

The Outlook

JUNE 2008

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Dedicated to the Exposition and Defense of the Reformed Faith

Christ the Builder

The Table of
Showbread

Earthquakes:
Signs of the Times

Looking Above

Examining
the Nine Points—
The Second Point

It's Decision Time

This is My Outlook

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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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Christ the Builder

“Then spake the Lord to Paul in the night by a vision, ‘Be not afraid, but speak, and hold not thy peace: for I am with thee, and no man shall set on thee to hurt thee: for I have much people in this city.’”

(Acts 8:9, 10)

The world is a visual place. The world makes our eyes busy. Videos, commercials, billboards—all these things stimulate and excite the eye. We live in a “seeing” culture where seeing is believing. Images flash before our eyes on TV like lightning; computer icons and ads try to make you look and click. The Christian faith, however, is different. It is *not* seeing to believe. The gospel is *not* something that stimulates our eyes. The eye is almost at rest in the Christian faith. The gospel is not “seeing is believing” but “hearing is believing.” The church is a place for the ears.

The book of Acts highlights speaking and hearing, not seeing. The whole book is really about Jesus’ saving word going forth to the ends of the earth. Chapter 18 is part of the building of Jesus’ church. Simply put, that is what these verses are about. The main point of these verses is this: *through His word, Christ builds His church.*

Christ is the one who takes the initiatives that lead to the expansion of the church. Notice how Jesus uses Paul to build His church in three ways. First, He builds the church with His commanding word. Then, Acts tells us how He builds His church with His encouraging word. Finally, Jesus builds His church with His Word proclaimed.

Jesus and His Word are central to

the whole enterprise. Do not miss that point! Jesus is on the throne as the great builder of His church—all authority has been given to Him in heaven and on earth. Thus, His apostles receive the commission to go to the ends of the earth with the gospel. Jesus is on the throne as a builder of His church.

Jesus’ Commanding Word

In Acts 18:9 Christ speaks to Paul in a vision. Paul is in the bustling city of Corinth, a trade-center, a busy city not too different from San Diego, perhaps. In Corinth, Paul met Aquilla and Priscilla, who would remain his brother and sister in Christ for years. While in Corinth, the Jews fought against Paul, hating the word that he preached; hating the gospel that he preached. Their opposition led Paul to tell them, “Fine! You reject this gospel—the blood is on your own heads. I told you about Christ, and you said no to Him; it is your own fault!”

This must have shaken Paul up a bit. A few years after this, Paul wrote a letter to this church (1 Corinthians), where he reminded them that he preached to them in “weakness and fear and trembling.” Paul was no doubt discouraged, afraid, and ready to run away and just give up.

Then came the vision. Christ appeared to His despondent apostle,

His servant. We know nothing of this vision, except that it happened at night. In the dark of night, perhaps awaking Paul, Jesus appeared and spoke to the apostle. What is important here is not what Paul saw, but what he heard. Luke, the author of Acts, makes us listen and hear, not see with Paul.

With three commands, the Lord of the church speaks to an apostle of the church. *Stop being afraid*, Paul (verse 9)! Paul probably thought about the Lord’s command to Joshua (Joshua 1:9) or maybe His command to Jeremiah (1:8). The Lord’s servants throughout history have been afraid in the face of danger, distress, or death. So the risen and glorified Christ spoke a word to Paul: do not fear; stop being afraid of those here who hate the gospel. *Keep on speaking!* Though you are afraid, preach on, Paul! *Keep speaking!* Sound waves must keep going out of your mouth; you cannot stop vocalizing the gospel here. *Keep on telling people about Me!*

Christ’s commanding words continue: *do not keep silent!* Again, like God’s words to His people in the past—especially the prophets—the Lord says, “Cry aloud! Speak my words!” Paul, how can anyone in Corinth believe in whom they have not heard? And how will they hear without someone speaking or preaching?

Paul soon came to realize that without gospel preaching, there can be no faith. These words of Jesus must ring aloud in Paul’s ears to his death, even when he is in chains in prison. Even when Paul is being

persecuted later in life, he never stops telling people about the Savior who lived and died to save sinners. It is Jesus' powerful commanding word that works: His word accomplishes its purpose. Jesus' Spirit-driven voice made Paul go and preach.

Though we have not seen Christ as Paul had, we have heard Him in the preached word. Jesus' commanding word remains powerful. We have heard this very word, the sound that hits our eardrums: "Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved." In the midst of a noisy world, bustling and busy cities—like Corinth or San Deigo, Des Moines or Jacksonville—in the midst of a world with so many glittering things to see, on the Lord's day we stop. We stop what we have been doing all week to listen to Christ.

We pause; we let our eyes rest, as it were, and open our ears wide to the voice of Christ. We need this external word; we need a word from the outside to save us from a world that wants to stimulate our eyes and drown out the voice of Christ. The sound of the gospel, the sound waves of a pastor giving the absolving words, "If you trust in Christ, your sins are completely forgiven." This sound breaks through the noisy world and reminds us that Jesus saves. Jesus builds His church. The sound of Jesus' voice draws us out of ourselves and out of this busy world to the source of the sound—Jesus on

the throne commanding and comforting His church.

Jesus' Encouraging Word

Jesus does more than command. He comforts as well. He shouts in Paul's ears, "*I am with you!*" He shouts in Paul's ears not to confound Paul but to comfort him. The sound of comfort is the Abrahamic promise: "I am with you, I will bless you, I am your God." Here in Acts, God's promise to Abraham is being fulfilled. Do not fear, Abraham. Do not fear, Paul. I am with you. I will be your God forever. These are covenant of grace sounds.

We are reminded of Jehovah's comforting word to the prophets: I am with you! When you go to the stubborn, Mosaic-covenant breaking people of Israel, do not worry; I am with you! God also speaks these words in the New Testament era. Remember the Great Commission in Matthew 28? "Go ye therefore and make disciples of all nations...teaching them" Jesus said in the Great Commission, "Lo, *I am with you* always, even to the end of the age." God's gracious Abrahamic covenant promise is repeated to a frightened Paul in Corinth around 50 AD.

These are words of life. Paul would never be without his Savior; his Savior will never be without Paul. *I am with you* are also words for all who have received Christ and rest in Him, trusting in Him for salvation from sin and

death. Jesus says to you even today—I am with you! Jesus was with His prophets and His apostles. He is always with His church. This is a comforting word of Christ. It is encouragement for the church. In Hebrews 13:5 the Lord swears an oath never to leave or forsake His own. This is what Immanuel means: God is with us; the gates of hell will never prevail over the church.

One commentator on Acts wrote "Calm confidence in the face of suffering springs from the assurance of our Defender's presence with us." Remember when you walk through dark valleys that Jesus says to you, *I am with you*. Remember when your doctor tells you that the tumor has spread that Jesus says, *I am with you*. Remember when you face people who distort the gospel and attack the church that Jesus says in your years, *I am with you*. Jesus never leaves His people!

In Corinth, Jesus continued to speak to Paul: *No one will harm you*. Of course, later in his life Paul was harmed, but on this occasion, Paul has a divine and comforting promise that he would not be hurt in Corinth. You might be opposed, but that opposition will not result in harm. "Paul," says Jesus, "I know you faced some opposition and hatred here in Corinth for preaching me, but who has been given all authority? For Whom do you work? Who is the head of the church? Who is the King of kings and Lord of lords?" Who builds the church?

Christ continued: *I have many here who are my people*. Jesus spoke authoritative words, words of com-

We need a word from the outside to save us from a world that wants to stimulate our eyes and drown out the voice of Christ.

fort to Paul. Many in Corinth are written in the book of life. Many are elect. Paul was assured that his work would not be in vain. Paul was promised that many would receive and rest in Christ.

This is one of those places in the Bible where we learn a little about election. Election means, “chosen for eternal life.” “My people” in verse eleven are the elect, those who belong to Christ; those who are written in the book of life. There are not two kinds of election. This passage is talking about those who have been granted salvation—not a salvation that can be somehow lost, but eternal salvation. The Canons of Dort teach: Before the foundation of the world, God chose a definite number of people to be saved through Christ. And He decreed that He would call and draw them effectively into Christ’s fellowship through His Word and Spirit (CoD I.7). Paul went to Corinth to preach and God’s elect were brought into the fold of salvation. The same thing happens in Acts 13:48: God appointed some to eternal life. This eternal life is heaven, salvation, and forgiveness—anything less would hardly be comforting for Paul.

Election is one of the reasons why we preach the gospel to all nations, as the Apostles were doing in Acts. Unlike Paul, we cannot tell if there are many elect in certain cities, but we leave it in the hands of Christ to bring home His people through hearing. Acts 1:8 is important: Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, ends of the earth—that is how the gospel will go forth! To bring the Abrahamic gracious promise into view again, His spiritual offspring

Speaking and hearing are more important than seeing.

are being brought in, and Jehovah is proven to be faithful to His gracious covenant promise. The family of believers is a truly international family!

And thus Jesus builds His church. Paul; be of good cheer: I am with you, you will not be harmed, and many in this very city will respond to your gospel preaching. I am building my church, says the Lord. It is still true today. We should continue to support mission work, we should continue to reach out to the lost even here in this city, we should continue to pray that Jesus would keep on building.

Jesus’ Proclaimed Word

Remember, the word is central. Speaking and hearing are more important than seeing. The word “word” is used around fifty times in Acts relating to gospel preaching and teaching.

Paul stayed at Corinth for a year and a half teaching the *word* of God. Paul taught: “Jesus Christ and Him crucified.” Paul knew the power of Christ’s word—Jesus’ word had converted him on the Damascus road. Paul knew the power of the gospel, that Jesus lived and died to save His elect. Paul knew that Jesus’ death killed death, sin, and hell and that Jesus’ resurrection was the victory over sin. Sin was wiped out and canceled by resting in Christ’s finished work. Paul knew that gospel well. That gospel is

the main point of all of his epistles, and truly, all of Scripture.

Paul did not use the latest trends in Corinth to help him spread the gospel. He did not hand out booklets of ten steps to build a bustling church. He did not lure the Corinthian civilians by promising he would make them feel at home and give them a hot cup of designer coffee before the service. Instead, he used something that the world calls foolish and weak, stupid, and crazy. He used the gospel—foolishness and a stumbling block to the world. The situation is the same today.

Preaching and teaching the gospel is commanded by Christ. It is not an option up for grabs. Preaching the gospel is a mark of the church. No preaching Christ, no church. You can have all the bells and whistles, the smoke and drums, the feelings and smiles, the health and wealth, the healing and spirituality, but if your church does not preach Christ, it is no church at all. Jesus commanded Paul to teach the word—not the word according to Corinth, or San Diego, or wherever—but the word of Christ, the gospel.

Luther called the church a “mouth house.” The Heidelberg Catechism says that God wants His people instructed by the *living* word. Through speaking, Jesus gathers His people. Through the word, Christ brings His sheep home. Paul came to Corinth with the words of Christ, the very voice of Christ, and

look what happened—people repented and believed the gospel! Jesus’ told Paul the primary church growth method: preaching the gospel. Through the preached gospel, Jesus builds His church.

Through speaking—sound waves through the air—Christ creates His church. Christ builds His church through vocal chords telling about Christ and eardrums receiving those sound waves. Christ built it in Acts; He will build it across the world.

Believing is *hearing*, not seeing! Many churches will stimulate your eyes, many things will delight your eyes and ears, but not everything has been commanded by Christ. Not everything creates a people or a faith. Christianity is all about speaking and hearing, about sound waves shaking your eardrums and by the power of the Spirit bringing new life according to Christ’s command. The preached word is Christ’s rock-splitting, faith-creating, heart-warming voice.

We, too, are a hearing people. By Christ’s commanding word, by His encouraging word, by His proclaimed word, Christ is building His church. Christ’s command is to preach. His promise is: *I am with you. I am with you always.*

Rev. Shane Lems is a pastor of a United Reformed Church church plant in Sunnyside, Washington.

The Table of Showbread

“And you shall set upon the table showbread before me always.”

Exodus 25:30

From the very beginning, the desire of the human race has been to have fellowship with God. Before the Fall in the Garden of Eden, Adam had around him all kinds of objects in which he could take delight with God. All creation had been formed and had been pronounced to be “very good.” To know God as the great Creator, to understand the beauty of general revelation in all that was around him, had to be a grand and glorious thing for Adam.

But Adam lost it all when he fell. Instead of communing with God, he ran from God. He hid himself in the very garden that once revealed God to him. No longer was there any common ground on which he might stand and meet with God.

So it remains to this day. Man, by his very nature, is still distant from God. He remains out of fellowship with God. We think we can only be at ease when we can keep our distance from God. Man has rejected God, has said he does not need God, and has even denied the very existence of God. Sinful man, left to himself, has nothing in common with God. He has rejected the very thing he needs most: fellowship with God.

And then special revelation suddenly breaks through. Paul writes, “but now, in Christ Jesus you who were once far off have been

brought near by the blood of Christ” (Ephesians 2:13). Not only can we come near to God once more and have access to God, but we can have fellowship with the Father through His Son, Jesus Christ.

In the Old Testament

That point was made very clear to the Israelites through the tabernacle. It was made particularly clear in two pieces of furniture within the tabernacle, the ark of the covenant and the table of showbread. Between these two pieces of furniture we can see some similarities as well as some differences. Both were made of the same material: acacia wood overlaid with gold; both were the same height.

Along with those similarities, there was also a great difference. Separating them was a great veil. One was in the Holy of Holies, the other in the Holy Place. The ark of the covenant had the mercy seat of God above it; the table of showbread was illumined by the golden lampstand.

The ark of the covenant represented the throne of God. There one would meet God as King in all His authority and majesty. We see Him there in His regal splendor as One before whom we must bow. Meeting someone at a table, however, is something different. When

someone invites you to dine with him and sit at the table with him, it means friendship and fellowship. The table of showbread was on the people's side of that veil rather than on God's side. It was an illustration of God's providential care for His people.

The showbread was to be put upon the table in the Holy Place on a regular basis—every Sabbath Day. It was to be unfailingly put there every week. By requiring this, God was illustrating to His people the regular and unfailing way in which He provided for the ordinary wants of His people. The God of the showbread is the God in whom we live, move, and have our being. The shelter we have from the cold, the food we have on the table, the clothes on our backs all come from God. We cannot do anything without Him. Were God to stop His work in nature, we would see how utterly fruitless all our work would be.

The twelve loaves of bread upon the table represented the twelve tribes of Israel encamped around the tabernacle. The royal Judah, the priestly Levi, and little Benjamin each had a representative loaf. Not one of them was forgotten. Not one was favored over the other. When the eye of the Lord rested upon the table, it rested upon His people.

In addition, Jehovah provided this table for His priests. The bread upon the table became their food. The loaves that were removed from the tabernacle were delivered to the priests to eat throughout the week. As the bread was replaced on the Sabbath Day, the priests fed

upon the holy bread before the Lord, sharing it, as it were, with Him, thereby symbolizing a dining with God. What a wonderful way to symbolize fellowship with God: dining with God.

In the Gospels

As we move to the New Testament, we must see that the showbread in the tabernacle was a foreshadowing of Jesus Christ. Jesus is pictured many times as the Bread of Life in the Word of God.

The multitude that wanted Jesus to feed them again was pointing to the wrong bread.

In John 6, for example, Jesus referred to Himself as the Bread of Life that came down from heaven to give life to all who receive Him.

The day before Jesus made that claim He had fed five thousand people using fives loaves of bread and two fish. The people wanted Jesus to duplicate the miracle. "Feed us again," they shouted.

They expected of Jesus what they knew of Moses. Moses had fed the people in the wilderness with manna—day after day, six days a week for forty years. They had been taught that when the Messiah came, He would reproduce the great miracle of the desert. And what was that great miracle: the

manna falling from the sky. The multitude that had been fed began to think that perhaps this Jesus was the Messiah. Feed us again. "We will believe in you," they said, "if you feed us as Moses did in the wilderness."

Jesus paused to correct the crowd. He reminded them that the manna was not a miracle of Moses; it was a miracle from God. The point that Jesus was trying to make was that He had not come to feed the people physically, He had come to feed them spiritually. Yes, the manna was important. Yes, it was certainly a fine illustration of God's care, but what would it profit the people if Jesus fed them again for a day, or a week, or even for forty years if they remained in the desert? What benefit is the manna from heaven if one never enters into the Promised Land? There were many people who ate of the manna but never entered into the promised rest. They never crossed the Jordan; never had that fellowship with God that every heart needs and every soul desires. What good is it to be in the Garden of Eden if you are going to spend your time there hiding from God?

The multitude that wanted Jesus to feed them again was pointing to the wrong bread. That great miracle within the wilderness that Jesus came to reproduce was not feeding the people physical bread, it was nourishing them with heavenly bread. It was not the manna from heaven that was the great miracle! The greatest miracle in the desert was the fact that God had come into their midst and that He would have fellowship with them.

Where did that take place? That took place in the tabernacle. Where in the tabernacle was that best illustrated? It is best illustrated by the bread on the table of the showbread. When Jesus said, “I am the Bread of Life,” He was declaring Himself as the bread within the Holy Place—the Showbread! Jesus came to give us the true bread, the bread that will bring us into fellowship with the Father, and whoever eats of this bread will have life.

Sometimes we are so lost in our sin that we think only of the manna that God can provide. Like the multitude in John 6, we cry out, “Feed me, give me more—more stuff, that is.” We want success, popularity, the world and all it has to offer. We are more than willing to acknowledge that every good gift comes from God. We are more than willing to thank God for our “Name it & Claim it” religion. But what will it profit a man if he gains the whole world and he loses his very own soul?

God not only nourishes us with the food we have on our tables. God not only gives us shelter from the cold. God supplies us not only with earthly blessings. He brings us not only general revelation, He nourishes us with Himself. He is the bread. He is the one of whom we must partake in order to dine with Him and have fellowship with Him. Whoever comes to God through His Son, Jesus Christ, will never hunger again. You will dine with God!

The New Testament

Jesus said, “Behold, I stand at the door and knock; if anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will

come in to him, and will dine with him, and he with Me” (Revelation 3:20). Jesus has said, “Come, dine with Me.” Do you see the correlation between what happened in the Old Testament, what took place in John 6, and that which occurs within the church?

The Church of Jesus Christ celebrates the sacrament of the Lord’s Supper. It is the same feast to which the priests of the Old Testament came. Those who were once afar off have been drawn near. Those who have come to the cross of Jesus Christ, represented in the Old Testament by the bronze altar, are reconciled to God on the basis of the death and shed blood of Jesus Christ. Those who have been cleansed by the Holy Spirit, represented by the bronze laver, have had the power of sin removed from them.

Those who are in Christ are a royal priesthood. Through Christ, they are invited to have fellowship with God—to dine with Him. The priesthood feeding upon the showbread at the table in the Holy Place points to that special expression of communion that God has with believers who gather around the Lord’s Table to partake of the Lord’s Supper. The same love that provided a table in the midst of the howling desert and gathered His priests around to eat has spread a table for us. No longer need we be strangers. No longer are we aliens in the Garden trying to hide from God. No longer need we be out of fellowship with the One who created us. Our heavenly Father has provided a way

to Himself. That way is His Son, the Bread of Life.

At the table the priest was the giver and the receiver. Every Sabbath the priest would come with fresh showbread to present to Jehovah and every Sabbath he received, as if from Jehovah’s very hand, bread to eat. The one expresses the giving of ourselves to Christ as we draw near to worship; the other illustrates the presentation of Christ to us as the bread upon which our souls may feed.

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

Earthquakes: Signs of the Times

Feeling our bed shake in the middle of the night during an earthquake in Bacolod City, Negros Occidental, the Philippines, was a scary and unusual experience for us. We jumped out of bed and rushed upstairs to get our children to the downstairs living room in case of an aftershock. In the light of day, it turned out to be a minor earthquake that had caused minor damage.

Earthquakes have been with us since the beginning of recorded history. Some had devastating effects. On All Saints' Day, November 1, 1755, Lisbon, Portugal, experienced three great shock waves, which demolished all the houses in the lower city in rapid succession. At noon, as a cloud of dust covered the ruined city, the last shock was felt. The Royal Palace, the recently completed Opera House, and the magnificent cathedral, which, although damaged, had survived the earthquake, were consumed by fire. Sixty thousand people perished in that terrible disaster. Voltaire, the embodiment of French 18th century Enlightenment asked, "Why could it not have burst forth in the midst of an uninhabited desert? Why is Lisbon engulfed while Paris, no less wicked, dances?"

Toward the end of the eighteenth century, human societies began to consider earthquakes as natural phenomena rather than God's retribution of sin. For millions of people God no longer exists. Many point to evolutionary theories and insights

gained by scientific research to show that the world exists on its own. They think of the Bible as a myth, a projection of religious symbolism and mythology. In *Why the Earth Quakes: The Story of Earthquakes and Volcanoes*, Matthys Levy and Mario Salvadori argue, "For the first time in human history the causes of these devastating physical phenomena, only a few centuries ago considered to be 'the acts of God', are now understood and it is up to us to avoid their worst consequences." If earthquakes are no more than natural phenomena, endless meaningless disasters, or scenes of a world without God, where then is hope? But from the biblical perspective, earthquakes have meaning.

The Earth is the Lord's

The attitude of modern Western people to nature is vastly different from the outlook of the Bible. When we look at the stars, we think in terms of light-years and the possibility of interplanetary travel, but for the biblical writer the night sky was a breathtaking display of the wisdom, power, and glory of the Creator (Job 38:31-33; Ps. 19:1-4; Isa. 40:25-26). We experience the cycles of days and seasons in terms of schedules of work and holidays, whereas the Israelites saw in them a sign of the covenant faithfulness of God (Genesis 1:14-19). The courses of the stars, the circuits of the winds, and the meandering of the streams, were all ascribed to the activity of God (Job 38:24; Ps. 104:10; Jer. 10:13).

In Scripture, the regularities of nature bear witness to the providential love and power of God. Unlike modern science and technology, therefore, based on the premise that the same causes under the same conditions always produce the same effects, the biblical writers believed that the outcome of all events depended on the will of God. In many places in Scripture, great convulsions of nature are spoken of in connection with special manifestations of God. Through sudden changes in the course of nature, He delivered His people from their enemies and brought judgment on the wicked. The burning of Sodom and Gomorrah, the plagues in Egypt, the parting of the Red Sea, and the dramatic change of the course of sun at Gibeon are well-known God-directed events.

The Role of Earthquakes in Scripture

In Scripture earthquakes have a prominent role. The whole of Mount Sinai "trembled violently" when God gave the Law (Ex. 19:18). God punished disobedient Korah. The ground "split apart, opened its mouth, and swallowed" Korah and his companions (Numbers 16:32). In the days of King Saul, God sent an earthquake to deliver the Israelites from the Philistine army (1 Sam. 4:15). A terrible earthquake took place in the days of Uzziah, king of Judah. According to Jewish historian Josephus (*Antiq.* X,4), it shook the ground. A rent was made in the Temple so that the rays of the sun shone through it, which, falling upon the king's face, struck him with leprosy. This was a punishment which

the historian ascribes to the wrath of God as consequence of Uzziah's usurpation of the priest's office. That this earthquake was of an awful character may be learned from the fact that Zechariah (14:5) refers to it. It also appears from the prophet Amos' words "two years before the earthquake" (1:1) that the event was extremely traumatic. It left such deep impressions on men's minds, that it became a sort of epoch from which to set dates. In the reign of Herod (Sept. 2, 31 B.C.) an earthquake occurred in Judea, "such as had not happened at any other time," destructive to men and animals (*Antiq.* xv.v.2)

The Fall

People often struggle with questions about why there are natural calamities such as earthquakes, hurricanes, floods, droughts, and other disasters that cause great suffering. Although the Bible does not explain these things in detail, it does state that the whole natural creation has been severely disrupted because of the fall of Adam and Eve into sin. Sin brought corruption to all of life, material and immaterial.

The very characteristics of the physical world have been altered radically by the Fall. God said, "Cursed is the ground because of you." (Gen. 3:17) Who cursed the ground? God did. The earth has been desecrated by its inhabitants. It is the victim of our transgressions (Hosea 4: 1-3). God announced that the earth would be changed to produce painful things like thorns and thistles (Genesis 3:18). Surely this must include other painful things such as the sting of scorpions and poisonous snakes, which

The real lesson is not that natural disasters help us to find the worst sinners, but that the fallen world does not offer guarantees.

Jesus identified with Satan's activity (Luke 10:19).

The broader cosmic aspects of the Fall are worked out in Romans 8:18-23. Not only humans, but all nature is subject to the law of threat and anxiety and death. Their rebellion against God has a universal dimension. The flood in the time of Noah is an example. By God's word the earth and the water were formed. "By water also the world of that time was deluged and destroyed" (2 Peter 3:5-6).

Judgment

At our own peril, we may not dismiss an earthquake as just another geological occurrence. Each earthquake points to the final judgment. Between the ascension and our Lord's second coming the Lamb of God reveals His wrath. He shakes the mountains and makes the earth tremble. He gives warning signals. The King and Judge of all the earth declares, "I am coming; prepare to meet Me." The church father Lactantius (c. 250-325) warned, "Stars will fall in great numbers, so that all the heavens will appear dark without lights. The loftiest mountains will also fall and be leveled with the plains. The sea will be rendered unnavigable. And that nothing may be lacking to evils of men and the earth, the trumpet will be heard from heaven.... And then everyone will tremble and quake at that mournful sound." In other words, God lets us know that no one can sin against Him and get away

with it. It will be pay day some day.

But is each earthquake a judgment of God because of a specific sin? Is a community that is buried under a landslide, more sinful than a neighboring community that is spared from disaster? Jesus had something to say about those moments when nature lashes out seemingly at random. He referred to a tower that collapsed, killing eighteen people (Luke 13:4). Whether it fell because of an earthquake or a strong wind or the natural processes of decay is irrelevant. The crucial fact is that eighteen bystanders, minding their own business, were crushed to death in an instant.

Jesus' question went to the heart of the issue: Were these eighteen people more wicked than anyone else in Jerusalem? His answer was, "No." The real lesson of the fallen tower was not that natural disasters help us to find the worst sinners, but that the fallen world does not offer guarantees. Any of us can be snuffed out at any moment by a wide variety of means.

Redemption

An earthquake not only points to judgment, but also to redemption. An earthquake accompanied both the death and resurrection of Jesus (Matt. 27: 51; 28:2). In obedience to His Father's will Jesus went to the cross. At the moment of Jesus' death, God caused the earth to quake, the rocks were split, and the tombs were opened. The earth-

quake shows that His death has significance for the entire universe. It foreshadows the restoration of the earth, divine harmony and order. There is going to be a new heaven and a new earth (Rev. 21:1). It would not have been possible apart from our Lord's atoning death.

The earthquake at the resurrection of Christ was a miraculous shaking of the ground in the particular place where the tomb was located. The reason for it was the descent from heaven of God's special messenger, an angel. He stepped forward and must have taken the stone completely out of its groove and turned it over on its side. The result? The heavy stone was lying flat on the ground and the angel was sitting on it, to symbolize Christ's triumph (Matt. 28:2). As Dr. William Hendriksen put it, "By means of the resurrection of Christ from the grave, and the mighty earthquake that appropriately accompanied it, 'the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ' not only laughed in the faces of the plotters who had requested this guard; he also smiled benignly upon all his dear children, for what he was actually saying was this: 'I have accepted my Son's sacrifice as a complete ransom for all the sin of all who take refuge in him' (Rom.4:25)." And God used for His redemptive purpose an earthquake in Philippi. The manifestation of His power brought about the release from prison of Paul and Silas (Act 16: 26ff).

Signs of the Times

Biblical prophecies reveal that earthquakes point to future calamitous events. When the disciples asked: "What will be the sign of your coming and of the close of the age?" (Matt.24: 3) Jesus replied with an apocalyptic depiction of the end-time. He spoke of cosmic disasters, the sun and moon ceasing to shine, the stars falling from heaven, and powers of heaven beings shaken. And Jesus plainly stated that "famines, and pestilences, and earthquakes," are to characterize more and more the coming of the end (Matt.24:7-9). These prophecies go against the grain of the self-satisfied, secular, culture-optimists who expect the improvement of the human race to come via science and technology. They contradict the philosophy of progress in which the positive elements in humans and nature will gradually overcome evil. But good and evil, persecutions, calamities, revolutions, epidemics, and earthquakes will be with us until the cup of God's wrath is full, culminating in the day of judgment.

Thousands of Christians interpret the disturbances of our time as the predicted signs of Christ's early return. Aren't we all we prone to predict, fix, know and predetermine the future, which is by definition unknowable and undeterminable? No one knows the future. God keeps the time of Christ's return secret.

Not only does God foresee the future, but He plans it and actually brings it to pass (Isa. 4:24-27). He has complete knowledge and control of events, both past and the future. Thus with regards to the end-time, Jesus said, "about that day or hour no one knows, neither the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father" (Mark 13:32). The time and seasons are fixed by authority of the Father alone (Acts 1:7; 7:26).

It is futile and sinful to predict the date of Jesus' return. Curiosity is wonderful, but for impertinence there is no excuse. Setting a date is trying to know more than the angels in heaven. The signs of the times mark the beginnings, but not the end. They are stepping stones to a final goal. God's plan is being carried forward. While we wait for our Lord's coming, people will eat and drink and marry and be given in marriage as they did in the days of Noah (Matt. 24:38).

While we watch the signs of the times, we continue to hope. The signs are reasons for joyful anticipation. It does not make the present moment of life less important but it takes away the fear of sinking into destruction from both our own end and that of the world. Amid the gathering darkness of our dangerous times, we continue on in the glowing optimism born of faith in the truth of the infallible Scriptures. What God has promised, He will do. His work will be finished. In Christ the creation will be restored and perfected.

The signs of earthquakes are not in themselves announcements that the

It is futile and sinful to predict the date of Jesus' return. Curiosity is wonderful, but for impertinence there is no excuse.

end has arrived. Rather, they are warnings that action must be taken because God is concluding His dealings with the present world. The warnings will increase as the last hour draws nearer. Jesus described them as ‘the beginning of birth pains’ (Matt. 24:80). They are signals that greater pain is to come and that something must be done before it is too late to act. As the church father Cyprian declared, “Since now the end of the world is at hand; turn your minds to God, in the fear of God.”

The Now and the Not Yet

How should we live as we watch the signs of the time and look forward to the Lord’s return? Do we withdraw from the world and take shelter in the safety of environment of the community of saints?

The answer is, “No. “To wait in the biblical sense is not just to sit around. It is an active vigilance. The early Christians, with their gaze confidently set on the fulfillment of God’s promises went into the world to proclaim the gospel of the Kingdom. The waiting and watching, which the nearness of the last day demands, is not waiting in panic and fear. It does not involve a suppressing of the coming end of history which leads to false security of eating and drinking, of marrying and giving in marriage. It does not cause us to hide, but it makes us lift up our heads because our redemption is near and the Son of Man is coming in great power and glory. (Luke 21:26ff.).

As we stand before the imminent end of this age, we cannot fit ourselves in this world. Yet we must be active in it, seeking to improve it.

Therefore, we must proclaim the gospel of the Kingdom. Roger S. Greenway notes that this gospel calls “for the transformation of the heart and all of life. It governs how we live as individuals, families, and communities. It teaches us to show mercy to the poor, defend the oppressed, and seek reconciliation between hostile sides.”

And let us not forget the role of the Church. She is the hope of the world and is positioned like no other channel of influence to shape culture. Her people are called to be in the world. As John Stott puts in *Basic Christianity*, “We find ourselves citizens of two kingdoms, the one earthly and the one heavenly. And each citizenship lays upon us duties which we are not at liberty to evade.”

Of course, utopia will not be achieved here on earth. We can only attempt to make the world a little more just and prosperous and free. We can try to replace dictatorships by slightly less bad democracies. As the German theologian Helmut Thielicke argued: “Where enthusiastic impatience is held in check by watchful soberness (1 Thess. 5: 6; 1 Peter 5:5) this activity will always take the form of an encouragement to take small steps. The modesty of small steps is possible because there is no illusion that we ourselves can bring God’s kingdom but there is the assurance that it will come.”

Conclusion

A biblical view of the sign of the times shows that life is not ruled by fate. The Lord is still on the throne. We live with hope. Death has already been swallowed up in victory

(1 Cor. 15:55,57). Therefore, we cannot and may not surrender to the threats from Islamists or any other enemies of the gospel. Life is not meaningless. What we do for the Lord is not futile. When He comes, everything will be made new. Jesus said, “Behold, I coming soon! Blessed is he who keeps the words of the prophecy in this book” (Rev. 22:7).

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Looking Above

A Series on The Revelation of Christ

Revelation 11:7-14

“The Death and Life of the Church”

We come, at last, to the end of the great interlude.

The great interlude began in 10:1 and now finally concludes in 11:14. The great interlude is set in the midst of the mighty trumpet blasts. We read of the first six trumpet blasts in 8:1-9:21; we read of the seventh trumpet blast in 11:15-19. In between 9:21 and 11:15, in between the first six trumpet blasts and the seventh trumpet blast, is the great interlude; in this great interlude our attention is focused upon the Church.

The interlude provides us with a description of the Church. It provides us with a portrait of the Church's life and identity. It is describing the history of the church, as she lives in the midst of the world, between the first coming of Christ and His return. This is the history of the church. This is our history. We are not spectators sitting in the stands watching the events unfold before our eyes; we are participants in the arena; we are participants in the action. This is the history of the church!

The history of the church can, at times, be quite disturbing, and certainly it is so here. John begins in verses 7-10 with nothing less than the “death” of the Church. “When they finish their testimony, the beast that ascends out of the bottomless pit will make war against them,

overcome them, and kill them” (11:7). The Church is the object of Satan's hatred. The Evil One has his sites on the Church; he pursues the people of God; he seeks to devour the body of Christ; he seeks to tear apart the fellowship of the Spirit. The verse speaks of the beast ascending out of the abyss, making war against the church, overcoming the church, even killing the church. The words are most disturbing. Satan and his minions make war against the church. Satan and his minions overcome the church. Satan and his minions even kill the church. That's what John is saying, and these things are taking place presently.

Even now Satan and his minions are making war against the Church, overcoming the Church, and even killing the Church. Need I tell you of the attacks to which the Church of Jesus Christ is subject? Need I tell you about the underground church and the persecution she faces in communist countries? Need I tell you of the atrocities that the Church suffers in China? Need I tell you of the persecution under which the Church suffers in Indonesia? Need I tell you of the death of many martyrs in the Philippines? The Evil One has made war against the Church. He appears victorious over the Church. He has even apparently killed the Church, silencing her voice altogether.

And we need not simply look abroad; we can look within our own borders as well. To be sure, in America we do not suffer the atrocities with which the Chinese Christians are familiar; we do not suffer under the persecutions with which the Christians in Indonesia are familiar, we do not suffer the martyrdom with which the Christians in the Philippines are familiar, but we are fooling ourselves if we do not think we are under attack. The attacks of the Evil One are different in our land: here his attacks are subtle and sinister. Here he has gotten the church to become like the world.

Think of the victories he has won: in many churches he has won the battle of worship, where the worship of the church resembles more of Hollywood than it does of Scripture; in many churches he has won the battle of the Lord's Day, where many Christians think nothing of spending the Lord's Day as they desire, rather than spending it as God desires; in many churches he has won the battle of the church's mission, where many Christians are no longer concerned with proclaiming the gospel of Jesus Christ, but with social and political action; in many churches he has won the battle of the mind, where many Christians no longer set their minds on things above, but on the things below.

Even now Satan and his minions are making war against the Church. Even now Satan and his minions are apparently overcoming the Church. Even now Satan and his minions are apparently killing the Church. And in all of this the Church is being

conformed to the image of her dear Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Was not Jesus Christ subject to the attacks of the Evil One? Was He not overcome? Was He not put to death? The Church of Jesus Christ is being conformed to the image of her Lord and Savior: attacked as Christ was attacked, overcome as Christ was overcome, killed as Christ was killed. The Church of Jesus Christ is being conformed to the image of her Lord in His humiliation and death. That's the point of verse 7.

The disturbing imagery continues in verse 8: "And their dead bodies will lie in the street of the great city which spiritually is called Sodom and Egypt, where also our Lord was crucified." Here the conformity of the Church to the image of her Lord and Savior Jesus Christ is spelled out even more clearly. Was not Christ put on display, and made subject to the abuse and scorn of the world? Were not the forces of evil arrayed against Him? So it is with the Church: she is made subject to the abuse and scorn of the world; the forces of evil are arrayed against her. Her dead body lies in the street; she is not buried; she is not treated with the least bit of courtesy and respect. The Church bears the humiliation of Christ.

That humiliation is spelled out in verse 9, "Then those from the peoples, tribes, tongues, and nations will see their dead bodies three-and-a-half days, and not allow their dead bodies to be put into graves." That humiliation is further spelled out in verse 10, "And those who dwell on the earth will rejoice over them, make merry, and send gifts to one another, because these two

prophets tormented those who dwell on the earth." Not only does the world refuse the church burial, but the world rejoices, makes merry, and even sends gifts to one another over the demise of the Church. Was it not so with our Lord? Did not the world rejoice at His death? Did not His enemies make merry at His death? Did not hell itself celebrate His death?

Verses 7-10, then, set before us the Church of Jesus Christ in conformity with her Lord and Savior Jesus Christ: conformed to Him in His apparent weakness, conformed to

***The Church of Jesus
Christ is being
conformed to the
image of her Lord.***

Him in His humiliation, conformed to Him in His suffering, conformed to Him in His apparent defeat, conformed to Him in His death. As the Savior was apparently weak, so the Church appears weak. As the Savior was apparently powerless, so the Church appears powerless. As Christ was humiliated, so the Church is humiliated.

And yet there is also a hint of the Church's power and exaltation, as she is conformed to her Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. We have noted the similarities: as Christ was attacked, so the Church is attacked, as Christ was apparently overcome, so the Church is apparently over-

come; as Christ was put to death, so the Church is put to death, as Christ was humiliated, so the Church is humiliated. Now notice one difference. Christ was buried; the two witnesses are not. Christ was buried; the Church is not.

What are we to make of that? Think back to the first Adam, formed from the dust of the ground (Genesis 2:7). After he sinned, the Lord pronounced the appropriate judgment: "Dust you are and to dust you shall return." The wages of sin is death. Adam would die. Adam would return to the dust of the ground. Adam would be buried in the earth.

Not so with the Church! She does not return to the dust of the ground; she is not buried. Why not? Because the Church is conformed to the image of the last Adam, not of the first. The last Adam, Jesus Christ, has suffered the curse in our place. The last Adam, Jesus Christ, has paid the wages of our sin in our place. The last Adam has died in our place. The last Adam was buried, buried in the dust of the ground, in our place. The church is not buried—does not return to the dust of the ground—because Christ the last Adam, has taken our curse, and has been buried in our place. There is no burial for the Church, because death for the Church begins her exaltation: "death puts an end to our sinning, and is our entrance into eternal life!"

All of this, which is suggested to us in verses 7-10, is now made clear in verses 11-12!

First we see the resurrection of the Church in verse 11: "Now after three-and-a-half days the breath of

life from God entered them, and they stood on their feet, and great fear fell on those who saw them.” Here is the Church conformed to Christ in His resurrection and exaltation. Here is the Church, finding her identity not in the first Adam, but in the last Adam, Jesus Christ. Here is the Church, rising up as a new Adam in Christ—as a new creation in Christ.

Next we see the ascension of the Church in verse 12: “And they heard a loud voice from heaven saying to them, ‘Come up here.’ And they ascended to heaven in a cloud, and their enemies saw them.” Here is the Church conformed to Christ in His ascension and exaltation. The Greek says literally, “they ascended to heaven in *the* cloud.” What cloud is being referred to here, but the glory-cloud of God’s presence? Here is the Church, conformed to Christ in His ascension.

Herein lies the life of the Church: persecuted, apparently overcome, put to death, but also raised from the dead and ascended into glory. Herein lies the life of the Church: complete conformity to Christ her dear Lord and Savior, who was persecuted, apparently overcome, put to death, but also raised from the dead and ascended into glory. Herein lies the life of the Church: complete conformity to Christ her dear Lord and Savior in His humiliation and in His exaltation. The identity of the Church is Christ Himself. The life of the Church is Christ Himself. This is the identity of the Church even now; this is the life of the Church even now.

That this is the present identity and life of the Church even now is sug-

gested by the number 3½. The bodies of the two witnesses lie in the street for 3½ days (verse 9) and then are raised from the dead at the close of the 3½ days (verse 11). Why 3½ days? The number corresponds to the numbers we have already encountered in Revelation 11: the 42 months of verse 2, the 1260 days of verse 3. The numbers are consistent; they are all describing the same period of time, namely, the time between Christ’s first coming and His return: 42 months to underscore the severity of the persecution, 1260 days to underscore the daily witness of the church, 3½ days to underscore the brevity of the humiliation.

The identity and life of the Church presently is Jesus Christ. She is conformed to Him even now both in His humiliation and in His exaltation. Even now the Church appears to be overcome; even now the Church may appear dead; but even now the Church knows the power of the resurrection; even now the Church finds her life in heaven. Even now the life of the Church is hid with Christ in God.

This is emphasized finally in verses 13-14: “in the same hour there was a great earthquake, and a tenth of the city fell. In the earthquake seven thousand people were killed and the rest were afraid and gave glory to the God of heaven” (verse 13). We read here of an earthquake. This is not the final earthquake, but an earthquake that is symbolic of all earthquakes. All earthquakes are harbingers of the final earthquake, the final shaking of the heavens and the earth. They are sent to warn the world of the final shaking of the heavens and the

earth. And only those who by faith have been united to Jesus Christ and thus are members of His body—the Church—will stand, as they cannot be shaken.

That it is still the day of grace is evident from verse 14, “The second woe is past. Behold the third woe is coming quickly.” It is still the day of grace, but that day will not last forever. The third woe is coming quickly.

We shall come, at last, to the end of the great interlude. Indeed, the seventh trumpet is about to sound; the Day of Judgment is at hand.

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Examining the Nine Points:

Point Two

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 2

Therefore Synod rejects the errors of those

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)*

This is striking language. Not only did Synod recognize as an *error* the implicit or explicit denial of the “commandment of life,” but Synod also rejected as an *error* any confusion of the principles between the prelapsarian and postlapsarian states. The second point is closely related to the first and every bit as important if not more important.

Adam was under the “commandment of life” before the fall. The principle of the “commandment of life” was “do this and live” (Genesis 42:18; Luke 10:28). After the fall, the “commandment of life” continues to demand, in the language of the Westminster Confession (7.2) “perfect and personal obedience.” The law must be obeyed and it must be obeyed perfectly. Of course, this is exactly what our catechism says:

9. Does not God then do injustice to man by requiring of

him in His Law that which he cannot perform?

No, for God so made man that he could perform it, but man, through the instigation of the devil, by willful disobedience deprived himself and all his posterity of those divine gifts.

We were made to “perform” the law. Because we were created to perform the law, and the law is just, the obligation continues even after the fall. At issue here is the divine justice. Those who would elide the difference between the commandment of life and the covenant of grace would also fail to account for the necessity of satisfying justice. Grace does not have to be satisfied, but justice does. The “commandment of life” was about “wages” (Romans 4:4). The covenant of grace is about unmerited favor.

Also at stake here is the nature of grace and the gospel. Those who confuse or conflate the covenants of works and grace also confuse the law with the gospel. Grace, in its nature, is free, unconditional, and undeserved. The revisionists want to make the pre-fall and post-fall covenants partly legal and partly gracious. Of course, for sinners, a partly legal post-fall covenant is not good news.

In this point Synod recognized that there are two fundamental principles by which human beings relate to God: law and gospel. Zacharias Ursinus (1534–83), the primary author of our Heidelberg Catechism and the authorized (by Frederick III, the Elector Palatinate who commissioned the catechism) expositor of it in the sixteenth century, explained the difference this way:

Q.36 What distinguishes law and gospel?

A: The law contains a covenant of nature begun by God with men in creation, that is, it is a natural sign to men, and it requires of us perfect obedience toward God. It promises eternal life to those keeping it, and threatens eternal punishment to those not keeping it. In fact, the gospel contains a covenant of grace, that is, one known not at all under nature. This covenant declares to us fulfillment of its righteousness in Christ, which the law requires, and our restoration through Christ’s Spirit. To those who believe in him, it freely promises eternal life for Christ’s sake (Larger Catechism, Q. 36).¹

The other primary author and editor of our catechism, Caspar Olevianus (1536–87) said,

For this reason the distinction between law and Gospel is retained. The law does not promise freely, but under the condition that you keep it completely. And if someone

should transgress it once, the law or legal covenant does not have the promise of the remission of sins. On the other hand, the Gospel promises freely the remission of sins and life, not if we keep the law, but for the sake of the Son of God, through faith.²

John Calvin's colleague and successor in Geneva, Theodore Beza (1534–1605) wrote,

We divide this Word into two principal parts or kinds: the one is called the "Law," the other the "Gospel." For all the rest can be gathered under the one or other of these two headings... Ignorance of this distinction between Law and Gospel is one of the principal sources of the abuses which corrupted and still corrupt Christianity.³

Though, tragically, many Reformed folk have come to think of this distinction as Lutheran, nothing could be further from the truth. Our Reformed theologians and churches were, until the modern period, every bit as committed to this distinction as were the Lutherans. None of these writers was confessionally or ecclesiastically Lutheran.

For much of the period before the Reformation the church read Scripture as if it were all law. The medieval church and Rome today distinguishes between the "old law" (Moses) and the "new law" (Christ), but it's all law. According to the medieval theologians and the Roman communion, "Do and live" is law and "For God so loved the world" is *also* law. For Rome, the

law is the gospel and the gospel is the law. So it is for the covenant moralists in the current controversy.

The distinction between law and gospel was never meant to be an abstraction. It was always meant to find expression in our covenant theology. According to Ursinus, the principles of law and gospel came to expression in two distinct covenants:

What does the divine law teach?

The sort of covenant which God began with man, in creation; by which man should have carried himself in serving God; and what God would require from him after beginning with him a new covenant of grace; that is, how and for what [end] man was created by God; and to what state he might be restored; and by which covenant one who has been reconciled to God ought to arrange his life.⁴

The Dutch Reformed theologian, Herman Witsius, said the same thing:

In the covenant of works there was no mediator: in that of grace, there is the mediator, Christ Jesus.... In the covenant of works, the condition of perfect obedience was required, to be performed by man himself, who had consented to it. In that of grace, the same condition is proposed, as to be, or as already performed by a mediator. And this substitution

of the person, consists the principal and essential difference of the covenants.⁵

Like Ursinus in the sixteenth century and Witsius in the seventeenth century, under this heading, Synod said that the distinction between law and gospel, as two principles of righteousness with God, is a basic, nonnegotiable distinction. It is not some boutique idea but as basic to being Reformed as air is to human being.

What is at stake in the second point is the gospel. Is the gospel "Christ was born under the law," "for God so loved the world," "I will give you rest," "And to the one who does not work but trusts him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is counted as righteousness," "For while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly" or is it, "If you do your part, I will meet you half way"? This is exactly what is being offered by the Federal Vision. According to the covenant theology of the FV, we are said to "get in by grace" and to "stay in by works" or "stay in by grace and cooperation with grace."

This is why Synod said, "in any way and for any reason." Just as when we drive on the road there are boundaries that we may not cross (lines and barriers) so in our theological discourse there are limits on what Reformed ministers, elders, and members can say and remain in good standing. If we are to remain Reformed then there are fixed boundaries that must be respected. This is no light matter. The doctrine of justification is of the "standing or falling of the church."

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).

Endnotes

¹ Zacharias Ursinus, “The Larger Catechism,” Q. 36 in Lyle D. Bierma, et al., *An Introduction to the Heidelberg Catechism: Sources, History, and Theology, Texts and Studies in Reformation and Post-Reformation Thought* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2005), 168–69.

² Caspar Olevianus, *Ad Romanos Notae*, (Geneva, 1579), 148.

³ Theodore Beza, *The Christian Faith*, trans. James Clark (Lewes, UK: Focus Christian Ministries Trust), 40.

⁴ Ursinus, “Larger Catechism,” Q. 10 in Bierma, *Introduction to the Heidelberg Catechism*, 164.

⁵ Herman Witsius, *The Economy of the Covenants Between God and Man*, trans. William Crookshank, 2 vol. (Phillipsburg: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing, 1990), 1.49.

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It's Decision Time, Finally

A Path Forward for the Christian Reformed Church on the Divided Issue of Women's Ordination to Ecclesiastical Office

Throughout life there are many times when two people or two parties will have differing opinions about a certain issue. In a democratic society this fact is all the more highlighted because debates are hotly contested and then after a vote, the majority position is the one that is taken to be the law of the land. Those in the minority submit to the ruling because overall it is what the majority of people wanted. One can continue to protest and work towards reversing the ruling, but in the meantime they must be under submission to the current state of affairs. There cannot be two different, contrary laws in effect at the same time left up to the individual citizen to choose which one he will follow at any one particular time.

When we start talking about issues in the church, the analogy to a democratic state falls apart on many levels, but there are some similarities. The church, or at least a particular representation of the church, has one body of truth to which it holds. In confessional churches that body of truth is spelled out concretely on many, many issues. There is no leeway (or there *shouldn't* be any leeway) given for one to hold a contrary position. Granted there are some issues where Scripture is not as clear and where the church has not spoken decisively on an issue, and

those differences do not, or should not, affect the unity and harmony of the church.

There are, however, some issues the church (or a particular denomination) is wrestling with that have caused much strife and division, and the church has officially proclaimed two contrary positions to be biblically viable. One such issue is women's ordination to the ecclesiastical offices of the church especially as it is being played out in the Christian Reformed Church in North America (CRC). Recently, this issue has focused on women being able to be delegates to the broader assemblies (classis and Synod), whereas in the past decade or so the issue of women's ordination was kept, at least officially, on the congregational level. The Synod of the CRC in 1995 ruled that both the position *for* women in ecclesiastical office and *against* women in ecclesiastical office to be biblical and allowed individual classes to make their own ruling as to which position their classis would take. Subsequently, the individual classes were allowed to make their own ruling as to whether women were permitted to be delegates to that particular assembly. With the most recent CRC Synod of 2007 the question of women being allowed to be delegates to the broadest assembly, that of Synod, took center stage.

What follows is neither an attack or a defense of the issue of women in ecclesiastical office. It is a critique of the CRC's official position that either side is biblically correct and an examination how that official position only superficially covered the problem in the past but how it now reveals its ugly face in the broader assemblies. *This article will show that the CRC cannot continue having as its official position that women should and should not be given access to all levels of authority in the church. For the peace, harmony, and unity of the church a decisive ruling needs to be made.* To make this claim it will be shown that this "official position" is hurting the unity of the church and although a decisive ruling will most certainly cause visible splitting of the denomination, overall it will benefit Christ's Church by allowing the broader assemblies to continue in the task of making sure that the gospel is being preached and Christ's sheep are being fed.

The History of the Women in Office Issue in the CRC

The current state of the issue in the CRC cannot be addressed without a look at its history. Although a very detailed study of the issue as it has played out in the CRC would be most appropriate, for the sake of brevity only the "highlights" can be presented here.¹

For all intents and purposes the debate concerning women in ecclesiastical office began in the CRC in 1973, when a Study Committee formed by the Synod 1970 presented its report.² The Study Com-

mittee in Recommendation B.1 stated, “The practice of excluding women from ecclesiastical office cannot conclusively be defended on biblical grounds.”³ The Advisory Committee of Synod that took up the study report could not agree with the conclusions stating that “several issues need further examination” and therefore, advised Synod to send the report to the congregations for their reactions and to form a new Study Committee, which was adopted by Synod.⁴

The reactions of the congregations and the conclusions of the new Study Committee were brought to Synod 1975. Out of the 165 responses, 146 did not agree with the conclusions to “Report 39” (the Study Committee report presented to Synod 1973), 17 favored the conclusions, and 2 were neutral on the issue.⁵ In the end, the new Study Committee presented the recommendation “that synod declare that the Christian Reformed Church is not ready or willing to open her offices to women.”⁶ The Advisory Committee of Synod that took up this report also had many questions concerning the study report, and so it advised Synod to “declare the practice of excluding women from the ecclesiastical offices... be maintained unless compelling biblical grounds are advanced for changing that practice.”⁷

Synod 1975 also mandated a Study Committee of Old Testament and

New Testament scholars to study the hermeneutical principles as well as the exegesis of the relevant Bible passages.⁸ The conclusions of the Study Committee presented at Synod 1978 did not necessarily weigh in on the matter of women in ecclesiastical office (their mandate concerned the hermeneutical and exegetical level), but they did recommend that Synod affirm a number of points to which the authority in the church should be reserved for men; however, the committee also recommended in a Majority Report that the office of deacon be opened to women.⁹ This recommendation was adopted by the Synod, and the appropriate changes to the Church Order were to be ratified at the following Synod of 1979.¹⁰

Since Synod 1978 opened the door for women in the diaconate it is interesting to note the number of documents brought before the 1979 Synod concerning women deacons and women in office generally (16 Overtures, 31 printed appeals, 1 personal appeal, 6 communications, and 10 informative communications).¹¹ Many of these documents requested annulment of the 1978 decision whereas some asked for clarification, deferment, and upholding.¹² Obviously on this issue there was still a lot of hesitation on the part of the CRC congregations and classes to open the office of deacon to women. Synod ultimately voted to submit the decision to further study, but to not discipline

those congregations that already implemented the 1978 decision.¹³

During the 1980s the debate still loomed large in the CRC although in 1984 and 1985 the emphasis of discussion shifted to whether or not “headship” of men in marriage should be a regulative principle in the church as well, thereby barring women from the office of elder or minister on those grounds. However, the issue took a big turn in 1990 when a Study Committee mandated by the 1987 Synod presented its report (Report 26) and ground-breaking decisions were made by the delegates to Synod. Without going into all the confusing details of the debate on the floor of Synod (at least confusing from reading the minutes of a meeting that took place over 17 years ago!) Synod decided to “change Article 3 of the church order to delete the word *male* from Article 3-a and merge Articles 3-a and 3-b to read ‘All confessing members of the Church who meet the biblical requirements are eligible for the offices of minister, elder, deacon, and evangelist.’”¹⁴ This was then to be ratified by Synod 1992, until which time the individual churches were asked *not* to implement changes until the Church Order change had been ratified.

As could be expected one of the dominant issues on the agenda for Synod 1991 was concerning the previous Synod’s decision to open all ecclesiastical offices to women. Many of those Overtures and communications asked Synod 1991 not to bring to ratification the proposed Church Order change to Synod 1992 and to keep the original wording (pre-1990) of the Church Order;

In 1979 there was still a lot of hesitation on the part of the CRC congregations and classes to open the office of deacon to women.

these Overtures were defeated by the Synod.¹⁵ Synod 1991 did form an *ad hoc* committee to gather grounds for the proposed Church Order change to be presented to Synod 1992 when the ratification was to take place.¹⁶ Since this was not a formal Study Committee, recommendations were not made, only grounds for the issue at hand were formulated. Synod 1992 ultimately considered that the grounds given by the *ad hoc* committee were “not sufficiently persuasive to win the confidence and support of the church” and voted *not* to ratify the change in Church Order Article 3.¹⁷ Women were granted the ability to use their gifts in teaching, expounding the Word of God, and providing pastoral care; however, it must be done under the supervision of the elders, and those churches who already introduced practices in conflict with the (unrevised) Church Order needed to be brought under agreement.¹⁸

Now there were clear dividing lines being drawn in the CRC. After Synod 1990 and even prior to it certain congregations were ordaining women as elders. The charge now being put forward in the CRC was that these churches and individuals were having their consciences bound because they could not adhere to the ruling of Synod (even though they acted improperly by ordaining women while the Church Order was not yet ratified). Ultimately Synod 1993 overturned the ruling of Synod 1992 and ruled by “giving councils and churches *the option* to ordain qualified women to the offices of elder, minister, and evangelist.”¹⁹ A motion was brought to the floor that wanted to make the Church Order change

After Synod 1990 there were clear dividing lines being drawn in the CRC.

(same change that was defeated by Synod 1992) effective immediately; however, that could not occur and ratification would need to be done by Synod 1994 per Article 47 of the Church Order.²⁰ Synod 1994, however, voted again *not* to change the Church Order, and clarified that there is “now no synodical decision in effect to allow women to serve in the offices of elder, minister, or evangelist.”²¹ The Synod passed the recommendation that “urged all councils which have ordained women elders, evangelists or ministers to release them from office by June 1, 1995, and all councils not to ordain any additional women elders, evangelists, or ministers.”²²

The CRC needed to rule decisively on this issue for the peace, unity, and harmony of the church. In 1994 it seemed as if that had been done; however those that recorded their negative votes with statements said the following, “As a matter of conscience I cannot agree with the recommendation,” and “... We will *not* release women elders from office.”²³ Throughout the years previous to this 1994 ruling, committees were advising churches who were in noncompliance with the Church Order, that they were in covenant with the other churches and part of that covenant was complying with the rulings of Synod. However, Synod 1994 was the first Synod actually to impose a date by which women needed to be removed from office.

Synod 1992 used language as quoted earlier that women were able to “expound the Word of God”, and in subsequent Synods the clarification as to exactly what that meant was requested. In 1995 Synod adopted the stance that this *does not* mean “exhorting and preaching in official worship services.”²⁴ However, as Synod 1995 continued, there would be a major shift in the discussion and the course of the next decade and a half of the CRC would be laid out.

Synod 1995 adopted the stance “that there are two different perspectives and convictions, *both of which* honor the Scriptures as the infallible Word of God, on the issue of whether women are allowed to serve in the offices of elder, minister, and evangelist.”²⁵ The vote on that recommendation actually passed by a large margin 112 to 66.²⁶ In light of this decision Synod acted on language that has since become infamous in CRC circles:

“A classis may, in response to local needs and circumstances, declare that the word *male* in Article 3-1 of the Church Order is inoperative and may authorize the churches under its jurisdiction to ordain and install women in the offices of elder, minister, and evangelist.”²⁷

It is interesting to note that this is exactly the *opposite* of what Synod 1994 adopted! Although negative votes are recorded when requested, the Minutes of the Synod do not give the actual numbers for or

against a particular recommendation, but other sources indicate they were slim.²⁸ Once more Synod had changed its position, and in order to “table” the matter for a period of time it was decided that the current arrangement be in effect for five years (until 2000) at which time it would be reviewed.²⁹ However, Synod adopted this change in the Church Order by not making the change in the Church Order itself, but placed the language of “inoperative” in the Article Supplement which means that it could be ratified *immediately, without* the requirement of the next Synod to ratify.

As could be expected Synod 1996’s agenda was replete with overtures dealing with Synod 1995’s decision to give the option of making the word “male” inoperative in Church Order Article 3-a Supplement. At the time of Synod 1996, 13 classes (out of 46) had declared the term inoperative.³⁰ However, all the overtures asking Synod to reverse the 1995 decision were declared out of order and the issue as it stood did not change as a result of Synod 1996. In the Synods of 1997 and 1998 a few overtures were presented asking that Synod deal with the “women’s ordination” issue, to which Synod did not accede to because of the year 2000 limit set by Synod 1995.

In the years leading up to Synod 2000, many of the “conservative” voices in the CRC had subsequently left the denomination. In

February 1996 Darrell Todd Maurina of the United Reformed News Service reported that over 30,000 members of the CRC left in the five years previous.³¹ In February of 1999 that number had risen to almost 41,000 members.³² Synod 2000 was given a Study Committee’s report on the “status” of the situation in the CRC since 1995 and essentially no changes were made concerning the issue of “women’s ordination.” It was to be kept on the local/classical level and there was to be another review period to culminate in 2005.

Synod 2005 began to deal with the issue of women delegates to the broadest assembly, that of Synod. Previously women were allowed to be delegates to classis meetings, but not to Synod.³³ Although Synod 2005 did not make a ruling on the female synodical delegates issue *per se*, it did put in place such a time when Synod could take up that issue – only when there was a majority of classes that declared the word “male” inoperative.³⁴ When Synod 2006 convened, the Board of Trustees Supplement to the *Agenda for Synod 2006* noted that the one-half majority of classes making “male” inoperative had been achieved. An overture was sent to Synod asking to make the broadest assembly of Synod open to women delegates as well as delete the word “male” from the Church Order. The Advisory Committee made the recommendation that the word “male” be removed from the Church Order

proper, which was adopted by Synod, but those changes needed to be ratified by the following Synod. Included in that recommendation, however, the Advisory Committee also recommended that the opportunity to serve as delegates to synod (and synodical deputies) *remain closed* to women.³⁵ The grounds for not allowing women to serve as delegates to synod or for them to be synodical deputies was to “[respect] on the synodical level those who oppose women serving in the offices of minister or elder.”³⁶

The Advisory Committee observed that the broadest assembly in the current state of affairs contained classes unwilling to allow women elders and ministers, and those classes that allow it. Because at Synod these differing classes would have to be working together, it is proper to allow for all delegates to be in agreement that their fellow delegates have the (biblical) right to be present. The Advisory Committee also recommended a “Sabbath Rest” of seven years from this discussion because of the “difficulty of the issue” within the CRC.³⁷ As could be expected this “rest” period drew a lot of criticism from members within the CRC, not to mention the decision by Synod not to allow women serve as delegates to Synod.³⁸

The Agenda for Synod 2007 contained twelve overtures dealing with the women’s issue, three of which called for the premature end of the “Sabbath Rest” and one recommending that Synod reverse the decision of the previous year and keep the word “male” in the Church Order. What is interesting is that Synod officially voted on removing

It is interesting to note that Synod 1995 did exactly the opposite of what Synod 1994 adopted!

the “Sabbath Rest” provision and acceded to the intent of those overtures *after* the other voting concerning the women’s issue was already complete.³⁹ Synod did approve a recommendation that “delegates who believe the seating of women delegates is in violation of the Word of God may record their protest on the appropriate credentials.”⁴⁰ Even though synod is now open to women, on the classical level women in classes that in effect leave the word “male” *operative* cannot be appointed as delegates even if there are constituent churches within the classis that allow it.⁴¹

Recent news articles and reports state that at least one classis in the CRC will be sending four women delegates to Synod 2008. Given the history that has been presented one can expect there to be protests, once more, asking Synod to reconsider their decision. It also remains to be seen how the assembly will function when there are delegates present that do not believe other delegates have the biblical right to be there. In the Majority Report from the Advisory Committee dealing with Women in Ecclesiastical Office from Synod 2007, the committee highlighted this exact phenomenon happening on the classical level and that the situation was worked out for those delegates, “Several delegates come from churches that oppose women in office, and they do not desire to be seated with women at the broader assemblies. These delegates register their protest and, in so doing, their conscience is unburdened, and they are free to participate.”⁴² Lord willing that will be the case as well on the Synodical level until which

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time all classes are on the same page once again. But as will be shown, this might not be the best course of action for the CRC to take.

Even though much has been decided and, as *The Banner* headline of July 2007 announced, the door has been opened for women in the CRC. However, there is still a lot of confusion and regulations that have to mediate between the two contrary positions that are still the official stance of the CRC. Females appointed as Synodical deputies must have a male as an alternate, churches within a classis that does not allow the ordination of women can go to another classis for ordination exams of women, churches that are opposed in a classis that allows women’s ordination do not have to participate in the ordination exam, and a *classis contracta* can be formed, along with other statutes attempting to make plausible a “unity” in the midst of contrary positions.

The fact that there are many rules and regulations, does not mean that there cannot be peace and order, but this author agrees with the Minority Advisory Report when it stated, “Many who remain in the denomination fear that their convictions either already are or will be bound by the denomination’s position on this issue.”⁴³ It is this point that needs

to be looked at more closely.

Those in the CRC who favored the ordination of women, essentially won that battle in 1995. Because of subsequent rulings of Synod the discussion concerning women being delegates to Synod could not be even broached until a majority of classes favoring women in office. Once that threshold was passed in 2006 the issue was immediately discussed regardless of the “Sabbath Rest” provision, and the ultimate decision came the next year at Synod 2007.

The Result of the Women in Office Issue in the CRC

As the history has shown there has been a very vocal contingent pushing for full male and female equality in the Christian Reformed Church in North America. It started with deacons, and has now essentially won all offices of the church. However, as studies of the CRC have discovered, even though the offices were open to women, not very many women were being chosen as pastors (or guest pastors) to lead congregations in those churches that allowed it.⁴⁴ Right now the broad CRC “government” cannot do anything about that. According to the newly adopted Church Order Article 3-a, “All congregations may, but *will not be required* to allow women to serve in the office of pastor, elder, or ministry associate.”⁴⁵

If equality is what is being sought, then full *quantitative* equality must be the goal. The civil governments can and have legislated that there must be a certain percentage of the work force from minority racial groups. In recent years even the idea of churches not being able to hire strictly according to their beliefs has been challenged. The question remains then, can a similar situation happen in the CRC? Obviously the future cannot be predicted, but given the history of the issue thus far, it is possible that the denomination will decide to make sure that women are being treated equally in the area of ecclesiastical office and require certain percentages of women to be represented in all the ecclesiastical bodies (from consistories to synods).

As was mentioned as a concern in the Minority Report, some are already feeling that they are bound against their biblical convictions by the rulings of the denomination. This will come to focus at Synod when they are forced to recognize the legitimacy of women delegates who are present. Sure they can register their protest, but they will have to work on committees together, recognize their vote on the floor, and in some cases probably be under their authority.⁴⁶ So for all intents and purposes the “protest” of those registering such will be of no practical value and their consciences are harmed.

Christian Liberty in the Women in Office Issue

This discussion needs to be viewed from another angle, that of those who believe that women should be allowed into all levels of ecclesiastical office looking towards their

brothers who oppose the idea. From this angle, are not those who oppose women’s ordination to be seen as “weaker brothers?” They have not been given the same spiritual insight into Scriptures and are still wrestling with the idea. We usually think of this “weaker brother” idea when it comes to things that are considered *adiaphora* such as consuming alcohol or smoking, but can we not make that argument here as well? Are not those still opposed to the progressive rulings of the church

Some are already feeling that they are bound against their biblical convictions by the rulings of the denomination.

“weaker brothers” remaining unconvinced?

John Calvin makes some very helpful comments concerning how we are to act around our weaker brothers in his *Institutes*. Not only is this helpful in everyday living, but very insightful when applied to the current issue. Calvin says that many err when “they use their freedom indiscriminately and unwisely, *as though it were not sound and safe if men did not witness it....* Some persons today reckon their freedom does not exist *unless they take possession of it...*”⁴⁷ As it relates to those assemblies where the opposition is rightfully in attendance, are the churches who put forth

women delegates exercising their newfound Christian freedom improperly? It is still the *official* position of the CRC that churches can biblically be warranted in withholding the offices from women. It then becomes a matter of Christian liberty.

Comparing this to an issue where Christian liberty is more commonly recognized will be helpful to understand the argument. The CRC position on the consumption of alcohol is: “According to Scripture, all Christians must avoid drunkenness. Though abstinence from alcohol is a morally creditable choice, those who, in their freedom in Christ, choose to use alcohol moderately are not to be condemned.”⁴⁸ There are those who choose not to consume alcohol, but are not offended by those that do because they recognize the freedom one has to make that decision. However, there are those that have not come to that conclusion, and their consciences can be troubled if alcohol is consumed by Christians in their midst. This is where Calvin exhorts Christians to have regard for their brother’s weakness and abstain from exercising their liberty in their presence as to not “harm their conscience.”⁴⁹

If the CRC position was something like “Christians *must* consume alcohol” then it is no longer a liberty issue, but one of requirement. We must consume alcohol regardless of who is around us! However, since that is not the case we must respect the positions of those who are not of the same opinion and take the utmost care not to put a stumbling block in their path (Rom 14:13) and “not

abandon the care of the weak, whom the Lord has so strongly commended to us.”⁵⁰

What if we take the position on alcohol and make it the position on women’s ordination? “Though abstinence from *ordaining women* is a morally creditable choice, those who, in their freedom in Christ, choose to use *ordain women* are not to be condemned.” Is this not, in fact, what the CRC’s position is on women’s ordination?

If we agree that the analogy above concerning alcohol becomes a Christian liberty issue, then this too becomes one as well. Therefore, the weaker brother needs to be thought of and cared for. Is it worth causing somebody to stumble in his faith just to exercise one’s Christian freedom? All true Christians would emphatically say “No!” and follow the second summary of the law to “love our neighbors as ourselves. (Matt 22:39)” Calvin also profoundly states, “Nothing is plainer than this: that we should use our freedom if it results in the edification of our neighbor, but if it does not help our neighbor, then we should forgo it.”⁵¹

Does delegating women to classis or synod *knowing* that there are those opposed to it work to edify one’s neighbor and the body of Christ as a whole or does that action cause stress, anxiety and anything but edification? Is Christian love truly being expressed or are they so unsure of the existence of their Christian freedom that they “must take possession of it” to prove it exists? If it is the latter, then one must seriously consider their motives in light of the official

stance of the church in recognizing that the opposite view is biblically tenable or “morally creditable.”

Calvin does warn that the “weaker brother” can in fact be a Pharisee when they charge (out of ill will or malicious intent) an action as an offense when it was actually done lawfully.⁵² This is something that those opposed to women’s ordina-

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tion need to be careful of as well. They shall not charge their opposition with an offense out of impure motives just to make their conscience troubled. Like the person who is still unconvinced that Scripture allows for the consumption of alcohol and who truly believes it is a sin against God, we are not to *give* them an offense by bandying about our Christian liberty and bind their consciences; so too, shall those who have come to the conviction that women are to be ordained lord it over those who have not come to that realization and thereby bind their consciences? Are they not the

weaker brother, and isn’t there something more important that stands to be lost than an exercising of one’s Christian freedom that can be exercised and acted upon in many other, more appropriate ways?

The Future of the Women in Office Issue in the CRC

Since there are those who delegated women to the broader assemblies *regardless* of the presence of “weaker brothers,” this issue must be taken out of the domain of Christian liberty. This can only be done by a decisive ruling, once and for all, concerning women in *all* levels of the church. The current frame of mind, as has been shown from the CRC’s history, does not show signs of bending to the edification of one’s neighbor, but instead asserting itself upon the church by making known to all its newfound freedom.

It is obvious through the past thirty-four years that the CRC is moving in a direction of full ecclesiastical equality of men and women. As much as it would pain the church to make a decision that would cause a schism and the potential loss of a large number of its constituents, it would overall give the church *true* peace, harmony and unity. No longer then, will the rulings of the broader assemblies violate the consciences of those on either side of the issue.

Throughout the past twelve years of discussion on this issue, Synodical reports have constantly had to redefine the “peace” in the church as a result of its stance on holding both positions as biblically viable. Nobody has tried to completely hide

the underlying tension, but some have attempted to cover it up with platitudes and “harmonious” language. That tension cannot be bound forever – it *will* erupt again, and this latest ruling of Synod might just signal the final chains being broken.

A lot of ink has been spilled in wrestling over whether or not women should be ordained to ecclesiastical office in the church. Whenever this issue was approached at Synod much time was spent on the floor and in committee debating and arguing both sides. This ink and time was well spent and it was an issue that the church needed to deal with. However, given the fact that the CRC has moved decisively in the direction of women in ecclesiastical office, there is no turning back, much to the disappointment of those in that body who hold to the contrary position. In a sense the handwriting is on the wall, and it is time that the CRC make its official stance to be that of opening all the offices on all levels to women. This would allow those on both sides to devote their time and energies to the more productive aspects of the church’s mission in the world, making sure the gospel is being proclaimed and that Christ’s sheep are being cared for.

Endnotes

¹The focus of this historical study will be on the Synodically appointed Study Committee Reports and the reports of Advisory committees to Synod. Applicable overtures and communications from individual congregations and classes are taken up by the Advisory Committees in their work, reports and recommendations. It would be inter-

esting to look at the development of this issue within particular churches and classes since more often than not the same classes and churches were pushing the hardest for the passage of women’s ordination in the CRC throughout its history.

²Agenda for Synod 1973, (Grand Rapids: CRC Publications), 380. This Study Committee was formed as a result of the disagreements on the issue among the members of the Reformed Ecumenical Synod of 1968. The CRC wanted to play a “responsible role” in that body and give guidance to its future delegates (Agenda 1973, 380).

³Ibid., 454. There was a “Minority Report” of one included in the Study Committee’s report; however, when presented to Synod that report was requested by the author to be a postscript to the report, and no longer an official Minority Report (Acts of Synod 1973, 588).

⁴Acts of Synod 1973, 86.

⁵Agenda for Synod 1975, 400.

⁶Ibid., 422.

⁷Acts of Synod 1975, 78. 31 of the 148 of the delegates to Synod requested that their negative votes be recorded.

⁸Agenda for Synod 1978, 331-332.

⁹Ibid., 375, 377. Since the issue of women in the diaconate is not in the scope of this paper, the actions of the CRC in regard to that issue will not be dealt with except where warranted.

¹⁰Acts of Synod 1978, 104-105. Changes in the CRC Church Order need to be ratified by a following Synod, usually that ended up being the Synod held in the next calendar year.

¹¹Acts of Synod 1979, 119.

¹²Acts of Synod 1979, 119. The Advisory Committee grouped the overtures into the following categories with their numbers:

Clarify the 1978 decision– 4

Reassess the 1978 decision – 1

Defer ratification – 5

Do not implement the decision– 3

Rescind (annul) – 12

For the other communications the Advisory Committee grouped them into the following:

Uphold– 4

Defer – 5

Rescind - 14

¹³Ibid., 122. It is interesting how quickly some churches jumped at this opportunity before the Church Order was ratified (and in this case was not ratified). This same thing happened in the other offices as well as will be seen below.

¹⁴Acts of Synod 1990, 657. emphasis added.

¹⁵Acts of Synod 1991, 726-727.

¹⁶Agenda for Synod 1992, 359.

¹⁷Acts of Synod 1992, 699.

¹⁸Ibid., 700. Like those churches that immediately appointed women deacons, so too churches did with the eldership before the Church Order was officially changed.

¹⁹Acts of Synod 1993, 596-597 emphasis added.

²⁰Ibid., 598-599, 612; see note 10 above.

²¹Vote found in Acts of Synod 1994, 516; quote from page 518.

²²Acts of Synod 1994, 520. Al-

though there is no commentary as to the wording of the recommendations, it is interesting that the word “urge” was used instead of something a little more definitive.

²³Ibid., 520 emphasis original. Again, it must be noted that these churches ordained women contrary to the Church Order and on the assumption it would be ratified in their favor.

²⁴Acts of Synod 1995, 692.

²⁵Ibid., 731 emphasis added.

²⁶<http://www.iclnet.org/pub/resources/text/reformed/archive95/nr95-070.txt>, accessed October 30, 2007.

²⁷Acts of Synod 1995, 733 emphasis original.

²⁸ Synod 1994 defeated an overture that would require a two-thirds vote of classes to allow the following Synod to ratify a change in the Church Order. One of the grounds of the overture stated that the recent voting by Synods on changes in the Church Order have been only by the slimmest of majorities which is why Synods have gone “back and forth” on a particular issue (Agenda for Synod 1994, 240). The United Reformed News Service reported on June 18, 1996 all the numbers regarding the women’s ordination issue in previous CRC Synods up to the 112-66 vote in Synod 1996. <http://www.iclnet.org/pub/resources/text/reformed/archive96/nr96-080.txt>.

²⁹Acts of Synod 1995, 735-736.

³⁰ Agenda of Synod 1996, 31; and Acts of Synod 1996, 355.

³¹<http://www.iclnet.org/pub/resources/text/reformed/archive97/nr97-020.txt>

³²<http://www.iclnet.org/pub/resources/text/reformed/archive99/nr99-023.txt>

³³Acts of Synod 1995, 735. Women could only be delegates to classis if the classis had made the word “male” inoperative, and if that classis hadn’t, then classis would have to extend an invitation to a female delegate.

³⁴Acts of Synod 2005, 759-760. As of Synod 2005, 46% of the classes had declared “male” inoperative.

³⁵Acts of Synod 2006, 722 emphasis added.

³⁶Ibid.

³⁷Ibid., 724.

³⁸See “Letters,” The Banner 141 no. 9 (September 2006): 8-9.

³⁹Acts of Synod 2006, 651.

⁴⁰Ibid., 612.

⁴¹Ibid., 610. See also Roxanne Van Farowe, “Synod Opens the Way for Women,” The Banner 142 no.7 (July 2007): 28. Note 33 gives how women can be delegates to those classes.

⁴²Acts of Synod 2006, 600.

⁴³Acts of Synod 2007, 603.

⁴⁴See “Committee to Review the Classical-Local Options with Respect to Women Serving in the Office of Minister, Elder, and Evangelist,” Agenda for Synod 2005, 307-332.

⁴⁵Acts of Synod 2007, 608.

⁴⁶It has yet to be seen if the Rules of Synodical Procedure will contain provisions that disallow women to be chairpersons of committees or lead in the synodical worship

services. If that is case, then there is another part of the church where women are unequal with men, and will be a source of contention.

⁴⁷John Calvin, *The Institutes of the Christian Religion*, trans. Ford Lewis Battles, ed. John T. McNeill (Louisville: WJK, 1960), III.19.10, emphasis added.

⁴⁸http://www.crcna.org/pages/positions_alcohol.cfm accessed December 1, 2007.

⁴⁹Calvin, *Institutes*, III.19.10.

⁵⁰Ibid.

⁵¹Ibid., III.19.12.

⁵² Ibid., III.19.11.

Mr. H. Vander Pol is a student at Westminster Seminary in Escondido, California.

This is My Outlook

Recently, the left front tire on my car was punctured. For the first time in nearly thirty years, I had to change a flat tire. After I put on the small replacement, which was low on air, I drove a mile to the tire store. The mechanics were very accommodating. As one set about the work, the other chatted with me. Our discussion centered on his tools of the trade. He gave me a quick visual tour of the shop. He pointed briefly to each machine and explained its purpose and cost. When he was done, I posed, "So you think there is about one hundred thousand dollars invested in tools here?" He smiled and responded, "At least that much."

What are a minister's tools of the trade? Aside from a quality computer, paper, and pens, his basic office tools are books. Unfortunately, there is not enough appreciation in the Church for his tools. This article addresss some issues of a minister's library.

Initially, there is the matter of money. Building a library is not an inexpensive endeavor. Yet, keep in mind, compared to a mechanic's tools, the average pastor's library is not going to run over a hundred thousand dollars! Further, his tools are used to nourish imperishable souls with doctrines of grace. Here are some modest monetary recommendations for a consistory. First, if a congregation calls a young man out of seminary, invest up front several thousand dollars in his library. Most likely due to the cost of higher education, he will not have the

means to secure a necessary library for years. Second, a pastor's annual book budget should be generous. Many churches give their pastors three to five hundred dollars a year. I think that is what my pastor received in the 1970's! Quadruple that amount. Twelve hundred dollars a year is not a lot of money when you consider that some volumes cost fifty-five dollars or more. Do not forget that he is also paying for postage! Third, provide him with two fine inexpensive books that evaluate commentaries. These books will help him by making recommendations for purchases: *Old Testament Commentary Survey* by Dr. Tremper Longman, and *New Testament Commentaries* by Dr. D. A. Carlson. Both of these volumes are published by Baker Book House in Grand Rapids.

Elders, invest in your pastor's library. Take encouragement from a nineteenth century church board of the Metropolitan Tabernacle in London, England. This was the congregation Charles H. Spurgeon served. His library was reported to have over twenty-four thousand volumes! What a commitment that church made for the most important aspect of a minister's calling: preaching.

Pastor, let me offer a few helpful ideas for the building of your library. If you are recently ordained, consult immediately with a clergy tax service. You can estimate your existing library and depreciate it over a period of seven years. The clock for depreciation starts with

your ordination date. Second, with the use of the internet, you can be a better informed consumer. No longer do you have to pay what one or two used bookstores quote you for a desired volume or commentary set, you can shop online at scores of used book stores and online auctions. For new books, you can often discover very good prices at online seminary bookstores. Seminary professors also give recommendations on their websites and blogs.

Many books are available on CD-ROM at low cost. AGES, for example, offers a complete library of all the works of Calvin, Owen, Pink, Spurgeon, and Edwards for \$90. There are also many books available for free on-line and on CD.

A final recommendation is for ministers about to retire. When my mentor, Dr. Charles Krahe, retired, he gave me many volumes from his stacks of books. His example of generosity has convinced me to follow suit. What a great gift we can bestow upon young men in the ministry, especially those who serve in smaller congregations with less financial means.

Committing to your pastor's library is an investment that, in God's providence, that will benefit more than one congregation.

Rev. Gerald C. Dodds is the pastor of the Covenant Orthodox Presbyterian Church in Grove City, Pennsylvania.

Alexander Comrie

In the framework of our reflections on the “Nadere Reformatie” and its representatives, our attention will focus on one born in Scotland, although he was greatly regarded by the Dutch as “one of their own.” His name is Alexander Comrie.

Alexander Comrie liked to call himself “Scoto Britanus.” He was born in Perth, Scotland in 1706. He received a godly training in Calvinism and the Westminster Standards from his parents. It is most likely that he was converted under the ministry of Ralph and Ebenezer Erskine, the founders of the Scottish Secession Church.

Due to economic hardship, Comrie, at the age of twenty, left his studies and moved to the Low Countries, finding employment in Amsterdam. While working in this capital city, Comrie became acquainted with a God-fearing man who told him about the spiritual needs in villages in the neighborhood of Leiden. In God’s providence, Comrie arrived in that area and was led to make friends with some influential patrons who enabled him to follow his deeper inclination of studying for the ministry.

In 1729, Comrie was admitted to the University of Franeker as a student of divinity. Four years later, in 1733, he transferred to Leiden to study philosophy. In 1734, he received his Doctorate in Philosophy. Upon graduation, he applied to the classis of Leiden and Neder-Rhynland to be examined with a view of entering the ministry. His

Doctorate in Philosophy was required in the defense of his dissertation, “the basis of the morality and the essence of virtue.” During that year, he also married Johanna de Heyda whose brother was a minister in Rotterdam. The marriage would last only four years when the Lord called Johanna to higher glory. They had one daughter. Comrie never remarried.

In February 1736, Comrie received and accepted a call to the church in the village of Woubrugge. His pastorate was the uneventful life of a small village pastor. He spoke and wrote the Dutch language with great difficulty, but left his imprint upon the hearts of the Calvinistic people whom he encountered. He had the great advantage of writing with the familiarity of the Westminster Divines and a firm conviction that the Puritan theology was the best of the old Calvinistic principles.

Comrie had a great philosophical grasp of dogmatic problems of his day. He traced and denounced the Pelagian and Arminian errors. His influence on the common people came through in his deep piety reflected in both his writings and his life. He was extremely powerful in his praying. Although his visits were few and far between, his method of family visiting was unique. He would visit for hours with the clear intention to do pastoral work for the spiritual well-being of all within the home—parents, children, and servants. He would

leave, only if he had the assurance that changes had been made and that the family had turned to the Heavenly Master.

Comrie made valuable contributions in explaining the doctrines of predestination, covenants, justification, and the value of faith. In regard to faith, he placed great emphasis on the element of assurance, which he held to be the very essence of faith. Comrie was a convincing follower of Voetius. He was familiar with supralapsarianism and put up fierce resistance to the spirit of tolerance which he believed was invading the church.

All thirty-seven years of Comrie’s pastorate were spent in his only charge of Woubrugge. He was involved as pastoral supply in Gouda where he died in 1774.

Mr. Nicolaas Van Dam is a member of the United Reformed Church in Escondido, California.

From the Editor

The theological landscape certainly has changed since Reformed Fellowship began fifty-eight years ago. The most dramatic change is perhaps the way people gather information. Instead of subscribing to *The Outlook*, many read it on our website:

www.reformedfellowship.net

In fact, our website gets several hundred hits every week. It is interesting to note that those visiting our website come from all over the globe. While our subscriptions are lower than in the eighties, I remain convinced that our readership has increased. The influence of Reformed Fellowship is no longer limited to those who are interested in events in a certain denomination or federation; it has become international in the defense of the Reformed faith. In fact, I often receive requests from foreign countries asking permission to reprint and translate articles. It is exciting, for example, to receive an email informing me that one or more of our articles have been translated into French. They often include the article—in French—in the email. I can't read a word of it, but I know that the Lord will use it for His glory and His kingdom.

In addition to *The Outlook*, the Lord has used Reformed Fellowship to produce several books. *With a Shepherd's Heart* by Dr. John Sittema has been a best seller for years. Recently we were able to add another book for office-bearers entitled, *Called to Serve*, edited by

Rev. Michael Brown. Our Bible Studies are being reprinted in a new format as demand for them has increased. The speed with which two books written by Rev. Daniel Hyde are moving illustrate the hunger for the Reformed faith in areas Reformed Fellowship had never before trod.

The faith of our fathers is moving to a new generation in ways we could

not have imagined a decade ago, let alone fifty-eight years ago. And while the theological landscape has changed dramatically in the past fifty-eight years, Reformed Fellowship remains dedicated to the promotion and defense of the Reformed faith. The Board of Reformed Fellowship asks for your prayers and support as we explore different avenues through which to promote the faith that we treasure.

In His service,
Rev. Wybren H. Oord

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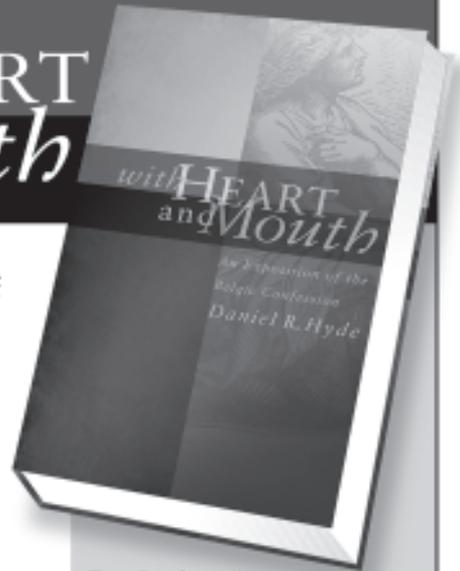
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