

# The Outlook

APRIL 2008

Volume 58 | Issue 4

Dedicated to the Exposition and Defense of the Reformed Faith

The Bronze Altar

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Bavinck  
the Dogmatician (1)

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Amandus Polanus  
on Sanctification/  
Regeneration

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Bible Studies on  
Joseph and Judah

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Examining the  
Exploration of  
Ethics

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Examining  
the Nine Points—  
The Introduction (III)

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Looking Out  
and About

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The Character  
of the Church's  
Creeds (1)

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HOLY BIBLE

# The Outlook

Dedicated to the Exposition and Defense of the Reformed Faith

April 2008—Volume 58 No. 4

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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.

Portage, MI 49024

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

Email: editor@reformedfellowship.net

Website: www.reformedfellowship.net

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**Editor:** Wybren Oord

**Contributing Editor:**

Dr. Cornelis P. Venema

**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

# The Bronze Altar

*“The priest shall make atonement for him in regard to his sin which he has committed, and he shall be forgiven.”* Leviticus 4:35b

For five hundred years the children of Israel had lived in Egypt as strangers in a strange land. During that time their numbers had greatly increased. A new Pharaoh had ascended the throne who did not know Joseph. He did not know how much the Egyptians owed to the strangers who lived in Goshen. Instead, he feared that their numbers were so great that they might ally themselves with his enemies and destroy him. The more he thought about this, the more he became determined to eliminate the undesirable aliens in his land. He did not succeed. Instead, the people of Israel were released from their bondage by the mighty hand of God.

## A Tabernacle of Instruction

The Israelites were released into the desert on their way to the Promised Land. On their way, the Lord chose to reveal Himself to His people. That revelation had to be a progressive revelation. They were spiritual infants. Israel had not passed through Egypt unscathed. They had learned much; they needed to unlearn even more.

At this point, they were in the kindergarten stage. They did not learn quickly but their Leader was very patient with them. He gave them object lessons throughout their journey in the desert. He taught them through pictures.

The tabernacle, with all its furniture and sacrifices was such a picture. It showed them sin and its dire consequences.

It also showed them that a way of reconciliation between a holy God and His sinful people was being prepared for them. Jesus Christ is that way. The tabernacle—its outer court, Holy Place, Holy of Holies, and all the furniture in them—pointed the Israelites to Jesus Christ.

In the outer court stood a bronze altar. There the prodigal could find his way back to the Father’s house. It was the place where lost sinners became obedient cleansed children of God. In this court they were covered with the precious blood of the spotless lamb.

The outer court of the tabernacle was first grade in the Father’s school. With grateful hearts the little ones learned to spell the word “RECONCILIATION.” None could come to God who had not first passed through the court and stood before the bronze altar.

The bronze altar would at once draw the attention of any worshipper who entered through the gate. It was right there. You entered the gate and there was the bronze altar. The position of the altar was meant to teach all who entered the tabernacle that man’s first need is to have his sins and impurities purged

away. Until that is done one cannot presume to worship God or enter into His presence.

The bronze altar was the largest piece of furniture in the tabernacle. It was made of acacia wood and overlaid with bronze. It was four-square, nine feet by nine feet, and stood five feet high. At each of the four corners of the altar was a horn made of acacia wood overlaid with bronze.

## Adonijah at the Altar

Very early in the first book of Kings it is recorded that David was well advanced in years, even near death. Who would be king after him? Absalom, the oldest son, was already dead. David had chosen Solomon to follow him as king. Adonijah, the second oldest son, went directly against the wishes of his father. He gathered some people around him, went to the priests for the necessary sacrifices, and declared himself to be the once and future king. Upon hearing the news, David appointed Nathan the prophet and Zadok the priest to anoint Solomon immediately as King over Israel. He would be the one who would receive the blessings from God.

When the news came to Adonijah, he was filled with fear. What should he do? Would Solomon with all of David’s armies and the blessing of the great Jehovah do to him as had been done to others who threatened the throne? Would his fate be like that of Absalom? Should he hide in a cave? Should he flee the country? In I Kings 1:50 we read “And Adonijah was afraid of Solomon, and he arose,

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went and took hold of the horns of the altar.” Adonijah fled for protection to the tabernacle and, in particular, to the corners of the bronze altar. Clasp the horns of the altar he would be safe from his brother’s wrath. Solomon, upon hearing that Adonijah was in the tabernacle holding onto the horns of the bronze altar allowed him to return to his own house.

When you read I Kings 1 all by itself, you cannot help but wonder how the horns of the altar could provide protection for Adonijah against the wrath of Solomon. The passage in Leviticus, however, tells us that the horns of the altar were sprinkled with blood—and in that blood there was great significance.

Death had already been there. The sword of justice had already done its work. It was the blood—and the blood only—that gave the horns of the altar its protective power. It released Adonijah of the guilt of trying to take over the throne for at least as long as he did not try it again. It released him, not because he was innocent, but because he knew he was guilty. He had confessed his guilt by grabbing the horns of the altar. What Adonijah was seeking was not justice, but mercy. When Solomon heard the news, he gave to Adonijah not only his life, but also his property, thereby establishing the throne as one of mercy rather than combat.

### **The Burnt Offering**

All the sacrifices of the people of Israel were brought to the bronze altar. The Bible tells us that without the shedding of blood there can be no remission of sin. In Leviticus 4, different sin offerings were com-

manded to be offered depending on who the offender was—the priest, the congregation, a leader, or the common person. Each was to bring an animal without blemish for sacrifice—a bull, a goat, or a lamb. Whether the sin was intentional or unintentional, the offender had to bring the sin offering to the bronze altar. The one bringing the sacrifice would have to press his hand hard upon the sacrifice as it was being slaughtered. The priest would take the blood of the sacrifice and put it with his finger on the horns of the altar. The fat of the animal would be burned on the altar. The rest of the animal would then be carried out of the entire camp and burnt to ashes. Those ashes would then be poured out to be blown away by the wind.

Leviticus makes very clear that the sinner himself had to come with the sin-offering. No servant, no friend, no parent, no child could go in the sinner’s place. No matter who you were; king, prophet, priest, or the common person; the sinner had to come. The transaction that was to take place on the altar was between the sinner and the holy God.

The tie-in there is obvious, isn’t it? You yourself must confess your sin before God. No one else can do it for you. If you want to come into the presence of the Most Holy God you have to acknowledge your sin and come to the altar that God has prepared.

In addition, once the sacrifice was laid on the altar, the person had to press hard his hand upon that sacrifice even as the priest thrust his knife into it. Sounds a bit gory, doesn’t it? It points out to us how absolutely gory our sin is! Lay your hand upon the Lamb, press hard, lean hard into it even as it is being killed and know for a fact that the wages of sin is death. The symbolism that the Lord brought into the sacrifice is obvious. As you picture the sin of the sinner being transferred to the animal upon the altar remember, these words of Isaiah 53:6: “The Lord has laid on Him the iniquity of us all.”

No longer is it the Roman soldiers who crucified Jesus. We killed Him! We pierced His hands and His feet. Our sin brought Jesus to the cross. Press your hand and your heart hard against that sacrifice upon the cross. As you lay your hand upon Him as He dies, know that your sins were transferred to Him. His death, in all its gory detail, was for you.

Four times in Leviticus 4 we read the words, “*and he shall be forgiven.*” Even as the sin of the guilty one was transferred to the innocent lamb, the blamelessness of that spotless lamb was transferred to the repentant sinner. Behold, the Lamb of God that takes away the sin of the world. God, according to the riches of His grace, not only transfers our

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***What Adonijah was seeking was not justice,  
but mercy.***

sin to the One dying upon the cross, but He imputes the righteousness of the sinless Christ to us.

### **The Rest of the Animal**

With all the pomp, ritual, and smoke rising up always from the fire on bronze altar, not all of animal was to be burnt on the altar. Half the animal, if not more, was brought outside the camp and was burned there until it was consumed.

We read in the New Testament: “And they took Jesus and led Him away. And He, bearing His cross, went forward into the place called the place of the skull, which in Hebrew is called Golgotha” (John 19:16, 17). The author of Hebrews ties this verse from John with the events that surrounded the bronze altar: “Wherefore Jesus also, that He might sanctify the people with His own blood, suffered without the gate” (Hebrews 13:12). In other words, Jesus suffered and died outside the city.

The entire sacrifice upon the brazen altar—the whole event from beginning to end—is a picture of Christ. It is no wonder that great scholar of the Old Testament, the apostle Paul, cries out his greatest desire is “That I may know Him!” (Philippians 3:10).

What about those ashes? The whole offering was burnt to ashes. The ashes from the sacrifice must correlate with the Christ who is our sacrifice. Do they represent how my sin is completely destroyed before God? As the winds blew away the ashes, so my sins are blown away out of God’s sight as far as the east is from the west?

One could certainly read that into the passage, but the passage really says so much more! In everything else there is a correlation between the sacrifice on the altar and Jesus Christ, but there is no correlation between the ashes and the Christ. The animals sacrificed upon the altar were completely destroyed. There was nothing left of them. That is why the sacrifice had to be done again and again. They were not enough. “For it is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins” (Hebrews 10:4).

The greatest victory ever won was when Jesus was nailed to the cross as our sacrifice and He cried out with a loud voice: “It is finished.” Yes, He suffered. Yes, He died. But on the third day He rose again. Jesus is the victor. That why the Book of Hebrews continually uses the phrase “Christ is the once for all sacrifice for our sins.” We do not have to go to the bronze altar time and time again. We need but come to Christ. He is the sacrifice that the Holy God received and accepted as the complete sin offering for our sin. “God made Him who knew no sin, to be sin for us, so that in Him we might be the righteousness of God” (II Corinthians 5:21).

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

## **PHILADELPHIA CONFERENCE ON REFORMED THEOLOGY**

Theme

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# Bavinck the Dogmatician (I)

Though Herman Bavinck's contributions to Christian scholarship were wide-ranging, he is properly known first of all for his work as a theologian. The most important work that Bavinck's productive pen ever produced was his monumental, four-volume *Reformed Dogmatics* (hereafter RD).

The translation and publication of Bavinck's dogmatics in English is a project of signal value for Reformed theology, since it will now introduce a far larger audience to Bavinck's fertile treatment of the great topics of historic Christian theology. Due to its value and importance for an appreciation of Bavinck's contributions to Reformed theology, our consideration of Bavinck in this and subsequent articles will primarily focus upon this work, and offer something of a digest or summary of its contents. After we have reviewed the main emphases and topics of Bavinck's dogmatics, we will also consider three themes that recur throughout Bavinck's scholarship: the "catholicity" of the Christian faith, the relation between God's work as Creator and as Redeemer ("common grace"), and the "certainty of faith" upon the basis of divine revelation.

Part of my purpose in presenting this series of articles on Bavinck's life and thought is to commemorate his contributions on the occasion of the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Stone Lectures he delivered at Princeton Theological Seminary in 1908, and

to call attention to the completion of the project to translate his dogmatics into English. However, my purpose also includes whetting the appetite of some readers to procure Bavinck's *RD* and read it for themselves.

Admittedly, this may prove for many to be a challenge, since we do not live in period in which Christians are accustomed to reading robust theological literature. There is a great deal of popular literature available today, but hardly anything that compares to Bavinck's dogmatics. Indeed, it is unlikely that Bavinck's dogmatics will make it on to the shelf of many Christian book stores, or the coffee tables of many Christian homes! (Nor will it likely compete for sales with the latest popular book by Joel Osteen or Rick Warren!)

Though I can remember my father recalling how Bavinck's dogmatics were owned and read by lay members of Reformed churches in a previous generation, the likelihood that many will purchase and read with eagerness the English translation of his *RD* is doubtful. Nevertheless, in the event that some readers of these articles choose not to read Bavinck's *RD* for themselves, my digest of his work will perhaps serve another purpose. Short of benefiting directly from reading Bavinck's work, at least readers will have a relatively brief and, I hope, accessible summary of his dogmatics by means of these articles.

## Introduction to Dogmatics

We begin our digest of Bavinck's dogmatics where Bavinck begins. In the first, and easily the most difficult, volume of his RD, Bavinck treats the subject of what is known technically as "theological *prolegomena*." Though this language may throw some readers off initially, it refers, literally, to "the first things that must be said" in Christian theology. In more common language, Bavinck's first volume of the RD offers an extended treatment of the "introductory matters" that are basic to Christian, and particularly Reformed, theology.

The purpose of this volume is to offer readers an account of the discipline of theology in general, and the branch of theological study known as "dogmatics" in particular. A particular focus of this introductory volume is the exposition of the doctrine of divine revelation, which constitutes the foundation or basis for any true knowledge of the living God. Since modern thought is often hostile to the idea of an authoritative revelation from God, and has sought to undermine the foundations of traditional Christian theology, Bavinck is especially anxious in this volume to address head-on the challenges raised to Reformed theology by the philosophy and world view of the modern age, particularly since the time of the Enlightenment of the eighteenth century.

## The Terminology of "Dogma" and "Dogmatics"

The very first thing that Bavinck considers in his RD is the terminology that is often used to describe the systematic or orderly presenta-

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tion of the truth of divine revelation in Christian theology. Whereas it has become common in English-speaking circles to designate this area of theology by such terms as “systematic theology” or “the study of the Christian faith,” Bavinck wishes to defend the traditional language of “dogmatics.” Only this language captures the distinctive focus and aim of theology, when it seeks to set forth in a disciplined and orderly fashion the principal teachings of the Word of God.

According to Bavinck, the language of “dogma” or “dogmatics” calls attention to four features of the knowledge of God that this branch of theology expounds. First, the terminology itself emphasizes a kind of knowledge that is “established and not subject to doubt” (RD 1:29). Unlike human opinions or prejudices that have little or no standing, dogma is, in the nature of the case, something that is regarded as certain or sure. Not only in theology, but also in other branches of human knowledge or areas of human life, the term “dogma” always connotes a conviction that has the quality of certitude. Just as a political dogma derives its authority from the civil government, so theological dogma derives its authority finally from what the theologian regards as divine testimony. Dogma, for the believing Christian, is the undoubted truth that corresponds to God’s self-testimony in his revelation.

Second, the term “dogma” has a “social” dimension; it refers to what is held to be true within a particular circle or community. Though the truth of God’s self-testimony does not depend upon our recognition of it, it always calls forth a re-

sponse, either the response of faith or of unbelief. The dogmas of Christian theology are the truths of Scripture, which are acknowledged within the community of faith, the Christian church.

Third, since dogma refers to what is certain, God’s testimony to the truth, and since dogma summons believers to recognize its truth, dogma involves an intimate interplay between two components; divine authority and churchly confession. Whenever the church sets forth what she believes upon the basis of the Word of God, we may

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speak of the church’s “dogmas,” which are of special importance to the Christian theologian. Though the dogmatician has the obligation to “test” the correspondence between what the church confesses and what God’s Word reveals, he always does so as a believer who stands within the community of faith and shares the common confession to which this community adheres.

Fourth, though the term “dogma” may be used loosely to refer to all the truths taught in the Word of God, the special task of the Reformed dogmatician is to interpret

the Word of God in line with the “articles of faith” that comprise the church’s confession before the world.

Reflection on these features of dogma yields a fairly clear picture of the special responsibility of Reformed dogmatics. The purpose of this branch of theology is to set forth in a coherent, orderly way, the dogmas that are revealed in the Word of God and confessed by the church in her conformity to the Word of God. The dogmatician must take his stand within the community of faith, as a believer who has a heartfelt conviction regarding the authority and truthfulness of God’s testimony in his Word. And he must aim to demonstrate how the dogmas of the church are derived from and are in agreement with divine revelation.

**The Material Content of  
Dogmatics**

After his somewhat formal treatment of the terminology of “dogma” and “dogmatics,” Bavinck addresses the topic of what might be called the “material content” of dogmatics. In doing so, he offers a defense of the traditional conception of theology as a genuine human science, which expounds a true knowledge of God and not merely a description of the human experience of God. In his consideration of this important and complicated subject, Bavinck frontally challenges the claims of humanistic philosophy and the arrogance of modern science, both of which seek to oppose the claim that theology is a legitimate science and that it expresses a true knowledge of God himself upon the basis of divine revelation. Bavinck’s claim is that

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“dogmatics is, and can only exist as, the scientific system of the knowledge of God. More precisely and from a Christian viewpoint, dogmatics is the knowledge that God has revealed in his Word to the church concerning himself and all creatures as they stand in relation to him” (RD 1:38). This definition of dogmatics, Bavinck acknowledges, assumes the truth of a fundamental dogma of the Christian faith, namely, that God exists and has revealed himself to his image-bearers in such a way as to give them a true knowledge of himself.

Though it may seem transparently true to us that theology assumes God’s existence, his self-revelation and knowability, Bavinck is keenly aware of the challenges to this basic Christian conviction in the realm of modern philosophy and science. For example, in the philosophy of Immanuel Kant, an influential philosopher who expressed well the spirit of the 18<sup>th</sup> century Enlightenment, the conviction that it is possible to have a true knowledge or understanding of God upon the basis of his self-revelation was radically set aside. According to Kant’s analysis of the limits of human understanding, the sciences are only able to know objects that are accessible to the human knower’s experience of phenomena in space and time, and that are subject to the limitations of human understanding. Because God transcends the limitations of human experience and knowledge, he is ultimately unknowable by means of human reason. From the standpoint of Kant’s philosophy and conception of the limits of human knowledge, theology, at least in its traditional sense, is not a legitimate science. Accord-

ing to Kant, we simply cannot know God directly through divine self-revelation.

As a result of Kant’s criticism of the traditional approach to theology, the German liberal theologian, Schleiermacher, attempted to find a new basis for theology in what he termed the human experience or “consciousness” of absolute dependence upon God. In Schleiermacher’s view, there is no possible basis in divine revelation for a true knowledge of God. However, it is possible for theology to describe the way in which different religions express distinct forms of the basic religious awareness of dependence upon the Absolute. Schleiermacher’s solution to the problem posed by Kant’s repudiation of the possibility of a knowledge of God based upon divine revelation, has captivated many theologians in the modern period. For these liberal theologians, it is simply no longer possible to base theology or the knowledge of God upon anything other than human experience. Though various theologians offer different accounts of the character of such experience, few are willing to view theology as anything other than a descriptive discipline. As a result, theology is permitted a place in the modern university only in the form of a “department of religious studies” or a “department of religion.”

But it was not only the claims of thinkers like Kant and Schleiermacher that posed a challenge to the traditional understanding of Christian theology, according to Bavinck. The privileged sciences of the modern period are those empirical sciences that limit their inquiry to a description of what can be seen and investigated through the senses, and described by means of human reason’s reflection upon the material world. Mathematics and the natural sciences have become the universal standard of truth in the modern era. The older sciences of philosophy, and especially theology, are judged by the measure of modern science to be purely “subjective” in their orientation.

Though theology, for example, may claim to be a study of the truth concerning God and his revelation, modern science views things quite differently. Theology at best offers merely a description of the characteristic features of religious experience and practice. As such, theology offers no “objective” truth regarding God as he can be known through revelation. Even where God’s existence is grudgingly acknowledged to be possible (though unknown and undemonstrable), the claim that he has revealed himself through a self-testimony that is accessible to human beings and capable of being understood by them, is generally rejected.

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***Bavinck is keenly aware of the challenges to this basic Christian conviction in the realm of modern philosophy and science.***

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Bavinck, who was well-taught in the history of philosophy and science, makes clear at the outset of his dogmatics that he is unwilling to concede these claims of post-Enlightenment thought. Rather than permit theology to be banished from the university as an illegitimate discipline, which lacks any standing as a science, Bavinck insists that theology is a legitimate science. It represents a true form of human knowledge that is based upon an acknowledged and reliable source, God's testimony in his Word. The knowledge of the truth that theology derives from divine revelation is no less true than the knowledge of the special sciences, all of which base their claims upon an acknowledged and reliable foundation.

Bavinck also argues that the pretended objectivity and neutrality of science is itself a fiction. Faith, in the sense of a foundational commitment to the reliability of human reason's apprehension of the natural order, is as critical to the enterprise of the non-theological sciences as it is to the science of theology. The insistence on the part of modern thinkers that theology is "unscientific," unless it merely describes the phenomena of human religious experience and foregoes any claims to truthfulness, represents a failure to reckon with the fact that the scientist also begins with (or must presuppose) non-theoretical commitments that undergird and enable him to carry on his work. Furthermore, the claim of liberal theology that no true or objective knowledge of God is possible rests upon a pre-theoretical, heart commitment that simply denies outright the possibility of a genuine revelation or testimony on God's part to himself.

In our earlier sketch of Bavinck's life, we observed that Bavinck chose to attend Leyden University because of its reputation as a first rank academic institution. In his reflection upon and defense of the science of dogmatics, it is evident that Bavinck's own biography played a significant role. In his consideration of the challenges of modern philosophy and science to the discipline of dogmatics, Bavinck demonstrates a rich and sophisticated grasp of challenges to the Christian faith and theology in the modern era. But he also exhibits a resolution not to allow the exclusion of theology from the modern university to go unopposed.

Both Bavinck's scholarship and his deep religious commitment are evident in the way he endeavours to confront the contemporary crisis of theology in the world of scholarship. Bavinck's own conviction regarding the place of theology within the academy played an important role in his decision to leave the seminary in Kampen and teach at the Free University in Amsterdam. It is not difficult to see something of his own decision in this respect showing through in his comment in his introduction to the RD on the place of theology as a science in the university.

We conclude, therefore, that when in the interest of church practice the modern science of religion concedes to dogmatics an ecclesiastical method and the practical disciplines an ecclesiastical seminary, it is thereby doing the church a 'favor' that Christian theology cannot accept. If it did, it would

thereby be admitting that materialistic or pantheistic unbelief bears a scientific character and at the same time that Christian faith does not belong in the domain of science. As a special favor, space may be cleared for it in an annex of the temple, in an ecclesiastical seminary! (RD I:52)

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

# Amandus Polanus on Sanctification/Regeneration

Modern Reformed Christians may be surprised to hear in Belgic Confession, Article 24 that faith regenerates. Similarly, John Calvin's third chapter of Book III of the *Institutes of the Christian Religion* is also called "Regeneration by Faith." Doesn't regeneration precede faith? The statement in the Belgic Confession might even sound Arminian to some. That is one reason that the Reformed Church in the United States (RCUS) changed Article 26 to read that we are "sanctified by faith" instead of "regenerated by faith."<sup>1</sup>

The way to understand this language is to realize that many of the sixteenth century Reformed theologians used the word "regeneration" to refer to the whole process of the elimination of sin from our soul and body. The Latin word can mean simply "renewal," which is obviously applicable to the whole process of the transformation of the Christian.

Today we usually speak differently. Later theologians used the word "regeneration" to refer to the initial implantation of new life in the elect and "sanctification" to refer to the process of removing sin throughout our lives. If we take the meaning of the word "regeneration" as "reborn," the later usage of the word seems to be more accurate. We are only born once. On the other hand, the older usage still has some insight for us, as we can gather from a short

doctrinal handbook written by Amandus Polanus.

Before we proceed to discuss Polanus's ideas on sanctification, we should say a brief word about his life. Amandus Polanus was born in the East German city of Polansdorf (hence, Polanus) in December 1561. He studied under a Melancthonian Lutheran at Breslau and became a low Lutheran, particularly through his study of Romans 9. His major objection to Lutheranism had to do with the doctrine of election. He later wrote in Latin *A Treatise on Predestination*, which was translated into English in 1597, defending this doctrine he had come to believe. Polanus joined the Reformed Church when he went to Basle, Switzerland, in 1583 and then on to Geneva where he studied under Beza whom he called "the Irenaeus of that century." In 1590, he returned to Basle and received his doctorate.

In 1596, Polanus became professor of Old Testament at Basle. He gained considerable fame through a new translation of the Bible. One of his major works was *Partiones Theologicae* or *Theological Distinctions*.<sup>2</sup> This work was translated into English along with some of his other writings and published in London in 1597 under the name *The Substance of the Christian Religion*. He was one of the most famous theologians in the age just after the Reformation.

## Regeneration by Faith

In Polanus's *Theological Distinctions*, we can see some of the advantage of using the word "regeneration" for sanctification. By using the word "regeneration" for the whole process, the connection between what we call "regeneration," "sanctification," and "glorification" is made clear. All three of these words refer to the removal of sin from our nature by a cleansing work of the Holy Spirit and an implantation (placing of new characteristics or habits) of grace within us.<sup>3</sup>

Thus, regeneration is the initiation of the process of transformation. Sanctification is the continuation of that process throughout our lives on earth. Glorification is the completion of that process.

We must understand, then, that the initiation of the transformation of our nature is temporally prior to justification. We do not believe in Christ until there is a transformation of our nature to enable us to repent and believe. This is the commencement of a new life within us, and we then begin to put this new life into action by faith and repentance, whereupon we are justified.

It is of the utmost importance, however, to continually affirm that we are not justified (declared to be righteous) on account of the implanting of new characteristics within us. This could not be the case because, first, the new characteristics within us (faith, hope, etc.) cannot make up for past failures to keep the law (which would render us perpetually unrighteous in ourselves), and, second, there is still the presence of sin within us, so that no act or

characteristic within us is in utter or complete conformity with the law.

It seems that some, however, have confused the early Reformed use of the word regeneration with a modern denial of the concept of an *ordo salutis* (order of salvation). In fact, in Polanus (as one example), there is a clear understanding that this renovation or regeneration has stages of initiation, progression, and consummation.<sup>4</sup>

Polanus also divides regeneration into that of the soul and that of the body. The regeneration of our soul consists in illumination and repentance (*resipiscentia*).<sup>5</sup> As the soul has two faculties (intellect and will), so regeneration heals these two parts. Illumination heals the intellect, and repentance heals the will.

In discussing the second part, repentance, he notes that it is a renovation of the will. This renovation of the will is something that it is totally a gift of God: “[Repentance] does not proceed from our free will, for that was lost after the fall, and there is nothing tending towards the good and especially towards eternal salvation (Gen. 6:5), but it is the gift of God.”<sup>6</sup> Thus, within regeneration (as Polanus defines it), there is an initial aspect that enables us to move toward saving good (which includes the exercise of faith), and this is solely a gift of God.

Polanus was able to bring together and show the progression of the three stages of transformation by this one word regeneration or renewal. At the same time, Polanus also believed that an initial transformation of the will was necessary in order for someone to be able to

believe. The phrase “regeneration by faith” is not used in an Arminian sense.

### **The Mechanics of Sanctification**

Polanus proceeds from this discussion to describe the mechanics of repentance. He notes that there are two parts of this renewal: mortification and vivication, that is, putting to death the old man and bringing to life the new man (Rom. 6:4-6, Col. 3:5-10, Rom. 8:13).

Mortification consists in an ac-

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knowledge, confession, and hatred of sin along with a true grief over sin (Is. 66:2, 2 Cor. 7:11, 2 Kings 22:19).<sup>7</sup>

Vivification is also called our resurrection with Christ. It consists of two parts: the consolation of the conscience and government by the Spirit.

The second aspect of our vivification, the government by the Spirit, is something that seems to be commonly understood. This occurs when God leads us and enables us by His Holy Spirit to walk in the way of His commandments.

It is particularly interesting, however, that Polanus places consolation or

assurance as part of living a new life in Christ. It is “the true joy in God of the humbled conscience of the believer after having received remission of sins through Christ by faith (Ps. 51:10, 14; Rom. 5:1; Is. 57:15-18; 61:1; 49:13).”<sup>8</sup> Thus, for Polanus, growing as a Christian means having a greater and greater joy over the justification that we possess in Christ.

The application that we can draw from his discussion is the high importance of the preaching of the law and the Gospel for our sanctification. This does not mean what many people think. It is more often thought that sanctification preaching is Gospel-law, that is, “You are forgiven, now obey God’s law out of gratitude.” This, of course, is part of sanctification preaching.

However, what Polanus’s definition gives us is an understanding that “sanctification preaching” is also law-Gospel, that is, “You have broken the law, and you are forgiven only on account of Christ’s righteousness.” This is often thought to be what we preach to those who are outside the Church or unconverted within the Church. Of course, this *is* what we preach to them, but it is also primarily what we preach to the converted.

Think back to Polanus’ definition of repentance. If our growth in repentance consists primarily in acknowledgment, confession, and humbling ourselves over our sins, then the law must be preached in its full power in order to produce those effects. Secondly, if we understand that becoming a new man in Christ is about joy over what we have received, then the Gospel must also

be preached in all its sweetness and consolation (*consolatio*, the word Polanus used).

Finally, we understand that there is not a huge chasm between the way we preach to believers and unbelievers. In both cases, the central message is, “You are sinner, and your only hope is Jesus Christ.” Understanding and receiving this message is how we become Christians, and it is how we grow as Christians.

This is also confirmed in the Heidelberg Catechism. There it says that all our obedience, even as Christians, is only a small beginning of what is required. The logical question is,

Q. Why, then, will God have the Ten Commandments preached so strictly, since in this life no one can keep them? A. First, that all our life long we may learn more and more to know our sinful nature, and so become the more earnest in seeking remission of sins and the righteousness Christ; second, that we may constantly endeavor, and pray to God for the grace of the Holy Spirit, to be renewed more and more after the image of God, till after this life we arrive at the goal of perfection (Q/A. 115).

All along the way to heavenly glory, we will continually be led to humble ourselves over our past and present sins. This will lead us more and more to see our standing before God as founded completely on Christ’s blood and righteousness. Even in glorification, the song of the

redeemed will be, “Worthy is the Lamb who was slain to receive power and riches and wisdom, and strength and honor and glory and blessing” (Rev. 5:12, *NKJV*).

#### Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> The Three Forms of Unity (Sioux Falls, SD: Pine Hill Press), 48.
- <sup>2</sup> Amandus Polanus, *Partitiones Theologicae* (London, 1591).
- <sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 58-60.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 17. This is Polanus’s discussion of free will in the various states of man’s existence.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 58.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 58-59.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 59.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 60.

**Rev. J. Wesley White** is the Pastor of the New Covenant Presbyterian Church in Spearfish, South Dakota.

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The Board of Reformed Heritage Christian School Association of Kalamazoo, Michigan, is inviting applications for high school faculty opening for the 2008-2009 school year.

The openings are of a combination of the following: math, science, and history, with some Spanish preferred.

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Interested candidates should send a cover letter and resume to: Reformed Heritage Christian School, 700 Fletcher Avenue, Kalamazoo, MI 49006; attention Mr. Dave Vander Meer, administrator. For more information, phone Mr. Vander Meer at 269-383-0505 or email at: dnjvm5@att.net.

# Bible Studies on Joseph and Judah

## Lesson 15: Pharaoh Directs Israel to Move

**Read Genesis 45:16-28**

### **Introduction: reconciliation after testing**

Joseph reveals himself to his stunned brothers. When the reality dawns upon them that they have been dealing all this time with their very own brother Joseph, the scene becomes very emotional. Joseph and Benjamin embrace each other and weep. The brothers talk together a long time about many things. Joseph has tested his brothers, and now the time for family reunion begins. God is good! Though He may place many trials and tests along the pathway of His people's lives, in the end He brings about greater blessings. Joseph has tested his own brothers, and the reconciliation is a beautiful picture and example of how God's grace can impact our lives.

### **Pharaoh says, "Come on down!" (45:16-20)**

Earlier in verse 2 it was noted that the report of Joseph's brothers being "in town" with Joseph had reached the ears of the Pharaoh. That part of the story had been interrupted as we read the details of Joseph revealing himself to his brothers. Verse 16 now picks up that part of the story. The news reports about Joseph's brothers being in Egypt could not, of course, be kept from the king of Egypt. Pharaoh and the entire Egyptian court hear this, and they are very pleased by this news. Pharaoh is not passive in his reaction, but he

gives very specific directions to Joseph about transferring the entire extended family of Joseph from the land of Canaan to Egypt. Carts loaded with goods are to go to Joseph's father, and the carts can be used again to transport everything down to Egypt. An all-expense paid trip to Egypt, one might say! "Don't worry about a thing," says Pharaoh (verse 20). "You will be put up in the best region that Egypt has to offer."

Going to Egypt has not been beneficial for the people of God up to this point. Consider these earlier incidents. Abram and Sarai nearly met with disaster in Genesis 12:10-20. The Pharaoh expels them once he realizes that Sarai was in fact Abram's wife. Then later on in Genesis 26:2 the LORD warns Isaac not to go to Egypt. But now the conditions seem to permit entrance into Egypt, even by God's direction. Yet Israel must remain a distinct (i.e., holy, separate) people in Egypt. This separation of the covenant people is always important, in both Canaan and in Egypt.

Here we see that God's plan of salvation is carried through in spite of evil intentions by men. The focus is not on Joseph's graciousness and bigheartedness. Yes, he is gracious and most helpful, but the real focus is going to be on God's preservation of the covenant race. But it is more than mere preservation; it is glory and honor. The Pharaoh assures Joseph and Jacob's family of the "best that Egypt contains;

you will live on the fat of the land" (verse 18) and "the best of all Egypt is yours" (verse 20). God has steered the Egyptian king to give nothing but the best for His people.

### **Joseph arranges for the family move (45:21-24)**

In obedience to Pharaoh's wishes, but especially in a desire to unite his family in a physical sense, Joseph sets about to prepare the way for his family to come to Egypt. We are not surprised to read that he furnishes his brothers with the necessary supplies for the journey back to Canaan. Verse 22 tells us that he provides each brother with a change of clothing. We can understand this on several levels. Of course, it is a token of his affection to give them clothes. But is there a bit of irony here as well? After all, it was a special coat from his father Jacob that had contributed to the brothers' hatred of Jacob. It was that same coat that had been stripped from Joseph by the bitter brothers, dipped in goat's blood and then presented to their father. Now the tables are turned: it is Joseph who is in charge of all Egypt, and he hands out the clothes to brothers who had once taken Joseph's coat away! And his brother Benjamin gets extra money and more clothes! Donkeys are loaded with goodies and food. This will not only help them on the return trip, but these goodies will also be evidence for Jacob to see that the story is true: Joseph is alive and is doing very well in Egypt.

There is one more thing that Joseph tells his brothers before they leave. In verse 24 he says, "Don't quarrel on the way!" Now it may be possible to understand the words in the original to

mean that they should not be afraid for their safety while they go back to Canaan. However, most understand this sentence to mean that Joseph does not want them to get tangled up in mutual blaming and recriminations. After all, now everything is out in the open for all to see. The guilt that had been gnawing away at the consciences of the brothers—perhaps more for some, less for others—is now uncovered. They had tried to snuff out Joseph’s existence, but here he is, big as life. Their dirty deeds of the past now could easily become the reason for a mutual blame-game.

But Joseph appears to say to them, “Don’t even talk about it! There is no profit in that discussion.” In other words, he does not want his brothers to dig up the past and assign blame for the sinful actions of the past. What is past, is past! And no one can change the past in the sense of actually turning the clock backward. Joseph has forgiven them because he sees the bigger picture, namely, that God was working to bring about saving his family’s lives and bringing a blessing to many other people in the process. S.G. De Graaf (*Promise and Deliverance*, vol. 1, p. 240) says that the

brothers were not “to blame themselves or each other, for the wrongdoing had been erased. Together with Joseph, they would believe in forgiveness. In that belief, they would be one.” Forgiveness allows everyone to move on again in life.

**Good news revives a father’s broken heart  
(45:25-28)**

We have dealt with the portion of the story that is reported in Genesis 45:25-28 (see *Bible Studies on Jacob: Genesis 25-49*, p. 130). Briefly, we simply note that

**Lesson 15: Points to ponder and discuss**

1. What is so striking or noteworthy about Pharaoh’s reaction to the news that Joseph’s brothers have come to Egypt? Is it somewhat unusual to have Pharaoh actually command that Joseph’s family join him in Egypt? What does this suggest about what Pharaoh thinks of Joseph and his presence in Egypt?
2. Pharaoh may or may not be consciously aware that what he is doing for Joseph’s family is a part of the divine plan, but Proverbs 21:1 says that the Lord can move the heart of the king as He wills (cf. Dan. 4:31-32,35; Isa. 45:1-3). What examples are there today (or in recent history) of how governments and national leaders have acted for the benefit of God’s people, the church? What risks are there when Christians begin to rely upon the state and political leaders for benefits and favors?
3. The Spirit of the Christ is working in the heart and life of Joseph. Joseph’s actions reflect something of what Christ would do for us later in redemptive history. Read John 14:1-6. Just as Joseph had prepared things for the arrival of his family, what has Christ done to prepare for our arrival in our eternal home, the new creation? In what ways is the Father’s house mentioned in John 14:2 so much better than the best of the land of Egypt?
4. God had repeatedly promised the patriarchs Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob the “pillar promises” of land and seed (descendants). Moving out of Canaan puts the promise of land into question, does it not? How relevant is Genesis 15:13-16 to this plan to move Jacob and his family to Egypt? What is good about this move, and what is dangerous about this move?
5. Joseph tells his brothers not to quarrel (Gen. 45:24). How does this reflect the Spirit of the Lord Jesus Christ as His will for life is heard in the words of Joseph? How is the gospel to make an impact on the way this household of God is to live together?
6. Psalm 25:7 asks the Lord God not to remember the “sins of youth.” How are sins forgiven? Does God remember those sins? Why or why not? Why is it sometimes hard for us to accept God’s forgiveness? What happens when people continue to dwell upon their sins and their guilt?

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the news of Joseph being still alive is initially met with unbelief on the part of Jacob. All the previous years of Joseph being absent had caused Jacob's heart to run cold and numb with grief, but all the words and evidence of Egyptian carts mount up to present aged Jacob with a conclusion that he could not deny. He now accepts the good news that the son who once was (thought to be) dead, was very much alive. The news of that "resurrection" (so to speak) kindled a flame of spiritual comfort for father Jacob.

The thoughtful reader is reminded of our reading of the Easter morning accounts in the Gospels where the initial reports of Jesus being alive again, risen from the dead, were initially met with unbelief. We think of Jesus' disciple Thomas,

who heard the reports of an empty tomb and of a living Savior, but he would not believe it until he was confronted with physical evidence (John 20:24ff.). But God is the God of miracles, of strange possibilities, and of unbelievable realities. Joseph never physically died, but the perception was that he had died. They say that "perception is reality." Well, yes and no. The reality is that Joseph was alive, although the perception had been—and they all had believed this!—that Joseph was dead. Jesus Christ, on the other hand, was really dead when He died on the cross on Good Friday. That was both the reality and the perception held by all. But the gospel is good news of what God does for us! Jesus Christ is risen from the dead! That is reality as well, and this wonderful message brings hope and courage, comfort and confi-

dence to God's people who embrace this with faith in the power of the Holy Spirit.

For Jacob and his entire family, a brand new chapter is about to be written. Their night is passing, and a new dawn confronts them with the marvelous reality that Joseph is not dead, but he lives and has great authority over a powerful empire. The thoughtful reader knows that many, many more years must pass before the Kingdom of God will come in power and glory. There will be dramatic setbacks for the people of God in the years ahead. God's covenant people will not always stay on the main track that leads to glory. But a refreshing oasis is being reached for the people of the Lord as these preparations are made for Israel to relocate in Egypt.

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## Bible Studies on Joseph and Judah

### Lesson 16: Israel Moves to Goshen

**Read Genesis 46:28 – 47:12**

**Introduction: all Israel moves**

The book of Exodus tells the story of how God brings His people out of Egypt and sets them on the journey toward the Promised Land. The stories in these chapters of Genesis, on the other hand, tell us how Israel comes to dwell in Egypt in the first place. The Joseph – Judah stories in Genesis 37-50 serve as a kind of narrative bridge that carries us over from Canaan to Egypt. Canaan is indeed the Promised Land, but to survive

physically, Israel must go down to Egypt for a period of time. God was working in the midst of the sinful actions of Joseph's brothers to prepare the way for Israel to move his entire household to the best part of Egypt, the land of Goshen.

This move was specifically and enthusiastically endorsed by Pharaoh himself. The ruler of Egypt wants Joseph to send for his father and all that belongs to Joseph's family. Joseph puts the services and resources of Egypt to work so that Israel, his entire family (children

and grandchildren), and all his possessions might move to Egypt. God will even come to Jacob in a vision of the night (Gen. 46:2-4), and He assures the aging patriarch that this move has heaven's approval. Many things are looking up, one might say.

We get a long list of names in which the inspired text of Genesis 46 tells us who went down to Egypt. The division of family units here is by each wife and her maidservant, Leah with Zilpah, then Rachel with Bilhah. The text tells us that 70 people went into Egypt, i.e., "all Israel" (cf. Deut. 10:22). There are some Biblical critics who say that only some of Israel went to Egypt, only some came out later,

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and some never left Canaan at all! But such a view is not in agreement with the biblical text. Furthermore, the Greek translation of Exodus 1:5 gives us the number of 75, not 70. Apparently Stephen quotes this when his words are recorded in Acts 7:14. Some scholars suggest that this figure may include five more descendants of Joseph (see the NIV *Study Bible* note for Acts 7:14).

In any case, the number 70 may represent a complete population. Some suggest that the number of peoples recorded in Genesis 10 comes to 70 nations. Shem, Ham, and Japheth are the ancestors of the world's population after the Flood. Admittedly, one can be a little too imaginative at times about the use of numbers in the Bible. Yet consider this: Leah's and Zilpah's descendants together are forty-nine (7 x 7), and Rachel's and Bilhah's descendants together are twenty-one (3 x 7). So this deliberate use of the number 70 (10 x 7) may very well point in the direction of saying that the family of Jacob is the seedbed of a new world population. We may not be there yet in redemptive-history, but God is delivering the family of Jacob, the people of Israel, so that the Redeemer may come later through their generational ranks. Through Israel there is the route to a new community that is (called to be) joined to the living God, as God's grace joins His elect to Christ, God's Son.

### **Joseph meets and prepares Israel (46:28-34)**

Jacob appoints his fourth son Judah to go ahead to Joseph in order that the final parts of the move might go

well. The rise of Judah to that of the leader among Jacob's sons is nearly complete (see Gen. 43:3,8-10; 44:11-34). Jacob is clearly leaning upon this son Judah and not upon the other older sons of Leah (Reuben, Simeon, and Levi). Judah had given the speech that had melted the heart of Joseph such that he had revealed himself to his brothers earlier in Genesis 45. But here is an irony: Judah had been a son that was responsible for actions that had brought Joseph to Egypt. Now he is the son who is made responsible for bringing Israel and his entire household into Egypt. Judah sees to it that there is a smooth transition into the good land of Goshen.

It is noted by scholars that the name *Goshen* has not been identified as Egyptian, and its precise location in Egypt is not certain. It is likely a Semitic name, and the probable location is in the northeast portion of the Nile River delta. If this is so, then these were certainly excellent areas for raising cattle that could graze in the area. This area was very close to the frontier border of Egypt in the northeast, and it probably was not that far distant from where Joseph lived in the royal court (see Gen. 45:10 and 47:1ff.).

When Joseph finally sees his aged father again, we read again of a very touching and emotional scene of embracing and prolonged weeping. Father Jacob had loved Joseph more than his other sons, and Jacob had provided his favorite son with a special coat that suggested royal appointment. Joseph knew that his father loved him, and both of them are deeply moved at the moment of meeting again after so many years of separation. God's goodness is

seen here in that a divine plan works to unite this family again for greater purposes in God's Kingdom. These have been very difficult years, and the moral choices of Jacob's sons have not been stellar. Yet in Christ things will work out for the good of God's people in the end. This is our Christian faith, our confession, because this is what God reveals to us (see Rom. 8:28-39).

Israel says that he is ready to die because he has seen his son alive. Again, our thoughts are drawn to the New Testament's revelation where we read of Simeon who can now leave this life in peace because his eyes have actually seen the Lord's Christ (see Luke 2:29-32).

Joseph now prepares his family so that they are properly rehearsed when he presents them to Pharaoh. They are told to indicate that their occupation is that of caring for livestock, since the Egyptians abhor shepherds (verse 34; cf. Gen. 43:32). Such abhorrence about shepherds would not remain only something that afflicted the Egyptians. Later on in history the Jews would also look down on shepherds. In the first century A.D. we are told that shepherds could not give testimony in the courts of the land since their word was not viewed as trustworthy. Yet it is to lowly shepherds that angels come in Luke 2:8ff. to announce the birth of Christ the Lord. For He is the Savior of His people, all His people, and such people can be found in every area of society, in every economic class, in every culture and tribe, and in every corner of the world. This is good news! In Christ there is neither Jew nor Gentile, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither

male nor female (Gal. 3:28). Therefore, God's people do not look down on anyone as unclean or unworthy of receiving the good news.

### **Joseph presents his family to Pharaoh (47:1-6)**

The moment arrives, and the family of Joseph comes before the great king of Egypt. Pharaoh is told that everyone and everything has come to Goshen. It is interesting to note that Joseph had said that he would tell Pharaoh what line of work his family was engaged in, but he leaves that all somewhat vague in his actual remarks to Pharaoh. He is somewhat indirect when he says that his family, their "flocks and herds" are here. Thus Pharaoh asks them what their occupation is, and they respond, "We are shepherds and always have been. Now, may we live in Goshen?" Pharaoh not only agrees, but he even asks them for help with his own royal livestock!

### **Jacob blesses Pharaoh (47:7-10)**

There are some Old Testament scholars who see the idea of *blessing* as one of the key themes that runs throughout the book of Genesis. In the beginning God blesses the creatures that He has made as well as mankind whom He makes in His image. Blessing is something that Abram is promised, and through him all the families of the earth will be blessed (Gen. 12:1-3). Blessing is something that comes to God's people from God in order that they in turn might be a blessing to others. The LORD is our light and salvation (Ps. 27:1), and Jesus is the Light of the world (John 8:12), but we in turn are called, in union with

## **Lesson 16: Points to ponder and discuss**

1. Speculate just a little bit. Is it likely that Jacob's family (the people of Israel) knew of the story of Abram and Sarai being expelled earlier (see Gen. 12:10-20)? Could they be aware that Isaac was told not to go to Egypt (see Gen. 26:2)? Hasn't God been communicating to them that it is best to stay out of Egypt? Why does Joseph (and Pharaoh) want Jacob and his family to come to Egypt so strongly? Why not just send a steady supply of food to Canaan until the famine is over?
2. The Egyptians detested shepherds, and yet the angel of the Lord and a heavenly choir announced Christ's birth to shepherds. Why do some people, or some cultures, look down on some occupations? Is some work "below our dignity," something we leave for cheap labor to perform? If an occupation is legitimate in God's sight, can it serve in some way in the Kingdom of God? Or, is our work done Monday through Saturday just "a job" in the "secular world?"
3. God's people will always hear these words when they read this story, "Jacob blessed Pharaoh." If it is true that the greater blesses the lesser (Hebr. 7:6,7; cf. Gen. 14:19), what does this story suggest about Jacob and Pharaoh? How has Joseph already been a blessing to Egypt? Do God's people bring (more) blessings to Egypt and the Egyptian people? Today, how can God's people bring blessings to those who rule us? How is Christ alone the source of blessing to all rulers and to all the peoples of the earth?
4. Paul tells the Philippian Christians that to live is Christ, but to die is gain (Phil. 1:21ff.). Jacob feels ready to die, having sojourned on this earth in the land of Canaan. Christians are pilgrims in this world. Describe the Christian attitude to this life and this world, and the attitude toward leaving this life and world to be with Christ. How do we keep a proper balance?
5. Jacob describes his years as "few and difficult." Is not his age—130 years—a testimony to the faithfulness of God? The older we get, the faster the years seem to go by: "time flies." Why is that? As Christians, we are brought by Christ into the age to come, even while we live in the present. What does it mean that we are to redeem the time, for the days are evil (see Eph. 5:15)?

Christ, to be the light of this world (Matt. 5:14).

Jacob “blesses” Pharaoh when he meets him and as he leaves him (verses 7 and 10). To be sure, the word in the original can have the meaning of “greet.” But that action of Jacob has a powerful sound to us who read it. This aged man is blessing the man whom the Egyptians revered as a living god! This is amazing.

Jacob is 130 years old. He would live another seventeen years in the land of Egypt before the Lord calls him from this life. We are struck by his description of his age as being a “few days” (verse 9). His grandfather Abraham died at age 175 years, and his father Isaac died at age 180 years. Jacob seems to say that by comparison, he has lived only a “few days” when he considers the life spans of his father and grandfather. Today, however, people who live to be 130 years old would make the headlines! When such long-lived folks pass away, there is usually a notice of such passing in the news. Psalm 90:10 says that our days are normally 70 or maybe 80 years.

But Jacob adds another descriptive term to describe his “few days.” He says that they have been “difficult.” The term in the original can mean “miserable, troubled, evil.” Jacob has often talked about dying, about going down to Sheol, the realm of the dead (see Gen. 37:35; 42:38; 44:29-31). One gets the impression that life has become a great burden to Jacob, and he would sooner leave this life and its miseries. In fact, now that his eyes have actually beheld his beloved

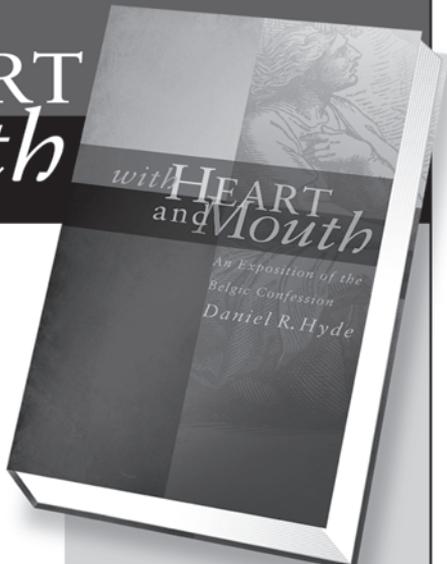
Joseph, he can die and leave this “vale of tears.”

### **Joseph provides land and bread (47:11,12)**

These two verses give us a summary of Joseph carrying out the command of Pharaoh. Pharaoh wants Joseph’s family to have the best of the land. Joseph’s family settles in the choice district of “Rameses,” called the “best of the land” (verses 6 and 11). This name has provoked much discussion since the first known Pharaoh with the name Rameses comes later than the time of Joseph. Some explain that it is an anachronistic explanation to help the later readers understand where the region is,

since the Ramesside dynasty began its rule in 1319 B.C. There is now some evidence to suggest that the name “Rameses” is earlier than the dynasty so-named. Future discoveries may throw more light on the use of the name Rameses. In any case, Israel is now in Egypt, there to experience God’s providence in both goodness and affliction later on in this foreign land.

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



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# Examining the Exploration of Ethics

## A Review of *Exploring Ethics*

Published by Christian Schools International 2006

People who study and write on the application of Biblical principles to complex issues facing us in everyday life are called ethicists. Their field of study is called ethics. Christians engage in this activity, submitting to the authority of the Word of God.

Given the complexities of the fallen world, this task has never been easy. Some claim current ethical questions are far more complex than any issue in the past. We should not, however, be deceived by such a view of modern complexity. God's Word is sufficient to lead the people of God until the second coming of Christ. We do not need to despair before we start. We do not need to explore ethical issues like work, human sexuality, stewardship, or race relations as morally blind participants in a hopeless task.

Rather, with confidence we look to the Word of God to give us knowledge and wisdom for every ethical issue. Any course, book, or examination of ethics from a Christian perspective must be rooted in the Word of God. The summary of any Christian ethic must be the Word of God. It is from this perspective that one must evaluate the recently published book on ethics entitled, *Exploring Ethics*. Published by Christian Schools International, this

book is intended for use in high school classes on ethics.

*Exploring Ethics* is filled with selected readings from dozens of authors. The editors of this book state that they have included authors who explore ethics from a Christian perspective. They do not intend to give blatant secular ethicists a voice propagating their positions. Some essays critique a non-Christian ethic, like Chuck Colson's critique of Princeton philosopher Peter Singer, the quintessential moral utilitarian. The essays themselves are supposed to be written from a Christian perspective.

*Exploring Ethics* promotes positions as Christian that are far outside a biblical Christian ethic. Error is presented as truth. Timeless moral absolutes are said to be culturally relative.

A few authors appear in *Exploring Ethics* who have a proven faithful Christian perspective. Douglas Groothuis addresses post-modernism, and Chuck Colson tackles stem cell research. Colson rejects the utilitarian view of Peter Singer and Christopher Reeve. However, I

would be surprised if students will recognize his positive reference to Mother Teresa (p. 331) as a compromise in the significant controversy in which Colson has been involved relating to Protestants and Catholics Together. Clifford Bajema's insightful essay, "Should Treatment Be Terminated", addresses the dangers of the quality of life arguments as the basis of treatment or non-treatment of the very ill. These and other essays do address some issues from a Biblical perspective. But the editors also chose many articles that fail to deal with the issues they explore from a Christian perspective. This is seen, first of all, in the summary of the ethical philosophy of editors.

The goal of the editors is stated in the foreword, "How should a person live his or her life? More specifically, what norms for ethical behavior should a Christian follow? What is morality? These are questions that many Christians have wrestled with, and this book includes some of the answers that have been suggested. The readings were selected to give a broad cross section of views on these important and challenging topics" (p. 5). There are several problems with this approach to Christian ethics.

First, this approach to ethics has already bought a mindset that assumes there is more than one legitimate option for the Christian ethicist. After recognizing the dangers

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of postmodernism by the inclusion of “The Fixed Point in a Postmodern Word” by Douglas Groothuis, the editors capitulate to postmodernism by offering two or more ethical options on most topics.

This is similar to the postmodern influenced declarations of the Synod of the Christian Reformed Church that there are two legitimate opposite positions on women in office. *Exploring Ethics* presents options like the just war theory (p. 373ff) and Christian Pacifism (p. 389ff). But a truly Christian ethic does not say there are two positions; choose which one you like the best. A true Christian ethic laments disagreement and acknowledges the reality of an absolute standard of right and wrong even when we disagree on a specific moral issue. A Christian ethic is not balanced. It is one sided. It is God sided.

Second, *Exploring Ethics* fails in its attempt even to present a broad section of views because of its predominant inclusion of the authors associated with liberal churches and progressive trends rejecting a Biblical ethic. There is no doubt that *Exploring Ethics* is not balanced between a historic Reformed Christian ethic and a contemporary progressive ethic. A historic Christian ethic is not even represented on a number of issues. Postmodern liberal ethical positions dominate the pages of *Exploring Ethics*. Those who are called to train our children in the Lord should not balance unbiblical teaching with Biblical teaching and encourage children to choose which is right. The Christian school must expose and

critique unbiblical teachings, not present truth and error as equally valid options.

The clearest example of these failures is the chapter, “Exploring Issues: Human Sexuality”. This chapter does not even attempt to present the historic, biblical, Reformed ethical position on homosexuality. This section begins with an article written by David G. Myers, professor of psychology at Hope College in Holland, MI. He has written extensively and is the author of college psychology textbooks used at a number of Christian colleges. In the fall of 2006, the Gender Department of Calvin College had Professor Myers lecture on the Topic, “Strengthening Marriage, Welcoming Gays”. His essay in *Exploring Ethics* is entitled, “Accepting What Cannot Be Changed”. David Myers writes the leading essay exploring a Christian view on human sexuality.

David Myers summarizes his position by quoting from *Sex for Christians*, written by Lewis Smedes, “I still believe that the Creator intended the human family to flourish through heterosexual love. I still believe that God prefers homosexual people to live in committed and faithful monogamous relationship with each other when they cannot change their condition and do not have the gift to be celibate” (p. 140).

Lewis Smedes also has an essay in *Exploring Ethics* in which he examines Romans 1:27, “Likewise also the men, leaving the natural use of the woman, burned in their lust for one another, men with men committing what is shameful, and receiving in themselves the penalty of their error which was due.” He concludes by stating homosexual relations within committed love can be as true to nature as are heterosexual relations within committed love (p. 151) because no one really knows what “contrary to nature” really means.

In the five articles dealing with homosexuality, not one of them stated the biblical position that homosexual acts and desires are sinful and contrary to nature. Not one of them addressed positively the transforming power of God recorded in Scripture. “Do you not know that the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived. Neither fornicators, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor homosexuals, nor sodomites, nor thieves, nor covetous, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor extortioners will inherit the kingdom of God. And such were some of you. But you were washed, but you were sanctified, but you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus and by the Spirit of our God” (I Corinthians 6:9-11). God in judgment condemns the sin and in His grace powerfully changes the adulterer and homosexual. Such change is declared impossible by David Meyers.

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***A Christian ethic is not balanced. It is one sided.  
It is God sided.***

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Although not as blatant in other subject matters, *Exploring Ethics* often rejects the historic Reformed biblical Christian ethic once embraced by these same schools. Christian Schools International is attempting to pass these unbiblical errors on to the next generation of high school students. The perspective that dominates many classrooms of colleges like Calvin and is debated within denominations like the Christian Reformed Church is now promoted by Christian Schools International. The unbiblical perspectives being accepted by the editors of *Exploring Ethics* has not developed in isolation from the community it comes from.

Certainly not every teacher in every CSI school will advocate the unbiblical ethic that fills many pages in *Exploring Ethics*. Not every school that is a member of Christian Schools International will find this book acceptable. At least one Christian School has already removed this book from the classroom. However, the editorial staff of Christian Schools International has demonstrated its inability to discern the difference between truth and error, between a postmodern mindset and a historic Reformed Christian ethic.

This drift into a postmodern perspective permeates most topics in *Exploring Ethics*. The sins of the fathers are being carried on to the third and fourth generations.

Schools associated with Christian Schools International are being led by an editorial staff that rejects the historic Reformed Presbyterian Biblical ethic. This is the perspective students will be taught. Students

embracing the ethic advocated in *Exploring Ethics* will be rejecting the historic conservative ethic of past generations. Some will do this without even knowing or being taught the difference between right and wrong on these topics. Students that come from churches and homes that faithfully teach the authority of Scripture and God's never-changing law for today will be encouraged to abandon these truths. Unless these students specifically reject the overall perspective presented daily in their classrooms, they will abandon the truth they are taught in their churches and homes. They will reject the preaching, teaching, and confessional standards of the conservative churches they are attending with their parents.

This publication represents the direction and views tolerated and promoted by many teachers, schools, and leaders associated with Christian Schools International. For generations parents and students could not assume that Christian institutions of higher education at the college level claiming to be Reformed were actually Reformed. Today, parents can no longer assume that Christian schools associated with Christian Schools International at the primary and secondary levels are Reformed, faithful to the confessional basis of their past, and holding and proclaiming the truth of God's word in all areas of life. What was true in their past may no longer be true for the present.

Many families had to make difficult decisions and left unfaithful churches and denominations in the past in order to bring harmony between their own convictions about

Biblical authority and the church they attended. They desired harmony between what was taught in the home with the teaching found in their church. This same difficult choice is now being forced upon parents as many Christian day schools compromise the truth of Scripture. May we all be granted the conviction to train our children in the Lord with a consistent perspective found in the church, home and school.

**Rev. Casey Freswick** is the pastor of the Bethany United Reformed Church in Wyoming, Michigan.

## Examining the Nine Points: The Introduction (III)

*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...*

Last month, as part of our consideration of the preface to the Nine Points, we considered how the Reformed Churches have historically related the covenant theology to the biblical and confessional doctrine of justification. This month concludes the examination of the preface to the Nine Points by considering the question of the relations between biblical, systematic, and confessional theology. We will also reckon with the influence some types of biblical theology have had upon the doctrine of justification

Beginning in the nineteenth century, both liberals (i.e. those who do not believe the historic Christian faith but who wish to be considered Christians nonetheless) and pietists (i.e. those who think that religious experience is more important than the confession of faith) began to set covenant theology against systematic theology. They argued that covenant theology arose as a way of alleviating the problems created by Reformed systematic theology. These moves and claims have been widely influential in the modern period, even among orthodox Reformed people who should know better.

Thus, there developed in Germany a specialized field of study known as “biblical theology.” Since the

development of this field, there has been a tendency among pietists (who may or may not be personally orthodox), liberals, and conservatives to treat “biblical theology” as a “scientific,” or “neutral” enterprise under which rubric one may say whatever one will without any regard to what Reformed systematic theology teaches or what the Reformed Churches confess.

This approach to biblical or covenant theology has created serious tensions, in some cases, in the “covenant theology” held by Reformed folk and the confession of the churches and the historic Reformed theology. Indeed, it has been the recipe for what the pietists themselves called “dead orthodoxy.” This approach to the Reformed confessions rendered them mere historical witnesses to faith rather than a living and vital confession by the churches. Some theologians have capitalized on this tension between “biblical” and “confessional” theology with the result that one may hear a “redemptive-historical” (i.e., covenant theology) sermon in the morning service saying one thing, e.g. that the covenant of grace is a matter of getting in by grace (i.e., baptism) and staying in by faith and works. In the evening sermon, however, one might hear a perfectly orthodox sermon from

Heidelberg Catechism Q. 21 on true faith.

Even more unhappily, however, for the last thirty years, some pastors and professors (in a movement now known as the Federal Vision) have been resolving this tension between their covenant theology and Reformed confessional theology in favor of their revision of covenant theology. This move has led them to re-define key words and ideas of the Reformed faith according to the new covenant theology of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. In this new covenant theology, there is said to be no real difference between faith and works in justification. In justification, faith is said to be “trusting and obeying” or “faithfulness” or even sometimes, “faith and works.” They teach this doctrine of justification because this is how the Federal Vision movement has come to read the history of redemption, as is the story of the “covenant faithfulness” of believers.

Of course not every practitioner of biblical theology has made this mistake. Geerhardus Vos (1862–1949), who taught in the early days of what became Calvin Theological Seminary, and more famously at Princeton Theological Seminary, set out to show that it was possible to do biblical theology and systematic theology without setting one against the other. As he worked on this project he found himself in conflict not only with the liberals, who wanted to reconstruct Christianity in their own image, but also some conservatives from various branches of the Dutch Reformed churches who, at the end of the

## THE NINE POINTS OF (URCNA) SYNOD 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).

nineteenth century, were developing an idiosyncratic covenant theology that could not be reconciled with the Reformed confessions and which was quite out of accord with the mainstream of Reformed covenant theology from the classical period. Vos published his work in several volumes. His lectures on biblical theology were later published in a volume by that title. After Vos, however, practitioners of biblical theology in the Netherlands, Britain, Australia, and in the USA have continued to set biblical theology against systematic theology and the Reformed confessions as if these three ways of doing theology were necessarily in tension.

In the recent controversies over covenant and justification, when queried about this method, these “covenant theologians” have replied, “We’re just following the Bible.” What they mean, however, is that they are trying to read the Bible as if no one has ever done it before. This attempt to read the Bible as if no one has ever done it before is known as “biblicism.” This approach to Scripture is very influential among American evangelicals and surprisingly, among liberals. Indeed, the earliest “liberals,” in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, were known as Socinians. They rejected the Protestant faith because, they said, it was not biblical enough. They said “We are just following the Bible” even as they denied the deity of Christ, the substitutionary atonement, justification *sola gratia*, *sola fide*, and eventually, the Trinity. This biblicism has affected the Reformed churches also. The Remonstrants (Arminians) in the seventeenth century, rejected at the

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Synod of Dort, also argued that they were just following the Bible. Eventually, the Socinians and some of the Remonstrants coalesced and formed the basis for the modern Unitarian movement. So, we should be alert and wary when people claim to be “just following the Bible.” The Reformed Churches have also read the Bible and we have reached definite conclusions, and we have confessed those conclusions in the Heidelberg Catechism, the Belgic Confession, and Canons of Dort. We confess what we do as churches because of our biblical theology.

This is not placing the confessions above the Bible. This is distinguishing between a churchly, confessional reading of the Bible from an independent, private reading of the Bible. It is a distinctly modern view that says that one’s private reading of Scripture trumps all other readings of Scripture. It has been objected, “But what about Martin Luther? Did he not set his private reading of Scripture over against the church’s reading of Scripture?” No he did not. In fact there was no conciliar dogma of justification in the Roman communion. As Martin Luther, and the Reformed with him, came to reject the prevailing medieval doctrine of justification by grace and cooperation with grace, they were rejecting a widely held private opinion on the basis of God’s Word. When it became clear that the institutional church had no

interest in submitting to the Word of God a Reformation became necessary. Rome’s excommunication of Luther was one subtle hint of her reluctance to reform.

The question is not the principle authority of Scripture. The question is the authority of individual interpretations of Scripture in the face of established and tested ecclesiastical interpretations of Scripture. After all, it is not as if the private interpretations proposed by the Remonstrants at Dort or by the Federal Visionists in our day do not have a setting. They arose in a time and a place. They did not descend from heaven. Everyone reads the Bible in a place, in a cultural, historical, and theological context. So the Reformed Churches have come to an agreed reading of Scripture and, having considered the revisions proposed by the Federal Visionists and others, we have rejected them in favor of those interpretations we have confessed since the Reformation. In this debate, the choice is between confessional and churchly interpretations of redemptive history and private and non-confessional readings of Scripture. Though it is common among evangelical and liberal biblical scholars to write and speak as if one can read the Bible in splendid isolation, the Reformed Churches have never done so. The modern individualist way of handling God’s Word is bound to create tension between the confessions of the

churches and this sort of biblical theology. In contrast, the Reformed Churches have always related our confessions very closely to our reading of redemptive history (covenant theology) and those two to our systematic theology.

Thus, in the preface to the Nine Points, the United Reformed Churches are saying in effect, we reject the premise that one can develop a “biblical theology” or a “covenant theology” that substantially contradicts what we confess. In this preface, the United Reformed Churches are also saying that we reject not only the creation of the tension between covenant theology and confessional theology but also the resolution of that tension by the Federal Vision whereby our confessions are substantially revised to mean something other than what they have historically meant.

The last point to be made about the preface to is closely related to the first, and it is this: what one says about covenant theology (the history of redemption) necessarily colors what one says about the doctrine of justification. The Reformed doctrine of justification exists within the environment of covenant theology. The latter is the womb or matrix of the doctrine of justification. Whatever a pregnant woman eats or swallows touches her unborn child. So it is with covenant theology and the doctrine of justification in Reformed theology. The changes to covenant theology in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries have not been without consequences for the doctrine of justification. As Karl Barth radically revised Reformed covenant theology by jettisoning the covenant of works (more on that

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***The choice is between confessional and churchly interpretations of redemptive history and private and non-confessional readings of Scripture.***

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later) he also radically reversed the Reformed hermeneutic (i.e., way of reading Scripture). Instead of law and gospel Barth proposed “gospel and law.” This move was followed by some contemporary evangelical theologians, most notably Daniel Fuller and Norman Shepherd. This reversal of law and gospel (and the accompanying claim that Reformed theology rejects the distinction between law and gospel) is a mainstay of the Federal Vision program. They, and the so-called New Perspective(s) on Paul, have us “in [the covenant] by grace” (i.e., united to Christ, head for head, in baptism in an “all or nothing” covenant) and we “stay in” by “faith and works” or “covenantal faithfulness.” This reversal, especially in the hands of the Federal Vision movement sets the Reformed faith upside down. Instead of the Christian life flowing out of grace and gratitude, lived in union with Christ in the covenant community, the Federal Vision would have us back under the law and in constant jeopardy of apostasy if we do not keep “our part” of the covenant.

All of these revisions flow from the revisions in Reformed covenant theology, parts of which were first proposed in the seventeenth century and which have been proposed and rejected repeatedly since, that took hold in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

If, for example, the covenants of works and grace are not distinguished clearly, then the ground of righteousness before God and definitions of faith are bound to change. This is precisely what has happened in the Federal Vision theology. Having put us under a cov-

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***If the covenants of works and grace are not distinguished clearly, then the ground of righteousness before God and definitions of faith are bound to change.***

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enant that is both legal *and* gracious before the fall, they have us under a covenant that is both gracious *and* legal after the fall. In this scheme, the terms of “the covenant” (as the FV writers like to say) are and always have been “faith and works” or “faithfulness.” Though he is not clear about most things, Norman Shepherd is quite clear about his claim that Adam and we are on the same footing. Adam owed faith and obedience. Jesus owed faith and obedience. We too owe faith and obedience.

Christians, however, who know the greatness of their sin and misery realize that Shepherd has done them no favors, as it were, by placing us on the same footing as Adam and our Lord. Nor has he done them any favors by making the Christ into the first Christian, in a way not terribly different from the nineteenth-century German liberals. In such a revised covenant theology, Christianity always becomes just another scheme for religious experience and moral improvement. Again, such radical revisions turn Reformed theology on its head. The Reformed faith is a doctrine of divine revelation and salvation, not religious experience and self-improvement (even if that self-improvement is cast in terms of “grace and cooperation with grace”).

Grace is God’s favor to *sinner*s. Adam was not a sinner until he sinned. We, as Adam’s children,

are sinners and therefore we sin. We are corrupt in all our faculties. We are corrupt in our intellect and therefore we think wrongly. Our affections are corrupted and therefore we love the wrong things. Because of sin, our wills are bent and therefore we choose corruptly. This is what we mean by “total depravity,” that all of our faculties are profoundly ruined by sin and therefore we cannot do “our part” in a covenant that is partly or wholly a covenant of works.

Therefore, any proposed understanding of grace which renders grace to be something other than free and unconditional is not really grace at all. It is merely a form of works righteousness cloaked in the language of grace. Any understanding of grace that makes it mere divine assistance for those who must “do their part” have turned grace into a recipe for damnation. God does not help those who help themselves. He justifies and saves those who cannot and will not justify and save themselves. Grace is Christ’s salvation of those who would voluntarily choose hell over heaven, who come to trust Christ and love God and hate sin *only* because the Holy Spirit makes them alive, gives them a “certain knowledge and a hearty trust,” and thereby unites them to Christ. The story of the covenant of grace is the story of God’s free favor to those who by nature hate him.

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So it is with the instrument of the covenant of grace: faith. By definition, faith is and has nothing to do with our “doing” relative to justification. One critic of Synod Schereville said to me that the language adopted by Synod is imprecise because it uses the verb “to be.” Synod said, “faith is the sole instrument of our justification apart from all works.” If this language is imprecise then tell it to the Belgic Confession and to all the Reformed Churches since 1561 since this is the very language we have confessed since then. In Article 22 we confess: “faith is only the instrument by which we embrace Christ, our righteousness.” We say: “faith is.” We do not say: “the exercise of faith is” (as was suggested by the critic). Why not? We should not speak this way because even the turn to the verb “to exercise” changes the nature of the verb. Faith does what it does, i.e. receives, rests, leans, trusts, and knows, because of the power of its object. Faith has no power in and of itself. That is why the Reformed theologians have often described faith, in the act of justification (which is what we are about here) as an “empty vessel” or, in Calvin’s case, an empty hand.

Faith does not justify because it does anything. That is why Synod was quite right to adopt the three points reaffirming and strengthening our stand on justification by faith alone “apart from all works.” The very point of the Belgic Confession is to exclude our “doing” from the definition of faith in the declaration of justification. To turn faith into more than this receptive instrument is to make something or someone other than Christ into a Savior.

That, the Belgic says, “is a most enormous blasphemy against God—for it then would follow that Jesus Christ is only half a Savior. And therefore we justly say with Paul that we are justified ‘by faith alone’ or by faith ‘apart from works.’”

In Reformed theology and in the Reformed confessions, covenant theology is not some innocent enterprise that can be isolated from our confessions. What a minister or teacher or writer says about covenant theology will, even if he himself does not intend or realize it, necessarily have consequences for the definitions of grace and faith and justification, and it is upon these articles that the church stands or falls. There is a Reformed covenant theology and there is a Reformed confessional theology and these two are in complete harmony. Any proposed covenant theology, therefore, that finds itself out of accord with our confession must be regarded as a covenant theology that is less than Reformed.

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

## Looking Out and About

- On March 1, 2008, Rev. Jacob Eppinga, who had faithfully served in the ministry of the Christian Reformed Church for 64 years, was called home to glory. He was 90 years old. Rev. Eppinga was the author of several books, most of which were gleaned from his observations about the church. They were originally published in *The Banner* as “Cabbages and Kings,” which he authored for almost forty years.

- Rev. Jerome Julien, who has been serving as Stated Supply at the Grace Reformed Church in Dunnville, Ontario, Canada, has received and accepted the call to serve the Dunnville congregation as their senior pastor.

- Mr. Steve Swets, a graduate of Mid-America Reformed Seminary in Dyer, Indiana, has accepted the call extended to him by the Immanuel Covenant Reformed Church in Abbotsford, British Columbia.

- In February 2008, Rev. Don Klop, who until recently was on the staff of Crosspoint Christian Reformed Church in Chino, California, was installed as Minister of Congregational Life at LaGrave Avenue Christian Reformed Church in Grand Rapids, Michigan.

- At a special classis meeting held on February 26, 2008, Classis Michigan voted to advise the Consistory of Grace United Reformed Church in Alto, Michigan to proceed with the deposing of Rev. Peter Adams.

# The Character of the Church's Creeds (I)

WHAT IS the character of the standards of a Reformed church, a church which aims at being a confessing church in the world by proclaiming the truth of God's Word? This question demands a composite answer. Such an answer has been provided by the late Prof. P. Biesterveld in his *Schets van de Symboliek*. He defines a doctrinal standard as "a writing wherein a church or group of churches pronounces what it holds to be the truth according to God's Word."<sup>1</sup> He pursues this subject by delineating the six characteristic purposes of these doctrinal statements:

- a. to present a correct and authentic summary of the doctrine maintained;
- b. to witness to this truth in the world;
- c. to preserve the unity of the faith among the several churches;
- d. to maintain the purity of the faith and oppose all heresy;
- e. to transmit this pure doctrine to posterity; and
- f. to demonstrate what the churches have always held to be the truth.

Our aim in these articles is not to elaborate on these several confessional aspects outlined by Prof. Biesterveld. Rather will it be the underscoring of one of these, namely, the *communal* responsibil-

ity of preserving the true faith among the several churches. This communal aspect, let it be said at once, has *juridical* implications, because the community of believers is characterized by a common order. This order in turn manifests itself in the specific rules which such believers are to obey in the spirit of love.

## Freedom and the Creeds

Within the church there exists, indeed, Christian liberty. Such liberty presupposes that differences of opinion may exist within the church. What may not be presupposed, however, is that such liberty renders lawful the free and uncontrolled blowing of every wind of doctrine within the house of the Lord. God is the God of order; therefore His house "is builded as a city that is compact together" (Psa. 122: 3). It may not be divided against itself. To express the unity of faith, this doctrinal unity of believers who with one accord praise the name of their God and Savior in the words of their confession, has always been one of the aims of creedal statements.

Therefore these confessions have a juridical aspect. By the term juridical we do not mean to affirm that confessions are laws imposed by a government, even at times against the will of some of the people. Rather a confession, accepted without constraint by members and officebearers of the church, is a communal possession

and heritage, subject to common rules. Thus it is never "my own business" whether I deviate from the confession. If I disagree with some part thereof, I should follow a prescribed path. This path is carefully outlined in the order of the churches. Nor is the liberty of the church such that it may claim to have a confession and yet refuse to preserve it. The church must ever be watchful to keep its standards high and pure.

## A Well-Defined Place

It may seem strange to emphasize the above in the community of Reformed churches. The reasons for doing so will be pointed out later. Here we only affirm that from the beginning the confessions as mutual doctrinal agreements have had their fixed place within the Reformed churches. Calvin stressed the necessity of such a confession immediately after his coming to Geneva. He required subscription to such a doctrinal statement from every citizen and urged that in this matter the members of the City Council set a good example. Upon his return in 1541 an ecclesiastical constitution was adopted, which demanded of every future minister the declaration "that he would receive and keep the approved doctrine of the church."<sup>2</sup>

In the constitution of the Reformed churches of the Netherlands subscription to the creeds played a significant role. The earliest synods already required of all officebearers an expression of their agreement with the Belgic Confession. On this matter the first synod, held at Emden, reported, "To demonstrate the doctrinal agreement

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among the Dutch churches the brothers consented in the subscription of the Confession of Faith of the Dutch churches.”<sup>3</sup> To this was added, “Also the officebearers who are not here present will be admonished to consent to this subscription; the same shall be asked of all others who shall be called to the ministry, before they enter upon their duties” (art. 4).

The Synod of Dort (1618-19) adopted the Form of Subscription still used by many Reformed churches today. Hereby the officebearers declare “that they heartily believe and are persuaded that all the articles and points of doctrine, contained in the confession and catechism of the Reformed churches, together with the explanation of some points of the aforesaid doctrine, made by the National Synod of Dort 1618-19, do fully agree with the Word of God. We promise therefore diligently to teach and faithfully to defend the aforesaid doctrine, without either directly or indirectly contradicting the same by our public preaching or writing.” The expression “do fully agree” reads in the Latin text “per omnia consentire” (agree in all parts).<sup>4</sup>

The same rule obtained in the Swiss churches at that time. In a letter of the Genevan delegates to the Synod of Dort we read, “In our churches no one is admitted to the ministry or to an office, however learned or gifted he may be, unless he binds himself by oath to the Swiss Confession (Confessio Helvetica), promising that he will teach in accordance with it and will propose, spread or propagate nothing strange to it either publicly or se-

## *Upon examination a candidate for the ministry signs the Form of Subscription.*

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cretly, before he proposed it and received the right to it in a major assembly or synod.”<sup>5</sup>

### **Allegiance to Creeds Restored**

During the nineteenth century those in the Netherlands who remained true to the Reformed faith again stressed this position. The synod of the Dutch Reformed Church had so altered the Form of Subscription that it became possible to assent to the doctrine expounded in the ecclesiastical standards not because (quia) but in so far as (quatenus) they agreed with God’s Word. As a result doctrines of all kinds were proclaimed from the pulpits and heresies were disseminated throughout the congregations. One of the first acts of the first synod of the Secessionists, held in 1836, was the subscription to a fraternal agreement, which essentially reproduced the venerable Form of Subscription adopted by the Synod of Dort (1618-19). The same was true in the days of the Doleantie. A conference of officebearers was held in the city of Amsterdam in 1883. This paved the way for the second secession from the old Dutch Reformed Church. All members signed a register under the following declaration, “In placing their names on this roll the undersigned declare that they cordially agree with the three Forms of Unity as the agreement of ecclesiastical communion, not in so far as but because they agree with the Word of God.”

The same requirement prevails in the Christian Reformed Church. Upon examination a candidate for the ministry signs the Form of Subscription. According to article 53 of the Church Order all ministers and professors of theology must subscribe to the Three Forms of Unity. “And the ministers of the Word who refuse to do so shall *de facto* be suspended from their office by the Consistory or Classis until they shall have given a full statement, and if they obstinately persist in refusing, they shall be deposed from their office.”

### **What Subscription Involves**

Two matters are involved in this act of subscription. The first is the solemn declaration that the confessions contain the doctrine of God’s Word; that they are — to use the language of the Reformed fathers — a repetition of that Word of God and are always and in all parts subject to that Word of God. The second is the sincere promise to teach and defend this doctrine, not contradicting it in any way and following the prescribed rules of the church, should any doubts or objections to any part of this doctrine arise. Likewise these rules pledge everyone to refrain from spreading such doubts and objections, while subjecting them in accordance with this promise to the judgment of the consistory or one of the major assemblies.

To this promise it is possible to raise an objection. Does not this conflict with that *libertas prophetandi* which we seek to honor particularly

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in the Protestant climate wherein we proclaim the sole authority of God's Word? We would reply that by definition (*per definitionem*) this "freedom of prophecy" is by no means an unrestricted and individual freedom. It is limited by the fact that not every prophet is a true prophet; not every prophecy a true prophecy. The Bible itself admonishes, "Prove the spirits whether they are of God" (1John 4: 1). It urges especially the elders to "take heed...to all the flock" since "grievous wolves" shall enter the church and not spare Christ's flock (Act. 20:28, 29). Yet this authoritative, *binding* character of the creeds upon all officebearers has throughout the years been denied by many. The arguments employed and the direction taken by those who object have been masterfully set forth by Prof. A. D. R. Polman in the first chapter of his large work on the Belgic Confession.<sup>6</sup> Today we are confronted in this respect especially with the views championed by Adolf von Harnack and Karl Barth.

### **Harnack and the Creeds**

During the winter of 1899-1900 von Harnack delivered his famous lectures on *What Is Christianity?* These embodied the thinking of the liberal theology of his day. In his lectures he stressed the ethical (moral) aspects of Christianity to the exclusion of the doctrinal. In his opinion the gospel is the message of human brotherhood. Such doctrines as the trinity and the two natures of Christ do not belong to its original message. These are but products of passing historical influences wherein the Hellenistic mind of the ancient church expressed itself.

It was Harnack's conviction that "no historical form of Christianity must be absolutized or regarded as normative or authoritative. Instead, we must recognize that, though we cannot be christians except through the medium of concrete historical traditions, it is not these traditions but their ultimate historical source that can be the fountain of Christian faith and life, namely the gospel of Jesus Christ. Where the gospel, as Jesus proclaimed it, is believed, there is Christianity; and the gospel does not require a normative, historical form (in doctrine, dogma, liturgy, church polity, etc.) in order to produce belief." His conclusion is that "Christians must live by the gospel, for which they must find free and unauthoritarian forms in their common life according to the exigencies of ever-changing historical situations."<sup>7</sup>

The intriguing point in von Harnack's exposition is that he appeals to the gospel for the sake of a free Christian attitude independent of historical circumstances and opinions. Yet this gospel is his own gospel — a historical, very liberal, and intensely personal Harnackian gospel including a severely critical attitude towards the inspired words of the gospel itself!

### **Barth and His Influence**

Karl Barth has upon more than one occasion expressed his hearty appreciation of the confessions. Their voice should be accepted and em-

braced as the voice of our fathers and brethren in the faith. It has ecclesiastical authority. But this authority is a spiritual, never a canonical authority. Everyone should read the confession as a first commentary on Holy Scripture and thereafter make his own decision. The confession is to function as a kind of horizon for our thinking and speaking. Of this horizon we should never lose sight. Yet within its confines we may feel free either to accept its terms and ideas or to contradict them. In this way Barth pleads for what he deems an actual and critical decision.<sup>8</sup>

In the Netherlands Barthian influences had played a significant role in the construction of the new Church Order of the "Nederlandse Hervormde" church. In this document the dynamic character of the act of confessing is stressed in such a way that, according to the famous tenth article, the church's communion with the confessing fathers does not exclude criticism of their confessions.

### **Discussions and Deviations**

Discussions on the character and binding authority of the creeds began in the "Gereformeerde" churches of that land during the thirties of this century. At a ministers' conference in 1940 Prof. Dr. F. W. Grosheide lectured on the theme "Living with the Creeds." Questions were raised at that time about Paul's authorship of the

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***This authoritative, binding character of the creeds upon all officebearers has throughout the years been denied by many.***

epistle to the Hebrews (Belg. Conf., art. 4) and the validity of the Catechism's interpretation of Christ's descent into hell (Heidel. Cat., 44). Of greater import were problems raised in connection with the terminology which the creeds employ. Such questions were asked as: Should we discover influences of Greek philosophy (Aristotle) in the terms and distinctions employed by the creeds; is it permissible to criticize these terms or explain them in a sense which we deem to be more biblical?"

Since 1940 much has happened within those churches. In 1944 the "Liberated Reformed Churches" separated from that body. One of the issues concerned itself with the character of the creeds, specifically with the right of synod to explain its creeds and to make such an explanation binding on all officebearers. Those who objected to this procedure spoke of "super-scriptural bindings." In 1946 these doctrinal pronouncements were retracted.

After this in the interest of possible union with the "Hervormde" church, some leaders in the "Gereformeerde" churches began to speak about a "reduction" of the creeds. How far this should go, no one defined precisely. Without a doubt this trend must be linked up with the old distinction between "fundamental" and "non-fundamental" articles of faith. Meanwhile a new feeling of confessional freedom seems to pervade these churches. In the "Liberated" churches a minister wrote a book dealing with what happens to man after death.<sup>10</sup> In his views he deviated from the Heidelberg Catechism. Yet he did not submit his

### ***Churches began to speak about a "reduction" of the creeds. How far this should go, no one defined precisely.***

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position to the judgment of the ecclesiastical assemblies. To this novel approach both his consistory and classis seemed to assent. Likewise the president of the youth organizations defended the position that images may be tolerated in the churches. He also failed to appear before the proper ecclesiastical assemblies with a gravamen (official protest) against the position set forth in the ninety-eighth question and answer of the Catechism.

#### **Criticism of the Creeds**

To show how strong this new and free attitude towards the creeds is becoming we would refer to the recent book of the Rev. H. Volten entitled *Around the Confession of the Church*. On the Canons of Dort he remarks "that the question begins to press whether a gravamen should not be brought in, although this is almost impossible." According to him the Canons reason much too deductively from God's eternal decree and fail to demonstrate with sufficient clarity the relation of election to Christ. As to the Belgic Confession "the relation between general and special revelation is poorly, if not wrongly, expressed in article 2." The concluding words of article 5 "are at least disputable, because the truth of God's Word can never be perceived without faith." There are "shortcomings in articles 3 through 7, articles 27 through 30, and article 36." In article 16 the author discovers too much deductive reasoning from two

virtues of God (his mercy and justice), "as if these two have nothing to do with each other."

Nor does the Catechism escape Volten's criticism. "The relation between God's justice and mercy in Lord's Days 4 and 5 has not been stated quite correctly." He uncovers "scholasticism" in the Lord's Days 5 and 6. The definition of faith in Lord's Day 7 he believes is productive of misunderstanding. The answer to question 41 is primitive and incomplete. Lord's Days 25 through 27 are not clear; 28 through 30 are too difficult and verbose. Others he criticizes as being too brief. Lord's Days 34 through 44 all betray defects; "they are not effective for our day." Small wonder that Volten concludes, "It is impossible to fix a literal binding; a distinction between form and content is inescapable, and it is useful to assume an essence and main points in the confessions."<sup>11</sup> Volten's criticism is no isolated phenomenon.

When a "Hervormde" pastoral letter criticized the following statement of the Canons: "That some receive the gift of faith from God, and others do not receive it, proceeds from God's eternal decree" (I,6), Prof. Polman agreed. He regards this expression as a logical conclusion not substantiated by Scriptural proof. He argues, however, that no real confessional question is at stake here "because it is clear, that a critical attitude towards some

formulas and pronouncements of the confessions and the use of others does not imply an attack on the gospel of God.”<sup>12</sup>

And with this also Prof. G. C. Berkouwer fully agrees. Berkouwer speaks in this connection of an interesting analogy found in present-day Roman Catholic discussions of the creeds of that church. There the distinction is made between affirmation of the truth, which is unchangeable, and representation of the specific truth, which is affected by time and circumstances. On these grounds Roman Catholic theologians seem to be able to criticize the very words of the decrees of Trent, while insisting in the same breath that they are not criticizing the truth of these words.<sup>13</sup>

In essence Berkouwer agrees with such or a similar distinction. According to him, and this is his main thrust, faithfulness to the gospel may involve a critical attitude to the form in which the confessions speak. “It is not an indication of relativism when we speak of the problem of affirmation and representation, but it may mean — this all depends! — faithfulness to the gospel, namely, when we have recognized the faithfulness of the church to the gospel in its historical struggle, in all kinds of frameworks and formulae, and in that way integrally accept the confession.”<sup>14</sup>

Thus he speaks of the possibility that “we learn to understand the confession in its human and defective character, and in that way try to understand what is the real doctrine of the church.”<sup>15</sup>

Against this background of the his-

toric position of the Reformed churches on the character and binding authority of its church confessions and of present-day discussions, I shall attempt in the next article to show what is at stake. Only then will it be possible to ask and answer the question whether there is a way out for a confessional church which truly wants to be confessing church in the world today.

#### Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> *Outline of Symbolics*; Kampen, 1912; p. 1.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. B.J. Kidd: *Documents Illustrative of the Continental Reformation*, 1941; p. 591.

<sup>3</sup> F. L. Rutgers: *Acta van de Nederlandsche Synoden der 16de Eeuw*, 1899; p. 56.

<sup>4</sup> H. H. Kuyper: *De Tost-Acta*, 1899; p. 187.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 513.

<sup>6</sup> A. D. R. Polman: *Onze Nederlandse Geloofsbelijdenis*; alg. inleiding.

<sup>7</sup> W. Pauck: “Adolf von Harnack’s Interpretation of Church History” in *The Heritage of the Reformation*, 1961 sec. ed.; pp. 345, 346.

<sup>8</sup> Polman, *op. cit.*, pp. 27,28.

<sup>9</sup> G. T. T., 1940, VI.

<sup>10</sup> B. Telder: *Sterven en daarna*.

<sup>11</sup> H. Volten: *Random de Belijdenis*, 1962; pp. 107-141.

<sup>12</sup> *Gereformeerd Weekblad*, 13 Juli, 1962.

<sup>13</sup> G. C. Berkouwer: *Vragen random de belijdenis*; G. T. T., Feb. 1963; pp. 4, 39.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 23.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 26.

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