

The Outlook

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Dedicated to the Exposition and Defense of the Reformed Faith

Our Song of Return

The Bronze Laver

Bavinck the
Dogmatician (II)

Bible Studies on
Joseph and Judah

Examining the
Exploration of
Ethics

Examining
the Nine Points—
The First Point

The Character
of the Church's
Creeds (II)

Book Reviews
-Ruth
-Celebrating
Salvation



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May 2008—Volume 58 No. 5

Our Song of Return.....3
Mr. Matt Nuiver offers as a meditation a look at Psalm 126.

The Bronze Laver.....6
Rev. Wybren H. Oord examines another article of furniture found in the tabernacle in the wilderness.

Bavinck the Dogmatician (II).....8
Dr. Cornelis Venema continues to write about Dr. Bavinck’s approach to dogmatics.

Bible Studies on Joseph and Judah.....13
Rev. Mark Vander Hart concludes his Bible Study on the last section of the Book of Genesis. This month Israel moves to Egypt.

Looking Above.....19
Rev. Brian Vos provides the next installment of his series on the book of Revelation by looking at Revelation 11:5-6.

Examining the Nine Points - The First Point.....22
Dr. R. S. Clark explores the implications of the first statement of the “Nine Points” adopted by the URCNA Synod of 2007.

The Character of the Church’s Creeds (II).....26
In light of recent discussions about the Form of Subscription, Reformed Fellowship offers this republication of the second of two articles by Dr. Louis Praamsma originally published in the October 1963 issue of Torch and Trumpet.

Book Reviews.....29

Dort, and the *Westminster Confession and Catechisms*.
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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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Our Song of Return

“When the LORD turned again the captivity of Zion, we were like them that dream. Then was our mouth filled with laughter, and our tongue with singing: then said they among the heathen, The LORD hath done great things for them. The LORD hath done great things for us; whereof we are glad.” (Psalm 126:1-3)

“The 150 Psalms shall have the principle place in the singing of the churches.” This is the first line of Article 39 of the Church Order and a right and true understanding of the importance that the Psalms should have in our worship. When we come together as a body to praise God’s name, our hearts are joined to the universal church.

For many of us it may be a struggle to find ourselves within the context of the Psalms. When we sing a well-known hymn our hearts are moved; tears often well up in our eyes. Yet when we sing the Psalms that same fervor is not always present. Certainly we grieve over our sin along with David in Psalms 32 and 51. We have great joy when we sing Psalms of praise like Psalm 23 or Psalm 100.

As we come to Psalm 126, we come before the almighty God to lay our lives before Him as a sacrifice of praise. The song had meaning in the time it was written, and it still holds much meaning for us. As we seek to see the Psalm’s meaning, we see that the Lord’s covenant people cry out for the return of the captivity of Zion. As people of that same covenant, we look to the Lord renewing and restoring a right relationship with His people. We cry out with the Psalmist in remembrance of past restoration in

verses 1-3 and we cry out for future renewal in verses 4-6.

Past Restoration

When we read Psalm 126, we perhaps struggle with the language and imagery of the Psalm. What does the Psalm mean when speaking of the captivity of Zion? How do we proclaim the goodness of our God to the nations? How do we see our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ in this song? These are all valid concerns; concerns we need answer by remembering who we are.

We are members of the covenant. We may not live in Jerusalem upon Mount Zion, yet the blessing of the covenant found in Psalm 126 stretches to us as a song about our Father’s faithful upholding of His people. It is a song passed from generation to generation, one that continues to be understood by the church with greater and greater insight to this day.

“When the Lord brought back the captivity of Zion we were like those who dream.” The Lord has always been faithful in bringing His people back, and restoring the life and love of His people. God’s people are standing in the present, singing praise to God for His work in the past of restoring His people. In the time of the Old Testament the people looked back to how God took His people out of the land of Egypt,

out of the house of bondage, and restored their fortunes by bringing them into the Promised Land. The Father had been faithful to His promises made to Adam and Abraham. Indeed after Israel’s wandering in the wilderness it must have been as surreal as a dream to come into a land flowing with milk and honey, a land promised to their fathers.

The people of God living in the time of Ezra and Nehemiah were given the awesome opportunity of returning to Jerusalem to rebuild the city and the temple. They, too, had looked back at the Lord’s past restoration and, as they looked at the entrance into the Promised Land and the return to Zion, they could now understand that feeling and emotion. As they returned from Babylon they too were like those who dream; the blessing was more wonderful than they could imagine.

The blessings of the past resound in the Scriptures. Our Father has filled this verse with even more meaning for us by sending His Son, Jesus Christ. When Jesus was sent into Jerusalem, into Zion, He restored the fortunes of Zion. The Lord was restoring the relationship that His chosen people were to have with Him. That restoration makes us like those who dream. “Can this Christ really be who He says He is? Did He really come to save me from my sins? Why would He make me a member of the covenant line that stretches all the way back to Adam?” In the death, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus Christ, He has gathered us to His holy hill. It still should seem like a dream that our Lord should die for us. This is

the good news of the Father's redemptive work throughout history.

This is why the Lord's people gathered for worship. His blessing and covenant faithfulness need to bring us to His house of prayer and praise to lay ourselves before Him. When God's people have been restored, as we reflect on the salvation that is ours in Jesus Christ, "Then our mouth was filled with laughter and our tongues with singing." Worship is the only appropriate response to the Lord's faithfulness. Ezra and all Israel worshiped as they looked at the past and present goodness. In Ezra 3:11a, "And they sang responsively, praising and giving thanks to the Lord: "For He is good, For His mercy endures forever toward Israel."

As God's people today we have the blessing of Jesus Christ, a gift that should fill our mouths with laughter because our hearts are filled to overflowing with the joy of the Lord. We desire to take this psalm on our tongues and sing it out because of the Spirit who has filled us. The Lord has restored our fortunes by bringing us back unto Himself, and we can do nothing but join with the church of the past in exalting the name of the Lord with all praise, honor, and glory.

The faithfulness of God is visible and in these ways audible to the world all around us. Egypt, Assyria, Babylon, and Rome witnessed the mighty power of God in the saints of the Old Testament, in the person of Jesus Christ, and in the saints who would be martyred but would not relinquish the faith. Every generation has seen God's faithfulness, and can only say among them-

selves, "The Lord has done great things for them"

The wonder of God's past restoration is that it is so obvious. David remembered the blessing of Abraham and Moses. Egypt marveled in God's goodness to Solomon. In Nehemiah's return to Zion, the power of God is seen in Nehemiah 6:16, "And it happened, when all our enemies heard of it, and all the nations around us saw these things, that they were very disheartened in their own eyes; for they perceived that this work was done by our God." The world today can see the blessing of the Word. They should be able to see and hear the testimony of God's faithfulness in our lives as we proclaim even in a dark world how the Lord has done great things for His chosen people.

Indeed, "the Lord has done great things for us." We look to the Word and are amazed by the great things God has done for us. He has created a most wonderful creation. He has continued covenanting with us in the midst of our sin. The Lord provided a plan of redemption for us, sending His one and only begotten Son into the world as the perfect sacrifice for our sins. He has continued, at each and every point of redemptive history to be faithful to His Word and promise.

The past restoration of God's people must make us alive in the hope and security of God's revelation and faithfulness. It must fill our hearts

with abundant joy, even as we sing the Psalms together. When we see our own lives in that framework of history, we rejoice more fully. When we see the Lord's faithfulness to us in Jesus Christ, we should be filled with such awe and thanks that all mankind, every person would hear and see the great things God has done for us. The Lord's past restoration is one of relationship, one of joy and worship, and one of witness and evangelism.

Future Renewal

We have been blessed with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly realms and yet we still sin. While Psalm 126 is a word of tremendous praise, it is also a memory of how we have fallen short and how our sin separates us from the blessing of our covenant Lord. Adam rebelled against the Word of the Lord. Abraham and Moses knew their sin. Israel wandered for forty years because they failed to trust the sovereign word. David sinned. Israel sinned and war forced them into exile away from the Promised Land. We are sinners. While we have been restored by the grace of God that comes by faith in Jesus Christ, we still have need, as did the Old Testament and early church saints, of the continued and future renewal that can come only by the hand of the One who is faithful in the midst of our unfaithfulness.

As God's redeemed people we still stray from the command of the

We look to the Word and are amazed by the great things God has done for us.

Lord. As we look back upon God's goodness to His people, it can be hard in the midst of our sin to cling to the promised renewal of God's Word. When we wander from our Father in our unrighteousness, so often we cower in fear, we run and hide.

Yet in God's faithfulness we are brought to our knees, asking for renewal, restoration, and for the Lord to turn to us. We desire that the Lord would restore our fortunes, that He would bring back His complete and total control over us. Our desire is for renewal in our relationship with the Father by the work of the Spirit. Psalm 80:19 calls out, "Restore us, O Lord God of Hosts, cause your face to shine and we shall be saved."

Psalm 85:4 declares, "Restore us, O God of our salvation, And cause Your anger toward us to cease." Adam hid and yet desired the fellowship of the Lord, fearing the One who gave Him life. Our fathers desired to be renewed in grace and mercy after sin. Psalm 51 declares David's desire as a man and as God's chosen king to be cleansed and renewed by the Spirit. We as the Lord's covenant people today cry out for the same captivity, for continual renewal by the blood of Christ and by the power of the Holy Spirit.

We cry out for God to return His blessing of covenant renewal, "as the streams in the south." In Israel, when the streams in the southern region dry up, the the ground is so hard that a person can walk through it without knowing that a river had once flowed there. But when the winter rains come, that

We desire that the Lord would restore our fortunes, that He would bring back His complete and total control over us.

same riverbed is filled to overflowing, a mighty torrent of water saturating everything in its path. The Psalmist desires renewal that comes in such an always-faithful way.

This cry for renewal must enter our own mouths. In our lives because of sin and unfaithfulness, we dry up. We ignore the waters of God's Word and our lives become as empty and desert-like as those dry riverbeds. Yet when we cry out to our faithful Father, He sends us the winter rains. He fills us with His Spirit. He opens up the living waters, the Word of truth, that we may know our faithful God who has revealed Himself, to us, and that we might be renewed in our relationship with Him. We call out with the church of all ages for our God to fill us once more when we become dry in our sin.

God is faithful in hearing our call. Isaiah 41:17-18 states,

The poor and needy seek water, but there is none, Their tongues fail for thirst. I, the Lord, will hear them; I, the God of Israel, will not forsake them. I will open rivers in desolate heights, And fountains in the midst of the valleys; I will make the wilderness a pool of water, And the dry land springs of water.

The Lord will always be faithful in filling His people, a faithfulness seen most fully in Jesus Christ, the

living water promised in John 4:14, "but whoever drinks of the water that I shall give him will never thirst. But the water that I shall give him will become in him a fountain of water springing up into everlasting life." Our Father is faithful to renewing us by filling us with Himself and with His Word.

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The Bronze Laver

“And he made the laver of bronze, and the foot of it of bronze, of the lookingglasses of the women assembling, which assembled at the door of the tabernacle of the congregation.” Exodus 38:8

What is it about little children that they must run through every mud puddle they can find? It does not matter whether they have old clothes, new clothes, boots or Sunday shoes; if there is a puddle of water somewhere within their sight they will see it and splash in it. Now let me ask you this: what is it with us Christians that no sooner do we confess our sins at the altar, that is at the cross of Jesus Christ, than we run off and commit the same sin again?

The little child, wearing his Sunday best, jumps in the puddle and suddenly realizes that his clothes are all dirty. He will run to his mother and, tear-faced, ask his mother not to be angry with him. How can she be angry? She kisses away the tears and the little child knows he has been forgiven. But it does not end with that. Mother not only forgives but she washes his face and hands and puts a new outfit on her child.

We are the little children of our heavenly Father. The bronze altar, upon which the sacrifice continually burned, taught us that without the shedding of blood there can be no forgiveness of sins. The bronze altar pointed us to Calvary and Christ’s sacrifice for our sins. There we are reconciled to God through the death of an innocent substitute who has died in our place. We have been forgiven. As a people forgiven,

we move toward the Holy of Holies to have fellowship with God.

At the Bronze Altar we received a new nature. Like a little child, however, our old nature loves the dirt. A constant struggle exists between the old nature and the new nature. All too often the old nature wins. We are Christians but we have to admit that we are carnal Christians, infants in Christ.

That certainly is not the Father’s intention for us. He wants His children to grow strong in stature and in wisdom. He sent His Son that we might live the abundant life. In order to live that life we need to move beyond the bronze altar; we must move to the bronze laver.

The Old Testament Laver

It is interesting to point out, as Exodus 38:8 does, that the bronze laver was made out of mirrors. The mirrors had been given to Israelite women by the Egyptian women. They were part of the plunder that Israel took with them when they were released from captivity—wonderful specimens of Egyptian handicraft made of bronze and highly polished.

Mirrors are used to look at one’s self to see if one is properly attired as one gets ready to meet the world. God does not look on us to see if we are outwardly clean and prepared for the world. We must be inwardly clean. God demands

holiness. It is not the sacrifice of bulls, goats, or lambs that God desires of us. He looks at the heart. Regeneration and sanctification are needed to make a person beautiful on the inside.

The bronze laver was God’s wonderful provision for that inner cleansing. It stood between the bronze altar and the entrance into the Holy Place. At the laver the Priest was to wash his hands and his feet before he could enter into the Holy Place to serve God. No priest was permitted to enter into the Holy Place with unclean feet or hands. If he did so, he was to be put to death.

The priestly washing in the tabernacle symbolized certain great truths. First of all, true washing must come from God. Aaron and his sons were to wash themselves at the bronze laver in the tabernacle. They were not to wash themselves in their own homes. Instead, the washing had to be done in the sanctuary of God. Self-purification will not do. We cannot cleanse ourselves from the defilements of sin. Sin is not skin deep as some may suppose that it can be washed away by the touch of our hands and a bar of soap. The stain of sin is dark and deep in our very nature and only the cleansing done through the blood of the Savior can wash it away.

In God’s plan the justification received at the bronze altar must always be followed by sanctification received at the bronze laver. Altar and laver are inseparable companions. The blood was for forgiveness, the water for cleansing. I do

not want you to infer from this that there are two fountains given to us for salvation: one for forgiveness and the other for cleansing. Both point us in the same direction—they point us to Christ. Water and blood are closely joined together in God’s Word.

In Numbers 19, for example, the unclean person was to be declared cleansed only after being sprinkled with water but the water was to be mixed with the ashes of a sacrificed heifer. The water and the sacrifice were joined together. The Apostle John wrote, “This is the One who came by water and blood, Jesus Christ; not with water only, but with the water and the blood” (1 John 5:6).

How can we forget this scene: “But one of the soldiers pierced His side with a spear, and immediately blood and water came out” (John 19:34). The Heidelberg Catechism uses this passage as proof that Jesus was truly dead; but it also proved that Jesus is the one, complete sacrifice replacing both the bronze altar and the bronze laver.

The New Testament Laver

In the New Testament, after the Feast of the Passover, Jesus knew that He would soon make the necessary sacrifice. He and His beloved disciples were in that Upper Room. They had partaken of the paschal lamb.

Supper being ended, the second person of the Trinity arose. He took a towel and began to wash the feet of the disciples. By doing so, Jesus was fulfilling the role of the laver providing the necessary cleansing for the disciples. When Peter protested, Jesus said, “If I do not wash

you, you will have no part with me” (John 13:10). Peter was a disciple forgiven and saved. For him the sin question was settled. But what about his daily walk?

By the blood shed for us by the Substitute at the bronze altar, our guilt is cancelled. At the bronze laver the defilement of that sin is washed away. The author of Hebrews writes that without the shedding of blood there can be no forgiveness. He also writes that without holiness no one shall see the Lord. Sin is trespassing. It is going where you are not allowed to go. It

People cannot be changed by certain political or physical improvements. What needs changing is the heart.

is leaving the path that God has set for you and wandering off in your own direction—no doubt to jump into the mud puddle of sin and defile yourself.

When we find ourselves in such a condition the beautiful words of 1 John 1:9 come to us: “If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins [the bronze altar] and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness [the bronze laver].” God promises not only to forgive, He also promises to cleanse. He provides not only the altar, but also the laver; not only the forgiveness of our sins but the removal of those sins from us.

The Present Laver

Cleansing thru the blood refers to a removal of the desire to sin. As the priests saw their reflection in the bronze laver and as we look at our reflection in the Law of God, even though we are forgiven we still have the desire for sin in our hearts. God said through the prophet Ezekiel, “Then I will sprinkle clean water upon you, and you shall be clean: from all the filthiness, and from all your idols, will I cleanse you. A new heart also will I give you, and a new spirit will I put within you: and I will take away the stony heart out of your flesh, and I will give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my spirit in you, and cause you to walk in my statutes, and you shall keep my judgments, and do them” (Ezekiel 36:25-27).

Isn’t that beautiful? That is exactly what we need before we enter into the Holy Place to fellowship with God—a cleansing of the heart. God says, “I will give...” The cleansing that is our sanctification is a gift of God given freely to His own. By faith we receive the Lord as our Savior; by faith we acknowledge our sins are forgiven through His once-for-all sacrifice upon the cross. He has removed our sin from us. Now we can move to the laver where, not only are we forgiven, but our hearts are made clean.

This is an inward process. True washing must be a spiritual washing. Many people today think purification is something material—something they can do. They think if they throw enough money, enough education, enough proper environment at something; they can change it. They want to change the

world by means of welfare and social programs.

We certainly have changed the world in which we live, but I would not say for the better. People cannot be changed by certain political or physical improvements. What needs changing is the heart. That is what God does: “I will give you a new heart.” True purification must be of the heart and the soul.

Interior, divine washing is necessary, indispensable. Without it a person will never be able to enter into fellowship with God. Revelation 7 tells us that without it we cannot enter into heaven. The saints in heaven are those who “have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb.”

The last Beatitude in the Bible teaches, “Blessed are those who wash their robes, so that they may have the right to the Tree of Life, and may enter by the gates into the city” (Revelation 22:14). In the blood of the Lamb at the bronze laver our garments are made white; our hearts are cleansed and made pure.

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Bavinck the Dogmatian (II)

The place of dogmatics in theological study

As a form of human knowledge of God and ourselves, which is based upon the divine testimony of God’s revelation, dogmatics has a particular place in the field of theological study. Biblical studies focus upon the interpretation of the biblical text, and are organized broadly in terms of the shape of the biblical canon. Historical theology focuses upon the history of the church that Christ is building by his Word and Spirit until the end of the age. Ministerial (“practical”) theology focuses upon the office and task of the ministry of the Word of God within the church.

In Bavinck’s understanding of dogmatics, this branch of theological study has a special task: to set forth in a comprehensive and systematic way the whole teaching of the Word of God. All the divisions of theology have their unique calling. The unique calling of dogmatics is to present in an orderly way what can be known about God and his relations with his creatures through divine revelation. In order to fulfill its assignment, dogmatics needs to derive its knowledge from divine revelation in Scripture, and to conform its presentation to the church’s summary of Scriptural teaching in the creeds and confessions.

In his consideration of the unique place and task of dogmatics, Bavinck addresses two important

questions. The first question concerns the relative authority of Scripture, confession, and experience in the dogmatic enterprise. The second question concerns the way in which dogmatics distributes or organizes the content of the knowledge of God.

On the first matter, Bavinck steers a course between two errors. On the one hand, the Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox traditions have ascribed an inordinate authority to their dogmas in relation to Scripture. According to these traditions, the church may derive her dogmas from Scripture as well as unwritten apostolic tradition with which the church and her bishops have been entrusted. In the determination of dogma, the church also is said to have a capacity to interpret infallibly what divine revelation teaches. As a consequence, the task of dogmatics is limited to the exposition and defense of the church’s dogmas. These dogmas are, in the nature of the case, not liable to testing by the higher authority of the Word of God in Scripture.

On the other hand, the tendency of liberal Protestantism has been to deny the authority of the Scriptures as the Word of God and to regard the church’s dogmas as an unfortunate imposition upon the simplicity of divine revelation. Within the orbit of Protestant liberal theology, there is no longer any room for the discipline of dogmatics, since there are no acknowledged dogmas, whether biblically derived or eccle-

siastically defined, that the theologian is able to set forth and defend. In Bavinck's view, the proper approach is to recognize that the Scriptures are the only source of the church's dogmas, and that, no matter how respectfully the theologian may view the church's confessions; they must always remain liable to examination by the standard of the Scriptures.

In his reflection upon the second matter, Bavinck defends the traditional way in which Reformed dogmaticians have organized their summary of the teaching of divine revelation in Scripture. In the sequence of doctrinal topics—the doctrines of God, of man, of Christ, of the Holy Spirit, of the church, and of the last things—Reformed dogmatics treats, comprehensively, the works of the Triune God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, in creation and redemption. The sequence of topics reflects what is basic to the Christian faith, the knowledge of the Triune God and the “appropriate” works of the persons of the Father (creation), the Son (redemption), and the Holy Spirit (sanctification).

As the dogmatician articulates the knowledge of God and of ourselves, which is given to us through God's own self-testimony in his Word, he begins with God and then “descends” to his works of creation and redemption. And since the work of redemption ultimately aims to restore all things to God, the pattern of dogmatics exhibits a clear acknowledgment that all things are from, through, and unto God. Indeed, Bavinck

insists that the dogmatician is governed by the obligation to glorify and love the Triune God. By expounding God's own testimony and Word, the task of dogmatics must always lead to further, informed praise of the God who is, and who was, and is to come.

The Foundations of Dogmatic Theology (*principia*)

In the first major section of his introductory volume, Bavinck treats the kinds of “formal” questions that we have considered in our summary thus far. He provides a

Dogmatics aims to set forth in a systematic manner what we may know about God and his creatures on the basis of divine revelation.

general statement of what the discipline of dogmatics, as one of the four branches of theological science, aims to accomplish. Dogmatics aims to set forth in a systematic manner what we may know about God and his creatures on the basis of divine revelation. Dogmatics presupposes, therefore, that God exists, that he is revealed to us, and that he may be known by us.

In Bavinck's view, any concession to the claims of post-Enlightenment philosophy and theology at this point, especially where they deny the reality of divine revelation or the knowability of God, must be resolutely opposed. In

this section of his introduction, Bavinck also provides an important review of the history of dogmatics in various confessional traditions of the church (Roman Catholic, Reformed, Lutheran, etc.). For our purpose in this summary, we will refrain from comment on this survey, though it represents an important context for understanding Bavinck's theology and is often absent from other textbooks in dogmatics.

What we still need to consider briefly is the second major section of the introductory volume, which takes up the subject of the “foundations” (*principia*) of theology as a science. In this section, Bavinck (even as was the case with the first section) is preparing for the last and most important section of the introductory volume, which deals with the doctrine of revelation in general and Scripture in particular.

In this section of his introduction, Bavinck argues that all forms of human knowledge, including dogmatics, must inquire after their foundations. Though modern philosophy and science seeks to undertake this task on behalf of theology, Bavinck insists that it belongs to the task of dogmatics to inquire after its own foundations. A Reformed approach to dogmatics is unwilling to concede this ground to unbelieving philosophy, since it always begins with the prior reality of divine revelation and proceeds upon the basis of faith's conviction that this revelation is reliable. The task of addressing the foundations of dogmatics, therefore, belongs itself to

the dogmatic enterprise.

Following a long tradition of Reformed theology, Bavinck notes that the foundations of the science of dogmatics, as is true formally of any science, are three: the first principle is the basic reality or object that any science aims to know or understand, and that stands behind any knowledge that we may gain regarding this reality (*principium essendi*, “the principle of being”); the second principle is the external or objective medium or instrument through which we may obtain a true knowledge of the object of science (*principium cognoscendi externum*, “the external principle of knowledge”); and the third principle is the internal or subjective reception or apprehension of what may be known in any particular science (*principium cognoscendi internum*, “the internal principle of knowledge”).

Though the language Bavinck employs in speaking of these three foundations of all the sciences, including the science of theology, may strike some readers as rather difficult or obscure, the basic point that Bavinck means to make here is relatively simple. Any one of the sciences could be used by way of illustration, but I will use the science of chemistry as a case in point. In order for chemistry to count as a science, we need to be convinced of the existence of chemicals and chemical reactions of various kinds. These “things” are the “stuff” of the science of chemistry (remember those “table of the elements” posters in your old chemistry classroom). If the study

of chemistry means anything, it means that the chemist seeks to discover and to offer explanations regarding chemical phenomena. This is what is meant by the *principia essendi* of the science of chemistry: the reality of the chemical composition and functioning of created things. But it is not enough to acknowledge the existence of chemicals and chemical processes for the science of chemistry to be prosecuted. It is also necessary that the chemist, based upon proper

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methods of observation and testing in a chemistry lab, come to a proper understanding of what can be known about chemicals and chemical processes (the *principium cognoscendi externum*). Without a scientist who comes to know something of the nature of what he studies, there is no such thing as science. All sciences, in other words, in a purely formal sense require three components: an *object* to be known, a *subject* or knower who truthfully understands what he is studying, and a *relation* between the known and the knower that involves human sensibility and understanding (the

principium cognoscendi internum).

For Bavinck, theology properly counts as a science on all three points. Though God is not an “object” or something (better: Someone) to be known in the way creaturely objects may be known, he does exist or possess reality in a surpassingly great manner. Because God is the Triune Creator of all things, the whole of created reality in some manner or degree reveals to us his everlasting power, wisdom and divinity. The whole of creation and all of history comprehensively reveal to God’s image-bearers something of who God is. Furthermore, God, who created man in his own image with the capacity to know and love him from the heart, has revealed himself in the divine testimony of his own Word.

Through divine revelation, the infinite Creator of all things has so accommodated and condescended to his creatures as to make himself knowable by them. Unless such divine revelation is denied or obscured through unbelief, we must insist that God is known through revelation by his image-bearers. Through faith, which confidently embraces the knowledge of God given through divine revelation, believers are granted a true knowledge of the true God. In a revealed and comprehensive statement of his position, Bavinck describes the foundations of the science of theology as follows:

Corresponding to the objective revelation of God, therefore, there is in human beings a certain faculty or natural apti-

tude for perceiving the divine. God does not do a half a job. He creates not only the light but also the eye to see it. Corresponding to the external reality there is an internal organ of perception. The ear is designed for the world of sounds. The 'logos' implicit in creatures corresponds to the 'logos' in human beings and makes science possible. ... Just as in science, so in religion there are three principles to be distinguished. Religion exists because God is God and wants to be served as God by his rational creatures. To that end he reveals himself to human beings in word and deed (the external principle of knowledge) and makes them subjectively fit to know and love God by that revelation (the internal principle of knowledge). ... [I]n religion these three principles again have their foundation in the Trinitarian being of God. It is the Father who reveals himself in the Son and by the Spirit. (RD 1:279)

Conclusion

With this lengthy quote of Bavinck, I will conclude this summary of the opening sections of Bavinck's dogmatics. It should be immediately evident why Bavinck devotes the remainder of his introductory volume to an extensive treatment of the doctrine of revelation, particularly the inscripturation of special revelation in the biblical canon. Christian theology in general, and dogmatics as a branch of the science of theology in particular, must be founded upon the divine testimony

of God's revelation. Unless we have a clear understanding of what we mean by revelation and the Word of God, we will build the house of theology upon an uncertain and indefinite foundation. Since Bavinck's treatment of the doctrine of revelation is quite extensive, and includes a lengthy exposition regarding the doctrine of Scripture, we will reserve our consideration of this section of the introductory volume to his Reformed Dogmatics until our next article.

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

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Bible Studies on Joseph and Judah

Lesson 17: Joseph Feeds Egypt

Read Genesis 47:13-31

Introduction

Genesis 46:1 – 47:12 are a kind of narrative bridge between the lands of Canaan and Egypt for Jacob and his clan. He and all his family have entered the land of Egypt. Jacob in fact had an audience with the king of Egypt, Pharaoh himself! Joseph has done his best to see to it that his family would be adequately cared for, and Pharaoh assures this family that the best of the land, the region of Goshen, would be reserved for them. The providence of God is clearly evident in all this since the famine is not yet over. More lean years lie ahead, but the covenant-keeping God has arranged everything for the good of His chosen people. A new chapter of the ‘good news’ is about to be written, even if it means that darker days are ahead since, in time, a new Pharaoh would arise who would not know or have any memory of the man Joseph and all that he did for Egypt.

A continuing food crisis (47:13-19)

When Joseph had revealed himself to his brothers, two years of famine had passed. There were five more years of hunger ahead. Such a famine could only get worse as available food sources and food reserves start to get depleted in the regions where the famine is hitting the hardest. Egypt has food stored up because of the gracious revelation of God and the wise leadership of Joseph. But both Egypt and

Canaan are suffering, and it did not get easier for them. People kept dipping into their cash sources to come up with the means by which they could buy food. In time, all cash resources would be exhausted as people reached deeper into their pockets to find the wherewithal to obtain food.

Since Joseph could not count on a cash income from these hungry people, he then asks for their livestock, which they also use to get food. Here is the first mention of horses, an animal that the Egyptians would master and even sell to others. Solomon later acquired horses from the Egyptians (1 Kings 10:28-29), something that is forbidden to God’s chosen king (see Deut. 17:14ff.), since the horse was often used as an animal of war and power, whereas Israel’s power and strength were to come from the LORD alone.

Joseph led the Egyptian people through that next famine year. The word used in verse 17 is reminiscent of the actions of a shepherd who cared for a flock. His leadership gave stability to the population during this time of economic crisis.

But the famine dragged on, and elements that could be bartered for food continued to dwindle. The Egyptians stood before Joseph with empty pockets. “The only thing that we have left is our bodies and our land,” they say (verse 18). The hungry people willingly give up their property and their persons in order

to eat. When actual starvation is staring a person in the face, that person will resort to some desperate measures in order to eat. The Egyptian population sell themselves to Pharaoh; they obtain seed in order to keep planting every year in the hope that the coming year will be better than the last one. In other words, the Egyptians have now become economic serfs, a state of existence somewhere between outright slavery and freedom. Desperate times call for desperate measures... or do they?

Pharaoh owns Egypt (47:20-22)

The result of Joseph’s actions in the light of this ongoing famine is that Pharaoh acquires under his control the entire land of Egypt. Since the government in the person of Joseph had a monopoly on food stuffs—and people have to eat, after all—now this stark reality confronts the Egyptians: you can eat now from the hand of the state, but you have no more (economic) freedom. The one exception to this plan is the land of the Egyptian priests. Perhaps the power of Egyptian priests was something that was best left undisturbed. The priests were known in Egyptian history to have been supported by Pharaoh through gifts of food (grain) given to the temples. Egyptian temples owned their own land.

Verse 21 differs in the several English translations, depending on whether they follow the Hebrew text or the Greek Old Testament (Septuagint) text. The NIV says that Joseph reduced the people to servitude, while the Hebrew text says that he moved them to the cit-

ies. If the latter is the proper reading, it may be for the purpose of moving farmers off national lands, “or to get them to work other national lands, or to bring them to the city to work on national building projects” (Currid, *Genesis*, 2:357). The cities were where the storehouses of food were. In any case, either action suggests that fairly significant social disruption occurred during this famine, and Joseph is the government leader who plays a large role in all this. We might think of similar social disruptions in the last century. During the “dust bowl” years of the Great Depression, many Midwesterners moved to California. Much more tragically, when communists took over Russia and China, many landowners were removed from their property, many of them killed. Crises can lead to significant changes in society.

Taxes at 20% (47:23-26)

Even in dry years, farmers plant in the hope that things may improve. Joseph knows how long the famine will last, but this does not mean that such insight was common knowledge among all the Egyptian people. Some people continued to work the land, and whatever crops did grow, Joseph took 20% as the share of the government; the rest belonged to the people so that the families and households of Egypt could eat.

The people’s response is interesting. The old adage is true: a person does not bite the hand that feeds him. To Joseph comes the loyalty of the Egyptian people. “You have saved our lives!” (verse 25). “Now we belong to Pharaoh.” Joseph had acquired the Egyptian people and their land for Pharaoh. The

two means of (capital) production have now effectively come under the control of the Egyptian state, for better... or for worse. Gold and grain do not have intrinsic value; their value is whatever people give to it. What lesson is embedded in these events that God’s people need to learn today?

“Carry me back to old Canaan” (47:27-31)

On the other hand, verse 27 describes Israel’s life in the Goshen region of Egypt. They obtain prop-

The Egyptians are desperate to secure food sources; the Israelites begin to grow in number.

erty as they continue to live there as resident aliens, and their numbers continue to increase. This verse is a kind of literary “oasis” in the sense that the gloom and doom situation that has befallen Egypt is contrasted to the bright prospects that the Israelites experienced in Goshen. Egyptian land goes to Pharaoh; Israelites acquire property in Goshen. The Egyptians are desperate to secure food sources; the Israelites begin to grow in number (i.e., they prosper).

This last item is a fulfillment, in part, of what God had repeatedly said to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob before (e.g., Gen. 12:1-3; 35:11-12). God was certainly blessing them. But God’s people, the church, are not to

remain in Egypt. The reason is not because Egypt is bad land. Rather, it is not the land of the older covenant era, promised by the LORD on oath. Yet, while they are in Egypt, at this moment in time the God of the covenant is faithful to His promises, and everything that His people need is provided. God’s primary concern is always for the well-being of His own. In adopting His children, He will never neglect them, and that is evident also at this moment in redemptive-history, through the ministry of Joseph.

And yet... Egypt the country and Goshen the district are not the homeland. This is not the Promised Land, even if this were the years of economic boom and plenty. God’s Word is decisive here: He had planted in the hearts and minds of Jacob and Joseph as well this truth, that God would establish His own people in a particular place in the world. When that truth is embraced by faith, it causes all priorities and every plan to be arranged in such a way that moves us toward what that truth entails. Canaan is the Promised Land, while Egypt is not. Thus when Jacob’s remaining seventeen years of life come to an end, he makes Joseph swear to him that Jacob’s body would not lie buried in Egypt, but rather that Joseph would see to it that Jacob’s body would be returned to the land that the LORD had promised on oath to give to the children of Abraham. Jacob’s eyes of faith see God’s promises, and therefore even where his dead body lies must be in accord with the promises of God. “Swear this to me,” says Jacob to Joseph. This Joseph does by placing his hand under his father’s thigh, near the organ of procreation, perhaps to

represent his connection to his family and this solemn obligation to fulfill his promise. In this way both Jacob, who wants the oath, and Joseph, who swears the oath, testify to their living faith that directs their entire being to movement to the place that God says is home. Canaan, not Egypt, is the Promised Land.

The same is always true for the people of God today. We are not our own because we have been bought by the precious blood of Jesus Christ. Therefore, our only comfort in life but also in death is that we belong to Him. For Jacob and for Joseph later on, this means that they want the resting place for their bones and body to be in the Promised Land. Christ rested in the grave for us, but He arose again, and then He moves on to prepare a place for all believers in the new creation. Because we are raised with Christ, we too direct our lives, thoughts and actions, toward that great reality (see Col. 3:1ff.). Our lives belong to Christ here and now, in every area of life, but our citizenship is in heaven (Phil. 3:20a).

Lesson 17: Points to ponder and discuss

1. “His mercies are new every morning; great is Thy faithfulness!” How was this true for the children of Israel during these famine years?
2. How has the grace of God changed and matured the man Judah? Contrast him in his earlier years, as we meet him in the text of Scripture, to that point where the family of Jacob settles in Goshen in the land of Egypt.
3. Children are dependent upon their parents for food, clothing, and protection—the basic necessities of life. Young children are, of course, immature. As we mature and grow up, we become increasingly responsible for providing those things for ourselves. What is the role of the community (church? state? family and friends?) when we experience genuine needs and shortfalls?
4. Are Joseph’s actions of centralizing (economic) power under Pharaoh (the ‘state’) something for that time only, or is this a model (example) for all times?
5. What does this passage remind us of regarding trusting in riches (in money, in property, etc.)? Can we look to the state to supply all our needs? What did our Lord Jesus say in Matthew 6 about our anxiety concerning food and clothing?
6. In Genesis 15:13-14, God had told Abram that his descendants would be afflicted in a foreign land for 400 years, that is, they would be slaves in Egypt. Do Joseph’s actions here set things up that help contribute to the Pharaoh’s later abuse of the Israelites? What happens when power is centralized and rulers love to have that power?



Rev. Vander Hart’s series on the life of Jacob is now available from Reformed Fellowship. Order your copies today from Reformed Fellowship! Call (616)-532-8510 or email address: sales@reformedfellowship.net

Bible Studies on Joseph and Judah

Lesson 18: Final Reconciliation and Future Resolution

Read Genesis 50

Introduction

We have come to the end of this chapter of redemptive-history. God has shown His covenant goodness throughout the life of the great patriarch Jacob. He dies at the age of 147 years (Gen. 47:28), a ripe age by today's standards, although it is several decades briefer than his father Isaac (180 years) and grandfather Abraham (175 years).

Embalming Jacob and burial in Canaan (50:1-14)

Genesis 49:33 ends that chapter with the notice that Jacob concluded his life in a dignified, almost grand, manner. He has spoken to his sons, noting that he was about "to be gathered to [his] people" (Gen. 49:29). The chapter ends with the words that Jacob had said would happen. He had gathered his sons around him to receive his parting blessing, and now he is gathered to his people in death. Does this suggest that in death he was gathered to the saints of God who had passed out of this life to be with the Lord? After all, the Triune God is the God of the living, not of the dead.

Joseph directs his private physicians to embalm the body of his father Jacob. John Currid (*Genesis*, 2:389,390) says that embalming had become an involved process during the Egyptian

Middle Kingdom (ca. 2040-1640 BC). The Egyptians were fascinated with death and the possibilities of life after death. In embalming, the internal organs were removed, stored in jars, and the body cavity was packed with a salt to dry out the body. The skin was also treated with resin and spices, and then the body was wrapped in linen strips, placed in a wooden coffin. The whole process continued to be improved over time in Egypt. Some mummified bodies could be relatively well-kept, as any Egypt section of a museum can attest. The Bible mentions only Jacob and Joseph as children of Abraham who were embalmed. It should also be noted that the Jews did not embalm. When the women were bringing spices to Jesus' tomb on Resurrection morning, it was to give a pleasant smell to a body that would have begun to decay after death. Once all the flesh had decayed, then the bones of the (wealthy) deceased would have been collected into special boxes.

Jacob in death is buried in Canaan at the cave in the field of Machpelah, east of Mamre. Other patriarchs are buried there in the hope of the promise being realized.

***"Now we're going to get it!"
(50:15-21)***

With the death of the great patriarch Jacob, the old wounds are

activated in the minds of the sons of Jacob. They are now afraid that it is "pay-back time!" Joseph, they fear, may have waited and waited for the moment when his father would die, and then he would strike back in all his fury against his brothers. Esau had plotted just such action in Genesis 27:41. Esau planned to kill Jacob, but he did not want to carry out the foul deed as long as his father Isaac remained alive. Joseph's brothers suspect that their powerful brother Joseph was secretly planning some kind of retaliation against them once father Jacob was dead and gone.

The brothers send a message to Joseph to tell him of a message that reportedly father Jacob had left before his own death. Did Jacob in fact leave such a message, or is this a "white lie" intended to keep Joseph from carrying out any vengeance that he may have in mind? In any case, they are asking for forgiveness, even if the request is through the intermediary person, father Jacob. This request pains the heart and soul of Joseph, so that again he weeps. In his mind, his brothers had not fully believed his words and actions of forgiveness in Genesis 45 and following.

Here come the brothers again, and they again bow in utter submission to Joseph. His dreams when he was 17 years old continue to come true: the members of his family would bow down before him. That bowing stretches from Genesis 37 through Genesis 50. But Joseph basically repeats his earlier message that he gave in Genesis 45: the brothers mo-

tives and actions were evil, intended to kill Joseph. But God! That simple phrase is the great turnaround that lies at the heart of the gospel message. But God, who is rich in mercy, is still sovereign over all the motives and actions of people in this world. He worked through their evil to cause many people, Israelites as well as many others, to live. So Joseph has to say twice in verses 19-21, "Don't be afraid." That message still echoes today whenever the true gospel is preached, "Don't be afraid! We are sinners, worthy of death, but Christ has died in our place, and He now lives and reigns in glory. He will provide us with everything we need to live for Him."

Dying with eyes (of faith) wide open (50:22-26)

Joseph died at the age of 110 years. To the Egyptians, that number was significant because they believed that this was the ideal length of life. This many years of life enabled Joseph to live long enough to see his grandchildren and even his great-grandchildren. Joseph's sons, Manasseh and Ephraim, were adopted by Jacob (with Ephraim designated to become the 'firstborn' in rank). Joseph's grandson Makir is named; he is the ancestor of the important Gileadite branch of the Manasseh tribe (cf. Joshua 17:1; Judges 5:14). Verse 23 says that Makir's children were "placed on Joseph's knees," perhaps a reference to Joseph adopting them as his very own.

Joseph has acted in a royal capacity during much of his time in Egypt. But he also acts as a

prophet in that he reminds his brothers of the covenant promises of God. Thus he can 'see,' as it were, into the future. He tells his brothers of what God is going to do later on the basis of what God has said earlier. "God will surely come to your aid."

Joseph has lived most of his life in Egypt, and most of those years (after his imprisonment) were lived in a position of power and relative comfort. He had become one of the highest officials in the

***How many things in
Joseph's life
anticipate the Lord
Jesus Christ!***

land of Egypt! His wife was an Egyptian from an important section of society. Humanly speaking, Joseph had it made! But that did not count for a great deal to Joseph. He had come to know the promise of God, and he embraced that promise so that when his earthly journey would end, his bones (his body) would rest in Egypt, but only for a time. Joseph also believed that the day would come when the church, the community of people that were gathered by the Word of the LORD, would leave the land of Egypt, and this family of faith would journey back to Canaan. Egypt may have many physical pleasures, but it is not "home." With all of its advan-

tages, pleasures and power, Egypt is still an alien land to those whose lives are gripped by the word of God's promise. By faith Joseph also wants his bones to rest (until the resurrection) not in Egypt but in Canaan (see Hebr. 11:22). God's Word always informs our faith, and then our spiritual eyes are directed to look where they should look. This present world is not our permanent home. We await the new creation in the firm resolve of faith.

Joseph's significance

What is the significance of this man Joseph in the history of redemption? On the historical road back to the face of God, on the way back to Paradise, the people of God had again been detoured to Egypt. The reason is again famine (cf. Gen 12:10-20). But before the clan of Jacob goes down to Egypt, one of the family goes ahead of the others. He is sold, sent away (in the ten brothers' minds) to death. But in God's plan, Joseph goes to prepare a place for them. He came on the command of the father to check on their welfare (their *shalom*), but they hated him and plotted against him. "He came unto his own, but his own would not receive him." How many things in Joseph's life anticipate the Lord Jesus Christ! Joseph was "attacked" by his brothers but also by Potiphar's wife (betrayed by a Gentile).

Truly there is much in the person, life, and ministry of Joseph that is analogous to, even typical of, the person, life, and ministry of our Savior and Lord, Jesus Christ. Commentators frequently note

this. All of this is an unfolding of God's plan for delivering His people alive, always in the midst of threats. The Satanic dragon-lion is always trying to attack the mother who is great with Child in the old covenant era, as Revelation 12 reminds us. But God always provides a way of escape. This is what Joseph sees and understands, and his revelation provides not only a perspective on events, even evil events, it contributes to the attitude of forgiveness and acceptance on the part of the one who is wronged. Joseph sees God's hand in all these things. He can forgive his brothers all the evil that they have plotted.

Joseph's life work in Egypt has several different points of focus:

1. He reveals God's will to both the church (community of faith) and the world. Here is the pattern: dreams come from God (revelation), he interprets them (e.g., Gen. 41:39-40), which in turn leads to exaltation (eventually), power and honor.
2. He is able to feed God's people but also the "whole earth." Thus blessing is coming to many nations through the seed of Abraham (cf. Gen. 12:3). This is the first real instance of this thing on a somewhat large scale. This looks ahead to what Psalm 72 will say about the Messianic king: when the needy look to Him, He will feed them.
3. Joseph sifts the church by

searching out the hearts and motives of his brothers. If he had hated them and sought strict justice, he could have had his brothers killed at the first meeting. Had he been only indulgent, he might have revealed himself right away at the first meeting, told them "all is forgiven," and invited them to come on down ("cheap grace"). He does not do either. Rather he engages in a kind of "cat and mouse" game with them to see what really lived in their hearts after all those years. It is in this back and forth struggle that Judah emerges as preeminent among his brothers.

4. There is a focal point of separation. This is perhaps more

Lesson 17: Points to ponder and discuss

1. In what ways did the LORD God mature Jacob and strengthen his faith over the years?
2. Review briefly the life of Joseph. How did the LORD God mature him and sanctify him in his life?
3. Why do the brothers find it so hard to believe that Joseph has really forgiven them? Do some Christians today also have a difficult time believing that God is truly gracious to us in Christ?
4. When Joseph tells his brothers about the future, it is not on the basis of some vision or dream. He simply reminds them of what God has promised to do. What can Christians today say, on the basis of God's Word, about the future? What is going to happen in the future in history and at the end of history? What is going to happen to the church communally and to all believers personally?
5. Genesis 50:26, the last verse of the book of Genesis, names Joseph, his age at death, the embalming of his body, and his placement in a coffin. This is a rather sober, almost chilly, ending to the story. Yet why is this not the last word to the story? How is death never the last word for God's people in Jesus Christ?
6. Joseph served in the court of a foreign king and contributed to the benefit of God's people. How would Daniel and Esther later on do similar kinds of things in the court of the Babylonian and Persian kings?

subtle, but it appears to be present. This has already been seen in the life-partners chosen for the patriarchs Isaac (Rebekah) and Jacob (Leah and Rachel). Esau had married two Hittites and an Ishmaelite, while Judah married a Canaanite (Gen. 38). Jacob and his clan will live separated lives in Egypt. Joseph, in faith, will separate his bones in death so that they may some day rest in the Promised Land of Canaan.

Dr. G. Van Groningen (*Messianic Revelation in the Old Testa-*

ment, p. 166) points out four similar things about Joseph:

1. As the firstborn (of the beloved Rachel), he wears the royal robe. He is the chief, a prince, the one who stands out. This pictures the firstborn preeminence of Jesus Christ (Rom. 8:29b and Col. 1:15,18).
2. Joseph “experienced the depths of humiliation and the heights of exaltation.” He was nearly “cut off from the land of the living.” This also outlines the states of Christ, in His humiliation and exaltation (Isa.

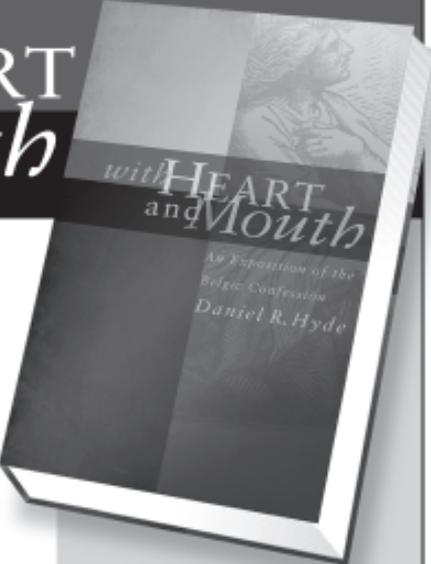
53:8b and Phil 2:8-9).

3. Joseph foreshadows Christ’s ministry in many ways: he reveals the divine will, delivers his people from death, and separates them from the world.
4. Joseph is “truly a messianic type.” He is considered a royal protector and provider.

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Looking Above

A Series on The Revelation of Christ

Revelation 11:5-6

“That Word Above All Earthly Powers”

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Throughout the great interlude of Revelation 10:1–11:14 the Church is in view. We have already seen that the true Church, which clings to Christ, is being separated from the false church, which does not cling to Christ (11:1-2). That separation is effected through the ministry of the two witnesses, namely the offices of the minister of the Word and the elder (11:3-4). God has chosen to work through the ministry of the two witnesses (the office of the ministry of the Word and the office of elder) to build His Church. Christ builds His Church not by the high liturgy of Rome, but by proclamation and rule. Christ builds His Church not by the gifts of tongues, faith healings, and holy laughter, but by proclamation and rule. Christ builds His Church not by the charisma of its leadership, but by proclamation and rule. Christ builds His Church not by earthly success with large numbers, but by proclamation and rule.

Do you long for the high liturgy of Rome, finding yourself dissatisfied with the simplicity of Protestant worship? Do you long for the Pentecostal gifts of tongues, healings, and laughter, finding yourself dissatisfied with the Word and sacraments in the Reformed church? Do you long for a charismatic leadership, finding yourself dissatisfied with the of-

office of the minister of the Word and the office of the elder? Do you long for earthly success with large numbers, finding yourself dissatisfied with a small assembly? Do you lose heart with the Protestant church? Do you scoff at the apparent weakness of the Reformed church? Then you do well to consider again the words of the Apostle in 2 Corinthians 4: “Therefore, since we have this ministry, as we have received mercy, we do not lose heart. But we have renounced the hidden things of shame, not walking in craftiness nor handling the word of God deceitfully, but by manifestation of the truth commending ourselves to every man’s conscience in the sight of God. But even if our gospel is veiled, it is veiled to those who are perishing, whose minds the god of this age has blinded, who do not believe, lest the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God, should shine on them. For we do not preach ourselves, but Christ Jesus the Lord, and ourselves your bondservants for Jesus’ sake. For it is the God who commanded light to shine out of darkness, who has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ. But we have this treasure in earthen vessels, that the excellence of the power may be of God and not of us” (2 Corinthians 4:1-7).

The power of the church of Jesus Christ does not rest in man; the power of the church of Jesus Christ rests in God and in His Word. That is where Revelation 11:5-6 directs us.

Revelation 11:5-6 directs us to the power of the Word of God—that Word above all earthly powers.

Two Old Testament Figures

The power of the Word of God is seen in the Old Testament figures of Moses and Elijah, upon whom verses 5-6 are based.

Our attention is first directed to Moses: “And if anyone wants to harm them, fire proceeds from their mouth and devours their enemies” (11:5a). Do you remember Numbers 16, and the story of Korah, Dathan, and Abiram? Do you remember their rebellion? “They rose up before Moses with some of the children of Israel, two hundred and fifty leaders of the congregation, representatives of the congregation, men of renown. They gathered together against Moses and Aaron, and said to them, ‘You take too much upon yourselves, for all the congregation is holy, every one of them, and the Lord is among them. Why then do you exalt yourselves above the assembly of the Lord?’” (Numbers 16:2-3). Who are you Moses, that you would be prince over us? Who are you, Moses, that you would be ruler over us? Korah, Dathan, Abiram, and 250 men with them, attacked the ruler of God’s people! Do you remember the result? The earth was opened up to swallow alive Korah, Dathan, and Abiram, along with their households and all their goods. Fire then came out from the Lord and consumed the 250 men who were with them.

“And if anyone wants to harm them, fire proceeds from their mouth and devours their enemies” (11:5a).

We move from Moses to Elijah in 11:5b, “And if anyone wants to harm them, he must be killed in this manner.” Do you remember 2 Kings 1, and the story of wicked king Ahaziah who sought to inquire of Baal Zebub, the false god of Ekron? Do you remember how Elijah intercepted the messengers of Ahaziah, telling them that Ahaziah would die? Do you remember how Ahaziah twice sent a captain of fifty with his fifty men to inquire of Elijah? Do you remember how Elijah twice called down fire from heaven to consume the enemies of God? Do you remember how Elijah finally did go to Ahaziah and told him he would die? Do you remember the result? “So Ahaziah died according to the word of the Lord which Elijah had spoken” (2 Kings 1:17).

“And if anyone wants to harm them, he must be killed in this manner” (11:5b).

Elijah is again set before us in 11:6a, “These have power to shut heaven, so that no rain falls in the days of their prophecy.” Do you remember 1 Kings 17, where Elijah the Tishbite appears on the scene and says to Ahab, “As the Lord God of Israel lives, before whom I stand, there shall not be dew nor rain these years, except at my word”? Do you remember the result? For three and half years, there was no rain on the earth.

“These have power to shut heaven, so that no rain falls in the days of their prophecy” (11:6a).

We move, finally, from Elijah back to Moses in 11:6b, “and they have power over waters to turn them to blood, and to strike the earth with all plagues, as often as they desire.” Do you remember Exodus 7-12? Do you remember the plagues which God sent upon Pharaoh and Egypt through his servant Moses? Do you remember how the water turned to blood? Do you remember the frogs? Do you remember the lice? Do you remember the flies? Do you remember the death of the livestock? Do you remember the boils? Do you remember the hail? Do you remember the locusts? Do you remember the darkness? Do you remember the death of the firstborn?

“They have power over waters to turn them to blood, and to strike the earth with all plagues, as often as they desire” (11:6b).

Two New Testament Figures

What are we to make of all this? Once again we see the two offices of the minister of the Word and of the Elder set before us. Who was Moses, but a prince of the people, a ruler of the people? What is an elder, but a prince of the people of God, a ruler of the people of God? Who was Elijah but a mouthpiece of God to the

The power of the church of Jesus Christ does not rest in man; the power of the church of Jesus Christ rests in God and in His Word.

people? What is a minister, but a mouthpiece of God to the people? The two offices are once again set before us in order to show us the power of the Word of God—the power of the Word of God in the office of the minister of the Word, and the power of the Word of God in the office of the elder.

The power of God's Word is great. The Word of God is effectual: it brings about the salvation of the elect, even as it brings about the condemnation of the reprobate. You might read the Third and Fourth Heads of Doctrine in the Canons of Dort, Articles 6-12. The same Word of God is effectual in bringing salvation for the elect and condemnation for the reprobate, and that through the "keys of the kingdom": the preaching of the Word (exercised in the ministry of the word), and church discipline (exercised in the rule of the elders).

But then, let me remind you that we are dealing here in Revelation 11 not so much with the Word bringing salvation to the Church and condemnation to the world, though it certainly does that; we are dealing here with the Word bringing salvation to the true Church and condemnation to the false church.

To be more specific still, we are dealing here in Revelation 11:5-6, with the attacks of the false church upon the offices of the minister of the Word and of the elder. The passage speaks about those wanting to harm the two witnesses. The passage speaks about those wanting to harm the office of the minister of the Word

We are dealing with the attacks of the false church upon the offices of the minister of the Word and of the elder.

and the office of the elder. Here is the warning of Revelation 11:5-6: those who would attack the office of the minister of the Word are themselves judged by the ministry of the Word. Those who would attack the office of the elder are themselves judged by the office of the elder.

God Himself has laid down the ordering of the church. God Himself has laid down the ministry of the Church. God Himself has laid down the proclamation and rule of the Church. God Himself has laid down the offices of the minister of the Word and of the elder. Would you dare attack the offices which God Himself has ordained? Would you dare attack the mouthpiece of God in the ministry of the Word? Would you dare attack the supremacy of Christ seen in the office of the elder?

Woe to those who would attack! Their judgment is spoken of here in Revelation 11. God takes the government of His Church very seriously. He treats the offices of the church with the utmost seriousness and regard. We must do so as well. Those who hold the offices of minister of the Word or elder must humbly go before God daily, confessing that they are not sufficient in and of themselves, but that their sufficiency

comes from God alone—daily it must be their prayer that Christ would be glorified in and through them. Those who are members of the congregation must likewise hold these offices in the highest regard—not because of the men who occupy them, but because they are the offices that God has ordained. God has laid down for us the pattern for the ordering of the church: proclamation and rule, ministers of the word, and elders of the people. These offices deal with the Word of God, and that Word is above all earthly powers.

Will the Protestant church survive? Will the Reformed church endure?

We may not have the liturgy of Rome, we may not have the charismatic gifts of the Pentecostals, we may not have the charismatic leadership of the Crystal cathedral, we may not have the numbers of Willow Creek. We may be a small assembly, we may appear insignificant and unimpressive, but present with this assembly, and that through the offices of the minister of the Word and the elder, is a power that is above all earthly powers, even the power of the Word of God.

Will the Protestant church survive? Will the Reformed church endure? You better believe it!

Revelation 11:5-6 is God's promise to the church that she will endure.

That Word above all earthly powers—no thanks to them—abideth;

The Spirit and the gifts are ours, through Him who with us sideth.

Let goods and kindred go, this mortal life also;

The body they may kill, God's truth abideth still,

His kingdom is forever.

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Examining the Nine Points: Point One

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.

Point 1

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)*

One of the most important moves by those who have spent the last thirty years attempting to revise the Reformed doctrine of justification and Reformed covenant theology is to change our perception of the difference between our state before the fall and after.

Among those who teach the so-called Federal Vision (FV), there is an antipathy to the doctrine of the covenant of works. To be sure, there are ministers who deny the covenant of works but who have nevertheless remained orthodox on the doctrine of justification. There are also men who walk on tightropes who do not fall. It is a happy thing that some survive such a treacherous journey without harm but that does not encourage us to imitate them. As we have already

seen, it is impossible to change Reformed covenant theology without affecting the Reformed theology and confession. If the effect of denying the "commandment of life" before the fall is not immediately apparent it becomes apparent in succeeding generations.

Those who reject the covenant of works/life/nature typically do so because they think it is "legalistic," i.e. they think it is unseemly to speak of God entering into legal relations with Adam before the fall. They assume that if God has a legal relation to Adam he cannot also have a familiar or filial relation. This assumption needs to be queried and rejected. Of course Adam can have both filial and legal relations to God simultaneously. Of course any example to which I appeal now comes from the postlapsarian (after the fall) world, but in principle, there is no reason why such conditions are inherent to a postlapsarian world. Take marriage for example. My marriage is relational, personal, *and* legal. My good relationship with my wife, our personal interaction, and mutual regard for one another is premised to no small degree on our legal relations. These two facts complement each other and are intertwined.

Others reject the covenant of works because they reject the idea that Adam could have “earned” anything from God. Again, this problem is grounded, at least partly, in misunderstanding. The doctrine of the covenant of works does not teach that, outside of a covenant of works (or “commandment of life”), Adam could have earned anything from God. The question is whether God is free to establish a covenant whereby he promises to reward Adam’s obedience. Reformed theology teaches, and the Reformed churches confess, that God did just that.

That covenant has been described in a variety of ways. It has been described as a covenant of works, which focuses on the condition of the covenant. The prohibition: “you shall not eat...” implied a positive command, just as “you shall not steal” implies a positive command to seek the welfare of our neighbor (Heidelberg Catechism 111). So, Reformed theologians have, since the sixteenth century, spoken of a covenant of works. This language was made confessional in the Westminster Standards. At the time they did so, it was quite uncontroversial. This same aspect of the covenant with Adam is also captured in the phrase used by several sixteenth-century Reformed writers, “the covenant of law.”

The same covenant can also be and has been described as a “covenant of nature.” In this case the focus is on the situation in which the covenant was made. Adam was, to use later language, “in a state of nature.” This is a shorthand way of saying that Adam was created good, righteous, and holy, i.e., with-

out defect. Adam was made able to obey. Adam was not a sinner or sinful until he sinned. The third way of describing the prelapsarian covenant is to speak of the promised reward: life. Here the noun “life” stands not just for bare existence, because Adam already had that, but rather it stands for “consummate existence” or the state of glorification. Adam was sinless, holy, and righteous but he was not glorified. Since the earliest church fathers it has been recognized in Christian theology that Adam was in a probationary state. This state has not always been described as a covenant of works, but this idea of probation is of the essence of Reformed, confessional covenant theology and it is a truly catholic idea. It has been recognized for the whole Christian period, i.e. for the entirety of Christian history, that Adam was the federal representative all humanity and that implicit in the Tree of Life was an offer of glorified existence for him and for us in him.

The FV movement wants to eliminate the fundamental difference between the prelapsarian covenant and the postlapsarian (post-fall) covenant. This is a very serious matter. In the history of Christian theology, the attempt to flatten out the difference between our state and ability and the conditions of glorification before and after the fall has been known as Pelagianism. Pelagius was a British monk who lived about the same time as St Augustine. Pelagius was offended by Augustine’s doctrine of divine sovereignty. He argued that it would lead to bad behavior as it reduced the incentive to good behavior. The whole Western church

rejected as heresy Pelagius’ doctrine that we are all just like Adam, even after the fall, and that we only become sinners when we sin. The FV is not exactly Pelagian and they might not even intend to put us on the road toward Pelagianism, but intent is not what matters most here. What matters here is the consequence of what they are saying and asking us to accept.

There are others, who, speaking strictly, are not FV, but who also reject any great difference between the commandment of life and the covenant of grace. They speak of a “so-called covenant of works.” They speak of a “covenant of favor” before the fall and a covenant of grace after the fall. From the perspective of the history of doctrine this way of speaking is most unhelpful. Historically “favor” is a synonym for “grace” and to speak of a “covenant of favor” before the fall is tantamount to saying “a covenant of grace” before the fall. To speak of a “covenant of grace” before and after the fall necessarily flattens out the great difference between Adam’s state (and ours in him) before the fall and after.

The phrase “covenant of favor” as a way of describing the pre-fall relations between God and man is ambiguous. It could possibly mean, “Adam was in a state of divine approval so long as he obeyed.” If that is what is intended by the phrase “covenant of favor,” then all is well. It is, however, a poor choice of words. Do those who speak this way intend to say, “Adam was in a state divine approval so long as he obeyed”? If that is what those writers means, why do they not use one

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).

of the older expressions such as “covenant of works,” “covenant of life,” or “covenant of nature”? Those who speak of a “covenant of favor” this way seem to deny the confessional, historic, Reformed covenant theology in favor of one of the modern revisions.

Some writers have been quite plain in following the consequences of this way of speaking. They say that Adam would have been glorified had he persisted in trusting and obeying. He teaches plainly that our Lord Jesus was accepted by the Father and glorified because he trusted and obeyed and we, like Adam and Jesus, will be accepted if we trust and obey. There are great problems here. First, relative to righteousness with God, the Apostle Paul in Romans 5:12–21 did not move from Adam to us. According to Paul, we are connected to Adam as our federal head only relative to sin and death. In other words, it never occurred to Paul to speak as Rev. Shepherd does. Paul did not write as these writers do because he accounted for the consequences of sin. Before the fall, Adam had the ability to keep the law because he was not a sinner. After the fall, neither Adam nor his children have that power. To suggest that we sinners are in the same state as Adam was before the fall is to ignore sin and downplay the great difference between the pre-fall and post-fall condition of man. This was Pelagius’ mistake.

Just as importantly, this way of relating sinners to Adam before the fall omits Christ from the picture. How can an allegedly Christian theology either omit Christ or make him a mere example of how to be

justified? At best, this approach does what the nineteenth– and twentieth–century liberals did: it makes Jesus into the first Christian. Our Lord was not a “Christian,” He was and is the Christ.

Finally, speaking of the pre-fall covenant as a “covenant of favor” tends either to eliminate Adam’s legal obligations or it tends to confuse grace and law. To speak of grace and law before the fall and to speak of grace and law after the fall tends to put us on the same footing as Adam. There is nothing Pauline or Reformed about this at all. We sinners are not at all on the same footing as Adam before the fall. The old Puritan rhyme was correct: “In Adam’s fall sinned we all.” After the fall we are dead in sins and trespasses (Ephesians 2:4). Christ obeyed, died, and was raised for the justification of sinners (Romans 5:8; 4:25). Most fundamentally of all, minimizing the difference between Adam and us before and after the fall tends to confuse grace and works. Paul was very clear about this: “But if it is by grace, it is no longer on the basis of works; otherwise grace would no longer be grace” (Romans 11:6).

These are two competing principles relative to justification. They can never be confused. To say “grace” is to say “gift” as Paul does in Romans 4:4: “Now to the one who works, his wages are not counted as a gift but as his due” and Romans 6:23, “For the wages of sin is

death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.” Before the fall Adam had no need of “gifts” or “grace,” in the sense in which Paul used the word in these verses. Before the fall, Adam was not corrupt or corrupted in any way. Before the fall, he was not wicked. His will was right, his mind clear, and his heart pure. That is why we confess in the Belgic Confession that he had the power to perform “the commandment of life.” After the fall, of course, the commandment of life continues but now we are sinful, corrupt, and vitiated in all our faculties. After the fall we are no longer able to fulfill the commandment of life. We need another to perform that commandment for us; and God graciously sent one, in the fullness of time: Jesus the Christ, the Savior of helpless sinners.

There is a sense in which we confess that Adam had “gifts.” His very existence may be said to have been a gift. All his natural endowments were gifts, and even the image of God, in the narrow sense of the “righteousness and true holiness” in which he was created, was a gift. Thus, in Belgic Confession article 14 we confess that, in the fall, Adam “lost all his gifts which he had received from God, and retained only small remains thereof....”¹ That is not what is at issue here. What is at issue is the way God related to us and we to him in the pre-fall state and in the

post-fall state. Before the fall God did not relate to his image-bearers, relative to their righteousness, first of all, on the basis of grace but on the basis of law.

One may well ask whether there is any useful way of speaking about grace relative to Adam’s state or the commandment of life covenant before the fall. Yes, God may be said to have made the covenant graciously. Please note the adverb. The adverb “graciously” describes the way God acted in making a covenant at all but it does not characterize the nature of the covenant itself. Adam was not under grace but under law and, because he was created in righteousness and true holiness, he was not a sinner or lawbreaker until he sinned by breaking the law.

It might be helpful to note here that the Westminster Divines might have said that God graciously made the pre-fall covenant, but they did not. Instead, they chose to say that God made the covenant of works by “voluntary condescension” (WCF 7.1). The choice of this language was quite deliberate. It focused attention upon the freedom of the divine will in entering into a pre-fall covenant. God was not obligated to make a covenant with Adam but chose to do. Why did the divines speak so? They used this language and not the alternative expressions because they wanted to avoid the very problem that the FV and others have created by speaking of a gracious covenant or a covenant of favor before the fall.

Synod Schereville likewise chose its words very carefully. The Nine Points use the language of the Bel-

After the fall we are no longer able to fulfill the commandment of life. We need another to perform that commandment for us.

gic Confession (Art. 14), “commandment of life.” Synod did not say, “covenant of works” or even “covenant of life.” Whatever quibbles one might have with the traditional phrases, it is necessary to affirm a strong and clear difference between the condition of glorification before the fall (there was no need for justification before the fall) and the condition and instrument of justification and glorification after the fall. The condition of the covenant before the fall was perfect obedience to God’s law. The instrument of the covenant of grace is faith in our covenant-keeper, Christ.

All this gets back to the basic principle of the prologue: Reformed Christians are not allowed to say one thing under the heading “biblical theology” or “covenant theology” and another under “confessional” theology. What we confess must permeate and inform our reading of redemptive history.

Endnotes

¹ Daniel R. Hyde, *With Heart and Mouth: An Exposition of the Belgic Confession* (Grandville, MI : Reformed Fellowship Inc, 2008), 179–94.

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The Character of the Church’s Creeds (II)

In light of recent discussions about the Form of Subscription, Reformed Fellowship offers this republication of the second of two articles by Dr. Louis Praamsma originally published in the October 1963 issue of Torch and Trumpet.

IN THE FIRST article I attempted to demonstrate, by an appeal to various decisions and documents, that the creeds have always occupied a clearly defined position within a confessional Reformed church which takes seriously her task of confessing in the world. It was further noted that recent discussions within several of these churches demonstrate the presence of problems in this connection. Specific words and phrases are under fire.

It is therefore not amiss that once again I raise the question: What is the character of the standards of the church? Perhaps I do not express myself too strongly, when I contend that this is a basic, a burning question within the fellowship of the Reformed churches today.

It is an *ecumenical* question. During the past summer the Reformed Ecumenical Synod again convened. Its avowed basis is the Holy Scripture of the Old and New Testaments as interpreted by the Reformed confessions. All members of such a synod must give public testimony that they adhere to these confessions.¹

It is also a *pastoral* question. It may well be asked what will happen when one unites with a congrega-

tion of likeminded, confessing believers with a determination to maintain distinctions between “essentials and non-essentials,” between “affirmation and representation” of the truth confessed. What are the rights of the congregation, when such is openly done? What may the congregations expect of pastors who champion such distinctions? Who gives the pastors the right to appeal from the creeds to the Gospel, when these men preach to God’s people who are by no means always in a position to follow the intricate evolutions of recent theological thought?

It is fully as much an *ethical* question. What does creedal subscription really mean? If such subscription implies a subjection to the substance but not the words of the creeds, is not thereby the door thrown wide open to an unethical and unallowable *reservatio mentalis*? Well may everyone who subscribes ask himself the pertinent question: To which creed am I subscribing — my own or that of the church? And should I be subscribing to my own creed, even in the most sincere way possible because therein I hear Christ’s voice, what guarantee is there that I am not disagreeing with the confessing church which has legally called me to be its pastor?

A Lesson From History

Several Dutch Reformed theologians at this point speak of the *intent* of the confessions. They fail, however, to answer the pressing and prior question: Is it always evident that there exists such an *intent* of the confession apart from the specific words which have been adopted? Is not the door flung wide open in such cases to individualism and subjectivism, to a degree of latitude in doctrine, perhaps even to a devaluation of Scripture when this idea of the *vox humana* (the relative historical context and content of human words) comes to be applied to the written Word of God?

We never live in a climate of *rein-kultur*, a climate of experimenting which would leave our experience unchanged. Our problems—and this deserves to be remembered—are the problems with which former generations also wrestled.

Here history can teach a much-needed lesson. Sometime during the previous century the father of Dutch Modernism wrote his justly famous and significant work on systematics, *The Doctrine of the Reformed Church*. This man Scholten was an honorable fellow. In harmony with the so-called results of the Biblical sciences of his day he developed a liberal theology. But in all sincerity he called his systematics Reformed! This is apparent from his introduction “One can conclude from my inquiry how a Reformed minister, faithful to his subscription, can adhere to the doctrine which, in its nature and spirit, is essentially and chiefly the Reformed confession, except for the free development of science; and that it makes quite a difference

scrupulously to honor the letter of the creeds or heartily to consent to the spirit and principles of the Reformed Church and to continue building on the evangelical foundation of our fathers.”² Scholten wanted to be Reformed, Biblical, and confessional. His pupils, as one after another they filled the pulpits of the land, corrupted the Reformation, the Bible and the church confessions.

Creeds Subjected to the Scriptures

All this makes the question most pertinent: What is the character of church confessions? Let us look at one of the oldest creedal statements of the Reformed Churches, the *Scottish Confession* of 1560. In its preface we read this statement: “If any man will note in this our Confession any article or sentence repugnant to God’s Holy Word, that it would please him of his gentleness and for Christian charity’s sake to admonish us of the same in writing; and we upon our honors and fidelity to God’s grace do promise unto him satisfaction from the mouth of God, that is from His Holy Scriptures, or else reformation of that which shall prove to be amiss.”³

Here the view is plainly stated that a confession should echo God’s Word. A creed therefore is changeable; in fact, it *should* be changed if anyone can demonstrate that the Gospel is not clearly sounded therein. Such a change must even be called a reformation!

The Arminians in the Netherlands, who deviated in their doctrine of predestination from the Belgic Confession, strongly opposed the binding character of creeds. Their argu-

ments were refuted by the church historian, Trigland, in the following manner: “In which sense should one subscribe to the creeds? Because they agree with the common opinion of all Reformed churches. But suppose your deviating opinion is indeed true and agrees with the Word of God? In that case you are right in this respect and the church is wrong. But in the mean-time you cannot be a minister of that church, because it does not recognize as long as it has that confession any other ministers as its own than those who accept its Confession as being in accord with Scripture. If the Reformed churches would change their Confession for another, the situation would be different. But this is not yet the case, because they know that their Confession agrees with the Word of God. If we do not speak in this vein, everything in our churches is unsettled, and all things are rendered free and uncertain.”⁴

Trigland’s position is illuminating. He stresses that God’s Word alone has final authority. It is possible, too, that the creeds in one or more parts must be changed. Yet so long as this is not done, the church confesses in and through its specific creeds the truth of God’s Word. No one may claim for himself the right to change the words of these creeds or deviate from their evident meaning.

Those within the Reformed community today who wrestle with problems presented to them by the language, expressions or texts quoted in the creeds usually overlook another equally significant problem: that of the *community of faith* within the church, of the mutual agreement of all members be they scholars or unlearned men,

men who are competent to read Kittel's *Theological Dictionary* or unable to do so, trained ministers or ordinary housewives. For all without exception the rule stands: our Forms of Unity are standards of the church. They are our common treasure. It is, therefore, an evil thing to speak of their intent apart from the meaning commonly attached to the words which they employ.

Real and Imaginary Problems

Are there, then, no real problems left at this point? Is it not a kind of confessionalism to adhere slavishly to the words and expressions of these venerable documents as these stand and are evidently meant? Should anyone defend the thesis that our creeds are sacrosanct, that in them once-for-all every aspect of the truth of God's Word has been summarized adequately, I would not hesitate to call him a confessionalist.

On the other hand, if there are real problems—and I read so much about this in today's theological literature—these must be presented and discussed and resolved in the assemblies of the church. This procedure alone does justice to both the church and those who have real difficulties.

Here I believe we should concern ourselves only with *real* difficulties. There are also *imaginary* difficulties. Among these must be reckoned objections raised against the language, style and syntax employed in the sixteenth century; to the quantity and quality of the texts quoted in the creeds; to the incompleteness of the creeds resulting from the fact that they do not meet

For all without exception the rule stands: our Forms of Unity are standards of the church.

all the needs and fail to challenge all the errors of our day. Who would not heartily agree with men who speak of the desirability of a new creed which could profess the name of our Lord in the language of and according to the needs of our time? How greatly the churches would benefit, if such a creed were framed and adopted.

Real objections are those registered against the evident meaning of words and expressions employed by the creeds. These are inspired by the tension between such words and the Gospel as we have come to understand it.

Should such difficulties arise, the only proper road to follow is that prescribed by the Form of Subscription, "We promise that we will neither publicly nor privately propose, teach, or defend the same, until we have first revealed such sentiments to the Consistory, Classis or Synod."

The Way of the Spirit

Here the task of the confessing church, which is also communion of the saints, begins. Such a true church is not a court of law. Neither are its assemblies a place for endless dialogue. Rather, the true church is the house of prayer where we may confidently expect and experience the presence of the Holy Spirit who leads us into all truth. Asking for the Spirit's light, the church will find the way which leads into all truth.

At this point several distinct possibilities open up, when these difficulties are properly registered and processed with the ecclesiastical assemblies. The possibility is very real that by means of brotherly discussion the objections will be removed.

A second possibility which emerges is the possibility of changing the creeds. In such instances advice should be asked of all Reformed churches who hold these confessions in common with us. They are not the private property of one denomination!

A third possibility is that the church will deem it wise to elucidate an expression in her confession by means of an explanatory note. It may be—and this is a fourth possibility—that the church cannot feel free to change her confession and the objector cannot feel free to change his opinion in the matter, but that synod nevertheless declares that the deviating view, under certain conditions, can be tolerated within the church's fellowship.

A fifth possibility is that to the church's mind the objections raised betray such a heretical character, that the person who presented them and persists in them must be disciplined not only because he patently contradicts the confession but because he is at this point disobedient to God's Word. This is the way of the well-organized church. By following this road the church will enjoy the blessing of true fellowship

in the common faith so strikingly set forth by St. Paul, “that we no longer be children, tossed to and fro and carried about with every wind of doctrine, by the cunning of men, by their craftiness in deceitful wiles. Rather, speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ” (Eph. 4:14,15).

Endnotes

1. Rules and Standing Orders of the Reformed Ecumenical Synods, II and IV.
2. J. H. Scholten: *De Leer der Hervormde Kerk*, 1861; p. vii.
3. Philip Schaff: *Creeds of Evangelical Protestant Churches*, p. 437.
4. J. Trigland: *Kerkelijcke Geschiedenissen*, p. 439.

Louis Praamsma (1910–1984) was professor of Church History at Calvin Theological Seminary, Grand Rapids, MI, from 1962 to 1963, and minister in the Christian Reformed Church in Canada. He was the author of *Abraham Kuyper als Kerkhistoricus*, *Calvijn, Het dwaze Gods*, *De Belijdenis in de Crisis*, and *Kerkenordening en Geschiedenis*, and *Let Christ Be King: Reflections on the Life and Times of Abraham Kuyper*.



Book Reviews

Faithful God: an Exposition of the Book of Ruth,

By Sinclair Ferguson. Bryntirion, Wales: Bryntirion Press, 2005, 157 pp., \$10.19. Reviewed by Mr. James D. Oord

Once again, Sinclair Ferguson has come out with a useful expositional commentary. This commentary on the book of Ruth is a stand-alone commentary, not part of any series. It is — understandably — a very short commentary, since its subject matter, the book of Ruth, is very short. He divides his text into four sections (one for each chapter of Ruth) plus a preface dealing with when and why he wrote the book, a prologue dealing with “Ruth’s story and ours,” and an appendix with a letter by John Newton on the guidance of God. The book is written in a very approachable and warm style that lends itself to both devotional reading and casual study.

Dr. Ferguson begins his book by reminding us that all scripture is God-breathed and useful for teaching, correcting, and training. He points out that although the book of Ruth might not be an enormous “work of deep theological reasoning” like Romans or a “magnificent symphony on the work of Christ” like John’s gospel, it is still an important part of scripture, tracing “the details of God’s working in the unfolding of the events of history” (page 11). It contains important lessons about life as members of the

kingdom of God. Throughout this book, Sinclair Ferguson’s goal is to guide us to not only understand the book of Ruth in its original context, but also to give us a firm exegesis and biblical application of it.

One overarching theme in the book of Ruth to which Dr. Ferguson draws his readers’ attention is the providence of God. The book of Ruth shows us that God works through what seem to be the little things in life. He does not always work through wonders like the plagues in Exodus or the miracles of Jesus in the gospels. Dr. Ferguson points out that we may not always be able to detect the workings of God’s providence in our lives, but that, like Ruth, He may work in mysterious ways beyond our comprehension or recognition.

Throughout the book Dr. Ferguson endeavors to bring us to see four basic “reflections” in every passage: first, to reflect on the various characters in the story, examining their actions and attitudes exegetically; second, to reflect on God and see His hand in the story; third, to reflect Jesus and how each passage points to Him; and fourth, to reflect on our own lives and see how God works in our lives today. In his commentary, Dr. Ferguson does a good job of showing us these reflections in every passage and still remaining thoroughly biblical, expository, and exegetical.

I thoroughly enjoyed reading and

studying this book. It is broken up into four main chapters, each corresponding to a chapter in the book of Ruth. Each one of these chapters is further broken down into smaller, easily manageable chunks. This made the book very easy to read, even for people with a short attention span like me.

The second chapter (after an introductory chapter) focuses on Ruth's "surprising conversion" in chapter 1. Here, Dr. Ferguson points out that Ruth's famous speech in chapter 1 ("wherever you go I will go...") is actually a speech chock full of conversion language. The continued use of the word "return" (and other synonyms) clearly indicates a conversion to Yahweh. Dr. Ferguson weaves his arguments expertly, culminating in a discussion of the cost of discipleship (because Ruth certainly had no easy road before her and she knew it!) and a challenge to us to see "God's autograph" on our own lives, specifically in our spiritual walks.

In the third chapter, Dr. Ferguson focuses on Boaz and the concept of *hesed*, that is, God's covenant love for His people. He discusses covenant faithfulness, love and grace in this chapter, calling us to live gracious lives and to examine our motives.

The fourth chapter contains an excellent description of the kinsman-redeemer (levirate) law central to Ruth, ultimately pointing forward to the great redeemer, Jesus Christ. Dr. Ferguson also includes many helpful applications drawn from the text, including discussions of covenant marriage, divine providence, and maintaining *hesed* in our lives.

The fifth chapter closes the book with a wonderful exposition of Ruth 4 and shows how Ruth (as the grandmother of David the king) and this whole story fits into the larger context of God's ultimate "mission" of salvation. Ferguson closes with praising God for His glorious faithfulness.

Within the commentary, Dr. Ferguson frequently discusses important Hebrew words and their function in the book of Ruth and in the Bible as a whole (for example, *shub*, the Hebrew word for "return," and its importance in the story of repentance and conversion). However, this fact should not frighten the interested lay person from picking up Dr. Ferguson's commentary. His discussions of Hebrew words and language are very accessible, interesting, and applicable.

He also explores the historical and theological contexts of the book of

Ruth (for example, why exactly Naomi and Elimelech's emigration from Israel was wrong in light of the importance of land in the covenant). This feature also was very interesting and vastly opened my eyes to the original meanings and significance of the book.

I would recommend this book to any student of scripture, whether he be scholar, pastor, seminary or college student, or just someone interested in learning more about the book of Ruth. It is accessible enough to pick up and read with minimal training, but also offers great insight into the passages that are invaluable in preaching or teaching the text. If someone wants to study the book of Ruth in great depth, he might want to pick up a few other heftier commentaries, but this commentary is a marvelous starting point, a true treasure for every thoughtful Christian scholar's library.

Celebrating Salvation

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Celebrating Salvation, by Rev. Clarence Stam, Premier Publishing – Winnipeg (Second Printing: 2005) \$16.67

Rev. Clarence Stam has once again provided the Church of Jesus Christ with a wonderful book, this one entitled *Celebrating Salvation*. This book, now in its second printing, focuses upon the aspects of our Savior's life as confessed in the Apostles' Creed: His life, death, resurrection, ascension, and return. It also includes a section on the Holy Spirit.

Rev. Stam introduces the book by acknowledging that the work is a compilation of material gathered over the course of his ministry while preparing sermons. His focus is to be faithful to the Word and in particular the passage that he exegetes in each chapter. Upon reading *Celebrating Salvation*, one can only agree that the congregations that heard these sermons preached were blessed with good, solid, Biblical preaching.

The opening chapter starts with the sovereignty of God surrounding the birth of Jesus Christ. In a delightful, succinct way, Rev. Stam proceeds to tie in the song of the angels, the naming of the newborn, and other events surrounding the Incarnation with the Old Testament and with relevant themes of current celebrations of Christmas.

Rev. Stam offers five messages on the death of Christ, each one focusing on an aspect of Christ's humiliation. In one message, Rev. Stam aptly points out that the carrying of the cross by Simon of Cyrene was not done to relieve the burden from Jesus, but to add to His humiliation

(page 82). Each message clearly explains the purpose for the death of God's Son and the need to acknowledge that salvation comes only by the atoning sacrifice He made. Rev. Stam writes, "we can never come closer to the cross than through this text" (page 127). By explaining the text, Rev. Stam truly brings us closer to, not only the cross, but the purpose of the cross.

After reading five messages on the death of Christ, one eagerly anticipates the five messages on the resurrection of Christ. Rev. Stam does not disappoint! Rev. Stam vividly writes about the how the resurrection affected Peter and John, Thomas, the Jewish leaders, and the reader. In the final message in this section, Rev. Stam writes about the determination that Jesus had that the news of His resurrection be proclaimed to the entire world. In this chapter, Rev. Stam deals with important issues such as the general offer of grace and the significance of baptism.

The theme of baptism is continued in the first of five messages on the ascension of Jesus in which Rev. Stam contrasts water baptism with Spirit baptism. Other messages on the ascension concern themselves with the event itself, as well as the role of the ascended Christ and the mandate to the disciples.

Seven messages are written about the outpouring of the Holy Spirit. Each message approaches the event of Pentecost in a different way. One explains how the event is the fulfillment of the Old Testament Feast; others deal with the gifts of the Spirit and the work of the Spirit in the church.

Particularly comforting to the Christian are the four messages that focus on the return of Jesus Christ. Rev. Stam writes about the binding of Satan, the definite destruction of the devil, the day of judgment, and the heavenly glory of the saints. Each message assures the Christian that the work of Christ accomplished on the cross guarantees the believer a salvation worth celebrating!

Celebrating Salvation is an informative digest of the work of Christ that is a delight to read. It offers both comfort and challenge to the Christian as we seek to celebrate the salvation given to us by grace through the sacrifice of God's Son.

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First Book of Christian Doctrine

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Other Materials

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Called to Serve

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