

The Outlook

FEBRUARY 2009

Volume 59 | Issue 2

Dedicated to the Exposition and Defense of the Reformed Faith

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of Incense

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Church

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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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The Golden Altar of Incense

Meditation

Rev. Wybren
Oord

“Moreover, you shall make an altar as a place for burning incense; you shall make it of acacia wood.” (Exodus 30:1)

“What do you want Me to do for you?” That was the question Jesus asked twice during His earthly ministry. The first time is found in Mark 10:51. There Jesus addressed a blind beggar outside the gates of Jericho. A noisy crowd had surrounded the Messiah. Yet the cry of the blind man had reached His ears; not only His ears, but His compassionate heart, as well. “Son of David,” the man shouted, “have mercy on me!”

Jesus called for the blind man to come to Him and asked, “What do you want Me to do for you?” The blind man said to Jesus, “Rabboni, I want to regain my sight.” It was a miracle that he asked for, and it was a miracle that he received. The blind man could once again see.

The other place where Jesus is recorded asking this question can be found in Matthew 20:21. A request to Him came from a mother whose two sons were standing beside her. The two sons were fishermen. They had braved many heavy storms, but now they seemed to be hesitating, looking to one another as if to say, “You ask.” The other replies, “No, you ask.”

The Lord sensed that they had something on their hearts. To encourage them He asked, “What do you want Me to do for you?” Emboldened by the question that Jesus asked, their mother stepped forward, “Command that in your kingdom these two sons of mine may sit, one on your right, and one on your left.” A foolish request, perhaps, but nonetheless one that Jesus was

willing to hear and to which He was willing to respond.

That, dear reader, is exactly what our heavenly High Priest does with our prayers: the ones that ask for miracles and the ones that ask for what we might consider to be foolish requests. Through the heart of Jesus, we are led to the heart of the Father. Every sigh, every wish, every prayer passes through the heart of our loving Savior.

In this issue we return to the examination of the furniture in the tabernacle, looking at the third and last item of furniture in the Holy Place. We have seen how the other two pieces of furniture in the Holy Place have pointed us to Jesus Christ and to the relationship that we have with Christ. The table of showbread pointed us to the Bread of Life—Jesus Christ. The golden lampstand pointed us to the Light of the World—Jesus Christ.

In what way does the altar of incense point us to Jesus Christ and the relationship that we have with Him? It was a small piece of furniture, eight inches by eighteen inches and about three feet high. It was made of acacia wood overlaid with gold.

The Biblical Meaning

As we look at the Bible, we find some very interesting ways in which the altar of incense was used. In Revelation 8:3,4 we find the altar used in this way: “Another angel came and stood at the altar, holding a golden censer; and much incense was given to him, so that he might add it to the

prayers of all the saints on the golden altar which was before the throne. And the smoke of the incense, with the prayers of the saints, went up before God out of the angel’s hand.”

In Luke, Zacharias “was chosen by lot to enter the temple of the Lord and burn incense. And the whole multitude of the people were in prayer outside at the hour of the incense offering” (Luke 1:9, 10).

These passages indicate that the golden altar of incense pointed to Christ’s intercessory prayers and to the prayers that believers are able to pray because of our relationship with Jesus Christ.

Christ’s Intercessory Work

In the tabernacle in the wilderness there were two altars: the bronze altar and the golden altar of incense. On the bronze altar a sacrifice was constantly being offered up. God made it very clear, however, that no sacrifice was to be placed on the golden altar. The bronze altar symbolized the atoning death and finished work of Jesus Christ upon the cross of Calvary. The golden altar pointed to Christ’s ongoing intercessory work of prayer.

The first altar pointed to the suffering and death of Jesus Christ—the atoning work accomplished once for all while He was still here on this earth. It was made of brass. If you read the descriptions carefully, you will notice that this altar had no crown, but spoke rather of the suffering and the humiliation through which our Lord passed in order to become our Savior.

The second altar was made of gold. It had a gold molding around it, representing a crown of gold extending outward from each corner in the form of a horn. This pointed to

the glory and the exaltation of Christ. It pointed to His intercessory work, the work He is doing now as our ascended Lord who is far above all principalities and powers.

The location of the gold altar of incense was also significant. It stood directly in front of the great veil that separated the Holy Place from the Holy of Holies where God manifested His presence. The closest the priests could come to God in daily worship was at the altar of incense.

Before the priests could offer incense upon this altar, three requirements had to be met. First, the priests had to minister at the bronze altar, shedding the blood of an animal for their sins. When the morning and evening sacrifices were brought to the Lord in the outer court, the priest took the fire from the bronze altar into the Holy Place and, using that fire, he would light the altar of incense. Second, the priests had to wash all defilement from their hands and feet at the bronze laver. Third, the priests had to be in the Holy Place in order to offer the incense of prayer. Cleansed by the blood at the bronze altar, and with hearts renewed at the bronze laver, the priests were now able to step into the sanctuary to have fellowship with God. The writer of Hebrews summed it up well when he wrote, “Let us draw near with a sincere heart in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water” (Hebrews 10:22).

It is important to notice that the incense of the golden altar was caused to rise up to the heavens by being set aflame by the fire from the bronze altar. Both the bronze altar and the altar of incense point to Christ. The vessels in the courtyard point to what Christ has done for us here on earth. They represent His humiliation.

Those in the Holy Place show us what Christ is doing now for His church in heaven. They represent His exaltation. Christ is in glory at the right hand of God the Father Almighty. He is there, still working for His elect.

Christ’s first work was to purge us of our sins—that’s the bronze altar. Now Christ is engaged in His second work. “He is able to save forever those who draw near to God through Him, since He always lives to make intercession for them” (Hebrews 7:25).

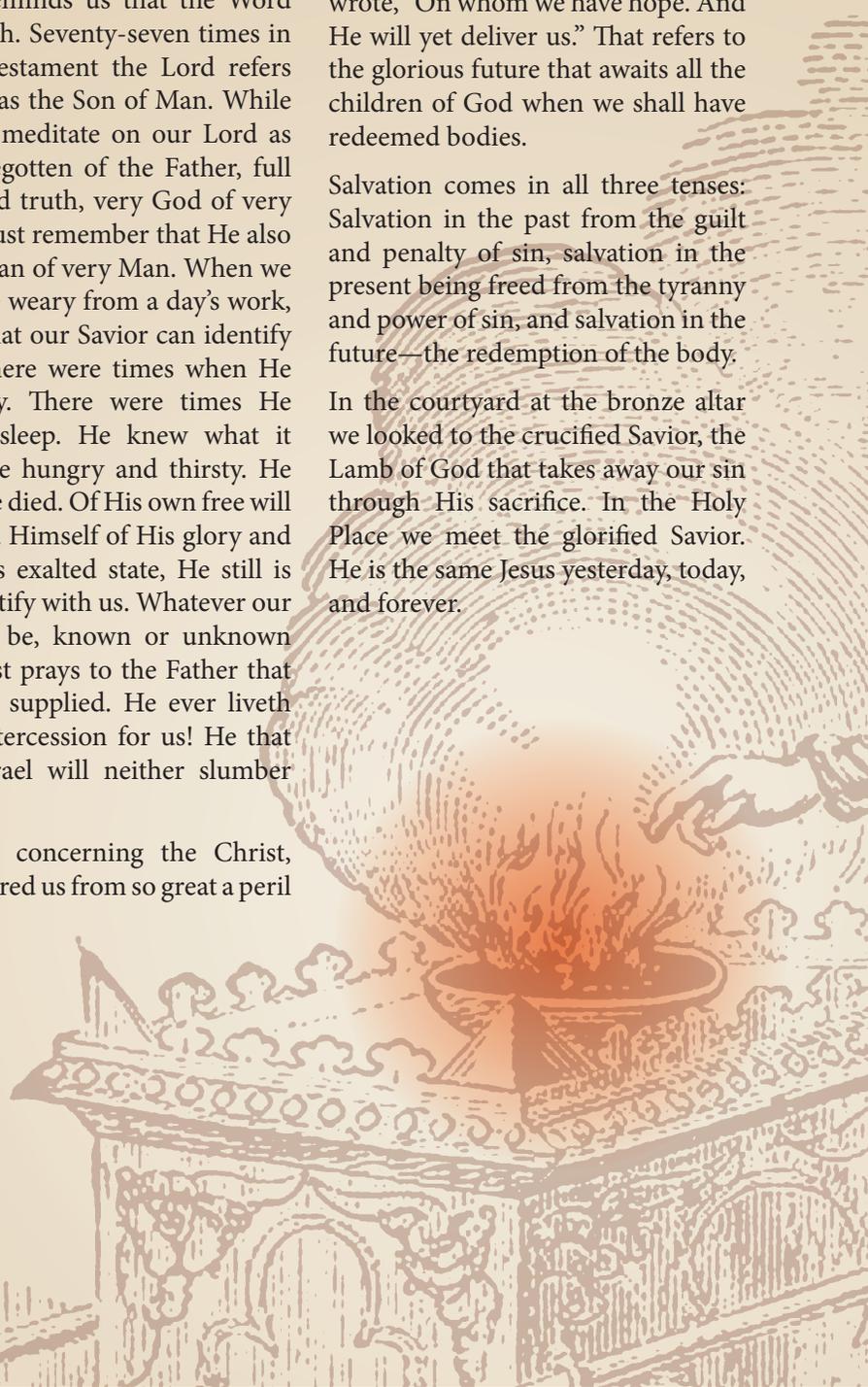
John 1:1 reminds us that the Word became flesh. Seventy-seven times in the New Testament the Lord refers to Himself as the Son of Man. While we love to meditate on our Lord as the only-begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth, very God of very God, we must remember that He also was very Man of very Man. When we come home weary from a day’s work, we know that our Savior can identify with us. There were times when He grew weary. There were times He sought to sleep. He knew what it meant to be hungry and thirsty. He suffered. He died. Of His own free will He emptied Himself of His glory and now, in His exalted state, He still is able to identify with us. Whatever our needs may be, known or unknown to us, Christ prays to the Father that we may be supplied. He ever liveth to make intercession for us! He that keepeth Israel will neither slumber nor sleep.

Paul wrote concerning the Christ, “who delivered us from so great a peril

of death, and will deliver us, He on whom we set our hope. And He will yet deliver us” (2 Corinthians 1:10). Jesus delivered us from the great peril of death—that’s past tense. That work is done, accomplished for us once on the cross. It is the finished, full, complete sacrifice and satisfaction for our sins. “He delivered us . . . and will deliver us” is an on-going present tense. It points to the work of Christ as our High Priest in the Holy Place, praying for us and ever living to make intercession for us. And finally, Paul wrote, “On whom we have hope. And He will yet deliver us.” That refers to the glorious future that awaits all the children of God when we shall have redeemed bodies.

Salvation comes in all three tenses: Salvation in the past from the guilt and penalty of sin, salvation in the present being freed from the tyranny and power of sin, and salvation in the future—the redemption of the body.

In the courtyard at the bronze altar we looked to the crucified Savior, the Lamb of God that takes away our sin through His sacrifice. In the Holy Place we meet the glorified Savior. He is the same Jesus yesterday, today, and forever.



Just as the priests first had to make a sacrifice at the bronze altar before they could come to the altar of incense, so also you can never benefit from Christ's work, symbolized in the golden altar, until you receive what Christ has done for you at the bronze altar. You can never have the confidence that Christ intercedes on your behalf until you have the confidence that His atoning sacrifice was made on your behalf. To get to the golden altar, you must first pass by the bronze altar where the sacrifice of the Lamb was slain and offered up for you. Before you can ever come to the Holy God in prayer, you must be cleansed by the shed blood of His Son.

The Prayers of the Saints

As a royal priesthood, believers have been set apart unto holiness. They are called to come before God at the altar of incense. The fact that Christ lives to make intercession for us constantly does not mean that we do not have to pray. Aaron was to offer incense on the golden altar at regular times each day. When the priests offered the morning and evening sacrifices on the bronze altar, they also had to enter into the holy place to burn incense on the altar there.

God has provided a way for the incense of our prayers to ascend constantly to the throne of grace.

"In the same way the Spirit also helps in our weaknesses; for we do not know how to pray as we should, but the Spirit Himself intercedes for us with groanings too deep for words" (Romans 8:26). The Holy Spirit is constantly interceding for us. He leads us to that secret place of prayer,

and there, just like the priests in the morning and in the evening, the Spirit opens up our hearts to pray to the Father in the name of Christ.

All true prayer must be initiated and inspired by the Holy Spirit. If not, we are praying like the Pharisee in the temple who basically prayed to himself. If you are not glorying in the cross of Jesus Christ, then your prayer is in vain. Then there is no fire, coming from the bronze altar, placed on the golden altar, rising up to the Lord. It is only when we seek the glory of God and the presence of God Himself that our prayers ascend to heaven.

As a royal priesthood we are standing at the altar of incense. Our faithful High Priest is standing beside us. He continues to pray for us as He did for His disciples. It is through His intercession that our prayers are made acceptable to the Father. His incense—His blood—has been mingled with the prayers of the saints.

How much time do you spend at the altar of incense; how much time do you spend in prayer? Our visit there—our prayer life—is the thermometer of our innermost life. James writes: "You have not because you ask not." Ask Him. Seek His face. He who did not spare His own Son but freely gave Him up for us all, how will He not also graciously give us all things? Go to Him. Confess your sins. Cleanse yourself through the Holy Spirit and lift your heart up to God.

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



Three miles from where I live is Mars Hill Bible Church, a mega-emergent church in Grandville, Michigan. The church's pastor is the popular Rev. Rob Bell, author of the books "Velvet Elvis," "Sex God," and most recently "Jesus Wants to Save Christians." My purpose in this article is not to critique what Mars Hill is doing or what Rob Bell is saying—others have already done that very well.¹ But, as the saying goes, "when you point a finger at others, three are pointing back at you."

With church buildings on nearly every corner, the Grand Rapids area can hardly be described as "unchurched." Several NAPARC churches exist in this area, including 10 percent of all the URCNA churches. So why is Mars Hill attracting such crowds while many of our churches are struggling? Depending on your perspective, answers will vary widely. Rob Bell is a gifted speaker with a certain charm and charisma. True. Our entertainment-saturated culture makes their worship style attractive to many. True. People today lack discernment. True. People can worship there without feeling as though they are being judged. True. People can worship there "anonymously" without oversight. True. True. True. And we can give many more reasons why people flock to this church, or others like it.

Here's one other possibility: might it be that some go emergent because our churches are submergent?

A submerged church is a church that exists under the radar. For all its internal activity, it is virtually invisible to the community. Outreach, evangelism, and missions are budget items, but nothing more. A submerged church is lethargic,

apathetic, self-focused, with a "we've arrived" attitude that refuses to evaluate itself or its ministry. It is a church satisfied with the answer, "that's the way we've always done it before." It is a church that takes "negotiable" things (*adiaphora*) and makes them non-negotiable, or refuses to deal with deficiencies in those things that are non-negotiable. It is a church that wears the cloak of "conservatism," but underneath is the corpse of traditionalism.

I would suggest that the real threat to non-emergent, conservative reformed churches is not the "emergent-church-movement" but the "submergent-church's-lack-of-movement."

I see this playing out in the following areas: the church and worship, the church and one another, and the church and the world.

The Church and Worship

To state it positively, our worship must be passionately God-honoring and Christ-centered in which we meet in covenantal, dialogue with our Creator and Redeemer. We, God's people, gather corporately before Him to bring praise, petitions, confession, and offerings while God speaks words of pardon and salvation, calling us to a life of faith and obedience. Negatively, our worship must avoid what God described in Isaiah 29:13 and repeated by Jesus in Matthew 15:8, 9: "These people draw near to Me with their mouth, and honor Me with their lips, but their heart is far from Me. And in vain they worship Me, teaching as doctrines the commandments of men." These things are non-negotiable.

Jesus responded to the Samaritan woman's question about worship with

these words: "But the hour is coming, and now is, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth; for the Father is seeking such to worship Him. God is Spirit, and those who worship Him must worship in spirit and truth" (John 4:23-24).

To worship "in spirit and truth" is, for Jesus, non-negotiable. What does this mean? William Hendriksen rightly explains it this way: "In such a setting, it would seem to us, worshiping in *spirit* and *truth* can only mean a) rendering such homage to God that the entire heart enters into the act, and b) doing this in full harmony with the truth of God as revealed in His Word. Such worship, therefore, will not only be spiritual instead of physical, inward instead of outward, but it will also be directed to the true God as set forth in Scripture and as displayed in the work of redemption."²

This means worship is *not* entertainment. It is not tailored to draw a crowd. Nor is worship primarily evangelism. The purpose of worship is not to recruit unbelievers, but for believers sincerely to offer to God what is due Him, and to be instructed and fed by Him through word and sacrament. This was the practice of the New Testament church. They came together for worship and edification (Acts 2:42; Hebrews 10:24,25), then, in obedience to Jesus' Great Commission, went out to evangelize the world. Worship was the "fuel" for evangelism.

If these things describe a vibrant, healthy worshiping church, then how is your church doing? Sincere worship (in spirit) is a difficult thing to evaluate. I do wonder at times what is happening in a person's heart when we begin worship by singing "Praise to the Lord, the Almighty,"

and it looks as though he is singing about his next dentist appointment. I cannot judge such a thing, but it *appears* as though there's little praise going on. And, of course, with others the opposite might be the case. A person can *appear* to be very engaged when inside he is not. The elders can regulate worship so that it is done in truth, but they cannot make a hypocrite sincere.

Though only God can change hearts, the elders are responsible to ensure that our worship is done in truth. "Our preachers are faithfully preaching the whole counsel of God!" we say. "We have catechism sermons." "The law is read each Lord's Day." As important as these things are in worship, there is more. What about your music? This ought to be a matter of real concern. The URC Church Order states in Article 39: "The 150 Psalms shall have the principal place in the singing of the churches. Hymns which faithfully and fully reflect the teaching of the Scripture as expressed in the Three Forms of Unity may be sung, provided they are approved by the Consistory." What songs are being sung from your second hymnal, or "floppy" book? Do they meet this criteria?

Too often elders are unwilling biblically and confessionally to evaluate the songs being sung, while being equally unwilling biblically and confessionally to evaluate new songs being written. The conviction seems to be: old hymns must be good (some aren't), and anything contemporary must be bad (some aren't). If, in your church, C. Austin Miles' *In the Garden* has greater appeal than Stuart Townsend's *In Christ Alone*, you have problems. The former, written in 1912, makes allusions to the scene of Mary meeting the resurrected Jesus at the empty tomb, though this can be easily missed by the singer.³ Beyond that allusive imagery, the song can hardly be said to "faithfully and fully reflect the teaching of the Scripture as expressed in the Three Forms of Unity." In

comparison, the latter, written in 2001, does much better reflecting biblical and confessional truth.

This refusal to do the hard work of evaluation is either due to laziness, stubbornly clinging to personal taste, or a fear of man that is greater than a fear of God. Whatever the case, it is a mark of a submergent church.

In some circles, one gets the impression that the only God-sanctioned instrument for worship is the organ. Any effort to integrate other instruments to accompany the singing of God's people is, at best, met with suspicion, and, at worst, fiercely opposed. By demanding organ only, we raise taste and tradition to the level of commandment, making what is negotiable non-negotiable.

When we will not discuss these matters, when we are unwilling biblically and confessionally to evaluate the various aspects of worship, the church has submerged into tired, worn-out traditionalism.

The Church and One Another

Scripture speaks clearly, and obviously God takes seriously, how we relate to one another in the body of Christ. Notice the following passages:

Hebrews 10:24–25: "Let us consider how to stimulate one another to love and good deeds, not forsaking our own assembling together."

Romans 12:9–10: "Let love be without hypocrisy. Abhor what is evil. Cling to what is good. Be kindly affectionate to one another with brotherly love, in honor giving preference to one another."

Galatians 6:1–2: "Brethren, if a man is overtaken in any trespass, you who are spiritual restore such a one in a spirit of gentleness, considering yourself lest you also be tempted. Bear one another's burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ."

Galatians 6:10: "Therefore, as we have opportunity, let us do good to all, especially to those who are of the household of faith."

In Matthew 18:15–17, Jesus instructs us how to deal in a godly way with someone who sins against us. Added to this, Peter says, "And above all things have fervent love for one another, for *love will cover a multitude of sins.*" (1 Pet 4:8)

Our relationships with one another must be characterized with love, encouragement, building up, restoring, forgiving, warning, and admonishing. Does this describe you and your church? In some "conservative" reformed churches there appears to be an undercurrent of anger, bitterness, and possibly even hatred—a condition that will negatively affect your fellowship, your worship, and your witness.

This is contrary to the will of God for His church:

Ephesians 4:31: "Let all bitterness, wrath, anger, clamor, and evil speaking be put away from you."

Hebrews 12:15: ". . . looking carefully lest anyone fall short of the grace of God; lest any root of bitterness springing up cause trouble, and by this many become defiled;"

The elders can regulate worship so that it is done in truth, but they cannot make a hypocrite sincere.



Galatians 5:15: “But if you bite and devour one another, beware lest you be consumed by one another!”

Where these things exist in the body of Christ, they must be dealt with. Believers need to love one another enough humbly to admonish one another. Elders need to love Christ enough to deal firmly with those who would ravage His bride. Where such ungodliness remains unchecked, people will inevitably go somewhere else while that church submerges into irrelevance.

Another issue in submergent churches is the congregation’s attitude toward the leadership of the church, toward its pastors and elders. Christ gave the church pastors and elders “for the equipping of the saints for the work of ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ.” (Ephesians 4:12) And Paul instructs elders to “take heed to yourselves and to all the flock, among which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to shepherd the church of God which He purchased with His own blood.”

These verses, and many others, are indictments against the all-too-pervasive distrust of leadership today. The individualistic, anti-authority mindset of the world is alive and well in the church. “Who are *they* to

equip me? I don’t need shepherding.”

These attitudes are often focused on the minister who becomes the target. “Pastors come and go, but the congregation remains.” With that attitude, one has no reason to listen to the pastor. He is seen as the hired hand rather than Christ’s ambassador to the flock (2 Corinthians 5:20). That sinful attitude allows one to ignore Paul’s instruction: “Let the elders who rule well be counted worthy of double honor, especially those who labor in the word and doctrine” (1 Timothy 5:17).

Where these unbiblical attitudes toward office-bearers exist in Christ’s church, the leaders will not be able to lead with any effectiveness, and the church will submerge into irrelevance.

The Church and the World

When Paul wrote to the church in Thessalonica, he began by commending them for their witness: “And you became followers of us and of the Lord, having received the word in much affliction, with joy of the Holy Spirit, so that you became examples to all in Macedonia and Achaia who believe. For from you the word of the Lord has sounded forth, not only in Macedonia and Achaia, but also in every place. Your faith toward God has gone out, so that we do not need to say anything.” (1 Thessalonians 1:6–8)

As the church of Jesus Christ, our calling is to worship and make disciples. We make disciples within our church body through education and instruction (Bible studies, catechism, Sunday school, etc.). But, sadly, this seems to be where the vision of some churches ends. We are, indeed, to be diligent in training our children and be diligent in studying God’s Word and growing in our knowledge and understanding. But our calling is more than this. Our vision must be greater. We are to go to the nations and make disciples: “And Jesus came and spoke to them, saying, ‘All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth. Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age’” (Matthew 28:18–20).

A submergent church lacks such a vision. Its vision is one simply of maintenance. “As long as we have regular worship services and good preaching; as long as Bible Studies are offered (whether or not I attend is beside the point); as long as I’m visited when I’m sick—then the church is healthy.” Such a church is completely focused on itself. It views ministry as nothing more than a “religious cushion.” As C. John Miller writes:

The local church was intended by Jesus to be a gathering of people full of faith—strong in their confidence in Him—not a gathering of religious folk who desperately need reassurance. Perhaps seeking personal comfort is not wrong in itself. But it is desperately wrong when it becomes the primary reason for the existence of the local church. When that happens, the local church is no living fellowship at all, but a retreat center where anxious people draw resources that enable them merely to cope with

the pains of life. The church then becomes a religious cushion.⁴

For the maintenance church, right doctrine is something to be taught, but not lived. It views our reformed doctrine defensively, as something simply to preserve and defend rather than to proclaim and promote. The vision for missions and evangelism goes no further than contributing money in the offering plate (and often without thought or prayer as to its destination).

We need to change that vision. Jesus said we are the salt of the earth and the light of the world (Matthew 5:13–16). If that is who we are, then let's *be* that. Our vision should be offensive, not defensive. We have the truth of the Almighty Creator God. We have the good news of free sovereign grace—a message this world needs desperately to hear. Our vision must be to advance that truth in order to change lives and conquer sinners for Christ. Our churches need to take responsibility for reaching the unreached rather than assuming this responsibility belongs to others.

We can begin to change our vision by raising our children to have hearts for missions and the lost. A couple from our church spent several weeks at an orphanage in Kenya this past summer. When they returned they gave a presentation to our church on a Wednesday evening. I made sure my children were present. Afterward, we picked up a photo and information about one of the boys in the orphanage named Moses. Now, at every supper, my children pray for Moses. They are acquiring a global vision for the spread of God's kingdom.

Our youth programs need to be intentionally service-oriented rather than consumer-oriented. Instead of constantly providing activities and pizza for our children, let's search and find projects for them to help others and serve. There might be an older couple in your neighborhood whose yard is covered with leaves that need

to be raked and bagged. There may be an inner city organization that needs volunteers. Let us train our children to think about and care about things beyond themselves, to love their neighbors, and to gain a global vision.

Our churches should consciously consider sending out missionaries. In the URCNA there is a surplus of ministers and candidates. Jesus said the harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few (Matthew 9:37), yet He has supplied our small federation with an abundance of laborers. Our church polity recognizes that it is the responsibility of the churches to call those who labor in foreign missions. **But there are very few who have actually done it.** Churches need to acquire a global vision and send missionaries.

Our churches should consciously consider church planting. Some "conservative" reformed churches are actually growing numerically. Praise the Lord. Now what? The tendency is to build a bigger building, increase the annual budget, and try to maintain. The result is that the pastor and elders become burdened—too often over-burdened—with the inevitable increased needs that arise within the body so that there is no time or energy to engage the community. As a result, we are frenetically active within the "church walls" while we are invisible to the world. Our churches need to recognize when this is happening and look for biblical ways to remedy this. One such remedy is church planting.

When we are engaged in such meaningful and significant activities, the inevitable human weaknesses within the church body will be more easily overlooked. Instead of fights, anger and bitterness, our focus will be on greater things. Our vision will be concerned with the reputation of Christ and the advancement of His Kingdom.

I suspect that like so many other "movements" in church history, the

emergent church movement will eventually submerge into nothing more than an interesting footnote. My fervent prayer is that our Reformed churches, who have received such a blessed inheritance, will not only be "the pillar and ground of the truth" (I Timothy 3:15), but also "a city that is set on a hill **that cannot be hidden**" (Matthew 5:14).

Now that would be truly emergent.

Endnotes

1. For critiques on Bell's "Velvet Elvis," I recommend "Postmodern Liberalism; Repainting a Non-Christian Faith" by Rev. Casey Freswick (Reformed Fellowship, 2005); and Rev. Dale Van Dyke's online article entitled, *Jumping off the Mark: A Review of Rob Bell's "Velvet Elvis"* <http://harvestopc.org/index.php?page=articles>.
2. Hendriksen, William. *New Testament Commentary: Exposition of the Gospel According to John*, Volume I. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1953) p. 167.
3. Miles' account of the writing of this hymn can be found in *101 Hymn Stories* by Kenneth W. Osbeck (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1982). p. 124.
4. Miller, C. John. *Outgrowing the Ingrown Church*. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1986) p. 20.

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Rome: A Synagogue of Satan?

Dr. D.G. Hart
&
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Since we have spent the last few installments clearing away some contemporary misconceptions about Roman Catholicism, readers may be wondering what is so objectionable about Rome after all. It would be simple enough to string together a set of *ad hominem* arguments against the Roman Catholic Church. Popular Protestant hostility to Rome may come from sources like the recent Luther film, which portrays the sixteenth-century papacy engaging in some particularly corrupt practices. For example, the church instituted the sale of indulgences in order to pay for the construction of St. Peter's Basilica.



But, some may respond, that was then; what about now? Hasn't the papacy been reformed? Do these abuses of the past render it a false church and justify the division of Christ's church? Are the concerns of the Reformation that led to scores of Protestant denominations still valid today? Here the recent clergy sex scandals might come to mind as further evidence of Roman Catholicism's inherent corruption. The problem with citing Rome's abuse of church office is that this sets the bar at a height that

Protestant churches would also have a hard time clearing. If Rome's jurisdiction is no longer valid because of moral scandals or clerical abuse, would not Protestant churches need to be perfect to be worthy of the status of true church? In point of fact, the Protestant world has too many of its own examples of immorality and clerical misconduct. For objections to Rome to stick, then, the case needs to rest on substantial matters. Here we see that the original protests against Rome involved not simply some corrupt bishops or prelates. Rather the focus was on the ministry of the church.

Ten Theses of Berne

The *Ten Theses of Berne* offer us good place to start in understanding the difference between humanists like Erasmus, who simply wanted to clean up church corruption, and the Reformers, who believed that church abuses stemmed from underlying problems in theology and worship. Under the leadership of Berthold Haller and Franz Kolb, the city of Berne joined Zurich in starting the Reformation in Switzerland. In 1528 the pastors in Berne convened a disputation that produced one of the earliest confessional statements of Protestantism, summarized in a short set of ten propositions. The theses cut to the heart of the Reformation.

The statement begins by affirming the authority of Scripture: "The holy, Christian Church, whose only Head is Christ, is born of the Word of God, abides in the same, and does not listen to the words of a stranger." Thus the church may only require Christians to believe what the Bible reveals; it cannot appeal to tradition on matters of conscience.

The theologians from Berne went on to affirm, on the basis of Scripture, that there was no salvation apart from the work of Christ: His merits are the only that will satisfy. He is the only, and therefore, the true mediator. We do not need the mediatorial work of Mary or any other saint. Moreover, to worship Christ alone is to do so free without the aid of images.

Finally, the Berne theses condemn the Roman Catholic theology of the Mass, and they reject the doctrine of transubstantiation. For the first Protestants, to call the Mass a sacrifice was the same as saying that Christ's once-for-all sacrifice on the cross was insufficient.

In less than three hundred words, this confession identifies precisely what was wrong (and still is) with Roman Catholicism, namely, its rejection of the sufficiency of Scripture and the sufficiency of Christ. As prophet, Christ has revealed the grace of God through his inscripturated Word. As priest, he has made the final sacrifice. As king, he is the head of his church, and his Word bears authority over tradition and the papacy. These initial and very basic interests of the Reformers had profound consequences as Protestants defended and propagated the gospel.

John Calvin and the Necessity of Reform

No one had a greater role in developing these principles than John Calvin (1509–1564). As the international Reformed community celebrates the 500th anniversary of his birth, it is fitting to give some attention to Calvin's work and his objections to Rome. Calvin is credited with reshaping western culture in many ways. He was the "constructive

revolutionary,” according to one biographer, the architect of a Christian “world-view,” and founder of western principles of education, economic, and politics, according to others. Among his enemies, he is vilified as the cruel theocrat of Geneva. What all of these characterizations overlook is that Calvin was first and foremost a Reformer of the church. Calvin’s passion was the unity and purity of the church. Calvin is best known for his majestic *Institutes* and his monumental *Commentaries*. These works bleed with his ecclesiology. He also composed the ecclesiastical ordinances a catechism for the Genevan church.

Often overlooked in his vast literary output was his defense of the Reformation, *The Necessity of Reforming the Church*. This 1544 book is a lens in which all of Calvin’s corpus can be comprehended. His successor, Theodore Beza, described this book as among the most vigorous and weighty of anything produced in this era. What is noteworthy in this treatise is how it echoes the *Ten Theses of Berne*. Calvin addresses four subjects in this book: worship, salvation (both of which were for him the soul of the church), the sacraments, and church government (which for Calvin constituted the body of the church). The Reformation cause, especially in Geneva, focused on these four issues. All “the evils and remedies” of Calvin’s day, the sum and substance of the Reformation’s cause, came down to worship, salvation, sacraments, and church government.

Worship was Calvin’s first concern. The church worships God properly only when worship is regulated by the Word of God. Contrary to the modern claim that the only criterion for true worship is the zeal of the worshiper, Calvin wrote: “God not only regards as fruitless, but also plainly abominates, whatever we undertake from zeal to his worship, if [it is] at variance with His command.” He goes on to ask, “What do we gain by a contrary

course? The words of God are clear and distinct, ‘obedience is better than sacrifice.’” Worship in the Roman Catholic Church had declined to the point where it was “gross idolatry.” For Calvin, idolatry was as serious as works—righteousness in justification, because both replaced divine revelation with human wisdom.

From here Calvin addressed the chief doctrine in the Christian message of salvation: justification by faith alone. Calvin wrote, “there is no point which is more keenly contested, none in which our adversaries are more inveterate in their opposition, than that of justification, namely, as to whether we obtain it by faith or works.” The Roman Catholic teaching was a deadly wound upon the church. Calvin proclaimed the biblical teaching in the clearest possible language: man “is regarded as righteous before God, simply on the footing of gratuitous mercy, because God, without any respect to works, freely adopts him in Christ, by imputing the righteousness of Christ to him, as if it were his own.”

Calvin was quick to challenge the Roman Catholic charge that this teaching would encourage sinful licentiousness or antinomianism in the church. It had, in fact, the opposite effect. “By convincing man of his poverty and powerlessness,” he wrote, “we train him more effectually

to true humility, leading him to renounce all self-confidence, and throw himself entirely upon God; and that, in like manner, we train him more effectually to gratitude, by leading him to ascribe, as in truth he ought, every good thing which he possesses to the kindness of God.”

Because believers need to have their faith strengthened to trust in God’s forgiveness, Calvin moved easily from justification to the Lord’s Supper. The Catholic principle of transubstantiation and the worship of the consecrated elements of bread and wine—for Calvin these practices were unbiblical, and they destroy the meaning of the sacrament and the comfort and blessing it is designed to convey. “While the sacrament ought to have been a means of raising pious minds to heaven, the sacred symbols of the Supper were abused [by Rome] to an entirely different purpose and men, contented with gazing upon them and worshipping them, never once thought of Christ.”

Calvin despaired at the condition of the church and the function of the Christian ministry, the last subject in *The Necessity of Reforming the Church*. Were he to review ecclesiastical indiscretions in detail, he lamented, “I should never [be finished].” He especially focused on the nature of church office, especially that of the pastor. This in turn required the



The church worships God properly only when worship is regulated by the Word of God.

restoration of the importance of preaching. “None of the churches [in Geneva],” he noted, were “without the ordinary preaching of the Word.”

Together, these four topics, representing the body and soul of the church, embraced “the whole substance of the Christian religion.” As he addressed them, Calvin labored to be faithful to Scripture and thus prove innocent of the charge of schism.

Rome’s Response: The Council of Trent

The Roman Catholic Church responded to the Protestant Reformation by convening the Council of Trent, from 1546 to 1563. Spanning the tenure of two popes, the council sought to institute reform in the church, but it also responded to Protestant arguments by reaffirming Rome’s teaching.

Trent defended the authority of church tradition. God revealed himself both in written books and in unwritten traditions that came to the apostles from the mouth of Christ himself or to the church through the Holy Spirit in “continuous succession” of apostolic authority. The church must receive and venerate these two forms of revelation “with an equal affection of piety and reverence.”

On this basis, the Council took up Reformation claims, from Berne to Calvin, and it pronounced the Protestant cause as “anathema” (accursed). Here are some examples:

- On justification: “If any one saith, that the good works of one that is justified are in such manner the gifts of God, as that they are not also the good merits of him that is justified; or, that the said justified, by the good works which he performs through the grace of God and the merit of Jesus Christ, whose living member he is, does not truly merit increase of grace, eternal life, and the attainment of that

eternal life—if so be, however, that he depart in grace—and also an increase of glory; let him be anathema.”

- On transubstantiation: “If any one denieth, that, in the sacrament of the most holy Eucharist, are contained truly, really, and substantially, the body and blood together with the soul and divinity of our Lord Jesus Christ, and consequently the whole Christ; but saith that He is only therein as in a sign, or in figure, or virtue; let him be anathema.”

- On the Mass: “If any one saith, that the sacrifice of the Mass is only a sacrifice of praise and of thanksgiving; or, that it is a bare commemoration of the sacrifice consummated on the cross, but not a propitiatory sacrifice; or, that it profits him only who receives; and that it ought not to be offered for the living and the dead for sins, pains, satisfactions, and other necessities; let him be anathema.”

Has Rome Changed?

By the terms of the Council of Trent, Protestants still stand condemned. And because Rome claims infallibility for the church’s teaching, the anathemas pronounced by Trent would appear to be forever true. What does Rome now say about Protestants?

The Roman Catholic Church is far more willing to dialogue with Protestants today than it was five hundred years ago. The second Vatican council (1962-1965) ushered in a kinder, gentler Rome. And more recently, Pope John Paul II particularly tried to reach out to Protestants. His 1995 encyclical, *Ut unum sint* (“That They May All be One”) builds on Vatican II’s potential bonds of unity with “separated brethren.” But there are limits to the ecumenicity of John Paul and his successor, Benedict XVI. For them a true church is one that is in fellowship with the Bishop of Rome.

More significantly, Roman Catholic Church has never lifted the anathemas of Council of Trent. The Vatican may tend to refer to Protestants as “separated brethren” rather than “heretics.” But Protestantism remains condemned, and Protestant churches are false churches, from Rome’s point of view.

So is the Roman Catholic Church a “synagogue of Satan” (to cite the language of the Westminster Confession of Faith)? Were the Reformers justified in separating from Rome? That question must be rephrased, because the problem with Rome lies in its separatism. It has abandoned the Word of God. It has “listened to the words of a stranger” and obscured the glory of the saving work of Christ.

Does that mean that no member of the Roman Catholic Church can be a Christian? Again, that might be asking the wrong question. A better question to ask is this: should Christians be Roman Catholics? Clearly, the answer to that question is no. Genuine Christians within the Roman Catholic communion must possess a greater trust in the merits of Christ than they receive from the official teachings of their church. If this conclusion is anti-Catholic, then at least the basis for such antipathy to Rome concerns not who deserves more credit for the achievement of western civilization or which branch of Christianity is more compatible with American political traditions. Instead, the foundation of anti-Catholicism must always and only be the weighty matter of man’s chief end.

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IN DEALING WITH such a subject as “Calvin’s Conception of the Church” one may well be on his guard against diverse temptations.

He who would be known as a Calvinist is in peril of unduly exalting the person of John Calvin and of ascribing to his teaching a quality approaching infallibility. Perhaps that danger is especially great in this year of our Lord, 1959, when Calvinists the world over are commemorating the birth of the Genevan Reformer in 1509 and the publication of the final edition of his famous *Institutes of the Christian Religion* in 1559. Hard though Calvin strove to base his teaching on the infallible Word of God, he, of course, was fallible in his interpretation of the Word.

On the other hand, both the Calvinist and the non-Calvinist are in danger of evaluating Calvin’s teaching by twentieth-century standards. Determined though Calvin was to abide by the timeless Word of God, he, like every other man, was unavoidably a child of his own times. Now, the fact that he was a product of the sixteenth century, and not of the twentieth, was not necessarily to Calvin’s disadvantage. In some respects it may well have been to his advantage. Yet, to ignore that fact is unfair to Calvin and gives evidence of a most faulty sense of history.

Calvin’s doctrine of the church lies scattered throughout all his writings, but it was summarized and set forth in orderly fashion in the twenty chapters of Book IV of the *Institutes*. In an article such as this it is obviously impossible to reproduce that doctrine in full. I have singled out four aspects which Calvin himself deemed important and to which we do well to give serious thought today.

I. The Church, Although Of Divine Appointment, Is Not Divine

That Calvin’s view of the church clashed head-on with the Romish view is a matter of common knowledge. According to Rome the church is nothing short of divine. That claim Calvin rejected unqualifiedly.

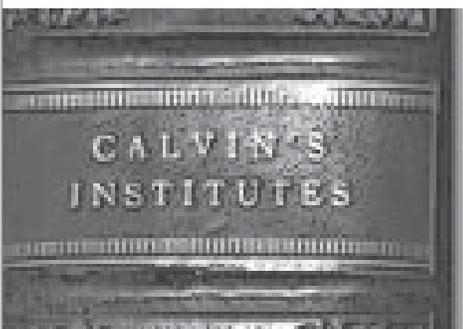
Roman Catholicism’s avowal of divinity appears in numerous ways—one may almost say, in countless ways. A few will be named.

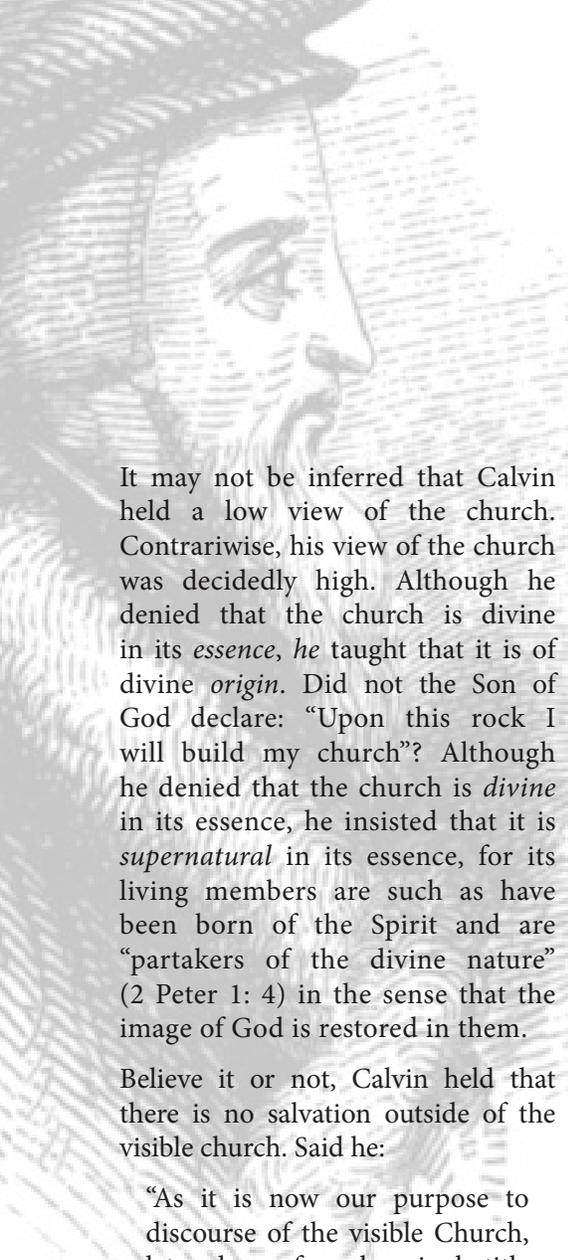
By ascribing infallibility, whether to ecclesiastical councils or—since 1870—to the pope in his *ex cathedra* pronouncements in matters of faith and morals, Rome arrogates to itself a divine attribute. Rome regards the pope as vicar of Christ and the church as the succession of the incarnate Son of God. Rome brazenly adds its traditions to the Bible and counts them an integral part of the Word of God. In absolutism, Rome enters upon the role of Him who alone can forgive sin, and when it boasts of imparting saving grace to men in the administration of the sacraments, it equates itself in that respect with the Holy Spirit.

All those claims Calvin rejected emphatically and contented himself with stressing, as does the Apostles’ Creed, that the church is “the communion of saints”; that is to say, the communion of God’s elect, of sinners saved by grace through faith. In other words, the church consists of human beings who even in glory will continue human. Thus Calvin resolutely rejected the basic Romish error of obliterating the distinction between God and man.

Highly significant is Calvin’s discussion of the fact that in the Apostles’ Creed the believer professes faith *in* God the Father, *in* God the Son, and *in* God the Holy Spirit, but not *in* the church. The Christian simply says: “I believe a holy, catholic church.” Said Calvin:

The particle *in* is often interpolated, but without any probable ground . . . We may perceive from early writers, that the expression received without controversy in ancient times was to believe ‘the Church,’ and not ‘in the Church.’ This is not only the expression used by Augustine, and that ancient writer, whoever he may have been, whose treatise, *De Symboli Expositione*, is extant under the name of Cyprian, but they distinctly remark that the addition of the preposition would make the expression improper, and they give good grounds for so thinking. We declare that we believe in God, both because our mind reclines upon him as true, and our confidence is fully satisfied in him. This cannot be said of the Church (*Institutes*, IV, I, 2).





II. The True Church Is One, not Many

It may not be inferred that Calvin held a low view of the church. Contrariwise, his view of the church was decidedly high. Although he denied that the church is divine in its *essence*, he taught that it is of divine *origin*. Did not the Son of God declare: "Upon this rock I will build my church"? Although he denied that the church is *divine* in its essence, he insisted that it is *supernatural* in its essence, for its living members are such as have been born of the Spirit and are "partakers of the divine nature" (2 Peter 1: 4) in the sense that the image of God is restored in them.

Believe it or not, Calvin held that there is no salvation outside of the visible church. Said he:

"As it is now our purpose to discourse of the visible Church, let us learn, from her single title of Mother, how useful, nay, how necessary the knowledge of her is, since there is no other means of entering into life unless she conceive us in the womb and give us birth, unless she nourish us at her breasts, and, in short, keep us under her charge and government, until, divested of mortal flesh, we become like the angels . . . Beyond the pale of the Church no forgiveness of sins, no salvation can be hoped for . . . The paternal favor of God and the special evidence of spiritual life are confined to his peculiar people, and hence the abandonment of the Church is always fatal" (*Institutes*, IV, I, 4).

There are those who regard Calvin's teaching that there is no salvation without the visible church as a remnant of Roman Catholicism. They find the same fault with Article XXVIII of the Belgic Confession, which likewise affirms of the visible church that "outside of it there is no salvation." Such critics much prefer the wording of the Westminster Confession of Faith, Chapter XXV, Section II, that out of it "there is no ordinary possibility of salvation."

However, beyond all reasonable doubt, Calvin and Guido de Brès the author of the Belgic Confession, meant precisely what the Westminster divines stated. Both Calvin and de Brès were, of course, fully aware that the one and only requirement for salvation is, as Paul told the Philippian jailer, faith in Christ. To ascribe to either of them the opinion that he who today receives Christ in faith and tomorrow dies without having been received formally into membership of the visible church is eternally lost, amounts to the sheerest pettifogging. What they meant to do was to state a rule without regard to rare exceptions.

Calvin's seemingly absolutistic position on this score was not due to failure on his part to purge all Romish leaven from his view of the church. There is another and much more reasonable explanation. It is found in his conception of the church as strictly *one*.

Today we are confronted by a multiplicity of denominations. Many of us, perhaps all of us, are confused by that phenomenon. We think there are a great many Christian churches. We recognize as a church almost any group that would be known by that name. A new denomination is founded, let us assume, for a wholly insufficient reason. At first we call it a sect, but it persists in calling itself a church, and

soon we fall in line. A denomination, let us say, departs even farther from the truth than does Rome. It denies, or permits its ministers and teachers to deny, such cardinal Christian truths as the infallibility of Holy Scripture, the virgin birth and bodily resurrection of Christ, his deity, and the substitutionary atonement, as well as salvation by grace through faith alone, and, instead of courageously, although mournfully, pronouncing that church false, we accuse of lovelessness those who draw that obviously unassailable conclusion. We opine that, all churches being more or less faulty, it does not make a great deal of difference to which of them one belongs. And we find rich comfort in the thought that it really does not matter much whether or not one belongs to any church at all, so long as one is a member of the invisible church of Christ, his mystical body. Thus we have acquired a low view of the visible church. We disparage it.

Calvin faced a radically different ecclesiastical situation. He was not confused by a multiplicity of denominations, for it was non-existent. And he was determined to base his view of the church squarely on Scripture, which teaches most emphatically that the invisible church is one and hardly less emphatically that the visible church ideally should be one. The New Testament knows nothing of denominations. In the apostolic church there were, to be sure, differences among believers in different localities and with different backgrounds, but denominations were out of the question. The visible church was one. And Calvin knew full well that the visible church and the invisible church are not two, but one. Visibility and invisibility are but two aspects of the one Christian church. The visible church is the manifestation of the invisible. Small wonder that he taught the necessity of membership in one as well as the other.

In short, the confusion was not Calvin's; it is ours.

His doctrine—rather, the Scriptural doctrine—of the unity of the church of Christ necessitated three conclusions, each of which Calvin embraced willingly.

1. The church of Rome and the church of Protestantism could not both be churches. Because of its ungodly teachings and practices Calvin denominated Rome a *false* church. It is noteworthy how forcefully, and yet carefully, he expressed himself on that matter. Said Calvin: “While we are unwilling simply to concede the name of Church to the Papists, we do not deny that there are churches among them.” Referring to the Roman pontiff, he went on:

We do not at all deny that churches remain under his tyranny; churches, however, which by sacrilegious impiety he has profaned, by cruel domination has oppressed, by evil and deadly doctrines like poisoned potions has corrupted and almost slain; churches where Christ lies half-buried, the gospel is suppressed, piety is put to flight, and the worship of God almost abolished; where, in short, all things are in such disorder as to present the appearance of Babylon rather than the holy city of God. In one word, I call them churches, inasmuch as the Lord there wondrously preserves some remains of his people, though miserably torn and scattered, and inasmuch as some symbols [baptism, for example] of the Church still remain . . . But as, on the other hand, those marks to which we ought especially to have respect in this discussion are effaced, I say that the whole body, as well as every single assembly, want the form of a legitimate Church (*Institutes*, IV, II, 12).

2. Some Anabaptists of Calvin's day upheld the principle of the “pure church.” Finding serious fault with the Protestant church for what they deemed laxity in the exercise of discipline, they seceded from it and formed communions of their own. It seems not to have occurred to Calvin to recognize those communions as churches. Instead, he designated their members as “schismatics” who had “renounced the communion of the Church.” He vigorously condemned secession for imperfections in the one true church. “Revolt from the Church,” said he, “is denial of God and Christ” and,

No crime can be imagined more atrocious than that of sacrilegiously and perfidiously violating the sacred marriage which the only begotten Son of God has condescended to contract with us (*Institutes*, IV, I, 10).

In a word, Calvin distinguished sharply between the church and a sect, as did the Belgic Confession when it warned: “All sects that are in the world assume to themselves the name of the Church” (Article XXIX).

3. Because of his strong conviction that the church of Christ is *one*, Calvin labored assiduously toward the assembling of all true believers in one communion. In a letter to Cranmer, Archbishop of Canterbury, he recommended the calling of “an assembly of the most eminent men of learning from all the various churches which have embraced the pure doctrine of the Gospel” in order that they might after careful study of the Word of God draw up “a true and distinct confession” to which all might subscribe. And he went so far as to suggest that those who would not accept that confession should be pronounced schismatics. (See “John Calvin and Ecumenicity” by John Bratt in *The Reformed Journal*, March, 1959.) That letter makes it perfectly clear that the unity for

which Calvin strove was, like that for which Jesus prayed in John 17, unity in the truth. The division of Protestants into Lutheran and Reformed churches grieved Calvin deeply. He was willing to employ the Lutheran Augsburg Confession as a basis of union. Again, his aim unmistakably was the highest possible degree of doctrinal unity.

III. The One Church Is True, Though Imperfect

In his *Institutes of the Christian Religion* Calvin taught that the true church has two marks or notes. These are his words:

Wherever we see the word of God sincerely preached and heard, wherever we see the sacraments administered according to the institution of Christ, there we cannot have any doubt that the Church of God has some existence (IV, 1,9).

Certain as he was that those marks had disappeared from the Romish church of his day, he denounced that organization as a false church. He did not mince words when he wrote:

As soon as falsehood has forced its way into the citadel of religion, as soon as the sum of necessary doctrine is inverted, and the use of the sacraments is destroyed, the death of the Church undoubtedly ensues, just as the life of man is destroyed when his throat is pierced, or his vitals mortally wounded . . . If the Church is founded on the doctrine of the apostles and prophets, by which believers are enjoined to place their salvation in Christ alone, then if that doctrine is destroyed, how can the Church continue to stand? . . . In place of the Lord's Supper, the foulest sacrilege has entered, the worship of God is deformed by a varied mass of intolerable superstitions; doctrine (without which Christianity exists not) is

wholly buried and exploded, the public assemblies are schools of idolatry and impiety.

He drew the conclusion: “Since this is the state of matters under the Papacy, we can understand how much of the Church there survives.” And he encouraged the faithful by assuring them:

In declining fatal participation in such wickedness, we run no risk of being severed from the Church of Christ (*Institutes*, IV, II, 1, 2).

Calvin’s followers have usually spoken of three, instead of two, marks of the true church. To the sound preaching of the Word and the proper administration of the sacraments they have added the faithful exercise of discipline. Guido de Brès did that already in 1561. Says the Belgic Confession:

The marks by which the true Church is known are these: If the pure doctrine of the gospel is preached therein; if it maintains the pure administration of the sacraments as instituted by Christ; if church discipline is exercised in punishing of sin (Article XXIX).

The question arises why Calvin omitted the exercise of discipline from his enumeration of the marks of the true church. The answer has already been suggested. He had to contend with the “pure church” notion of the Anabaptists and was determined to give that notion no quarter whatever. In opposition to the extremism of the Anabaptists he found it necessary to insist that the true church is inevitably marred by faults and that no one has the right to secede from the church because it is not perfect.

Pleading for “indulgence in tolerating imperfection of conduct,” Calvin argued:

There always have been persons who, imbued with a

false persuasion of absolute holiness, . . . spurn the society of all in whom they see that something human still remains. Such of old were the Cathari and the Donatists, who were similarly infatuated. Such in the present day are some of the Anabaptists, who would be thought to have made superior progress. Others, again, sin in this respect, not so much from that insane pride as from inconsiderate zeal. Seeing that among those to whom the gospel is preached, the fruit produced is not in accordance with the doctrine, they forthwith conclude that there no church exists.

Granting that, sad to say, “the offense is often well founded,” and unqualifiedly condemning all sin, he proceeded:

Still those of whom we have spoken sin in their turn, by not knowing how to set bounds to their offence. For where the Lord requires mercy they omit it and give themselves up to immoderate severity. Thinking there is no church where there is not complete purity and integrity of conduct, they withdraw from a genuine church (*Institutes*, IV, I, 13).

Calvin made the obviously correct admission that a measure of doctrinal difference is allowable within the true church. “All the heads of doctrine,” said he,

are not in the same position. Some are so necessary to be known, that all must hold them to be fixed and undoubted as the proper essentials of religion: for instance, that God is one, that Christ is God, and the Son of God, that our salvation depends on the mercy of God, and the like. Others, again, which are the subject of controversy among the churches, do not destroy the unity of the faith; for why should

it be regarded as a ground of dissension between churches, if one, without any spirit of contention or perverseness in dogmatizing, hold that the soul on quitting the body flies to heaven, and another, without venturing to speak positively on the abode, holds it for certain that it lives with the Lord? . . . The best thing, indeed, is to be perfectly agreed, but seeing there is no man who is not involved in some mist of ignorance, we must either have no church at all, or pardon delusion in those things of which one may be ignorant, without violating the substance of religion and forfeiting salvation (*Institutes*, IV, I, 12).

In his opposition to the “pure church” principle Calvin appealed to Christ’s parable of the tares in Matthew 13. In so doing he was quite right. To infer, as is often done, from the sentence “The field is the world” (verse 28) that this parable has no reference to the church but teaches the inevitable co-existence of the righteous and the wicked in the *world* until the day of judgment, is truly simplistic. The parable refers unmistakably to the imperfect visible church. The field is indeed the world. Into that field the good seed is sown, and thus the church comes into being. But Satan sows tares among the wheat and thus introduces the children of the wicked one into the church. That is the presentation of this parable. (See G. Vos, *The Teaching of Jesus concerning the Kingdom of God and the Church*, pp. 165-168.)

Lest Calvin be misunderstood, he was fully aware that the parable of the tares, while forbidding extremes in church discipline, by no means rules out such discipline. He regarded it as not merely desirable, but necessary. He said:

If no society, nay, no house with even a moderate family, can be kept in a right state without

discipline, much more necessary is it in the Church...As the saving doctrine of Christ is the life of the Church, so discipline is, as it were, its sinews; for to it, it is owing that the members of the body adhere together, each in its own place. Wherefore, all who either wish that discipline were abolished, or who impede the restoration of it . . . certainly aim at the complete devastation of the Church (*Institutes*, IV, XII, 1).

Again he asserted: "It is a great disgrace if dogs and swine are admitted among the children of God; much more, if the sacred body of Christ is prostituted to them. And, indeed, when churches are well regulated, they will not bear the wicked in their bosom, nor will they admit the worthy and unworthy indiscriminately to that sacred feast" (*Institutes*, IV, I, 15).

As for doctrinal error, even of minor departures from the truth, Calvin asserted:

I have no wish to patronize even the minutest errors, as if I thought it right to foster them by flattery and connivance (*Institutes*, IV, I, 12).

And as for such cardinal truths as the deity of Christ and salvation by grace, Calvin not only taught that their deniers should be excluded from the church, but insisted that their denial by a church rendered that church false.

If the Church is 'the pillar and ground of the truth' (1Tim. 3:15), it is certain that there is no church where lying and falsehood have usurped the ascendancy (*Institutes*, IV, II, 1).

And

Since the Church is the kingdom of Christ, and he reigns by his word, can there be any doubt as to the falsehood of those statements by which the kingdom of Christ is represented without his sceptre,

in other words, without his sacred word? (*Institutes*, IV, II, 4).

We conclude that the inclusion of discipline in the marks of the true church does no violence whatever to Calvin's conception of the church but, rather, is in complete harmony with it.

IV. The Church Is Free, in Bondage to No Man

That Christ is the sole Head of the church is one of the most emphatic teachings of John Calvin. He stressed that truth more strongly than did Martin Luther. Calvin affirmed:

Her only Head is Christ, under whose government we are all united to each other, according to that order and form of policy which he himself has prescribed (*Institutes*, IV, VI, 9).

It follows that the church is subject to the law of Christ alone and that no council or pope may add to that law.

"Let this then be a sure axiom," said Calvin, "that there is no word of God to which place should be given in the Church save that which is contained, first, in the Law and the Prophets; and, secondly, in the writings of the Apostles" (*Institutes*, IV, VIII, 8).

Speaking of the consciences of believers, he declared:

They must acknowledge Christ their deliverer, as their only king, and be ruled by the only law of liberty, namely the sacred word of the Gospel, if they would retain the grace which they have once received in Christ: they must be subject to no bondage, be bound by no chains (*Institutes*, IV, X, 1).

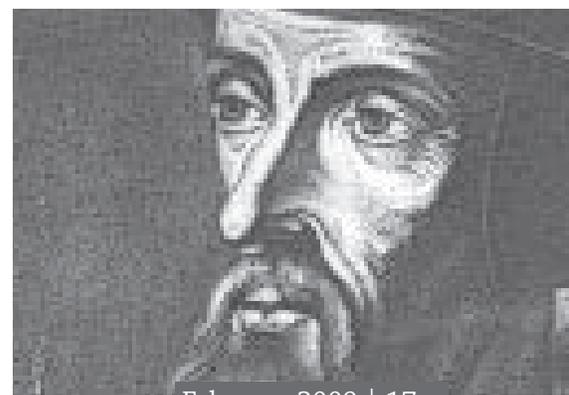
According to Calvin, God alone is Lord of the conscience, the church is not; and the church has no legislative power, it has but to proclaim the law of Christ.

Today Calvinists generally deduce from the sole headship of Christ over

the church that doctrine which is loosely designated as "the separation of church and state." Specifically they take the position that, although the state must protect the church in its exercise of religious liberty and may properly judge concerning its property rights, the state has no authority over the spiritual affairs of the church. Calvin did not thus limit the authority of the state. On the contrary, he ascribed to the magistrate the task, among others, "to cherish and support the external worship of God, to preserve the pure doctrine of religion, to defend the constitution of the church" (*Institutes*, IV, XX, 2).

For that view Calvin has been criticized severely. Most severely has he been taken to task for its application in the execution of the heretic Servetus by order of the Genevan council. While it must, beyond all doubt, be granted that Calvin was in serious error at this point, Henry E. Dosker was right in warning that "in judging this lamentable occurrence we must beware of an anachronism" (*Outline Studies in Church History*, p. 214).

In the Reformation period practically all Protestants took the position now under discussion. Rome insisted on a totalitarian church. It arrogated to the church authority over the state in civil affairs. Small wonder that, when rejecting that position, Protestantism swung over to the position of Erastianism, that the state has a measure of authority over the spiritual affairs of the church. Evidently the law of action and reaction was asserting itself. And so it was not strange that Servetus was executed



with the advice and consent of all the Reformers, irenic Melancthon included. Even a century later the Westminster Assembly affirmed that the civil magistrate “hath authority, and it is his duty, to take order, that unity and peace be preserved in the church, that the truth of God be kept pure and entire that all blasphemies and heresies be suppressed, all corruptions and abuses in worship and discipline prevented or reformed, and all the ordinances of God duly settled, administered, and observed” (Westminster Confession of Faith, XXIII, III).

In short, in the Reformation period the church’s understanding of the Word of God had not yet progressed to the point of its subscription to what we today are wont to denominate “the separation of church and state.” Incidentally it may be remarked that it is highly unlikely that even now the last word has been spoken on that thorny problem.

The Anabaptists of the sixteenth century have been credited with denying the authority of the state over the spiritual affairs of the church. As a matter of fact, they did make that denial, and they were right in so doing. It has been suggested that Calvin should have been willing to learn from them. While that suggestion need not be dismissed categorically, it must be observed that Calvin found the background of the Anabaptist denial highly reprehensible. There were among the Anabaptists extremists who virtually rejected all human government. Of them Calvin said:

Some, on hearing that liberty is promised in the gospel, a liberty which acknowledges no king and no magistrate among men, but looks to Christ alone, think that they can receive no benefit from their liberty so long as they see any power placed over them (*Institutes*, IV, XX, 1).

Over against that libertarian view Calvin felt duty bound to uphold the Scriptural teaching, explicit in Romans 13, that the state is divinely ordained and that therefore believers, as well as others, must be subject to it. At bottom Calvin found the Anabaptist view of civil government so obnoxious that his refusal to profit by any deduction from it is not surprising.

Not only are Calvin’s severe critics on the score under consideration guilty of an anachronism; they also are wont to withhold credit due to him.

Calvin taught emphatically that on occasion the Christian must adopt the apostle Peter’s resolve to obey God rather than men.

In that obedience which we hold to be due the commands of rulers, we must always make the exception, nay, must be particularly careful, that it is not incompatible with obedience to him to whose will the wishes of all kings should be subject, to whose decrees their commands must yield, to whose majesty their sceptres must bow...The Lord, therefore, is king of kings. When he opens his sacred mouth, he alone is to be heard, instead of all and above all (*Institutes*, IV, XX, 32).

That courageous teaching, no doubt, helps to account for the observation made by liberal John C. Bennett in his recent book, *Christians and the State*, published by Charles Scribner’s Sons:

Calvinism became the inspirer of political revolution in many countries — in Scotland, France, Holland, England and, more indirectly, in America (p. 71).

Supremely significant is what Herman Bavinck has pointed out in his *Gereformeerde Dogmatiek* (IV, 446) concerning Calvin’s conception of ecclesiastical discipline. In Lutheran churches discipline came to be exercised by the “consistories” in which both church and state were

represented. In practice this led to the same result as the teaching of Zwingli, Erastus, the Remonstrants, the Rationalists, and many recent theologians, according to which the state has become Christian and consequently the church must, or at least may, surrender to it the power of discipline. For Calvin, on the other hand, church discipline was a matter of life or death. In Geneva he fought for twenty years for the right of the church to banish evil from its midst. It was not until 1555 that he gained the victory. Here one cannot but recall Calvin’s heroic defiance of the council of Geneva in his barring of libertines from the Holy Supper.

Because of prevalent Erastianism the churches of the Reformation were, generally speaking, “established” or “territorial” churches. That is to say, they were under state control. One of the outstanding characteristics of nineteenth-century church history was the rise of “free” churches. It was no accident that this trend asserted itself more strongly in Calvinistic countries than in Lutheran lands, for the separation of church and state was implicit in Calvin’s emphasis on the sole kingship of Christ over his church. Although Calvin himself did not become fully aware of that implication, he laid down a principle which in course of time was bound to assert itself — and did.

In his conception of the church Calvin was indeed a child of his times. That could hardly have been otherwise. Thanks to his exceptionally keen and deep insight into the Word of God, he was also ahead of his times.

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Bible Studies on the Book of Judges

Lesson 11: Judges 10 The Importance of Minor Judges

Mr. James
Oord

In Judges 9, Abimelech plummeted Israel into the depths of depravity and civil war. From here on in the book of Judges, Israel will be plagued by more depravity and tribal disunity than ever before. In chapter one, the author of this book made a big deal about the unity of the twelve tribes. Throughout the book, this unity becomes ever more tenuous, until the climactic and horribly depressing finale in the last chapters. Chapter ten tells us the story of Israel after Abimelech; verses 1–5 telling us about two minor judges, verses 6–16 reminding us how far Israel has fallen, and verses 17–18 setting up the story for the next deliverer, Jephthah.

Tola and Jair are often called “minor judges,” along with Ibzan, Elon, and Abdon in chapter 12, and Shamgar back in chapter 3. They are called minor judges because the author spent so little time describing their exploits or their administrations. They are each given only one or two verses with the bare minimum of information. It is as if the author just wants you to know that they existed and then moves on to the more interesting or important stuff.

We might be filled with curiosity over these mysterious men (especially, for instance, Shamgar, who killed a gaggle of Philistines with only an oxgoad). But, the author deemed it necessary for us to know only a few things about them, and we must be content, for that is all that God in His infinite wisdom wanted us to know. He wanted us to know that He cares for His people sometimes with notoriously interesting people, like Samson, Gideon, and Deborah, and sometimes with unknowns like Tola and Jair. We do not need to know everything about

them; what we can learn from them is that God cared and provided for His people, as He does today. However, do not let the name “minor judges” mislead you. These men were still important. This classification is similar to the term “minor prophets” as opposed to “major prophets.” It only refers to the length of time the Bible spends on them, not the importance of their ministry.

What can we say about these men? Not too much. All we know about Tola from verses 1–2 is his family lineage (he was the son of Puah, the son of Dodo), his tribe (Issachar), where he lived (Shamir, which is in the hill country of Ephraim), how long he judged (twenty-three years), and where he died and was buried (in Shamir). But in this passage, we have an implied hint of the LORD’s goodness. Tola’s work came “after Abimelech,” the destroyer of Israel. Perhaps Tola’s administration, either by good policies or military victory, provided a stable time for Israel to recuperate from Abimelech’s pervasive destruction. The LORD did not allow His people to be forever stuck in the cycle of chaos and disintegration started by Abimelech.

The description of Tola, especially since it comes right after the horrors of the reign of Abimelech, leads us to hope for a return to the “good old days” of Joshua, Othniel, and Deborah, where the judges were more trustworthy, courageous, and pious. The Hebrew word translated “save” in verse 1 is the same word specifically used earlier in the book to describe the work of Othniel, Shamgar, and Deborah.

However, the next judge, Jair, seems to return to the pattern of self-centered judges that we have (sadly) gotten

used to. Where Tola showed us the goodness of God, Jair showed us the pride of man. The text tells us that Jair had thirty sons. Now that in and of itself is not a problem. Psalm 127 tells us that many sons are a gift from God. However, Jair’s many sons (and who knows how many daughters he had in addition to them) implies that he had more than one wife. The last time someone (Gideon) in Judges had more than one wife, the Abimelech fiasco took place. And, recall that polygamy was frowned on in the Mosaic law, especially for kings and those in authority (Deuteronomy 17:17).

Jair had very political aspirations. He had much wealth. Verse 4 tells us that each of his sons had a donkey. If Jair lived in modern times, it would read “Jair had thirty sons, and each son drove a BMW.” Most people in the time of the judges walked; donkeys were expensive. He also had thirty cities. Dr. K. Lawson Younger says that it seems that Jair and his sons were more concerned with building a power for themselves than with saving Israel. Dr. Dale Ralph Davis sums up Jair’s judgeship this way: “We need not begrudge Jair his success, his influence, his evidently peaceful administration. Yet surely we understand him. In all our ways there is this subtle urge to secure our position, to display our status, to extend our influence, to guarantee our recognition. Christ’s servants seldom care to be servants as they are called to be.”

When we seek to serve God and His kingdom, we often fall into the same temptation as Jair. We want recognition, we want power, we want security. We are not happy with serving; we want people to recognize

how good we are at serving. We want a title; we want our name listed on the back of the bulletin, or a little plaque on the church office door, or a special listing in the church directory. How different this is from Christ, who downplayed His miracles and warned those He healed not to tell anyone. How different this is from Christ's teaching to "not let your right hand know what your left is doing."

Judges 10:6–16 serves as the typical introduction to a major judge. The people did evil in the sight of the LORD and He sent them trouble. But this is a much more detailed introduction than usual. The previous accounts usually just stated that they committed apostasy by worshipping this or that god. Here, Israel *really* commits apostasy. Instead of serving the Baals or the Asheroth as they did before, the people of Israel decided to worship buffet style, sampling a smorgasbord of the gods of everyone around them. Verse 6 has a whole list of idols, every possible god that Israel could find. They forsook the LORD, worshipping everything but Him. The

Israelites were out of control when it came to idol worship. And so are we. Often, we try anything but the LORD. We save Him to be our last resort. We would rather rely on ourselves, our money, our charisma, our good looks, good grades, or good friends. We look to things like sex, drugs, worldly entertainment, and alcohol to give us pleasure. It is not so much that every person has his own particular idol, but that every person has a whole host of idols. John Calvin was right when he said that the human heart is an idol factory, churning out god after god to take the place of the one true God.

The LORD answered this intense apostasy with intense punishment. He sold them into the hands of the Philistines and the Ammonites, a double oppression. The narrator uses vivid language, saying that these two nations "crushed and oppressed" the Israelites (other translations say "shattered" or "afflicted" and *the Message* says "bullied and battered"). For eighteen years they oppressed all the Israelites who lived beyond

the Jordan (the tribal lands of Gad, Reuben, and half of Manasseh), as well as crossing the Jordan to assault Judah, Benjamin, and Ephraim. Notice the irony here—Israel insisted on worshipping these other gods, and the nations who worshipped those gods came and oppressed them. So, Israel cried out to the LORD in their distress.

Instead of deliverance, the LORD came to them in verse 11 and told them to live consistently. If Israel insisted on worshipping other gods, then they should have cried out to them to deliver them when they got into binds like this. If they insisted on crying out to God every time they got into trouble, then they should worship Him in times of prosperity and peace. They should have served Him in the good times as well as in the bad. But the other gods were just too tempting. The worship of the LORD was just so boring and restrictive for the Israelites. All those rules and sacrifices really restricted the average Israelite from having a little fun. Baal and those other gods—they knew how to give their worshippers a good time. Their temples were filled with prostitutes; they let you do what you wanted to do and live as you wanted to live. There was none



God is not a vending machine where you can insert repentance and automatically out comes a perfect solution to every problem.

of that “do not commit adultery,” “do not covet” stuff with Baal and the other gods. So, when times were easy, Israel wanted to worship the fun gods. But in worshipping those gods, they missed out on the true blessings that come from the true God. God promised them true blessings, true peace. Not just temporal, earthly pleasures, but lasting spiritual blessings. After all, the Promised Land itself was only a picture of the true Promised Land in heaven.

But we, like the Israelites, find this way too easy to forget. Sure, we know that it is much better to look forward to heaven, where moth and rust do not destroy or thieves do not break in and steal, but it is so hard to live that way. We like the things of this world, the little pleasures. We are not content with what we have (I Timothy 6:6–10) and so often we go after other gods. When times are easy, we would much rather be found worshipping at the shrine of plenty, the temple of fame, or the synagogue of sex. It is only when the going gets rough that we remember to pray, read our Bibles,

and act like Christians. Like the Israelites, we only live out our faith when we need help.

The Israelites seemed to respond to their affliction with true repentance, but it was too little too late. They were only sorry that they had gotten caught, not really repentant over their behavior. They know how to talk the talk; they can confess their sins like pros, but they were not really sorry for their sins. The LORD had become impatient with their behavior. God is not naïve nor is He soft. God is not Santa Claus, mercifully winking at sin. God is not a vending machine where you can insert repentance and automatically out comes a perfect solution to every problem. Israel assumed that every time things got bad, they could go to the LORD and He would instantly save them. This does not mean that God is not merciful. He is abundant in mercy, but also in justice. This is not true

repentance. Dr. Davis puts it this way: “there is a difference between a prodigal son who comes to his senses and returns home and a prostitute who pleads for her husband’s security only until she finds someone else to take her on.” Given their track record, the people of Israel are a lot more similar to the prostitute than the prodigal son. We may be able to hide our motives from other humans, but God always sees the heart. He sees the wickedness and improper motives that exist in our hearts. We may be capable of going through the motions and worshipping God in insincere and superficial repentance, but God will not be manipulated.

So God let them go in their sin. He said “I will save you no more” in verse 13. Too often, we think that this response from God is just an Old Testament phenomenon. However, remember the story of Simon the magician in Acts 8. He thought that he could use the LORD for his own purposes (namely, to make a few bucks with the Holy Spirit). And what was God’s reaction? He did not send the Holy Spirit to Simon. If we insist on making God “safe” and emphasize His forgiveness to the point of forgetting His justice and hatred of



sin, we run the risk of becoming like Israel or Simon, even though we are “New Testament Christians.” God is still the same God. To make Him something He is not is to worship someone other than the LORD.

Verses 15 and 16 are very interesting. Israel cried out to God, saying “We have sinned! Do to us whatever seems good to you, only please deliver us this time.” Verse 15 tells us that “they put away put away the foreign gods from among them and served the LORD, and He became impatient over the misery of Israel.” It is tempting to read this as a cause and effect. Israel finally came to their senses, repented, and then God relented. Their repentance changed the LORD’s mind and He decided to have compassion on them. However, Davis proposes two good reasons why this might not be the best interpretation of these verses. First, Israel’s previous repentances probably had also involved putting away the other gods for a time. The LORD’s complaint in verse 11–14 was not that Israel had failed to put away other gods, but that each time that He had saved them in the past, Israel had abandoned Him for the other gods, over and over again. So, the LORD’s compassion would not have been a result of their putting away of their gods. Secondly, the verse does not tie God’s compassion to Israel’s repentance but to her misery or suffering.

So what is the meaning of these two verses? “The LORD became impatient over the misery of Israel.” He could bear Israel’s suffering no longer; He became impatient with the misery of Israel. Israel’s hope did not rest in the sincerity of their repentance. Rather, the basis of Israel’s hope (and of ours) was in the mercy and love of the LORD. Even though they were sinful, He could not stand to see His people being bullied, bruised, and crushed. Of course, true repentance is important. I am not saying that you do not need to confess your sins and repent for them. But our hope must be

in divine grace rather than in our own human repentance, no matter how sorrowful and true it is. God’s holiness demanded that He judge His people; yet at the same time, His heart moved Him to spare His people. Ultimately this conflict between grace and justice was solved on the cross. God poured out His full wrath against sin on Christ on the cross, effectively removing the penalty of our sin by placing it on Christ. In this magnificent event, God showed the full extent of His wrath against sin and the full measure of His love for His people.

So often, we think that God was severe and just in the Old Testament, and full of mercy and grace in the New. But here, in Judges 10 (which is in the Old Testament), we see a beautiful act of grace; God gave salvation to His people when they least deserved it.

In verse 17, the Ammonites came to trouble Israel again. So, the leaders of Gilead decided to go find themselves

a savior, rather than crying out to the LORD. They made a deal, offering a kingship to whoever came and saved them from the Ammonites. You would think that they would have learned their lesson with Gideon and Abimelech—man-appointed kings just do not work. They decided, however, to take matters into their own hands and find their own deliverer. Dr. K. Lawson Younger calls them “irreligious opportunists.” They did not care about the true worship of the LORD. In fact, they usurp God’s role by seeking to raise up a deliverer for themselves.

Of course, God was sovereign over all of this. As mentioned above, He was gracious; He would send a judge to deliver them out of their misery. But the judge He sent them in chapter 11 is exactly the type of judge they deserved. A judge who was like them in every way, sin included.

Lesson 11: Points to Ponder

1. We so often focus on big names and famous people. Have there been any “minor” characters that God has used in your life to help you grow spiritually?
2. The Bible says that the love of money is the root of all kinds of evil. Is it wrong to be successful? Do church leaders necessarily have to be paupers?
3. How can we become guilty of a smorgasbord of worship of false gods and worship styles?
4. Do we often assume God will forgive us? What does true repentance require of us? Is our hope for salvation in our repentance?
5. Discuss the justice of God and the grace of God. How did these come together at the cross of Calvary?
6. Why did the Israelites seem so reluctant to call upon the Lord, seeking deliverance through a king instead? How are we guilty of seeking deliverance in means other than the true God, such as through the government, personal wealth, etc.?
7. Why is it that mankind seeks deliverance by anyone or anything except God? What will be the result?

Bible Studies on the Book of Judges

Lesson 12: Judges 11–12 An Unfortunate Oath

Mr. James
Oord

Judges 11 introduces us to Jephthah. When people find out that I am a college student majoring in theology with a special interest in Old Testament theology, one of the first questions I am asked involves Jephthah. “Did Jephthah *really* kill his daughter?” is a question I have had to deal with over and over again. I hope this lesson will provide sufficient information on that question and that it will also provide a look into the life of Jephthah, a judge deemed faithful enough to be included in Hebrews 11:32, in a list with David, Samuel, Gideon, and the prophets. Too often the controversy surrounding his daughter eclipses everything else he ever did.

Judges 11:1–3 gives us a brief biography of Jephthah. He was from Gilead, the town being troubled by the Ammonites in Judges 10:17–18. Confusingly, Gilead was also the name of his father. Jephthah is introduced as a “mighty warrior” in verse 1. This is the same phrase that the Angel of the LORD used to describe Gideon back in chapter 6. So, it appears that Jephthah is the perfect candidate for Gilead’s salvation. He was a mighty warrior and a native Gileadite. What kept the elders of Gilead from just asking Jephthah? The second part of verse 1 adds a problem to Jephthah’s background. Sure, his father was Gilead, but his mother was a prostitute. When Gilead’s legitimate sons were old enough to start worrying about the coming inheritance, they drove Jephthah out of the town. So, Jephthah went off into the land of Tob and gathered a band of “worthless fellows” around him. The NIV calls these men “adventurers,” but that plants pictures of a Robin-Hood-and-his-merry-men type group. The Hebrew here paints a negative picture

(the last time this word was used was to describe Abimelech’s followers who helped him slaughter his seventy brothers). These were unsavory men, a “band of freebooting guerillas led by a social outcast” as Dr. Dale Ralph Davis labeled them.

Verse 4 takes us from Jephthah’s past back to where chapter 10 left off. The Ammonites were attacking Israel. The elders of Gilead, seeking a deliverer, came to Jephthah. They were desperate; they were ready to turn to whoever would get the job done. So, they told him, “We know that we threw you out, but now we want you to come and rescue us.” Jephthah knew that the elders of Gilead were trying to use him (just as the LORD knew Israel was trying to use Him). Their first offer (in verse 6) was only to make him “leader,” a different word denoting lesser rank than they used in 10:18. Jephthah said to them, “You expelled me and rejected me. Given these facts, how on earth can you now come to me when you need help?” Because of his objection, they increase the stakes and offer him the original title from 10:18, translated “head” in most translations. This is a higher office, a better bargain. This is an act of reconciliation; the elders of Gilead are desperately trying to get Jephthah, the “mighty warrior,” to fight for them, so they are trying to smooth over the past. They are willing to stop at nothing to get a deliverer of their own choosing, and they got a leader just like themselves. Jephthah, as evidenced by his behavior here and later, was a man who was willing to use people to pursue his private agenda. Like the elders, he was an opportunist. He so desperately wanted to be restored and accepted, to be the leader, that he did anything he could to achieve his goals.

But Jephthah was also God’s chosen savior for His people. Perhaps the dialogue between Jephthah and the leaders sounded familiar. Gilead’s entreaty was exactly what Israel had told the LORD in chapter 10; Jephthah’s answer was directly parallel to the LORD’s. The difference came in the responses of the LORD and Jephthah. The LORD refused to be used by the Israelites’ false repentance (basically, bribery). Jephthah opportunistically seized the day (and the offer of kingship) and agreed to be their man (but only after making them swear before the LORD that they would keep their promise). The parallels between Jephthah and the LORD are very interesting, and they also further highlight the fact that Jephthah is going to be God’s chosen tool of salvation. John 15:20 tells us that “a slave is not above his lord; if they persecuted me [Jesus], they will persecute you as well.” Jephthah, God’s servant, got no better treatment than the LORD Himself did. And what a strange servant of God he turned out to be.

After Jephthah dealt with the elders and secured his position as leader, he dealt with the king of the Ammonites. He sent messengers to the Ammonites, asking why they had come into Israel’s land to bother them. The king sent back messengers, saying, “It was ours first, so we are just taking it back!” Israel had taken the land away from Ammon when they first came from Egypt, back under the command of Joshua. But Jephthah did not back down. He replied by sending the king of Ammon a history lesson. Jephthah briefly recounted the events of Numbers 20–24 and Deuteronomy 3 in his letter to prove that the land was Israel’s because God had given

Jephthah was a mercenary and he assumed that the LORD was, too.

it to them. Jephthah replied, “The God of Israel dispossessed all of these people—He was more powerful than the gods of Moab, the Amorites, and any other Canaanite gods you can think of. So who are you to dare to come against Him? Are you better than they were?” This is amazing! Jephthah seems to be surprisingly well-versed in the Scriptures and in his knowledge of what God has done! Jephthah rose to the occasion and defended the LORD. He even went so far as to make a dig at Chemosh, the god of the Ammonites, in verse 24. This certainly raises our hopes that maybe Jephthah will be a good judge after all. The essence of Jephthah’s letter is in verse 27. He called on the LORD as his trump card, saying “Let the LORD be the judge between us.” Keep in mind that the LORD had not yet committed to do anything for Israel. In fact, the last time we heard from Him, He was out of patience with Israel. The Ammonite king ignored Jephthah’s message.

Jephthah’s letter encourages us to look to God and what He has done in history. Jephthah used the historic faithfulness of God to argue his point with the Ammonite king. We, too, can and should trust God on the basis of His past history (there are other reasons to trust Him too, of course). We can look back at God’s sovereign hand over events in our own lives and see that He is a caring and gracious God who has led us through many trials and tribulations. If He has been faithful in the past, He will be faithful again. You may have lived through some difficult times, but see how He has led you through and used those troubles to refine you and for your ultimate good. Look to His faithfulness in history, how He was with His servants in the Bible. God’s Word leaves no room to question the faithfulness of God. He will forever remain faithful to His covenant.

Jephthah’s story is still looking good when we reach verse 29. The Spirit of

the LORD came upon him, and he headed out towards the Ammonites to make battle. The next logical step is verse 32, when Jephthah attacked the Ammonites. But there are these two verses (30 and 31) that just appear here. We would not miss them story-wise if they were not there; they are a detour. But in these two verses, Jephthah ruins everything. He knew what God had done in Israel’s past; He knew God’s Word, but He did not know God. He viewed God as powerful, yes, but he thought God could be bought.

Jephthah was a mercenary, and he assumed that the LORD was, too. He thought that he knew how to guarantee God’s help, so he made his foolish vow. What a foolish vow it was! “If you will give the Ammonites into my hand, then *whoever* comes out from the doors of my house to meet me when I return in peace shall be the LORD’s and I will offer *him* up for a burnt offering.” Almost all the English translations say “whatever comes out” and “I will offer it up,” dumbing down what the Bible actually says (the NASB’s addition of an “or,” “it shall be the LORD’s *or* I will offer it up as a burnt offering” is an addition to the text meant to avoid the ethical dilemma). The Hebrew says “whoever” and “him.” Although the case can be made that this could refer to an animal, the phrase “coming out of the doors to meet me” seems to imply a purposeful, human action. And this is what we would logically expect, is it not? Cows and goats do not come out to meet us. Sheep do not run out and rush to welcome us home. Jephthah was clearly thinking of a human sacrifice here. These are the depths to which Israelite religion had plummeted. Jephthah thought

that a human sacrifice would not only be appropriate, but pleasing to the LORD.

With our modern sensibilities, we are reluctant to think that of Jephthah. He could not have been planning on sacrificing a human, could he? Maybe he thought that a cow or something would come out and that is what he meant. We just do not want to think that of Jephthah. We do not want to tag Jephthah as a deliberate murderer. And anyway, the narrator does not tell us that his vow was explicitly wrong. But that is not a valid point. Old Testament narrators do not explicitly condemn every evil action. Did our narrator in Judges condemn Gideon and his ephod? Did he condemn Jair and his many wives? These things should be obviously wrong, so it should not surprise us that the narrator does not go out of his way to condemn it. He assumed that we would know it was wrong to make vows to sacrifice human beings.

In the days of the judges, the heathens regularly sacrificed their children and other humans to their gods in times of great distress. It was a common practice. This became a real temptation to the Israelites. They were sure that they would get results if they sacrificed some humans. There are laws in Leviticus against human sacrifice. Why are laws made? Laws are made because people are tempted to do evil things or are already doing it. There would not have been a law against human sacrifice if it was not a real temptation in the ancient Near East. The first verses of chapter 10 say that Israel was going out and worshipping the gods of other nations. In that context, it is not surprising that Jephthah would make such a vow. Chemosh, that god whom Jephthah lambasted earlier, was well known for human sacrifices. Now Jephthah is treating the LORD like Chemosh. Jephthah proved that he cares for no one but himself. In his letter, he said he was resting his case on the divine

Judge, but now he is acting as if he can slip the judge a little something under the table.

An objection to this theory of Jephthah's vow being explicitly about human sacrifice is found in verse 29. Many people point to the phrase "the Spirit of the LORD was upon Jephthah" and point out that no one under the working of the Holy Spirit would ever make such a vow. That is true. But nowhere is it clear that the Holy Spirit was upon Jephthah when he made that vow. The Spirit of the LORD was on him leading him to battle with the Ammonites. This would link it to verse 32, where it says "The LORD gave the Ammonites into his hand."

The battle turned out well. Jephthah got what he wanted. He returned home, and who came out to greet him but his daughter, his only child. Not a servant, as Jephthah would have expected, but his daughter. Now Jephthah, ruler of Gilead, would be barren and alone. As soon as he saw her, he tore his clothes and yelled at her. "Alas, my daughter! You have

Jephthah, who earlier seemed to know so much about God, seems to know nothing about the law of God.

brought me very low, and you have become the cause of great trouble to me." What did Jephthah see as most important? It seems he was not most concerned about his daughter's life, but about his own reputation and self. He mourned for himself, not his own daughter!

Do not feel sorry for Jephthah! Jephthah, who earlier seemed to know so much about God, seems to know nothing about the law of God. Not only does the law say to not sacrifice your children, but it also provides a way out. Leviticus 27 gives rules for this very situation—if you vow inappropriately (as Jephthah did, vowing contrary to the law of God), there were certain ways you could rectify the situation without having to keep your vow. So, Jephthah had three options. First, he could just not keep his vow. He could have broken his promise to the LORD and kept

his daughter alive. Jephthah was honest enough not to do this. Second, he could have followed the rules of Leviticus 27 and redeemed his daughter. Jephthah did not know the law of God well enough to do this. So, the third option was all he had left to do. He had to kill his daughter, as he had vowed.

His daughter understood what was going to happen to her, so she asked permission to go off with some friends and mourn "for her virginity" for two months. This is understandable. A young girl was told that she is going to have to be killed "before her time," so she went off with some friends for a tearful and emotional farewell. Some have taken this passage as an

excuse to let Jephthah off the hook as a child-murderer. They say that since she was mourning "for her virginity," that could mean that Jephthah was just telling her to "get thee to a nunnery," as Shakespeare would say. In other words, Jephthah dedicated his daughter to the LORD to live as a celibate for the rest of her life. Davis points out that dedicating someone to the LORD did not mean that they had to be celibate. To say that that was the intent of Jephthah's vow is to read too much into the text.

Matthew Henry also raises some interesting questions with this interpretation as well. He asks, if she was confined to a single life, why would she need two months to mourn and say goodbye to her friends if she had the rest of her life to mourn for it and to spend with her friends? And why would the Israelite women go off and mourn her four days every year if she was just an old maid who could not marry?

So we are left with the sad fact that Jephthah murdered his daughter. We are so repulsed by this action. How could he? The same way that everyone else in his culture did. This was not an isolated incident. Israel had fallen into horrible depravity. Jephthah idolized success and ended up sacrificing his child. Some of us do that, too (only in miniature, though, not really killing them, I hope). We idolize our jobs and never spend time with our children, letting them grow up in a home where money is more important than they are. Instead of being a mother or a father, we become "mini-Jephthahs."

We are so horrified by the fact that Jephthah sacrificed his own daughter. We do not want to believe it of him. But David, "the man after God's



own heart,” committed adultery and murdered the husband. Gideon, “Jerubbaal, the scourge of Baal,” built an idol and led Israel astray. Peter, one of the most loved disciples, denied Christ three times. And yet men like these appear in Hebrews 11 as men of faith. We must get over the Sunday school mentality, that Bible characters are meant to be perfect role models. They were just as depraved as we are. They all needed Christ just as much as we do.

Jesus, like Jephthah, was born out of wedlock and was hated by His own countrymen. He was in truth the Son of God, the ultimate Deliverer, of whom Jephthah was only a poor type. Jesus never said a rash word or made a foolish promise, rather He fulfilled every promise of God that was ever made—He is God with us, the very incarnation of God in all of His covenant love and faithfulness. And Jesus Himself was the ultimate sacrifice, laying down His life for us on the cross. And His sacrifice was in full accordance with the Law of God, fulfilling everything on our behalf.

The sad story of Jephthah is not yet over. In Judges 12, he has to deal with the men of Ephraim. The men of Ephraim did the same thing to Jephthah as they did to Gideon in Judges 8. Gideon and Jephthah had called them for aid. They refused to come. Then, after the victory had been won, they came and complained that they were not included. Now the men of Ephraim have a threat. They wanted to burn Jephthah’s house with him in it. Notice the irony here. Jephthah had already burnt his household, his only daughter, as a burnt offering. Notice the difference in how Gideon and Jephthah reacted to the men of Ephraim. Gideon resolved the crisis with smooth speech. Jephthah dealt with the same situation by letting civil war break out. He initiated civil war.

Jephthah was still the same. He was obsessed with keeping his authority

and power, obsessed enough to lead the nation of Israel into civil war. He treated the men of Ephraim just as he treated the men of Ammon. He gave them a little speech, touting the name of the LORD. But by this point in the story, we realize that this was all talk, not really true. The description of the bloody civil war is very similar to the brief description of Jephthah’s battle with the Ammonites in 11:32–33. They both involve capturing and holding a river.

After slaughtering 42,000 men of Ephraim, his own fellow Israelites, Jephthah went on to judge Israel for six years. And then he died. There was no rest after he died. Jephthah had come to an end. Then come three more minor judges. It is interesting to note that Ibzan, the judge who came right after Jephthah, had thirty sons and thirty daughters, and Jair,

the judge who came right before Jephthah, had thirty sons, as if to highlight the fact that Jephthah had only one child, and that child, he killed. All three of these minor judges died. And none of them led to any rest. Over and over we hear “and he died.” This raises the question of who will judge next? Israel is in such disarray. Something needs to happen. The next judge, with a miraculous birth and an appearance of the Angel of the LORD, seems to be a spring of hope. But what Israel, and we, really need is the ultimate deliverer, the Messiah who lives forever. He has broken the power of death and is the true Prince of Peace.

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Lesson 12: Points to Ponder

1. Give examples of how God has shown His faithfulness in Scriptures. In the church. In your life.
2. Why do you suppose God would call someone as unlikely as Jephthah to be the judge over Israel at this time in their history? Why do you think he is included in the heroes of faith (Hebrews 11)?
3. Do you think Jephthah was trying to bribe God with a human sacrifice? Why or why not? Are there times when we have tried to make deals with God?
4. Ignorant of the Word of God, Jephthah offered up his daughter as a sacrifice. What does this say about his view of God? What does it tell us about the necessity to know God’s Word?
5. In what ways do we “sacrifice” our children for the sake of financial gain or success?
6. When Saul made a foolish oath in 1 Samuel 14, the Israelites intervened. Why do you suppose the Israelites did not intervene in this case?
7. The Ephraimites seemed once again more. Was Jephthah’s anger and vengeance against them justified? Give examples where Christians have an Ephraimite-like spirit in that they enjoy the benefits of Christ’s victory but refuse to take upon themselves their God-given responsibilities.

Bavinck the Dogmatician (5)

The Doctrine of Inscripturated Special Revelation

Dr. Cornelis P.
Venema



“Organic” Inspiration

In his survey of the development of modern biblical criticism, Bavinck is surprisingly frank regarding the implications of this approach for the older doctrine of inspiration. As he observes, the Christian theologian “does not resolve the dilemma [of the inspiration and absolute authority of Scripture] in all its sharpness by closing one’s eyes to the serious objections that careful Bible research derives from the facts it discovers and can advance against the self-testimony of Scripture” (*RD* 1:420). Contemporary Reformed theology is obliged to reckon with the challenges to the divine authority and authorship of Scripture that such criticism has expressed. In the formulation of the doctrine of inspiration, therefore, Bavinck steers a careful course between a kind of obscurantism, which refuses to engage

the challenges of modern biblical studies, and a kind of accommodationism, which abandons the historic doctrine of Scripture as no longer tenable. In order to articulate the doctrine of Scriptural inspiration in a responsible manner, Bavinck notes that many biblical critics appeal to the “phenomena” of the Bible to undermine the clear testimony of Scripture to its divine origin. However, the Scripture’s self-testimony to its inspiration is so clear and compelling that it is impossible to appeal to the phenomena of Scripture in this way. Even though the doctrine of inspiration must be formulated in a manner that does justice to the kind of writings that comprise the Scriptures, the fact of Scripture’s inspiration may not be denied without impugning the compelling testimony of Scripture itself.

Bavinck defines what is meant by inspiration by noting the significance of the term the apostle Paul uses in 1 Timothy 3:16. Though we are accustomed to the term “inspiration,” which derives from the Latin (Vulgate) rendering of the Greek term, *theopneustos*, the literal sense of Paul’s term is that the Scriptures are “God-breathed.” Like his contemporary, the Presbyterian theologian B. B. Warfield, Bavinck observes that this term should be taken in a passive sense to denote the divine origin or authorship of the Scriptures. The Word of God is the product of God’s divine power and wisdom, and should be received accordingly as possessing full divine authority. Though Bavinck acknowledges the impenetrable mystery of the Spirit’s work in the production of the Scriptures, he maintains that this work occurs within the framework of the Spirit’s “immanence in everything that

has been created” (*RD* 1:426). The inspiration of the Scriptures is not to be viewed as an “isolated event.” Rather, it reflects the “crown and zenith” of the comprehensive work of the Spirit in perfecting and utilizing the created order. Here too we have an instance of the inter-relation between creation and redemption; the same Spirit who is at work in the whole creation is now at work in the context of redemption or re-creation. The work of the Spirit in the inspiration of the Scriptures is, nonetheless, a unique and intermittent work, which must be distinguished from the broader work of the Spirit in creation and in the regeneration of believers.

In order to provide a more definite view of the nature of inspiration, Bavinck distinguishes between “mechanical,” “dynamic” and “organic” inspiration. While Bavinck rejects the first two views as incompatible with the testimony of Scripture and the nature of the biblical writings, he defends the third or “organic” view as one that is consistent with the historic conception of the church, but that does greater justice to the historical character of the Scriptures. Only an “organic” view of inspiration is able to account simultaneously for the divine origin and authorship of the Scriptures and the full humanness of the Scriptural writings.

As the language intimates, “mechanical” inspiration is the view that the biblical authors were mere conduits through whom the Holy Spirit channels divine revelation. Rather than doing justice to the full engagement of the human authors in the production of Scripture, the mechanical understanding tends to

lift the human authors out of their historical context and disregards their connections with their environment. In this conception of inspiration, God is not only the primary author of the biblical writings, but he is really the only author. In Bavinck's estimation, a "mechanical notion of revelation one-sidedly emphasizes the new, the supernatural element that is present in inspiration, and disregards its connection with the old, the natural. This detaches the Bible writers from their personality, as it were, and lifts them out of the history of their time" (RD 1:431). While it is often alleged that this mechanical understanding of inspiration was the teaching of the church throughout much of its history, Bavinck demurs from this assessment and wisely notes that this generalization needs to be tested against the particular statements of older writers on the subject.

Bavinck expresses even greater dissatisfaction with the "dynamic" view of inspiration, which has become the favored view of modern liberal theologians. The dynamic view, which emphasizes the inspiration of the biblical authors but not the inspiration of their writings as such, reduces the Bible to an "inspiring" book that contains many elevated religious sentiments but is not the Word of God as such. The insuperable problem with this conception is that it places an impossible burden upon the interpreter of Scripture, who is obliged to determine what in the Scriptures is of divine inspiration and what is not. On this approach, the doctrine of Scriptural revelation is thoroughly undermined.

With his contemporary, Abraham Kuyper, Bavinck maintains that we should speak of the "organic inspiration" of Scripture. Without denying the fundamental truth of Christian orthodox theology, namely, that the Bible is the inspired Word of God, the organic view aims

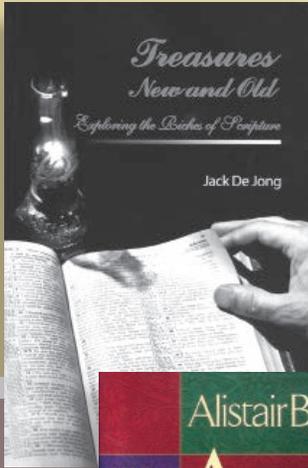
to do justice to the human authorship of Scripture. The Holy Spirit does not "coerce" or displace the human authors in the production of Scripture. The Spirit uses the human authors as "human beings, not as blocks of wood, but as intelligent and moral beings" (RD 1:432). The language of the various books of the Bible exhibit clear and compelling evidence that the human writers were "authors" in the proper sense of the term. These writings reflect the character, language, and style of their authors. Nothing that is genuinely human or properly illustrative of the personality and times of the biblical writers is suppressed. Within God's providence and superintendence, the human authors of Scripture are used by the Spirit in a way that fully honors their distinctive personalities, gifts and powers. All of these are made serviceable to the Spirit's aim, which is to communicate the Word of God in human language so that the Scriptures might become the "possession of the whole human race" (RD 1:433). In the preparation for their writing, these authors engaged in research, made use of various sources, and enlisted all of the various means ordinarily employed in the production of any human writing. Even though the language of these authors does not display a consistent beauty or elevated style, the thoroughly human character of their writings serves the purpose of communicating the Word of God to all human beings. The humanity of Scripture, far from being an embarrassment, is precisely the reason the biblical writings continue to speak in a clear and compelling manner to all peoples and at every stage in human history.

In view of all this, the theory of organic inspiration alone does justice to Scripture. In the doctrine of Scripture, it is the working out and application of the central fact of revelation: the

incarnation of the Word. The Word (*Logos*) has become flesh (*sarx*), and the word has become Scripture; these two facts do not only run parallel but are most intimately connected. Christ became flesh, a servant, without form or comeliness, the most despised of human beings; he descended to the nethermost parts of the earth and became obedient even to the death of the cross. So also the word, the revelation of God, entered the world of creatureliness, the life and history of humanity, in all the human forms of dream and vision, of investigation and reflection, right down into that which is humanly weak and despised and ignoble. The word became Scripture and as Scripture subjected itself to the fate of all Scripture. (RD 1: 434)



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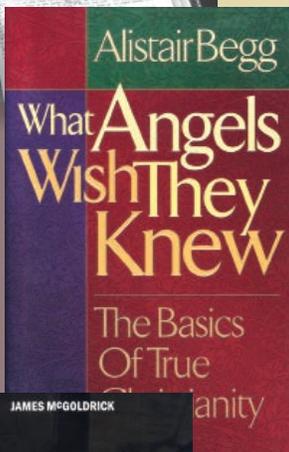


Treasures New and Old: Exploring the Riches of Scripture

by Dr. Jack De Jong,
Premier Publishing—Winnipeg (2004). 274 pages.
Reviewed by Rev. Wybren Oord.

This book of meditations written by Dr. Jack De Jong was compiled by Cornelis Van Dam with the assistance of Kristen Kottelenberg Alkema. For those in the Canadian Reformed Church, the name of Dr. De Jong is very familiar.

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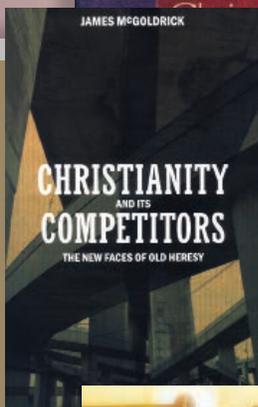


What Angels Wish They Knew

by Rev. Alistair Begg,
Moody Press—Chicago (1998). 207 pages.
Reviewed by Rev. Wybren Oord.

I have always enjoyed listening to the radio program, “Truth For Life.” I have to admit that I listened to the program for a long time before I realized the speaker was not Alex Trebek. Rev. Alistair Begg, pastor of Parkside Church

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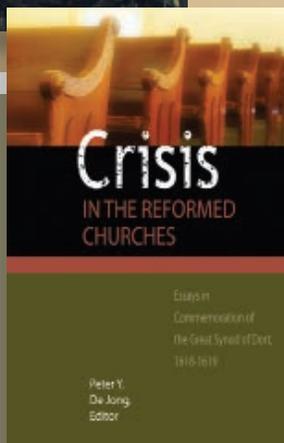


Christianity and Its Competitors: The New Faces of Old Heresy

by Dr. James McGoldrick, Christian Focus—Scotland (2006). 206 pages.
Reviewed by Rev. Wybren Oord.

The author of Ecclesiastes once wrote that there is nothing new under the sun. The same can be said for false teachings that enter into the church. Professor James McGoldrick of Greenville Presbyterian Theological Seminary has

(continued on page 31)



Crisis in the Reformed Churches: Essays in Commemoration of the Great Synod of Dort (1618-1619)

Dr. Peter Y. De Jong, editor, Reformed Fellowship—Grand Rapids (2008).
Second Printing 335 pages.
Reviewed by Rev. Wybren Oord.

Over forty years ago the Board of Reformed Fellowship commissioned nine men, who today would be considered a “Who’s Who” in Reformed

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Treasures New and Old: Exploring the Riches of Scripture

(continued from page 29)

He taught in the Theological College for more than a dozen years. This compilation of meditations is a tribute to the man who dedicated his life to the service of his Lord. They were first published in the *Clarion* in the 1970s and 1980s.

Delegates to the URCNA Synod in Escondido (2001) were privileged to meet Dr. De Jong when he addressed the synod as a fraternal delegate. His address was published in the July/August 2001 issue of *The Outlook*. In that address it was clear that Dr. De Jong had a vision not only for the CanRC and the URCNA, but more, for the Church of Jesus Christ. That vision is made all the clearer in *Treasures New and Old*.

The editor of *Treasures New and Old* did not merely gather a collection of De Jong's meditations from the *Clarion* and toss them together in chronological order of their publication. Instead, they have been divided into themes that focus upon the great work that God has done for His people. Beginning with the theme of God's faithfulness, the editor compiles the meditations from the whole of Scripture into sections that lead us through the anticipation of Christ, His coming, His work from

birth to ascension, on to the Holy Spirit, the Christian life, and the return of our Savior.

These meditations are a pleasure to read. They clearly come from the pen of a man who loved the Lord and His Church. Dr. De Jong was a man of his times and saw well the difficulty of being steadfast in the Christian life in a world that is no friend to grace. Each meditation focuses not only upon the greatness of our God and the work of His Son, but also brings proper application to the reader's personal life.

We thank Dr. Van Dam for compiling these meditations and pray that they may be a blessing to the people of God and His Church everywhere.

What Angels Wish They Knew

(continued from page 29)

in suburban Cleveland, is a very fluid preacher and has a voice that is very easy to listen to. His writing style is equally easy to read.

In his book, *What Angels Wish They Knew*, Begg makes the fundamental teachings of the Christian faith very easy and logical to follow and understand. In many ways this book is similar to Josh McDowell's *Evidence that Demands a Verdict*. Both books present a line of reasoning as to who

we are before God, who Jesus is and what He has done, and the necessity of placing our faith in Him. They both supply evidence for the deity of Jesus, His death, and resurrection. Both insist that man is accountable before God.

The difference in the two books is that, whereas McDowell presents charts and data in a very matter-of-fact way, Begg presents them in his own delightful and pithy style. Each chapter has wonderful illustrations that draw the reader in and help develop the point he is trying to make. Why, one would hardly know that he was teaching doctrine.

Those who know Reformed doctrine may find the book somewhat shallow. There are no new teachings, no great discoveries, no great hermeneutical insights. That is not the purpose of this book. It is purposely shallow so that the reader can understand the deep truths of the Christian faith. Because of that, *What Angels Wish They Knew* can be used as a wonderful tool for evangelism. After you are done reading this book, pass it on to a friend who doesn't know the Lord. It is written in a way that will keep his interest and, by the grace of God, lead him to understand the truth of Scripture.



Christianity and Its Competitors: The New Faces of Old Heresy

(continued from page 29)

written a book that takes the old heresies that infiltrated the early years New Testament church and applies them to the heresies that are entering into the modern New Testament Church. Beginning with the early Judaizers who infiltrated the church in Galatia, and moving on to Montanism, Arianism, and Pelagianism, McGoldrick shows how contemporary errors that haunt the church today were fought against by the church fathers years ago.

Too often within conservative churches we draw the lines of battle in peculiar places. We debate over how often we should celebrate the Lord's Supper but have nothing to say to the Jehovah's Witness that comes to our door. We carry a list of concerns we have with the local Reformed school, but instead of beginning a school that is Reformed, we send our children to an Arminian school. As Allen Harman writes in his endorsement of this book, "this book is a wake-up call to modern Christians, who have lost the concern for doctrinal accuracy."

McGoldrick, who teaches Church History, has done the research and tries to make readers aware of some of

the teachings to which we have become complacent. Examples of false leaders in the early church are given, and parallels are drawn to our own day. The author traces the teachings of Jim Jones, David Koresh, Pat Robertson, and others to the false teachings that plagued the early church. He very boldly points out how the condemned teachings of the past have been resurrected in Roman Catholicism, Mormonism, Arminianism, fundamentalism, Pentecostalism, and more. McGoldrick clearly explains how following the false teachings of the past to their end has devastating results for the church today.

Although well researched, *Christianity and Its Competitors* is not at all difficult to read and should instill in every Christian the need to test the spirits to see if they are from God.

Crisis in the Reformed Churches

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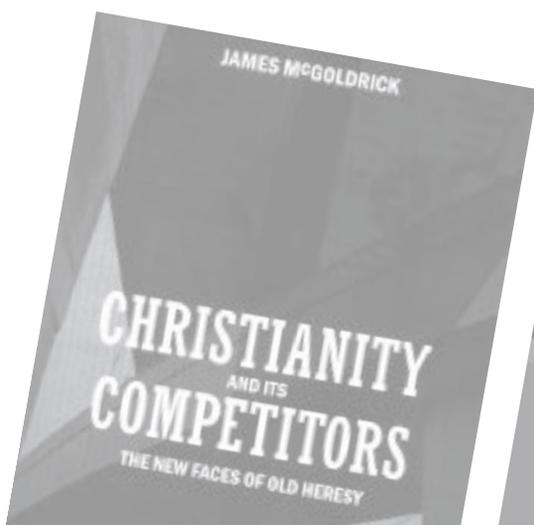
theology, to commemorate the 350th anniversary of the Synod of Dort.

Under the leadership of the editor, Dr. P. Y. De Jong, these giants of the faith wrote on a variety of topics regarding this great event in Reformed history. Their contributions brought to the

Christian community a greater understanding of the history and the necessity of the Synod of Dort, the key figures involved in the synod, and the application and decisions made at the synod to the tumultuous times within the church during the 1960s when first published. Each article reflected not only the expertise of the writer, but also his love for the Reformed faith.

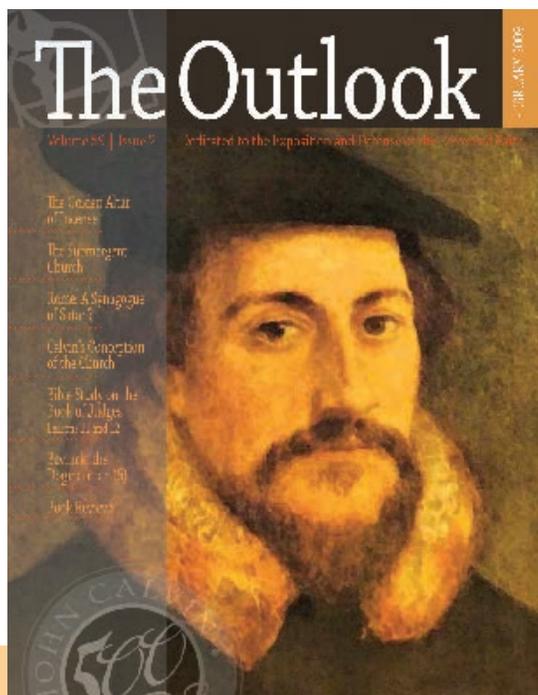
In the ensuing years, serious discussion of the Synod of Dort always included references to *Crisis in the Reformed Churches*. Historians, theologians, seminary students, and ministers alike, shared an appreciation for the work accomplished by the remarkable defenders of the faith that made their case at the Synod of Dort, and also, for the faithful servants of God who diligently defended the Reformed faith as it was challenged through the centuries.

Four decades after its original publication, the Board of Reformed Fellowship has reprinted *Crisis in the Reformed Churches*. As the church enters a new millennium, those who hold to the Reformed faith see that the crisis within the church is not limited to the seventeenth century nor the twentieth century. The church militant must always be ready to give an account of what she believes, defending her faith rooted in the Word of God. *Crisis in the Reformed Churches* offers great insight and wisdom to those seeking to defend and define the Reformed faith. By understanding our history, the church may move forward until the sovereign God who rules over the church brings us to the church victorious through His Son, Jesus Christ.



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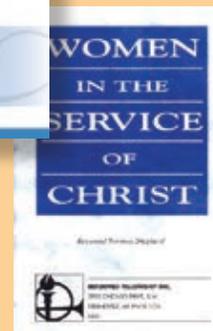
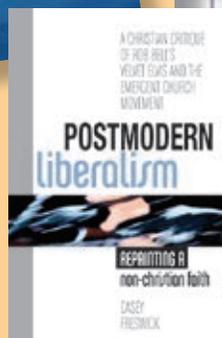
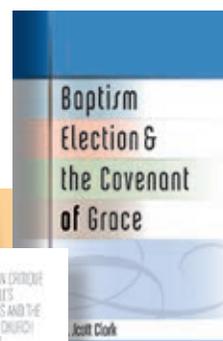
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