal greetings from Rev. Alan Strange on behalf of the OPC Presbytery of the Midwest and from Rev. Charles Brown on behalf of the Great Lakes – Gulf Presbytery of the RPCNA. Letters of greeting from two RCUS classes and a classis of the CanRC also were read.

For the Classis,
Doug Barnes, Clerk

Report on meeting of Classis Michigan

June 19, 2007

Classis Michigan met at Bethany United Reformed Church in Wyoming, Michigan on June 19, 2007. The officers of the day were Rev. C. Freswick, Chairman; Elder Dale Oosterbaan, Vice-Chairman; and Rev. W. Oord, Clerk. The main item on the agenda for this meeting was the examination of two men for candidacy: Mr. Bill Boekestein, a graduate of Puritan Reformed Seminary, and Mr. Shane Lems who graduated from Westminster Seminary in California.

Prior to the examination, reports were offered by the Clerk, Treasurer, Church Visitors, and Missions Committee chairman. A handout was distributed by the Missions Committee that gave an analysis of the various ministries supported by the churches within Classis Michigan. It was noted that in the year 2006, churches within the classis gave over a quarter million dollars to URC mission causes and URC related missions. An additional \$188,863.30 was collected for ministries not affiliated with the United Reformed Church.

Finding all matters in good order, the delegates were called upon to examine the prospective candidates in the areas of practica, Bible Knowledge, Biblical Exegesis, confessional knowledge, Reformed doctrine, church history, and ethics. Both Mr. Boekestein and Mr. Lems impressed the delegates enough to bring a unanimous vote in support of having their respective

consistories declare them eligible for call in the URCNA. May God use them mightily within His church!

Following the joy of two excellent examinations by men eager to serve the Lord, the delegates were reminded that they were still part of the Church Militant as several churches sought advice in discipline cases. Such matters are always difficult, and yet a very vital part of maintaining the purity of the church.

The next meeting of Classis Michigan is scheduled to meet at Grace United Reformed Church in Alto, Michigan on October 9, 2007.

Respectfully submitted,
Rev. W. H. Oord,
Clerk of Classis

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