

December 2007 • Volume 57 • Issue 11

The Outlook



Dedicated to the Exposition and Defense of the Reformed Faith



- ◆ Why a King Failed ◆ What is Reformed Worship (VII) ◆ Looking Out and About ◆ Bible Studies on Joseph & Judah
- ◆ The Tenth Plague: The Sound of the Final Note ◆ Book Review ◆ Index 2007

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(ISSN 8750-5754) (USPS 633-980)
"And the three companies blew the trumpets...and held THE TORCHES in their left hands, and THE TRUMPETS in their right hands. . .and they cried, "The sword of Jehovah and of Gideon."
(Judges 7:20).

Journal of Reformed Fellowship, Inc.

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The Outlook (USPS 633-980) is published monthly by Reformed Fellowship, Inc. (except July-August combined) for \$25.00 per year (foreign subscribers please remit payment in US Funds). Unless a definite request for discontinuance is received, it is assumed that the subscriber wishes the subscription to continue without the formality of a renewal order and he will be billed for renewal. Anyone desiring a change of address should notify the business office as early as possible in order to avoid the inconvenience of delayed delivery. Zip Code should be included. Periodicals postage paid at Grandville, MI and an additional office. POSTMASTER: Send address changes to *The Outlook*, 3363 Hickory Ridge Ct., Grandville, MI 49418; OR in Canada to *The Outlook*, P.O. Box 39, Norwich, Ontario NO1J0. Registered as International Publications Contract #40036516 at Norwich, Ontario.

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Why a King Failed

And he said, "Hear ye now, O house of David; Is it a small thing for you to weary men, but will you weary my God also? Therefore the Lord Himself will give you a sign: Behold, a virgin shall conceive, and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel." Isaiah 7:13, 14

Eight hundred years before Christ was born, a small summit conference was being held in Jerusalem between Judah's king and God's prophet. King Ahaz and the prophet Isaiah were discussing the nation's terrible plight. The king had to make a decision. It was a decision that would affect the lives of every person in Palestine, not only for a few years or decades, but, as history reveals, for thousands of years. History rarely forces a ruler to make a decision as momentous as the one Ahaz had before him.

King Ahaz was confronted with a severe crisis. The king of Israel and the king of Syria, the two kingdoms north of Judah, had banded together. They wanted to kill King Ahaz and set up a puppet king they could control in his place. These kings had not yet been successful in their attempts at overthrowing King Ahaz, but they followed the old axiom: "If at first you don't succeed, try, try again." This time they were more powerful than ever. Humanly speaking the odds were not in favor of King Ahaz, and he was well aware of it.

The continual invasion of Judah by two foreign armies had given the nation a bad case of the jitters. Although Jerusalem had not been captured, the land had been invaded. When the king and his people heard that war had broken out yet again, they were filled with fear.

The prophet of God came to the king and offered him immense comfort. Isaiah told King Ahaz that he had nothing to fear because the armies could not defeat him. He had God's own promise to that effect. Hearing this should have given the king peace of mind, but Ahaz was anything but comforted by Isaiah's news. He remained a troubled king.

The Unwanted Sign

All of this set the stage for the summit between Judah's king and God's prophet. Isaiah came to the king with a message from God: Ask for a sign. God had graciously sought to give the king all the assurance he would need that Jerusalem would not be conquered. All would be well if Ahaz would stand firm in his faith and trust God to defeat the enemy for him.

"Ask anything!" Isaiah says. After all, the request was going to the almighty, sovereign, covenant God. The One being asked was the great Creator of heaven and earth who had called all nations into being and who had set Ahaz on the throne. It was a blank check and Jehovah had signed it! All Ahaz had to do was write in the amount—any amount—and God would honor it.

King Ahaz could have asked for his eyes be opened so that he could see the armies of God even as an earlier prophet had opened the

eyes of his servant so that he could see the armies of God. King Ahaz could have asked to speak with one of his ancestors, perhaps asking David for battle strategy or Solomon for wisdom. He could have asked anything to assure him that the armies of the invading kings would not, indeed, could not, prevail. Yet, Ahaz refused.

His response sounds so pious. He replies, "I will not ask, neither will I tempt the Lord." It is, however, a far from holy answer. King Ahaz had already made up his mind and was not about to be turned away from the decision that he had made. This earthly king rebuffed the sovereign God saying, in essence, "I do not need your sign. As a matter of fact, I do not need you. I can get out of this mess by myself."

Then the anger of the Lord comes through the prophet Isaiah. He says, "Hear ye now, O house of David; Is it a small thing for you to weary men, but will you weary my God also? Therefore the Lord Himself will give you a sign." Whether Ahaz wants it or not, God will give him a sign. The king may have his mind made up, but God is still in control and when the Almighty is determined to act, no king can refuse Him! And this shall be the sign: "Behold, a virgin shall conceive, and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel."

Immanuel for Ahaz

Too often, when we read this passage, the idea is stressed that it is an announcement of a virgin birth. In the Hebrew, the word so often translated as "virgin" can also be translated as "young maiden." We

translate it today as “virgin” because we read back into the text our knowledge of Christ, the Son of God, born of the virgin, Mary.

When Isaiah spoke, his usage of the word may well have meant “virgin,” but the word King Ahaz received in his mind was “young maiden.” To Ahaz, this really was no extraordinary sign. A young woman was to give birth? Big deal. It happened every day in the city. Except for the name of the baby, everything else appeared normal to King Ahaz.

To Isaiah, not only was the virgin birth unique, so was the name being given to the child. As a matter of fact, the baby’s name is the key to the sign. His name shall be “Immanuel” meaning “God with us.” The baby’s name should have told King Ahaz that God would be with him during this national crisis if only the king would trust Him. It was God’s way of saying to King Ahaz that he had nothing to fear.

The sign came with both a promise and a warning. The king is told that before this child would reach the age when he could tell right from wrong, the two kingdoms that threatened Jerusalem would be destroyed. In a short time the fearsome danger that hung over Judah like a black cloud would be blown away. That was the good news; the short-range forecast of this sign.

The long-range forecast was not so good. Terrible years would follow for King Ahaz and his people because of his refusal to trust completely in God. The sign indicated that a different nation would lay Judah low; not Syria or Israel, but Assyria.

That was quite a statement for the prophet to make at this summit conference. How could he possibly have known that King Ahaz had already made up his mind to strike up a bargain with Assyria to help Judah fight these two nations currently attacking him? Ahaz had been warned: God knew his plans.

At the summit’s end, the king still had a decision to make. A national crisis confronted him. What made this crisis so severe was that he would not trust God’s sign. The threat from the north was more real to him than the promise of God. Taking a large sum of money gathered from the national treasury and from the temple treasury, King Ahaz went to the emperor of Assyria and asked him to save him from the armies of Syria and Judah.

In response, the emperor marched out with his massive army and wiped out the two oppressing armies. In the short run, Ahaz’s strategy worked out just fine; but in the long run it backfired. The time came when the emperor of Assyria wondered if there was any more money in the treasuries of Judah. He took the same massive army that brought relief to Judah and forced Judah to become a vassal state to Assyria. From that time on Judah had been under foreign domination. King Ahaz has been called the Judas of the Old Testament because he sold out his country. Because King Ahaz would not accept God’s sign, he had to accept God’s judgment.

Emmanuel for Us

Over eight hundred years later, a couple got married. The young woman was expecting a baby and

the young man was not the father. Instead, the Holy Spirit of God had created this life within the womb of the young girl. Matthew writes, “Now all this was done, that it might be fulfilled which was spoken of the Lord by the prophet, saying, ‘Behold a virgin shall be with child, and shall bring forth a son, and they shall call his name Emmanuel, which being interpreted is God with us’” (Matthew 1:22, 23).

It is at this point that the words of Isaiah become important to us. In Matthew 1, the sign that God gave to King Ahaz becomes the sign that God gives to us. Emmanuel still means “God with us.” The little child whose birth we celebrate this month is God with us. That is the good news that arches over all human history like a rainbow: God with us. We are not orphans; we are not forsaken or forlorn; we are not destined to be fugitives from God. He has promised to save us, and the sign of His presence is the Son of God breaking into human history at Bethlehem.

Do not take this part of the miracle of Christmas for granted. It boggles the mind to think that the infinite Creator of this vast universe—the edges of which have not yet been discovered—has chosen to make His home with us. Scripture asks, “Is anything too hard for God?” Mary asked a similar question when told she would become the virgin mother of God’s own son, “How can this be?” The answer given by the angel: “With God nothing is impossible.”

The worst thing that could ever happen to us would be for God to separate Himself from us, no longer being our Emmanuel. The results

would be devastating, even as they were for King Ahaz. He lost everything. When the prophet Isaiah met the king at the beginning of their summit, he said, "Ask the Lord your God for a sign."

Ahaz refused. Isaiah responded by saying, "Will you try the patience of my God?" Not "your God" as before but "my God." That subtle change indicated that the Lord had removed His grace from Ahaz. The king had alienated himself and his house from God. He traded the comfort of God's presence for the protection of Assyria. He thought he had a better deal and lost everything.

Emmanuel is God's gift to you in Jesus Christ. In this season and always, may God's presence give you the comfort that escaped King Ahaz.

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

Looking Out and About

• On Sunday, October 21, 2007, the United Reformed Church of Allendale, Michigan held its final services. Their pastor, Rev. Mark Zylstra, who served the congregation since 1999, is being granted emeritation and is moving to Welland, Ontario, Canada. Organized in 1992, the congregation was also faithfully served by the late Rev. Clarence Werkema from 1992-1996.

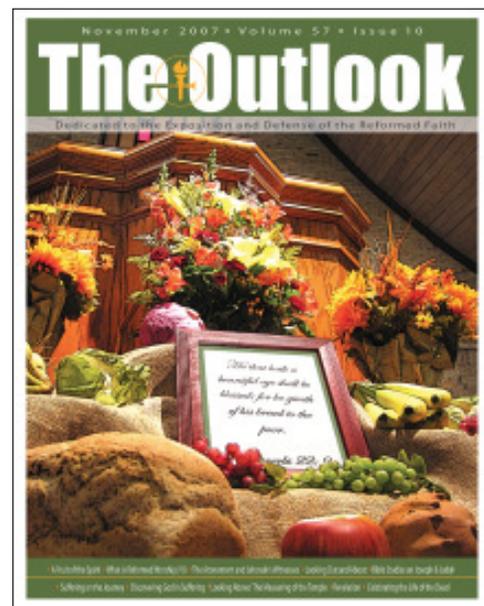
• Rev. and Mrs. Edward J. Knott were honored following the morning service at the Bethany United Reformed Church of Wyoming, Michigan on October 21, 2007 upon the occasion of the sixtieth anniversary of Rev. Knott's ordination. Rev. Knott was actively involved in the organization of the United Reformed Churches in North America and also served as one of the

founders of Mid-America Reformed Seminary. For a number of years Rev. Knott was the president of Reformed Fellowship. Rev. Knott remains active as a preacher and teacher and also serves as the Chairman of the Song Book Committee of the URCNA.

• Rev. Ralph A. Pontier, who has served as pastor of the Redeemer United Reformed Church, Orange City, Iowa since its organization in 1994, has accepted the call extended to him by the Emmanuel United Reformed Church of Neerlandia, Alberta, Canada.

• The Godwin Heights Christian Reformed Church of Wyoming, Michigan celebrated its eightieth anniversary at the morning service of October 28, 2007. This service also served as the last service of the church.

OOPs!! We put the wrong cover on our November issue. Here is what it was supposed to look like.



What is Reformed Worship? (VII)

It is Liturgical

In most evangelical Protestant circles “liturgy” is a four-letter word, at worst; and a “Catholic” word, at best. If you want to silence a crowd fellowshiping over coffee after a service, just say, “I really wish we had some liturgy here at the church.”

In reality, this word is neither Roman Catholic nor a bad one. It is a biblical word. Our English word “liturgy” comes from the ancient and biblical Greek words *leitourgia* (n.) and *leitourgein* (v.). These words speak generally of any kind of “service” (Phil. 2:17, 30; 2 Cor. 9:12), but when used in a religious sense they carry the idea of the official religious “service” of the priests and of Christ as our great High Priest (Num. 8:22, 16:9, 18:4; Luke 1:23; Heb. 9:21).

Biblically speaking, liturgy is religious service. What is most amazing is that liturgy is primarily Christ’s “service” to us as He summons us before His presence to bestow upon us His gifts and graces in Word and Sacrament. In response to His service to us, liturgy is also our service of thanksgiving to Him when we come together to serve the Lord in His house. It is this covenantal activity of Christ serving us and our serving Him that we normally think of as a “liturgy,” or, “order of service.”

What this means is that every church that has ever existed engages in liturgy in the service of worship. Whether a church has a

structured or a loose service, or whether a liturgy is printed in the bulletin or not, all churches follow some sort of liturgy every time they meet to worship. Even the free-style “Spirit-led” services and the “revival” services follow a predictable pattern.

The question before us, then, is not whether we have a liturgy, but whether we are faithful to the pattern exemplified in the Scriptures as we seek to worship the Father in “spirit and truth” (John 4:24). Let us seek the best possible liturgy, biblically, that will bring glory to God and comfort to the believer.

Is Liturgy Lazy?

This is particularly important since one of the idols of our culture and churches is that in order for something to be sincere it must be informal and spontaneous. Yet, the heavenly scene of worship in Revelation 4 explodes this as idolatry. We follow a set form and pattern in our weekly worship because the Church in heaven worships in a liturgical way with set responses and songs to the One upon the throne and to the Lamb:

And whenever the living creatures give glory and honor and thanks to him who is seated on the throne, who lives forever and ever, the twenty-four elders fall down before him who is seated on the throne and worship him who lives forever and ever. They cast their

crowns before the throne, saying, “Worthy are you, our Lord and God, to receive glory and honor and power, for you created all things, and by your will they existed and were created.” (Rev 4:9–11)

Revelation is filled with liturgical songs and material from the Old and New Testaments. Furthermore, the Psalms themselves are formal prayers and songs. In describing the worship of the Jewish synagogue and its liturgy, one writer said, “The prayers were set in such a form that all could take part in their recitation.” Biblical and Reformed worship is not lazy, but it is *common* worship in which we all actively join together with one voice.

What about the repetitiveness of liturgy, which leads to heartless recitation? In the words of Anglican minister Peter Toon,

Familiarity with them [set prayers] increases their usefulness as the content of the human response to God’s gracious invitation to draw near to Him and behold His glory. If they are learned of by heart then each day as they are prayed the mind is able both to see and pour into them ever deeper meaning, the affections are able to be raised in delight, peace and love towards God, while the will is moved in resolve to obey God at all times.

What is the Purpose of a Biblically Reformed Liturgy?

By placing an abundance of Scripture before us in an orderly, meaningful, and intelligible way, a liturgy

focuses our minds and hearts upon the glory of God in Jesus Christ, while taking our minds and hearts off our selfish selves. Reformed liturgy gets our focus not just off ourselves but also off this sin-torn world and onto the hope of the life to come. In worship, we get a foretaste of heaven, as we gather around the throne of grace and cast ourselves before our Triune God that He might raise us up. As pilgrims awaiting our heavenly homeland, we come to worship acknowledging with Augustine, “Thou hast made us for Thyself and restless is our heart until it comes to rest in Thee.”

The Basic Flow

The heart of the liturgy is the Word and Sacraments, which have been the two defining marks of Christian worship since the earliest of days. The service of the Word was derived from the synagogue, with Scripture readings, singing, prayers, confession of faith, alms, and the sermon. The service of the Lord’s Supper was derived from the Upper Room commandment of our Lord, which included prayer and singing. This pattern is expressed in Exodus 24:1-11: God calls Moses and the people to the foot of the mountain; the book of the covenant is read; a sacrificial act ratifying the covenant was performed and a meal was eaten before the LORD; and the people were sent forth. This pattern of entering, hearing, eating, and

sending is laid out in Scripture, testified to by the ancient Church, and was followed in the Reformation.

This basic pattern is illustrated in Isaiah 6. In this familiar story, Isaiah first draws near to the LORD (vv. 1–7). He sees the LORD on a throne, high and lifted up in transcendent glory, and is filled with awe because the LORD is “holy, holy, holy.” This moves him to recognize his own unholiness. He is not even worthy to stand in the LORD’s presence as he says, “Woe is me!” He confesses his sins in expectation of receiving forgiveness, and the LORD responds in grace by sending an angel to purge his guilt and sin. After entering and being cleansed he hears the voice of the LORD (vv. 8–13). The LORD himself preaches his Word to Isaiah and gives him the message he is to speak to the nations.

Since we participate in this liturgy weekly, it is imperative for us to understand and believe what we are doing, as the following summary of the basic flow of our liturgy hopes to do.

Entering

The liturgy begins as we enter the presence of our Triune God (Cf. Lev. 10:1-3; Ps. 73:25-28; Eph. 2:13-21; Heb. 4:14-16, 7:11-28, 10:19-25). We who have already been “brought near by the blood of Christ” (Eph. 2:13) now “have access in one Spirit to the Father”

(Eph. 2:18) to “draw near to the throne of grace” (Heb. 4:16).

As we stand in the presence of this Triune God, He speaks and invites us into His heavenly, royal presence with the call to worship. The call to worship is God’s summoning of His church, His “called out ones” (Greek, *ekklesia*), from the world and into His presence to participate in the worship of heaven. The call to worship expresses the otherworldliness of worship, and that worship is like a foreign language we must learn.

In God’s greeting, the Lord welcomes us into His presence through the voice of the minister (Rev. 1:4–5; 1 Tim. 1:2; Jude 1–2). The greeting is God’s promise of grace. As our Triune God invites us into heaven in the liturgy, what have we to offer in response? Surely not our good works, for they are filthy rags; surely not our treasures, for he owns the cattle on a thousand hills. What then? The Lord wants us; he wants our bodies “as a living sacrifice” (Rom. 12:1). He wants a “sacrifice of thanksgiving” (Ps. 50:14; Heb. 13:15).

To do this we sing the ancient Psalms of the Old Testament since we are “the Israel of God” (Gal. 6:16), and we praise God with the great hymns of the Faith, whether old or new, in order to express ourselves in heartfelt song to the Lord. The issue of what to sing in worship has, in recent years, been falsely distinguished as contemporary versus traditional songs.

As we come before our great God and praise Him, we are also struck with His holy majesty. As God speaks in the reading of the Law,

In worship, we get a foretaste of heaven, as we gather around the throne of grace and cast ourselves before our Triune God that He might raise us up.

The call to worship expresses the otherworldliness of worship and that worship is like a foreign language we must learn.

we recognize that He is holy and that we are sinful. The law exposes us for who we truly are, “Wretched man that I am” (Rom. 7:24).

After reading the Law, the minister exhorts us to turn in heartfelt repentance towards the God who “does not despise the humble sacrifices of a broken spirit, a broken and a contrite heart” (Ps. 51:17). We are commanded by God to confess our sins all throughout Scripture (e.g., Ps. 51; 1 John 1:9). As well, the examples of the saints, such as Isaiah 6, teach us that when we draw near to God we must confess ourselves to be unworthy. When we make confession, whether the minister prays, the congregation prays in unison, or we sing a Psalm of penitence, it is *our* confession.”

While the Law shows “the greatness of my sin and misery” (Heidelberg Catechism, Q&A 2), the Gospel declares to us that God, in His Son, Jesus Christ, has satisfied for our sins. The minister then pronounces the good news, that “Christ has redeemed us from the curse of the law, having become a curse for us” (Gal. 3:13). He then applies that promise, saying in effect, “To all of you who have repented of your sins and trust in Jesus Christ, I declare to you, in the name of Christ and by the authority of His Word, that all your sins are forgiven, and that you are no longer under the condemnation of God.”

The minister’s authority to declare us forgiven comes from such texts as Matthew 18:18 and John 20:23, in which Jesus gives his representatives “the keys of the kingdom” (Heidelberg Catechism, Q&A 83-85). This declaration is an application of the ministry of the Word; therefore, as a key, it opens the doors of the kingdom of heaven to those who believe and closes them to those who continue to live in rebellion and unbelief.

Hearing

The entire liturgy is a “service of the Word,” but it is in this particular part of the liturgy that we pause and reflect upon what the Word is teaching us as God’s people.

We often begin with a prayer for illumination, asking for the grace and power of the Holy Spirit to illumine our blind eyes, dark hearts, and stubborn will, that we might understand the Lord’s Word (Ps. 119:18; Eph. 1:17–18; Col. 1:9). Why do we need the illumination of our spiritual eyes? The answer is that even as Christians, sin blurs our understanding.

From the time of the Jewish synagogue and through the days of the apostles, the reading of the Scriptures as an act of public worship has always been a central concern. In the Scripture reading, whether we read both an Old and New Testament text, or just one text, we are doing what Paul instructed Timothy

to do in publicly reading the Word in the assembled congregation (1 Tim. 4:13). The Old Testament promises Jesus Christ in types and shadows. The New Testament reveals to us Jesus Christ and His work on our behalf. “Thanks be to God!”

The sermon is the preaching of the Word and is the primary “means of grace” for God’s children. This means that God’s Word explained and applied to us is the very Word that creates and confirms faith in our hearts. Here we are like the Old Covenant people of God at the foot of the mountain hearing God’s voice. But instead of an earthly mountain, Hebrews 12 states that we are at the foot of the heavenly Mount Zion, hearing the very words of Christ himself. Listening intently, then, is of the utmost importance.

What is preaching supposed to be about? Biblical preaching, which was rediscovered by the Protestant Reformers, is Christ-centered. Paul confirms this in 1 Corinthians 1:17-2:5 when he states: “But we preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles” (1:23 cf. Col. 1:28).

Eating

Having fed us with His precious promises audibly, Christ feeds us with the same promises visibly in the sacrament of the Lord’s Supper as often as we celebrate it. As the Table is spread in the wilderness, all are warned that it is not for everyone, but is a sacred meal intended only for the covenant community. To partake of the bread and wine in unbelief is to bring judgment down upon oneself. For this reason, the minister issues a warning, sometimes called the “fencing of the

table.” After this warning he invites the people to God to “taste and see that the Lord is good” (Ps. 34:8).

Paul’s “Words of Institution” from 1 Corinthians 11:23-26 are then read. These words relate the tradition of communion that our Lord instituted before His crucifixion. They focus our hearts on what the Lord’s Supper is all about: God feeding us with His grace in Christ. In applying these words the minister briefly explains to the congregation what communion is. The language of “remembrance” has to do not with mere intellectual memory, but with experiencing what God has done and continues to do.

The prayer that follows has been called the “prayer of consecration,” not because we expect the bread and wine to be transformed into the body and blood of Christ, but that the Holy Spirit would come upon us and lift us up to feed upon Christ in heaven by faith.

We then recite the Word in a corporate declaration of our common faith. We do this because we are a body united. Just as there is one loaf, so too there is one Church (1 Cor. 10:17). As well, we confess our common faith because Jesus said, “Everyone who acknowledges me before men, I will also acknowledge before my Father who is in heaven” (Matt. 10:32). In confession of faith we “offer up a sacrifice of praise to God, that is, the fruit of lips that acknowledge his name” (Heb. 13:15). We use one of the ancient ecumenical creeds of the Church, the *Apostles’ Creed* or *Nicene Creed*. These have been confessed and used as summaries of the Faith by all branches of the Church in every century, in every

place. In the Apostles’ Creed we make a personal affirmation of our faith as we say, “I believe.” In the Nicene Creed the “faith once for all delivered to the saints” (Jude 3) is expressed in the corporate, “We believe.”

The Scriptures give no detailed description of the manner in which the Lord’s Supper was practiced. Even so, we are commanded to celebrate it. The way in which we receive the bread and wine (coming forward, sitting at tables, remaining in the pews) is indifferent.

***Listening intently is
of the utmost
importance.***

God has not only given us His Word but He has given us the sacraments. In the preached Word the Gospel comes from the mouth of the minister, but in the visible Word it comes from His hand. In the preached Word we are called to believe in Jesus Christ, but in the visible Word we are called to receive him. In preaching we hear the Word, but in the sacraments we experience with all our senses the grace of Christ: “Taste and see that the LORD is good” (Ps. 34:8). In the preached Word Christ promises us that our souls are in His hand, but how much more so in the visible Word, with this minister actually standing before us!

Sending

We conclude our worship as we are sent back into the world to be its salt and light. Again, we lift our voices in a brief, triumphant song of praise to our Triune God, who has called us, met with us, and fed us in worship. Then, God gets the final word as He pronounces His benediction upon us (Num. 6:24–26; 2 Cor. 13:14).

In understand the liturgy as a covenantal activity, a greeting at the beginning of the service and a benediction at the end signifies that it is God who has brought us out of the land of Egypt (Ex. 20:2) and who will be with us unto the end of the age (Matt. 28:20).

Why do we respond “Amen” so many times in worship? Simply, because it is the most fitting biblical response we can give. The word means, “This is true.” We find it on the lips of God’s people throughout the Bible. Psalm 106 commands, “Let all the people say, ‘Amen’” (v. 48). In 1 Corinthians 14, when Paul speaks about “tongues,” asks, “How can anyone in the position of an outsider say ‘Amen’ to your thanksgiving when he does not know what you are saying?” (v. 16) “This is true” is an apt response to the Word we have heard and tasted during the service.

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Bible Studies on Joseph and Judah

Lesson 7: Joseph Interprets Pharaoh's Dreams

Read Genesis 41:1-36

Introduction

Joseph had received revelation and understanding from God for the dreams of the chief cupbearer and the chief butler. Joseph wants out of prison, and he asks the cupbearer to take his appeal to Pharaoh himself. But nothing happens for two full years. God is with Joseph, it is true, but Joseph must learn patience through what he suffers. Dreams have brought Joseph trouble, but they also provided a means to impress two royal officials in prison about Joseph's abilities. More dreams are on the way in this chapter. At one level, the dreams of Pharaoh, the ruler over Egypt, will confirm the dreams that Joseph had when he was 17 years old. By interpreting Pharaoh's dreams, Joseph will show that he can rule and have authority in Egypt, for "the Spirit of God" is with him. The prophetic dreams of Genesis 37 are about to be fulfilled.

Impossible dreams of cows and grain (41:1-8)

We know that the Pharaoh was only a man, merely a particular human being who ruled ancient Egypt. But the Egyptians viewed him much differently. The ancient Egyptian religion and worldview held that Pharaoh had a very special relationship to all the other gods and goddesses. In fact, they believed that Pharaoh was a living god, the deity Horus incarnate, and that Pharaoh

was the figure who held the nation together and provided it with order. As the French king Louis XIV would later boast, "I am the state," so too the Pharaoh was the heart of the Egyptian state, it was believed. For him to have a troubling dream would have disturbed all in his court. Added to this was their belief that dreams must have some meaning, and if the meaning of any dream is unknown, this could develop into a small-time crisis for the Egyptian monarch.

But Pharaoh is only a man, a human who has dreams as we all do. In one night he has two dreams. The first dream has seven healthy cows coming out of the Nile River. Cows in Egypt would often graze in the reed grasses by the river, sometimes going partially into the water to cool off and escape pesky insects. This Pharaoh sees. But then something disturbing occurs in the dream: seven ugly and thin cows come up after the others, and they devour the good cows. As anyone of us can attest, when a troubling or violent thing happens in our dreams, we may be jolted awake. Pharaoh wakes up.

But the night is not over. He dozes off into sleep, only to have a second dream with many elements parallel to the first dream. This time it is not fat and thin cows; instead it is seven plump and seven blighted heads of grain. And again, as in the first dream, the thin, blighted heads of grain devour the seven good heads

of grain. Pharaoh is again startled awake, only to realize that he has had another disturbing dream. We generally forget our dreams (at least I do!); they somehow rarely write themselves onto our memory "hard drive." But Pharaoh remembers them quite well. They have troubled him.

Pharaoh, thought to be a living "god," cannot explain his own dreams. He has magicians and wise men as religious experts in his court. He tells them his two dreams, and his religious experts with all their wisdom and cleverness are not able to interpret the dreams either. The entire Egyptian court is still in the dark; their achievements in religious studies and Egyptian theology have provided them with no help to solve the riddle of dreams about cannibal cows and thin heads of grain. Ph.D.'s in "dreamology" are not going to provide any answers this time around. All the wise men and magicians are stumped!

Now the cupbearer remembers Joseph (41:9-13)

This pathetic little "crisis" over two dreams now jolts the cupbearer's memory, and he steps forward to confess his shortcomings (literally, "my sins"), namely, he had met Joseph two years earlier, a Hebrew slave who actually explained his own dream in a most accurate way. But after he had been released the cupbearer had said nothing about Joseph! In describing Joseph to Pharaoh the cupbearer does not even name him (did he completely forget his name? did he so disdain this "young Hebrew" that he could

not even be bothered with his name?). Since we readers are “all-knowing” (in a literary sense), we already know from Genesis 40 that the LORD is with Joseph and that He provides him with the proper interpretation. Pharaoh is about to learn who Joseph is; we readers already know him.

Joseph: from internment to interpreter (41:14-36)

Pharaoh, eager to know what his dreams mean, orders Joseph to be brought before him. However, before Joseph could ever hope to come before a “living god,” he must be properly prepared. Things move fast now as Joseph is quickly brought (literally, “made to run”) from the pit. His body and head are shaved (the Egyptians were a bit fanatical about cleanliness), and a fresh change of clothes is given to him. Psalm 105:20 says, “The king sent and released him, the ruler of peoples set him free.”

Pharaoh tells this young man, just fresh out of the royal dungeon, that he has heard that Joseph is able to interpret dreams. Joseph’s response is quite striking: “Not I! It is God who will give Pharaoh the answer that explains what his dream means.” Whatever else Joseph has learned in prison, he continues to remember and believe that he is a child of God, that God has all the answers, and that God must be given the full credit that He deserves. One might say that Joseph embraces the life motto, “*Soli Deo Gloria* – to God be the glory alone!” Joseph could have said, “Yes, I have insight into dreams.” But he stays true to his earlier confession when he had said to the chief cupbearer and the chief baker

that interpretations belong to God (see Gen. 40:8).

Pharaoh relates his dreams to Joseph, and he does so with some embellishment. Probably the most notable item that is added is that after the lean, ugly cows devour the fat cows, the lean cows are just as lean and ugly as before. In other words, once the lean years are past, Egypt’s resources will be largely spent.

Joseph then interprets. Now, we must remember that a (royal) prophet must be accurate: Joseph would have forfeited his life had he been wrong. The dreams are in fact “the same” (41:25,26). The fact that there were two dreams is significant (41:32): God has confirmed the message with “two witnesses” in order to help establish the truth being communicated in the dreams (as He had done in Joseph’s dreams in Genesis 37). All of this discredits the magicians and wise men of Egypt: it is not that they have a “wrong” interpretation of Pharaoh’s dreams; they have no answer at all. They are completely clueless! God’s ways have put to shame the wisdom of this world, just as God’s grace may appear to be foolishness to the world. In fact it is wiser and more powerful than anything this present evil age has to offer (cf. 1 Cor. 1:18ff.).

But Joseph is not finished speaking. In a rather bold move, he goes on to tell Pharaoh what course of action

he should take. First, appoint a wise man to be in charge of Egypt. Second, Pharaoh should appoint commissioners to take a fifth of all harvests during the years of plenty and store all this food in the various cities of Egypt. Joseph has in mind the well-being of the country. A wise ruler knows that a hungry citizenry can easily turn into an angry, even revolutionary, mob. Remember the cry of the mobs during the Bolshevik revolution in Russia was, “Peace, land, and bread!” Joseph is thinking about the well-being of the Egyptian people, for in their well-being the Pharaoh could experience stability in his reign.

Joseph in Egypt, Daniel in Babylon

Many Bible readers have seen parallels in what happens to Joseph here and what happens to Daniel later during the Exile in Babylon. Both men are taken in their youth against their wills to foreign lands, there to be exploited by pagans. Joseph is sold as a slave, and Daniel (with his three friends) would be groomed to become a “new man” in Babylon (new name, royal diet, Babylonian education and worldview, etc.). Satan would try his best to crush these young men so that they would not be effective in God’s work. But God was with these godly young men so that in showing obedience and loyalty to this same God, God prospers them in very deliberate and noticeable ways.

Pharaoh is about to learn who Joseph is; we readers already know him.

Allen Ross (*Creation and Blessing*, p. 637) identifies four similarities between Joseph and Daniel:

1. Both men are Hebrew slaves who are summoned before the king to interpret his dream.
2. The king explains that problem of the dream that has eluded the wise men of his court.
3. With God's help, each man interprets the dream of the king.
4. The foreign king elevates the Hebrew in reward for resolving the problem of his dream.

With both Joseph and Daniel, the so-called wisdom of the court magicians and wise men is seen to be foolish and ineffective. God clearly comes out as all-wise and decidedly on the side of His own people, even if they are held captive in a foreign land. God's hand is not shortened; His Word is never bound.

The Pharaoh is being confronted with the Word of God in the mouth of a man of God (Nebuchadnezzar will receive the same, centuries later). Pharaoh might not acknowledge it in the right way. Joseph is virtually the equivalent of the Word of God in the role he plays (see S. de Graaf, *Promise and Deliverance*, I:229). Joseph's promotion paves the way for Israel's "redemption" by a 400+ year sojourn in the land of Egypt. Egypt is not yet an object for conversion or evangelism, but that great day would come later through Christ.

Lesson 7: Points to ponder and discuss

1. Joseph underwent several trials in his life, including his younger years. He was hated by his brothers (nearly killed), sold as a slave, falsely accused by Potiphar's wife and then imprisoned. What are some things that he might have learned in all these trials?
2. God does not give us special revelation via dreams in this redemptive era. How do we gain understanding today in the issues that confront human beings, communities, and nations?
3. James 1:2 tells us to "consider it pure joy... whenever you face trials of many kinds." How can we do that? Do we rejoice in the suffering, *or*, does Scripture tell us to focus on what the Lord is teaching us in the suffering? What are some of the things that James 1:2-4 says Christians may develop in the midst of suffering? How can a believer gain wisdom during his or her sufferings?
4. Read Matthew 2:1-12. King Herod would also be confronted by a revelation from heaven, a star that appears to wise men from the East. Jewish religious leaders will point to the prophecy of Micah to provide some kind of explanation and interpretation. In the dreams to Pharaoh, in the star from the East, and in the Biblical prophecy of Micah, powerful rulers are confronted with the Word of God. How do they respond to that Word? How are their responses different? What are the consequences to their responses?
5. Read 1 Corinthians 1:18-31. How does God make foolish the "wisdom" of Egypt by giving Joseph the interpretation of Pharaoh's dreams? How has God supremely made Jewish desire for signs and Greek interest in wisdom look weak and foolish? Does God *need* the wise, influential, and powerful people in His program? What use does God make of the "foolishness of preaching" (*not*, foolish preaching!)? Where is our true Christian boasting now?
6. Do Christians have a responsibility to address rulers today with God's Word? Why or why not?

Bible Studies on Joseph and Judah

Lesson 8: Joseph Cares for Egypt... and the World

Read Genesis 41:37-57

Introduction

The transition for Joseph in one day is breathtaking. One moment he is still in the royal dungeon of Egypt, and then next moment he is being rushed to get cleaned up and properly clothed in order to stand before Pharaoh. God's timing is not always personally comfortable, but His timing is the best, never too early or too late. God sent the dreams that disturbed the Egyptian king, and God used the occasion to awaken the chief cupbearer's memory concerning a "Hebrew lad" who perfectly interpreted two dreams two years earlier. The spotlight now falls upon Joseph again so that he can be the agent of revelation to the royal pagan court.

Pharaoh is impressed! (41:37-44)

Joseph not only has provided an accurate interpretation of Pharaoh's dreams, but Joseph also gives Pharaoh unsolicited advice about how to guide the nation through the next several years. This defies sense! Who would have thought that a foreigner ("Hebrew"), a youth, someone from the dungeon, serving a sentence for assaulting the wife of a high Egyptian official—who would think that such a person would now be telling a "living god" how to run his country? God's ways are certainly not our ways, but they are amazing to behold! Pharaoh did not have the interpre-

tation to his own dreams, and his magicians and "wise" men did not know what the solution was, but God gave all answers to Joseph. And these pagans recognize that Joseph has spoken with true wisdom.

Pharaoh is led to confess that the "spirit of God" is found in no one else but in Joseph. Pharaoh's advisers are reduced to silence; they are now "dumb" in more ways than one. To Pharaoh, Joseph has the "spirit of God," not in the sense of Holy Spirit, since the Pharaoh is not a Trinitarian. Still, to the New Testament believer, Pharaoh's words resonate on that level: Christian believers know that the Holy Spirit of God is with Joseph to give him understanding of both dreams and insight into a national crisis that will be present in seven years time.

Pharaoh promotes Joseph, putting on him the royal signet ring, fine linen robes (new clothes again!), and a gold chain. He gets his own limousine (actually, a chariot), which Egyptians are obliged to greet with acts of bowing and homage. Pharaoh remains the head of the state, but in fact Joseph is in charge. "Without your word no one will lift hand or foot in all Egypt," Pharaoh tells Joseph (verse 44).

Joseph acquires a family (41:45, 50-52)

Pharaoh is not finished with Joseph. He also renames him with the name Zaphenath-Paneah. While we may

not be certain as to the exact meaning of this name, John Currid (*Genesis*, vol. 2, p. 271) suggests that it means "God speaks and he lives." This probably is to make this young Hebrew more presentable as an Egyptian to the rest of the country. In addition, Pharaoh gives Joseph a wife, Asenath ("she belongs to [goddess] Neith"), a woman taken from the upper ranks of Egyptian society (her father is an Egyptian priest!). Asenath comes from a priestly family in the city of On, where a temple to the sun god Re existed. She probably would not have been Joseph's choice as a wife, and we can only wonder what religious influence he would have on his Egyptian wife. From all that the Bible reveals to us about Joseph, it seems assured that he maintained his faith in the one true God, and doubtless, he testified to Asenath about this true God. Furthermore, since Asenath is the only wife mentioned, we may assume (although we cannot prove it) that Joseph was monogamous (in contrast to his father Jacob).

Within the seven years of bumper crops, Joseph also experiences a good "harvest" in his own marriage. Two sons are born to him and Asenath. Children are truly a heritage of the LORD! The firstborn son is named "Manasseh," a name which sounds like the verb "forget." He says on the occasion of Manasseh's birth and naming, "It is because God has made me forget all my trouble and all my father's household." This son helps Joseph erase some of the pain that he had experienced in Jacob's family. The second son is named "Ephraim," meaning something like "double fruitfulness." He exclaims, "It is

because God has made me fruitful (again!) in the land of my suffering.” Certainly we feel Joseph’s joy in the birth of two sons. From this point on in the Biblical record, Joseph will not experience any more dramatic setbacks, at least nothing on the order of the earlier imprisonments that he had suffered from Israelite or Egyptian alike. He will remain an important official in Egypt until the day he dies, many decades later.

Joseph acquires plenty of food (41:46-49)

Joseph is 30 years old (verse 46) when he is promoted to being vizier, the second in charge of all Egypt, something like a modern-day prime minister. In thirteen years he has gone from being a boy hated by his own brothers, to becoming the functional ruler (under Pharaoh) of the entire land of Egypt! It is not that Joseph is personally clever in escaping trouble: the Lord God was with him, enabling him to escape and to use his God-given talents and wisdom with very powerful effects.

Joseph steps up to the plate as he is assigned a great task, namely, securing the food of Egypt in anticipation of a great period of famine. He travels throughout the entire land of Egypt, becoming familiar with the land, its agriculture, its officials, and its people. He has been assigned high honor, but it does not go to his head in order to inflate his ego.

The seven years of plenty begin. Normally, the seasonal flooding of the Nile River sets up the situations that lead to good years of food production. The flooding deposits rich soil along the Nile banks, enabling fields to produce bumper crops.

What was different now during the seven years of plenty, we cannot be sure. In any case, the food coming in during harvest seasons is overwhelming, “like the sand of the sea,” the same kind of language that God had used to describe the number of children to be given to Abraham and Jacob (see Gen. 22:17 and 32:12). Food harvested near particular cities was stored in those cities. Joseph now gathers the food “beyond measure” (verse 49), so much, in fact, that record-keeping breaks down. But God, who controls the seasons and all

*From this point on
in the Biblical
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harvests, was providing so much grain in these seven years because it would have to be enough to carry Egypt (and many others!) through a seven year period of famine.

In addition, in a world in which public officials are corrupted by money and prestige, using high office to line their own pockets, we may well believe that Joseph did his honest best to make suitable arrangements to store food supplies throughout Egypt. Had he not done his job well, when the famine came to strike the land, there would not have been enough food, and then Joseph would have lost his life. Even in a totalitarian state like an-

cient Egypt, rulers (like Joseph) are servants of the Most High God, ones who must someday give to God an account of their office (see Romans 13:1ff.).

Joseph feeds the world (41:53-57)

The period of famine comes, “just as Joseph had said” (verse 54). This famine is not limited to Egypt, but people are getting hungry everywhere. People cried out for food, but Pharaoh directed people to Joseph. The “living god” can do nothing, but the man of God is in charge. Furthermore, the sense of the wording in verses 56-57 is that Joseph wisely rationed out food to Egyptians and to others who came to Egypt for food. In this way, something of the words of Genesis 12:1-3 are coming true here. God had promised that through the seed of Abram, all the nations of the world will be blessed. A great-grandson of Abram, a young man named Joseph, is bringing physical blessings to many people in his day. This is a sketch, an outline, of what a later Son of Abraham, Jesus Christ, would do in bringing life, abundant life, to all the nations of the world.

Joseph experienced both humiliation and exaltation. By God’s grace alone, he remained faithful to God, who has a great plan that He works out through all the twists and turns of our lives. Our calling is to be faithful to this God and the work that He assigns to us. Joseph becomes responsible for feeding Egypt and later the rest of “the world” (at least, the eastern end of the Mediterranean). God placed Joseph here for the sake of the Lord Jesus Christ and the rescue of God’s

people. Indeed, in so many ways Joseph's life and career anticipate and parallel so much in Christ's own life. His own would not receive him, he is lowered into the pit (like a grave), then raised to rule at the right hand of the authority, in charge of all things so that blessings might be distributed to many. No, Joseph is not Jesus Christ, but God is drawing out a pattern here that we will see fleshed out in fullness and in reality when Jesus Christ comes into this world. For our heavenly Father has given all authority to our risen Lord Jesus Christ (see Matt. 28:18) so that everyone in need might go to Him, and He will tell us what to do (see Gen. 41:55; Matt. 28:18-20).

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Lesson 8: Points to ponder and discuss

1. We love to hear about “rags to riches” stories, about how a person in less than favorable circumstances is able to overcome the odds and rise to success. How is the story of Joseph's appointment as overseer of Egypt *not* just another “rags to riches” story? Does Joseph “succeed” through blind fate or his own cleverness?
2. Joseph not only receives insight from the Lord in order to interpret the dreams, but he also sees what needs to be done for the whole nation. Once appointed second-in-command of Egypt, he gets to work. In this sense, one might call Joseph an “entrepreneur.” Wisdom, coupled with hard work, also belongs to the Christian calling. How can Christians apply Biblical insights and concrete efforts in the area of education today, or business, or politics? How do we pool our resources together for these efforts?
3. Read Psalm 104. What does the Bible teach us about God's providence? See Heidelberg Catechism, Lord's Day 10, and Westminster Confession of Faith, chapter V. How do people today respond to prosperity or to disasters? How do Christians respond to these things, and how should they respond?
4. Through Joseph's efforts, there was food available for the hungry of Egypt and neighboring countries. Does this story teach us that the government is responsible for feeding the hungry when all else fails? Why or why not? What role do God's people have in taking care of the poor and hungry?
5. We know that Daniel later will arouse jealousy and hatred from other royal officials (see Daniel 6). Let's speculate just a little. What do you think may have been the attitude of the Egyptian magicians and “wise men” toward the promotion of this Hebrew young man to second in charge in all Egypt? Were they perhaps afraid of him, jealous of him, in awe of him? If Potiphar and his wife are still living, what must they think? (Remember, we are only speculating...)
6. Joseph shows that he can stay focused on his task, his calling. In Potiphar's house, he is a good and faithful servant, in the prison Joseph is the same, a good and faithful servant. He receives promotion, even though he goes through periods of trouble. Faithfulness results in promotion. Is this something of a fluke, a quirk in God's providence, or is a general biblical principle seen to be at work here? Read Luke 16:10-16: “He who is faithful in little, is faithful also in much.” What do Christians learn here?

The Tenth Plague

The Sound of the Final Note

Exodus 11:1-10

The tenth plague is the last plague in the plague narrative; it follows three series of plagues with three plagues in each series. The first nine plagues belong to the three series of plagues with the tenth plague standing alone. The structure of the text sets the tenth plague apart; there is a parallel relationship between the literary structure of this passage and its theological meaning. The tenth plague carries more theological freight than the other plagues.

In this article we will consider the announcement of the tenth plague, and how God's word ultimately determined what happened in Egypt. This passage is framed around Pharaoh's declaration to Moses, and Jehovah's response to Pharaoh through Moses. In a nutshell this passage is about whose word will prevail: Pharaoh's word or Jehovah's word.

Trying to Silence Jehovah

This was the last time that Moses would appear before Pharaoh. Pharaoh had declared that if Moses appeared before him again he would die. But Pharaoh would not have the last word, Jehovah spoke one more time through His servant Moses. Jehovah told Pharaoh that there would be one more plague. In addition, following this last plague, Pharaoh's officials would appear before Moses, they would bow down before him and they beg Moses to leave Egypt. This set up

the contest between Pharaoh and Jehovah, and whose word will prevail. Who was the true sovereign of Egypt, Pharaoh and the false gods of Egypt or Jehovah?

It is not until Exodus 11:8 that we read "Then Moses, hot with anger, left Pharaoh." Up to this point Moses had been before Pharaoh. As a result, Moses received a prophetic message from Jehovah while he was still standing in the presence of Pharaoh.

The message that Moses received from Jehovah was a response to Pharaoh's declaration. Pharaoh had just declared "Get out of my sight! Make sure you do not appear before me again! The day you see my face you will die." While Moses never appeared before Pharaoh again, it did not prevent Jehovah from saying what needed to be said. It would not prevent Jehovah from executing His judicial plan against Pharaoh. Jehovah responded while Moses was still standing before Pharaoh. Another appearance was not needed. Pharaoh was unsuccessful in his attempt to silence Jehovah and His prophet.

Pharaoh was trying to avoid any further plagues by silencing Moses. In the ancient world, it was thought that if you could silence God's prophet, then God would no longer be able to execute His plan. This is one of the reasons why Israel killed the prophets of God. They falsely believed that if they killed God's mouthpiece, the prophet, then they could circumvent God's judgment.

This was Pharaoh's strategy. Pharaoh was trying to avoid any further plagues by silencing Moses. By limiting his ability to appear before him and threatening him with death if he did come before Pharaoh one more time, Pharaoh was trying to take control of the situation. He was trying to exercise a false sense of sovereignty.

Jehovah Is Not Silenced

Jehovah told Moses what was about to take place: "I will bring one more plague on Pharaoh and on Egypt. After that, he will let you go from here; and when he does, he will drive you out completely. Tell the people that men and women alike are to ask their neighbors for articles of silver and gold." Notice the amount of detail and the confidence of this statement.

The very man that had forbidden Moses to appear before him would soon drive Moses and the people that followed him out of Egypt. It gets even worse for Pharaoh: his own people including his officials would become favorably disposed toward Moses. Clearly, Jehovah ruled over the hearts of the Egyptians, Pharaoh's officials, and Pharaoh's own heart. Not only was Pharaoh not in control of the situation, but he was unable to rule over his own heart.

Verse 3 literally says, "He gave the people grace in the sight of the Egyptians." It is telling that the very people who had been hated and despised by the Egyptians were now respected and honored by them. God was at work, changing the hearts of the Egyptians toward His people, and this change in heart,

allows the Hebrews to plunder Egyptians without crossing swords. The Egyptians willingly gave their wealth to the Hebrews. This illustrates the power of God and the power of His word.

The means whereby God would accomplish this was through the tenth plague. The tenth plague, and for that matter all the plagues, were the result of God's word. In verse 4 Moses spoke using the divine formula, "Thus says Jehovah." Jehovah had put His word in the mouth of His prophet. Moses spoke for Jehovah in the first person. God says, "I am going out" through Egypt. God will go out through Egypt, and He will bring His people with Him.

As a result every firstborn son in the land of Egypt will die, from the first-born of Pharaoh to the first born of the slave girl who labors at the millstone, and the first born of the animals. God will bring a final, horrible plague upon Egypt. It will result in many deaths. All the first-born sons of Egypt will die, including animals, yet not a dog will bark in the land of Goshen.

Anubis, the Egyptian god of the dead, and the embalming god, was personified as a dog. The impotence of Anubis is emphasized by the fact that even the firstborn among the animals will die, yet not a dog among the Hebrews will bark.

If you live around a lot of dogs you know that it is common for dogs to bark at night, yet not a single dog will bark among the Hebrews. This is a picture of peace and tranquility! Contrast it with the worst judgment Egypt could ever experience. The type of quiet, depicted by the silenc-

ing of the dogs, is a picture of comfort. It is a picture of God's salvation. In contrast, the death of the firstborn is a picture of judgment.

Judgment and Comfort

The death of the firstborn is a picture of the final judgment that will take place at the end of this age. In the final judgment, ungodly men and women will be confronted with the awesome presence of God and His justice. They will be doomed for eternity, whereby they are always dying but never annihilated. The type of misery associated with the final judgment is a misery that is

God will go out through Egypt, and He will bring His people with Him.

worse than anything we can imagine. In contrast, the type of peace, fulfillment, and comfort associated with God's salvation is fuller and more satisfying than what we can fully comprehend. Not even a dog will bark. No strangers will be lurking around under the cover of dark, causing your dog to bark. The image is one of peace, and security.

The final plague would result in a great cry throughout the land of Egypt. This great cry was characterized by a plea for help. Egypt would cry out to their gods for help, but their gods will remain silent. The same verb used to describe the Egyptians cry for help is used to express the Hebrews call for help

when they called on Jehovah (2:24). Jehovah heard the call of His people, but the false gods of Egypt were silent and powerless.

The contest between the gods of Egypt and Jehovah included the elements of hearing and the ability to save. Whose god heard the cry of his people and whose god is able to save? Jehovah, the living God, heard the cry of His people and He saved His people. The same God who spoke creation into existence is the same God who ultimately defines reality by the power of His word.

God's sovereign work was accentuated by the fact that Pharaoh's officials would appear before Moses "bowing down before him and saying 'Go, you and all the people who follow you!'" Instead of Moses appearing before Pharaoh, Pharaoh's officials appeared before Moses, assuming a posture of humility and defeat. By bowing down before Moses and pleading with him to leave Egypt, with all the Hebrews, their livestock and the wealth of Egypt, Pharaoh and his officials were acknowledging the awesome power of Jehovah. This picture symbolizes the completeness of God's salvation, and His defeat of His enemies. When God saves He doesn't do it half way; He saves His people in a way that surpasses their expectations.

God rules and sustains all of creation by the power of His word, and His Spirit. The question we need to ask ourselves is a question of faith. When there is a conflict between what you intuitively think is true and what God's word says, in whose word do you trust? Where do you

find comfort? Do you ultimately trust in God's word or do you ultimately trust in some other word?

It is ironic that the Egyptians would cry out to their gods when their gods had failed to save them at every point in the conflict. Not even once did the false gods of Egypt thwart one of the ten plagues. Although Moses and the Hebrews were respected and viewed favorably by this time in the conflict, the Egyptians still refused to acknowledge Jehovah as the one true God. They failed to call upon Jehovah for salvation. Instead of calling upon the one true God, they continued in their folly. This illustrates that apart from God's sovereign mercy all men remain steeped in their ignorance.

Consider the words of Jesus:

"Therefore everyone who hears these words of mine and puts them into practice is like a wise man who built his house on the rock. The rain came down, the streams rose, and the winds blew and beat against that house; yet it did not fall, because it had its foundation on the rock. But everyone who hears these words of mine and does not put them into practice is like a foolish man who built his house on the sand. The rain came down, the streams rose, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell with a great crash." When Jesus had finished saying these things, the

crowds were amazed at his teaching, because he taught as one who had authority, and not as their teachers of the law" (Matthew 7:24-29).

Jesus taught with authority, because He was the self-revelation of God; He was the Word incarnate. According to Jesus there is only one foundation to build upon: it is the word of God. A time is coming when the storms of life will test what you are building upon. Are you building your life upon God's word with Jesus Christ being central to who you are, or is your life built upon some other foundation?

When king David was fleeing for his life, because his son Absalom had organized a coup, and was trying to kill his father, David cried out to God.

"O LORD, how many are my foes! How many rise up against me! Many are saying of me, "God will not deliver him." But you are a shield around me, O LORD; you bestow glory on me and lift up my head. To the LORD I cry aloud, and he answers me from his holy hill. I lie down and sleep; I wake again, because the LORD sustains me. I will not fear the tens of thousands drawn up against me on every side. Arise, O LORD! Deliver me, O my God! Strike all my enemies on the jaw; break the teeth of the wicked. From the LORD comes deliverance. May your blessing be on your people." (Psalm 3:1-8).

David understood that salvation comes from the Lord. Even when his son had become his archenemy, he cried out to the Lord in prayer. David prayed that God might bless His people. Does God's word frame your thinking about life, your own identity, the world, your struggles? Do you look to Christ alone for your salvation, or do you look to Christ plus your own works?

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A Review of James DeJong's *H. J. Kuiper: Shaping the Christian Reformed Church, 1907-1962*

The church of Jesus Christ owes its existence to the saving purpose and work of the Triune God. The Father has purposed to give to His Son a people chosen unto everlasting life. The Son gathers this church to Himself by His Spirit and Word. And the Holy Spirit makes the Word and sacraments effective in the lives of those who are being called into the fellowship of the church. For this reason, the Apostle's Creed includes an article regarding the church ("I believe a holy catholic church"). As an article of faith, what we believe about the church focuses our attention upon what we believe concerning the Triune God.

Though the church of Jesus Christ is entirely the fruit of the work of the Triune God, this does not mean that its story may be told without taking note of those human instruments God uses in building and gathering His people to Himself. In the history of the Christian Reformed Church in North America, for example, it is not difficult to identify the names of those whom the Lord used in an extraordinary way to write the story of this denomination. I was reminded of this again as I read James A. DeJong's recent biography of H. J. Kuiper, one of the most remarkable and influential ministers in the Christian Reformed Church, who served at a particularly important time in its

history. Perhaps more than any other figure in the first half of the twentieth century, H. J. Kuiper provides us a window into the CRCNA that illumines the history of this denomination, not only in the past but also in the present.

In the opening acknowledgments to his biography, DeJong gratefully notes the generous support that was provided for the building of the fifth floor of the Hekman library at Calvin College and the establishment of the H. J. Kuiper chair in the Calvin Seminary doctoral program. Since H. J. Kuiper's daughter, Claire, and her husband, Edsko Hekman, were major contributors to these causes, DeJong's volume constitutes a kind of tribute to H. J. Kuiper written in gratitude to the Hekman's and in the awareness of his importance to an interpretation of the history of the CRCNA.

For the purpose of this review of DeJong's book, I will closely follow the sequence of DeJong's account of H. J. Kuiper's life and ministry. De Jong divides his study into three parts, which roughly follow the chronology of Kuiper's life. In the first two chapters, he treats Kuiper's early life and pastorates. In the second section, which consists of chapters 3 through 8, he details Kuiper's involvements in a number of "extradenominational projects." And then in the third

section, he focuses exclusively upon Kuiper's principal work as the editor of *The Banner*. After this review of the main findings of De Jong's biography, I will conclude with a few observations regarding DeJong's interpretation and the significance of this biography for our evaluation of more recent developments in the CRCNA.

Early Life and Ministry

After an introductory chapter, which offers a rationale for a study of the life and influence of H. J. Kuiper upon the CRCNA, the first two chapters of DeJong's book are devoted to Kuiper's early life, education and pastorates.

H. J. Kuiper was born December 22, 1885, and with his parents (Jacob Kuiper, a blacksmith, and Hilligje Franken) was a member of the Spring Street Holland Christian Reformed Church (the name of the denomination at the time). The congregation was pastored by Rev. J. H. Vos, father of the well-known biblical theologian, Geerhardus Vos. At the time the CRCNA had a total membership of 21,156 souls and was divided into five classes. During the period of H. J. Kuiper's life, the denomination would grow rapidly, primarily through immigration from the Netherlands, so that it numbered some 86,779 souls by the end of WWI and 250,934 by the end of Kuiper's life.

When conducting his research on Kuiper's family and youth, DeJong observes that he was unable to find much information in

The story of Kuiper's life that DeJong tells focuses almost entirely upon Kuiper's public ministry.

the record. The only information on the Kuiper home of Kuiper's youth is provided through the testimony of his brother-in-law, Reverend Harry Bultema, who married his younger sister Dena. Almost all the sources that were available to DeJong for the purpose of writing his biography, detail aspects of Kuiper's official ministry and public engagements. DeJong plausibly surmises that the absence of such material may be the result of Kuiper's own desire. But it means that the story of Kuiper's life that DeJong tells focuses almost entirely upon Kuiper's public ministry.

After attending a Christian grammar school and Grand Rapids High, Kuiper enrolled in the preparatory program of the theological school of the CRC in 1901. Kuiper's years of study at Calvin Theological Seminary were not without turmoil and controversy, which was prophetic of later battles in the CRC in which he would play a prominent role. Kuiper's abilities as a student are attested by the fact that he graduated at the young age of twenty-one-and-a-half years, perhaps the youngest candidate in the history of the CRC. Shortly after graduation Kuiper married Cornelia Freyling and took the call to the CRC congregation in Luctor, Kansas.

The bulk of DeJong's treatment of Kuiper's early life and ministry

focuses upon his service as a minister in four different congregations. During these early years of Kuiper's ministry, many of the interests that would preoccupy him throughout his years as editor of *The Banner* began to surface. The extraordinary reach of Kuiper's involvement in many facets of the denomination's life commenced in this period as well, especially his service as editor of the denominational periodical, *The Banner*. In addition to his formal training at Calvin Seminary, Kuiper's ministry in these congregations served him well as a platform on which to build throughout the remainder of his life.

Already in his first charge in Luctor, DeJong observes that Kuiper exhibited patterns of "hard work, spiritual sensitivity, and discipline that would characterize his subsequent endeavors" (p. 23). Whether it was teaching all the catechism classes, working with the young people of the congregation, instituting a special consistory meeting each month to study the church order, or starting a choral society, Kuiper proved to be a hard-working, gifted, and effective pastor in Luctor, Kansas, and in all of his charges. He also began to participate in a number of denominational debates regarding Christian day-school education, which he zealously promoted, and the question of the responsibility of the church to provide for the education of its min-

isters by means of a denominational seminary. After his first pastorate in Luctor, Kuiper served briefly in the Prospect Park congregation in Holland, MI, from 1910-1913. Thereafter, he served the Second Englewood, Chicago, IL, congregation for a period of six years (1913-1919), the Broadway congregation of Grand Rapids, MI, for a period of ten years (1919-29), and the Neland Avenue congregation of the same city for a period of fifteen years (1929-1944). According to DeJong, Kuiper's pastorates at Broadway and Neland Avenue were marked by his increasing involvements in denominational matters, whether doctrinal disputes, synodical assignments, or other areas of ministry. During his Neland Avenue pastorate, Kuiper began his service as the editor of *The Banner* (1928), a position that became full-time in 1944.

DeJong interprets Kuiper's pastorates at Broadway and Neland Avenue as "the making of an editor." The nature and extent of Kuiper's participation in the denominational fights and other projects during this period made him a natural choice for the special responsibility to edit the denomination's official English-language periodical (*De Wachter* was the older, Dutch-language periodical). During this period, Kuiper played a leading role in advocating a uniform order of worship for all CRC congregations as a member of a synodically-appointed study committee, was a zealous advocate of evangelism and missions, led in the push to have professor Ralph

Janssen removed from his teaching position at Calvin Seminary due to his embracing certain higher-critical views of Scripture, and defended the synodical decisions on common grace in 1924 and worldly amusements in 1928. Kuiper's position and influence on these and other denominational debates made him a familiar and respected minister in the denomination, and a natural choice for editor of *The Banner*.

Extradominational Projects

The second major section of DeJong's biography addresses what he terms Kuiper's "extradenominational projects." Employing Abraham Kuiper's distinction between the church as "institute" and as "organism," which H. J. also embraced, DeJong treats in several chapters a variety of projects that were dear to Kuiper throughout his ministry.

First on the list of Kuiper's extradominational projects was his life-long advocacy of Christian schools. In the early history of the CRC, Christian schools, where established, were often parochial schools that were owned and governed by local congregations. Kuiper was an advocate of Christian schools that were owned and administered by a Christian school society, composed of parents and others in the community who supported the cause of Christian education. In his pastorates in Chicago and Grand Rapids, he was instrumental in initiating the push for the establishment of Christian high Schools, even serving for a time on the school boards of these respective institutions.

Both as a pastor and as the editor of *The Banner*, Kuiper invested his time, energy, and money, in the cause of providing the children of believing, Reformed parents with Christian schools. Not only did Kuiper write his first editorial as editor on the subject of Christian education, but he wrote on this subject more than any other throughout the lengthy tenure of his editorship. For Kuiper such schools were not simply an option or a luxury. They were a necessary expression of the covenant obligations that Christian parents have to train their children in a way that would prepare them to serve Christ as King in all areas of life and in whatever legitimate vocation they might pursue. In his advocacy of Christian schools, Kuiper illustrated the extent of the influence of Kuyper upon CRC developments, especially in the area of Christian education. In the sphere of education, Christ's kingship and the obligations of the covenant must be honored.

Though Kuiper is best known as editor of the denominational periodical, *The Banner*, DeJong also documents his contributions as a writer and author in other settings as well. In addition to his work as a contributing author and editor of several denominational study committee reports, Kuyper served early in his life as an associate editor and writer for the *Witness*. The *Witness* first made

its appearance in 1921 with Louis Berkhof as its editor. This periodical was only published for five years, and aimed to apply the confessional Reformed faith to issues of the day and to emphasize the central importance of the work of the instituted church. In his articles for the *Witness*, Kuiper opposed the views of Ralph Janssen and sounded many themes that would later preoccupy him on the pages of *The Banner*. Unlike a contemporary periodical that was also published by CRC authors, *Religion and Culture*, the *Witness* emphasized the antithesis more than common grace, and aimed to reach a general rather than academic audience.

One of Kuiper's life-long interests, Christian hymnody, led him to spearhead the publication of the *New Christian Hymnal*, a collection of "popular sacred song" in 1929. The publication of this *Hymnal* was significant milestone that prepared the way for the publication of the Centennial Psalter Hymnal (the "red" book) of 1957. After his many years of service as editor of *The Banner*, Kuiper continued to write, but for the *Torch and Trumpet* (now *The Outlook*). The *Torch and Trumpet* began publication in 1951 and represented a more confessionally Reformed viewpoint than its rival, *The Reformed Journal*, which represented a more progressive and accommodating viewpoint.

After his many years of service as editor of The Banner, Kuiper continued to write, but for the Torch and Trumpet (now The Outlook).

Initially a contributing editor in 1957, Kuiper eventually assumed the role of editor of the *Torch and Trumpet* until his death in 1962.

The last of Kuiper's "extra-denominational projects" that DeJong treats was his life-long interest in missions and evangelism. In all of his pastorates and during his tenure as editor of *The Banner*, Kuiper was an energetic proponent of the cause of reaching out into the community and to the ends of the earth with the gospel of Jesus Christ. During his pastorates in Chicago and Grand Rapids, he was keenly interested in the establishment of "chapels" that would enfold new members through evangelism. Though Kuiper acknowledged some of the weaknesses of this "chapel" method of evangelism, he also lamented the fact that many CRCs were "too cold and indifferent" to be able to reach others effectively with the gospel. To illustrate Kuiper's emphasis in this area, DeJong quotes his remarkable insistence that "[n]early every church or group of churches has a mission field in its own community *and not until every one of these fields is occupied by a salaried missionary or volunteer workers or both are we able to say we are making serious business of our missionary task*" (p. 134, italics Kuiper's).

Recognizing the danger of approaching this missionary task in a non-biblical or un-Reformed manner, Kuiper was a leading proponent of the establishment of a distinctively Reformed Bible Institute, which would prepare its students for this task. Despite considerable resistance from other denominational figures, Kuiper fought hard to see to it that such an institution be founded. DeJong concludes a chapter on Kuiper's commitment to RBI (now Kuyper College) by observing that "[t]he school remained his cherished cause, and he its esteemed board president until his dying day" (p. 152).

Editor of *The Banner*

No doubt the greatest contribution of H. J. Kuiper to the CRC was his service for many years as editor of *The Banner*. During Kuiper's tenure, *The Banner* was arguably the most influential instrument for cultivating a common mind on the calling and challenges facing a confessionally Reformed communion of churches in North America. As DeJong observes, "[t]he paper achieved a level of denominational prominence and influence under his leadership unknown before or since his tenure" (p. 153). In the concluding section of his biography, DeJong manages in several chapters to provide his readers

with a thorough examination of the themes and emphases that characterized Kuiper's editorials through the many years of his editorship. These chapters offer the clearest portrait of Kuiper's convictions and also include the most explicit commentary by DeJong on what he regards to be his greatest contributions and most significant weaknesses.

In the first of the chapters in this section of his biography, DeJong offers a general sketch of Kuiper's editorship of *The Banner*. This chapter is perhaps the most revealing of the book, at least in terms of DeJong's own view of Kuiper's weaknesses. Though DeJong credits Kuiper with greatly expanding the content and enhancing the quality of *The Banner* during his editorship, he also emphasizes some of what to him were weaknesses in Kuiper's handling of his responsibilities.

For example, Kuiper could be fierce in his criticism of those whose views he opposed, and he was not above using his influence as editor to his own advantage. De Jong cites as evidence Kuiper's use of his editorial position to oppose the teaching of Rev. Wezeman, principal of Chicago Christian High School whose views on Scripture were similar to those of professor Ralph Janssen. He also maintains that Kuiper contributed significantly and needlessly to the creation of a climate of suspicion in the denomination regarding Calvin College and Seminary. According to DeJong, "[i]f H. J. Kuiper is appropriately credited with the

DeJong also maintains that Kuiper contributed significantly and needlessly to the creation of a climate of suspicion in the denomination regarding Calvin College and Seminary.

many positive contributions he made to Christian Reformed life and institutions, he must also be assigned responsibility for contributing to an unhealthy mood of suspicion and to growing polarization within the denomination” (p. 185).

The other chapters in this third section of DeJong’s work describe Kuiper’s editorials on the subjects of Reformed spirituality, ecumenical relations with other churches, and the calling of the believer in human society. Prominent themes in Kuiper’s view of the Christian life were: the cultivation of personal piety and devotion, the development of a healthy covenant home environment with meaningful family devotions, a Reformed world view that embraces all of life, a rigorous but joyful use of the Sabbath for Christian worship and service, a diaconal interest in the needs of recent Canadian immigrants, the cultivation of a healthy and vigorous church life and ministry, and the promotion of a proper kind of denominational loyalty and self-awareness.

When it came to relationships with other church communions, Kuiper opposed inappropriate alliances with liberal churches and cautioned against ecumenical contacts that would compromise the confessional character of the CRC. Kuiper was an advocate, however, of membership in the National Association of Evangelicals and welcomed enthusiastically the formation of the Reformed Ecumenical Synod (now Council). He also viewed positively and exhibited a keen

Students of CRC history are in DeJong’s debt for writing a thoroughly researched, clear, and helpful account of one of the most influential figures in the denomination.

interest in the formation of Westminster Theological Seminary and the Orthodox Presbyterian Church. Though it is sometimes reported that the CRC failed to address carefully the split that occurred in the Reformed Churches in the Netherlands in the 1940’s, Kuiper offered at the time a Banner editorial that presented a concise, informed critique of the covenant conception of Klaas Schilder, which played an important role in the division that occurred among the Dutch churches (February 22, 1946).

In the last chapter of this section of his biography, DeJong also summarizes Kuiper’s views on contemporary social, economic and political developments. In his commentary on broadly social and cultural subjects, DeJong interprets Kuiper as, in general, a follower of Abraham Kuyper, though his emphasis is more upon Kuyper’s doctrine of the antithesis than of common grace.

Concluding Observations

Though I have offered only a brief sketch of the main findings of DeJong’s study, it provides a basis for a few concluding observations that I would like to offer for further reflection.

First, students of CRC history are in DeJong’s debt for writing a

thoroughly researched, clear, and helpful account of one of the most influential figures in the denomination during a critical period of its history. In preparation for his biography, DeJong painstakingly researched the available material on Kuiper’s life and ministry. This material included consistory minutes, synodical documents, editorials, and other writings. In his biography, DeJong has managed to offer a well-written narrative of Kuiper’s life, and at the same time an evaluation of his contributions to and importance for an interpretation of this period of CRC history. For the most part, DeJong resists the temptation to camouflage Kuiper with his interpretive commentary and analysis. Kuiper is permitted to speak for himself throughout the biography. Even though DeJong acknowledges that we have few sources on Kuiper’s personal life, the reader of his biography will find that Kuiper’s life and thought are in the foreground, while DeJong remains, in the proper sense of the term, only the biographer. Anyone who has an interest in the history of the CRC (and that includes members of churches that stand in the same tradition) should obtain a copy of this volume and read it carefully.

Second, DeJong’s biography of Kuiper is more than a biography.

It tells through the lens of Kuiper's life and ministry the story of the CRC in the first half of the twentieth century. Perhaps in this respect it is well that Kuiper did not leave much material on his personal life and family. More than his predecessor as editor of *The Banner*, Rev. Henry Beets, Kuiper deserves to be described as "Mr. CRC." The character of the CRC, the challenges confronting a confessionally Reformed and immigrant church in North America, the great theological debates that preoccupied the early decades of the twentieth century, the extraordinary institutional development of the CRC, the common convictions of denominational members during this period—all of these and more are embodied in the person of Kuiper. In this respect, DeJong's biography confirms the assessment of James Bratt, the author of another important work on CRC history, *Dutch Calvinism in Modern America*: "Indeed, as his tenure lengthened it became increasingly difficult to distinguish between the man, the periodical, and the group they served." No one person before or after Kuiper quite so accurately captures the spirit and forms of denominational life.

Third, in the interpretation of CRC history, writers have often distinguished three broad "points of view" among its members. Though the terminology varies, these views are most commonly referred to as "confessional Reformed," "antithetical Calvinist," and "positive [common grace] Calvinist." The conflict between the different perspectives on the

identity and calling of the CRC in the first half of the twentieth century are regarded, accordingly, as expressions of the competing emphases of these three minds.

While DeJong does not challenge the legitimacy of identifying these distinct points of view within the CRC during this period, he demonstrates through Kuiper that they do not represent positions that are wholly incompatible or incapable of expression through the life and ministry of the same person. Kuiper himself exhibits elements that belong to all three minds. Though Kuiper might be viewed as a spokesman for the

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confessional Reformed mind, who was only interested in the well-being of the instituted church and its faithful adherence to the Reformed confessions, it is evident that he shared many of the cherished tenets of the antithetical Calvinists and even some of the concerns of the positive Calvinists. Kuiper opposed Janssen's views on Scripture because they blurred the lines of the antithesis between believing and unbelieving biblical scholarship. But he also opposed Herman Hoeksema's denial of the legitimacy of common grace as a theme in Reformed theology and life. By acknowledging the com-

plexity of Kuiper's positions, DeJong advances the traditional categories of interpretation that have governed the study of CRC history for a long time.

And fourth, DeJong's biography of Kuiper also provides insight into the background for subsequent developments in the CRC after his death. During Kuiper's lifetime (due in part to his influence and role) the CRC was often embroiled in pitched battles and debates, all of which in some way were related to the denomination's sense of its identity and calling in North America. These battles never led, however, to any significant division or parting of ways (with the possible exception of the formation of the Protestant Reformed Churches in 1924). The denomination held together remarkably well during Kuiper's lifetime and enjoyed a considerable measure of apparent unity and peace. No one who is acquainted with the subsequent history of the CRC will likely want to challenge my observation that this is no longer true. A number of painful divisions have surfaced in more recent decades, which have reversed a century of rapid growth by the denomination. For example, the CRC grew by 1000% during Kuiper's lifetime (if my math is correct), but it has hardly grown in the sixty years after his death. The obvious question this raises, and it is one that DeJong hints at only obliquely in his biography, is: what happened? Or: what changed?

If I may be permitted an interpretive hypothesis, the answer to this question is actually provided in

Kuiper's last official editorial for *The Banner* (August 31, 1956). In this editorial, Kuiper observed with dismay that, in every theological controversy in the CRC during his tenure as editor, there were always CRC leaders who were prepared to defend the position of those who he believed were departing from biblical and confessional orthodoxy. His comments are sufficiently important to require quoting them at length:

One thing in particular, however, makes us very apprehensive. With all the emphasis in our Church on purity of doctrine, we expected in our younger days that our people would be quick to recognize false teachings and prompt to disavow them. But in this matter we have been disillusioned. We have learned that whenever any one of our leaders strikes a false note, especially if he is popular and well schooled, he will soon get a following.

In his editorial, Kuiper went on to rue the lack of discernment among members of the denomination that was often exhibited in the midst of controversy and debate.

I believe Kuiper's observation here was almost prescient (knowing in advance). In subsequent battles in the CRC, unity within and loyalty to the denomination

and its institutions proved to be the more powerful "glue" that held things together than loyalty to the distinctive confessional identity of the CRC. So long as the denomination had leaders who were loyal to the confessions, as Kuiper undoubtedly was, it managed to retain its identity as a confessional Reformed church.

In the one significant critical comment on Kuiper's ministry in his biography, DeJong criticizes him for contributing to a climate of suspicion and growing polarization in the denomination. In my view, this criticism is misdirected. Kuiper, who was only defending the historic position of the CRC against those whom he judged to be its detractors, should hardly be criticized for doing so. Kuiper's concerns only illustrate that the seeds of the CRC's troubles in more recent decades were already germinating during his lifetime. They also demonstrate that lack of real enthusiasm for confessional Reformed Christianity was already present in the CRC during the "good old days" of Kuiper's influence. Perhaps already during Kuiper's lifetime, the real unifying force in the CRC was more sub-cultural, ethnic, and institutional, than we have believed until now. If I may use the controversial image of "burning the wooden shoes," perhaps the CRC eventually burned the wrong

shoes, namely, the confessional Reformed identity that Kuiper worked so hard to promote. The "wooden shoes" that should have been burned—but at no great risk of losing something of ultimate importance—were the shoes that were retained, namely, sub-cultural, ethnic, and institutional identities.

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If I may use the controversial image of "burning the wooden shoes," perhaps the CRC eventually burned the wrong shoes, namely, the confessional Reformed identity that Kuiper worked so hard to promote.

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