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The Outlook

Dedicated to the Exposition and Defense of the Reformed Faith



• I Have Found the Book • What is Reformed Worship (V) • The Ninth Plague: Judgment Through Darkness • Bible Studies of Joseph and Judah
• Reformed Youth Services Convention • Looking Above: The Mighty Angel and the Little Book • Paedocommunion: Concluding Observations (Part 2)

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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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I Have Found the Book

“And Hilkiyah answered and said to Shaphan the scribe, ‘I have found the book of the law in the house of the Lord.’ And Hilkiyah delivered the book to Shaphan.” (II Chronicles 34:15)

One of the most godless kings ever to rule in Jerusalem was King Manasseh. An attempted reformation among the people by his father, King Hezekiah, did not leave much of an impression upon King Manasseh. No sooner did King Manasseh take the throne and the Bible tells us, “He began to do that which was evil in the sight of Jehovah.” Manasseh rebuilt the high places that his father had torn down. He erected altars for heathen gods. He worshipped the sun, moon, and stars instead of the Creator of them. Certainly King Manasseh grieved the one, true, living God.

Worse than all of this was that the king did not just bring this hedonism upon himself; he dragged down the people of Judah with him. He had not learned anything from his father’s attempt at reformation. It got so bad that, according to II Chronicles 33:9, the behavior of the people of Judah was worse than that of the people whom the Lord had driven out. For all of this, the anger of Jehovah was kindled against the king and his people.

It is true that King Manasseh repented late in his life and that among the people there was a measure of conversion. However, when Manasseh’s son, King Amon, took the throne, it started all over again.

That is the way it was when Josiah became king. His father, Amon, was assassinated when Josiah was only eight years old. Josiah was then made king. How different he was from his father and his grandfather! As young as King Josiah was, he sought to serve Jehovah, the God of Israel.

Reformation in Judah

Early in his life, Josiah began to seek the God of his forefather, David. He began to purge Judah of all its idolatry. When he was a little older, Josiah raised money through free-will offerings collected by trustworthy men in order to restore the temple in Jerusalem, which had fallen into a state of disrepair during the reign of his father and grandfather. When he was twenty-six years old, and after eighteen years as king, Josiah presented the money to the high priest, Hilkiyah, through the scribe, Shaphan.

When Shaphan arrived with the money, Hilkiyah had some startling news that illustrates how far the people had wandered away from God. Hilkiyah reported, “I have found the book of the law in the house of the Lord.” In order to find something, it must first be lost or misplaced. In other words, the Word of God had become a relic of the past. The Word of God had become so ignored that the rediscovery of it is recorded in II Chronicles as big news.

Remember that the Law was given by God to Moses. Part of that Law was that it was to be read and discussed by the people on a daily basis (Deuteronomy 6:6-9). The people had no excuse for not knowing the Law. There was no excuse for their ignorance. Apparently, the people had failed to keep even the one small part of the Law that commanded that they read the Law. The natural result was the Book of the Law had become a forgotten book collecting dust in some dark corner of the temple.

Upon rediscovering the writings of Moses, Hilkiyah dusted them off and presented them to Shaphan the scribe, who in turn brought them to the king. King Josiah, in turn, had the Law proclaimed to the people of Judah. The rediscovery of God’s Word began a reformation within the land of Judah that lasted all the days of King Josiah.

Reformation in Europe

The events of the reformation in Judah are very similar to what happened at the time of the Protestant Reformation. There, too, the Word of God was rediscovered. It had been buried under a pile of dust—the dust of tradition and man made rituals. By the grace of God, there were men who dusted off the Word of God and gave it back to the people.

Martin Luther, teaching Bible students in Romans Catholicism, was struck by the words of the Apostle Paul in the Book of Romans: “By grace you are saved, apart from the Law;” and “There is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.” Grace! Amazing

grace! Further study led Luther to read Paul's words, "Through Jesus Christ, we have peace with God."

This wonderful rediscovery of God's Word led to a new proclamation: "My only comfort is that I am not my own, but belong body and soul, in life and in death, to my faithful Savior, Jesus Christ...He has freed me from the tyranny of the devil." Incredibly good news based upon the truth of God's Word.

New words began to creep into the vocabulary of the reformers and soon these words were proclaimed in the church: Assurance, Comfort, Grace. The Book of God was dusted off during the Reformation and once again men began to preach the whole counsel of God.

Reformation in Us

All around us today we see, once again the Word of God collecting dust. In fact, instead of just placing the Word of God in a corner where it will gather dust, our society has been very actively trying to bury the Word of God deeper and deeper in the dust and dirt of this world. It is not just the world that is doing this. Those who stand in the tradition of the Reformation are also experiencing a sharp spiritual decline. It is among the children of the Reformation that the Word of God has once again been allowed to gather dust. For many, the Bible has become a relic of the past with nothing to say to our modern times. Others deny placing the Scriptures on the shelf, but in their hearts they agree that the Bible is not always relevant to the needs of today. Discussions at major assemblies are based on feelings rather than rooted in Scripture.

Sinful human reasoning has set itself up as the judge of God's holy Word. Man decides, through his own sinful reasoning, what is true and what is myth, what is factual and what is legend, what is relevant and what is not. Our view of Mankind is based upon scientific discoveries made by sinful man rather than the truth declared to us by God.

And it all leads to this: a denial of the fact that Jesus came into the world to save people from their sins. This is denied because there is so much dust on the Law of God that people no longer see themselves as sinners. If they no longer see themselves as sinners, they will not see their need for a Deliverer.

When is the last time you heard the Law of God read in your church? Have you ever wondered why it is no longer read in many churches today? Is it because we know it so well? Is it because we no longer need to hear it? Is it because we keep it so well? The Law of God has become a relic of the past, collecting dust, because we are told by psychologists we no longer have guilt; we only have guilt feelings. Mass murderers and rapists can not help themselves because they are a product of their environment. Alcoholics and homosexuals can not help themselves because they are born with those tendencies.

Preachers love to preach from Martin Luther's favorite verse: "There is now no condemnation," but they forget the last part: "for those who are in Christ Jesus." How clear it is that we have, as in the days of King Josiah and Martin Luther, allowed a thick layer of dust to gather upon the precious truth of God's own Word.

If we are to be worthy heirs of the Reformation, we must constantly be on guard. Our calling is not to reform the Church of Jesus Christ by means of every wind of doctrine that comes along. Rather, we are called to reform our hearts but back to Jesus Christ. We must go back to the belief that every word of the Holy Scriptures is God breathed and useful for instruction even in our society today. We must hear the Law in order to recognize ourselves as sinners that we might be ever thankful to the gracious God who has provided us with His only Son as our Savior.

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What is Reformed Worship? (V)

It is Reverential

As Reformed Christians we have historically been those who seek to worship the God of Scripture in a scriptural way by doing what He commands. Since Biblical religion is theocentric and not anthropocentric, worship is about what God wills for Himself in terms of our glorifying Him with “the glory due His Name” (Ps. 29:2).

Much ink has been spilled on this topic over the centuries and in recent years. One aspect of worship, however, that does not seem to get much attention is the attitude of worship. So much energy is expended on proving the mechanics of worship (what may or may not be done in public worship) that the spirit of worship is often lost. As those zealous to worship our “jealous God” (Ex. 20:5) only as He commands, we must also seek to do this in the mood, tenor, and attitude that the Scriptures teach. Since the Bible says that in worship we enter the presence of the God who is “holy, holy, holy” (Isa. 6:3; Rev. 4:8), and on His terms, the attitude of such an encounter with God should reflect this truth: reverence.

Old vs. New Covenant Worship?

When we teach that worship is a reverential approach to God, we as Reformed churches are at odds with our feel-good, psychologically therapeutic, and affirming culture. Unfortunately, we live in a day in which “as goes the culture, so goes

the church.” For example, our culture is infatuated with therapy and self-help, but not in a confrontational, “judgmental” way. The result is wrapping up therapy in the entertaining garb of Dr. Phil. This has then been transferred into the church by means of informal, upbeat worship that resembles a therapy session instead of a meeting with God. The result is that all too often this merging of the culture and the church has caused professing Christians to believe that worship in the Old Testament was formal and reverent, while worship in the New Testament is spontaneous and exuberant. This is far from the truth.

Even a cursory glance in the *New Testament* book of Hebrews teaches us that the attitude of New Covenant Christian worship is to be both bold and reverent. We are to “with confidence draw near to the throne of grace” (Heb. 4:16). This confidence, however, is not out of arrogance. It is a confidence in which we, with our weaknesses, temptations, and sins (Heb. 4:15), come boldly because “we have a great high priest” (Heb. 4:14). Our boldness is in Christ. Our boldness is that because Christ “was heard because of His reverence” (Heb. 5:7), we too will be heard by the Father. Our boldness is that because Christ “offered Himself without blemish to God” (Heb. 9:15), we can now worship.

Hebrews, therefore, teaches that our attitude is boldness in Christ, not

the flippant, “come as you are” casualness of much modern worship. Instead, this boldness is to be one of “reverence and awe, for our God is a consuming fire” (Heb. 12:28-29). The God who was worshipped in the Old Testament as a “consuming fire” (Deut. 4:24) is the same God who *is* a consuming fire in the New. This reverence, or, “fear of the Lord” as the Scriptures call it, is even one of the great benefits of the New Covenant, which the LORD promised to place in the hearts of His people for their good (Jer. 32:38-41).

Because worship concerns the very heart of Christian faith and piety, we must be driven to Scripture alone, and not to culture, in matters of what we do in worship as well as how we do it attitudinally. As Reformed churches we can all too easily fall into the trap of “doing the liturgy” or being so caught up in the “regulative principle” that we forget how and why we are to worship. This is in contrast to much Evangelical worship, which sees worship as true based on how it makes one feel. As one author puts it,

For the modern evangelical, worship is defined *exclusively* in terms of the individual’s experience. Worship, then, is not about adoring God but about being nourished with religious feelings, so much so that the worshipper has become the object of worship.

On the island of Patmos, while worshipping, John saw the signifi-

Worship is a meeting between sinful people and a holy God, between servants and a King.

cance of worship as the curtain of heaven was pulled back. He was shown that worship was a joining with myriads of heavenly hosts and saints at the throne of the Almighty (cf. Rev. 4-5). And thus, our subjective feelings, whether over the mood of worship or the aesthetic quality of worshipping in a cathedral, do not give worship its value. Worship, like faith, is only measured by its object. When our hearts delight in worshipping God, when we focus on His glory, on what He wants, then we will be blessed by worship.

A Meeting With God

In order to communicate to the world, and even to many professing Christians, why our worship is so different with its attitude of reverence, we must grasp and promote that worship is a meeting with the Triune God. It is no trivial matter for which we assemble. Worship in the Bible is a meeting between sinful people and a holy God, between servants and a King. To be in the presence of this all-holy King is to keep silent: “the LORD is in His holy temple; let all the earth keep silence before Him” (Hab. 2:20). To be in the presence of the one true God is to stand on “holy ground” (Ex. 3:5).

What is happening, in Biblical terms, is that we, as the LORD’s “treasured possession among all peoples,” the “kingdom of priests,” the “holy nation,” assemble to “encamp before the mountain” (Ex. 19:5,6,2). We are

meeting with the Creator of the universe and the Redeemer of His people.

In the terms of the New Testament we do not come to a physical mountain, but,

...to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to innumerable angels in festal gathering, and to the assembly of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven, and to God, the judge of all, and to the spirits of the righteous made perfect, and to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel (Heb. 12:22-24).

Worship is not a time for “hangin’ out with Jesus,” being a part of a great social event, or having our numerous “felt needs” met as consumers. Instead, it is time in which the infinite, all-holy God of the universe condescends to meet us in grace and the power of the Holy Spirit through the means of grace.

We see this illumined for us in the terms the Bible uses. First, there is the general Hebrew term *‘abodah* (“service”), which comes from the same root as *‘ebed* (“slave, servant;” Ex. 3:12, 21:1-6, 23:25; Pss. 89:3, 20, 116:16). This is the more general term of the two words in the Hebrew Bible for worship. It views

worship as servants of the great King who come to offer Him the service He desires and deserves. The New Testament uses the verb *latreuo* and its noun *latria* (“service, worship;” Acts 7:42, 24:14, 26:7; Rom. 1:9, 2:37, 9:4, 12:1, 15:16; Phil. 3:3; Heb. 8:5, 9:9, 10:2; Rev. 7:15, 22:3).

More specific to “worship” are the Hebrew *histahawa* (“prostrate”) and the Greek *proskunein* (“to fall on the ground in adoration”). Whereas the Hebrew term *‘ebed* is used for “serving” the LORD, *histahawa* is used of the *cultus* proper, the worship offered to the LORD in accordance with His Word (Gen. 24:52, 27:29, 49:23; 2 Chron. 7:3, 29:29); while *proskunein* is used to express the honor given to God (Matt. 4:9-10, 14:33; Mark 15:19; Jn. 4:21-24; Acts 10:25).

The most specific word is the Greek verb *leitourgein* and its corresponding noun, *leitourgia*. This term is used generally in the ancient world for any “service to the community or state; yet it is the specific word used for the official liturgical acts of worship in the Septuagint and New Testament (Ex. 28:35, 43; 1 Sam. 2:11, 18, 3:1; Luke 1:23; Acts 13:2; 2 Cor. 9:12; Phil. 2:30; Heb. 9:21, 10:11).

As the worshipping community, we come to serve the Lord by bowing and kneeling (Ps. 95:6). It is in that posture that we are to “lift up” our eyes “to the LORD our God until He has mercy upon us” (Ps. 123:1-2); we are to “lift up” our hands “to the holy place” (Ps. 134:2). These postures are

the outward way we show our inward attitude of utter dependence upon the LORD in worship. We bow down knowing that we deserve nothing; we lift our eyes because it is from heaven that we seek “grace to help in time of need” (Heb. 4:16); we lift our hands because we embrace the LORD and His promises by faith alone.

Because both Testaments say that worship is a meeting with *God*, and not simply a time of fellowship, we receive His service to us in worship through the means of grace, the preaching of the Holy Gospel, and administration of the Holy Sacraments (Heidelberg Catechism, Q&A 65). Thus, our liturgy is supposed to cause some sense of awkwardness in us! If it doesn't, then we need to be worried. We are still sinners and in worship we approach the great King. In worship He meets our truest and deepest needs, giving us the spiritual therapy we need: freedom of conscience, forgiveness, assurance, absolution.

A Break From the World

As we come to meet with God, we are doing something that is counter-cultural. As such, our reverential service to the Lord is a break from our worldly “norm.” Worship is meant to be a time that is set aside from our worldly labors, cares, and toils. As we assemble, we do so in a mood that gathers our thoughts and sets them aside for the worship event: “casting all your anxieties upon Him, because He cares for you” (1 Peter 5:7). We come to publicly set aside our anxieties, our

worries, and our stresses to give ourselves wholly to God, laying our lives down as a “living sacrifice” (Rom. 12:1).

We watch television all week; we listen to sound byte news all week; we are bombarded with the visual media all week; we are taught to be consumers all week. We need worship to be different. We need it to restore to us a sense of sanity, a sense of what the world and life is really about. We hear “the buzz” all around us, enticing us, calling us, distracting us. Worship is meant to break that tyranny, not feed it. Listen to how the ancient document, the *Apostolic Constitutions*, describe the worship of the church:

...let the deacon oversee the people, that nobody may whisper, nor slumber, nor laugh, nor nod; for all ought in the church to stand wisely, and soberly, and attentively, having their attention fixed upon the word of the Lord...let some of them attend upon the oblation of the Eucharist, ministering to the Lord's body with fear. Let others of them watch the multitude, and keep them silent... After this let the sacrifice follow, the people standing, and praying silently; and when the oblation has been made, let every rank by itself partake of the Lord's body and precious

blood in order, and approach with reverence and holy fear, as to the body of their king.

That is the worship we need. That is the break our hearts long for so desperately.

We, as historic Protestants, need to capture the attention and affections of our culture by presenting a worship in which people participate in something larger than themselves. True worship, although in time, at a place, and with people, is not bound to any time, place, or people. Instead, it is the historical outworking of the pattern of heavenly worship. This is why in all historic liturgies we find the *sursum corda* (Latin, “Lift up your hearts”). We lift up our hearts to the Lord because He dwells in heaven, in eternity; therefore we must worship Him there by going there in our worship.

It is while our enemies, the world, the flesh, and the devil, surround us during the week, that we cry out, “To you, O LORD, I lift up my soul” (Ps. 25:1). It is when we are downcast by the ways of the world that we come to worship to say, “Gladden the soul of your servant, for to you, O Lord, do I lift up my soul” (Ps. 86:4). It is when it seems that there is no purpose in this life and that we have no direction that we attend public worship and say, “Make me know the way I should go, for to

Our liturgy is supposed to cause some sense of awkwardness in us!

you I lift up my soul” (Ps. 143:8). It is when we sin and stray like lost sheep that we pray with the corporate assembly, “Let us lift up our hearts and hands to God in heaven” (Lam. 3:41).

And so, reverence creates transcendence, which produces mystery. And mystery creates wonder. This interplay between reverence (the fear of the Lord) and wonder, and everything in between, is expressed by one author in these words:

True worship of God springs from our inability to answer two simple questions posed by a biblical understanding of the fear of the Lord: (1) O God, who is like you in power, righteousness, mighty deeds, and in pardoning sin (Ps. 71:18-19; Mic. 7:18-20)? and (2) what are woman and man that God should look down from heaven and care for them and lift them up to sit with princes (Pss. 8:4, 113:5-8)?

Too many of the visitors (whether truly seekers or merely tourists) in our churches have been captured or captivated by innovations in worship (drama, dance, individual expressions of piety such as “special music,” multimedia, etc.). We must introduce them to the majesty and mystery of God.

We are meeting with God. To receive His ministry to us, to break the tyrannical pattern of the world, and to join in the eschatological chorus, we must worship with “reverence and godly fear, for our God is a consuming fire” (Heb. 12:28-29).

Reverence in the Liturgy

From the beginning to the end of Reformed worship, this reverential attitude is evidenced as the congregation assembles with a marked seriousness and purpose for why things are done the way they are done. This is evident in several ways in classic Reformed worship. Many Reformed churches begin worship with a time of silent reflection to meditate upon entering into the presence of God. This causes in both believers and unbelievers a sense of reverence before God so that they will seek forgiveness and grace in Jesus Christ. As Moses said to the Israelites as they crossed the Sea, “you only have to be silent” (Ex. 14:14).

In all the historic Reformed liturgies this reverence is exercised in the time of corporate confession of sins and receiving the promise of the gospel in the absolution/declaration of forgiveness. In the singing of the Psalms is expressed this reverence by taking upon the lips the very words of the Lord, with all the range of emotions, especially lament and trust in the Lord. When the Creed is recited we reverently take our place in the great “cloud of witnesses” (Heb. 12:1), acknowledging that we did not discover the truth of the Christian Faith, but that it discovered us. In hearing the Word of God read and preached, the people are to do this “with godly fear” (Westminster Confession of Faith, XXI.5.). We sit at the foot of the heavenly mountain (Heb. 12:22-26) and hear the very voice of Christ. Finally, this reverential attitude is

culminated in the reception of the very elements the Lord gave on the night in which he was betrayed in the Lord’s Supper, whether sitting at tables, kneeling, or coming forward to receive the bread and wine “from the hand of the minister” (Heidelberg Catechism, Q&A 75).

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The Ninth Plague: Judgment Through Darkness

Exodus 10:21-29

The ninth plague was the last plague in the third series of plagues. It arrived without any warning just as the third and the sixth plagues. The last plague in each series of plagues followed this same pattern: there was no formal meeting before Pharaoh and no advanced warning. The last plague in each series of plagues functioned as an exclamation point. They emphasized the point that God was fighting against Pharaoh and the false god's of Egypt.

Jehovah's power over the gods of Egypt had been clearly displayed up to this point. Yet it was important that the plague of darkness be reserved as the final note of judgment before the sound of death. Throughout the Scriptures, darkness is associated with judgment and the Day of the Lord.

The Cultural Context

The ancient Egyptians regarded Amon-Ra to be the personification of the sun. The sun god was their chief deity. They considered Amon-Ra to be the creator-god. His rising in the east was the symbol of life. When Amon-Ra sank in the west, it was understood to represent death and the underworld.

It should have been clear that when Jehovah darkened the sun, He had overpowered Amon-Ra. By means of the ninth plague, it is clear that Jehovah was sovereign over Egypt's most powerful God, Amon-

Ra. By implication, therefore, Jehovah was sovereign over life and death. During the ninth plague Amon-Ra did not rise over Egypt; he did not give light and life. He was confined to the realm of death and judgment. It only makes sense that the tenth plague, the plague of death, would follow the darkness that was associated with death and judgment.

The Supernatural Darkness

The first thing that we notice about the darkness associated with the ninth plague is the supernatural character of this darkness. It is not uncommon for Bible commentators to try to explain the ninth plague through some type of natural means, such as a sandstorm. There is no justification for such an explanation. For example, in regard to the eighth plague, the Biblical author tells us that God used a wind to deliver the locusts. We are also told that the Lord changed the direction of the wind to remove the locusts from Egypt. The means associated with the eighth plague demonstrates God's sovereignty over the wind, but in regard to the ninth plague there is no mention of means. Therefore, we should be careful about speculating how God darkened the sky, unless there is Biblical warrant for doing so.

The darkness in Egypt was so intense that it could be felt. It put an end to all activity in Egypt for three days. Three days was sometimes used in the Old Testament to symbolize completeness and finality. In

the case of the ninth plague, it indicated the final defeat of Amon-Ra and the other gods of Egypt. Unlike Jesus, who was dead for three days and then rose to life again, Amon-Ra was powerless. He remained dead; he had been overcome by Jehovah.

During this plague, a distinction was being made between the Egyptians and the Hebrews. God's people had light, and Pharaoh's people were in total darkness. Egyptians had no reprieve from the darkness. They were unable to light lamps or candles, whereas the Hebrews had light.

For three days the Egyptians saw no one: "No one could see anyone else or leave his place for three days. Yet all the Israelites had light in the places where they lived." The Hebrews could light lamps and candles, but the Egyptians could not. This fact drives home the point that Jehovah is the author of light, not Ra. Apart from Jehovah there is no light. In addition to this, Jehovah will give light to those whom He wills, and likewise He will withhold His light from those that he wills.

Judgment and a New Creation

In the Bible, darkness was either associated with judgment or the pre-creation state of darkness and chaos. Both of these meanings are present in Exodus 10. The exodus was a picture of God's judgment, but it was also a picture of God's reversal of the creation order. Jehovah had uncreated Egypt, causing Egypt to return to a semi, pre-creation state. In the exodus, Jehovah was the great judge. Jehovah had the ability to save His people. In conjunction with His saving activity,

the salvation theme merged with the re-creation theme.

The language of creation was applied to Israel, but, likewise, the pre-creation state of darkness was applied to Egypt. Egypt was becoming uncreated, a place of chaos and death, just like the earth before there was light. In contrast, Israel represented the new creation. Throughout the Bible, Israel was used as a shadow of the heavenly creation, the new heavens and the new earth, and the new Jerusalem. The earthly city of God was a shadow of the heavenly city. This applied to the land, the temple, the monarchy, and the people.

“In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. Now the earth was formless and empty; darkness was over the surface of the deep, and the Spirit of God was hovering over the waters” (Genesis 1:1-2). Before God said “let there be light,” the earth was formless and void. Darkness was over the surface of the deep. Likewise, God had uncreated Egypt; Egypt had reverted back to a place of darkness, a darkness so thick it could be felt. It is very possible that a dense humid cloud accentuated the darkness.

In the creation narrative God separated the light from the darkness: “God saw that the light was good, and He separated the light from the darkness” (Genesis 1:4). Likewise, in Exodus, God separated the light from the darkness. There was light in every Hebrew house, while every Egyptian house was dark. It is easy to see how the exodus was a re-creation event. God was at work recreating a people to be His people, a people that He had called

out of darkness. This same image is applied to believers in the New Testament, but it had its origin in the Old Testament. Isaiah 45:7 says “I form the light and create darkness; I bring prosperity and create disaster; I, the LORD, do all these things.”

The Day of the Lord

God’s special presence is associated with both with His judgment and His salvation. He is present both to judge and to save. This is the way that the Biblical authors describe the Day of the Lord. “Woe to you who long for the day of the

There was light in every Hebrew house, while every Egyptian house was dark.

LORD! Why do you long for the day of the LORD? That day will be darkness, not light. ‘In that day,’ declares the Sovereign LORD, ‘I will make the sun go down at noon and darken the earth in broad daylight’” (Amos 8:8-9). Amos warned the nation of Israel that the Day of the Lord would be different from what they had thought. They assumed that they would be saved because they were children of Abraham. However, they are told that if they continued in unbelief, the day of the Lord would be a day of judgment instead of a day of salvation.

In the book of Revelation, John describes the day of the Lord as a Day of Judgment for the beast and

everyone associated with his kingdom. “The fifth angel poured out his bowl on the throne of the beast, and his kingdom was plunged into darkness. Men gnawed their tongues in agony and cursed the God of heaven because of their pains and their sores, but they refused to repent of what they had done” (Revelation 16:10, 11).

The Day of the Lord is a day of salvation. It is also a day of intense darkness. At the end of this age, the kingdom of the beast will be thrown into darkness and misery. The misery will be so great that the members of this kingdom will gnaw their tongues in agony. Just as God made a distinction between night and day and between Egypt and Israel, God continues to make the same distinction between the two seeds, between the seed of Satan and the seed of the woman (Gen. 3:15), between darkness and light.

Light and Darkness

In first Samuel we read, “He will guard the feet of his saints, but the wicked will be silenced in darkness. “It is not by strength that one prevails” (1 Samuel 2:9). Second Samuel says, “You are my lamp, O LORD; the LORD turns my darkness into light” (2 Samuel 22:29). The psalmist comments on this same theme. “You, O LORD, keep my lamp burning; my God turns my darkness into light” (Psalm 18:28). “Even in darkness light dawns for the upright, for the gracious and compassionate and righteous man” (Psalm 112:4).

The spiritual principle of God’s light shining in the darkness for His people is illustrated in Exodus 10 in a literal way. The Hebrews had

light in their homes while the Egyptians lived in total darkness. Just as God provided light for the Hebrews, when they lived in the midst of darkness, God has provided light for His people even now. The light that God provides His people is a spiritual light, it is the light of His Word and His presence.

In the book of Ecclesiastes, the author compares God's wisdom to light and folly to darkness. "I saw that wisdom is better than folly, just as light is better than darkness. The wise man has eyes in his head, while the fool walks in the darkness" (Ecclesiastes 2:14).

The light and darkness theme continues on into the New Testament. In the gospel of John, for example, Jesus is presented as the light of God. Everyone who rejects the light of Christ rejects the Father. Likewise, everyone who receives the light of Christ believes in the Father. If you believe in Jesus Christ as the self-revelation of the Father, then you belong to God, but if you reject the light of Christ you belong to the darkness.

The apostle Paul wrote "So I tell you this, and insist on it in the Lord, that you must no longer live as the Gentiles do, in the futility of their thinking. They are darkened in their understanding and separated from the life of God because of the ignorance that is in them due to the hardening of their hearts" (Eph. 4:17-18). If this were not explicit enough, Paul goes on to teach, "For you were once darkness, but now you are light in the Lord. Live as children of light (for the fruit of the light consists in all goodness, righteousness and truth) and find out what pleases the Lord. Have noth-

ing to do with the fruitless deeds of darkness, but rather expose them" (Eph. 5:8-11).

Paul writes that the ungodly are darkened in their understanding. They live in folly and ignorance. They lack the basic elements of wisdom, faith, and the fear of the Lord. But everyone that belongs to Christ is in the light. Paul's logic for living an obedient life is based on your relationship with the light of Christ. Because you belong to Christ you are in the light. Since you are in the light you should put off those things that are associated with the darkness, like sexual impurity, greed, obscenity, foolish talk or coarse joking, which are out of place; rather you should put on thanksgiving. In other words, live according to who you are in Christ. "For you were once darkness, but now you are light in the Lord. Live as children of light."

Just as the Hebrews enjoyed the light of God in their homes, likewise you enjoy the light of God through your fellowship with Christ. If you believe, then you have been spiritually united to Jesus Christ, the first fruits of the New Creation. The nation of Israel was a picture of the new creation, the heavenly creation, but you are a member of heaven if you are a member of Jesus Christ. Just as the light of God illuminated the Hebrew homes, the light of Christ has illuminated your mind and heart, causing you to see your sin and to turn from your evil ways. This process is incomplete, in this age, but this is no excuse for slothfulness. You should strive to live in obedience to Christ and you should actively reject that which is associated with darkness. If you have

come to faith, then you are obligated to walk in the light of Christ, because your life is hidden in Christ.

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Bible Studies on Joseph and Judah

Lesson 3: Judah Begins to Live in Canaan

Read Genesis 38:1-11

Introduction

It is puzzling perhaps to have this chapter placed in the Bible where it is. Genesis 37 ends with Joseph being sold to Potiphar, and Genesis 39:1 resumes the story account of Joseph. Yet the very fact that Genesis 39:1 is written as it is strongly suggests that the Biblical writer here “knows what he is doing.” God the Holy Spirit wants the story of Judah, Tamar, and the birth of their two sons to say something about Jacob’s family (cf. Gen. 37:2) and tie that in with Joseph’s going down to Egypt. Any ideas come to your mind as to why this chapter is placed here by the Holy Spirit?

Judah chooses Canaanite friends and family (38:1-2)

Judah had played an important role in what had happened to Joseph in Genesis 37. It was Judah who suggested that Joseph not be killed but rather sold (Gen. 37:26,27). Now the story returns to focus its lens on what happens in the life of Judah. What we read in the opening verses of Genesis 38 is ominous: some time soon after Joseph was sold to traveling merchants, Judah moves away from his family. We are not told why. There does not seem to be any family discord. After all, later on he will join his other brothers in going to Egypt to get food during the famine.

In any case, the thoughtful reader of this text detects some not so

subtle changes taking place. Earlier in Genesis, it was clear that Isaac and Jacob had to have wives who were not Canaanite. Rebekah, Rachel, and Leah all came from the broader family circle back in Haran. Esau’s Hittite wives, on the other hand, had been a source of grief to Isaac and Rebekah.

But concern for whom Judah marries does not appear in this story. Judah moves into a Canaanite area and acquires a Canaanite friend, Hirah of Adullam. Furthermore, he marries a Canaanite woman, a daughter of Shua (or, Bathshua). Incidentally, the places and persons in this story anticipate elements later on with King David: Adullam is a village within tribal Judah’s territory; Bathshua is similar sounding to Bathsheba; David has a daughter named Tamar... but we are getting ahead of ourselves.

Judah has a Canaanite wife and a circle of Canaanite friends. It is not a great stretch of imagination to believe that Canaanite values, a pagan worldview, were also surrounding and influencing Judah. He does not seem distressed by his new environment as righteous Lot was disturbed when he lived in wicked Sodom (see 2 Peter 2:7,8). Of course, wickedness is not merely around us: it is also within us. Judah also was involved in the plunder of Shechem and the selling of Joseph. Still, Judah’s move into Canaan is more than simply a physical move. It suggests something spiritually more dangerous.

My three sons (38:3-10)

Judah and his Canaanite wife have three sons (Er, Onan, and Shelah), apparently in rather quick succession. As they grow up in Judah’s home, Joseph meanwhile has to deal with sexual temptation and imprisonment, with only the LORD as his aid. The Bible tells us that Judah obtained a wife for his firstborn son Er. This wife is apparently a Canaanite by the name of Tamar. Judah arranges this marriage, something that is not unknown in other Biblical stories and in the culture of that time. As we watch this story unfold, Judah will come across as a “take charge” kind of guy, a father figure who actively arranges things in his family.

The text does not waste words in ending Er’s life. He is so wicked that the LORD ends his life. “Er erred,” writes Gordon Wenham (*Genesis 16-50*, p. 366). Interestingly, in the Hebrew language, if you reverse the letters of the name *Er*, it creates the word that means *wicked*. But what was his evil? We are not told. We could pause for a moment and reflect on the quality of Judah’s spiritual direction to his family, but the text does not make that a concern for us. Judah’s reaction to his son’s death is not recorded either. Jacob was grieved by the loss of Joseph. Judah’s loss of Er is met with textual silence.

Judah tells the second son, Onan, to take the widow Tamar and “fulfill your duty to her as a brother-in-law” to produce an heir. This was an ancient practice designed to maintain the family line of the dead brother. The practice has become

known as “levirate marriage” (*levir* is Latin for “brother-in-law”). Perhaps Onan calculates the possibilities: if the dead Er has no son, then only Onan and the other brother, Shelah, can divide the inheritance between them. But if Er has a son (through Onan and Tamar), then the firstborn would receive a substantial portion of the inheritance, thus diminishing what Onan would get. So to prevent Tamar from becoming pregnant, Onan interrupts the sexual act and spills his semen on the ground. The net effect, therefore, is to use Tamar for his sexual pleasure, but he refuses the obligation to produce a son. This now becomes a case of incest, which would be clearly forbidden in the law of Moses (see Lev. 18:16). Onan thus is guilty of greed and deception as well as adultery by refusing to produce a son for his dead brother Er. The LORD, who searches all hearts and minds, executes Judah’s second son. What must Judah think now? What thoughts pass through Tamar’s heart as she observes these events around her? She has watched as two wicked sons of Judah die, and she is still without children.

Keeping the name alive (Deut. 25:5-10)

One issue that runs throughout Genesis 38 is that of childlessness and the highly irregular way in which that issue is resolved. Earlier we referred to “levirate marriage,” a practice that the law of Moses would regulate. Read Deuteronomy 25:5-10. As we noted above, a man could not marry his sister-in-law. The exception for this came in the case of the brother who died without a son. The dead man’s brother could take the widow

as his wife. The purpose for this is explicit in Deuteronomy 25:6, “The first son she bears shall carry on the name of the dead brother so that his name shall not be blotted out in Israel.”

The living brother might refuse this duty, and presumably another brother could step forward to accept this responsibility. If the brother declined this duty, the widow could appeal to the larger community (city elders). If their attempts at persuasion fall on deaf ears, then came the sandal ceremony (a sandal is taken off), coupled with the dishonoring event of being spit in the face. At least the poor chap was not executed! But his own family would gain a bad reputation that could last for years, acquiring the name, “Family of the Unsandaled.”

This practice comes back before us (with some variations) in Ruth 4:1-12. The story is well-known. Boaz, a worthy Judean, is challenged by Ruth in Ruth 3 to marry her (on behalf of Naomi). Boaz is a near relative, a kinsman-redeemer. God designed the role of kinsman-redeemer to be that in which a relative would protect the poor, secure the land, and execute justice. Boaz knows that there is a relative who is closer to Elimelech, Naomi’s dead husband. This unnamed relative is challenged to buy Naomi’s land, and he is willing to do so. But when told that Ruth the Moabite widow is part of the bargain, he backs out, claiming that he fears endangering his own inheritance. Apparently the unnamed redeemer in Ruth 4 was afraid that if he had only one son, that son would receive not only all of Elimelech’s possessions, but

also his own property as well. In any case, Boaz is willing to take a risk and marry Ruth for the sake of Elimelech and Naomi’s future in terms of family name and land preserved.

Thus we see that Deuteronomy 25:5-10 is not an odd law of God at all. Rather, it had a very deliberate “redemptive” purpose. Keeping a name alive through children provided a way for God’s people to occupy and hold property in the Promised Land. Seed (children) and land were the “pillar promises” that Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob had repeatedly heard as gospel promises. Nothing must frustrate that!

When we come back to the story in Genesis 38, we note that Onan would prefer to see his dead brother Er remain childless, quite likely so that he might gain a greater inheritance. Later on in Israel, refusing your duty as a brother-in-law such behavior meant sandal-removing, spit in the face, and a bad family nickname. But for Onan, it meant death.

Jesus Christ, God’s eternal and natural Son, was made like us in every way, but without sin (Hebr. 2:14; 4:15). By becoming our Brother, Jesus became responsible to carry out the role of Kinsman-Redeemer. He protects His poor family (the elect brothers and sisters), He secures their inheritance, and He rights all wrongs by executing justice. When Adam, God’s first human son, defaulted and failed, God sent His own Son, who never fails us. The church is not left a forlorn widow, but she is redeemed in divine love by Christ, who paid the ultimate price to secure the church as His own Bride.

Judah sends Tamar away (38:11)

Judah had arranged Tamar to be Er's wife initially. But now Judah does something quite unusual: he dismisses her from his family circle. Tamar is called "his daughter-in-law" in verse 11, please note. Of course, Judah holds out hope for the future. Once Shelah, the third son, is old enough for marriage, he can rise to the occasion and produce a son for Er. But what is more than unusual, even inappropriate, was for Judah to send Tamar away to her father's house. By marrying Er, Tamar had entered Judah's family. She was no longer under the authority of her own father, but she was now very much a part of Judah's household.

Judah in fact is deceiving Tamar. He thinks to himself, "Shelah may die as well." Therefore, why would he ever give Tamar to Shelah? Judah appears to blame Tamar somehow for the death of Er and Onan. Is she "bad luck?" Is she some kind of jinx to his sons? Judah appears to be the kind of father who is blind to his own sons' wickedness, but he is willing to blame the Canaanite woman. Therefore, by telling Tamar to wait in her father's house for Shelah to grow older, Judah is not being wholly honest. Judah treats Tamar like a pawn. By telling her to wait for Shelah, Tamar is not free to marry anyone else. She is consigned to a "no man's land." The problem is that Judah is shirking his duties, and even more importantly, Judah's line is in danger.

By entitling this lesson, "Judah begins to live in Canaan," we indicate much more than that he moved

away from his brothers geographically. Judah and his sons are sinking deeper into Canaanite culture and pagan depravity. Of course, Judah showed something of this even earlier. But if Judah stays in

Canaan, then humanly speaking, the future is dark and grim. To think that David and, later, Jesus Christ come from this household! Some radical and powerful grace from God must intervene.

Lesson 3: Points to ponder and discuss

1. The LORD strikes Er and Onan dead for their wickedness. What do we learn about the consequences of sin? In this regard think of the Flood and the end of the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah. Why is God's justice so immediate in the case of Judah's sons?
2. Judah seems to be almost blind to the reason for his sons' deaths. He appears to blame Tamar. How is it possible for parents to be blind or maybe oblivious to sinfulness in their children? Do some parents have the attitude of "my child would never do that?" Have they perhaps forgotten what they were like when they were younger? What does the psalmist mean when he prays, "Remember not the sins of my youth" (Ps. 25:7)?
3. How aware does Judah seem to be to his own calling before God? Does he see himself as distinctive in this world in terms of his identity and his covenantal responsibility? Or, does he just want to have a "nice life?"
4. The Sadducees refer back to this practice of brothers marrying a widow of a dead brother. See Luke 20:27ff. How do Sadducees understand this practice? Are they mocking it in the case they tell Jesus? What does our Lord teach about marriage in the age to come?
5. The practice of *levirate marriage* was intended to preserve a name alive and thus the claim to the land. Where do Christians today get their *name*, i.e., their identity? Where is our *land*, i.e., our inheritance in the Promised Land? Who holds that name and land for believers today and preserves them safe for believers? (Hint: think of Rev. 3:12, of baptism and the coming new creation)
6. How difficult was it for Lot and his family when they moved into Sodom? How difficult does it appear to be spiritually for Judah and his family when he moves into Canaan? How difficult is it today for Christians as we live in this world (although we are not of this world)? What role do the Christian church, Christian education, and other Christian organizations have to play in equipping God's people for life in this world?

Bible Studies on Joseph and Judah

Lesson 4: Tamar's younger son "breaks through" to secure Judah's line

Read Genesis 38:12-30

Introduction

This chapter is a sordid story that reveals a most unseemly side in Judah and his family. He has wicked sons, so wicked that the LORD Himself removes them through death. Then Judah removes Tamar, implying by his actions (and thoughts) that she must be somehow responsible for the death of Er and Onan. But there is more to Tamar, and this chapter reveals how she acts in a "more righteous" way than Judah. Her actions result in the answer for the grand problem in this chapter, namely, the threat of childlessness.

Tamar deceives Judah (38:12-14)

Time passes, and another member of Judah's family dies, namely, his wife Bathshua. Perhaps we feel some sympathy for this man. Just as Naomi will later lose both her husband and two sons, so now Judah has lost two sons and his wife. His son Shelah remains.

Tamar has been living with her own father since Judah sent her away following the death of Onan. Up to this point Tamar has been quite passive in the story: her marriage had been arranged by Judah, and it is Judah who removed her from the family circle. We have not heard her speak in the text. But her clothing tells a story. Judah comes to the end of his mourning period, but

Tamar continues to wear her widow's clothing (verse 14). We do not know how long a widow might wear such clothing in that culture. In her case it may very well be her way of saying that she still belongs to Judah's household, a widow of one husband, but waiting for Shelah to reach the age when he could produce a son for his dead brother Er.

For Judah, life should resume some normalcy. With his friend Hirah, Judah goes into the hill country to participate in the shearing of sheep. Normally, that would be a time of partying, and so it may have been a time to help Judah move beyond his recent grievous losses.

Tamar now takes action. After she is told about Judah's movements, she disguises herself by putting on clothing that suggested she was a prostitute, veils herself, and waits at a public spot. She is no fool as she realizes that Judah has been less than honest with her. She had been promised Shelah as a husband, but Judah never issues the call for Tamar to come back to his family circle. In effect, Tamar was deceived, and now she will deceive, trick, Judah.

Judah visits a "prostitute" (38:15-19)

Earlier we made the point that Judah had moved into Canaan, and Canaanite attitudes were influencing him. But Judah is not a helpless puppet, and he brings his own sinful

nature with him as he settles in Canaan, marries a Canaanite, and establishes a strong friendship with a Canaanite. Although he is now a widower, Judah has no right to visit a prostitute. Loneliness may be what he feels, but it is no excuse for what he now does.

Tamar's actions also cause thoughtful readers to raise the eyebrow and shake their heads in disgust. True, she is not really becoming a prostitute as a career, but surely this trick—dressing up as a prostitute in order to have sexual relations with Judah—cannot be right. Can it?

In any case, Judah takes the proverbial bait. Spotting a "prostitute," he makes his approach, and these two consenting adults agree to the terms: she will get a young goat in exchange for sexual intimacy. But Judah is not in the habit of carrying a young goat around with him! Nor does he have enough money on him. This action thus appears to be a somewhat spontaneous act on Judah's part. He was not looking for a prostitute, but he quickly hatched a plan once he saw her along the road.

Tamar asks for a pledge, and she suggests a couple of very valuable, personal objects from Judah. The seal was a hollowed-out cylinder that would have had distinctive markings (or ornamentation) on it. Typically worn around the neck with a cord, it could be pressed upon soft clay to make a "signature." The staff (or scepter!) would likely have a carved or ornamented top as well. All this suggests that Judah is not a poor man, for a young goat would be cheap payment for his sexual tryst with a

Canaanite prostitute. But to give away his seal and staff is comparable to giving away one's credit card or a checkbook! What was Judah thinking?

We also note in passing how clothing and a young goat play a role in deception. Jacob had dressed like Esau and served goat meat to his father. Judah and his brothers had killed a goat to spill its blood on Joseph's special coat. Now Tamar uses prostitute clothes to deceive Judah, who promises a young goat to the "prostitute."

The story moves quickly as both parties appear to get what they want. Verse 18 says that "he gave... slept with her... and she conceived." She resumes her posture as a widow by means of her clothing, but the readers all know that what Judah will soon learn: Tamar is pregnant!

The joke is on Judah (38:20-23)

Judah wants to pay up. She needs to get the goat so that Judah can get his "credit cards" (the seal and the staff) back again. He is quick to fulfill this obligation while the obligation to Tamar (and thus to his own son Er) he does not simply neglect, he has no intention of keeping. His Adullamite friend takes the payment, and he asks around for the shrine prostitute (using a different word from that used in verse 15). An ordinary prostitute (e.g., Rahab) did not have as high a status in Canaanite society as did a shrine prostitute. To visit a shrine prostitute was a religious act, in fact a superstitious one, since it was thought that sexual relations with shrine prostitutes would make the

gods bless your land: your crops and your livestock would receive fertility.

But there was no shrine prostitute around here, the locals report. She's gone! Now Judah is in a bind: he has his young goat, but he really would like his "credit cards" back. He's been "taken to the cleaners!"

Judah does not appear to blush much at all here. Yes, he's embarrassed by his loss but not by his sin. When you move into Canaan, the very real danger is that Canaan moves into you! Living in Canaan involves satisfying the sinful nature and its lusts, including visits to prostitutes, whether involved with shrines or not. If God does not intervene in this story, Judah is on the road to death.

Who is the father anyway? (38:24-26)

By the third month of Tamar's pregnancy, the word is out. Tamar is with child. But who is the father of the child? Tamar has patiently waited, dressed in her widow's clothes, waiting for the head of the house, Judah, to call her back to his family circle to be joined with Shelah, his only surviving son. That call to come back never comes. Judah and everyone else conclude that Tamar has been involved in illicit sexual activity, specifically, prostitution. On one level they are right: she had acted like a prostitute. Yes, but... Yes, but Tamar had resorted to desperate means to secure something of great importance to her personally, no doubt, but even more important, her pregnancy will have great significance for the coming of the Kingdom of God.

Judah decrees the death penalty: death by fire for Tamar, a most extreme punishment. Later on in the law of Moses, if a priest's daughter was involved in prostitution, she had to die by fire (Lev. 21:9). At the same time, had the facts been fully known, since Tamar was technically betrothed to Shelah, the penalty for adultery was death by stoning (see Deut. 22:23-24). Capital crimes, striking as they do at fundamental matters, require capital punishment.

Tamar is arrested, no doubt by family members. But she has a final trump card to play. She produces Judah's seal and staff (his "credit cards"). Tamar clinches her defense argument with the statement, "I am pregnant by the man who owns these. Recognize these?" That question is similar to the one Judah and his brothers had asked father Jacob about Joseph's coat. One can only imagine how wide Judah's eyes became as he indeed recognized these personal items of identification. And perhaps he blushed deeply, for his sin has now been exposed.

But if Judah blushed, he did more than that. He also dismissed the case against Tamar. "She is more righteous than I," declares Judah. This statement may likely strike us as odd, even startling. Is Judah saying that Tamar's methods are acceptable, that the "end justifies the means?" That is not what Judah means, especially as he points to his own refusal to give Shelah in marriage to Tamar.

"Tamar is in the right" means that Tamar took the call to bear children seriously enough. Er and Onan

were dead; Shelah is kept away. God had promised a “seed of the woman” that would crush the serpent’s head. God had promised numerous descendants to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. But now Judah stood in the way. So Tamar resorts to highly questionable and most unusual actions to secure a child in Judah’s line. Judah says that, by comparison, Tamar is right while he was not right.

The second son “breaks through” (38:27-30)

It’s twins... again! Rebekah in Genesis 25:24-26 had a “lively” pregnancy with twins who struggled in her womb. With Tamar, her twins “struggle” to be born first. The little infant hand of one emerges from the womb, and he is designated with a scarlet thread as the actual firstborn. His name is Zerah (meaning “scarlet” or “shining”), the ancestor of Achan. But then the second son emerges. He “breaks through” to everyone’s surprise, and thus he is named Perez, “break through.” As Ruth 4:18ff. shows, he is the ancestor of King David and thus of King Jesus Christ.

Gordon Wenham (*Genesis 16-50*, p. 370) observes that “this story, which at first sight seems so marginal to biblical history, records a vital link in saving history. Tamar, through her determination to have children, secured for Judah the honor of fathering both David and the Savior of the world.” Jesus Christ is the ultimate Son who “breaks through” in a way that no one expected. The second and last Adam of history comes through for us. Once

again, we stand amazed that God would move in a mysterious and gracious way for the salvation of His own. He uses even a Canaanite woman, Tamar, who was determined to have a son to

maintain the line of Judah. Tamar will become a mother even of the Christ.

Lesson 4: Points to ponder and discuss

1. I once was told by a long-time member of a church that he did not even know that this story was in the Bible. Why might that be the case? Is this chapter sometimes skipped in Bible reading around the family table? Have you heard many (or any) sermons preached on Genesis 38? What makes this chapter so uncomfortable for us?
2. Judah sees a prostitute, and he desires to have sexual relations with her. In the Lord’s Prayer, we pray, “Lead us not into temptation.” What is temptation? How does it differ from divine testing? Who are our “sworn enemies that never stopping attacking us”? See James 1: ; Heidelberg Catechism, Lord’s Day 52, Q/A 127; Westminster Larger Catechism, Q/A 195; Westminster Shorter Catechism, Q/A 106.
3. Tamar is determined to have children. Could Tamar know about the divine promises in the covenant of grace, namely, that God would give both seed (children) and land? Or, is she simply motivated by a maternal instinct, a natural desire to have children? Is there any way that we can tell from the Biblical text? How does God use and bless this desire to have children?
4. Judah wants Tamar burned for engaging, he believes, in prostitution. Most civil governments today in North America punish prostitution, but they no longer punish adultery or other acts carried out by “consenting adults.” Should such things be punished (again) by the civil magistrates? Could such things be outlawed again? Or, should Christians try only to change people’s views and behaviors in these areas without a change in legislation?
5. We do not believe that the “end justifies the means.” But are there ethical “grey areas?” What actually does “justify the means” that are used toward any particular end or goal?
6. Matthew 1 has a genealogy that leads to Christ’s birth. What unusual women are in that list who are the mothers (ancestresses) of Jesus Christ? What unusual things do they do that serves or advances God’s cause?

Looking Above

A Series on the Revelation of Jesus Christ

Revelation 10

The Mighty Angel and the Little Book

Is the Gospel *good* news to you? Or is it merely news?

If the Gospel of Jesus Christ is mere news to you, then you do well to consider that which the six trumpets of Revelation 8 and 9 set before you.

The first four trumpets belong together. These trumpets have in view the undoing of the created order. The first four trumpets sound and creation itself is touched. Creation itself is shaken and undone. In view here are tornadoes, hurricanes, floods, monsoons, fire, wind, and all the devastating forces of nature. Here we learn that these things come forth from the throne of God Himself. With the sounding of the first four trumpets it is as though God Himself were undoing everything He has done in creation. The first four trumpets bring cosmic disorder. You can read about them in Revelation 8.

If the first four trumpets belong together, then the last three trumpets belong together. These trumpets do not have in view creation; they have in view man himself. The last three trumpets sound, and mankind is touched. The human race is shaken and undone. With the fifth trumpet blast we have the unleashing of the hordes of hell; so terrible is this affliction, man cries out for death, man seeks death, man wants to die; but death

escapes him. You can read about in Revelation 9:1-12.

If you thought things were horrific with the sounding of the fifth trumpet, they get worse with the sounding of the sixth trumpet. With the sixth trumpet blast war is set before us—a composite picture of all the wars and rumors of wars that have occurred from the time of Christ’s first coming to the time of His return. Here we find man mercilessly killing one another. Here we are confronted with the butchery, brutality, and bloodbath of war. One third of mankind is killed. You can read about it in Revelation 9:13-21.

These, then, are the six trumpets of Revelation 8 and 9. As terrible and horrific as they are, these six trumpets are only harbingers of the last trumpet that is yet to sound. If you think the sounding of these six trumpets—bringing about the undoing of the created order in trumpets 1-4, unleashing the hordes of hell in trumpet 5, bringing untold carnage and death in war in trumpet 6—if you think the sounding of these six trumpets is terrible and horrific, then imagine what lies in store with the sounding of the seventh trumpet on the great and terrible day of the Lord!

This, then, is the lay of the land. The six trumpets of Revelation 8-9 have been sounding from the

time of Christ’s first coming; they will continue to sound until Christ comes again, and that with increasing intensity. Even now the trumpets are sounding! Even now God is active. Even now God is speaking—speaking through His mighty trumpet blasts—warning the world of the impending doom and judgment that is to come! The seventh trumpet is about to sound!

An Interlude

Before we get to that seventh trumpet, however, we are given an interlude in Revelation 10:1-11:14. We have been confronted with the first six trumpets in Revelation 8-9; we will be confronted with the seventh trumpet in Revelation 11:15-19. But now in Revelation 10:1-11:14, we are given an interlude. Even as we were given an interlude between the opening of the sixth seal and the seventh seal, so now we are given an interlude between the sounding of the sixth trumpet and the seventh trumpet.

This interlude, however, is not to be understood chronologically. It is not as though the six trumpets must complete their sounding, and only then do the events of Chapter 10 take place. The interlude of Chapter 10 is descriptive. It describes the life of the church as she lives in the midst of the world between the first coming of Christ and His return on the clouds of glory to judge the living and the dead. Chapter 10 reminds us, once again, that we are not spectators sitting in the stands watching the events unfold before our eyes; we are participants in

It is as though John is witnessing the second coming of Christ!

the action. This is the history of the church.

The Angel of the Lord

The interlude begins with the words of verse 1: "I saw still another mighty angel coming down from heaven, clothed with a cloud. And a rainbow was on his head, his face was like the sun, and his feet like pillars of fire." Whatever the identity of this mighty angel, it is clear that this angel is being set over and above the seven angels who sound the seven trumpets. In view here is no ordinary angel. In view here is an angel that excels all others. In view here is the mighty Angel of the Lord!

Elsewhere in Scripture, the Angel of the Lord appeared to Hagar as she fled in the wilderness, speaking to her of her son Ishmael. She identified Him as the Lord Himself (Genesis 16). The mighty Angel of the Lord appeared to Abraham on Mount Moriah, commanding him not to slay his son. Abraham identified Him as the Lord Himself (Genesis 22). He appeared to Jacob and told him to return to the promised land. There He identified Himself as God (Genesis 31). He appeared in the burning bush to Moses and gave His Name: I AM WHO I AM (Exodus 3).

In view here in Revelation 10 is no ordinary angel. In view here is an angel that excels all others. In view here is the mighty Angel of

the Lord. In view here is the Lord Himself! You are being confronted with Christ, the risen and exalted Lord of Glory!

Note His description: John sees Him coming down from heaven. It is as though John is witnessing the second coming of Christ! He sees Him coming down from heaven, as if to judge the living and the dead!

He is clothed with a cloud. You remember the pillar of cloud by day and the pillar of fire by night? You remember the thick cloud that appeared on the top of Mt. Sinai as God gave His law? You remember the glorious cloud of God's presence coming down and filling the tabernacle? Here is the Christ, clothed with a cloud! Behold, He is coming with clouds!

A rainbow is on His head. You remember the rainbow of Genesis 9? The waters of the flood have receded, the dry land has emerged, and God makes a covenant with all creation, promising never again to destroy the world with a flood, and He gives the sign of a rainbow in the skies. The Hebrew is the word for a warrior's bow. But that bow is now held in the position of peace; not raised in the position of war to send forth its arrows of wrath, but held at the side in the position of peace. God will keep covenant; the rainbow is proof of that. That rainbow now surrounds the head of the Christ, signifying His covenant faithfulness.

His face is like the sun. Here is the Sun of Righteousness, risen with healing in His wings! He dwells in unapproachable light! He is Light!

His feet are like pillars of fire. Again, remember the pillar of fire by night, bringing light, warmth and protection for Israel of old.

Here, then, we are confronted with the risen and exalted Christ! This is the Christ, the King, all-glorious above! The mighty Angel of Revelation 10 is the Angel of the Lord! The mighty Angel of Revelation 10 is the Christ! He is the One with whom we are dealing in Revelation 10!

Notice also His position in verses 2-3: "He had a little book open in His hand. And He set His right foot on the sea and His left foot on the land, and cried with a loud voice, as when a lion roars." Note His position, and note it well: a little book open in His hand; His right foot on the sea; His left foot on the land; His voice crying out loudly. We will come back to His position and posture in a moment.

The Seven Thunders

Notice now what happens when He cries out with His voice: "When He cried out, seven thunders uttered their voices. Now when the seven thunders uttered their voices, I was about to write; but I heard a voice from heaven saying to me, 'Seal up the things which the seven thunders uttered, and do not write them'" (vv. 3b-4).

What are we to make of the seven thunders? As we have seen before, the number seven is the number of completeness, and

thunders are usually associated with judgment. It would seem, then, that these seven thunders are parallel with the seven seals, the seven trumpets, and the seven bowls. It would seem that these seven thunders would begin another cycle of judgments in line with the others in the book of Revelation. In fact, John, having heard the seven thunders was about to write about them, even as he wrote of the seals, trumpets, and bowls. But now, before he writes, he hears a voice from heaven, commanding him to seal up the things which the seven thunders uttered, commanding him not to write down what he has heard.

John tells us that he heard the seven thunders, but he is not permitted to write down what he heard. Why not? Could it be that the seven thunders are intentionally hidden from us for the purpose, now in this interlude, of impressing upon us the comfort that is ours in Christ? The intent is to place these seven thunders before us, thereby underscoring their reality, but then intentionally to turn our attention away from them, thereby underscoring that which is of the utmost significance, namely: Christ!

In other words, our attention is not to be focused upon the seven thunders, though they are there! Our attention is to be focused upon Christ! The seven thunders are there, to be sure, but our eyes must be fixed on Christ! How does the Catechism put it? “In all my distress and persecutions, I lift up my eyes to heaven, and confidently await as Judge the very

One who has already stood trial in my place before God and so has removed the whole curse from me!” The interlude fixes our eyes upon Christ!

Indeed, John focuses our attention once again upon the position and posture of the Christ, verse 5: “The angel whom I saw standing on the sea and on the land raised up His hand to heaven.” Christ now takes the posture of an oath: the little book in His hand, His right foot on the sea, His left foot on the land, his other hand raised to heaven to swear an oath. “The angel whom I saw standing on the sea and on the land raised up His hand to heaven and swore by Him who lives forever and ever, who created heaven and the things that are in it, the earth and the things that are in it, and the sea and the things that are in it, that there should be delay no longer, but in the days of the sounding of the seventh angel, when he is about to sound, the mystery of God would be finished, as He declared to His servants the prophets” (vv. 5-7).

The Next Great Act of God

Christ swears His oath before the eternal and living God, the Creator of heaven and the things that are in it, the Creator of earth and the things that are in it, the Creator of the sea and the things that are in it. Christ the Son swears an oath before the Father, and what is the content of that oath? There should be delay no longer! The seventh

angel is about to sound, the mystery of God is about to be finished! This is the oath that the Son of God takes in the presence of His Father. There will be delay no longer! The seventh trumpet is about to sound! The mystery of God is about to be finished! Christ was conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, dead, and buried, He descended into hell. The third day He rose again from the dead, He ascended into heaven, and sitteth at the right hand of God the Father Almighty. From thence He shall come again to judge the living and the dead! This is the next great act of God: the coming of Christ to judge the living and the dead! When the seventh trumpet sounds there will be no more opportunity to repent! When the seventh trumpet sounds there will be no more opportunity to flee to Christ. When the seventh trumpet sounds the history of redemption will reach its consummation!

The only remaining act of God, in terms of the history of redemption, is His return to judge the living and the dead. Christ has sworn an oath before the Father, that there should be delay no longer, that the seventh trumpet is about to sound, that He is about to come again!

The Little Book

But then, look what happens next, verses 8-11. John is commanded to take the little book from the

When the seventh trumpet sounds there will be no more opportunity to repent!

hand of Christ; he is commanded to eat it, and it will be sweet as honey in his mouth, but bitter in his stomach, and then he is to prophecy again to many peoples, nations, tongues, and kings. The little book which Christ holds in His hand is the gospel, which proclaims the mighty acts of God in history for the redemption of His people—those mighty acts that culminate in the person and work of Jesus Christ. John must eat that book, and it will be sweet as honey in his mouth, even as it is bitter in his stomach. Such is the message of the gospel. What can be sweeter than the gospel of salvation by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone? But that same gospel also brings bitterness, for as that gospel is preached, persecution breaks out against those who proclaim it, bringing bitterness.

The message of the gospel, then, goes forth. The message of Christ is the message of the gospel. It goes forth to peoples, nations, tongues, and kings. It goes forth to you. Do you understand what you are being confronted with in Revelation 10? Christ is even now standing, as it were, one foot on the sea, the other foot on the land, hand raised to heaven, swearing an oath before the Father, that the time is at hand. Such is the urgency of the gospel! The six trumpets have been sounding from the time of Christ's first coming, they are sounding even now, but the seventh and last trumpet is about to sound. In God's conception of things, there is no delay. Understand

the time in which you live--the heavens are about to open! It is as though the skies are about to be rolled back; the trumpet is about to resound; Christ Himself is about to descend. Is it well with your soul?

The message of the gospel goes forth to you. This message, presented to you in the interlude of chapter 10, is not intended primarily to warn the unbeliever (though it does that); it is intended primarily to comfort the saints. Your Savior has accomplished your redemption, and so certain is it that He will bring that redemption to its consummation, that He swears an oath before the Father that He will bring the consummation soon!

Do you think the undoing of the created order in trumpets 1-4 can undo you? Do you think the hordes of hell in trumpet 5 can shake you? Do you think the wars and rumors of wars in trumpet 6 can take you? Do you think the final judgment in trumpet 7 can separate you from Christ? Then consider the oath your Savior has sworn before the Father! Nothing in heaven, nothing on earth, nothing in the seas, can separate you from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord, not even the final judgment!

We need this interlude. We need to know that amidst all the carnage of the six trumpets—amidst the shaking of the created order, amidst the unleashing of the hordes of hell, amidst war and rumors of war—that we belong to Christ! We need to know, even as we live in an-

icipation of the last trumpet, that in the final judgment, we belong to Christ.

This is the comfort of the Church. This is the message of the gospel. May it not be merely news to you. May it be, in every sense of the word, *good* news to you.

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Paedocommunion: Concluding Observations

(Part Two)

Though I have largely concluded my assessment of the biblical evidence for paedocommunion, I believe it is important to return once more to the principal assumption that underlies much of the contemporary advocacy of this practice in Reformed and Presbyterian churches. When I introduced this study, I noted that advocates of paedocommunion often argue that the historic practice of the Reformed churches belies their covenant doctrine.

Whereas the inclusion of children within the covenant people of God is adduced as a compelling basis for the practice of paedobaptism, the implications of this inclusion are denied when it comes to the admission of children to the Lord's Table. By denying children access to the Lord's Table, the significance of the biblical doctrine of the covenant is mitigated and a "baptistic" view of the children of believers is unwittingly imported into the doctrine of the sacraments.

Rather than constituting a means of grace that strengthens the communion of all covenant members with Christ, the sacrament of the Lord's Supper is restricted to those only who have made a "profession of faith" and are capable of the kind of faith that remembers, proclaims and discerns the body of Christ. In the traditional practice of the Reformed churches, there is, according to contemporary advocates of paedocommunion, a sort of

back-handed "ex-communication" of covenant infants and children that radically compromises their status as genuine members of the new covenant community.

It is not my purpose here to delve deeply into the complexities of the covenant theology that undergirds the present advocacy of paedocommunion. However, I do want to offer some general reflections on the shape of this theology, particularly the reason it so strongly insists that *all* covenant members be admitted to the Lord's Table without previously professing their faith in Christ.

Covenant Theology and Paedocommunion in Contemporary Discussion

Among some contemporary advocates of paedocommunion, the claim is made that *all* covenant members without exception—believers and their children who are recipients of the covenant promise and the accompanying sacrament of covenant incorporation, baptism—enjoy a full and saving union with Christ. Though Reformed theologians have traditionally distinguished between those who are "under the administration" of the covenant of grace and those who truly enjoy the saving "communion of life" that the covenant communicates, some proponents of what is sometimes termed the "Federal [covenant] Vision" reject as inappropriate any such distinction between covenant members.

In the traditional language of Reformed theology, a distinction was made (using a variety of expressions) between the covenant in its historical administration, which includes all professing believers and their children, and the covenant in its fruitfulness as a saving communion of life. This distinction was drawn in order to account for the biblical teaching that not all recipients of the covenant of grace in its historical administration are "elect" persons according to God's sovereign purposes.

Among those who are under the administration of the covenant, some are non-elect and never come to true faith so as to enjoy the saving benefits of Christ's redemptive mediation. Despite the privileges and benefits of their participation in the covenant in its outward administration, these members of the covenant community ultimately prove to be unbelieving and impenitent and fall under the greater judgment of God. In order to preserve the biblical teaching regarding God's sovereign and gracious election, and to account for the perplexing circumstance that not all of those who are recipients of the covenant promises are "children of the promise" in the same sense (cf. Rom. 9:6), Reformed theologians have ordinarily articulated the doctrine of the covenant in a way that allows for the inclusion of non-elect persons within the administration of the covenant of grace.

Though it is difficult to know precisely what some present-day advocates of paedocommunion mean when they insist that all covenant members are in saving union with Christ, it is not difficult to find

statements in their writings that assert this in an unqualified manner. Rich Lusk, for example, offers the following definition of the covenant of grace:

On the one hand, some so totally identify covenant and election that to be in covenant and to be elect are one and the same. ... At the other extreme are those who identify the covenant with the visible church, but make covenant membership a matter of mere externals. ... Against both of these distortions, we must insist that *the covenant is nothing less than union with the Triune God, nothing less than salvation.* ... So when someone is united to the church by baptism, that person is incorporated into Christ and into his body; that person becomes bone of Christ's bone and flesh of his flesh.

Whether or not Lusk accurately represents the alternatives to his view, it seems clear from this statement that he believes that all believers and their children are in saving union with the Triune God. All covenant members enjoy the richest communion with Christ, such that they are bone of his bone and flesh of his flesh. Other advocates of paedocommunion offer similar definitions of what it means to be in the covenant of grace. Every covenant member is understood to enjoy the saving benefits of communion with Christ, which include the forgiveness of sins, regeneration, justification, sanctification, and the like. Since the children of believing par-

ents are members of the covenant community, they too share fully in Christ and his saving work.

Within the framework of this unqualified definition of what it means for all believers and their children to be members of the covenant of grace, contemporary advocates of paedocommunion also assert a strong doctrine of the efficacy of baptism as the sacrament of covenant inclusion. This emphasis upon the significance and efficacy of baptism is of particular relevance to the question whether children of believing parents should be admitted to the Table of the Lord. Since the baptism of the children of believers effectively unites them to Christ and grants them full participation in his saving work, baptism by itself provides a sufficient warrant for admitting such children to the Table of the Lord without requiring a preceding profession of faith.

While there may be some differences among advocates of paedocommunion regarding the efficacy of baptism, some authors ascribe to baptism a kind of power that leads inexorably to an insistence that all baptized persons be admitted to the Lord's Supper. For example, in his defense of paedobaptism, Rich Lusk insists that the sacrament of baptism does something that even the Word preached does not accomplish. In his interpretation of

Acts 2, especially verse 37, Lusk argues that

[p]reaching alone is insufficient to make them [believers and their children] participants in Christ's work of redemption. ... Baptism, not preaching per se, is linked with forgiveness and the reception of the Spirit. Clearly, Peter believes God will give them something in baptism that they have not received through preaching alone. Baptism will consummate the process of regeneration begun by the Word preached.

In this statement, the sacrament of baptism is understood to be *constitutive* of its recipients' membership in the covenant of grace. Whereas traditional sacramental theology would speak of the Spirit producing faith through the Word and *confirming* faith through the use of the sacraments, this view of sacramental efficacy ascribes to the sacraments the power to effect communion with Christ in the fullest sense of the term. By virtue of their baptism, believers and their children are constituted members of Christ and participate in the fullness of his redemptive work on their behalf. All of the benefits of Christ's saving mediation are imparted to those are incorporated into the covenant community by means of baptism.

Advocates of paedocommunion assert a strong doctrine of the efficacy of baptism as the sacrament of covenant inclusion.

At stake in the debate regarding the admission of children to the Lord's Table is nothing other than a consistent covenantal hermeneutic or way of interpreting Scripture.

Another example of this emphasis upon baptism as an effectual means of incorporating believers and their children into Christ is provided by Steve Wilkins. In his understanding of the relation between covenant, baptism, and salvation, Wilkins also proceeds from the conviction that covenant membership involves full, saving communion with the Triune God. All persons who are incorporated into the covenant of grace enjoy “a real relationship, consisting of real communion with the triune God through union with Christ. The covenant is not some *thing* that exists apart from Christ or in addition to Him (another *means* of grace)—rather, the covenant *is* union with Christ. Thus, being in covenant gives all the blessings of being united to Christ.”

The sacrament of baptism is the instrumental means whereby this covenant union with Christ is effected. All who are baptized, accordingly, enjoy the fullness of participation in Christ and are the recipients of all the blessings of such participation, including regeneration, justification, and sanctification. Though it is possible for such persons who through baptism are united to Christ to fall away in unbelief and impenitence, thereby losing the real benefits of salvation that were once their possession, Wilkins maintains that baptism is the means of incorporation into Christ and places its beneficiaries in possession of all the benefits of his saving work.

Within the framework of this understanding of what is true of all members of the covenant community, and of the effectiveness of baptism as constitutive of their incorporation into Christ, the warrant for the admission of children of believers to the Table of the Lord should be apparent. It is a simple matter of theological and covenantal consistency to move from the reality of covenant membership and saving union with Christ, which are the possession of all believers and their children under the covenant of grace, to the reception of children of the covenant at the Lord's Table.

To exclude children from the Table of the Lord is nothing less than a denial of their covenantal membership and its corresponding privileges. The children of believing parents, who already possess Christ in his fullness, may scarcely be denied a participation in Christ by means of the sacrament that Christ appointed to strengthen communion with himself and to nourish faith. At stake in the debate regarding the admission of children to the Lord's Table is nothing other than a consistent covenantal hermeneutic or way of interpreting Scripture. Consequently, those who advocate the admission of children to the Lord's Table upon the basis of their covenant membership regard the historic practice of the Reformed churches on this question to be baptistic and inconsistent.

Some Critical Observations Regarding the Covenant Communion Argument

Some of the features of the contemporary covenant theology that undergird the advocacy of paedocommunion are exceedingly complex and beyond the scope of our interest. However, it is this theology, more than any exegetical arguments that appeal to particular biblical passages, that constitutes the real engine that drives much of the advocacy of paedocommunion today. For our purposes, it will be sufficient to take note of some of the serious problems that this covenant theology entails.

First, the unqualified assertion that all believers and their children—who are embraced within and stand under the covenant of grace in its historical administration—are savingly united to Christ is contrary to the teaching of Scripture and the historic understanding of the Reformed churches. While it is commendable to insist upon the importance of the administration of the covenant of grace in the communication of the saving work of Christ, it is simply impossible to argue that all persons who are embraced within the circle of the covenant enjoy an identical, saving communion with the Triune God.

Though all covenant members are recipients of the gospel promise, which proclaims God's grace for his people in Christ and is signified and sealed in baptism as a kind of “appendix” (Calvin) to the Word, all covenant members do not enjoy thereby the same fullness of saving union with Christ. The grace of God remains sovereign, even though it is not “arbitrary” in the way it is

It is simply impossible to argue that all persons who are embraced within the circle of the covenant enjoy an identical, saving communion with the Triune God.

covenantally communicated. Ordinarily, the triune God works salvation in the lives of his people by means of the administration of the covenant of grace, which includes the proclamation of the gospel Word and the administration of its accompanying sacraments. God sovereignly accomplishes his saving purposes in the way of the covenant and throughout the generations, embracing believers together with their children. However, the Scriptures clearly and frequently remind us that, to use Old Testament language, some of the “circumcised” (and “baptized”) members of the covenant are not genuinely “of” the people of God. They may be “in” the covenant, but they are not genuinely “of” the covenant people of God (see e.g., Deut. 10:16; Jer. 4:4; 9:25-26; John 15:5-8; Heb. 11:20-21; Rom. 2:28-29; 9:6, 11-14; 1 John 2:19).

Once this distinction between covenant membership and authentic, saving communion with God is acknowledged, the argument that covenant membership entitles all believers and their children to be admitted to the Lord’s Table begins to lose some of its persuasiveness. The claim that all believers and their children already enjoy full participation in Christ, and ought therefore to be nourished in Christ at the Table of the Lord, is an unwarranted exaggeration of what covenant membership entails. To insist that all

covenant members enjoy true communion with Christ and therefore may not be excluded from the Table of the Lord presumes too much. However much we may emphasize the significance of the covenant relationship between the Triune God and his people (believers and their children), it is simply not true that this relationship entails the salvation of all with whom God covenants.

Second, the understanding of the sacraments that is associated with this covenant theology, borders on a form of “sacramentalism.” Rather than viewing the sacrament as a sign and seal of the promise communicated through the gospel, baptism is understood to effect the incorporation of all its recipients into a saving fellowship with Christ. On this understanding, baptism itself is identified with the grace that it signifies and seals. To use the traditional language of theology, the sacrament of baptism works by its mere performance (*ex opere operato*, “by the work performed”).

Though proponents of this view of the sacrament do not deny the need for faith on the part of the sacrament’s recipient, the implication is left that all persons who are baptized into the name of the Triune God enjoy *on that account* the salvation in Christ that the sacrament visibly confirms. The sacra-

ment of baptism not only attests the covenant membership of believers and their children, but it also confers upon all of its recipients the grace to which it points. Consequently, some authors who view baptism in this way are prepared to speak of a kind of “baptismal regeneration” or “baptismal salvation.”

The problem that this conception of baptism creates should be apparent. Whereas the Reformed confessions emphasize the *sacramental connection* between the “sign” of baptism and the grace “signified,” they resist the temptation to *confuse* or simply *identify* the sign with the reality to which it corresponded. The blood and Spirit of Christ, to which baptism points sacramentally, are the means whereby the baptized person’s sins are washed away, not the water of baptism.

Furthermore, in the historic Reformation view of the sacraments’ use in relation to the gospel Word, the sacraments do not add anything to the Word, nor do they effectively communicate the grace of Christ, which they signify and seal, without the presence of faith on the part of their recipients. Only as the Holy Spirit produces faith through the Word of the gospel, to which the sacraments are added as visible signs and seals, do believers enjoy saving communion with Christ. Even the sacrament of baptism, which is administered to the children of believers upon the basis of their covenant status without their knowledge or informed consent, does not confer grace to its recipients unless the Spirit works faith in them. In this understanding of the sacraments, it is essential that baptized members

of the covenant community *respond* to the gospel promise in Christ in the way of faith and obedience. Such faith and obedience are only authored by the Holy Spirit, who uses the preaching of the Word to produce faith and the administration of the sacraments to confirm faith. Such Spirit-authored faith is always indispensable to a right reception and use of the sacraments as means of grace.

The historic practice of the Reformed churches, which requires a prior profession of faith on the part of covenant members who are admitted to the Lord's Table, is fully coherent with this understanding of the Word and sacraments. Far from representing a failure to think through the implications of the covenant, this practice recognizes that covenant membership, including reception of the sacrament of baptism as a sign and seal of the gospel promise, places believers and their children under definite covenant obligations.

Principal among these obligations is a believing appropriation of the grace of God in Jesus Christ, which is firstly communicated through preaching and secondly attested by the proper use of the sacraments. Since baptism, which visibly confirms the gospel Word, requires Spirit-authored faith in order to communicate God's grace in Christ, baptized children are required to confirm publicly their appropriation of the covenant promise by way of a public profession of the Christian faith.

Furthermore, since the Lord's Supper is uniquely the sacramen-

tal means of nourishing such faith, the church is biblically warranted to require a rite of public profession as a way of ensuring the presence of faith, which is the mouth whereby Christ is received in the sacrament. Far from constituting an artificial barrier to children of the covenant, the requirement for a preceding profession of faith prior to admission to the Table of the Lord, represents a consistent application of the doctrine of the covenant and the administration of the means of grace. Because the Reformed view rejects the teaching of baptismal regeneration, which ascribes a full and saving union with Christ to all the baptized, it has always rejected the admission of children to the Table without a confirmation of their believing embrace of the gospel promise proclaimed to them in their baptism. It is not surprising, therefore, that contemporary advocates of paedocommunion within the Reformed churches have found it necessary to revise substantially the historic conception of the way God's grace is communicated to believers and children, particularly by means of the sacrament of baptism.

And third, the argument from covenant membership for the admission of children to the Lord's Table fails to reckon adequately with the biblical stipulations for the administration of the covenant,

including the sacrament of the Lord's Supper. Both in the old and new covenants, membership among the covenant people of God bestows real privileges. But such membership also places covenant members under corresponding obligations and responsibilities. Believers and their children are not "automatically" guaranteed access to all the rites of the covenant's administration.

During the course of our consideration of the biblical evidence regarding admission to the Lord's Table, we have had occasion to review the Scriptural requirements for admission to the Table. Though we have acknowledged that the promise of the covenant and its sacramental confirmation in baptism constitutes a kind of "invitation" to come to the Table of the Lord in order to be nourished in faith, this invitation is not an unqualified opening-of-the-door of entrance to whoever wishes to come. It places recipients of the invitation under the obligation to come in the way of faith, after they have "examined" themselves to see whether their faith exhibits the marks that belong to true faith.

Though analogies are often dangerous due to their obvious limitations, sometimes the analogy is used here of what it means for children to be "minor" members of a family, but not yet permitted

Membership places covenant members under corresponding obligations and responsibilities.

to enjoy all the privileges of such membership until they come to sufficient maturity. Restrictions upon a child's exercise of adult responsibilities are not tantamount to a kind of "exclusion" from true membership in the family. Similarly, children who are not permitted to exercise certain privileges within the context of the civil order, are not on that account any less citizens of the civil community. They may not be permitted, for example, to drive a car, since there are certain pre-requisites necessary to the responsible exercise of such a privilege.

No doubt these kinds of analogies are of limited usefulness in evaluating an administration of the new covenant that requires that children of believing parents profess their faith before they are admitted to the Lord's Supper. But they do serve at least one purpose: they illustrate how it is possible to be a true member of a community, including the covenant people of God, though not yet permitted to enjoy all the benefits of such membership.

In this connection, it is especially important to note that, in the case of the children of believing parents, there are no restrictions upon such children's access to the primary means of grace and nourishment in Christ that the new covenant church has been given. It is irresponsible, therefore, to insist that children, who are nourished in the richest of foods, the preaching and teaching of the Word of God, are virtually "excommunicated" from the covenant and fellowship with Christ if they are not admitted to the

Lord's Table without a prior profession of faith.

Conclusion

With this brief treatment of a recent form of the argument from covenant membership for paedocommunion, we come to the close of our assessment of the question of the admission of children to the Lord's Supper. Though my consideration of the case for paedocommunion has led to a negative conclusion, I do not wish to close on a negative note. Nothing in my evaluation of the case for paedocommunion should be taken to suggest that Christian churches do not have an obligation to lead children, on the basis of the covenant promise that was signified and sealed to them in baptism, to the Table of the Lord.

There is a direct pathway that leads from the baptismal font to the Lord's Supper, and it is the duty of the Christian church accordingly to exert itself in the course of instructing the children of believing parents in the Christian faith. The baptized children of believing parents need to be constantly reminded of the great privileges and corresponding obligations of their membership in the covenant community and of their baptism.

When such children are properly instructed in the faith, the church may expectantly anticipate that they will be admitted to the Table of the Lord, where the faith they have professed will enjoy a most wondrous feast of thanksgiving and communion with the crucified and risen Lord. The spirit and the

form in which such children are instructed in the faith in preparation for their coming to the Table of the Lord, should reflect the words of the Lord Jesus himself who said, "Let the little children come to me and do not hinder them, for to such belongs the kingdom of heaven" (Matt. 18:14). Despite the claims of paedocommunionists, who often argue that this invitation is belied by the historic practice of the Reformed churches, the instruction of children in the faith before they come to the Lord's Table is precisely the biblically responsible way in which such children should be brought to the Lord and to his Table.

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

Reformed Youth Services Convention in California

The Young Peoples' Point of View

Written by: Emily Yonker, Sarah & Rachel DeBoer

The RYS Summer convention crew picked an absolutely spectacular place for convention this year: Concordia University, California. It was a wonderful time for spiritual growth and fellowship with friends! There were many excellent speakers who taught us more about God's Word and gave us many good lessons that we can definitely apply to our lives. The two main session speakers this year were Pastor Phil Vos, from Escondido URC, CA and Pastor Paul Murphy, of Messiah's Reformed Fellowship, New York. They both did a very good job at bringing out the theme for this year: "Rooted in Christ."

Rev. Vos told us about how roots do not look great and are usually unnoticed. A tree's roots, however, grow as deep as the tree is tall. We are to have our roots deep in Christ and in His Word. Rev. Murphy spoke about taking up our cross (dying to our old nature daily), denying ourselves, and following Christ. He also said that before mirrors were invented, people could not see themselves. God made us to look

out of ourselves at others first.

A really good workshop called "Fatal Addiction," by Rev. Jeff Doll. He told us how deadly addiction to alcohol and drugs can be, by sharing with us about his father who was addicted to alcohol. Rev. Doll also encouraged the young men not to be ashamed of being godly young men. He told the young ladies not to believe the world's lie that staying at home is second class because there is no higher calling than being a mother.

Other workshops included "Why Should You Pray and Read the Bible," led by Rev. Mike Brown of the Christ URC in Santee, California; "Daughters of Sarah," a girls only workshop led by Mrs.

Julie Murphy of Brooklyn, New York; "Jesus the Anointed Will Build His Church," led by missionary Rev. Bill Green from Costa Rica; "Matchmaker, Matchmaker, Make Me a Match!" led, not by Teveye, but by Rev. Rich Kuiken of the Reformed Bible Church in Pompton Plains, New Jersey; "Zip-A-Dee-Doo-Dah???" a workshop with a catchy title by Mid-America Reformed Seminary graduate, Mr. Jeremy Veldman; "Living as a Proverbs 31 Man," a guys only workshop led by Rev. Jason Tuinstra of the Emmanuel URC in Lamoore, California; "Dare to be Different," led by Rev. Chris Gordon of the Lynden Washington URC; "Counseling Christ," led by the Pastor of Youth and Family at New Life Presbyterian Church, Mr. Rip Pratt; and "Eden's Tree in Iraq," led by Rev. Tyler Wagenmaker of the Beaver Dam, Michigan CRC who has served as a chaplain in Iraq.



Rev. Phil Vos addresses the group as Keynote Speaker

*The Young People
singing in the choir*

We also had a wonderful time getting to know old friends better and making new ones! The people you room with are usually from a different state. It is very interesting to find out what life is like for them. Every morning we had Son-rise groups where we would meet with others for our morning devotions. These are groups of two leaders and about seven or eight girls (or guys), each from different churches. This was also a neat way to get to know others.

Every evening, for night time devotions, we had Son-set groups made up of our own church leaders and young people. There were many fun sports tournaments, including: volleyball, basketball, and soccer. They had dodge ball and a couple scavenger hunts for those not interested in sports. You could also play your own games during free time if that is what you were more inclined to do.

Thursday was the “day away.” This year it was at Sea World in San Diego. It was SO much fun! Even the two and a half hour, cramped bus ride turned into many laughs and cheers as we tried to get our bus driver to pass all the other buses. The trip was beautiful and Sea World was great. There were lots of fun rides and many animals to see. We sat in the “soak zone” for the Shamu show and we never became completely dry again until



we changed clothes that night for the talent show. At the talent show, there were a lot of nice songs that were played and sung. For the humorous side of things, there were several funny skits and silly songs.

We had many creative people putting this convention together. It was a great experience! We would encourage every young person to go if given the opportunity. Next year the convention is planned to be at Bethel University in St. Paul, Minnesota. We will definitely try to come back.

The Sponsors’ Point of View

Written by: Tom & Irene VanDyk, Youth sponsors from Messiah’s IRC, Holland, MI.

It is an awesome sight and feeling when you have over six hundred young people and sponsors lifting up their voices in praise to the Lord. Pulling from Revelation 5:9-10 and chapter 7:9-10 “...singing

‘Salvation belongs to our God, who sits on the throne and to the Lamb!’”

The overall mission statement for Reformed Youth Services, which began in 1996, is: “Committed to the spiritual and social nurturing of our covenant youth.” I also like



*Pastor Jeff Doll leading
his workshop*



*A day of fun at
Sea World*

their earlier one: “Ministering the timeless truths of the historic Reformed faith to today’s youth.”

This is very evident throughout the entire year. We receive newsletters about retreats and workshops coming up. When we receive the summer convention information in January, there is a tangible excitement in our youth group. All would love to go, and hope to be able to.

This year’s theme for the summer convention was “Rooted In Christ” with the verse taken from Jeremiah 17: 7-8: “But blessed is the man who trusts in the Lord, and whose hope is the Lord. For he shall be like a tree planted by the waters, which spread out its roots by the river, and will not fear when heat comes; but its leaf will be green, and will not be anxious in the year of drought, nor will cease from yielding fruit.”

The conventions are organized by a committee. From the beginning of registration to the final farewell of the week, each convention runs like clockwork (at least, it looks that way). These members are constantly on the go making

sure everything runs smoothly. They watch over the workshops, main sessions, music, food, housing, and so much more.

The committee members really do take their RYS commitment to heart. They are all volunteers, serving for three years. They truly have a heart for youth to dedicate three years to setting up the conventions. These committee members also usually serve as sponsors for their own church youth groups. We have witnessed their dedication in the last three years of attending conventions with our youth group.

To Parents: what spiritual goals do you have for your young teenager? To Sponsors: what are the spiritual goals for your youth groups? Where can our youth go to meet with other young people of like-minded faith? Where can our youth go to gather with other Christian young people from all over the United States, Canada, and the world to broaden their horizons as to what God is doing in other areas--not just their own lives and families?

We live in a culture that idolizes self-absorption. To come apart

from that for just one week during the summer, and a weekend during the school year, to study God’s Word and grow deeper in our faith is such an important thing to do. Though we chaperoned our youth to these events, we also learned a lot and were convicted just as much, if not more, to what the Lord calls us to be and do.

Get involved with RYS! Statistics have shown that a large percentage of our youth, once finished with four years of college, do not continue in the faith. We know and have studied the sovereignty of God, but we also have the blessed responsibility to pass on the faith to our children and youth. We are to train them and encourage them to come alongside us and work in Christ’s Kingdom. RYS does a great job in helping us do that.

Christian Renewal Celebrates Twenty-five Years of Publication

Christian Renewal began on October 11, 1982 with a five team editor board consisting of J. D. Hellinga, J. B. Hulst, T. Plantinga, J. Tuininga, and H. Vander Goot. The current editor, John Van Dyke, came on board in 1984 and gradually was granted the responsibility for the complete content and direction of the magazine.

Within a few years, *Christian Renewal* began addressing issues within the Christian Reformed Church as the denomination began drifting towards feminism and theistic evolution. Along with ecclesiastical issues, *Christian Renewal* kept an eye on world issues such as the New Age Movement, the AIDS crisis, and much more.

The Board of Reformed Fellowship extends its congratulations to the *Christian Renewal* in achieving this milestone. We are thankful for the contributions the magazine has made to the Church of Jesus Christ. May the Lord continue to bless the endeavors of the *Christian Renewal* in her work for the Church.

Reformed Fellowship Annual Meeting

Friday October 12
Trinity United Reformed Church
7350 Kalamazoo Ave. SE - Caledonia, Michigan

Dr. Robert Godfrey, speaker Calvin at 500: Did He Succeed?

- 6 PM— punch bowl
- 6:30— dinner (\$8.50 per person)
- 7:15— annual membership meeting and election of board members
- 8:00— mass meeting in the sanctuary

For reservations call 616-532-8510 or email
office@reformedfellowship.net
The Mass Meeting is free and open to the public
a free will offering will be recieved

Reformed Fellowship Announces Our Third Annual Essay Contest

Three Categories:

High School
College
Adult

1st Prize: \$200

2nd Prize: \$150

3rd Prize: \$100

All other entries we publish
will receive at least \$25

Contest Rules:

1. Manuscripts will be judged on spiritual insight, relevance to modern life, and style.
2. Manuscripts must include author's name, address, age, and school currently attending, if applicable.
3. Manuscripts should be a minimum of 1,500 words and not exceed 4,000 words.
4. Authors may send more than one manuscript. Only one prize will be granted per writer.
5. Manuscript must be original material.
6. Author must guarantee that their manuscript contains no copyright material without receiving full permission for its use.
7. Manuscripts must be received by the editor by January 15, 2008.
8. Manuscripts are preferred on disc in Microsoft Works or Rich Text Format or emailed to wymbkath@juno.com. If no computer is available, send manuscript to Rev. W. H. Oord, 7724 Hampton Oaks, Portage, MI, 49024.
9. Manuscripts become the property of Reformed Fellowship and will not be returned.
10. Regular contributors and family of Board members are not eligible.
11. By submitting a manuscript, all contributors accept the rules and conditions of this contest.

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