

The Outlook

FEBRUARY 2008

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Dedicated to the Exposition and Defense of the Reformed Faith

Heaven:
What Is It?

The Christian
Life in a Prayer
From Paul

On Being Named

Bible Studies on
Joseph and Judah

The Praise of the
Persecuted Pilgrim

Examining
the Nine Points:
An Introduction

Herman Bavinck:
A Sketch of His Life.



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

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Editor, Rev. Wybren Oord

7724 Hampton Oaks Dr.

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Phone: (269) 324-5132 Fax: (269) 324-9606

Email: editor@reformedfellowship.net

Website: www.reformedfellowship.net

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Editor: Wybren Oord

Contributing Editor:

Dr. Cornelis P. Venema

Business Manager: Shellie Terpstra

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Editorial Office

7724 Hampton Oaks Dr.

Portage, MI 49024

(269) 324-5132 Phone

(269) 324-9606 Fax

Email: editor@reformedfellowship.net

Circulation Office

3363 Hickory Ridge Ct. SW

Wyoming, MI 49418-8301

(616) 532-8510 Phone

Business Mailing Address

3363 Hickory Ridge Ct. SW

Wyoming, MI 49418-8301

Email: office@reffellowship.net

Heaven: What Is It?

“After this I looked, and behold, a door standing open in heaven! And the first voice, which I had heard speaking to me like a trumpet, said, Come up here . . . At once I was in the Spirit, and behold, a throne stood in heaven.”
(Revelation 4:1, 2)

In the recent 2003 survey quoted in my first article concerning heaven, the Barna Research Group revealed that of those who believe in heaven, only forty-six percent described it as “a state of eternal existence in God’s presence” and only thirty percent said they believe it is “an actual place of rest and reward where souls go after death.” These numbers hardly evidence a firm understanding of the afterlife among Christians.

In our last article, we answered in the affirmative that there is life after death as we examined the words of Ecclesiastes 3. This passage taught us that all humans know that there is life after death. In this article, I intend to solidify our thoughts and our hope in the afterlife by explaining not only that there is life after death, but especially to describe the place we call heaven. We will see this by turning to Revelation 4 and asking the simple question, “What is heaven like?”

A Place of God’s Creation

The first thing we learn about heaven in Revelation 4 is that heaven *is a place of God’s creation*. In the breathtaking scene of Revelation 4, John sees “heaven” opened and he is invited to enter it. He simply assumes not only that it exists, but also that it is a place. He can assume this because of what is

explicitly stated at the end of the chapter. He sees and hears what occurs around the throne in these words: “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*” (v. 11). God created all things, including the realms in which all things exist. To use the language of the Nicene Creed, God is the “Maker of heaven and earth, and of all things visible and invisible.” In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth, meaning, the invisible realm as well as the visible realm.

The Place of God’s Presence

The second thing we learn about heaven is that *it is the place of God’s presence*. The text describes God’s throne (vv. 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 9, 10) as being engulfed in “lightning, and rumblings and peals of thunder” (v. 5), which is an Old Testament description of the presence of God (Exodus 19). The throne is also surrounded by the light of “seven torches of fire, which are the seven spirits of God” (v. 5). This is a metaphor of the fullness of the Holy Spirit. The Spirit with all His gifts and power are blazing before the throne.

Certainly, God is omnipresent, that is, everywhere at all times. To speak of heaven as the place of

God’s presence is an accommodation for us. But more than a mere verbal accommodation, heaven is an actual accommodation in which God condescends to our creaturely level so that we can experience Him after death. If there is no place created called heaven, then we as creatures would not be able to experience God and have fellowship with Him after this life. The reason is that even after death, when we are taken into God’s presence, we will still be creatures with all the limitations thereof. Since we cannot relate to an immense, infinite God, we need a local place to enjoy Him forever. Passages, such as Psalm 16, speak of God’s right hand as His pleasure-filled presence for His people. Revelation 4 speaks of twenty-four elders and four living creatures being “around” this presence and the throne giving God glory (v. 4, 6).

The Place of God’s Rule

Third, heaven is *the place of God’s rule*. Although God is inexpressibly transcendent and glorious, John is given a glimpse of the heavenly King. We recognize here that John uses the literary convention of a simile (a comparison using “like” or “as”) to describe God. The One upon the throne is described with regal colors, having “the appearance of jasper and carnelian” (v. 3). The jasper stone can be many different colors such as red, green, blue, brown, yellow, or white. The sardius, or carnelian stone, is a beautiful red. There is also an emerald rainbow (v. 3), which is a crystal-like, transparent bright green. What does all this mean? There are not individual meanings

*The peace that passes all understanding is there
and is freely given to all the redeemed.*

for each stone and color, but what John is describing to us is that the One who sits upon the throne is so glorious that the only way to describe His glory is to compare it to the most precious and brilliant stones and colors. He is King.

Further, the King is surrounded by His court—the twenty-four thrones upon which sit the twenty-four elders, clothed in white with crowns on their heads (v. 4). God is described as a glorious King, as well, by the fact that His throne is at the very center of this heavenly scene. Everything revolves around Him for everything comes from Him! This vision reminds us of Psalm 97. From this central throne in heaven God issues His judgments in all the earth against the sin and wickedness of this world that we encounter in Revelation 6, the seven seals in Revelation 8–9, the seven trumpets, and in Revelation 16, the seven bowls.

But also notice that His glorious reign as King is also revealed in the rainbow surrounding His throne. He does punish the wicked. But at the same time He remembers His covenant that He made thousands of years ago to Noah in Genesis 9. He made a covenant with all living creatures not to judge the earth by a massive flood again. So it is for the sake of gathering His elect that He does not wipe out this world, as He is “not willing that any should perish, but that all should come to repentance” (2 Peter 3).

A Place of God’s Peace

The fourth thing we learn of heaven in this chapter is that *it is a place of God’s peace*. John continues using a simile by saying, “Before the throne there was as it were a sea of glass, like crystal” (v. 6). This communicates that there is no more turmoil, no more antagonism, and no more enemies. In describing heaven as being “like crystal” John describes a smooth sea that has no waves. In the Old Testament the waves of the oceans symbolize the uproar of the nations (Cf. Psalm 46:3, and 93).

This is what this creation will be like when it is renewed in chapter 21: “And there was no more sea” (21:1). The peace that passes all understanding is there and is freely given to all the redeemed.

The Place of Worship

Finally, John’s vision teaches us that heaven *is the place where God’s people worship*. When the door to heaven is opened, John immediately sees God. Yet, notice what he says about God, “Behold... One sitting upon the throne” (v. 2). God is ineffable, that is, He is indescribable, inexpressible, unutterable, and unspeakable. No man can see God and live; no man can see God for He is Spirit; therefore Christ reveals to John a vision of God. And even in this vision God cannot be described.

All John can say is “One sitting on the throne.” This reveals our God’s utter transcendence. He is so dif-

ferent from us that He is as far from us as highest star in the sky at night. God’s transcendence is like this: George W. Bush is President of the United States. He calls us “fellow citizens” or “my fellow Americans,” but because he is President—living where we have never been, surrounded by secret service agents—he transcends our common American citizenship.

Various groups surround this majestic King in Revelation 4: the elders and the four creatures. What does it mean that the twenty-four “elders” worship Him? This is the church in heaven. This is what we call the glorified church, the church triumphant, or the invisible church. They have overcome, they are ruling now, they are completely glorified and without sin, they are sitting as royalty. To be absent from the body is to be present with the Lord, as Paul says.

What does it mean that the four living creatures worship Him? In Ezekiel 10:20 we are told that these four living creatures are the cherubim, which guard the holy things of God, such as the Tree of Life in Genesis 3:24 and the ark of the covenant in Exodus 25:20. There are four of them because they represent the animate creation of the earth. Just as there are four winds and four corners of the earth, there are four living creatures in this heavenly vision telling us that all creation stands before God’s throne worshipping Him.

What John teaches us in Revelation 4 is more than just a nebulous, generic “afterlife.” Instead it communicates to us a firm understanding of heaven. While all humanity

knows by nature that there is life after death, it is by the special revelation of Revelation 4 that our wayward thoughts about it are corrected. Therefore we are comforted in this life with a certain knowledge of its existence and given a brief glimpse into what it is so that we may hope for it even more.

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

The Christian Life in a Prayer From Paul

In the midst of his letter to the Ephesians, the apostle Paul drew attention to the prayer that he offered for the saints of God in Ephesus, expressed in one long sentence.

“For this reason I bow my knees before the Father, from whom the whole family in heaven and on earth derives its name, that he would grant you, according to the riches of his glory, to be strengthened with power through his Spirit in the inner man, so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith, and that you, being rooted and grounded in love, may be able to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ which surpasses knowledge, that you may be filled up to all the fullness of God” (Eph. 3:14-19).

As Paul found himself upon his knees before God, he reflected upon the reason for such a posture of prayer and humility before the Almighty. Why did he bow his knees before the Father? Unto what cause did the apostle attribute his prayer of intercession? In the thinking of Paul, it was God Himself who had put him on knees of gratitude and supplication by a loving conquest of sovereign grace.

Prayer and the Triumph of Grace

Paul had already acknowledged within the same epistle that his previous life had been unacceptable to the Almighty, meriting even the wrath of God (Eph. 2:3). The decisive change in his own life—bringing him from death in his transgressions to life in Christ—could only be traced to the wonders of mercy, love, and grace (Eph. 2:4-5). But for Paul the favor of God overflowed the deep channels of grace that flow into the lives of all the people of God. To him “the very least of all the saints” was given the added grace and privilege of proclamation, “to preach to the Gentiles the unfathomable riches of Christ” (Eph. 3:8). He was “Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God” (Eph. 1:1).

It was divine grace that prompted gratitude unto God, which issued forth in service in behalf of the church. This then was the reason for his prayer. Paul loved God and His people. His prayer was an act of love, a word of intercession for the Ephesians who had come to “faith in the Lord Jesus” and who were known for their “love for all the saints” (Eph. 1:15).

Paul rendered homage to the Father. His knees bent. His head bowed in humble supplication. His thoughts filled with the mystery of the Trinity. He petitioned the *Father* that we be strengthened in the inner man through the *Spirit* in

order that we may advance in our knowledge of *Christ*.

Even as he mused upon the Trinitarian Godhead, he poured out his concerns for the saints in Ephesus. Paul ever viewed the Christian life as the seedbed in which there would be the cultivation of faith, hope, and love (1 Cor. 13:13)—what medieval theology would later expound as the three theological virtues, the fruit of grace and not natural ability. In this prayer, imbedded in his letter to the Ephesians, we find the same three longings—that the saints in Ephesus would have faith as the appropriate response to gospel proclamation, love as the foundation of their new life in Christ, and hope directed to that future of complete conformity to the moral image of Christ.

As a son of God by the grace of adoption, Paul came to the Father in a position of adoration and thanksgiving. Bowing himself in lowliness before him, he recognized at the same time that the Father has a household and that he, Paul, was one child among an innumerable multitude in the vast household of God (Eph. 2:19). It is one cosmic family, many of whom are already in heaven and the rest of whom are still on the earth. The whole family belongs to the Father. They are His children. They bear His holy name. The bonds of love and brotherhood within the family of God are the matrix out of which this prayer ascends into the presence of the Heavenly Father.

What exactly did Paul pray for? What concern did Paul have for

the flock of God committed to his care?

A Foundational Petition

The great desire that Paul had for the Ephesians was that they would saturate themselves in the knowledge of the love of Christ. He longed that they would be gripped by the love that Messiah Jesus has for man in his misery and sin.

He recognized though that such a spiritual comprehension is contingent upon the presence of God in our lives. The Spirit and Christ Himself must powerfully dwell in the inward man, even in the heart of

The great desire that Paul had for the Ephesians was that they would saturate themselves in the knowledge of the love of Christ.

the believer. This then was the foundational petition of the apostle—he entreated God that we his readers, believers in Christ, would increasingly experience the powerful presence of Christ and the Spirit in our lives.

An increase in their mighty presence would come only “through faith” (Eph. 3:17)—which only “comes from hearing, and hearing by the word of Christ” (Rom. 10:17). Thus the sequence of blessing begins with proclamation. The Word of God must be proclaimed. This preaching must be heard with faith in the heart. Such belief brings

a renewed manifestation of the divine. The presence of God comes once more with power. The believer experiences afresh the profound mystery, “Christ in you, the hope of glory” (Col. 1:27).

The potent indwelling of Christ in the heart is transformative. It changes the life. Love permeates. Benevolence reigns. Such folk are changed. They are “being rooted and grounded in love” (Eph. 3:17). They love God, the church, and even their enemies (Matt. 5:43-48).

It is this kind of person, *and only this kind of person*, who is qualified—morally able—to apprehend the love of Christ. If we would begin to comprehend to some measure this multidimensional love of Christ—even the elements of its breadth and length and height and depth—we must have the pervasive indwelling of Christ in our hearts, and we must have love at the base of our lives.

It is no wonder that Gregory Nazianzen commented, “Not to every one...does it belong to philosophize about God; not to every one; the Subject is not so cheap and low.” He went on to say, “It is permitted only to those who...at the very least are being purified.” He added this warning: “For the impure to touch the pure is, we may safely say, not safe, just as it is unsafe to fix weak eyes upon the sun’s rays” (*The First Theological Oration XXVII*).

Knowing Incomprehensible Love

If we will follow the Lord’s direction in this prayer of Paul, we will find an expansion in our knowl-

edge. If we will give ourselves to the means of grace—to hearing the Word of God and receiving the sacraments with faith, to prayer and fellowship with the saints—we shall experience the nearness of Christ and the Spirit, indeed their enabling presence in our hearts. When love increasingly saturates our lives, we shall then grow in our knowledge of that which surpasses knowledge—the supreme manifestation of the love of Christ in which He “gave Himself up for us” (in our place) “an offering and a sacrifice to God” (Eph. 5:2).

Here Paul reminds us that even as the evil powers of this age laid their vile hands upon an innocent man and did away with Him, the Lord Jesus endured the acts committed against Him with His gaze fixed upon heaven. He was self-consciously giving Himself to God as an offering and a sacrifice in our stead. It is this reality and the love that impelled it that must grip our minds and hearts so that we can be mastered by its conquering power.

The End of the Gospel

The life of the believer—indwelt by God, suffused with love for others, basking in the warmth of the love of Christ—has an ultimate end that entails blessing beyond measure. Paul draws our attention to this in the final clause of his prayer: we shall “be filled up to all the fullness of God.”

We are not complete in ourselves. We have great need. That which fills God needs to be found in us. This does not mean, of course, that we will become God. As Augustine said, “To be a partaker of God is not the same thing as to be God” (*The*

City of God XXII.30). It does mean, however, that we “become partakers of the divine nature” (2 Pet. 1:4). This, indeed, as Calvin remarked, is “the end of the gospel.” Its purpose is “to make us eventually conformable to God” (*Commentary on 2 Peter*).

Luther concurred with this perspective, even while expanding upon it. Preaching on the Incarnation in a Christmas sermon in 1514, he declared, “Thus power becomes powerless so that weakness may become powerful. The *Logos* puts on our form and pattern, our image and likeness, so that it may clothe us with its image, its pattern, and its likeness. Thus wisdom becomes foolish so that foolishness may become wisdom; and so it is in all other things that are in God and in us, to the extent that in all these things he takes what is ours to himself in order to impart what is his to us” (WA 28).

We rejoice that our ultimate end by divine predestination is conformity to the moral image of the Son of God (Rom. 8:29). Yet even now in this life it is the intention of God that His moral excellencies will be found within His household among His children by the sanctifying work of the Spirit. May we pursue the holiness which God gives us. Unto that end may we embrace the apostolic prayer and make it our very own.

Dr. Mark Larson is the pastor at Grace Orthodox Presbyterian Church in Fair Lawn, New Jersey.

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*He will bring glory
to Me...*

John 16:14a

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On Being Named

John 1:35-51

“What’s in a name?” Names usually mean a lot, don’t they? We love naming our children and our children love naming their toys and animals. We have nicknames, middle names, and last names. Names are important. Naming is what we do by nature. We do not want our family names defamed; we want a good name. Many people today live their whole lives trying to find or make names for themselves. We all know of teenagers who crave attention and popularity so much that they get lost in alcohol, drugs, gangs, and so on. College students want everyone to know their names. Amazingly, many people even Google their own names to see if they are known or popular. Thousands of people want the name “American Idol.” This naming business can turn into a craving Babel-like lust; then it becomes sinful.

There are two ways to go about getting a name. You either can name yourself, or be named by another. In John’s language, you can either reject true testimony, or accept it and be named “child of God.” You might bend over backwards to gain fame and build a Babel-tower for yourself, so to speak, so that your name can go on it and endure.

On the other hand, by grace, we receive a name from God. We are in the middle of seeking a name for ourselves, and God comes down,

strips us of our old name, and wraps us up in a new one. It is called Baptism. It is called conversion. In baptism we are given the name, “Christian;” we are set apart from the names of the world. When the Lord changes our hearts—before, during, or after baptism—the name becomes official. Our names then are written into God’s heavenly register, never to be forgotten.

Testimony. Christ. Seeing. Following. Finding. Naming. These things are what John speaks about in his gospel. John the Baptist gives testimony to Christ. Some receive the testimony, then see, and follow Christ. Christ finds them and names them. It happened in the first century; it happens today. Christ is the Namer in John 1.

Jesus has already been baptized at this point, and publicly received His name: My beloved Son, my Pleasure (Matt. 3:17). His name is now public testimony. He now turns and names His people, His disciples. This is part of Jesus’ mission, a name investiture.

Day One: John the Baptist’s Public Testimony

Before Jesus starts naming His disciples, John the Baptist takes the stand and testifies: Jesus is the Lamb of God! Jesus is the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world! John declares Jesus’ name to his disciples: Lamb of God. Remember the verses before: law came through Moses, but grace and truth come through Christ. Moses

can not save; Jesus can and does. Moses can only give you the name “Pharisee;” Jesus gives the name “Saved-by-Grace.” This salvation by grace comes through blood, as the Baptist hints at. Jesus is that Old Testament Lamb who was slain as a substitute for the people—sin must be dealt with, after all. The forgiveness of sins is the center of John’s legal and public testimony, and the center of the Christian faith. Jesus forgives. Jesus’ name “Lamb of God” is part of the legal process of name changing for Christians.

Notice too, how the sound waves of John’s mouth effect something. That is, John’s five-word sermon is effective. Two of John’s disciples follow Christ because of John’s testimony. John pointed his finger, as Luther said, at Jesus Christ. John the Baptist’s disciples go to where he points; to the Lamb of God. Faith comes through hearing—the Baptist knew it! Faith comes through public testimony—John the Baptist knew it! This is why we preach so diligently in Reformed churches. John the Baptist preached; we follow his and Paul’s method—we preach Christ, because the preaching-testimony to and of Jesus works! Jesus is the one we name in our preaching, we testify to the name of Christ in our preaching, just like John the Baptist.

When two of John’s disciples came to Jesus, He asked them, in a sort of ironic way, “Whom are you seeking? For whom are you looking?” Of course, Jesus knew! They answered Him, “Rabbi, where are you staying?” Jesus invited them: “Come and you will see!” (v39).

They called Jesus “Rabbi,” which the Evangelist reminds his readers means “Teacher.” The Evangelist wants his written testimony to be clear, so he explains this name for his non-Jewish readers. When these two disciples asked Jesus, “Where are you staying,” they were simply saying, “We want to enroll in your school. We know you are a unique teacher—someone extraordinary—we want to follow you.”

Jesus’ “Come and you will see” invitation is fulfilled later: “Everyone that the Father gives me will come to me, and whoever comes to me I will never cast out” (John 6:37). Every name that the Father speaks to Him will come to Jesus. He will write the name down, never to forget it. It is a naming process. The disciples will slowly learn this; they will learn more of the name of Jesus and their own new names, as well.

One of the two disciples, named Andrew, went to get his brother, Simon. He said, “Simon, Simon, guess what! We have found the Messiah!” The Evangelist reminds us Gentile readers that the name Messiah means Christ, the anointed one. John the Baptist’s testimony was effective: Andrew believed. Having heard, Andrew could not keep quiet—he testified, or witnessed, to his brother Simon. The one testified to becomes a testifier, a witness. The Messiah is here!

Jesus looked up from whatever he was doing and saw Peter coming to Him. He reminds us—and Simon—that he was found by Jesus before he came. Jesus knew his name before any formal introduc-

tion. And now he is given a new name by Jesus. He is named by the Namer. Simon is named by Jesus. Simon is renamed by the Messiah. By gifting Simon with a new name—Peter or Cephas—He is giving Simon a whole new identity. Simon is now Peter. The old is gone, the new has come. A new world is made for Simon. He is given a new name as were Abram, Sarai, and Jacob. He has a new story with a new beginning, an entirely new life. He will never again be his old self, Simon. His “this-worldly” story ends here. He is swept up onto the stage of Christ’s drama and given a name: Christian.

Jesus still gives new names today. In baptism, we are set apart and given the name “Christian.” When God is pleased to convert and regenerate us, we are registered in God’s book of life. We are “church-goers,” named by the Lord of the church. This name does indeed sound strange to those who still try to name themselves. The worldly serpent laughs at us and tells us that his name for the fruit is much better. The construction workers at Babel still say, “Let us make a name for ourselves!” But praise God for our new names, and repent from trying to make a worldly name for yourself. After all, ultimately every “this-world name” is either “Babel” or “fool” (Genesis 11:9; Psalm 14:1). Christian, you do not define yourself!

You do not write your own story! Jesus named you, and He does not forget those whom He names!

Look again at newly named Peter. Oh Peter, you tried to stand between Christ and His cross, and received a momentary rebuke-name of “Satan” (Matt 16:23). Oh Peter, you tried to rename yourself as you denied Jesus that dark night. Why did you say three times, “My name is not Peter, but Simon?” Oh Peter, you were rebuked by Paul for treating Gentiles as second-rate Christians. Peter, you have not lived up to your new name!

Shame, however, is not only on Peter, but us, as well. We have dragged our name “Christian” through the worldly mud time and again. We have said, even after we have professed faith in Christ, that we want a world-given name. We have said, “Jesus? I do not know Him” as we ignored our neighbor in need, or cursed our enemy. All of us build our little Babel-towers too often. We need to repent for stomping on our Jesus-given name, “Christian.”

As with Peter, despite all of our name hating, Jesus does not forget our name, nor does He trample it through the mud. When Peter was rejecting His name, Jesus was remembering it. “Peter! Satan asked to sift you like wheat, but I have *named* you in heaven—I have prayed for you (Luke 22:31). I

***Jesus still gives new names today. In baptism,
we are set apart and given the name
“Christian.”***

have not forgotten your name; I have named you before my Father. Your name has been heard in heaven, and will always be heard in heaven. Your name is echoing off the walls of heaven. On earth as it is in heaven: Satan cannot touch you no matter how you deny your name and Namer. My naming is stronger than your denying!”

The same Namer that prayed Peter into heaven—that bled and died so Peter could be named in heaven—names you into heaven. He had you in mind in His high priestly prayer. Your name was on His mind when He died on the cross. Now He ever lives to make intercession for you. Right now, Jesus is naming you to the Father. It is gospel. It is salvation. You will never be sifted to hell, because Jesus has named you! This is what the fifth part of the Canons of Dort is about: preservation. Your name is known by the Father in heaven. Jesus prays for those named Christian.

Christianity is really all about learning what our new name means. The disciples learned the significance of their new names as they grew older. Slowly they began to see who Jesus really was, especially after He burst the doors of hellish death as He rose again from the dead and ascended into heaven. Interestingly and significantly, Jesus is never called Rabbi after His resurrection – most likely because after that, they knew He was more than a rabbi. You will learn slowly too. Just remember, that Jesus who named you will not forget your name. He will not deny you, because He is the faithful witness. He

Despite all of our name hating, Jesus does not forget our name, nor does He trample it through the mud.

had your name in mind as He went to the cross, and He will not forget it as He sits on the right hand of the Father. You have been named by Christ—that is the gospel.

Before our eyes and ears John 1:11-12 is being fulfilled: some *did* receive Jesus, and to them He gave the right to be children of God, named by God.

Day Two: Coming and Seeing

The next day Jesus found Philip. Two words that Jesus uttered were earth moving for Philip. “Follow me!” Philip’s life was changed by those two words of Jesus. Philip tells Nathanael—actually he *finds* Nathanael—and tells him about one named Jesus. Philip was from Bethsaida, a little fishing town in the first century. Bethsaida was near the Sea of Galilee, so it is not surprise that fishing was part of every day life there. These disciples were just regular people like you and me.

Jesus’ words, “Follow me” have power. Just a few words of divine testimony are effective. Isaiah told us as many as seven hundred years before the Evangelist wrote that the word of God does not return to Him without *doing* something (55:11). The word succeeds here in drawing sheep to the Shepherd. The same voice that said, “Let there be” here says, “Follow me.” Later this voice will work wonders: “Lazarus, come out!” Just by

Jesus uttering Lazarus’ name, Lazarus *must* stand up and breathe once again.

Philip, now a follower of one named “Jesus,” names Jesus to Nathanael. “We have found Jesus, son of Joseph, the One from Nazareth (v. 45b). We have found the man that Moses and the Prophets named in the Scriptures, in the law and prophetic books. Remember all those words that tell us about a Messiah, a ruler, a King? He is here! Seriously!” Even before these disciples had post-resurrection knowledge about Jesus, they understood that the Old Testament named Jesus so many years before their time. They knew that the Old Testament pointed to Jesus. They will learn it more, but they knew from the outset that the Scriptures were about Christ.

Nathanael’s answer to Philip’s remark is a bit cynical. “Nazareth? Can anything good come from there?” No Old Testament prophecies speak about Nazareth! Nazareth is not even on Old Testament Maps! I can not find Nazareth in an Old Testament word search. Was Philip bearing false witness? Philip’s words echo Jesus’ earlier: “Come and see. If you do not believe my witness, come for yourself and see.” John the Baptist witnessed, which turned Andrew into a witness. Then Peter followed. Now Philip witnesses and Nathanael

follows. The name of Jesus is being proclaimed early on in John's Gospel.

Jesus saw Nathanael coming towards Him (v. 47). Before a formal introduction was given, Jesus said, "You are a guile-free Israelite, indeed." Nathanael was confused. How did Jesus know who Nathanael was before he had introduced himself? "How do you know me," he asked Jesus. Jesus answered, "Before Philip talked to you about me I saw you sitting under a fig tree."

Jesus knows His people. Even when His people have not yet heard of Him, or simply sinfully forget Him, Jesus knows and remembers His people. Jesus knew His people when He went to the cross. He had their names on His mind, as it were. It is comforting for us to know that Jesus knows. Jesus does the seeking and saving; He is the Knower and Namer, despite our ignorance and denying. Your Savior *always* thinks about you. He always prays your name to the Father, praying for your good and salvation.

That was all Nathanael needed to hear. Jesus knew what he was doing before anyone told him. "Rabbi! You are the Son of God, the King of Israel." Is he going a bit too far? Just because Jesus knew this Nathanael makes a deeply significant statement. Jesus compelled Nathanael on in his faith. "You think that was a sign? You said that just because I knew you? I give legal testimony before God—Amen Amen, verily verily—you will see greater

things. Truly truly, you will see heaven opening and angels going up and coming down on the Son of Man."

Only Jesus says these legal words of "Amen Amen." It is an oath swearing word; Jesus gives binding assurance that it will happen. "You think my knowledge is amazing, just wait until you come to know me by the name "Mediator."

Conclusion

Even those who cautiously accept someone else's testimony must also experience Jesus for themselves to be completely convinced. Jesus said, *I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life...the sheep follow him, for they know his voice* (8:12 & 10:4).

A person needs the right Christology, the right doctrine of Christ, and faith in that testimony. You need to know who Jesus is and accept and believe it, and depend on Him. You need to believe the testimony of who Jesus is and go see Him for yourself, so to speak, along with these early disciples. You can not just stay under that fig tree and say, "Sure, I believe Jesus is what the Bible teaches." No, get up! Go find out if this testimony is true! This testimony may make you lose a name and get a new one. It may make you leave your fishing nets and fig trees and give you a whole new world. It may make people hate you, it may make your life more uncomfortable, but it will save you. Yes, you will get a new name, and remember that Jesus

names His own—prays for His own—in the presence of God.

Jesus is the Namer. Jesus is the Savior. Jesus is the Mediator, the way to heaven, God's presence. If you trust in His name, you get all wrapped up in a new name. To have Jesus name you is to get a heavenly name, a name that God sings over.

Rev. Shane Lems is pastor of a URCNA church plant in Sunnyside, Washington.

Bible Studies on Joseph and Judah

Lesson 11: Israel's Sons Return to Egypt with Benjamin

Read Genesis 43

Introduction

In Genesis 42 the sons of Jacob go to Egypt for food since the famine has hit Canaan very hard. Joseph recognizes them, and he recalls the message of his dreams. He initiates a process of testing his brothers by accusing them of being spies, imprisoning them for three days, but then sending them home. He keeps Simeon in custody, telling them they may return to Egypt only if the youngest brother comes with them. He is testing them to see if they are honest men. In fact, this test stirs up feelings of guilt as they remember what they had done to Joseph many years earlier. Even more astonishing to them is finding their money—all their money!—returned in the grain sacks they brought back from Egypt. What is God doing to them?

Genesis 43 tells us about the brothers' second visit to Egypt. Actually this visit will last through chapter 45, since their return home in Genesis 44 will be interrupted when the Egyptians discover the silver cup in the sack of Benjamin, and the brothers are brought back to Joseph for judgment. This second visit to Egypt will be amazing in terms of the many things (and people) that will be revealed.

Continuing stress in Israel's family (43:1-14)

The famine has dragged on, and food resources become scarce. Israel's pantry begins to thin out. We wonder whether Israel was even able to keep many (or all) of his own servants, since there are many mouths to feed in his household. Israel (the name used for Jacob in this chapter, the name he had received from the wrestling "stranger in the night") presses his sons to return to Egypt for food. Actually, the family discussions take up the first 14 verses of this chapter, and the things they discuss are basically a repeat (with some variations) of several things mentioned in Genesis 42:30-34. Judah emerges here as the chief spokesman in talking with his father.

We have not been impressed with Judah up to this point. Judah was the brother who suggested that they sell Joseph and profit financially from their collective hatred of him. Judah then leaves the family circle, marries a Canaanite, and he begins building his own family. He appears to blame Tamar for his sons' deaths, he visits without qualms a prostitute, but he is righteously indignant when his daughter-in-law Tamar is pregnant through prostitution. Yet, for all that, the statement he makes when he is confronted with the sure evidence

that he is the father of Tamar's children—"She is more righteous than I"—suggests that there may be some change in his own heart. Maybe, just maybe, the Holy Spirit has begun to work in Judah's heart so that his life begins to take a new direction. The twins born at the end of Genesis 38 are named Perez and Zerah. Perez means "breakthrough," and Zerah means "dawn." Has God broken through to Judah, got his attention, so that a new chapter in his life might be dawning?

We do not read of Judah again until the family is hungry, and the sons of Israel must visit Egypt to get grain. Reuben still feels guilt. What about Judah? What are his thoughts and his attitudes about what had happened to Joseph? What will Judah's actions be?

Judah points out the great dilemma that Israel's family now faces. In verses 3-5 Judah begins and ends his words by reminding his father, "The man solemnly warned us, 'You will not see my face again unless your brother is with you.'" Either Benjamin comes along, or the family of Israel faces slow starvation. Israel lashes out by accusing his sons of telling something they should not have mentioned. But hindsight is always 20/20, and the principle of unintended consequences seems to apply. Is father Israel being unfair to his sons? While he does not know the precise role his sons have played in the disappearance of Joseph, he is desperate to hold onto Benjamin. But the brothers can claim, with some legitimacy, that they had no

idea that the questioning by “the man” in Egypt would lead to him making this demand: “Either the young brother comes along, or you can forget about ever getting food from me again.” The family is caught between the proverbial “rock and a hard place.” But the sons of Israel are caught between two other hard places: the harsh words and demand of the “the man” in Egypt, on the one hand, and the painful lament of their father, on the other hand.

Judah’s speech is very striking in verses 8-10. While we cannot be sure that he is speaking for all his brothers at this point in terms of attitude and purpose, we stand amazed that Judah readily promises to protect his half-brother Benjamin. Judah assumes full responsibility for his well-being, and if he should fail, Judah accepts the fact that the blame and guilt for failure will be his alone.

Being afraid in Joseph’s house (43:15-25)

The text is deliberate in telling us what the brothers take to Egypt: gifts, twice the amount of money, and Benjamin. They also go with their father’s prayer: “May God Almighty (El-Shaddai) grant you mercy before the man...” All of these will play a role in terms of satisfying “the man.” But it is the sight of Benjamin (verse 16) that prompts Joseph to move to another phase of his test. No longer will they be subjected to intense questioning, but they will be his guests at a feast in Joseph’s house.

All that the brothers know is that they have been summoned to the

man’s house. They fear the worst. They recognize their own helplessness, complete vulnerability, before Joseph. That “the man” might actually love them as a true brother is the last thing in their minds. They think that he remembers the “lost” money (found in their grain sacks), and now he is vengeful, fully prepared to sell them into slavery and confiscate their donkeys. Ironic, isn’t it: these brothers, who had sold Joseph into slavery, are now afraid that “the man” will sell them into slavery. They are feeling anxiety similar to what their young brother Joseph had experienced years earlier.

Josephs treats his brothers to a banquet (43:26-34)

Joseph arrives at home, and the terrified sons of Israel can only act in very careful manner to show their deep humility. These are the brave men who had earlier mocked Joseph as the “lord of dreams, that dreamer” (Gen. 37:19). They were prepared to kill him, and they thought nothing of selling him to strangers in a murderous attempt to be rid of him. But now, they are reduced to cowering in his presence. Twice the text tells us (verses 26,28) that they bowed down before him, further serving to fulfill the dream prophecies of Genesis 37.

Joseph almost seems to be playing the so-called “good cop, bad cop” game with them. In the first visit, he makes a strong accusation against them (“You’re all spies!”), but he then releases them to go home with grain. Their money mysteriously (at least it is mysterious to them) ap-

pears in their sacks, prompting them to think that God had miraculously put it there. When they are ordered to Joseph’s house, they fear the worst, but when they are there, they are given water to wash their feet and food for their donkeys. We might think that Joseph is toying with their emotions, “playing with their heads,” so to speak. The net effect that Joseph intends is for them to be kept off-guard. At the same time, it may be that he has approved and appreciates their honesty in that they did do what he had required of them: they have brought Benjamin with them. So he now wants to feast with them, although they will not yet know the reason why.

Here then is another irony: while Joseph had pleaded with them from the pit, they had eaten a meal, completely indifferent to his cries (Gen. 37:25). But now, Joseph serves them a feast, arranging them in seating order according to their ages, oldest to the youngest. This “man” must have divine knowledge!

The brothers can only look on with more wonderment at the fact that the youngest, Benjamin, gets five times as much as they received. Why him? What is Joseph’s strategy here? There may be several things going on here at once. First, it may be simply Joseph’s sheer pleasure at seeing his brother again, that, though Joseph must remain incognito, he can at least show this kindness by giving his younger brother plenty to eat and drink. People like to see those they love satisfied with good food. But sec-

ondly, this may be a subtle “special coat” strategy. Just as the special coat that Jacob had given young Joseph created jealousy and hatred from Joseph’s brothers, so it may be that Joseph will pile on the benefits to Benjamin as a way to stir up whatever sinful attitudes and dark feelings that may be lingering below the surface in the half-brothers’ hearts. If Benjamin gets special treatment, how will they all look upon him then? Will it be something like this, “There it is again! Another son of Rachel gets treated better than we.” If Joseph has this in mind, then he is further working toward his brothers’ refinement. Joseph is not tempting them to sin, but he is testing them. Once more, time will tell what really lives in their hearts.

Lesson 11: Points to ponder and discuss

1. Judah seems to have replaced Reuben as the leader of Israel’s sons. Reuben had offered two of his sons to be killed if Benjamin is not brought back home (Gen. 42:37). But Judah offers himself (Gen. 43:9,10). Is Reuben falling to the background because of his earlier sin with Bilhah (Gen. 35:22), or because he was ineffectual as the firstborn son when he failed to protect Joseph? What has happened to Judah that might explain this change in him?
2. All of us probably know of people who show indifference or even contempt for the things of the Lord and His Kingdom in their early years. Perhaps we may have been like that ourselves. The early Judah strikes us as cold and calculating. Is it too easy for more mature Christians to give up on prodigal sons and daughters of the covenant? Is there ever a point when we may give up on them? What things can we do to keep up meaningful Christian contact and witness with them?
3. Father Israel finally sends his sons to Egypt with the prayer that God Almighty may grant them mercy before “the man.” Is prayer a last resort for Israel? How do faith and trust interrelate with planning and careful thinking? How will God’s power and mercy play out in this story?
4. Joseph was called “the man who is over the land” earlier, but in Genesis 43 he is typically called “the man.” From “the man” the brothers have experienced forms of judgment (accusation, imprisonment) as well as mercy (food, returned money, freedom to go home). Like it or not, the sons of Israel must deal with “the man.” To what extent do these things anticipate the (royal, kingly) work of the Lord Jesus Christ later on in history? How is Christ involved with us in both judgment and in mercy?
5. Judah’s speech is so striking in terms of what he is willing to risk for both his father and his half-brother. He is willing to take responsibility for a brother, and he is prepared to assume guilt in the matter. Later on Christ is made like His brothers in every way in order to be a sympathetic High Priest for us. In what ways does Judah’s speech here anticipate the (priestly) work of the Lord Jesus Christ later? What will Christ actually do to be responsible for us? What does He do with our own guilt?
6. The brothers recognizing and not recognizing one another provides us readers some very powerful drama in this story. In addition, meals play a key role at certain moments in redemptive-history. Contrast this all with great meal in the new creation, the marriage supper of the Lamb (Rev. 19:9). What will be the mutual recognition of Christ and of each other that will occur in the new heavens and new earth? How does Jesus Christ treat us now, and how will He treat us who were once His enemies?

Bible Studies on Joseph and Judah

Lesson 12: Joseph “Arrests” His Brothers

Read Genesis 44:1-17

Introduction

There were some tense moments for Israel’s sons as their shopping trip for food had begun, especially when Joseph’s steward directed them to Joseph’s house. They feared the worst, proclaimed their innocence, showed him the money, and offered the gifts. Lots of bowing did not hurt their cause either. But in the end, Joseph hosts his brothers and some Egyptians at a feast. The tensions melt away as food is consumed and drink is imbibed. Everyone is left feeling really good as evening falls, and the brothers then sleep, intending to return home in the morning.

Joseph plans to trap his brothers (44:1-5)

Joseph works together with his own steward in order to set up this “sting operation.” This is not quite the same thing as entrapment, in which a person will be tempted to commit a crime. Rather, Joseph wants a situation to be set up that will extend his test of his brothers. They have claimed to be innocent men, and he has overheard the brief discussion they had about guilt (Gen. 42:21,22). They have *talked* a good line: do they *walk* the same good line? Joseph’s plan will serve to uncover what is really going on in their hearts.

Joseph tells his steward to fill their grain sacks generously (“as much food as they can carry”). He will

appear good beyond expectations. But into the sacks will go their money (again!), and his own silver cup will go into Benjamin’s sack. The beloved son of father Israel either will be the object of the brothers’ protection, or, he will be another brother abandoned to his fate in Egypt. Which will it be? Time will tell. Joseph is testing them.

There is another irony in this story, a parallel from an earlier incident.

The brothers had partied with Joseph the day before, and the night of sleep now has passed. The donkeys are loaded with grain, and they set out on the way home. We can only imagine that the men must have felt great relief and even joy for the most recent events. Consider this: the harsh ruler who controlled the grain had released Simeon and even hosted them at a feast. He had acted so kindly to Benjamin, the young brother concerning whom all in the family had worried. Obviously this harsh ruler has softened toward these men from Canaan, and their actions had proven that they were innocent men, honest men. Taking Benjamin

along, although a gamble (humanly speaking), had paid off. The donkeys were loaded down with grain for the household in Canaan. Father Israel would see all of his living sons again (Simeon and Benjamin included), and there was plenty of groceries as well. Does it get better than this?

However, this delightfully pleasant picture will end very soon. Joseph is scripting the events as they unfold; he knows what he is doing. Probably the evening before, Joseph’s steward is given his lines with which to confront the men. They are to be accused of stealing a very personal item that Joseph uses, his silver cup. This theft is described as repaying good with evil. The master of the steward has shown such great kindness and hospitality to these foreigner visitors, and now look what they have done: stolen this special cup! It is ironic that the brothers had earlier sold Joseph to the Midianite merchants for silver. Now they will be accused of stealing silver in the form of a cup. Some scholars think that this silver cup was no small object, perhaps something approaching the size of a punch-bowl (see Currid, *Genesis*, II:310).

The term “divination” is used in verse 5. Some pagan cultures would read omens by pouring water and oil into such sacred cups (bowls) and then studying how the liquids flowed or mixed together. This is something on the order of reading animal entrails or watching the flight of birds. Stealing such an object was viewed as a very serious crime, the penalty for which could be either death or being reduced to a slave. It is most likely

that Joseph is playing a role here and not actually one who used such divination.

Joseph's steward "finds" the silver cup (44:6-13)

The steward easily overtakes the men, who have not traveled a great distance at all. Hearing these charges, the brothers immediately proclaim their innocence. "Not guilty!" is their plea. They are prepared to make a vigorous defense. They remind the steward that they had brought the silver back from Canaan. Who would have ever expected them to do something like that? If they had gone to such extremes over the earlier cash they had found in their sacks, then surely no one could accuse them of taking anything from the Egyptian ruler. So certain are the brothers of their innocence that they pronounce their own sentence: the guilty person should be executed, while all the rest of the brothers could be reduced to slavery. Obviously they must have all proclaimed their innocence before any search has started. "Not me! I don't have this silver cup." With this their sure belief, would the brothers have dared to pronounce such a possible sentence against themselves?

It is noteworthy, however, that the Egyptian steward lightens the sentence. He says in verse 10 that the guilty man would become a slave, while the rest would be free from blame. The possibility of escape from judgment is held up at this point, but it is only a moot point here: the brothers are convinced that no silver cup will be found. So what difference

does it make to talk about any possible punishment?

The sacks are quickly unloaded from the donkeys. The steward also knows in what order to proceed: start with the oldest brother and move toward the "guilty" one, the youngest. The text says nothing about any of their money being found: the object of the search—and thus of narrative and dramatic tension—is the silver cup. We suspect that each brother breathes a sigh of relief, or perhaps feels (maybe says?), "See, I told you so," when no cup is found in his sack.

There is another irony in this story, a parallel from an earlier incident. When Jacob had left his father-in-law Laban in Genesis 31, Laban is outraged that Jacob has left with his (stolen?) daughters, Jacob's wives, Leah and Rachel. Laban is also very upset that his teraphim were taken, and he searches the group to find these teraphim. Jacob does not know that Rachel has them in a saddle-bag on her camel, just as the brothers were very unaware that the silver cup is in Benjamin's grain sack. One difference, of course, is that Laban never finds the stolen teraphim as Rachel remains seated. But the Egyptian steward, Joseph's accomplice in this sting, finds the "missing" silver cup. Jacob had been allowed to depart with Leah and Rachel, but the brothers of Joseph will not be so fortunate. When the last grain sack is searched, the cup is found.

At this point, the brothers feel the world collapsing around them.

Shocked and numb with grief and disbelief, they tear their clothes. Reuben had done the same thing years earlier when he came back to his brothers, only to find that Joseph was sold and therefore gone (Gen. 37:29). Here, all the brothers tear their clothes, a symbolic action as if to say that their world has "come apart" as emotional pain rips through their hearts. They have no choice: they are under arrest, so to speak, since the steward has undoubtedly come out with some armed guards. They must return to the city and face "the man," the owner of the silver cup.

Joseph offers his brothers a plea bargain (44:14-17)

When listening to news stories about people arrested and accused, we often hear about prosecutors offering a plea bargain arrangement with the accused. The prosecution may lessen the charge in order to get a conviction. The brothers had been so confident of their collective innocence that they were ready to call upon themselves harsh penalties (verse 9). Even the steward had said such was not necessary: only the guilty would be the slave, while the rest could continue on their journey home.

The issue in this portion of Scripture is the fate of Benjamin. What will happen to him? And with that, what role, if any, will the other sons of Israel play in whatever happens to Benjamin? The arrest is part of the test: what kind of men are they now? In earlier audiences, the men had bowed in proper Near Eastern fashion as subjects before a

mighty ruler. But in verse 14 they simply fall to the ground, men reduced to utter helplessness. They literally throw themselves upon the mercy of the court.

Joseph proceeds to give them a tongue-lashing about their crime of stealing, suggesting that he was able to discover their guilt by divination. The brothers had witnessed the incredible ability of Joseph to seat them according to birth order and age; it is believable to hear him say that he could know who the “guilty” party is. And yet, they all know this simple fact: *they did not steal the cup*. How in the world will they be able to convince “the man” that they really are innocent?

Do not fail to notice the man that is quietly identified as the leader of the brothers. Reuben, Simeon, and Levi are not the apparent leaders. Verse 14 says, “Judah and his brothers came in.” It is Judah, the fourth son, who leads in making the opening remarks for the defense (verse 16). Judah continues to emerge in the story as the son on the rise. This will set the stage for the speech that Judah will give during this trial Joseph has with these men.

Judah says “we.” He mentions “your servants’ guilt,” using the plural. He states the verdict: “we are now my lord’s slaves,” again speaking in the plural. But Joseph suggests, “Let’s make a deal.” He proposes that it would be unjust to enslave them all. No, only the guilty should have to pay. He shows them all an open door: you’re all free to go home in peace. Only the guilty brother,

Benjamin, will stay behind as a slave. Joseph does not say that he will execute Benjamin. Will the brothers take this bait? Will they escape, coming home (again) with another son of beloved Rachel missing? What does love demand in such a case? Being filled with terror and with a desire to survive and live, what might they do? What would you do?

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

Lesson 10: Points to ponder and discuss

1. Joseph knows that his brothers have a strong sense of guilt about what they had done to him many years earlier. But he sees that they did what he demanded, namely, they have brought young brother Benjamin along. So why does Joseph keep up these bit of a charade? Why does he not reveal himself to his brothers now? What more does he need to know about his brothers?
2. Joseph’s brothers are not sinless men, but they are not guilty of the theft of which they are accused. What does the Scripture teach us about God’s people being falsely accused? How should we respond in such circumstances? (Think of the many Psalms that address this; e.g., Psalms 26, 28, 44, etc.)
3. Joseph tests his brothers so that they might show what is really in their hearts at this point in redemptive-history. How is this similar to the test that righteous Job suffers? Does the Lord allow such tests today in the lives of some of His saints? Eventually the brothers find out who is testing them. Does Job ever get a similar insight on why he suffers and is tested as he is?
4. Collective guilt and individual responsibility: how are these two elements at work in this story? How do they play out in other places in redemptive history? Read Ezekiel 18.
5. The brothers are terrified by the judgment that may be brought against them. In the Garden of Gethsemane, Christ also faced the utter horror and terror of God’s awesome justice against sin. He faced hellish agony on the Cross. What did Christ pray then? What did He do there for us?

The Praise of the Persecuted Pilgrim

The Apostle Peter's life was one that we can classify as a life full of the highest highs and the lowest lows. Peter had been given faith enough to call out to Christ to come out of the boat, but he lacked faith when he looked at the troubled waters instead of at the Messiah. Peter's faith lacked when he denied the Christ three times the night in which Jesus was betrayed, even though he had said just a few days earlier, you are the Christ, the Son of the living God. Peter had witnessed the growth of the church through the power of the Spirit after Pentecost and on the foundation of his testimony that Jesus was the promised Lord and Savior. Peter's first letter was written to the pilgrims of the Dispersion. Peter had not only seen the church grow, but he also saw the church persecuted. Forced into hiding, believers were being imprisoned and killed for their faith. Hardship and trials abounded. Peter saw a church struggling to reconcile living in the last times, anxiously awaiting the return of Christ with the present context, the everyday reality of their suffering and trials.

Peter's first epistle could have been written directly to us. We live in a land that no longer regards the Bible as its source of truth or morality. We are persecuted, seeking God's face to understand the suffering and trials that come to us. Even so, Peter could do nothing but bring hope to the scattered church because of his faith in the Triune

God. Peter brought a message of great hope and comfort, a message that Calvin wrote "raises us above the world, in order that we may be prepared and encouraged to sustain the spiritual contests of our warfare." Paul wrote in Ephesians "For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this age, against spiritual hosts of wickedness in the heavenly places."

We are fighting a battle against a world that beats us down and hates our Father. But our hope is in God, the author of our election, in the Spirit who continues to work out our sanctification, and in Jesus Christ, who has cleansed us by His blood and raised us up unto obedience to the honor and glory of His name. Peter, in faith and by the power of the Spirit, wrote his letter, not in sorrow, but in a jubilant note of praise and encouragement. It was written not just for the suffering churches then, but also for himself and for the church today.

The Praise of God's Redemption

Peter began his epistle by outlining why we would bless our God. In His grace and mercy, the Father elected us. He is blessed because He has sent us the Comforter, the blessed Holy Spirit that we may continue to be molded and shaped by the love of our Savior. He is blessed in the love and the cleansing brought by the sacrifice of Jesus

Christ. In that blessing, we have been set free and made wholeheartedly ready and willing to serve Him.

Peter could have finished his letter to the persecuted pilgrims at this point. There was more than enough hope given to the church in just the first two verses of his epistle. Yet Peter goes on to remind the people that their praise is to be found in their Father and in the redemption that He has provided in Jesus Christ. We are to praise Him for His works and His redemption and for the attributes that Peter shares with us throughout his letter.

The first blessing that we receive is that God is our Father. Because of the work of Christ in drawing us to the Father and the Father's abundant mercy in redeeming us to Himself, He has caused us to be born again to a living hope. Look again at the situation of Peter's day. Peter would soon be martyred. The church was persecuted at every angle. How could they speak of hope, much less, of a "living" hope?

Peter's response was this: God has given us new life. He has begotten us, caused us to be born again, given us this new life where we are children of God, and God through Christ has become our Father. This in itself is hope. Surely the church's physical and spiritual world was being attacked and tested and tried. But Peter reminded the church that the world, the testing and trials of our life, cannot touch our standing with the Father. Our faith will never be taken from us. Our redemption is secure. God is our

Father. He has shown us mercy that cannot be shaken.

In addition, we have been given a living hope through the promise and resurrection of Jesus Christ. The early church had a living hope because Christ was the fulfillment of the promise, the covenant promises God the Father had established with His people. We have a living hope through the resurrection because of the promise of Immanuel, God with us. We have a living hope because the resurrection was the fulfillment of the promise that Christ would be as a lamb led to slaughter, a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief. We have a living hope through the resurrection because in that new life on that glorious Easter Morning, Christ has fulfilled the great promise of Genesis 3, in crushing the head of the serpent, in defeating sin and death and hell, and bringing His people then before the Father's throne of grace for all eternity. This is the promise set before the people of God by Peter. Look at what you have, Church of God; in the resurrection you have the fulfilled promise of God. This is your source of rejoicing and praise. Do not look at the toil of the day, but look to the completed promise that is yours in Christ.

God had given new life to Peter and to the persecuted church of his day, all the way to the church today. God has called us together as a church to uphold one another in the praise of God's redemption. Not only were the believers to look to the Lord, but He had blessed them in the context of a congregation, of a church that they were a part of then, as well as being a part of the promise of

God's continuing covenantal faithfulness

There is still an additional blessing in our redemption and that is our inheritance. If we have truly been made sons and daughters, then we are heirs to the promise that had been fulfilled in Christ. This is not the inheritance one receives when someone dies, but a promise that is sure to be and is also now. This inheritance is eternal life.

The Father's redemption is not finished there. He has redeemed us to this inheritance. Through Christ we have been made His children, heirs to the promise, now! Peter is speaking to today, providing a glorious description of God's covenant promise to us. Though the world be full of death and decay, stained by sin, and full of darkness, we are assured that His covenant promises will never pass away, that we will be changed and never see or know sin, pain, or hardship again. That promise will shine forth as real as did the promise in the book of Genesis, unto all eternity, never perishing, spoiling, or fading. Together, as those kept by God's power, we will see that glory day, whether in death or at the trumpet sound in that last day.

We await our heavenly existence with the redeemed of God. God is, and ever will be, blessed because of the work of His hands. He has been faithful in the past in causing us to be born again and will continue to

preserve and keep us until that glorious day in the future. This vision of the future coming and our blessing now is sweet and must move all of us to songs of praise.

The Praise of God's Reassurance

The church past, present, and future has enjoyed the thought and reality of the now and coming promise of eternal life. However, there is tension. The vision is before our eyes, but like Peter, so often we get caught up in the turbulence of life. Peter had to learn this lesson for himself. He showed the pilgrims some of the reasons for the struggles and trials that they have encountered. It was meant to reassure them in their faith. Although the time of trial is short, and we are grieved for a little while, there is still a reason for it as God keeps us by His power.

Peter wrote, "you may have had to suffer" or in other translations, "If need be." Simply put, we need to be tried. James wrote, "Consider it all joy, my brethren, when you encounter various trials, knowing that the testing of your faith produces endurance" (James 1:2, 3). The Father is working in us His salvation. The Father, through various trials, upholds the promise of Lamentations 3:31-33. "For the Lord will not reject forever. For if He causes grief, He will have compassion according to His abundant lovingkindness. For He does not

***Look at what you have, Church of God;
in the resurrection you have the fulfilled promise
of God.***

afflict willingly or grieve the sons of men.”

Even in our grief we have hope. We are tried and tested so that the genuineness of our faith may be found to praise, glory, and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ. If something is genuine it will withstand testing. Gold, when tested by fire, proves to be pure gold. Our faith indeed is much more precious than gold. Hope lifts us from the world to see that gold perishes, but faith, when tested and sent through the fires of trial, lasts because of its Creator.

Job was a man who knew much trial and suffering. Yet God gave Job faith the cry out “The Lord giveth and the Lord taketh away. Blessed be the name of the Lord.” Job knew the source of his faith, a faith that showed itself genuine in Job 23:10. “But He knows the way I take; When He has tried me, I shall come forth as gold.” Faith is a gift given to us from the Father that He preserves and keeps and makes grow and by the tests and trials of life He shows us the preciousness of that gift.

God gives us that faith that He tests. True faith shows itself through all circumstances and all times to be exactly what He said it was! All of this brings Christ praise, honor, and glory. At Christ’s return He will say, “Come and enter my rest.” This is the glory of Christ for which Peter longed. He rejoiced at his source of praise in reassuring the faith of the church.

You can almost hear Peter’s own struggle and passionate faith throughout his epistle. “Look, I saw Christ and doubted Him, yet though you have not seen Him, you LOVE

God gives us that faith which He tests and shows itself through all circumstances and all times to be exactly what He said it was!

Him. I did not believe when Christ said He would suffer and die, but because of Him you not only believe, but you are filled with inexpressible and glorious joy even in the struggle we call life.” Peter was showing us the preciousness of faith and was encouraging the pilgrims in their walk. The Church was learning through her time of hardship simply to walk by faith and not sight!

The Praise of God’s Revelation

Peter drives us back to the foundation of our hope, back to Christ. Still, Peter has more to say about the source of our praise because of the gift of the Word of God. God has provided His revelation so that we could know ourselves, and salvation so that we could know Him. He has given us His word that we might rejoice all the more. The church’s salvation was known and written long before Christ died and rose again. It was given in the garden, and it was given to the prophets who prophesied of the grace that would come to you.

Indeed, the prophets lived in hard times and often were called upon by God to deal with the injustice and sin of the people. From the beginning of the Old Testament to John the Baptist these men were equipped to bring the Word of God, of Redemption, and Reassurance. Daniel brought a word of judgment and deliverance; Isaiah, Jeremiah,

Amos, Habakkuk brought the same message, a message of destruction and trial and yet a Word of Hope. Jeremiah and Habakkuk cried out, “How long O Lord,” and rejoiced in the great faithfulness of their God and the life of the righteous. These men agonized and grieved over what they had heard and yet were filled with praise in proclaiming deliverance. It was more than deliverance from the nations that would try them, but it was deliverance from sin.

As much as the prophets inquired of its meaning, there is no meaning without Jesus Christ. They carefully searched and inquired, wanting to know and see and understand what we know. All that they had were shadows. They wanted to know when and how and why a Messiah would come as a man in sorrow to die and rise again. For the Spirit of Christ was not yet upon them in its fullness. We live in reality not shadows. We understand the sufferings of Christ by the Spirit. We understand the glory of Christ seated at the right hand of God making intercession for us. Yet the Spirit did testify to the prophets that they were speaking to us. They were ministering peace to us, not to themselves. Their prophecy stretched well beyond their physical trials and deliverance from spiritual oppressors. They believed the promise, a promise that we have seen fulfilled in Christ.

Our hope is in the Gospel. It is in the plan of salvation that God our Father has willed, that Christ has accomplished, and that the Holy Spirit continues to proclaim to us. A story so awesome, so majestic, that even the angels who minister before the Lord in the fullness of His glory, desire to look into it. The story of God's love for His people is the greatest, sweetest thing ever heard. This is the hope of the pilgrim, the redemption, reassurance, and revelation of God; blessings that transcend our vapor of life, and are a living hope promised for all eternity. No longer must the pilgrims look at themselves or the trials that last for a moment, but instead they marvel and praise God for His goodness in providing salvation, and making it known in His Holy Word.

Mr. Matt Nuiver is a graduate of Mid-America Reformed Seminary. He is a candidate for ministry in the URCNA.

Herman Bavinck: A Sketch of His Life

In my office at Mid-America Reformed Seminary, there are two portraits of Reformed theologians whom I admire and seek to emulate in a small, limited way in my work as a professor of doctrinal studies or systematic theology. One of the portraits is a well-known sketch of John Calvin in his library. The other is a print of the Dutch theologian, Herman Bavinck, which was taken at the height of his labor as a professor at the Free University in Amsterdam in the early years of the twentieth century. Though it is generally agreed that John Calvin is the leading theologian of the Reformed tradition, Herman Bavinck is not a figure who is often regarded as of comparable significance. My decision to hang a portrait of Bavinck, which faces from one end of the room the sketch of Calvin on the other, reflects my conviction that no theologian after Calvin in the Reformed tradition comes closer to his stature than Bavinck. Though there may be theologians in the Reformed tradition that are Bavinck's peer, this often-overlooked theologian deserves to be ranked with only a few theologians whose approach and contributions to Reformed theology are, to use an often-undeserved expression, "larger than life."

My admiration for Bavinck as a theologian partly explains my decision to embark upon a series of articles in *The Outlook*, which will describe Bavinck's life and legacy

as a Reformed theologian and consider a number of the important themes of his theology. However, I also gladly accepted the editor's suggestion that I write this series at an auspicious time for reconsidering Bavinck's legacy. The year of our Lord, 2008, will witness, D.V., the publication of the fourth and last volume of Bavinck's greatest work, *Reformed Dogmatics* (orig.: *Gereformeerde Dogmatiek*). Translated by John Vriend and skillfully edited by John Bolt of Calvin Theological Seminary, this English translation of Bavinck's dogmatics, which is published by Baker Academic and represents the most ambitious project of the Dutch Reformed Translation Society, is an accomplishment that holds great promise for Reformed theology. At last, students of Reformed theology will have Bavinck's dogmatics available to them in English as a model of Reformed theological scholarship at its best.

The year 2008 is also an important year for commemorating Bavinck's legacy, since it marks the 100th anniversary of his delivery of the Stone Lectures at Princeton Theological Seminary. These lectures, which were originally published in Dutch, German and English with the title, *The Philosophy of Revelation*, focus upon one of the primary themes of Bavinck's theology and confirm his reputation at the time as a leading Reformed theologian. In addition to the completion

of the English edition of Bavinck's dogmatics, a conference on Bavinck will be held at Calvin Theological Seminary in September under the sponsorship of a number of Reformed seminaries. The time is ripe, therefore, for the Reformed community in North America to (re)acquaint itself with Bavinck. The purpose of my articles is to contribute in a small way to such a reacquaintance with and commemoration of Bavinck's work as a Reformed theologian.

In order to introduce this series on Bavinck's contributions as a Reformed theologian, I will begin in this article with a brief sketch of his life and most important writings. In subsequent articles, I will offer an overview of Bavinck's dogmatics and also treat some of the most important themes that recur throughout his theological writings.

Early Life and Education

Herman Bavinck was born at Hoogeveen, the Netherlands, in the province of Drenthe, on December 13, 1854. His father, Rev. Jan Bavinck, was a well-known and respected pastor in the *Christelijke Gereformeerde Kerk* (Christian Reformed Church). This denomination was originally formed in 1834 as a result of the *Afscheiding* or "Separation" from the *Hervormde Kerk*, the state Reformed church of the Netherlands that had become increasingly liberal and estranged from the Reformed confessions. The earliest leaders of the Christian Reformed Church in North America, pastors like Albertus Van Raalte (Holland, MI) and Hendrik Scholte (Pella, IA), stemmed from this seceding church tradition. Herman was the second of seven

children born to Jan Bavinck and his wife, and was the oldest of the boys.

Biographers of Bavinck uniformly describe Herman's father, Jan, as a modest and unassuming pastor, who tended to underestimate his own considerable abilities. While the elder Bavinck was a student in seminary, he was asked to teach classes in Latin, Greek, and Hebrew. Later he would commit to his son the completion of his revision and editing of the *Synopsis Purioris Theologiae* (6th ed., 1881 [1625]), a Latin edition and collection of the writings of some of the greatest theologians in the early Dutch Reformed tradition. When the churches of the secession of 1834 established a seminary in Kampen in 1854, Rev. Jan Bavinck was a natural candidate for appointment as a professor, but he declined the appointment and remained in the pastorate. Bavinck's mother, Gesina Magdalena Holland, was by all accounts a natural complement to his father, being more outspoken and aggressive in manner than her husband. The home in which Herman was raised was characteristic of many of the churches of the secessionist tradition. Though the Bavinck family was not poor, they were of modest means and unpretentious in manner. According to the testimony of his son, Rev. Jan Bavinck was a fine preacher, clear and simple in his presentation of the gospel, almost mystical in his deep personal devotion to the Lord and the people of the congregation whom he served. Bavinck's lifelong devotion to the Lord and service to the church as a theologian represent a fitting testimony to what he had been taught by word and example through his parents.

Bavinck's earliest formal education took place at Bunschoten, where his father had moved when Bavinck was still an infant. At the age of seven he enrolled in Hasselman Institute, a private school of excellent reputation in Almskerk in the province of Noord Brabant. At this early stage in his education, he already exhibited considerable academic ability. At the age of sixteen, Bavinck was enrolled in the "gymnasium" in Zwolle, a boarding school that was in many respects comparable to a North American college. Bavinck managed to complete the normal four year program at Zwolle in three years. While at Zwolle Bavinck expressed his desire to attend the University of Leyden for his seminary training. The University of Leyden was perhaps the most liberal, and certainly the most academically prestigious, of the Dutch universities at the time. The faculty at Leyden included such renowned theologians as Kuenen, Scholten and Rauwenhoff, who were known for their repudiation of a confessional Reformed theology and advocacy of an "ethical" and "critical" reinterpretation of the Christian faith. Despite his desire to attend Leyden, Bavinck's parents and others prevailed upon him to commence his studies at the seminary of the Christian Reformed Church in Kampen. However, Bavinck's desire for a full university training at an institution widely renowned for its outstanding scholarship compelled him to transfer to Leyden, much to the displeasure of his parents and many others who feared that he would be unable to retain his convictions and confession under the pressure of a Leyden education.

Bavinck began his studies at Leyden at the age of twenty and was able to

complete his studies by 1880 with the degree of Doctor of Theology, having written a dissertation on the topic of *The Ethics of Zwingli*. Bavinck distinguished himself at Leyden as an exceptional student, and was granted the doctor's degree "with honors," an achievement that was ordinarily not granted to students upon the completion of their studies. During his study at Leyden, Bavinck learned much from his teachers, but also faced many challenges to his personal confession and convictions. To one of his close university friends, he confided that "I have learned much at Leyden, but also unlearned much." Though his personal views were not shared by his professors, Bavinck earned their admiration and would even be offered at a later stage in his life a professorship at the University. While at Leyden, Bavinck became a close friend of fellow student Snouck Hurgronje, who later became a distinguished Semitic scholar at Leyden. Despite substantial differences of conviction, Bavinck maintained his friendship with Hurgronje throughout his life. In course of his studies, Bavinck excelled in language studies, becoming proficient in Greek, Hebrew, and Arabian in addition to his previous mastery of Latin, French, English and German. The influence and impact of his Leyden education are evident in the breadth and excellence of Bavinck's later scholarship as a professor at the seminary in Kampen and then at the Free University in Amsterdam.

The Kampen Years

Upon the completion of his studies at Leyden, Bavinck entertained the idea of further study but was persuaded to enter the ministry in the Christian Reformed Church. After

submitting to an oral examination by the faculty at Kampen, Bavinck became a pastor of a church in Franeker for a short period of two years. During his pastorate, Bavinck proved himself an eloquent and gifted preacher as well as sympathetic pastor. Bavinck's pastorate in Franeker was of immense benefit to him in preparation for his later teaching ministry, as he became personally acquainted with and more adept in his interaction with the people of the churches among whom he served throughout his life.

While in Franeker, Bavinck was twice offered and declined an appointment to teach theology at the Free University in Amsterdam. However, in 1882, when the general synod of the Christian Reformed Church invited him to fill the vacant chair in dogmatics at the seminary in Kampen, Bavinck accepted and began his labor on January 10, 1883, with an inaugural address on "The Science of Sacred Theology." This address was well received throughout the churches, and even captured the attention of Abraham Kuyper, who reviewed it in *De Heraut* (Jan. 21, 1883), observing that "I have hardly ever read a treatise with such undivided attention, from start to finish, as this inaugural." With this inaugural address, Bavinck embarked upon a twenty year period of productive labor at Kampen. Early on he met and married Johanna A. Schippers, a woman who proved to be a gifted partner throughout his

life. One of his Leyden professors, Kuenen, aptly remarked at the time that "Leyden is Scholten as Kampen is Bavinck." Much loved by his students for his modesty, unusual eloquence, and extraordinary breadth of knowledge and reading, Bavinck produced during his Kampen years his most important contribution to theology, the *Reformed Dogmatics* in a first edition of four volumes (1883-1901). He also produced a steady stream of brochures and studies, and was much in demand as a speaker in a wide diversity of academic and popular settings.

Among the works Bavinck produced during this period, in addition to his earlier dissertation and the critical edition of the *Synopsis Purioris Theologiae*, were the following: *The Theology of Dr. Chantepie de la Saussaye* (1884); *The Catholicity of Christianity and the Church* (1888); *Eloquence*, a treatise on the art of public speech (1889); *Principles of Psychology* (1897); *The Sacrifice of Prayer* (1901); and *Creation or Evolution* (1901). In addition to these more academic works, Bavinck also produced a great number of shorter essays and articles, serving for a period with Kuyper and Rutgers as an editor of *The Clarion (De Bazuin)*, the denominational paper of the Reformed Churches of the Netherlands (*Gereformeerde Kerken der Nederland*), the union denomina-

To one of his close university friends, he confided that "I have learned much at Leyden, but also unlearned much."

Bavinck embarked upon a twenty year period of productive labor at Kampen.

tion of the churches of the Secession of 1834 and the churches of the “Doleantie,” a further secession from the Dutch Reformed Church that took place in 1886. During this period, Bavinck also made in 1892 the first of two trips to America. While in North America, he gave an address to the Alliance of Reformed Churches holding the Presbyterian System in Toronto, Canada. He also took the occasion to visit with his close friends Geerhardus Vos, who was at the time professor at Calvin Theological Seminary, and also H. E. Dosker, who was a professor of theology at Hope College. He also took the opportunity to visit Princeton Theological Seminary to make the acquaintance of professor B. B. Warfield.

Professor at the Free University

During the struggle that took place in the 1880’s to unite the churches of the Secession (1834) and the churches of the Doleantie (1886), one of the most disputed issues was the question of church control over the teaching of theology and the preparation of students for the ministry. Most of those who stood in the line of the Secession of 1834 wished to maintain the principle of church-control, whereas those who stood in the line of the Doleantie under Kuyper favored the principle of “free study” or the location of the discipline of theology in a university setting. Bavinck, who participated

significantly in the process that led to the union of these churches in 1892, was something of an anomaly in his own tradition, since he was sympathetic to the idea that theology should be pursued in a university context so as to encourage the most rigorous academic and “scientific” approach. This preference provides an explanation for Bavinck’s decision, upon the fourth occasion of an appointment in dogmatics to the Free University, to accept the appointment in 1902. Much to the disappointment of the supporters of the seminary in Kampen, Bavinck assumed the post at the Free University as Abraham Kuyper’s replacement (Kuyper had been asked by the queen to organize a cabinet for the Dutch government). And so Bavinck began another important phase in his life, now as professor of dogmatics at the Free University. His teaching at the Free commenced on December 17, 1902, with an inaugural address on *Religion and Theology*.

Bavinck’s work at the Free University continued the labor he had begun at Kampen. During this period of his life, he revised and published a second edition of his *Reformed Dogmatics* (1906-1911). Even though he assumed a formidable challenge as Kuyper’s successor in the area of dogmatics, he enjoyed the same reputation with his students at the Free University as he had earlier at Kampen. During this period, Bavinck visited

America for a second time, principally to deliver the Stone Lectures at Princeton Theological Seminary in 1908, when he was also privileged to visit with President Theodore Roosevelt who shared with Bavinck his pride in his Dutch heritage. However, there is evidence of some shift in Bavinck’s scholarly interests during this later period of his teaching. As he described it to his friend Dosker, “As I grow older my mind turns more and more away from dogmatic to philosophical studies and from these to their application to the practical needs of life about me.” The titles of many of Bavinck’s works during this period reflect this shift of attention and interest. Another shift in Bavinck’s work is evident in his increasing withdrawal from direct engagement in church affairs. Never comfortable in church settings that involved fierce conflict or disagreement, Bavinck sought to disengage himself from direct involvement in church matters and gave his attention to the Christian school movement in the Netherlands and to a number of pressing social issues of the period. In many of his later writings, Bavinck attempted to offer a broad philosophical and pedagogical basis for the pursuit of excellence in the cause of the Christian schools at every level, including the university.

Among the works of particular importance to this period of his life are the following: *Calling and Regeneration* (1903); *Principles of Education* (1904); a second, revised edition of *Reformed Dogmatics* (1906-1911); *Our Reasonable Faith* (1909; Dutch title: *Magnalia Dei*), a compendium of his more extensive dogmatics; *The Educa-*

tion of the Adolescent (1916); *The New Education* (1917); *The Philosophy of Revelation* (1919, including the Stone Lectures of 1908); and *Biblical and Religious Psychology* (1920). During this period of his life, Bavinck also addressed a number of social and political issues, such as the question of women's suffrage, which he favored, and the question of *Christianity, War, and the League of Nations* (1910). Bavinck's intellectual interests were wide-ranging, from traditional theological and philosophical topics to a broad range of social, cultural and political questions. His reputation is evident from the accolades he received from friend and foe alike, his knighting by the queen as a member of the Order of the Dutch Lion, his membership in the First Chamber of the States General, and his membership in a number of prestigious scientific societies.

Bavinck's life within God's providence was concluded rather unexpectedly, at a time when he was still engaged in a variety of academic, political, cultural and church settings. After offering an eloquent address on the floor of the synodical meeting of the Reformed churches in Leeuwarden, Bavinck suffered a heart attack from which he first rallied but never fully recovered. After a prolonged period of illness, Bavinck "fell asleep" in the Lord on July 29, 1921. Among the poignant memories recorded of visits with Bavinck at the time is one of Bavinck's words in reply to the question whether he was afraid to die: "my dogmatics avail me nothing, nor my knowledge, but I have my faith, and in this I have all."

Characteristic Features of Bavinck's Work

In the course of our subsequent articles on aspects of Bavinck's work and theology, we will have occasion to comment further on characteristic features of his theology. However, in order to complete this biographical sketch of his life and work, I would like to conclude with a few summary observations regarding Bavinck.

Though it is difficult from the point of view of historical distance to capture the person of a figure like Bavinck, the profile that emerges from his contemporaries and biographers is that of a son who was in many ways like his father. Bavinck was by all accounts an exceptionally gifted person, particularly in the area of his scholarship. However, he seems to have exhibited a reserve and modesty throughout his life that belied his ability. Like his father before him, he was as likely to underestimate his ability as overestimate it. In his dealings with others, especially in his engagement with the views of others, even of those with whom he strongly disagreed, Bavinck was always courteous and respectful, perhaps to a fault. Wherever possible, he would acknowledge the partial truth expressed by others even though he could not finally concur with their viewpoint. Consequently, though he was ultimately uncompromising in his convictions or confession as a

Reformed theologian, Bavinck was nonetheless often respected by contemporaries who were not at all sympathetic to his viewpoint.

Since we are primarily interested in Bavinck's scholarly and theological labor, there are several outstanding qualities of his work that are worthy of note. One of these qualities stems from what we have noted about his person, namely, his sympathetic treatment of the views of others. Throughout his writings, Bavinck exhibits a meticulous care in representing alternative positions. Before he critically engages a position with which he disagrees, he is at great pains to represent it in the best possible light and to acknowledge whatever insight it might express. He also resists the temptation to arrive prematurely at a conclusion. In his dogmatics, for example, Bavinck evidences an extraordinary familiarity with the discussion of theological topics throughout the history of the church. When he addresses a theological topic, he takes account of the spectrum of opinion throughout history and among the most diverse confessional communions (whether Protestant, Roman Catholic, Eastern Orthodox). Only after a thorough canvassing of the biblical, historical and confessional discussion of any particular topic does he arrive at a conclusion of his own. And even then he resists the temptation to be inappropriately "dogmatic" about the position he personally

The titles of many of Bavinck's works during this period reflect this shift of attention and interest.

His reputation is evident from the accolades he received from friend and foe alike.

espouses. There is a reserve, even tentativeness, about Bavinck's theological work that has sometimes been criticized as too concessive or uncertain. Some even argue that in this respect Bavinck's work may have unwittingly contributed to some of the theological declension that would later occur among the Reformed churches in the Netherlands. Whether this is a fair judgment or not, it is no doubt the case that Bavinck looked with disfavor upon any theological method that was too hasty in arriving at conclusions or too arrogant to allow for the possibility of correction or improvement. The qualities of meticulous and catholic scholarship, painstaking research and consideration of all the possible answers to a question, characterize Bavinck's work in an exemplary way.

It has been suggested, not implausibly, that Bavinck's theology reflects a kind of "duality" that corresponds to his personal biography. Bavinck is at once the faithful son of the "Secession" of 1834 and the scholar who deliberately chose to study at the most liberal university in the Netherlands, a university that had felt deeply the brisk winds of the eighteenth century Enlightenment. On the one hand, Bavinck endeavoured to adhere faithfully to the authority of the Scriptures and the subordinate standards or confessions of the Reformed churches. On the other hand, he read widely and engaged sympathetically the best of modern theological scholar-

ship and culture. One could characterize Bavinck as, in these respects, a "man between two worlds." In a remarkably revealing passage in an essay on the nineteenth-century liberal Protestant theologian, Albrecht Ritschl, Bavinck himself expressed something of this tension in his thought and life:

Therefore, whereas salvation in Christ was formerly considered primarily a means to separate man from sin and the world, to prepare him for heavenly blessedness and to cause him to enjoy undisturbed fellowship with God there, Ritschl posits the very opposite relationship: the purpose of salvation is precisely to enable a person, once he is freed from the oppressive feeling of sin and lives in the awareness of being a child of God, to exercise his earthly vocation and fulfill his moral purpose in this world. The antithesis, therefore, is fairly sharp: on the one side, a Christian life that considers the highest goal, now and hereafter, to be the contemplation of God and fellowship with him, and for that reason (always being more or less hostile to the riches of an earthly life) is in danger of falling into monasticism and asceticism, pietism and mysticism; but on the side of Ritschl, a Christian life that considers its highest goal to be the kingdom of God, that is, the

moral obligation of mankind, and for that reason (always being more or less adverse to the withdrawal into solitude and quiet communion with God), is in danger of degenerating into a cold Pelagianism and an unfeeling moralism. Personally, I do not yet see any way of combining the two points of view, but I do know that there is much that is excellent in both, and that both contain undeniable truth.

As we take up in subsequent articles various facets of Bavinck's theology and scholarship, we will have occasion to observe this convergence of emphases in his thought. I shall hope to show that these emphases were not in ultimate disharmony in Bavinck's work. Rather, the catholic breadth of Bavinck's understanding of the biblical, Reformed faith required that he critically engage modern theology with the gospel of Jesus Christ, who is the Mediator of creation and redemption. Like his contemporary, Abraham Kuyper, Bavinck could not be satisfied with an approach that did not seek to bring all things captive to the obedience of Christ. Nor could he be content with the idea that any dimension of truth is separable from the Truth that is in Christ, to whom all things in heaven and on earth are subject.

Dr. Cornelis Venema is the President of Mid-America Reformed Seminary in Dyer, Indiana.

Examining the Nine Points: An Introduction

In the Reformed and Presbyterian world summer usually means Synod or General Assembly, and the summer of 2007 was a particularly notable season for such assemblies since both the Presbyterian Church in America (PCA) and the United Reformed Churches in North America (URCNA) took action regarding the New Perspective(s) on Paul and the self-described Federal Vision movement. In turn, these assemblies followed on the heels of reports received by three other confessional Reformed denominations and federations (the Orthodox Presbyterian Church, Reformed Church in the United States, and the Orthodox Christian Reformed Churches) also rejecting the same movements. In the series of essays to follow I will explain the statement of Pastoral Advice that was adopted by the delegates to Synod Schererville (URCNA).

New Perspectives

Since 1974 the confessional Reformed and Presbyterian Churches in North America have been troubled by a series of proposed revisions of a series of related doctrines. The Rev. Mr. Norman Shepherd, then a professor of Systematic Theology at Westminster Theological Seminary (Philadelphia, PA), proposed to in a course of lectures on the doctrine of salvation (soteriology) that sinners are justified by “faith and works.” This doctrine created considerable opposition and ultimately led to Mr. Shepherd’s dismissal from the

seminary. Over the course of the controversy in the 1970s he modified his language to teach justification through “covenant faithfulness” but without discernable change to the substance of his theology. Since that time he has openly rejected the historic Reformed doctrine of the imputation of the active obedience of Christ (i.e. that all of Christ’s obedience was not for himself but for us and that all that he did and not just his death on the cross is imputed to believers). Along with this proposed revision of justification by faith alone (*sola fide*) came proposed revisions of the doctrines of covenant, election, and baptism (which have been addressed in the pages of this magazine).

At the very same time these revisions were being proposed within the Reformed churches scholars of Palestinian Judaism and scholars of the New Testament were proposing equally far-reaching revisions of our understanding of setting and doctrine of the Apostle Paul. This movement has come to be known as the “New Perspective(s) on Paul (hereafter NPP). In the 1990s these two movements coalesced in certain quarters of the Reformed churches. The revisions first proposed by Mr. Shepherd in the 1970s seemed to have been given a new lease on life by this vigorous academic movement that seemed to be reaching similar conclusions. According to the NPP, speaking quite generally, the Apostle Paul was much less concerned about how

one is “right with God” and much more concerned with determining who is “in” the covenant community and who is “out.” Some of the more popular writers advocating versions of the NPP seemed to be saying the same thing as Mr. Shepherd (and others): we get into the covenant of grace by grace by baptism, which makes the baptized person temporarily, historically, and conditionally united to Christ, elect, and justified, and we stay in the covenant by cooperating with grace.

Of course those who know their church history will recognize this formulation as exactly that which was rejected by the Protestant Churches in the sixteenth century. It also turns out that the picture painted for by the proponents of the NPP is misleading. The impression is sometimes created that because some rabbis sometimes talked about grace that when the Protestants criticized Paul’s opponents for teaching a doctrine of righteousness by works that the Protestants misrepresented the rabbis. The evidence seems to disagree, however. What seems to have been happening is this: some rabbis spoke quite baldly about appearing before God on the basis of works. Others did speak of grace, and cooperation with grace. The proponents of the NPP and the FV do not seem to be aware that righteousness before God on the basis of “grace plus works” is not much better than righteousness before God on the basis of works alone. In both cases our works are definitive for our standing before God. Second, neither the NPP nor the FV seem to understand that the Reformation was responding to a very similar doctrine:

THE NINE POINTS OF (URCNA) SYNOD (SCHEREVILLE) 2007

Synod affirms that the Scriptures and confessions teach the doctrine of justification by grace alone, through faith alone and that nothing that is taught under the rubric of covenant theology in our churches may contradict this fundamental doctrine. Therefore Synod rejects the errors of those:

1. who deny or modify the teaching that “God created man good and after His own image, that is, in true righteousness and holiness,” able to perform “the commandment of life” as the representative of mankind (HC 6, 9; BC 14);
2. who, in any way and for any reason, confuse the “commandment of life” given before the fall with the gospel announced after the fall (BC 14, 17, 18; HC 19, 21, 56, 60);
3. who confuse the ground and instrument of acceptance with God before the fall (obedience to the commandment of life) with the ground (Christ who kept the commandment of life) and instrument (faith in Christ) of acceptance with God after the fall;
4. who deny that Christ earned acceptance with God and that all His merits have been imputed to believers (BC 19, 20, 22, 26; HC 11-19, 21, 36-37, 60, 84; CD I.7, RE I.3, RE II.1);
5. who teach that a person can be historically, conditionally elect, regenerated, savingly united to Christ, justified, and adopted by virtue of participation in the outward administration of the covenant of grace but may lose these benefits through lack of covenantal faithfulness (CD, I, V);
6. who teach that all baptized persons are in the covenant of grace in precisely the same way such that there is no distinction between those who have only an outward relation to the covenant of grace by baptism and those who are united to Christ by grace alone through faith alone (HC 21, 60; BC 29);
7. who teach that Spirit-wrought sanctity, human works, or cooperation with grace is any part either of the ground of our righteousness before God or any part of faith, that is, the “instrument by which we embrace Christ, our righteousness” (BC 22-24; HC 21, 60, 86);
8. who define faith, in the act of justification, as being anything more than “leaning and resting on the sole obedience of Christ crucified” or “a certain knowledge” of and “a hearty trust” in Christ and His obedience and death for the elect (BC 23; HC 21);
9. who teach that there is a separate and final justification grounded partly upon righteousness or sanctity inherent in the Christian (HC 52; BC 37).

righteousness before God on the basis of grace and cooperation with grace. The Reformation agreed with the Apostle Paul (Rom 11:6), when it comes to righteousness before God, grace and works are two opposite principles. As far as we are concerned justification is either by God's unmerited and undeserved favor or it is by works. We confess that Jesus has accomplished all righteousness (Matt 3:15–17) for us and we benefit from all he did by faith alone, i.e. by a "certain knowledge and a hearty trust" that "God without any merit of mine, of mere grace, grants and imputes to me the perfect satisfaction, righteousness, and holiness of Christ, as if I had never committed nor had any sin, and had myself accomplished all the obedience which Christ has fulfilled for me" (Heidelberg Catechism 21, 60).

Interpreting Synod

One of the main matters of business at Synod was to address an overture brought by Classis Michigan regarding the FV theology. As part of dealing with that overture Synod took two actions. First it re-affirmed and strengthened the language first adopted at Synod Calgary regarding justification by faith alone (*sola fide*). Synod affirmed: "the Scriptures and confessions ... teach the doctrine of justification by grace alone, through faith alone, based upon the active and passive obedience of Christ alone" and "the Scriptures and confessions teach that faith is the sole instrument of our justification apart from all works." Synod also determined to "remind and encourage individuals and churches that, if there are office-bearers suspected of deviating from or obscuring the doctrine of

salvation as summarized in our confessions, they are obligated to follow the procedure prescribed in Church Order Art. 29, 52, 55, 61, and 62 for addressing theological error." That same assembly also voted overwhelmingly against the distinctive doctrines that compose the FV. So there were Three Points on *sola fide* and Nine Points on the FV adopted in two motions.

It is important to note that we are discussing ecclesiastical action. These are not private opinions of pastors and theologians but represent the consensus of those delegated to Synod by the churches. This means that we must exercise care in interpreting these points. This approach, of course, assumes that the Nine Points can and should be understood by ministers and laity alike. It has been suggested, however, that only those who were actually in attendance can actually, accurately interpret these Synodical actions. This is an odd hermeneutic. Neither you nor I were present during the history of redemption, nevertheless we interpret the Bible daily. It is true that all "all things in Scripture are not alike plain in themselves" (Westminster Confession of Faith, 1.7), but Scripture is clear enough, with the help of God's Spirit, to be understood for faith and life, that even the simplest of God's people can understand what they must for righteousness and life. The proposed hermeneutic (only those present can understand) would also make it impossible for us to understand the Canons of Dort.

Fortunately, the Reformed Churches have and should never consider that only those present at synods can actually discover the

intent of the document and the intent of the body in adopting a document. When an ecclesiastical body adopts a document or a series of points that use the expressions, "synod affirms" or "synod denies" the intent of Synod is not a mystery. The question remains what exactly Synod is affirming and denying (hence these essays explaining the Nine Points) but it is clear that Synod has taken a clear stand *for* some doctrines and *against* others. Synod's rejection of the inclusion of works in the definition of faith as it functions in the act of justification is unambiguous. According to the Reformed faith, sanctification and good works are necessary as "fruit" (Belgic Confession, Art. 24; Heidelberg Catechism Q. 86) and evidence of justification (James 2:14–26) but not as part of the ground or instrument of justification (righteousness before God). The ground of justification is certain: the imputation of Christ's active and passive obedience. Further, it seems clear from the "Three Points on *Sola Fide*" that Synod intended to reject the revision of the doctrine of justification proposed by Mr. Norman Shepherd and his followers in the FV, that we are justified by trusting *and* obeying.

Synodical Ambiguities

There is, however, a question about the nature of the action taken by Synod Schererville in adopting the Nine Points. Synod took the unusual step of describing the Nine Points as "pastoral advice." The difficulty arises from the fact that the words "pastoral advice" do not occur in the church order and thus there is some ambiguity about the force of something called "pastoral advice." In one sense, insofar as "Federative

relationships do not belong to the essence or being of the church” (Foundational Principles of Reformed Church Government, #7, adopted at the first Synod in 1995), all actions of Synod are “pastoral advice” in a federation since any congregation that cannot submit to the decisions of Synod are free to withdraw from the Federation (Church Order, Art. 29). In another sense, insofar as we are voluntarily bound together in a federation, nothing Synod does is “pastoral advice.” Article 29 of the Church Order says in part, “All decisions of a broader assembly are to be received with respect and submission, and shall be considered settled and binding, unless it is proved that they are in conflict with the Word of God or the Church Order.” Even though Synod described the Nine Points, as “Pastoral Advice” they were adopted, after thorough and vigorous debate, by Synod. Surely when the Church Order says “decisions of a broader assembly” it means for us to think of those actions of Synod adopted by Synod. The Nine Points constitute an act of Synod.

A second ambiguity about the Nine Points also emerged after Synod Schererville. The same Synod that adopted the Nine Points also established a study committee to bring a report to the next meeting of Synod (2010) leaving something of a vacuum in the intervening period. Thus these essays on the Nine Points are not offered as an authoritative, ecclesiastical interpretation, in lieu of the committee’s report, but they are offered as an interim work for the edification of the churches seeking to understand the issues surrounding the contemporary controversy over the doctrines

of covenant, election, justification, and baptism.

Whatever ambiguities may surround the Nine Points, one thing is clear. They are a series of unequivocal denials of error adopted overwhelmingly by the delegates to Synod Schererville. Those errors are clearly stated and just as clearly rejected. Synod does not “pastorally” reject a series of errors. It rejects them categorically.

The Righteousness of Synod

It has also been suggested that Synod acted improperly by considering the committee recommendation of the Nine Points. In the years preceding Synod Schererville it has sometimes been argued that Synod can only address the FV problem if a minister or elder was charged with error and if that case came to classis or Synod on appeal. Two things are to be noted in response. First, Synod has not agreed with this principle since Synod Escondido (2001) when the assembly adopted a series of points on the creation controversy even though no officer had been charged with error. Second, it is fortunate for us that the Reformed Churches did not follow this procedure in the seventeenth century or else there would never have been a Synod of Dort to produce the Canons we rightly treasure.

It is clearly within the power of Synod to address matters “that pertain to the churches of the broader assembly in common” (Church Order Art 25). It is clearly within the power of Synod to make decisions that are “to be received with respect and submission” (Art. 29). Of course Synod can address doc-

trinal errors that threaten the whole Federation.

Finally, under this heading, some have objected that it was improper for Synod to adopt the Nine Points since they did not come from a consistory but from an ad hoc committee of Synod. This objection is particularly hard to understand since, were the United Reformed Churches to adopt this principle we would become genuinely congregational and not Reformed in our polity. Second, it would mean that no broader assembly could actually act as a deliberative body, i.e. it could not adopt committee recommendations, amendments, or substitute motions. Church Order Art. 25 says, “In the broader assemblies only those matters that could not be settled in the narrower assemblies, or that pertain to the churches of the broader assembly in common, shall be considered. All such matters shall originate with a Consistory and be considered by classis before being considered by synod.” It certainly appears that the Nine Points adopted by Synod meets these tests. The Nine Points came to the floor of Synod from the committee appointed by Synod to consider an overture by Classis Michigan concerning these very issues. The doctrines of covenant, justification, election, and sacraments affect all our churches. This matter had already come, in a less developed form, to Synod Calgary (2004) by way of an appeal of classical action. In response to that matter Synod reaffirmed that the United Reformed Churches understand the Word of God as confessed by the Reformed faith to teach justification by faith alone, without works, and that the basis of our righteousness

before God is the imputation of the active and passive (suffering) obedience of Christ. By Summer 2007, with an overture from Classis Michigan before them, it became obvious to the delegates to Synod Schererville that it was time for Synod to address these questions more completely. We may be grateful that the delegates found a way to speak clearly, biblically, and confessionally to these difficult issues.

Dr. R. Scott Clark is an Associate Professor of Historical and Systematic Theology at Westminster Seminary in Escondido, California.

Recommended Reading

R. Scott Clark, *Baptism, Election, and the Covenant of Grace* (Grand Rapids: Reformed Fellowship, 2007).

— “Baptism and the Benefits of Christ: The Double Mode of Communion in the Covenant of Grace,” *The Confessional Presbyterian Journal* 2 (2006): 3–19.

— ed. *Covenant, Justification and Pastoral Ministry: Essays by the Faculty of Westminster Seminary California* (Phillipsburg: P&R Publishing, 2006).

Cornelis P. Venema, *Getting the Gospel Right: Assessing the Reformation and New Perspectives on Paul* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 2006).

— *The Gospel of Free Acceptance in Christ: An Assessment of the Reformation and ‘New Perspectives’ on Paul* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 2006).

Michael S. Horton, *Covenant and Salvation: Union With Christ* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2007).

Guy P. Waters, *The Federal Vision and Covenant Theology: A Comparative Analysis* (Phillipsburg: P&R Publishing, 2006).

— *Justification And The New Perspectives On Paul: A Review And Response* (Phillipsburg: P&R Publishing. 2004).

Gary L. W. Johnson and Guy Waters, ed. *By Faith Alone: Answering the Challenges to the Doctrine of Justification* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2007).

Report on Justification Presented to the Seventy-Third General Assembly of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church (2006).

Mid-America Reformed Seminary, *The Doctrinal Testimony Regarding Recent Errors* (2007).

For more resources see: <http://www.wscal.edu/clark/fvnpp.php>.

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Parables

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Acts 14-28

Rev. Henry Vander Kam

II Corinthians

Gospel Power Magnified through

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I & II Thessalonians

Rev. Henry Vander Kam

II Timothy & Titus

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I Peter

Rev. Henry Vander Kam

I Peter

Pilgrims Among Pagans

Dr. Nelson Kloosterman

I John

Rev. Henry Vander Kam

Catechism Materials

Learning to Know the Lord

by P. Y. De Jong

First Book of Christian Doctrine

by Hylkema & Tuuk

A Beginning Course in Christian Doctrine

by P. Y. De Jong & John R. Sittema

Other Materials

Michael Brown, ed.

Called to Serve

A Handbook for Office-bearers

R. Scott Clark

Baptism, Election, & the Covenant of Grace

Casey Freswick

Postmodern Liberalism - Repainting a Non-Christian Faith

Daniel R. Hyde

Jesus Loves the Little Children

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An Exposition of the Belgic Confession

John R. Sittema

With a Shepherd's Heart

Reclaiming the Pastoral Office of the Elder

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