

The Outlook

JUNE 2009

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Dedicated to the Exposition and Defense of the Reformed Faith

The Ark of the
Covenant

Faithfulness
to God

John Calvin
(Part 1)

Bible Study on the
Book of Judges
Lesson 20

Lovers of God Rather
than Lovers of Pleasure
(Part 1)

A Cry for the
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When Ordinary
is Exceptional



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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 Ark of the Covenant

Meditation

Rev. Wybren
Oord

You shall put into the ark the testimony which I shall give you.
Exodus 25:16

This month we return to the furniture in the tabernacle. We step with special reverence and holy awe beyond the Veil. We move beyond the curtain that separates the Holy Place from the Holy of Holies. We come to that spot that in the Old Testament days was the holiest place in all the earth. Under the old covenant, only the High Priest was permitted to enter into this part of the tabernacle—and he only once a year, on the great Day of Atonement. He could enter only with blood from the bronze altar.

We have before us the holiest of all the furnishings within the tabernacle. In the Holy of Holies there was only one piece of furniture made up of two separate parts. The lower part was called the ark of the covenant; the upper part was called the mercy seat. Included with the ark of the covenant and the mercy seat, we must also see the cherubim rising above the ark and the *shekinah glory*. The *shekinah glory* was why this was such a holy place. At the ark of the covenant, God's very presence was made manifest. God had said: "*And there I will meet with you*" (Exodus 25:22).

How the hearts of the children of Israel must have been filled with joy and gratitude when God made the gracious promise that He would meet with them. How gladly they must have brought their offerings to make the sanctuary where God Himself would dwell.

Five chapters in Exodus describe for us the tabernacle and its contents. God begins by showing us the ark

of the covenant and the mercy seat. Then He leads us out of the Holy of Holies to the Holy Place by the golden lamp-stand that sheds its light upon the table of showbread and the golden altar of incense. We pass from the Holy Place into the outer court and find there the bronze laver and the bronze altar.

While we started this series at the outer curtain and moved to the bronze altar, notice where God starts. God starts at the ark of the covenant; God starts at the mercy seat. It is God's way of salvation from beginning to end, not only from the beginning of the construction of the tabernacle, but also from the very beginning of God's Word, where God meets fallen man and asking the question, "Adam, where are you?"

It is God—it is always God stooping down to meet man, not man ever reaching up to meet God. Our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ traveled all the way from the mercy seat in the Most Holy Place, from heaven itself, through the Holy Place to the bronze altar of sacrifice. Paul wrote, "He emptied Himself, taking the form of a bond-servant, and being made in the likeness of men. And being found

in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross" (Philippians 2:7,8).

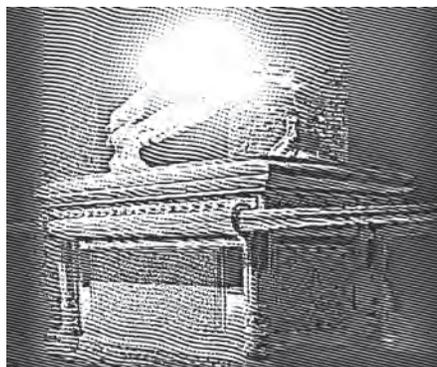
Three Arks

Have you ever wondered about the exact meaning of the word "ark"? This is not the first time that that word appears in the Bible. The first time was when Noah gathered his family and the animals into the ark. The second was when Jochebed hid her son in the Nile—she placed him in an ark. The word "ark" carries with it the idea of a chest for the safekeeping of cherished articles. In the ark of Noah there were the eight people whom God cherished. He had chosen to save them from the flood along with all the animals that God directed to go into the ark. The ark that hid among the bulrushes on the Nile contained a cherished little baby by the name of Moses.

What was in the ark of the covenant that was so cherished? The ark really was not all that big—three and a half feet long, two and a half feet wide, and two and a half feet deep. In the ark were placed a pot of manna and Aaron's rod that budded in the wilderness. These articles were cherished by the Israelites because they signified God's almighty miraculous deeds done on their behalf.

One Item in the Ark

There was one other thing in the ark of the covenant. It was the very reason why it was called the ark of the covenant. In the ark of the covenant were the terms of the covenant. It





contained the two tablets of stone upon which were written the Ten Commandments.

The tablets of stone that were placed in the ark were inscribed by the very finger of God. They were an expression of God's righteous demands upon the people whom He had delivered out of bondage. The Law promised life to those who could keep all the terms of the covenant that were written upon those two tablets.

But here's the thing: it could not give life. The Law that was put in the ark of the covenant found man to be a sinner by nature, yet, it had no power to change that nature. It found man dead, but could not give to him life. It declared the righteous demands of God; both in regards to what man ought to be in relationship to God and what man ought to be in relationship to his neighbor. It declared what ought to be but it gave no power to enable man to be what he ought to be. It demanded; it threatened; it denounced; but it could not give. It could condemn but it could not save. All the Law really did was sentence a person to death.

You may recall how God gave the people of Israel the Law. They were slaves in a foreign land. They cried out

to God for deliverance and He sent them Moses. Ten plagues later, with a mighty and outstretched arm, God delivered them out of bondage and out of their slavery in Egypt. He had led them into the wilderness; daily He supplied the people with manna, and when the people asked, He sent quails. He opened the rocks and water gushed out.

When the people came to Mount Sinai, God gave them His Law—the terms for a relationship with Him. Three times the people of Israel heard these Ten Commandments—the terms of the covenant—read to them. Three times they replied, “All that the Lord has said we will do and we will obey” (Exodus 24:3).

After the people agreed to the terms of the covenant, Moses sprinkled both the book of the covenant and the people with blood, signifying the sealing of a covenant between them and God. It was a covenant that bound them to obedience. It was a covenant that bound God to punish disobedience. It rested on the faithfulness and strength of the people of Israel. All God had to do, so to speak, was be with them and watch over them, and, if they should become disobedient, to deal with them accordingly.

It must have sounded good to them when they said they would obey the Ten Commandments. They were doubtless thankful to God for their release from captivity. They gratified their hearts by what seemed like a humble promise to obey God. But mankind can not obey God.

In the midst of all man's failure and sin, God comes in His mercy and grace. At Sinai Israel was binding herself to a Law that she could not keep, exposing herself to all the righteous vengeance of God, but God looked onward to the One who would be able to fulfill the demands of the covenant on behalf of Israel. Certainly God could not lower His standard. Just as certainly, man

had no power to attain righteousness for himself.

In addition, the covenant had been confirmed with blood so that neither party could set it aside. It could not just be forgotten. It could not be annulled. It could not be torn in two. It was holy, just, and good. It was given by God Himself. The people had agreed to the terms. There it was—the Law—a solemn witness of the unapproachable righteousness of God and the ruin and helplessness of mankind.

There was but one hope for deliverance, and the God of hope foreshadowed that way of deliverance in the tabernacle. Let one be found—a man made under the Law who would fulfill all the requirements of the Law. A man who would place himself in the sphere and circumstances of the guilty and lost race, yet prove Himself to be obedient. Let one be found among the unholy who would prove Himself to be holy, one who would love while others hated, one who would bless while others cursed. Let one be found who would love the Lord his God with heart, mind, and soul and his neighbor as himself.

And yet more than that was needed. For Israel was not only powerless to keep the Law and maintain righteousness, they had done far worse. They had broken the Law and, in breaking the Law, they had incurred its awful curse. Before the very tablets of the Law were brought down from the mountain, Israel was found reveling in sin around the golden calf. The Law had been broken at its very introduction. Moses, coming down from the mountain carrying the Ten Commandments, must have sensed the uselessness, as well as the danger, of bringing the terms of the covenant to the people. He threw the stone tablets to the ground. The Ten Commandments were broken, not only in the stone tablets that fell to the ground, but also in the stone hearts of the very people who were to receive it.

While Moses was in the mountain receiving the Law, the people were bowing before an image that they declared was the god who had delivered them out of bondage. Such was the reception man gave to the introduction of God's holy Law, and such is our treatment of the Law to this day. The Tablets were broken, and like the fallen race, they can never be restored. How foolish we are to think that by observing a fragment of a broken Law that we can satisfy God or justify ourselves. And yet, that is how so many seek to enter into the kingdom of God. They zealously cling to outward forms or a small piece of the Law that they are able to keep, all the while ignoring the other fragments around them.

Salvation is not some complex thing made up of law and grace. It is grace, grace, and grace alone. If you add law to it, it is no longer grace. You must realize that you are helpless as well as hopeless. You have broken the Law of God and thereby not only forfeited the claim of righteousness but you are under the curse that comes with it—death. The curse of the broken Law has to be borne. There was no provision in the covenant for mercy, so judgment has to take place.

All those through the ages, from the people who bowed before the golden calf to those who have said, "All that the Lord has said we will do," must cry out with the apostle Paul: "Wretched man that I am! Who will set me free from this body of death?"

(Romans 7:24). Someone had to be found: someone who is able to fulfill all righteousness; someone who will bear on our behalf the deadly penalty for breaking the covenant.

And such is Jesus Christ. He was foreseen in the counsels of God, foreordained before the foundation of the world. In the fullness of time He was sent by God "made of a woman under the Law to redeem them that were under the Law" (Galatians 4:4, 5).

Why It Was in the Ark

And now, we come back to Exodus 25 and the ark of the covenant. In this little box, carefully preserved, was the Law of God—the terms of the covenant. Do this and live. Fail to do this and die. You want a relationship with God? Do this! You want fellowship with God? Here are the terms.

Now notice that the Law was preserved out of sight. It was placed in the Holy of Holies. It was removed out of Israel's way forever to conceal the ministration of death and to prevent it from breaking forth in all its vengeance.

Here in the ark, we find the Law. It is under the mercy seat of God. Here we have a beautiful representation of Jesus Christ. Jesus came down from heaven to do the will of Him who sent Him. He delighted in that will and was obedient even unto death. Through His death He has accomplished the removal of the curse.

This same Jesus stands before God as the One who has fulfilled all

righteousness. He has forevermore removed the stern barrier that prevented sinful man's approach to God. He has fulfilled the demands of the Law. What the Israelites were unable to do—what we were unable to do—Jesus Christ has done for us. That is why Paul can write, "There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus."

That which was the very hindrance has through Jesus Christ become the very ground for our fellowship with God. The Law has been kept—not by us, but by Christ. When we come to God through Christ, the conditions of the covenant are met. We can have fellowship with God. We can enter that most sacred place, the Holy of Holies.

Our way to God is through Christ. He has taken Law out of the way—by fulfilling it. "For what the Law could not do, God did, sending His own Son as an offering for sin" (Romans 8:3). God meets us, not in the Law, but in grace, through Christ. And so this Law was placed in the ark of the covenant, but it was covered up, sealed by the blood of Jesus Christ.



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Although Psalm 89 is in the genre of “laments,” it nonetheless reveals much about God’s steadfast love to a needy, sinful people. In this Psalm, the Lord takes great care to show how He will not abandon His people. He shows this in His word, His oaths, His might, and in the promise of future redemption. Finally, in swearing an oath on His holiness, God gives surety that He cannot ever abandon His people. No matter how greatly they transgress, He will bring them back to Himself.

Scripture entreats us to view our relationship with God in terms of covenants. God is a covenant-keeping God. He relates to mankind through covenants. From the beginning of time God has entered into covenants with man. The first such covenant was “a covenant of works, wherein life was promised to Adam, and in him to his posterity, upon condition of perfect and personal obedience.”¹ The Lord also blessed certain individuals, such as Abraham, with covenant relationships. Psalm 89 is primarily concerned with the covenant God made with Abraham’s son, David. It is to this covenant that the prophet most often appeals.

This Psalm is filled not only with outright references to the covenant, but with covenant language such as the Hebrew word *hesed* (cf. verses, 1, 2, 14, 24, 28, 33, 49), often translated “lovingkindness,” “mercy,” or “steadfast love.” Sinclair Ferguson writes of *hesed*, “it means God’s deep goodness expressed in his covenant commitment, his absolute loyalty, his obligating of himself to bring to fruition the blessings he has promised, *whatever it may cost him personally*

to do that.”² Based on the language used by the prophet in this psalm, it is clear that the prophet had a similar understanding of *hesed*, which is why there are so many references to God’s *faithfulness* (cf. verses, 1, 2, 5, 8, 14, 24, 33, 49). God’s faithfulness and steadfast love are bound up together: God is faithful because of His steadfast love, and He has steadfast love because He is faithful.

The psalmist begins this lament with the beautiful praises of God’s long established mercies and blessings. This lament shows the prophet’s trust in God. Although he and his nation are greatly afflicted, he nonetheless is still moved to praise God’s mercy of old, assured that one day the tangible manifestations of that distinct mercy will be visible again to the covenant people.

In verses 3–4 the prophet introduces the covenant God made with David, the mediator through whom this prophet makes his appeal. In these verses, we see that the foundation of his faith is the Word of the Lord. Calvin writes, “Faith ought to depend on the Divine promise,” which gives the reader more confidence in the authority of the prophet’s appeal. The confidence is not in God’s word to the prophet alone, but God’s word to him through David—a covenant mediator—for the people of geopolitical Israel.³

The covenant with David was but a shadow of God’s covenant with Christ. David represents Christ, who is the ultimate covenant Mediator. God’s covenant with His people through Christ allows the church to go to the Father and ask blessings. So here, too, the psalmist came expecting God’s grace because of God’s word to David.

When the New Testament saint prays, he follows his Lord’s command to pray “in Jesus’ name,” because Christ is the ultimate covenant Mediator for the church. Prayers not offered through and in Christ’s name are abominations to God. So too, in this revelation of God’s covenant, the Old Testament saint prays for the sake of the most immediate covenant mediator, David, who is a *type* of Christ.

The saint knows that, although times may be hard at present, God will keep His covenant with David. This confidence moves him to song and is the reason for the persistent joy he has through affliction. The everlasting nature of this covenant is cause for great thanksgiving because the prophet knows it points to a new type of David, one who could truly have an everlasting reign: namely Jesus Christ. The saint sings in expectation of that promised deliverer.

After confessing his faith and its foundation, the psalmist recites God’s greatness and tells of His wonders. He begins by praising God for his wonders, but the exaltation is chiefly praise for God’s steadfastness. This mighty God is also faithful. These verses serve as an introduction to the next fourteen verses, which praise God’s deeds, tokens of His faithfulness. In verses 9–10, the psalmist gives an example of that mighty faithfulness displayed, recalling God’s sovereignty over the sea and His destruction of Rahab. Calvin sees these verses as referring to the Exodus, with *Rahab* representing Egypt.⁴

In verse 14, the psalmist takes us into God’s sanctuary to view the very foundation of God’s throne. The ornaments of Jehovah’s throne

Righteousness and justice kiss steadfast love and faithfulness on the cross at Calvary.

and reign are not those of an earthly potentate, but the very attributes of His character, alone more grand than any earthly prince: “righteousness and justice.” Earthly magistrates must adorn their throne with foreign objects to give the appearance of majesty, but Jehovah is by His nature more majestic than they. The psalmist does not stop only at God’s righteous justice, for He is ever preceded by two other attributes, “steadfast love and faithfulness.” The Father is not only an all-powerful, perfectly righteous judge, but also full of mercy and longsuffering concern for His people. God’s mercy and His justice meet together in the person of Christ. Christ was sent to show God’s mercy to bring His unfaithful people to Himself, and to bear the just punishment upon Himself. Righteousness and justice kiss steadfast love and faithfulness on the cross at Calvary.

After recounting the joys of membership in the covenant community, the prophet considers the covenant with David. The psalmist again and again emphasizes God’s choice, for since this covenant rests not on the merits of the chosen, but purely on the grace of God, it is everlasting. At first glance, it may appear that God chose the mighty, but it quickly becomes clear that the mighty one is only great because God has “granted,” “exalted,” “found,” and “anointed” him.⁵ David, whom He chose, was not great and powerful but the weakest of his brothers. There was nothing of royalty in David or in any whom God chooses. God’s wisdom is unfathomable to men; it is like the wind blowing where it wishes. In the same way, we do not know how or why God chooses whom He will. Because of this, our only response must be gratitude, not second guessing God’s

grace or justice.⁶ Calvin clarifies that this covenant with David does not supersede the Abrahamic covenant, but rather strengthens it and carries it “forward by a continued process of improvement” ultimately in Christ.⁷

After praising the Author of this covenant, the psalmist recounts God’s promises of blessing for David and His people. God promises David aid from the wicked and the increase of his reign and honor. Though at times David’s line would be cut down, a root always remained until the coming of Christ. Because of Christ, these blessings can be assured to David and the church at large. Christ’s victory outwitted the enemy; Christ crushed his foes and struck down the adversary of His church. Christ’s Kingdom extends even beyond the “sea” and the “rivers” (cf. vs. 25, Ps. 72:8). In fulfillment of David’s Kingdom, the church has citizens from every tribe and nation on the earth adopted into God’s family.

The great victory that allowed these gracious kisses of God did not come, however, without great cost. In the very manner in which God the Father exalted His people, God—incarnate as the Son—lowered Himself. First, God declares: “My arm also shall strengthen Him.” Christ went willingly to the cross, weak, as a lamb led to the slaughter. For the transgressions of David, Abraham, and all His covenant people, God withdrew His arm and allowed Christ to be wounded, smitten, stricken, and afflicted. Such was the faithfulness of God to His whoring people, that He would come to *them* and bear *their* sins and credit His righteousness to them.

Second, “the enemy shall not outwit him.” Day after day, Christ taught in the temple, yet none of the legalists dared touch Him, for fear of the

people. Instead, the priests plotted with one of His twelve to outwit and capture Him in an orchard outside the city. His enemy thought he could deceive Him, but even this was comprehended in God’s infallible foreknowledge. Our Lord allowed Himself to be captured by the enemy so that the blessings of David might be possible, God’s word fulfilled, and His people ransomed. The Devil thought he could outwit the Lord, but Christ triumphed over him, though to all the scoffers (cf. Ps. 1) it appeared as though they had outwitted Him.

Third, “the wicked shall not humble him.” Christ, the second person of the Trinity, abandoning His glory, came to earth and took on the very form and infirmities of man. He not only became a man of sorrows, living a life as a humble sojourning preacher, but He was exposed to shame, spitting, and scoffing by the wicked at His death. Those who hated Him struck Him down and murdered Him.

Fourth, “I will crush his foes before him.” It was the will of God to “crush” Christ for the iniquity of His people. He brought down the full measure of His wrath and condemnation upon our Lord, the full measure which *we* deserved. The Father crushed His own Son that we, His foes, may be reconciled to Him.

With the fullness of Scripture, we can see the vastness of God’s grace, mercy, and steadfast, covenant love displayed for all to see: bleeding, dying, afflicted on a cross, set on a hill used to execute the most egregious of criminals. There, for mercy’s sake, once and for all, Christ, Himself fully God, fully Man, fully Righteous, took on the sin “of many” that they may be forgiven and have life in the covenant. But even without the completion of God’s special revelation, the prophet knew God would keep His people. He ends this section with God’s promise that His covenant will stand and establish David’s offspring forever. These promises, by design, precede

89 I will sing of thy steadfast love, O LORD, for ever; with my mouth I will proclaim thy faithfulness to all generations.
2 For thy steadfast love was established for ever, thy faithfulness is firm as the heavens.
3 Thou hast said, "I have made a covenant with my chosen one, I have sworn to David my servant:
4 I will establish your descendants for ever, and build your throne for all generations."

the saint's retelling of the "covenant curses" on David's line, to serve as an introduction to what follows.

After the psalmist recounts the promises of God and the blessings of God to the church through the covenant mediator, he turns to address a more immediate situation. In verses 30–37, the psalmist shows God's concern to keep His people from rejoicing in sin. God, knowing that the "posterity of David . . . would frequently fall from the covenant, by their own fault, has provided a remedy . . . in His pardoning grace." Not only has He provided a remedy, He does not allow them to continue in their sins, and promises chastisements that they may learn to follow Him and not delight in sin.

When the results of their sins come down upon them, His people learn to see the beauty of God graciously giving His statutes. Through the misery, they see the horrid nature of their sin, which drives them to their Redeemer. Even affliction is a sign of His grace for it drives them back to Him, away from their sin. Through the trouble, they see their need for

Christ's righteousness all the more and are humbled anew, seeing that the "salvation of the church depends solely upon the Grace of God and the truth of His promises."⁸

God uses affliction to drive His people back to Him; though He "punish[es] their transgression with the rod and their iniquity with stripes" (vs. 32), His punishment does not consume them. The Son bore the full measure of God's wrath, so that the people of God might only be chastised and not smitten, for by the Son's stripes we are healed.

The prophet dwells briefly on the chastisement, but then returns to considering God's faithfulness, for it alone endures. In the strongest words possible, the psalmist retells God's faithfulness despite affliction. He recounts the Lord's strongest oath, upon His holiness, that He will be faithful to David. God's oath will not change. He swears not only by mere created things, but makes a covenant with David founded in Himself on His own holiness. To allow even one member of David's line, the church, to fall away would be to impugn God's honor and His holiness. For that reason, with His Son before Him pleading mercy (vs. 36), God ensures that all heirs of this covenant persevere to the end. This covenant is a shadow of the glorious covenant between the Father and the Son, which accomplishes our redemption, that Christ would redeem a people by shedding His blood for them.

After making it clear that he knows God's word, God's faithfulness, and the demands of God's covenant, the prophet moves to the reason for his prayer: the affliction of the church. The saint does not begin this prayer as one would think, "O Lord have pity on us in this our hour of need. . . ." Instead, he cries out to God in familiarity, as a Father, "You have renounced the covenant with your servant!" It appeared as though God had renounced the covenant, since

the blessings ceased. God was the source of immediate blessings, but God was also the source of immediate and temporal covenant curses for transgressions. The church was in the dust, overrun by her enemies. The saint has completely changed his tune, from Newton to Nietzsche. The change is so complete that it does not make logical sense, at first reading.

Either the saint has forgotten the entire psalm up to this point and calls God a liar, or this saint structured his prayer in such a way as to provide a comforting assurance of God's steadfast faithfulness before making his complaint known. These accusations give the appearance that all things are going contrary to the divine promise. When we consider the whole psalm, we see that the saint prays to God knowing that He did not renounce the covenant, for he knows God will not and cannot. This section follows a declaration that, when the church sins, God will send affliction. Now that the saint has acknowledged the justice of God's chastisement, he pleads with God to restore Israel's fortunes.

It is a further sign of God's graciousness that the saint approaches God, not with bitterness, but with a heavy heart and with clear, specific complaints and lamentations, knowing that God will hear him. He began by singing of the steadfast love of the Lord. The prophet clearly understands God to be gracious, despite what he may *feel*; by the assurance of God's own words. He *knows* God will not cast off His people because he has just read it in the Word of God. Although he is not afraid to bare his feelings to God, his feelings are restricted and controlled by what he *knows* from God's Word.

Even if the calamities had not been sent upon Israel, there is still the problem that man will someday die. He confesses the utter worthlessness of life apart from God and pleads with Him to show mercy and to end His wrath. Herein the saint reaches

his climax; in verse 48 he cries out for a deliverer. He confesses the need for one not only to deliver man from hardship, but from the very power of death itself.

Paul writes in I Corinthians 15 that the blood of Jesus Christ alone can unite God and man. In Him, death is swallowed up in victory. Because of Christ, death has no sting and sin has no power over God's people. Christ has won the victory, and God counts the church as victorious with and through Christ. Throughout the psalm, the psalmist has pointed to Christ through shadows and now claims Him plainly for all to see. The psalmist sees that all these promises are vanity and fleeting without one who can deliver man from hell's power. At this verse, the psalmist seemingly cries out, "send us the Christ; send us your Messiah!" In this verse, the prophet exclaims the truest and deepest need of Israel, not that her walls be rebuilt, but that her people be saved from death. And that is the essential need that all people have.

Now that he has confessed Christ and his utter need of Him, there little left to say, and the psalmist moves to a recapitulation. He pleads for a return of the "steadfast love of old" and calls to mind the suffering of God's people. He does so in a different manner now that He has made his profession of the Messiah. He tells the Father that the insults against the church are not simply against the saints, but mock the very footsteps of the promised Christ, who would deliver Israel to perfect peace and blessedness with the Father.

The saint ends with simple trust: "Blessed be Jehovah forever!" With his mature faith, he knows there is nothing left to say, but to trust in God's faithfulness and sovereignty. He rejoices in affliction because of the promises of God, ending his lament with a doxology and to "assuage the greatness of his grief in the midst of his heavy afflictions, that he might entertain the

livelier hope of deliverance."⁹

From this Psalm, we see, first, the importance of frequent, fervent, and familiar prayer. The saint can cry to God in such a manner because he knows his Father. He is frequently in prayer. Also apparent is that he is regularly reading the Scripture, the book of the covenant. Fervent, effectual prayer is tied to a regular, close reading of the Scripture, for how else do we know what to pray. This psalm is the result of the Spirit's working through one who is frequently in the Word of God and frequently in prayer.

Second, we learn that in time of trouble and affliction, the saints must look to God's Word and not to their own feelings. As the hymnist writes, "When all around my soul gives way, He then is all my hope and stay." We ought not to view a "frowning providence" as testimony that we have been cast off. In the Scriptures, the saint finds his assurance that God is with him through the difficult times and learns how to live his life and turn in repentance from sin, by prayer and petition. The reading of Scripture in times of affliction affects the prayers of the afflicted, for in it one learns how to pray and sees God's promises of faithfulness.

Third, the attitude of a Christian ought to be naught but gratitude, trust, and humility before the righteous God. Were it not for God's faithfulness, God's concern for His holy honor, every article of the covenant with Abraham, Moses, and David would be trampled in the dust by the church's pursuit of other gods. Instead, God pursues His people and causes them to return to Him and turn from their sin, imputing Christ's righteousness to them in His grace. From this we see the necessity of Christ. Our security in the covenant is only because of His work; we may only appeal to the Father through Christ as Mediator because He alone can come to us,

taste death for us, and rescue us from its power.

Finally, God can never cast off His chosen. Christ's work is the security of the saint's salvation. God will never lose him. Though the evil one will attempt to deceive and convince the saint that God has forgotten him, it is the Father's great concern for His people to know that He will not forsake them. He will bring His people unto Himself to cause them to return to Him. God's promise is founded in His holiness and guaranteed by the blood sacrifice of His Son. He will be faithful to complete the work He began; He cannot forget His dear ones, whose names are written, even engraved on the palms of His hands.

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1. Westminster Confession of Faith (1646), 7.2.
 2. Sinclair B. Ferguson, *Faithful God*, (Bryntirion, Wales: Bryntirion Press, 2005), 64. (emphasis original)
 3. John Calvin, *Calvin's Commentaries*, vol. 5, "Commentary on the Book of Psalms: Volume Second" (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2005), 421
 4. Calvin, 426
 5. Also consider Matthew 5:2-12
 6. Robert Lewis Dabney, *The Five Points of Calvinism* (Richmond, VA.: Presbyterian Committee of Publications, 1895; Harrisonburg, VA: Sprinkle Publications, 1992), 53. citations are to the Sprinkle edition
 7. Calvin., 434
 8. Calvin, 441.
 9. Calvin, 459.

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John Calvin, Practical Theologian: The Reformer's Spirituality

James Edward
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Introduction

In the sixteenth century the terms *piety* and *spirituality* were not synonyms, and piety was the preferred term among Protestants because they associated spirituality with Roman Catholic mysticism, as exemplified in Bernard of Clairvaux (1090–1153), Teresa of Avila (1515–82), John of the Cross (1542–91), and others. *Pietas* signified worship primarily, and its secondary meaning was reverence toward parents and other authorities and charity toward needy people. Service toward one's neighbor was deemed a proper expression of piety.

Spirituality denoted virtues, and it included preaching, instructing, and praying. To be spiritual was the opposite of being carnal, and spiritual people, in the view of medieval Catholicism, were those who exceeded the ordinary requirements of religion to rise above earthly affections in order to obtain purity by following the example of Christ.¹ Much of the practice of spirituality so construed occurred in monasteries, so laymen had little to do with it. Even parish priests experienced only occasional contact with it. The Protestant Reformers challenged this forcefully by postulating a theology without the sacred/secular, clergy/laity dichotomy that dominated medieval religion. The theology of the Reformers produced a fundamentally different understanding of spirituality, but suspicion toward Roman Catholic practice led Protestants to use terms such as *piety*, *devotion*, or *holiness* rather than spirituality. The Reformers maintained that God's grace transforms lives and makes believers love God and their neighbors. Sound doctrine then leads to holy living.

French authors of the seventeenth century made the term spirituality popular in religious literature, and many stressed a radical distinction between material and spiritual life, that is, between body and soul. This encouraged perpetuation of the medieval idea that people could best cultivate the health of their souls by withdrawing from society into communities maintained by religious orders of monks or nuns. To Protestants that was unacceptable, since their doctrine of the priesthood of all believers implied a denial of secularity as such and entailed bringing all aspects of life into the context of holiness or spirituality.² The Reformers abandoned the medieval conception of the Christian life as an ascetic retreat from the world, and they emphasized living by God's Word in all circumstances under all conditions. As John Calvin (1509–64) said, "the whole life of Christians ought to be a sort of practice of godliness."³ It is obvious, medieval and Reformation conceptions of spirituality were conflicting and contradictory.

To his fellow believers Calvin wrote, "The increase, as well as the commencement of everything good in us, comes from the Holy Spirit."

Spirituality and the Holy Spirit

In an essay entitled "John Calvin, the Theologian," Princeton scholar Benjamin B. Warfield (1851–1921) asserted:

It is probable that Calvin's greatest contribution to theological science lies in the rich development . . . which he was the first to give—to the doctrine of the work of the Holy Spirit. . . . The *Institutes* is . . . just a treatise on the work of God the Holy Spirit in making God savingly known to sinful man, and bringing sinful man into holy communion with God.⁴

The honor and glory of God were Calvin's foremost concerns, and he believed Christians must pursue true godliness, which "consists of a pure . . . zeal which loves God as a real Father and looks up to him as a real Lord; it embraces his righteousness and detests offending him more than it does dying."⁵ When believers regard God in this way, they honor and glorify him.

Calvin understood the human condition well, so he realized that no person, however devout, could love God adequately. God, however,

works in his elect in two ways; within, through his Spirit; without, through his Word. By his Spirit illuminating their minds and forming their hearts to the love and cultivation of righteousness, he makes them a new creation. By his Word, he arouses them to desire, to seek after, and to attain that same renewal.⁶

To his fellow believers Calvin wrote, "The increase, as well as the commencement of everything good

Calvin did not advise disgust with God's creation but rather urged Christians to admire the divine handiwork and to enjoy its wholesome benefits...

in us, comes from the Holy Spirit.”⁷ Again, Calvin wrote, “God gives us the Spirit as our teacher in prayer, to tell us what is right and [to] temper our emotions.”⁸

Throughout his writings Calvin extolled the work of the Holy Spirit, whom he identified as both the Spirit of God and the Spirit of Christ, and urged Christians not to separate the Word from the Spirit, as some radicals were then doing. Spirituality requires the objective truth of divine revelation, for that is the basis for subjective life and its development. The Holy Spirit leads believers to embrace sound doctrine, and that doctrine must regulate all of life. Book III of the *Institutes of the Christian Religion* reminds readers that books I and II deal with the knowledge of God objectively, as Creator and Redeemer, while conferring the subjective knowledge of God is the work of the Holy Spirit. While philosophers acclaim human reason as the supreme guide for life, Christians must subject reason to revealed truth, which requires reason to “yield, retire, give place to the Holy Spirit [and] subject itself to his direction.”¹⁰

Calvin maintained that true holiness requires separation from sinful practices by living “under the government of his [God’s] Holy Spirit,” who is “the fountain of all holiness, all righteousness, and, in short, all perfection.”¹¹ Therefore, “until our minds become intent upon the Spirit, Christ, so to speak, lies idle because we coldly contemplate him as outside ourselves—indeed, far from us.”¹² The union of believers with Christ is due to the work of the Holy Spirit, who illuminates the Word and grants faith. Union with Christ then leads to assurance of salvation and confidence in God.¹³

Appreciation for the Word of God requires the action of God’s Spirit to regenerate and convince people to believe Scripture. Although

Scripture is inherently true and self-authenticating, the witness of the Holy Spirit is necessary before people will concur with its teachings. No one will invest faith in the Word without the Spirit’s witness persuading him.¹⁴ God’s special revelation is the basis for true piety, as it is the authority for all of life, for doctrine and practice, but only the Spirit of God can convince people this is so. The Spirit provides the “efficacious confirmation of the Word.”¹⁵ The Spirit does not add to the revelation of the Bible but speaks by means of the written Word and enables readers to receive its message as authentic.

There could be no spiritual life without regeneration, which is the work of God the Holy Spirit. Those whom the Spirit regenerates exercise saving faith in Christ, because of God’s gift through his Spirit, who is “not only the initiator of faith, but [the one who] increases it by degrees until by it he leads us [the elect] to the kingdom of heaven.”¹⁶

Spirituality and the Christian Life

John Calvin referred to his *Institutes of the Christian Religion* not as a *summa theologiae*, but as a *summa pietas*, for he was concerned to promote both sound doctrine and sincere piety.¹⁷ For the Reformer of Geneva theology was not an academic pursuit for scholars alone but an undertaking essential for the wellbeing of all believers. Calvin therefore united doctrine and spirituality and had no place for an uninformed piety that does not seek to know God through faithful study of his Word. Theology and spirituality belong together. It is proper to distinguish between them; it is wrong to separate them. The Christian life

begins at regeneration, when the Holy Spirit imparts his transforming power, and it continues as the Spirit directs believers to the means of grace by which they seek holiness as long as they live. Spirituality then encompasses the entire experience of Christians, as they conduct their pilgrimage to the City of God.

While they remain on earth, the people of God must remember their primary citizenship is in the kingdom of heaven, to which they owe ultimate loyalty. Like the Apostle Paul (Phil. 1:21–26), believers will long for eternal repose with Christ, but they must accept the duties of Christian living upon earth until God calls them to their heavenly home. Calvin called for careful balance when Christians consider life on earth in the light of eternity, and he urged them to meditate on eternity as a beneficial way to perceive the present life properly. As he stated the matter,

Let believers accustom themselves to a contempt for the present life that engenders no hatred for it or ingratitude against God. . . . We must . . . become so disposed that we count it [earthly life] among those gifts of divine generosity which are not at all to be rejected.¹⁸

To maintain contempt for the world means to learn to pass through this world as though it is a foreign country, treating all earthly things lightly and declining to . . . set our hearts upon them. . . . If we . . . are strangers in the world, we will use the things of this world as if they belong to someone else—that is, as things that are left to us for a single day.¹⁹

Calvin did not advise disgust with God’s creation but rather urged Christians to admire the

divine handiwork and to enjoy its wholesome benefits, for God made such things attractive precisely so humans would enjoy them.²⁰ The Reformer held, however, that believers are moving away from creation as it is now, stained with sin, so he did not promote vigorous efforts to improve society, except in those areas such as Geneva, in which Christians had control.²¹

As John Calvin understood it, the Christian life is like a term of military service in a hostile land. When the pressures of that experience tempt believers to lose heart, they should regard heaven as their “homeland” and earth as a “place of exile.” They must hate the present life to the degree that it subjects them to temptation and sin.²² Christians should bear in mind that their trials draw them away from concern with the present world and excite their desire for immortality, even though the evil remaining within them still inclines them toward earthly concerns. They must focus on eternity while they endure real pain, sorrow, and a variety of problems. Assurance that God controls all things should cheer them in the midst of their trials. In particular, they should reflect upon Christ’s triumph over sin and death and remember he has made them participants in his victory.²³

In order to succeed in the Christian life, believers require clear instruction from God’s Word, and Calvin wrote extensively to meet that need. Although he was a profound scholar, the Reformer had the heart of a pastor who fervently desired that professing Christians would enjoy all the fruits of the Holy Spirit to empower them to attain genuine spirituality. Calvin defined spirituality or piety as “reverence joined with love of God which the knowledge of his benefits induces.”²⁴ That is, piety is an attitude produced by reflection on the gifts of God. People who know God savingly will cherish him and his Word and seek to please him according to biblical precepts, for the Word of God is not given to teach us how to talk, or to make us eloquent or skillful in debate, but to reform our lives, so that the world may know that our desire is to serve God, to give ourselves wholly to him and live in conformity with what pleases him. If we want to know whether a man has profited by the gospel or not, let us take note of his life.²⁵

Calvin therefore assigned great importance to the role of Scripture in the development of spirituality, which involves both private study of the Word and attendance at the public proclamation of its truths through preaching and counseling

believers. The Holy Spirit creates faith in the Word of God and faith in the God of the Word, and piety requires Christians to organize their lives around Scripture, applying its teachings to all of their activities. Piety must be anchored to the Word, so believers must attend public worship to hear the Word, and they must reinforce that with personal study and meditation. Reciting Scripture in song is one valuable way to promote spiritual growth, and the Reformed church services in Calvin’s era featured vigorous congregational singing, especially of the Psalms, which the reformer called “prayers of the Spirit.”²⁶

Spirituality is a product of apprehending the proper knowledge of God and of one’s self, and that knowledge comes from the Word of revelation, which requires regular study to obtain divine instruction.²⁷ John Calvin was a biblical rather than a speculative theologian. *Sola Scriptura* was his formal principle, so the teaching of the Bible determined the character of his doctrine of piety.²⁸ He was not a remote academic figure, detached from ordinary people and the temptations and obstacles they had to confront. His method of exposition was to teach believers so as to prepare them for Christian living in the real world.



Mystical Union

Perhaps the most prominent feature of Calvin's view of spirituality was his concept of *unio mystica* (mystical union) with Christ. Some scholars contend this is the central theme of the Reformer's theology. Whether or not a single doctrine dominated his thinking, the concept of union with the Savior appears often in Calvin's writings, regardless of the main subject he was addressing, so it must have been one of his foremost concerns. Although he did not explain this doctrine fully (perhaps because it is inexplicable), he considered it a reality and contended that some appreciation for it is essential for godly living.²⁹

In medieval thinking about union with Christ, pantheism sometimes appeared, at least by implication, as writings of some Rhineland mystics illustrate.³⁰ Calvin was, however, careful to maintain belief in the Creator/creature distinction while espousing his belief that the Holy Spirit unites Christians with Christ, and this union with the Savior is the source of all benefits he bestows. A person cannot be justified (declared right with God) if he does not demonstrate the effects of grace in his life, and no one could experience real

love for God apart from the presence of Christ dwelling within him.²³¹

Although Calvin referred to the union of the elect with Christ as *unio mystica*, that term could be misleading. In the French version of his works, he wrote *union sacrée*, which better expresses his meaning.³² Calvin used *mysticus* to signify mysterious, secret, or wonderful, terms appropriate for describing the communion Christians enjoy with their Lord.³³ The Reformer did not intend to imply absorption into Christ or the loss of the believers' identity in eternity.

According to Calvin, justifying faith leads to intimate fellowship with Jesus Christ. The reformer expressed his understanding in this way.

Most people consider fellowship with Christ and believing in Christ to be the same thing; the fellowship we have with Christ is the consequence of faith. In a word, faith is not a distant view, but a warm embrace of Christ, by which he dwells in us, and we are filled with the divine Spirit.³⁴

Faith assents to the message of Scripture because the Holy Spirit illumines human minds to believe it and to embrace Christ, the object of faith. This faith establishes an eternal bond between God and his people, as

his Holy Spirit resides within them. In Calvin's words:

Not only does he [Christ] cleave to us by an invisible bond of fellowship, but with a more wonderful communion; day-by-day he grows more and more into one body with us until he becomes completely one with us.³⁵

Spirituality entails intimacy between God as the object and believers as subjects.³⁶ As Calvin put it to readers of his *Institutes*, "you must possess Christ, but you cannot possess him without being made partakers in his sanctification."³⁷ In other words, God never bestows the grace of justification without the grace of sanctification, a subjective experience that leads Christians to progress in spirituality toward its completion in eternity.

Calvin understood spirituality to involve deep personal communion with Christ as the fruit of justifying grace, so he scorned those people who claimed to possess faith while failing to demonstrate its reality in their lives. In pointed terms he exclaimed:

We detest these trifling sophists who are content to roll the gospel on the tips of their tongues when its efficacy ought to penetrate the inmost affections

Calvin was not an austere person with a countenance of stone and a heart of ice. Rather he understood the complexity of human nature, and he maintained that love for Christ must involve the emotions as well as the will.



of the heart, take its seat in the soul, and affect the whole man a hundred times more deeply than the cold exhortations of the philosophers.³⁸

Warnings to people whose faith is only cerebral or academic abound in Calvin's writings, for he knew that a formal faith of the intellect alone could not lead to godly living. Contrary to popular myth, he was not an austere person with a countenance of stone and a heart of ice. Rather he understood the complexity of human nature, and he maintained that love for Christ must involve the emotions as well as the will.³⁹ True faith then is not only *cognito fidei*, but *fiducia fidei*—a continuous trusting relationship with the Savior as empowered by the Holy Spirit. "The certainty of faith is knowledge, but [it] is acquired by the teaching of the Holy Spirit, not by the acuteness of our own intellect."⁴⁰

Since John Calvin emphasized the necessity of an intimate relationship with Christ, he did not hesitate to compare that to a marriage, as the Apostle Paul had done. Commenting on Ephesians 5:29, the Reformer wrote:

The strong affection that a husband ought to cherish toward his wife is exemplified by Christ, and an instance of that unity which belongs to marriage is declared to exist between himself and the church. This is a remarkable passage on the mysterious intercourse we have with Christ.⁴¹

Jesus, then, communicates not only his favor and benefits, but *himself*. More than fellowship (*societas*), it is comparable to the marital union.⁴² It may also be compared to eating, for Jesus said, "I am the bread of life" (John 6:35). This eating requires faith, and faith leads to communion with the Savior.

For faith does not merely look at Christ . . . but embraces him that he may become ours and dwell in us. . . . So it is true that we may eat Christ by faith alone, provided we



grasp at the same time how faith unites us with him.⁴³

While Calvin was careful to ascribe the work of salvation entirely to God, he understood that divine grace does not negate the personal responsibility of believers to discipline themselves so as to promote their own spirituality. Participation in Christ begins at regeneration, and thereafter God's law informs believers who God is and what he requires of them, so they can live with God and serve him. As the Reformer put it, "we are consecrated to God in order that we may . . . think, speak, meditate, and do nothing except to his glory."⁴⁴ This will often require deliberate denial of oneself, and it means believers will submit their affections to their Lord, along with all of their possessions. This will happen only where "inward mortification" occurs, because concupiscence, the root of all sin, is always present, even in the lives of saints. Concupiscence is lust, which "remains in a regenerate man, a smoldering cinder of evil which desires continually to leap forth to allure . . . him to commit sin."⁴⁵ As one skillful student of Calvin has remarked, "the mortification of concupiscence . . . involves the denial of all impulses of the flesh," and "sinful self-love is the direct result of

concupiscence."⁴⁶ Calvin admonished his readers:

It is of no slight importance for you to be cleansed of your blind love of self that you may be made more nearly aware of your incapacity, . . . that you may learn to distrust yourself, that you may transfer your trust to God.⁴⁷

Christians, of course, experience inner tensions because their efforts at self-denial conflict with their natural desires. To meet the challenges from evil tendencies, they must be ruthless and resolute in dealing with them. In Calvin's words, "we must labor and fight and apply our utmost energy, and we must begin with self-denial."⁴⁸ No passive reliance upon divine aid is proper, but believers must take action against themselves when temptations appear, for the Christian life is a relentless warfare against sin.

However valiantly God's people seek to suppress the evil still within them, they cannot prevail without their Lord's assistance. God knows their frailty, so he has provided them with "the continued working of the Spirit by which he gradually mortifies the relics of the flesh and renews in them [the elect] a celestial life."⁴⁹ The Holy Spirit binds believers to Christ, who is in heaven. The Spirit alone can unite heaven and earth, and he raises Christians to heaven to commune with Christ, so they have ready access to the Savior's help, as they struggle with temptation.⁵⁰

1. A helpful examination of these terms appears in Jill Raitt, "Saints and Sinners: Roman Catholic and Protestant Spirituality in the Sixteenth century," in *Christian Spirituality in the High Middle Ages and Reformation*, ed. Jill Raitt with Bernard McGinn and John Meyendorff (New York: Crossroad Publishing Company, 1987), 454–63.

2. See Alister E. McGrath, *Spirituality in an Age of Change*

- (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1994), 23–36; James Edward McGoldrick, “Luther on Life Without Dichotomy,” *Grace Theological Journal* 5 (1984), 3–11.
3. John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill, tr. Ford Lewis Battles (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1960), III:19,2.
 4. Benjamin B. Warfield, “John Calvin the Theologian,” in *Calvin and Augustine*, ed. Samuel G. Craig, forward by J. Marcellus Kik (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company, 1971), 485–86.
 5. John Calvin, *Truth for All Time: a Brief Outline of the Christian Faith*, tr. Stuart Olyott (Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1998), 3. This fresh translation of a summary of the first edition of the *Institutes* is a fine place to begin a study of Calvin.
 6. Calvin, *Institutes*, II:5,5.
 7. John Calvin, *Commentaries on the Epistles of Paul to the Galatians and Ephesians*, tr. William Pringle (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1984), 261.
 8. Calvin, *Institutes*, III, 20:5.
 9. McGrath, *Spirituality in an Age of Change*, 192.
 10. John Calvin, *The Piety of John Calvin*, ed. & tr. Ford Lewis Battles (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1978), 56.
 11. John Calvin, *Grace and Its Fruits: Selections from John Calvin on the Pastoral Epistles*, comp. Joseph Hill (Darlington, UK: Evangelical Press, 2000), 209–10.
 12. Calvin, *Institutes*, III:1,3.
 13. *Ibid.*, III:2,33–35; see Eifion Evans, “John Calvin, Theologian of the Holy Spirit,” *Reformation & Revival* 10 (Fall 2001), 83–104.
 14. Calvin, *Institutes*, I:7,4,5.
 15. *Ibid.*, I:9,3.
 16. *Ibid.*, III:2,33.
 17. This is an insight of Paul Chung, *Spirituality and Social Ethics in John Calvin* (Lanham, MD: University of America Press, 2000), 8.
 18. Calvin, *Institutes*, III:9,3.
 19. Quoted from the *Geneva Catechism* by McGrath, *Spirituality in An Age of Change*, 135.
 20. Chapter 10 of book III in the *Institutes* deals with this matter.
 21. See Richard C. Gamble, “Calvin and Sixteenth Century Spirituality,” *Calvin Theological Journal* 31 (1996), 335–58.
 22. Calvin, *Institutes*, III:9,4.
 23. *Ibid.*, III:8, 9–11; III:9, 103, 5–6.
 24. John Calvin, *The Christian Life*, ed. John H. Leith (San Francisco: Harper & Row Publishers, 1984), ix.
 25. Calvin, *Grace and Fruits*, 188.
 26. See Hughes Oliphant Old, “What is Reformed Spirituality?” in *Calvin Studies*, ed. John H. Leith (Davidson, NC: Davidson College, 1994), 61–68.
 27. Calvin, *Institutes*, I:2,1.
 28. An insightful study of this matter appears in Ronald S. Wallace, *Calvin’s Doctrine of the Christian Life* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock Publishers, 1997). See chapter 14 especially.
 29. Charles Partee, “Calvin’s Central Dogma Again,” *Sixteenth Century Journal* XVIII (Summer 1987), 191–99.
 30. *Meister Eckhart, a Modern Translation*, ed. Raymond B. Blackney (New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1941).
 31. John Calvin, *Commentary on the Gospel According to John*, II (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1949), 188–89.
 32. Francois Wendel, *Calvin: Origins and Development of His Religious Thought*, tr. Philip Mairet (Durham, NC: Labyrinth Press, 1987 rpt. of 1963 ed), 237.
 33. This observation comes from B. A. Gerrish, *Grace and Gratitude: the Eucharistic Theology of John Calvin* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993), 73. Cf. Calvin, *Institutes*, IV:17,1; III:2,24.
 34. Calvin, *Commentaries on Galatians and Ephesians*, 262 (on Ephesians 3:17).
 35. Calvin, *Institutes*, III:2,24.
 36. This is an insight of Otto Gruendler, “John Calvin: Ingrafting into Christ,” in *The Spirituality of Western Christendom*, ed. Rozanne Elder (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 1976), 180.
 37. Calvin, *Institutes*, III:16,1.
 38. *Ibid.*, III:6,4.
 39. William J. Bouwsma, “The Spirituality of John Calvin,” in *Christian Spirituality: High Middle Ages and Reformation*, 318–33. This is a very perceptive essay.
 40. Calvin, *Commentaries on Galatians and Ephesians*, 264 (on Ephesians 3:19).
 41. *Ibid.*, 322–23.
 42. Gerrish, *Grace and Gratitude*, 73–74.
 43. Calvin, *Commentary on Gospel According to John*, 250 (on John 6:35).
 44. Calvin, *Institutes*, III:7,1.
 45. *Ibid.*, III:3,10.
 46. There is an outstanding analysis of this matter in David K. Winecoff, “Calvin’s Doctrine of Mortification,” *Presbyterian: Covenant Seminary Review*, 13 (1987), 85–101.
 47. Calvin, *Institutes*, III:7,3.
 48. Calvin, *Commentary on Galatians and Ephesians*, 163 (on Galatians 5:17); cf. Wallace, *Calvin’s Doctrine of Christian Life*, 57–60.
 49. John Calvin, *Commentary on the Epistle of Paul to the Romans*, tr. & ed. John Owen (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1955), 293 (on Romans 8:11).
 50. Winecoff, “Calvin’s Doctrine of Mortification,” 87; see Calvin, *Institutes*, IV:17, 26, 31.

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Bible Studies on the Book of Judges

Lesson 20: Judges 20–21

Mr. James
Oord

We have arrived at the last section in the book of Judges. In chapter 19, we reached an all-time low in Israel's history with the horrible sins of the Gibeonites, who were of the tribe of Benjamin. These last two chapters, which tell us of one event, candidly show us just how far Israel has fallen, giving us a view of their twisted, sinful minds. The conclusion of the book of Judges is anything but a happy ending. It is a depressing, horribly discouraging book. Throughout the whole book, we have been searching for a deliverer. We have studied some judges who did pretty well, some who messed up, and others who just downright failed. But none of them brought unity to the tribes of Israel, and none of them brought lasting deliverance. At the end of the book, Israel was still in the clutches of Canaanite occupation and in the clutches of their sin. The book leaves us searching for a deliverer, longing for salvation.

We left chapter 19 with various and sundry body pieces circling through Israel via UPS, causing the Israelites to call a meeting. Verses 1–3 set the stage; in fact all three verses say the same thing; nothing happens until the end of verse 3. The narrator went out of his way to tell us that the people were unified. Verse 1 tells us that *all* the people of Israel, from Dan (the northern boundary) to Beersheba (the southern boundary), including the land of Gilead (the trans-Jordan lands) came. Everyone came. And not only did everyone come, but they came “united as one man.” This was all of the Israelites, from every tribe. Why have they come? What was the focal point of their assembly? The Bible says that they came to the LORD at Mizpah. Not one of the judges in this entire book achieved this kind of

response! This was unheard of in the book of Judges. This assembly sets up an expectation that something good is going to happen.

Verse 2 tells us that it is not just the people who assembled, but their chiefs, too. The meeting is referred to as “an assembly of the people of God.” *Assembly* is a word used in covenant renewal ceremonies, where the people recommitted themselves to the LORD. Verse 2 also adds the detail that there were four hundred thousand men at this assembly. This was about the size of our current United States army. This was enormous, especially in comparison with other armies of Scripture. It reiterates the fact that *all* the people were united. It makes us wonder where all these people have been during the rest of the book of Judges. If they had shown up earlier, they could have defeated the Canaanites, and this book would not have had to happen.

Verse 3a adds a parenthetical statement. Benjamin, the offending tribe, was not there. This verse distinguishes Benjamin from Israel and tells us that “all” does not include Benjamin. Benjamin knew what was happening; they would have received one of the twelve pieces of the body, but they did not come.

The first scene of this epic was a question and answer period. The Israelites asked the Levite why he had sent them the body parts. They asked “How did this evil happen?” The true answer was that they had ignored God and His laws; they had done what was right in their own eyes. They had failed to press on in defeating the Canaanites, and they became worse than the Canaanites. Compare that with the answer that the Levite gave.

The Levite is described as the “husband of the murdered woman.” He could better have been described as the man who left this woman to die on the doorstep. This positive description of him prepares us for the way in which he is going to present himself. What was his answer? How did this evil happen? He told the assembly that he came to Gibeah, which belonged to Benjamin; the leaders came out wanting to kill him; they raped his concubine, and she died. This is rather different from the story in Judges 19. He omitted that little bit about him shoving his concubine out of the door to the men. Chapter 19 said that the rapists were the worthless men of Gibeah, but according to the Levite, it was “the leaders,” which made it sound like the whole town was in on the rape. He also said that the men surrounded the house (which was true) with the intent of killing him (which was not true). This was not a complete fabrication; they might have killed him if they had had their way with him and raped him violently as they did his concubine. He also did not mention anything about his loving and caring response to his concubine in the morning (“Hey, get up, let's go.”). He said that he cut her body up and sent it out “throughout the country of the inheritance of Israel” (which is what it was meant to be, but was not yet). He ended his little speech by calling for advice and counsel. What is wrong with this picture? According to Deuteronomy, for such charges to be laid against anyone, let alone a whole town, there needed to be at least two witnesses to make the accusation. This was a genuine offense, but there was only one witness, they only knew his side

of the story, and we have seen that it was not entirely true.

In verses 8–11, the people of Israel came to a decision. Both verse 8 and 11 remind us again that the people were united as one man. They were assembled against Benjamin, especially against Gibeah. They decided to punish Benjamin for their wicked act and sent out a tenth of their forces to take vengeance on Gibeah. What is missing from all of this? The LORD.

In verses 12–13, the tribes of Israel appealed to the Benjamites. They asked them to give up the worthless fellows so that the Israelites could put them to death and “purge the evil from Israel.” It is interesting that the Israelites called the offenders “worthless fellows” instead of the leaders like the Levite had said. The Benjamites would not listen to the voice of “their brothers.” The issue at stake here was Benjamin’s relationship and loyalty. How does Benjamin fit within the relationship of the Israelites tribes? Which of their two loyalties was stronger, their family unit (the people in Gibeah) or the covenantal ties with Israel? Benjamin decided to muster their men and stand beside the inhabitants of Gibeah. The battle lines were drawn. Israel was engaging in civil war.

Benjamin had twenty-six thousand men; Gibeah had seven hundred. Israel had four hundred thousand men of war. Both sides had skilled warriors on their side. This was going to result in many deaths. These soldiers, who should have been fighting together against the Canaanites, were going to be fighting against each other.

In verse 18, the Israelites inquired of the LORD, “who should go up first?” Those words should sound familiar. It was exactly where the book of Judges began in chapter 1. There, Israel also inquired of the LORD who should go first into battle. There is one key and crucial difference, however.

Here, they are fighting against Israel instead of against the heathens! What a terrible contrast! How far Israel has fallen! They did not even think to ask “should we go up?” The only time Israel was ever fully unified was to engage in this civil war, instead of uniting to fight the heathen.

The strange thing is, the LORD answered them. If this was such a bad situation, such a bad decision, why did the LORD answer them? Think. When bad things happen in the midst of God’s people, does He refuse to answer them? Not always. The LORD was setting them up for failure. In the same way, an answer to our prayers does not necessarily mean we are following God’s will. We can pray ridiculous things like, “If it is your will that I marry Joel, let there be mint chocolate chip ice cream available in the cafeteria today,” or, “If you want me to take this job, let an acceptance letter be in the mail when I get home.” Sounds ridiculous, does it not? There are people who do things like that. They set up little tests for God and think that if they are answered, it must be God answering. In Ezekiel 14, the LORD says, “I will not answer them except in terms of their idols.” Sometimes the LORD spoke to Israel through false prophets in order to give them what they wanted to hear, to set them up for failure, to teach them a lesson. He sometimes does the same thing when we set up silly little tests for Him, too. He is able to work His purposes without endorsing the actions used. In one sense, this civil war is right: Gibeah certainly deserves to be destroyed for its crime, and if Benjamin sided with them, they should be punished, too. This whole situation is wrong.

Verses 19–21 describe the first battle. It was an overwhelming victory for the smaller side. This sort of thing happens all the time in the Bible; the smaller side wins because the LORD helps them. But in this battle, we are not sure who to root for; neither side

was right; both sides were in sin, and this whole civil war thing is just a horrible situation for God’s covenant people to be in.

In verses 22–23, the Israelites regrouped. This time, they went before the LORD with weeping, asking if they should attack again. As in chapter 2, the Israelites were again going through the motions, trying to get God on their side, but not at all repentant or sorry. And again, the LORD set them up for failure. It is always strange when people say that they are doing something because they claim “the Lord told me to.” Here is an instance where the LORD “told” someone to do something, and eighteen thousand of their own men ended up dead! Here is just one more reason to be scared when people claim that they got a special message from the LORD to do something.

In verses 26–29, the Israelites, the whole army, went up to Bethel and wept. They fasted, offered offerings, and inquired of the LORD. There is even mention of a real priest, descended from Aaron, and the ark of the covenant. Do not be too impressed with their piety, though. Until they have actions and hearts to match their pious religious display, God will hate their offerings and their worship, for He desires obedience more than sacrifice. The other times, they prepared first and then asked. They offered the LORD an option. “Shall we go out once more to battle, or shall we cease?” This time, the LORD responded differently, telling them to go out for He would give Benjamin into their hands.

Verses 30–35 tell the new battle plans. This time, Israel set an ambush instead of drawing battle lines (very similar to Joshua’s plan for Ai). A few soldiers created a ruse, forming battle lines as before. The people of Benjamin went out against them. Once the Benjamites had the Israelites on the run, the rest of the Israelites, who had been hidden away until this point, came out and

routed them, destroying their city and destroying many Benjamites. And the LORD defeated Benjamin. Only six hundred Benjamite men remained.

Benjamin was defeated. Chapter 21:1 gives us a flashback to a vow made before the battle at the meeting at Mizpah. The Israelites had vowed “No one of us shall give his daughter in marriage to Benjamin.” There was a biblical basis for punishing Gibeah and those Benjamites who declared covenant solidarity with Gibeah. But this vow was entirely different. Israel was more than happy to give their daughters to Canaanite husbands. This was a vow that they should have made concerning the Canaanites. If only they had been this conscientious about their covenantal commitment to destroy the Canaanites. Judges 21 lays out the moral gymnastics that the Israelites had to go through to keep their vow. They basically said “Heaven forbid that we break a vow, so let us break every other commandment in order to keep it.”

To figure out what to do about this vow, the Israelites again travel to Bethel. Here again we have an assembling before the LORD. They wept bitterly, built an altar and offered many offerings. There was weeping, sacrifice, but what was missing? A response from the LORD. They asked the LORD a question: “Why has this happened in Israel, that today there should be one tribe lacking?” But He did not respond. They should have known the answer. It should have been staring them right in the face. It is their wickedness that has caused this tragedy.

The Israelites did not really notice or care that God did not respond. Instead of saying “and the LORD said,” we are told “the people of Israel said.” They had compassion for Benjamin and tried to figure out how to find them wives, without breaking their vows. There were 600 Benjamites left; where could they find 600 women? They had much zeal for this; they really wanted

to find a solution. Why could they not have had this zeal for doing God’s will? So, Benjamin needed wives and they could not give them their daughters. What should they have done?

The only good answer would be to rewind their lives and start over; they should not have done these things in the first place. They could have identified this oath as a bad oath—there were provisions for people who swore foolish oaths in Leviticus. So, they could repent, offer a few sacrifices, and purify themselves, and the problem would be solved. What Israel was doing for Benjamin was exactly what Benjamin did for Gibeah in chapter 20. Gibeah had sinned. Benjamin had placed more importance on Gibeah than on the covenant. Now Benjamin sinned, and Israel placed solidarity with them above obedience to God’s Law.

In verses 10–12, the Israelites figured out that Jabesh-Gilead had not come to the mustering. They decided to destroy it and kidnap their virgins to give to Benjamin. So, they sent twelve thousand of their best men to destroy a peaceful, quiet city. They attacked and killed every man, married woman, and child, and then abducted four hundred virgins. This is the same thing that the old man in Gibeah was willing to do in chapter 19. “Here, take my virgin daughter and do whatever you want with her,” he had said. Now, Israel was fulfilling the same kind of role as that old man, facilitating the same kind of abuse.

The Israelites then took the virgins to Shiloh. Notice in verse 12 that it mentions that “Shiloh was in the land of Canaan.” Shiloh was where the Ark was. It was supposed to be the heartland of Israel, but it is identified as Canaanite.

In verse 13, the whole congregation sent word to what was left of Benjamin, proclaiming peace. On what basis did they declare peace? There was no repentance by Benjamin; they

never said that they were wrong to have sided with Gibeah. No change, just peace, peace, when there was no peace. This was not justice; this was not repentance; this was just being tired of fighting.

However, there was a problem. There were six hundred Benjamite men and only four hundred virgins. So, they decided to go get more women. Notice that nobody asked how the women felt about all this. Why did they do this? Verse 15 tells us that they did it out of compassion on Benjamin “because the LORD had caused a breach in the tribes of Israel.” Wait, who caused this breach? Israel certainly was not an innocent bystander.

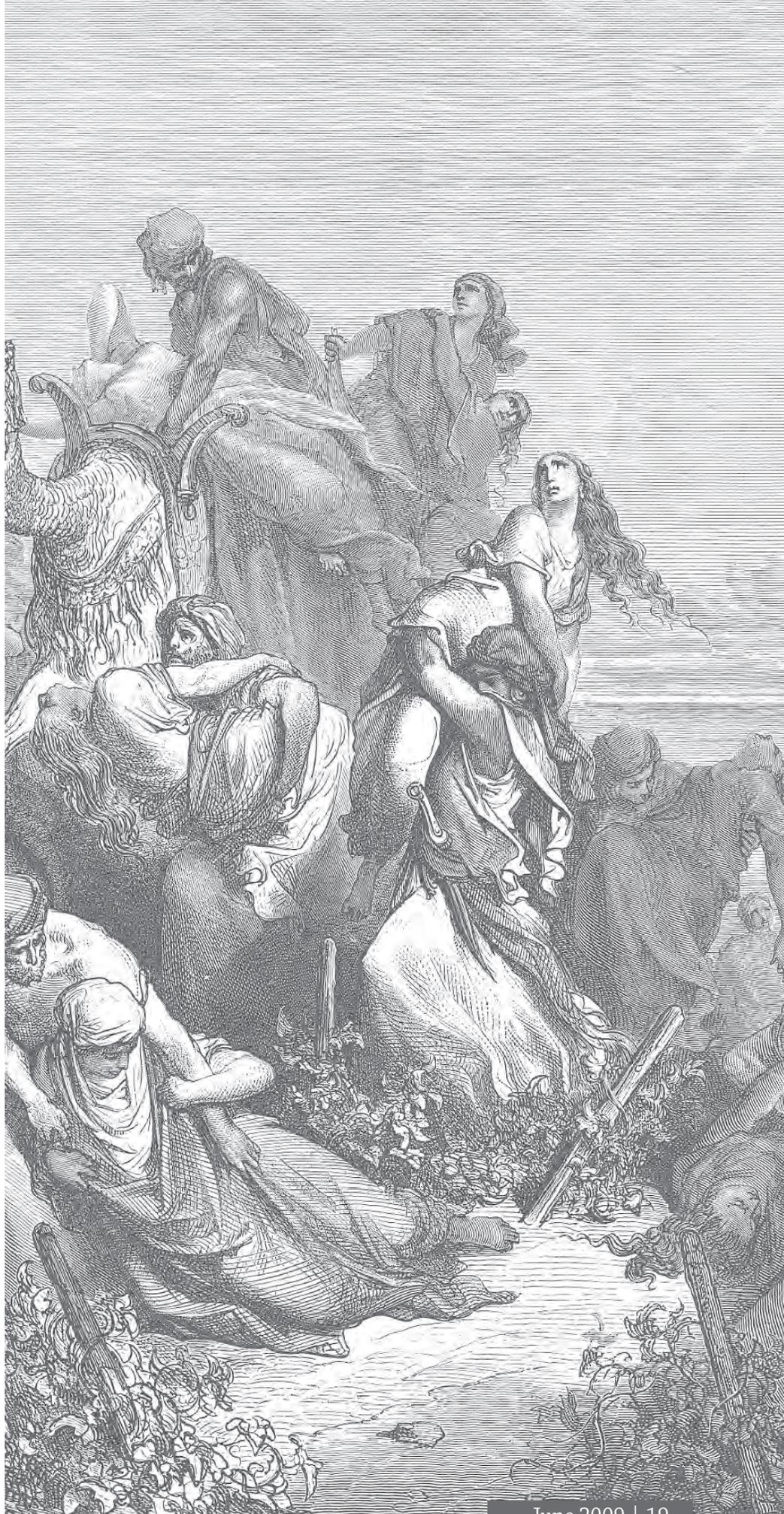
Israel was obsessed with maintaining the formal order of the twelve tribes. They did not feel that they had to live like a holy nation; they did not have any problem with intermingling with the nations around them; they did not have a problem with Baal and Asherah, but they needed to have all twelve tribes accounted for! They had compassion on Benjamin because they thought it was all the LORD’s fault. They valued their warm fuzzy kinship feelings over God’s will.

This warm fuzzy compassion led them to advise the 200 wife-less Benjamites to go kidnap some virgins from the religious festival at Shiloh. They were committed to not giving them wives from among their daughters because they had vowed not to. They have broken every other commandment, but they had to keep their vow. So, the Benjamites jumped out from behind some bushes, grabbed a wife, and high-tailed it back to their homes. In verse 22, the Israelites anticipated the objections of these girls’ fathers and brothers. The leaders decided that the best thing to tell them would be “at least you did not break your vow.” Because these girls were forcibly taken, not given, the vow was kept. Now everyone can be happy, right? Notice who is not getting consulted here—the virgins. They were probably

not too thrilled with the husbands they got, but no one cared. Once more, the elders of the people were acting just like the old man of Gibeah in Judges 19. In order to deal with the problem, they facilitated the rape of 200 more women. In Judges 19, we started with one woman raped and murdered. By the end of the book, we have six hundred women raped and tons of men murdered.

The narrator concluded the book by stating the obvious: everyone did what was right in his own eyes.

Israel is so lost, so reprobate. By the end of this book, it is more of a sinful nation than it is a church, a chosen people of God. In this chapter, they are much more concerned with preserving their nation than about obeying God, so Israel became Canaanized. What happens when the Church become Canaanized, exactly like the culture around us? Just look around you. The divorce rate is the same within and outside of the church. The number of teens having pre-marital sex is the same within and outside of the church. There is no difference in the statistics of how people within and outside of the church behave. Our churches are plagued by an outward appearance of religiosity, when inside, they are rotting. We use all the right words and wear all the right T-shirts and pray all the right prayers, but there is no difference between most people in the church and in the world. We believe that God exists, but He is not a reality to us. He is just out there somewhere, far away. All of the trappings of serving Him are still in place, but His reality has utterly disappeared. This chapter of Judges is shocking because it shows just where



The children of Benjamin carrying off the virgins of Jabesh-Gilead by Gustave Doré

“And they found among the inhabitants of Jabesh-Gilead 400 young virgins who had not known a man by lying with him; and they brought them to the camp at Shiloh, which is in the land of Canaan.” (Judges 21:12)

the American church is heading. We are not cutting people up into pieces or pushing people outside to get gang raped, but we are being Canaanized just as much as Israel was.

The Israelites were so obsessed with keeping their vows that they forgot true obedience. There are certain little laws that we, like the Pharisees, are careful to keep, but the weightier matters like mercy or justice are ignored. We keep certain rules, but the substance of serving God gets totally lost. What sorts of rules do you obsess over? You can gossip and slander all you want, but you never take a whiff of tobacco. You obsess over abstinence and keeping your virginity, but you have no concern over guarding your heart and keeping yourself free from lust. You would never even think of letting a drop of alcohol meet your tongue, but you succumb to pride daily. You do your daily devotions without fail, but you hold grudges against your fellow Christian. You go to both services every Sunday, but never really keep the Lord's Day in your heart, never keeping it with love and Christian unity. All these things are just outward structures without any true foundation. The Israelites had compassion for the Benjamites, but not for the women being raped. Those women were just nameless people. We can be very concerned for our friends and the people immediately around us, but not with our brothers and sisters around the world.

The Israelites wanted compassion, peace, and inheritance. They wanted to show compassion to the Benjamites; they wanted peace with their lost brothers, and they used human strategies to achieve it. Human strategies only succeed in multiplying sin. Human efforts to solve these problems of sin do not cut it. There is no real peace at the end of this book, only a return to the status quo of total depravity.

We are where Benjamin was; more than that, we are where Gibeah was.

We are sinners, men of unclean lips, and we show solidarity to other sinners; we are quite comfortable in our sin, and it does not trouble us in the least. There are two trajectories that the people of Benjamin were offered. First, they were threatened with judgment from the Israelites. That is what we deserve, to be totally wiped out as most of Benjamin was. Second, Benjamin was offered cheap grace from the elders of Israel. It did not cost the men of Benjamin anything. The result was a return to the status quo of sin. We can find temporary situations to deal with our sin that make us feel comfortable, but really do not solve anything. We merely live in a fake, hypocritical world. What we need is a radical change, a solution that actually deals with our sin.

But sin never just disappears. It can never just be waved away. Sin needs to be dealt with. Simple forgiveness does not wipe away the cost. For instance, if someone totals your car, you can forgive him, but you still expect him

to pay for the damages. We need our sin to be totally dealt with. On the cross, Christ paid for our sin in a way that enables us to be really forgiven. We can now receive our inheritance ultimately because of what God has done in bringing the ultimate King. Sinners killed that King, but that ultimate act of rebellion is the way through which our sins were ultimately paid for. Here is the source of hope for Benjamin, hope for us, and hope for Paul, a Benjamite who wrote that now there is therefore no condemnation for us in Christ Jesus. The human strategy of finagling around sin does not work. It only leads to death and destruction. We are completely lost in sin. Our only hope is through what Christ has done on the cross.

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Lesson 20: Points to Ponder

1. How and why do we often fight against our fellow Christians rather than against the world? When is it proper? When is it improper?
2. How are we at times guilty of simply going through the acts of worship? Are there times when we listen to what "the people say" instead of what God has said?
3. Why do you suppose that God gave the victory to Benjamin in the early stages of the battle?
4. Has the church today become like Canaan?
5. What is corporate sin? How does this passage illustrate the wickedness of corporate sin?
6. The author of Judges frequently points out that there was no king in the land. Would the future generations be any better because they had a king? How is sin to be dealt with? What kind of king do we need?

Lovers of God Rather Than Lovers of Pleasure (1)

A Christian approach to pleasure in an Entertainment Culture

Jaques
Roets

In 2 Timothy 3 the apostle Paul gives us a description of the times in which we live, the “last days,” the days between the first and second coming of Christ. He ends the list of descriptive words with these words “lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God” (v. 4). What an apt description of the twenty-first century! When you walk into Sam’s Club or Costco the first thing you see is the big screen TVs. When you leave the stores like Target and Walmart, you find the latest releases on CD and DVD right next to the Hershey’s bars. In this context it is crucial for Christians to reflect on the place of pleasure in our lives. We must ask ourselves: What are godly or innocent pleasures that we can and must pursue? What are guilty or sin-stained pleasures that we must put off? In the following articles we will seek to answer these questions. First we will look at what constitutes innocent pleasure and see how at times we twist and taint them. In the second and third articles we will look at guilty pleasures—how to identify them and how to fight against them. Our goal is to analyze the place of pleasure in our Christian lives and provide guidance to living as “lovers of God rather than lovers of pleasure.”

Pleasure and the Christian

The pursuit of pleasure occupies the highest of priorities in our culture. Much of our time is spent trying to entertain ourselves with our big screen TVs, home entertainment systems, amusement parks, mega movie theaters, and snowmobiles. Many people live only for the weekends. Many only work so that they can have money to entertain themselves. As Christians we have

not been unaffected by this excessive drive for entertainment.

In the climate in which we live it is absolutely essential that we reflect critically on the place of pleasure in our lives. Many Christians react to our culture by denying the legitimacy of entertainment. They say that we must focus only on the spiritual issues and do our duty. We must withdraw from this culture before we are polluted. This approach to our culture is problematic on at least two accounts.

First of all, it denies the radical reality of sin. Simplistically, this view teaches that sin is located in the entertainment culture, so if we avoid this culture we avoid sin. This is a denial of the radical nature of sin, which is always located in the human heart. Sin is not outside of us but inside. To withdraw from the world is not the same as dealing with sin. When the apostle John urges us to fight against the world, he points to the world in our hearts: “Do not love the world or the things in the world.

If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. For all that is in the world—the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life—is not of the Father but is of the world. And the world is passing away, and the lust of it; but he who does the will of God abides forever” (1 John 2:15–17; cf. James 4:4). We must guard against the worldliness of our own hearts. This is not done by fleeing out of this world, but by crucifying the sinful nature and putting on the new man in Christ even in the area of entertainment.

The second problem with this approach is even more dangerous. To advocate withdrawal is a denial of God’s original good creation. It is to attack the Creator himself when we withdraw. The psalmist reminds us in Psalm 24:1 “The earth is the LORD’s, and all its fullness.” Everything in this world is from God; every good and perfect gift is from God. Recreation is a gift from God. It is a most wonderful gift that provides us so much pleasure and joy. It also is a great source of rest for so many who are overwhelmed by the burdens of life, allowing us to catch our breath in this restless world. We must not deny ourselves or others the legitimate pleasures in life that God has given because some people are prone to abuse these good gifts of God. This is the perennial human problem: we are creatures of extremes. We react to one extreme with another.

Since the approach of withdrawal is problematic, what should our approach to recreation be? Instead of falling for the defective approach that our culture pursues, we must examine what pleasure truly is and enter our culture with the bigger and brighter pleasures



that God offers. We must be people who are truly able to have pleasure without being consumed by the pursuit of pleasure. Even in this area we must be light and salt in our culture.

What is Innocent Pleasure?

Consider your own life for a moment. What are the truly innocent pleasures you delight in? Make a short list if you want. The innocent pleasures in your life can be gotten at by asking yourself the following questions: What gives me simple pleasure? What truly refreshes me? Where do I lay my cares down? What are the pleasures in my life that leave no lingering guilt? Innocent pleasures leave no tarnish, no blemish. They are truly blissful pleasures.

What are the kinds of things that are truly innocent? Here are a few things I have come up with: Watching a sunset or sunrise, enjoying a good breakfast, wrestling with my sons, visiting with a friend, drinking a warm cup of strong coffee, reading a good book, spending time with my wife, watching a good movie. Innocent pleasures are often unique to us. What is pleasurable for one is not necessarily pleasurable for another.

Innocent pleasures are often ordinary things in life that bring us a moment of joy as we simply delight ourselves in them. There are actually many occasions in our lives to enjoy such moments of pure, unstained pleasure. But one of the big problems with our culture in its excessive, restless search for entertainment is that it strips these

moments of pure simple pleasure of their God-given joy, because they don't seem to measure up to the thrill-standard that we have set for ourselves. Today we are pressed to go for the thrill, and the thrill drains out of our lives all the small, innocent moments of pleasure that surround us at every moment.

Another enemy of innocent pleasures in our lives is our own tendency to use these innocent pleasures in ways that are not so innocent. We often turn them into escape hatches. We look to them to provide us an escape from the pressures of life. The typical pressures we want to escape are boredom or loneliness, stress or frustration, and the hurt and pain caused by others who treat us unfairly. What do we do? We become excessive TV and movie freaks; we begin to snack excessively; we seek emotional comfort from food or animals. The list goes on and on. Think about this: What are the situations in your life that drive you to seek an escape? How do you seek to escape them? What "innocent pleasures" do you look to for your comfort?

What is the problem with looking to these things to provide us with an escape from the stresses of life? The problem is that we are looking toward pleasures to provide us what God alone can provide. We are in this way exchanging the Creator for

the creature. This is idolatry; it is to exchange the truth of God for the lie, and to worship and serve the creature rather than the Creator (Romans 1:25). When we look toward food to bring us emotional healing when we have been hurt or frustrated, we are exchanging the creature for what God alone can supply. When we make idols of innocent pleasures, we destroy those pleasures, because we are seeking from them far more than they can supply. It is no wonder they leave us so empty.

The antidote to this tendency of ours to inflate "innocent pleasures" is to come to God, the source of purest pleasure. The psalmist leads the way when he says: "In Your presence is fullness of joy; At Your right hand are pleasures forevermore" (16:11). This is what we need to learn to say. We must learn to say with Asaph in Psalm 73:25-26: "Whom have I in heaven but You? And there is none upon earth that I desire besides You. My flesh and my heart fail; But God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever." God is the greatest and purest pleasure our soul can delight and rest in. We must rest and delight ourselves in Him. When God is our biggest pleasure, then all the little pleasures fall into place as well. When our delight is in God, then we will also take true delight in the innocent pleasures in life, because then we will not look to these gifts to provide what is ultimately to be found only in the Giver of all pleasures. When God is on the pleasure-throne then all the other pleasures in life take their place, and we are able to enjoy them abundantly.



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Over the past several years, I have heard some humorous names used for the cry room in our church building, names such as, “the penalty box,” “romper room,” and “the torture chamber.” My favorite, however, is “purgatory.” Like the purgatory of Roman Catholic dogma, the cry room is a place where souls suffer until they are ready to enter into God’s presence and the assembly of the saints!

While the doctrine of purgatory is false, the potential suffering of those using the cry room is a reality. Any parents who have spent numerous Sunday mornings worshiping in a cry room with their infant or toddler can tell you about the challenges. It can be noisy. It can be crazy. It can feel like purgatory—without the flames.

I sympathize, therefore, with parents who, at times, may feel discouraged and perhaps frustrated with life in the cry room. As a pastor of souls, I do not want my parishioners to feel disheartened about attending the means of grace. For this reason, I hope to encourage parents who, with their little ones, make their way to the cry room each Lord’s Day. I also want to encourage everyone in our congregation to be supportive of those in our covenant community with young children.



A Place for Training

Though we typically call it a *cry* room, it may be more appropriate to describe it as a *training* room. As parents, we have the responsibility to train our children, to “bring them up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord” (Eph. 6:4). This includes teaching our children the meaning and importance of the worship

service. As baptized members of the visible church, our children belong in the worship service with us. They are to grow up learning and singing the songs of Zion, confessing the creeds of Christ’s church, and praying the Lord’s Prayer. Most importantly, they are to grow up hearing God speak to his people through the preaching of the gospel. In the worship service each Lord’s Day, God condescends to us to announce his promises and renew his covenant. It is in this divine act, which is unlike anything else we experience in this life, that God ushers us into his heavenly presence so that we might receive from his open hand (Heb. 12:18–29)—*and he ushers our children with us.*

While the cry room might seem inconvenient to us at times, we must realize that theology, not convenience, informs our worship. One of the central tenets of our theology is the covenant of grace. God makes his covenant not only with those adults who can make a credible profession of faith in Jesus as their only comfort in life and in death, but also with the children of believers, who cannot yet make such a profession. Throughout redemptive history, God has included the children of believers into his visible covenant community. Baptized



children, therefore, are entitled to the worship service as much as their parents are. It is where they belong.

The cry room, then, provides a place of training for our little ones. It is far more in line with our theology than a nursery room. In a nursery room, baptized children are, in most cases, dropped off by their parents and completely removed from the assembly of God's people. When this happens, these precious heirs of the covenant are denied exposure to and training in the vital act of corporate worship. In a nursery room, infants and toddlers are deprived of the opportunity of hearing mommy or daddy confess their sins, sing the doxology, confess the creed, pray the Lord's Prayer, and partake of communion. As inconvenient as the cry room may feel at times, it nevertheless provides a setting more conducive to parental training than a nursery room. In the cry room, parents are preparing their children to become active participants in the worship service.

A Place for Transition

The goal of our training and preparation is for our children to graduate to the main auditorium (i.e. "sanctuary"). The cry room therefore is a place of transition. As our infants grow into toddlers, parents can begin making excursions into the service with their children. Explain to your little one beforehand what you plan to do. Preparation is the key



here. Explain to them on Saturday night (and perhaps again on Sunday morning before worship) that they have the opportunity to sit with the congregation for the first part of the service.

I have found that many children become very excited about this. Estimate how much of the service you think your little one can handle, have a plan, and give it a shot. If they begin to squeal and shriek, you can always take them back to the cry room. At first, they may only be able to sit still up to the first hymn. In time, it may be up to the song of preparation before the sermon. Eventually, with a lot of training and perseverance, children will make the transition into worshipers.

This transition does not end once our little ones are sitting through the whole service quietly. The goal is not merely for our children to sit still and be quiet. The goal is for them to become mature worshipers, to become active listeners who eagerly receive from God in Word and sacrament, and respond to God in song, prayer, and giving.

Yes, it requires work. There is no plenary indulgence offered to families so that they can spring a suffering soul from the purgatory of the cry room! Rather, it takes much planning, effort, and perseverance to make the transition. But the transition *can* be made; it is not impossible. And the



cry room helps to that end.

A Place that is Temporary

The Word of God endures forever, but the cry room does not. It is only for a season. There is light at the end of the tunnel. Of course, for a family with several small children, that light might seem rather dim at times; when one child finally graduates to the main auditorium, another is born! With the joy of a child's birth can come the potentially gloomy prospect of spending more years in the cry room. Nevertheless, the cry room is not forever. Like all parental responsibilities, training our children in the cry room is only for a season. Eventually, this too shall pass.

In the meantime, some parents may find it helpful to trade off services with their spouse. If mom trains the baby in the morning service, then perhaps dad can do the same in the evening service, allowing mom to be freed up to receive the means of grace without distraction. This is yet another good reason for having two services on the Lord's Day.

It is only for a short period that we have the opportunity to train our children in the instruction and discipline of the Lord. May God make us faithful stewards who use wisely the time we have been given. And may we encourage one another in the congregation as we see parents engaging in the hard and sometimes frustrating work of training and preparing these little heirs of the covenant. May we be patient with one another and pray for each other, asking the Lord of the covenant to bear much fruit in these children of his promise.

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The Church in the Wilderness

Revelation 12–14 opens our eyes to the battle in which we are presently engaged. It is that battle described by the Apostle Paul in the sixth chapter of his letter to the Ephesians, “We do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this age, against spiritual hosts of wickedness in the heavenly places” (Ephesians 6:12). Paul uses the first person plural pronoun “we” to indicate our participation in the battle. Revelation 12:6 also indicates our participation in the battle, not by the use of the first person plural pronoun, but by the imagery of the woman.

This woman has already been set before us in verses 1–2, where she was described as “a woman clothed with the sun, with the moon under her feet, and on her head a garland of twelve stars. Then being with child, she cried out in labor and in pain to

give birth.” The woman there is the expectant people of God, particularly the saints of the Old Testament, who longed for and eagerly anticipated the birth of the Messiah.

In verse 6, it is still the same woman, but the focus has shifted. In view here are not so much the saints of the Old Testament. In view here are the saints of the New Testament. Why the shift in focus from the Old Testament to the New Testament? Something has happened! Verse 5: “She bore a male Child, who was to rule all nations with a rod of iron. And her Child was caught up to God and His throne.” The shift in focus from verse 1 to verse 6 reflects the shift from the Old Testament to the New. Christ has come, and having completed His work, has been exalted to the throne of God, where He is beyond the reach of the dragon.

Though the focus has shifted, nevertheless the imagery of the

woman remains the same, and that is because there is but one church of God in Jesus Christ spanning both the Old and New Testaments—one church from the beginning of the world to its end. It is clear, then, that the woman in Revelation 12:6 is the church of Jesus Christ, specifically the New Testament saints who live between the first coming of Christ and His return.

Notice that the woman has fled into the wilderness. We are given the distinct impression that the woman is in danger. She is at risk; her very existence is threatened. She is being pursued. At the end of the chapter we shall learn that she fled with good reason: she is being pursued by Satan himself, that great, fiery red dragon, who previously sought to devour the Christ!

Throughout the Old Testament Satan sought to cut off the promised Seed of the woman, at times coming very close. When Christ was finally born, he sought to destroy Him. But Christ triumphed over Satan, making a public spectacle of him at the cross. Now, knowing that he cannot defeat Christ, Satan has set his sights on the church. This will be further described in Revelation 12:7: “Woe to the inhabitants of the earth and the sea! For the devil has come down to you, having great wrath, because he knows that he has a short time.” It described still further, and with great vividness, in Revelation 12:13–17: “Now when the dragon saw that he had been cast to the earth, he persecuted the woman who gave birth to the male Child. But the woman was given two wings of a great eagle, that she might fly into the wilderness to her place, where she is nourished for a time and times and half a time, from the presence of the serpent. So the serpent spewed water out of his mouth like a flood after the woman, that he might cause her to be carried away by the flood. But the earth helped the woman, and the earth opened its mouth and the swallowed up the flood which the dragon had spewed out of his mouth. And the dragon was enraged with the woman, and he went to make war with the rest of her offspring, who keep the commandments of God and have the testimony of Jesus Christ.”

Though we will examine those passages in greater detail, the message is already clear: Satan has the church in his sights. He wants nothing more than to devour and destroy the church of Jesus Christ. The Holy Spirit has given us Revelation 12–14 that our eyes might be opened to the battle and that we might be able to withstand the wiles of the devil. The Holy Spirit has given us Revelation 12–14 that we might not be devoured by the great fiery red dragon!

Presently, then, we live in the wilderness. It is here that we have “a place prepared by God” (v. 6). It is fitting that God would prepare a place for us in the wilderness, for the wilderness is the place of trial, the place of testing, the place where we learn to depend fully upon God. The Israelites wandered for forty years in the wilderness. Elijah wandered for forty days in the wilderness. Jesus Himself was led into the wilderness to be tempted by Satan for forty days and forty nights.

It was in the wilderness that Israel was protected and nourished and fed by God. “And you shall remember that the Lord your God led you all the way these forty years in the wilderness, to humble you and test you, to know what was in your heart, whether you would keep His commandments or not. So He humbled you, allowed you to hunger, and fed you with manna which you did not know nor did your fathers know, that He might make you know that man shall not live by bread alone; but man lives by every word that proceeds from the mouth of the Lord” (Deuteronomy 8:1–3). Moses went on to describe God as the One “who led you through that great and terrible wilderness, in which were fiery serpents and scorpions and thirsty land where there was no water; who brought water for you out of the flinty rock; who fed you in the wilderness with manna, which your fathers did not know, that He might humble you and that He might test you, to do you good in the end . . .” (8:15–16). It was in the wilderness that Israel was humbled, learning to depend fully upon the Lord.

It was in the wilderness that God protected and nourished and fed Elijah. He protected Elijah from the death threats of Queen Jezebel. He

nourished him with bread and water from heaven. It was in the wilderness that Elijah was humbled, learning to depend fully upon the Lord.

It was in the wilderness that Jesus Himself was tempted, and where He demonstrated His full dependence upon His Father, even quoting the words of Deuteronomy: “Man does not live by bread alone, but by every Word that proceeds from the mouth of God.”

As it was for Israel, Elijah, and Jesus Christ, so it is for the church: we are protected and nourished and fed by God in the wilderness that we might be humbled, learning to depend entirely upon the Lord. Question and Answer 54 of the Heidelberg Catechism: “Q. What do you believe concerning the holy catholic church? A. I believe that the Son of God through His Spirit and Word, gathers, protects, and preserves for Himself a community chosen for eternal life and united in true faith, and of this community I am, and always will be a living member.” How does the Son of God gather, protect, and preserve for Himself this community, the church? He does so through His Spirit and Word. He does so through the means of grace, namely, the preaching of the Word and the sacraments. These are the means God has chosen for the gathering and nourishing of His church. Through the preaching of the Word, He gathers His church, snatching them from the clutches of Satan. Through the sacraments, He strengthens His church, that she might be able to withstand the wiles of the devil.

Why these means? Because in them and through them Christ is proclaimed! Our Catechism puts it this way in Question and Answer 65: “Q. It is by faith alone that we share in Christ and all his blessings: where

then does that faith come from?

A. The Holy Spirit produces it in our hearts by the preaching of the holy gospel, and confirms it through our use of the holy sacraments.” The Holy Spirit produces faith in our hearts through the preaching of the gospel, and He confirms and strengthens it through the sacraments. Question and Answer 67 goes on to state: “Q. Are both the word and the sacraments then intended to focus our faith on the sacrifice of Jesus Christ on the cross as the only ground of our salvation? A. Right! In the gospel the Holy Spirit teaches us and the holy sacraments he assures us that our entire salvation rests on Christ’s one sacrifice for us on the cross.”

How necessary are the means of grace! Romans 10 reminds us: “Whoever calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved. How then shall they call on Him in whom they have not believed? And how shall they believe in Him whom they have not heard? And how shall they hear without a preacher? . . . So then, faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the word of God” (Romans 10:13–14, 17). It is in the preaching of the Word that we hear Christ saying to us: “Come unto Me all ye that are weary and heavy laden and I will give you rest.” In the preaching of the Word it is Christ that is set before us; it is Christ that addresses us; it is Christ that sets before us all of His merits and all of His beauty. He does this so that when the enemy of our souls seeks to destroy us, we may turn again to His Word where He proclaims to us His blood that flowed to wash us and cleanse us of all our sins and His righteousness with which we now stand clothed.

As if that were not enough, He has also given us the sacraments, the visible Word, for the strengthening and nourishing of our faith. In the waters of baptism we behold the work of our

Savior for us, who bore the judgment we deserve, that we might live in Him. At the table of the Lord our dear Savior beckons us and says, “Come, eat of the bread, drink of the cup, and lift up your heart on high to where I am seated in the heavenlies, and know that I have secured your salvation.”

Do you begin to see what transpires as we gather in worship on the Lord’s Day? Our Savior is strengthening us for the battle. He is nourishing our souls unto everlasting life. In his book *A Better Way*, Michael Horton describes it this way: “Here, we taste of the powers of the age to come, and our hearts are gradually subdued. Our lust for this world and its ‘boasted pomp and show’ yields slowly but surely to the ‘solid joys and lasting treasures’ that none ‘but Zion’s children know.’ While tasting is not the same as feasting face-to-face in our raised and glorified bodies at the Lamb’s wedding reception, it fills us with gratitude and hope. Through these divinely appointed means, the Spirit breaks into our drab, one-dimensional, fearful, plotless world and sweeps us into his kingdom that is even now coming down out of heaven.”¹ Horton goes on to write:

Through the preached Word, the Spirit ushers us into that heavenly celebration that is eternal for God and for all who are brought into His Sabbath ‘time.’ Through Holy Communion we ‘taste the powers of the age to come’ and share Jesus’ own cup as he, both host and victim, grants to us the right to eat from that Tree of Life in the paradise of God that is his body. None of this is so realized that we have nothing to look forward. In fact, ‘eye has not seen, nor ear heard what God has prepared for those who love him.’ But the same Spirit who indwells

the heavenly city now indwells his church and takes from what is God’s and makes it ours. Not only ‘previews of coming attractions’ but the actual dawn of the new creation itself is what the Spirit who raised Jesus from the dead brings through the ordinary ministry of Word and sacrament. What a difference it would make in our worship if people didn’t simply think they were practicing for an eternity what they don’t have use for anyway but rather tasting the food on the table of a world feast that never winds down.² Do you see how great our dependence upon the Lord is? Do you see how badly we need such nourishment from week to week? The Catechism reminds us that our sworn enemies, the devil, the world, and our own flesh, never stop attacking us, and that on our own, we are too weak to hold our own even for a moment (Question & Answer 127). Take away the nourishment we receive from God in the preaching of the Word and the sacrament, and we will most certainly go down to defeat in this spiritual battle. We need the means of grace to strengthen us, to encourage us, to nourish us, to feed us, and to protect us.

What a joy and delight to come each Lord’s Day to be the recipient of the means of grace. More often than not, we come as weary warriors that we may be refreshed and strengthened once more as we reach forth with the “empty hand” of faith to receive the blessings of Christ the King who sits upon the throne. Do we see our need for the Lord’s Day? Do we see our need for the means of grace? Do we see our need for the preaching of the Word and for the sacraments? I dare say that if we caught even one

glimpse of our enemy, and the hatred and vehemence with which he seeks to devour us, we would never look at the Lord's Day in the same way again!

This nourishment in the wilderness continues for 1,260 days (verse 6). What is pictured to us here in terms of 1,260 days is described elsewhere as three-and-a-half years; in other places as a time, times, and half a time; and still in other places as a thousand years. They are all referring to the same thing: the time between Christ's first coming and His return.

We are reminded here not only that Christ preserves His church against all the rage of hell, but we are reminded as well that the time is short, only 1,260 days. God has determined the time of our wilderness sojourn. Let us not grow weary, then, for while we are

presently subject to the attacks of the evil one, we are also reminded that the issue of the battle between Christ and Satan has never been uncertain; it will certainly end in victory for Christ and His church. At the cross Christ crushed the dragon's head. We now contend with a vanquished foe that has already been overcome. In those times when we feel the serpent at our heels, we may go to our Savior, whose heel was bruised, but who, with that bruised heel, crushed the serpent's head. And the day is coming when He will crush Satan beneath our feet as well (Romans 16:20).

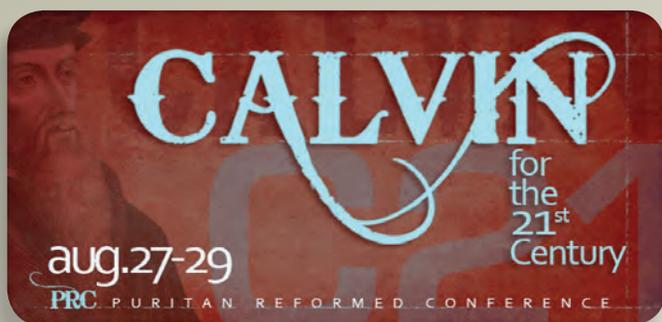
The day is coming when our wilderness sojourn will be over. The day is coming when we will be forever beyond the attacks of the dragon. The day is coming when we will dwell in the Paradise of God, where we

shall never hunger and never thirst. Let this hope sustain us now as we journey to the heavenly city, receiving the nourishment we need from the hand of our Savior, Jesus Christ. The day is coming when our wilderness sojourn will be over and the means of grace are no longer necessary. Then at last we shall sit down at the great wedding banquet of the Lamb, and we shall feast with Christ for all eternity.

1. Horton, Michael. *A Better Way*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book, 2002. p. 139.

2. *Ibid.*, p. 140

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Puritan Reformed Theological Seminary will be hosting its first conference August 27–29. This year's theme is "Calvin for the 21st Century." The conference will be held at the Calvin College Prince Center in Grand Rapids, Michigan. Speakers at this year's conference will include Joel Beeke, Jerry Bilkes, Ligon Duncan, Michael Haykin, Nelson Kloosterman, David Murray, Joseph Pipa, Neil Pronk, Donald Sinnema, Derek Thomas, and Cornel Venema. They will be addressing a variety of ways in which Calvin can assist us in understanding the Word of God, the love of God, the work of the Holy Spirit, redemption, reforming the church, ethics, the benefits of salvation, and reprobation.

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Reformed Protestants have a public relations problem. In their churches and worship services they lack pizzazz. In fact, the chief attributes of Reformed worship—decency and order—are lousy for appealing to seekers who want a faith that has a higher profile, one that is grand, beautiful, or simply inspiring. This predicament puts Reformed Protestants in a difficult spot within the contemporary liturgical climate. People who are looking for a church with high-octane worship generally bypass Reformed or Presbyterian congregations for Christian services at opposite ends of the spectrum. In the mass of Roman Catholicism or its Protestant high church equivalents, those looking for meaningful Christian worship find services marked by pageantry, beauty, and grandeur. In the Praise & Worship variety of worship, seekers may find conspicuous amounts of energy in up-tempo music, worshipers in various states of emotion, and throngs of ecstatic participants. As long as it has not tried to imitate either extreme of the high or low varieties of liturgy, the average Reformed worship service looks dull, unimaginative, and hollow. Indeed, the nickname for Calvinists of “God’s frozen chosen” is apt on one level in capturing the nature of worship that is hemmed in by Reformed attention to decency, order, sobriety, and reverence.

Ordinary is one way of describing Reformed worship, and it is a word that most people would prefer not to be used in describing them. To be ordinary is to be average, without distinction or notable achievement, possibly even dull. But as unappealing as *ordinary* is as an adjective, from a Reformed perspective on worship it

is a true compliment. The reason is that when Protestants first began to reform the church, they intentionally created services that were ordinary in their effect and that were accessible to ordinary believers. By avoiding the extravagance and self-importance of extraordinary worship, Reformed Protestants conducted services that embodied the theology of the Reformation.

Vulgarity Rightly Understood

From one point of view, the assertion that Reformed worship is vulgar is an objectionable characterization, since the word *vulgar* is synonymous with indecency, obscenity and lewdness. If this is what someone meant by charging Reformed worship with vulgarity, then adherents of the Reformed faith should properly take offense and attempt to deny the accusation by showing how Reformed worship is just the opposite because of its reverence, its exaltation of God’s word, and its self-conscious effort to keep human pride and self-

righteousness in check. But the word *vulgar* has another meaning, one that Reformed Christians should take as a compliment. The word can mean a characteristic of the ordinary people in society, or the vernacular language spoken by those ordinary people, or even something that is common or current. In this sense, vulgarity is different from refinement or ostentation. This sense actually gets much closer to the nature of Reformed worship since the Reformation attempted to rid Christian worship of the excessive ceremonies and rituals of Roman Catholic services that made the Mass inaccessible to the laity and exalted the work of priests over the ministry of the word.

One way to illustrate this is by comparing descriptions of Roman Catholic and Reformed churches. One website describes St. Peter’s Basilica in Rome as a space that covers 5.7 acres, has a capacity for 60,000 people, and displays “the finest Renaissance monuments and decoration money



...by virtue of its ordinary character preaching would not let men take credit for salvation, but showed that the power of the gospel was God alone.

could buy, employing the talents of such greats as Michelangelo and Bernini.” When Charles Dickens in 1846 visited Rome and saw St. Peter’s, he wrote, “The first burst of the interior, in all its expansive majesty and glory; and, most of all, the looking up into the Dome; is a sensation never to be forgotten.” In contrast, here is how Evelyn Underhill described another St. Peter’s church, this one in Geneva: “No organ or choir was permitted in [Calvin’s] churches; no color, nor ornament but a table of the Ten Commandments on the wall. No ceremonial acts or gestures were permitted. No hymns were sung but those derived from a biblical source.” Underhill went on to observe the distinctive character of Reformed church architecture. The walls were whitened, and the pulpit was at the center, along with the baptismal font and table. Unlike Roman Catholic, Lutheran, or Episcopalian worship, the pulpit was not on the side with an altar in the middle. Although she was writing in the 1930s and did not see Calvin’s church at the time of the Reformation, her account faithfully reflects the changes that occurred in Reformed churches at the time of the Reformation. More importantly, Underhill’s depiction points to the understated, restrained, and even vulgar character of Reformed worship in contrast to the ostentatious pomp of Roman Catholic worship.

When Ordinary is Exceptional

To say that the point of the reform of worship at the time of the Protestant Reformation was to make worship services ordinary is to capture more than a grain of truth since the commonness of Reformed piety was a crucial part of its character. The Reformers self-consciously

eliminated the rituals and trappings of Roman Catholic worship that called more attention to the church and her priests than to they gave glory to God. The Reformers also sought to make worship accessible to the laity by using the vernacular language of the people, rather than Latin, and by engaging the congregation more in the elements of the service. To many these reforms destroyed the beauty and majesty of Rome’s worship. But the Reformers not only questioned the biblical justification for such visible expressions of glory; they also understood that in the Christian era of the history of redemption God’s people were called to a simpler and even vulgar form of devotion.

The characteristic components of Reformed worship reflect this twin commitment to the Bible’s sufficiency in regulating worship (sometimes known as the regulative principle) and the value of simplicity in glorifying God. On the level of congregational participation, the Reformation introduced liturgical reforms that captured the imperative for all of God’s assembly to participate in worship rather than watching priests perform the service. One indication of lay participation was congregational singing. Aside from the question of exclusive psalmody or hymnody, Protestants were unanimous in promoting the entire congregation’s singing of praise and thanksgiving. Of course, not having sung before, the laity at the time of Reformation faced a stiff challenge to participate in songs of praise. This is why the Reformers commissioned music that could be sung by the entire congregation, not simply by those gifted to sing in a choir.

Another element of worship in which

the laity participated was the Lord’s Supper. Aside from the enormous reform of teaching and practice that took away the Mass and returned the sacrament to its status as a meal, the way the Reformers administered the Lord’s Supper engaged the laity in ways unheard of within the Roman Catholic Church. Not only had the laity prior to the Reformation participated in the sacrament only once a year, but when they did they received only the bread because they might spill the wine, thus desecrating what was thought to be the very blood of Christ. By introducing the observance of the Supper more frequently (at least four times a year in most Reformed churches) and by giving bread and wine to the laity, Protestant worship became more accessible than Rome’s practice for the ordinary people of God.

The ministry of the word also reflected an affirmation of the common in Reformed worship. The preaching of the word was first of all in a known language. Unlike the Roman Catholic liturgy which was in Latin and completely inaccessible to anyone outside the learned elite, Reformed worship aimed to bring all people into full participation, even when they sat and listened to the word proclaimed. At the same time, by making preaching more central in worship than the Lord’s Supper, the Reformers were following the apostle Paul’s instruction about the means that God uses to bring people to faith and sustain them on their pilgrimage. As Paul conceded to the Corinthians, preaching appeared to be a foolish way—perhaps even vulgar from the Greek’s perspective—to proclaim the truth and goodness of Christ. But its simplicity was precisely the point,

because by virtue of its ordinary character preaching would not let men take credit for salvation, but showed that the power of the gospel was God alone.

Indeed, the very premise of Reformed worship—the so-called regulative principle—which taught that God should be worshiped only according to his revealed will, was a simpler or more ordinary way of glorifying him than by following the imaginations of men. God’s word was and remains a surer guide to how he should be worshiped than relying on a variety of saints’ best intentions or pious reflections. This affirmation of the Bible’s authority is particularly evident in the way the Reformed tradition rejected the use of images in worship. The Heidelberg Catechism is clear in answer 97 that making images of God is forbidden because they are a form of idolatry, that is, worshiping the image instead of God who is a spirit. But the Reformers knew that Rome countered that images were a useful way to teach the unlearned or common man who did not know how to read. Answer 98 of Heidelberg responds to this line of argument by declaring that images should not be used as “teaching aids” because “we should not try to be wiser than God.” The catechism adds, “he wants his people instructed by the living preaching of his Word—not by idols that cannot even talk” In other words, preaching was adequate for the common man and woman, and to try to find another way than the means appointed by God was to attempt foolishly to be wiser than God himself.

The Westminster Confession of Faith captured well the ordinary element of Christian worship that the Reformation recovered in its chapter on the covenant of grace. There it teaches:

Under the gospel, when Christ, the substance, was exhibited, the ordinances in which this

covenant is dispensed are the preaching of the Word, and the administration of the sacraments of baptism and the Lord’s Supper: which, though fewer in number, and administered with more simplicity, and less outward glory, yet, in them, it is held forth in more fullness, evidence and spiritual efficacy, to all nations, both Jews and Gentiles. . . . (WCF 7.6)

This paradoxical relationship between the simplicity of worship after the coming of Christ and the greater fullness of the gospel has bedeviled the church through the ages. The temptation is to think that the greater reality of grace that comes through Christ is a reason to have worship that is even more majestic and elaborate than that practiced in the Old Testament temple. But the opposite is exactly the case. Because of the fuller revelation in Christ, the administration of the covenant of grace in the church depends less on outward or external means than it did in Israel. Reformed worship captured that important difference between the Old Testament saint’s desire for signs that would show God’s power and the New Testament’s abrogation of those old forms for the simpler means of grace in the church.

The Piety of the Ordinary

Of course, the Reformation did not stop with a reform of worship along the lines of the ordinary and simple. By recovering the reality of the priesthood of all believers and the related doctrine of vocation, the Reformed tradition affirmed the truth that simple people could serve God in their everyday duties and responsibilities as farmers, bakers, merchants, mothers, and maids. No longer did one need to go to a monastery or nunnery to lead a life dedicated to God. Because creation was good, because man was called to work in the created order as part of God’s provision for his creation,

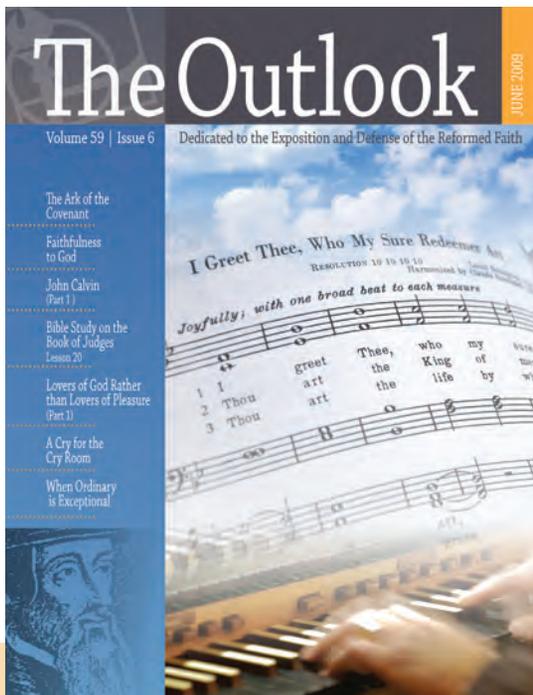
ordinary work in the world was not evil. And when consecrated to God through prayer, this work became a means of glorifying God even during the ordinary week days in between the Lord’s Days, the holy days set apart for public worship.

All of these reforms, both in worship services proper, and in the work-a-day world of the common man and woman, point to the Reformation as a recovery of the ordinary. This does not mean that Reformed Protestants are off the hook from charges of dullness, or that they may coast in their efforts to be faithful individually and corporately. But even when Reformed Christians are doing their best to serve God and love their neighbors, they know that the authenticity and vigor of the Christian faith cannot be measured by outward displays of pomp, enthusiasm, and power. Instead, through decent and orderly services, and in quiet and peaceful lives, Reformed Christians try not to draw attention to themselves in their worship and service because they believe that God should be worshiped only in the ways he has commanded. Reformed Christianity teaches that after the epoch-making work of Christ, the surpassing glory of redemption cannot be contained in external or outward attempts at majesty or extraordinariness, and that God uses foolish, weak, and ordinary means so that his people will boast only in him and his power.

Dr. D.G. Hart and Mr. John R. Muether are coauthors of several books, most recently *Seeking a Better Country: 300 Years of American Protestantism* (P&R 2007). Both are ruling elders in the Orthodox Presbyterian Church.

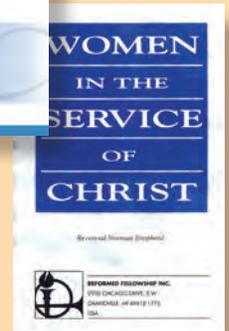
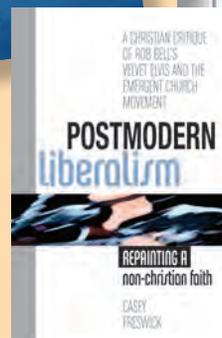
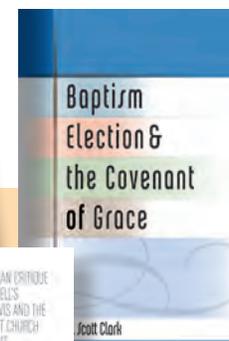
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