

# The Outlook

MAR/APRIL 2010

Volume 60 | Issue 2

Dedicated to the Exposition and Defense of the Reformed Faith



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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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*“He made Him who knew no sin to be sin on our behalf,  
that we might become the righteousness of God in Him.”*  
—2 Corinthians 5:21

This verse, found at the end of chapter, sums up the entire fifth chapter. In fact, the verse sums up the entire book of 2 Corinthians. One could go so far as to say this verse sums up the entire New Testament, even to the point of giving us the purpose of the whole Bible.

### **He Knew No Sin**

This verse has been falsely interpreted to say that Jesus had no knowledge of sin. Jesus knew very well what sin was. It was all around Him during His stay upon this earth. He was well aware that all the people around Him were filled with sin and had upon them the infirmities of sin. He was aware that those before Him and those who were yet to be born were all guilty of original sin and that they would fall into the snares of the devil throughout their lives. He was aware, as we are, that the wages of sin is death and all have fallen short of the glory of God.

All, that is, but Jesus. That is not to say that Jesus was not tempted. Satan himself tempted Jesus in the wilderness. Satan tried to get Jesus to stumble using the people of the church, using the very people He healed, using even the disciples. But—praise God—it did not work. Even when He was on the cross, with nails driven through His hands and feet, Jesus chose to forgive rather than to curse His accusers. Jesus did not sin. He never fell short of the glory of God. The punishment of death, due to fall upon every human being because of their sin, would never have to fall upon Jesus. He was “tempted in

all things as we are, yet without sin” (Hebrews 4:15).

### **Made to Be Sin**

Second Corinthians 5:21 goes on to teach that the One who knew no sin was made to be sin. Taken in context, both the Hebrew and the Greek words for “sin” can also be interpreted as “sin offering.” In Isaiah 53 the Servant of the Lord becomes a sin offering (Isaiah 53:10). In Romans 8:3 Paul declares the Son of God to be a sin offering.

Numbers 28 and 29 describe for us the significance of the sin offering. During Passover a male goat was sacrificed to Jehovah as a sin offering to make atonement for the sins of Israel. All the sins of Israel were symbolically placed upon the goat. The goat was then slaughtered by the priest, and Israel’s sins were declared erased. The animal to be sacrificed was to be without defect, spotless, and perfect.

During a particular Passover, less than two thousand years ago, there was a sin offering sacrificed to Jehovah to atone for the sin of all of fallen mankind. When we read the crucifixion account in the New Testament, we see very clearly that Jesus becomes the spotless sacrifice. Neither Pilate nor Herod could find any fault in the Nazarene, yet the priests were insistent that He be put to death. They were responsible for sacrificing the life of the One who knew no sin—Jesus Christ—just as the priests in the Old Testament were

responsible for sacrificing the spotless goat in the Old Testament.

The Gospels make very clear that the One sacrificed for the fallen race was without defect, spotless, and perfect. Before His birth, the angel told Mary that the One to be born was holy. The same angel announced to Joseph that the Child to be born would save His people from their sins. In the twenty-four hour period leading up to and including His death, no less than four people declare the innocence of Jesus: the wife of Pilate, who begged her husband not to have anything to do with the blood of the just man; Pilate, who washed his hands and testified he could find no fault in Jesus; the penitent thief at the side of Jesus, who chastised the other thief by declaring Jesus had done nothing to deserve His punishment; and a Roman centurion, who proclaimed Jesus to be a righteous man.

Like the innocent lamb of the Old Testament that was led to the slaughter, Jesus, the Lamb of God, became the holy, spotless, and perfect sacrifice to Jehovah for all our sins. He became the perfect sin offering so that we might become the righteousness of God.

During the first three hours on the cross, while the sun was still shining, Jesus suffered under the hands of men. Although He suffered greatly as He was rejected by the human race, He gave no evidence of self-pity. Instead, He looked down from the cross and saw His mother and beloved disciple standing nearby. He

said to Mary, “Behold your son,” and to John, “Behold, your mother” (John 19:26, 27).

He looked at the great crowd gathered all around Him and heard their taunts of hatred and blasphemy. He could have called ten thousand angels to destroy them. Instead, He called to His Father to forgive them (Luke 23:34).

During those daylight hours, He heard the prayer of the thief asking, “Jesus, remember me when You come to Your kingdom.” Jesus immediately answered that prayer: “Today you shall be with Me in paradise” (Luke 23:42, 43).

Jesus suffered greatly under the hands of men with the devil throwing everything he could to get Jesus to come down from the cross and not complete the sin offering. What Jesus endured at the hands of men, however, could never put away one single sin, for no work of man is capable of removing sin.

Then we read in Luke 23:44, “And it was about the sixth hour, and darkness fell over the whole land until the ninth hour.” Great, appalling darkness spread over Golgotha. Jesus, who was the Light of the World, was perishing in the darkness of the cross.

It was in that darkness that the Father entered into judgment against His Son regarding our sins. In those three hours on the cross, Jesus, alone upon the cross, faced the judgment that our sins deserved. It was then that He was made a sin offering. On the cross, the Son of God was “smitten of God and afflicted.” “He was pierced through for our transgressions; He was crushed for our iniquities.” In the darkness of the cross “the chastening for our well being fell upon Him, and by His scourging we are healed” (Isaiah 53:5). He who was very God of very God was made sin for us as He endured in His inmost being what we would have had to endure for all eternity, had it not been for His mighty sacrifice. It was then that Jesus cried, “My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?” (Mark 15:34).

### **The Righteousness of God**

The answer to that question that Jesus asked in the darkness upon the cross is this: It was so that, through Jesus, you and I might become the righteousness of God. The condemnation that we deserve was placed upon Him. Our sins are forgiven! All are forgiven who acknowledge that horrible moment in history as taking place on their behalf. Their sins have been placed upon the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.

Several years ago the Lord brought into my life a young girl who had had two abortions. The first was from her promiscuity; the second from a rape she afterwards thought was the wrath of God upon her. She felt that she had put two innocent children to death

and that God would not forgive her. As we began walking through the New Testament, she discovered the innocence of Jesus and how He was put to death by sinful men and women. Instead of returning evil for evil, Jesus was willing to forgive the very people who were putting Him to death. Could her sin be worse than that?

After Jesus was arrested in the Garden of Gethsemane, all His disciples fled. Peter eventually gained enough courage to follow closely behind his Master. In the time when Jesus needed moral support the most, Peter became afraid and denied the very One who he had once claimed to be the Son of God. Can our sins be worse than that? Yet, Peter is forgiven—forgiven for denying Jesus, forgiven and declared righteous because he acknowledged the once for all sacrifice of Jesus as being made on his account.

Before his conversion, the apostle Paul persecuted and killed a great number of innocent, believing Christians. He, too, was sought out by Jesus and turned to the cross for forgiveness. After his conversion, Paul preached Christ and Him crucified as the only means of reconciliation with God.

It is because of the death of Jesus Christ, the perfect sin offering, that we can be forgiven and declared righteous. We cannot do it on our own. It is by faith in the atoning sacrifice He made at Calvary and by acknowledging that He who had no sin was made sin for us that—in Him—we become the righteousness of God.

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As we serve the Lord in our Reformed congregations across the country, we need to remember that the leaven of theological liberalism is still with us. In this sense the dawn of the twenty-first century is not much different from the beginning of the twentieth.

“The battle cry of modern culture,” Wolfhart Pannenberg observes, has been “to follow the light of reason, not the prejudices of authority.”<sup>1</sup> Donald Bloesch adds, “Though the omniscience of reason has been sharply challenged, faith in its practical efficacy still holds sway over the centers of knowledge and power in society.”<sup>2</sup>

## Elevating Reason

Like the liberals of generations past, contemporary proponents of the same school of thought maintain that human reason has a central role to play in theology, either as the foundation or the criterion of a sound theology.

The one example that we shall consider is David Tracy, a professor of theology at the University of Chicago Divinity School. Tracy explicitly speaks about “the importance . . . of reason and its critical, self-correcting function for all theology.”<sup>3</sup> Because he gives reason such a paramount place, he takes the position that “much of the traditional Christian manner of understanding . . . should be rejected.”<sup>4</sup> Tracy here reminds us that we live at a time when much of contemporary theology feels intent on attacking the faith that was once for all delivered to the saints.

Tracy illustrates a commitment to the view that human reason has a corrective function with respect to the

Bible: “Corrective reason . . . is directed upon the revelation . . . questioning its credentials, submitting it to scrutiny and criticism, removing from its content whatever may be involved in irreconcilable conflict with other well-founded convictions that may be held.”<sup>5</sup>

Although Tracy and other liberals believe that this corrective function of critical reason is quite legitimate when it operates with reference to Scripture, we should remember that the biblical position is much different. It is not our place to correct Scripture. It is the place of God-breathed Scripture to correct us: “All Scripture is given by inspiration of God and is profitable . . . for correction” (2 Timothy 3:16).

## Claiming Enlightenment

There is no question that contemporary liberals are full-blooded sons of the Enlightenment. As George Brown Tindall observes, “Reason . . . was the highest Virtue” for Enlightenment thinkers. They often underscored their position by capitalizing both words.<sup>6</sup> The liberal theological establishment stands in the tradition of Immanuel Kant on this point. Kant’s Enlightenment motto is well remembered: “Have courage to use your own reason!”<sup>7</sup> Tracy, no doubt, would agree heartily with the Kantian exhortation.

We may better understand the place that liberals give to reason if we remember that “the issue . . . is between reason as reason and reason as God.”<sup>8</sup> Biblical Christianity affirms that the proper use of human reason is to think God’s thoughts after him. Theological liberalism, however, operates on the assumption that reason is God.

## Corrected by Scripture

Liberalism gives to reason a finality and authority that it does not possess.

The first sin included a commitment to the supremacy of the human intellect.



The position of God was clear: eating of the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil would bring death (Genesis 2:17). There ought to have been a proper use of human reason at this point. Adam and Eve were to endeavor to think God's thoughts after him. Man, however, fell when he no longer regarded his own reason as *nothing more than reason*. Reason in the fall *became God*. The human intellect was elevated, and the divine perspective was repudiated. Rather than remaining an object of fear because it would bring *death*, the Tree of Knowledge became "*good for food . . . pleasant to the eyes, and . . . desirable to make one wise*" (Genesis 3:6).

The Genesis narrative shows that giving to reason such a decisive authority is sin by the very nature of the case. How much more inappropriate it is to give reason a corrective function with reference to Scripture after the fall in the Garden of Eden! Scripture affirms, "The Gentiles walk in the futility of their mind, having their understanding darkened" (Ephesians 4:17–18). It is no exaggeration to maintain that "reason since the fall has been blind, proud, vain, wrapped in error and self-deceit."<sup>9</sup> Reason therefore must not have a magisterial function in theology, acting as the standard of what theology ought to be.

## A Better Way

What exactly is the proper use of reason in theology? There can be no doubt that God invites us to use our reason in reflecting upon God and salvation. The ancient invitation still stands: "Come now, and *let us reason*

together . . . though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow" (Isaiah 1:18).

There likewise can be no dispute that the apostolic ministry entailed the use of reason. Luke summarizes the ministry of Paul in the synagogue in Thessalonica in these words: "Then Paul, as his custom was, went in to them, and for three Sabbaths *reasoned* with them from the Scriptures, explaining and demonstrating that the Christ had to suffer and rise again from the dead" (Acts 17:2–3).

This is a significant text because it demonstrates the elucidatory exercise of human reason. "In its elucidatory function, reason sifts, analyzes, expounds and, generally speaking, brings into light the content of revelation."<sup>10</sup> This is precisely what Paul was doing with reference to the Old Testament. He was expounding its contents and showing how it found fulfillment in Jesus of Nazareth.

What was the objective of Paul's work as a theologian? Why do any of us give ourselves to the labor of using reason in the service of biblical exposition? It has been well said that the end of theology is always for "the clear and graceful proclamation of the gospel."<sup>11</sup>

May God be pleased to give us the grace to use the gift of reason in the service of the gospel and the salvation of souls.

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1. Wolfhart Pannenberg, *An Introduction to Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1991), 14.

2. Donald G. Bloesch, *A Theology of Word and Spirit: Authority and Method in Theology*, vol. 1 of *Christian Foundations* (Downers Grove, Ill.: Intervarsity Press, 1992), 25–26.

3. David Tracy, *Blessed Rage for Order: The New Pluralism in Theology* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1996), xiii.

4. *Ibid.*, 5.

5. John Macquarrie, *Principles of Christian Theology*, 2d ed. (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1977), 17.

6. George Brown Tindall, *America: A Narrative History*, vol. 1 (New York and London: W. W. Norton and Company, 1984), 120.

7. Quoted in Colin Brown, *Christianity and Western Thought: A History of Philosophers, Ideas and Movements* (Downers Grove, Ill.: Intervarsity Press, 1990), 285–286.

8. Rousas J. Rushdoony, *By What Standard? An Analysis of the Philosophy of Cornelius Van Til* (Fairfax, Va.: Thoburn Press, 1974), 17.

9. Thomas C. Oden, *The Living God*, vol. 1 of *Systematic Theology* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1987), 395.

10. Macquarrie, *Principles of Christian Theology*, 17.

11. Duane H. Larson, "A Current Agenda for Systematic Theology," *Lutheran Theological Seminary Bulletin* 74 (Winter 1994): 23.

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**C**hristian unity is important. In the previous article we underscored four reasons, witnessed by Scripture and experience, why Christian unity should be important to you. First, unity is a good and pleasant thing. Second, disunity is a bad and unpleasant thing. Third, unity is at the center of the Christian's calling. Fourth, God promises to command the blessing of eternal life within the context of Christian unity.

In this article, I suggest that the most significant roadblock to true unity lies in our own misconceptions of true unity. If we misunderstand what Christian unity is, then we will never get to the real thing. Instead, we will remain deceived, accepting the counterfeit in place of the authentic.

Let me illustrate. In my culinary world there is no better prepackaged snack than an Oreo cookie. As you know, the Oreo has been copied by many well-meaning but under-achieving cookie makers. Now, suppose your whole life you knew only imitation Oreos. You would likely be satisfied with them. The fact that you were satisfied with a simulation would actually keep you from experiencing the real thing. Now, while you could still live a happy life to the glory of God if you only knew of counterfeit Oreo cookies—not so with counterfeit unity.

Counterfeit unity gives the impression of oneness and thereby keeps us from enjoying life in true community. There are at least four imitations that many of us may be accepting as true Christian unity. Our goal is to identify these counterfeits so that we can reject them and give our attention to seeking the real thing.

### **Superficial or Formal Unity**

The first two counterfeits are similar enough to be considered together. Superficial unity is the sort of kinship that stays at the surface. This is the unity that is often expressed on first dates. Imagine a “love-struck” girl clasping her hands on her heart and exclaiming to a boy she has just met, “You like music too! We must be soul-mates.” We could make an endless list of such coincidental commonalities that surface early in any relationship: music preference, age, type of vehicle driven, or skin color. There is nothing wrong with enjoying these superficial similarities as conversational starting points in a relationship. We must not think, however, that by virtue of these things we are unified.

Formal unity is a little more complex, which only makes it more deceptive. By “formal unity” we mean unity in form only, not in reality. These forms often seem much more substantial than the superficial things just mentioned. For example, because each of us belongs to a family, (whether nuclear or ecclesiastical) we experience a built-in form of unity. In

your nuclear family you have a formal unity because you share a name. You live in the same house. You may eat at the same table. In your church family, as well, there is a formal unity that sometimes passes as the real thing. We know each other's names. We may even spend time with each other outside of church. There is, however, little intimate involvement. Too often, we do not know the people with whom we are formally united. The problem is that, beneath the formal skeleton of unity, there lies a bunch of unconnected parts.

Is your unity superficial or formal? Take this simple test: Children, what was the last thing that made your father cry? Fathers, what is your teenage son's greatest heart struggle? Wife, what are your husband's greatest fears? What is his greatest hope? Open up your church directory to a random page and point your finger at a “random” family. When have you last shared a meal with this family? Digging deeper—are their extended family members saved? If not, have you prayed for them? How well do you know the families that make up the other churches of your classis? These



may appear to be arbitrary questions, but the answers may be indicative of superficial or formal unity. Do not be content with this!

Another way to identify superficial or formal unity in particular relationships is to ask yourself how this relationship would be different if the formal or structural unity did not exist. For example, imagine there was no coffee time after church. Imagine that everyone entered worship silently and left immediately after service. Would your church “still” be unified?

A few years ago I gained a good friend. We initially became friends because we commuted to and from work together and then worked side by side all day. We spent roughly seventy-five percent of our waking hours together. And we had fun. But it was not until the night before I moved away from that particular city that we both came to amazingly difficult but enlightening realization that we had been enjoying a superficial friendship on the basis of formal unity. We came to that realization when one of us suggested that we pray together. This was something that we had never done. This is not to say that we did not care for each other, but that our friendship was built primarily upon formal structures.

Parents sometimes realize that the relationship between themselves and their spouse is simply a formal unity. When the children move out, the scaffolding that had “unified” them for so many years is removed. Long-term marriage breakups are often blamed on the “empty-nest syndrome.” Perhaps the “syndrome” should better be called “full-nest-formal-unity syndrome.”

God is not calling us to a superficial unity. He is calling us to something deeper. “There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called in one hope of your calling” (Ephesians 4:4; KJV). He says we are to be one in body and one in Spirit. Just as

*If some of your relationships are simply expressions of hypocritical unity, ask God to give you the wisdom and courage to ground these relationships upon the truth and in love.*

a human body enjoys an intimate interconnectedness between all of its parts, so must we know all the parts of our familial bodies. God says that Christians all have one hope. In other words, the unifying element is not just a formal structure. It is a common hope in the grace of God.

### **Hypocritical Unity**

The second type of false unity is less subtle. Sometimes we boldly pretend to be in harmony with others when we know this is not the case. This is hypocritical unity. You may know that the word “hypocrite” literally refers to one who wears a mask. A hypocrite pretends to be one thing while actually being another.

I was once walking through a mall with my wife when, all of a sudden, another girl bounded up to her, gave her a hug and started talking as if she was a long lost friend. After the girl left I mentioned to my wife how nice it must have been to see such a good friend again. Her response was, “That girl has never liked me.” I had been completely fooled by the mask put on by this girl.

Sometimes our unity is simply the donning of a mask. The Bible tells us that this is not only a modern problem. One of the clearest biblical examples of hypocritical unity is described by Paul in Galatians 2:11–13. “Now when Peter had come to Antioch, I withstood him to his face, because he was to be blamed; for before certain men came from James, he would eat

with the Gentiles; but when they came, he withdrew and separated himself, fearing those who were of the circumcision. And the rest of the Jews also played the hypocrite with him, so that even Barnabas was carried away with their hypocrisy.”

Hypocritical unity is a bald-faced lie. Genuine unity always tells the truth. In fact, truth-telling is the difficult antidote that God prescribes for cases of hypocritical unity. Paul spoke difficult words of truth to Peter. Peter would have then been obliged to speak difficult words of truth not only to the Gentiles whom he had offended but to the Jews whom he had tried to appease.

If some of your relationships are simply expressions of hypocritical unity, ask God to give you the wisdom and courage to ground these relationships upon the truth and in love. In a passage clearly calling for unity Paul admonishes us to, “Let love be without hypocrisy” (Romans 12:9).

### **Sentimental Unity**

There is a type of supposed solidarity that is built upon emotions and feelings rather than on truth and love. This is not exactly superficial unity since emotions generally run quite deep. Neither is it hypocritical unity since there is no intentional desire to mislead. Sentimental unity has the appearance of politeness or courtesy. Those who practice sentimental unity prefer not to “rock the boat” or “ruffle feathers.” In fact, this is false unity. It is a cowardly refusal to take a stand on the truth. And, sadly it is something that we experience all too frequently.

Bob was a tenth grader at a Christian school. He had a large group of friends who were quite close. They were generally regarded as “good kids.” Recently, however, Bob had begun to experiment with marijuana. Some of his close friends were aware of Bob’s new habit. They even talked

about it when Bob was not with them. For the sake of unity (their so-called friendship) they said nothing to him. This is sentimental unity. As you can guess, this false unity eventually unravels. Bob soon became distant from his once-close friends because they had rejected true unity. Soon he became committed to drugs and began down the road to a very difficult life.

Or, consider this example that could have happened in your family. During a recent holiday gathering, a relative began to open up about his religious views. Now this was something new. It was perhaps uncomfortable for the individual. The problem was that the views expressed were entirely unorthodox. Now, sentimental unity would say, “No one should speak out against these views because the speaker might become either discouraged or hurt. That is not how we do things in our family. After all, people are sensitive. We don’t want to create a stir. We don’t want to appear to be divided so let’s just nod our heads.”

It should be obvious that this is not the kind of unity that Paul is advocating. We saw in Galatians 2 that Paul paid no mind to mere sentimental unity. He opposed Peter openly (probably hurting his feelings). Why? The gospel was at stake. We may disagree with each other; sometimes we must. At times our disagreements will make things uncomfortable. We must not pretend that the preservation of sentiments is the equivalent of true solidarity.

### **Inappropriate Unity**

Finally, the Bible makes clear that some things just do not go together. Just like oil and water cannot unite, so light and darkness cannot be united. This is illustrated to us every single day. Every day we witness a battle between light and darkness. We call these times dawn and dusk. There is a temporary mingling of the two, but every time either the light scatters the darkness or the darkness consumes the light.

Similarly, the Bible teaches that Christians may have no real unity apart from the family of God. In a previously cited passage, Paul names our common baptism as a characteristic of true unity: “There is . . . one Lord, one faith, one baptism” (Ephesians 4:5). This word “baptism,” properly understood, gives us a parameter for unity. God says that baptism is a distinguishing mark of those who may appropriately be unified. Now this does *not* mean that you may have fellowship with anyone so long as they have undergone the external rite of baptism. Some of the most wicked people in the world have been baptized. So why does Paul connect unity with baptism?

We must remember that, regarding sacraments, there is intended an intimate connection between the sign and the thing signified. Baptism signifies the washing away and the putting to death of sins, and the renewal and sanctification of the believer in Christ (Heidelberg Catechism, Q&A 70). Paul mentions baptism as a ground of unity. He is not referring to baptism as a bare sign, but baptism as a symbol of union with Christ. Christians may have fellowship only with those who are truly living out that which baptism symbolizes.

By contrast, we live in a world where ecumenism is running rampant. The cultural priests of this age promote with vigor the doctrine of the brotherhood of all men. John Calvin speaks for all Christians when he says, “We recognize no brotherhood . . . except amongst the people of God” (Commentary, Psalm 133:3).

In the next article, we shall consider the primary theological consideration for true unity. What we need to understand is that the only real basis for Christian unity is our mutual union to the Triune God. When a person is grafted by faith into a communion with God, he is also grafted into a community of the redeemed (Romans 11). This

means that what unifies us with fellow believers at the same time takes away the possibility of our having true unity with unbelievers. Genesis 3:15 declares that there is a God-ordained hostility (not unity) between believers and unbelievers. The antithesis defines Christian unity both positively and negatively.

This may challenge some of us deeply. Some of will have to admit that we really do not like “hanging out with church people” but would prefer to associate with worldly people. The Bible teaches that one of the litmus tests of true Christianity is love for the brethren (1 John 3:14). Conversely, God says that “if any man love the world, the love of the Father is not in him” (1 John 2:15). Where is your love? Is it expressive of true unity or of inappropriate unity?

Christian unity is no superficial or formal thing because it is rooted in our relationship to God himself. Christian unity cannot be characterized by hypocrisy because Christians are those who have been set free by the truth (John 8:32). Christian unity is much more than a commitment to preserve feelings, because true unity loves the whole person, not just his feelings. Finally, ultimate solidarity cannot exist between those whom God has separated.

Next time we ask the question, “How is this possible? How can superficial, hypocritical, sentimental and un-loyal people enjoy true unity?” Hopefully this critical approach to unity has helped us to clear away lesser things so that we are able to take in the amazing reality that Christian unity is an expression of our mutual union to the Triune God.

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# Bible Studies on the Life of Abraham

## Introduction

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Genesis has been and continues to be a book of beginnings. The first eleven chapters provide us with the beginning of creation, the beginning of mankind, the beginning of sin, and the beginning of grace. We even saw the beginning of nations as the children of Noah had their tongues confused at the Tower of Babel causing them to scatter and to populate the earth.

The end of Genesis 11 contains a new beginning. Up until now we have seen creation, destruction, and repopulation of the world. The beginning of God's Word focused on the world in general. Now it begins to focus on one person in particular—Abraham and his descendants. The first eleven chapters of Genesis covered a period of 2,000 years. Twenty generations of human history are covered in just eleven chapters of the Bible. The rest of Genesis, Chapters 12–50, follows the history of one family over a period of four hundred years. It records detail after detail of the life of Abraham—his call and his fall, his trust and distrust, his strengths and his weaknesses. Then Genesis tells us detail after detail about Abraham's son, his grandson, and his great-grandson: Isaac, Jacob, and Joseph. The rest of the Old Testament is devoted to the history of the nation that comes from the children of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.

That is done because Genesis, as well as all of Scripture, is ever forward looking. The Bible is the Book of Salvation. It is the Book of Redemption. Eleven chapters of the Bible are focused on the creation of man, the fall of man, the depth of that fall, and then the rest of the Bible deals

with the future of the world and where the human race will spend eternity. It is ironic that the human race seems to have turned this all around. Today we are forever looking for the origin of all things while we pay very little attention to where we are headed.

Abraham has been called in the Bible “a friend of God” and “the father of the faithful.” In Genesis 11 we are introduced to the one Paul calls “the father of all true believers” who, with his descendants, is the subject of the entire biblical revelation. In this study of the life of Abraham, we shall see the four steps of Abraham's spiritual pilgrimage—his call to leave Ur, his need to learn dependence upon God, his need to learn that God can do all things, and his need to know God will do all things for those who trust in Him. And we shall work to respond in faith to God's call as Abraham did.

### Genesis 11:27–32

In Genesis 11:27–32 we are introduced to Terah's family. He had three sons: Abram, Nahor, and Haran. Abram is named first not because he is the oldest, but because he is the most important as far as biblical history is concerned.

Haran had at least three children: Lot, Iscah, and Milcah. Haran died at a relatively young age before the family left the city of Ur. Nahor married one of Haran's daughters, Milcah, and started a family. Abram married Sarai who was also a daughter of Terah. She is a half-sister to Abram. Abram took care of Haran's son, Lot, after Terah died.

The family of Terah began to make the trip toward Canaan already before Abram received the call of the Lord in Genesis 12. Stephen, in Acts 7:2–4, says that Abram had received the call

to leave “his country and his people” while still living in Ur. After Terah died in Haran, the Lord calls Abram to leave his country, his people, and his “father's household” in Genesis 12.

It is generally agreed that the city of Ur is located in southern Babylonia. It is interesting that the Lord calls His first patriarch out of Babylon. Earlier in the chapter, God had scattered the nations from Babylon by confusing their language at Babel. Now, God calls to Himself the father of His nation from Babylon. In the future, this same nation would be exiled to Babylon.

In the day of Abram, Ur was considered to be one of the most civilized and cultured cities of the world. Archaeologists claim that a gravity system of running water provided homes in the city with running water, indoor plumbing, and even a type of air conditioning. It was no small request from the Lord to have Abram's family pack everything up and become nomads living in tents.

Ur was also polytheistic, and the family of Terah was no different (Joshua 24:2, 14, 15). The call of Abraham is a great example of God's sovereign election. Abram was not a Jew when God called him. He was a pagan, in all likelihood an idol worshipper. Passing by the whole nation of Chaldeans, God goes to one single family, and in that family He passes by everyone except for one man—Abram. Such action on the part of God reveals His sovereign grace. There was nothing in Abram that made him worthy of being called above the others. In fact, the opposite is quite true. Abraham was an old man without any offspring. But in His sovereign grace, God chooses Abram, the son of Terah, and makes him a shining example of His electing love.

# Bible Studies on Abraham

## Lesson 1: Hearing God's Call

### Genesis 11:26–12:9

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The beginning of Genesis 12 is so much different from that of Genesis 11. Genesis 11 begins with the construction of a secular building. It shows a people going about their business without God as they try to make a name for themselves without God. Genesis 12, on the other hand, is about what God will do. In Genesis 11 we have man's goals; in Genesis 12 we have God's goals.

The contrast between these two passages is fascinating. Look at some of the differences:

The plans of man fell apart as God confused their language, but the plans of God are forever. Once more, God took the initiative in the continuing redemption plan. Listed in Genesis 12 are seven "I wills" or seven promises from God to Abram:

1. *I will show you a land.*
2. *I will make you into a great nation.*
3. *I will bless you.*
4. *I will make your name great and you will be a blessing.*
5. *I will bless those who bless you.*
6. *I will curse those who curse you.*
7. *I will give your offspring this land.*

The Tower of Babel illustrates very clearly that mankind, even with his best efforts, is unable to form a great nation. They became scattered throughout the earth, forgetting God's promise in the process. God, however, did not forget. God did not forget the promise He had made to Adam and Eve. God did not forget the promise He made to Noah. And God did not forget the desire of man to be a great nation.



God had seen the sin of the human race. Instead of sending a flood to destroy them all again, as He had in the past, God saved one man and his family. To this man God came and gave wonderful promises, "I will make you a great nation. I will bless those who bless you and curse those who curse you."

These promises are indeed very astonishing promises! At the very beginning of this great nation we discover how little hope there is for Abram and Sarai actually to be the forerunners of a new race. The one whom God called to be the father of a great nation had a wife who was barren. The human race, at Babel, had said that they did not need God to be a great nation. Here God took the human race and said, "I don't need you to help Me make a great nation." He took a man and a woman without a future, a couple who had no hope, and made from them a great nation. If the Lord had wanted a great leader and a great nation, He could easily have chosen Nimrod the great warrior or the builders of Babel. Instead, God chooses the most unlikely candidate He could find and promised to make him into a great nation.

The call of Abram was an act of a sovereign God. In spite of all his handicaps, Abram was called by God out of an idolatrous country to become the father of a great nation through which God would fulfill His promise of the Messiah. God did not choose Abram because of any qualities He might have seen in him. Rather, it was what God was going to do for Abram, with Abram, and through Abram.

## The Command to Leave

God came to Abram and commanded him to leave all his luxury behind to become a nomad. Abram was to leave everything that was familiar—country, people, and family—in order to go to an unknown land to serve a god unknown to him. Yet, the command to leave came with a promise—indeed, the seven promises listed above.

The first and final promises go together. What started off as a promise of land to be seen became a land to be possessed. God chose the land and then He enabled Abram's descendants to possess the land.

God promises to make Abram's name great. The people at Babel were unable to make a great name for themselves. They tried but they failed. Why is the name of Abram great while the people of Babel are forgotten? Because of God. Those whom God promises to make great become great, and those we often think are great are often soon forgotten. God kept His promise to Abram. God made Abram's name great.

God promises to bless Abram. In the very next chapter (Genesis 13:2) we read: "Abram had become very wealthy in livestock and in silver and gold."

Promises five and six go together. Through the years Abram and his descendants would come into contact with many people. Some would be friends, others would be enemies. God's promise was that the friends would be blessed and the enemies would be cursed. History shows that God takes this promise very seriously. One example would be in Exodus 1 where Pharaoh instructed the Hebrew midwives to kill all the baby boys that were born. Many of the midwives befriended the Jews and would not kill the babies. Exodus 1:20, 21 says: "So God was kind to the midwives. . . . He gave them families of their own."

As Christians, we should be most interested in this promise given to Abram. Paul, in Galatians 3:8, cites this promise as it applies to the Gentiles. Believing Gentiles have become the spiritual descendants of Abram and have the privilege of sharing in Abram's faith and heritage. Those who believe in the promises given to Abram and fulfilled in Christ receive the same blessing Abram did.

None of the promises depended upon any action from Abram. They are unconditional, depending not upon the patriarch but upon the faithfulness of the God Abram followed.

### Abram's Faith

Genesis 12:4 tells us, "So Abram left." In spite of all the obstacles of leaving family and friends, Abram obeyed God's call to leave. Abram did not understand how God would bless him, but he obeyed trusting that God would bless him.

Although the journey from Haran to Canaan is about five hundred miles, we are given no details about the excursion. The author is more interested in Abram's obedience than Abram's adventures along the way. Abram believed God and acted on that belief. This was not merely an abstract, intellectual belief. It was a faith that changed his entire life. At the age of seventy-five Abram packed up his family and his belongings and went to Canaan as the Lord had directed him.

Hebrews 11:8 records, "By faith Abraham, when he was called, obeyed by going out to a place which he was to receive as an inheritance; and he went out, not knowing where he was going." Faith is the most natural thing we have. For example, every time we sit down, we have faith that the chair in which we are about to sit will not collapse. We have faith in our car as we drive it down the road and faith in other drivers who zoom past us on the highway.

At the same time, faith is the most unnatural thing for a person to have. Abram was called upon to believe in God's promises although everything pointed to them as being impossible. By faith, he left a life of comparative ease to live in a tent, wandering from one site to another. With every mile the terrain would become less familiar and less appealing. The people he encountered along the way were different in their language and their customs. The comfortable sights of Ur and Haran slowly vanished behind him. He was a foreigner, but he continued on, convinced that it was God's will for him, confident that God would be true to His promises.

By faith he lived in a tent overlooking the land that would one day be his. Of all the people in Canaan, he seemed the least permanent. They lived in the cities, while he lived in a tent. Abram believed that God would one day give him the land, not by sword or battle, but by spiritual conquest. After all, the land was promised to him and to his offspring. Even so, he seems to be the one least attached to it. He was looking for a better city—one built by God.

### Abram's Worship

Although Abram and his people lived in tents, they did a fair amount of building in the land their descendants would one day possess. Twice in the few verses we have before us Abram built an altar—one at Shechem and one near Bethel. As Abram traveled throughout the land promised him, he built altars to the Lord. His devotion was to the Lord who had brought him into the land and was a testimony of God's claim upon that place. Abram built altars because he knew he was not to possess the land for himself but he was possessing it for the Lord. Eventually he would arrive at that heavenly city whose architect and

builder is God, but the altars would remain behind. They would stand as a witness that a child of God had once knelt, prayed, recognized God's grace, and believed His promises.

The promise of God came to Abram, and by faith Abram believed and did as God instructed him to do. The promise of God is for all who heed His call. The Son of God says, "Come unto Me, all who are weary and heavy laden, and I will give you rest" (Matthew 11:28).

Just as God came to Abram to show him a new land, so also God comes to His people today. He says, "Follow Me." This is not only a command, it is

a promise. You may not be called to some distant land, but you are called to take up your cross and follow Jesus. If you do so, the Lord will give you possessions you never dreamed possible, for God has promised:

1. *"I will give you the forgiveness of your sins."*
2. *"I will give you eternal life."*
3. *"I will bless those who bless you."*
4. *"I will curse those who curse you."*

God will do these things for those who acknowledge His Son, Jesus Christ, as their Savior and Lord. He is the great *I Am That I Am*, and He is

able to keep His promises.

Three times Abram is called "a friend of God." That truly is an amazing nickname! It was not given to Abram because his strong faith. Abram grew up in a home filled with idol worship. Throughout his life his faith faltered; at times he was strong, at other times weak. Even though called to go to Canaan, Abram settled in Haran, moving on only after his father died. One does not need to be a spiritual giant to follow God. All we have to do is begin to follow Him. The Lord will certainly lead us.



## *Points to Ponder and Discuss*

1. Was there anything significant about Abram or Sarai that God should choose them? Is there anything significant about you that God should choose you?
2. God takes the initiative in calling Abram out of Ur. Can you find other places in the Bible where God took the initiative in His redemption plan?
3. How important is it to include God in your plans? Have there been times in your life where you excluded God from your plans? What were the results?
4. Contrast what God does at the Tower of Babel with what God does by calling Abram.
5. List seven hindrances that would have kept Abram from obeying God. How do the seven "I wills" from God answer the difficulties Abram may have felt?
6. Is it significant that God chose the land for Abram?
7. What made Abram an unlikely candidate for the founder of a new nation? Why would God choose Abram?
8. Abram's faith in God made a dramatic change in his life. How has your faith in God changed your life?
9. Is it significant that Abram builds the altars in the Promised Land?

# Bible Studies on the Life of Abraham

## Lesson 2: The First Test

### Genesis 12:10–13:4

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We like to think that, when we are where God wants us to be, things will go well for us. After all, we are trying to follow God's will for our lives, so we expect life to be free from testings and trials. But now we see something different taking place in the life of Abram. This is only the beginning of Abram's journey of faith, and we see that Abram is a person very much like ourselves. He has the same struggles we have, often uncertain of exactly what God has in store.

Abram had only just begun his journey in faith when a disturbing situation arose—a famine came in the land that was supposed to be flowing with milk and honey. In the last lesson, Abram believed God, left his country, and traveled to the place where God had sent him. He was trusting God, turning his back on the world, and following the promise that God had given to him.

Sometimes it takes more grace to stay where God wants you to be than it does to get where He wants you to go. That certainly was the case for Abram. Instead of trusting God to provide for him despite the famine, Abram took matters into his own hands. He turned his back on Bethel and went down into Egypt. To rely on Egypt was to trust in human resources rather than trusting in God. Throughout the Old Testament, Egypt represents the world and worldly thinking. The prophet Isaiah writes: "Woe to those who go down to Egypt for help, who rely on horses, who trust in the multitude of their chariots and the great strength of their horsemen, but do not look to the Holy One of Israel, or seek their help

from the Lord" (Isaiah 31:1). Abram should have trusted in God, saying: "Here is where God has placed me, and it is here that I will stay until He tells me to move." Instead, Abram left the place of obedience and traveled to Egypt.

How long Abram had been in the Promised Land before the famine came is uncertain. It was not likely a very long time. It was enough time for Abram to notice some of the barriers he faced: a barren wife, an unknown destiny, the people around him settled in their communities—each with their established homes and wells, each with their own armies and weapons.

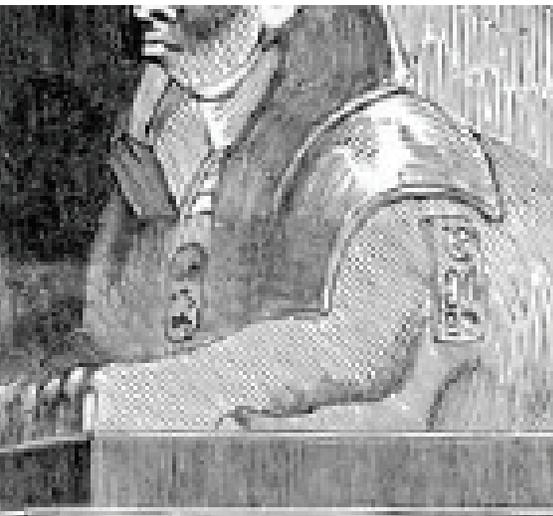
As Abram watched the harsh environment around him worsen, he opted to reject God's promised land for the supposed greener pastures of Egypt. Throughout his decision process there is neither a hint of prayer to God nor any turning to God for advice. Abram trusted God enough to leave Ur and go to an unknown country, but then when he got there, he did not trust God enough to take care of him. Instead of trusting God, Abram failed the first test of faith God set before him and moved to Egypt.

### Abram In Egypt

Once Abram entered Egypt, he lost his sense of peace and security. He began to worry. After all, his wife was a beautiful woman. He feared for his own life and devised a plot that he believed would save him. Recognizing that a husband would be in greater danger than a brother, Abram instructed his wife, Sarai, to tell people that she was his sister. That way they would not kill him in order



to get to her. It was not exactly a lie, was it? After all, Sarai was Abram's half-sister. That makes it a half-truth. And yet, it is a whole lie because it was meant to convey the untruthful impression that Sarai was not Abram's



wife. Certainly this precaution did not arise out of any true faith in God. Abram's trip out of fellowship with God led him to resort to lying when he should have been trusting, fearing for his life when he should have been confident in his God, and making excuses when he should have been resting peacefully in the Lord. When Abram failed to believe that God could sustain him through the famine, he was driven to a point in Egypt where he did not trust God to fulfill His promise, causing him to lie to Pharaoh for the sake of his own life.

Abram had hoped that he might escape death and that both he and his wife would be kept safe if Sarai would claim to be his sister. But Abram's precaution led to Pharaoh's action. The very thing he feared and hoped to avoid happened. Because of his half-truth, Sarai was brought into the harem of Pharaoh; and because of their deception, they were rendered helpless, unable to object without divulging their secret.

Abram has placed himself in a horrible situation, hasn't he? There is no way out. He had left God's place for him and he had lied about his wife. There is no way to reverse the situation and start over. How could he go to the great Pharaoh and explain to him what had happened? What would he say? "Heh, heh, I told you she was my sister, but you know what? There's something I forgot to tell you." That would not work. What about, "Hey, guess what? I've got something really interesting to tell you, Pharaoh." No. That would not work, either. There was no way that Abram could climb out of the hole he dug for himself and for his wife Sarai. Abram learned the hard way the awful consequences of getting oneself out of harmony with God.

### **God to the Rescue**

While Abram was unfaithful, God remained faithful. He inflicted serious diseases upon Pharaoh and

his household. Interestingly, the plague fell upon Pharaoh, who acted in ignorance, and not Abram, who acted in disobedience. God did not desert his child even though His child had wandered away from Him. He did not cast the disobedient, sinning believer away, but rescued him out of his dilemma. God knew Abram would make the wrong choices but permitted it to take place. God used Abram's failure to teach Abram a great lesson.

Somehow Pharaoh recognized that the plagues were a message from God. He confronted Abram with harsh words and commanded that Abram and Sarai be deported under military escort. Though not harmed, Abram is deservedly rebuked by the heathen Pharaoh. The friend of God stood mute while a pagan pointed out his wrong conduct. The Lord brought Abram out of the land of Egypt back to the Promised Land where we once more see the tent, the altar, and the promises of God.

### **An Important Lesson**

God had allowed the famine to take place in order to test Abram. Certainly God knew Abram would fail this test which He had placed before the patriarch, and God also could have kept Abram from failing. But He allowed Abram to fail. Abram failed at the point where he was supposed to be the strongest—his faith. God then used the failure to teach Abram a great lesson of trusting in Him. God tested Abram to cause his faith to grow, to develop his perseverance, and so that he might mature in his walk with God. If Abram had stayed in Canaan when the famine came, his faith would have grown by seeing how the God he worshipped provided for him in spite of the hardships. But since he did not stay in Canaan, the same famine that could have meant spiritual growth took him away from

the Lord, led him to sin, and eventually brought him great humiliation when he was rebuked by Pharaoh. And yet, even in all of that Abram learned an important lesson.

Thousands of people trust God to bring them to the Promised Land. They trust God with their souls, but they think they have to do the rest. God saves them, but they have to maintain their salvation. They do not trust God to keep them. Others trust in God for eternal things but do not dare to trust in Him for the material things. Many will gladly sing praises to God in church, but the moment something goes wrong in their lives, their joy is gone.

God allows trials to enter into our lives. He allows us to make mistakes in order that He may use those experiences and mistakes for our growth in the faith. James writes: “The testing of our faith develops

perseverance” (James 1:3). We see that wonderful truth in the life of Joseph, Abram’s great-grandson. His brothers were going to kill him, but instead they sold him into slavery. Later on, Joseph was put into jail. But it was all used by God eventually to save the lives of the very brothers who at one time had wanted to kill him. Joseph says to his brothers: “You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good” (Genesis 50:20). Paul wrote in Romans 8:28 “And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love Him, who have been called according to His purpose.” God is able to take the things that people mean to do for evil and make them work for His kingdom.

Abram is a wonderful example of this truth. While Abram was unfaithful, God remained faithful. God does not desert His child, even though His child was living in sin and disobedience. God plagued Pharaoh’s house until Pharaoh drove Abram

and Sarai out of Egypt. God would not leave His patriarch in Egypt, even though it took an unbelieving king to drive Abram back to the place of obedience.

God had tested Abram, and Abram had failed. If Abram would have stayed in the land that God had given him, God certainly would have provided enough food and water for Abram and his herds. God would not have failed Abram, but Abram failed God. By going to Egypt, Abram trusted in himself rather than trusting in God. God does not always make our way easy, but He does arrange the steps of faith to lead us in an upward direction so that our spiritual muscles will grow stronger and stronger as we learn to trust in God more and more.

## *Points to Ponder and Discuss*

1. What might Abram have expected once he arrived in the land God had shown him? Is this what we often expect from the Christian life?
2. In verses 10–12, how do changes in Abram’s life and circumstances threaten both his faith in God and the promises God made to him?
3. Why did God send the famine? What two different responses to the famine were set before Abram? Which one did he choose?
4. For Abram, one sin led to another. Trace the progression of Abram’s sin. Have you witnessed a similar progression in your own life?
5. Following Abram’s journey into Egypt, trace the results of Abram’s sin. Have you experienced similar results at times when you failed to trust completely in God?
6. Abram’s deception almost cost him his wife. Have there been times when a “small deception” or “white lie” caused great pain in your life?
7. God came to the rescue in Abram’s life. Has God come to the rescue in your life? How?
8. How can we better trust God to provide for us not only spiritually, but also physically?
9. What does Genesis 12 teach you about the practical realities of living by faith?

# Bible Studies on Abraham

## Lesson 3: The Second Test

### Genesis 13:5–18

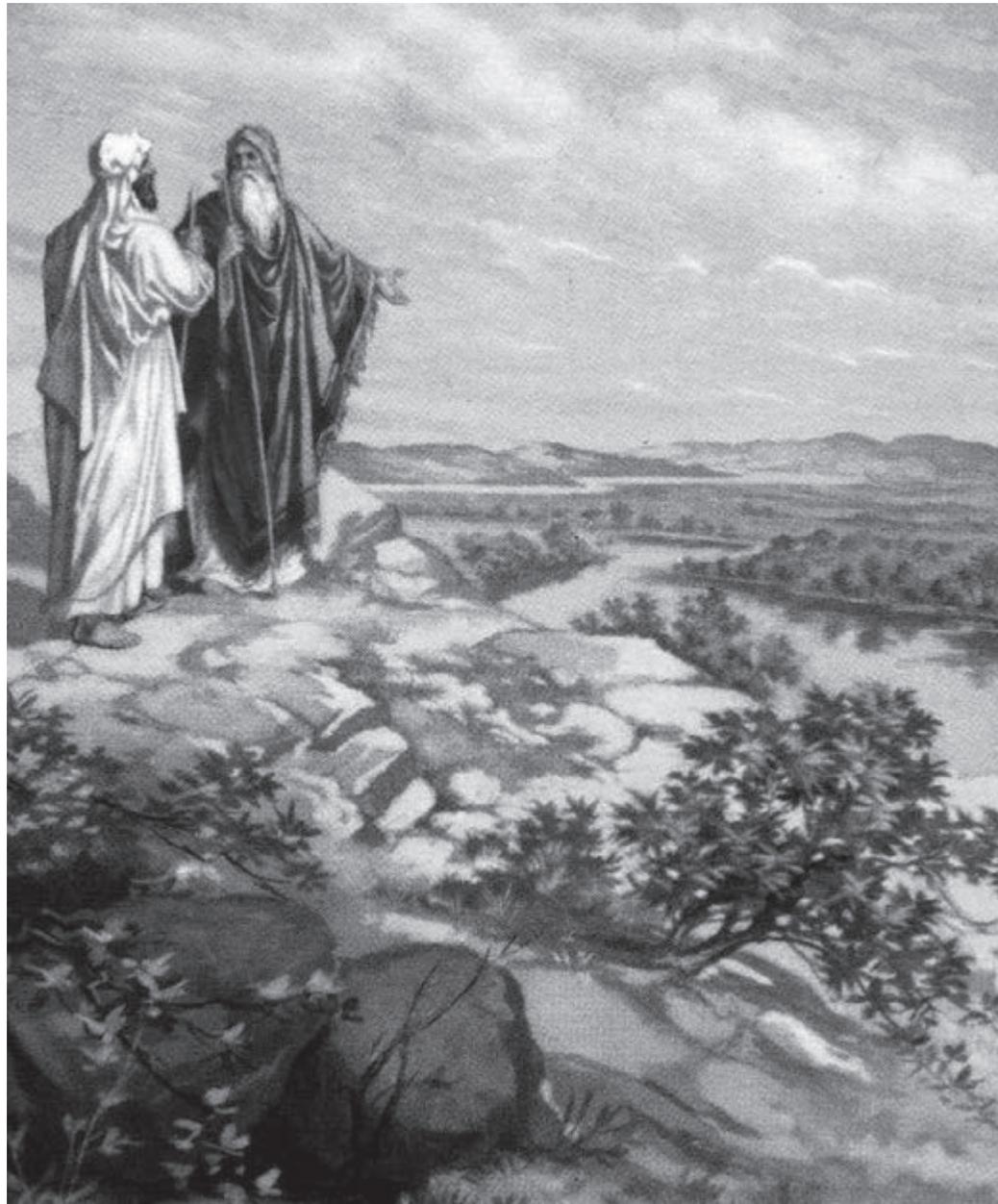
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Paul wrote, “Whatever a man sows, that shall he also reap.” Nowhere is that better illustrated for us than in the life of Abram. God had told the patriarch to leave his father’s country, his father’s people, and his father’s household to go to the place that God would show him. That was the call of faith. Abram believed it, left his land, and went to Canaan. However, he did not go alone. Instead of leaving everything behind, Abram left with his family. He took with him his nephew Lot. This nephew became a source of great sorrow for Abram.

#### **Trouble in the Land of Promise**

The trouble began when Abram, his family, and all their possessions came back from Egypt. They left Egypt to return to Canaan, but Egypt had not left them. Driven to Egypt by the famine, Abram and Lot returned as men of great wealth. Abram and his nephew had shared in each other’s poverty and hardships. Now returning to Canaan, they shared in each other’s wealth. The gifts of Pharaoh went to Canaan with them and made them very rich. This is the first instance of riches in the Bible, and along with it came an interesting problem connected with wealth. Because of their wealth, strife grew between the herdsmen of Abram and the herdsmen of his nephew, Lot. Partly because the land had not fully recovered from the recent famine, and partly because of their increased wealth, grazing land became scarce. The herdsmen of Lot and Abram began to quarrel over where their respective herds were to graze.

Abram was a lover of peace. He was also a hater of strife. So much so, that it almost cost him his wife in the last chapter. Because he cherished



the family bond, Abram proposed a friendly solution. He was ready to give up his own interests to keep the family from quarreling. Abram suggested to Lot that they separate and pasture their herds in different areas—one in the plains, the other in the hills.

Abram was the leader of this entire adventure. He was the one who had

been called by God to go to Canaan. God had made the covenant promises to Abram. One day he would be the possessor of the land. Lot was merely a tag-along. In addition, Abram was the older of the two. By rights, he should have chosen first. Yet Abram does nothing of the kind. He gives Lot the option to choose first.

It seems Abram had learned his lesson in Egypt. Whereas in the previous test, Abram worried for his life, in the second test he looked beyond his money pouch to God. He rested secure that God would provide for him regardless of Lot's choice. He knew God would take care of him, trusting more in God's word than in what he could see. Motivated by the promise of God, Abram was not concerned about where he pitched his tent. After all, one day all the land would belong to his descendants.

### **The Choice of Lot**

Lot, on the other hand, is simply selfish. He had become very rich, and the trip into Egypt had a different effect upon him than it did his uncle. He shows no devotion to the Lord, nor is there any apparent need for the Lord in his life. What had been to Abram a learning experience, had been to Lot a temptation. Lot should have returned the right of choice to his uncle, or selected what he believed the inferior of the two options. After all, Abram was Lot's superior in age and therefore entitled to first choice; Abram was Lot's uncle and therefore deserving of Lot's respect. Even more, Abram was Lot's guardian ever since Lot's father had died and therefore worthy of the gratitude of his benefactor. It was, after all, Abram who had made Lot rich.

Concerned about his own wealth and prosperity, Lot looked out upon the plush plains and thought they held the better future. Poor Lot. He fell for the oldest temptation in the book. His life was rather shallow, and when confronted with choosing between green pastures and rugged hillside, the choice came almost too easily. Moses, the author of Genesis, makes an interesting editorial comment in verse 10, describing the valley of the Jordan as looking like "the garden of

*Lot's decision should serve to remind us that the eye is the organ through which Satan most frequently tempts people and causes them to fall.*

the Lord, like the land of Egypt." While it may have been as plush as Paradise, to Lot it looked a lot like Egypt—the place where he had accumulated his wealth. The option was clear: Bethel or Egypt—the place of worship or the valley of wickedness? He chose grass over grace. He chose what seemed materially better regardless of the company he would have to keep. Lot was motivated by what he saw—the well-watered plains of the Jordan.

Lot's decision should serve to remind us that the eye is the organ through which Satan most frequently tempts people and causes them to fall. It began already with Eve when God forbade man to eat of the tree of knowledge of good and evil. The devil came and convinced Eve that God was holding something back from her and her husband. In Genesis 3:5 the serpent said: "God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God." The devil promised to show Eve something—something she had never seen before. God said: "Believe My Word." The devil said: "Come, see for yourself." Genesis 3:6 records the dire results of the first temptation: "When the woman saw that the fruit was good for food and pleasing to the eye and also desirable for gaining wisdom, she took some of it and ate it."

We see it happening again in Joshua 7 and the case of Achan. When Jericho had been defeated, the Israelites were to destroy everything. Neither

plunder nor spoils were to be taken from the conquered city. But Achan saw some things he wanted and was tempted to take them. In his confession, he admits: "When I saw in the plunder a beautiful robe from Babylonia, two hundred shekels of silver, and a wedge of gold weighing fifty shekels, I coveted them and took them" (Joshua 7:21). Achan had coveted with his eyes that which God had told the Israelites to destroy.

Satan tried the same tactics when he tempted Jesus: "See these stones? You are hungry. Turn them into bread. See the ground? Throw Yourself off of the temple and You will see the angels save You. See all these nations? Bow down to me and they will be Yours." Jesus responds by saying, No. . . . you say this, and you show me this, Satan, but God says . . ." Jesus quoted Scripture every time—His confidence was in the Word of God.

### **The Trust of Abram**

Where Lot had what looked like Paradise, Abram had the promise. We cannot forget that the account we have before us is supposed to be about Abram, not Lot. Abram was the leader in this entire episode. He was the one who was called by God to go to Canaan. God had made the covenant with him and told him that he would be the possessor of all the land.

Abram seemed to have learned his lesson. This time Abram believed God's Word more than he believed in what he could see. This time he knew that God would take care of him regardless of what the immediate sacrifice might be. Ultimately all the land would be his. God would see to that. This is truly a triumph of Abram's faith. He lets his nephew choose first.

Abram had learned an important lesson in Egypt. In our last lesson, he had chosen for himself and he

discovered that making his own choices without guidance from God led to great difficulty. In this chapter, Abram is content to leave the choices up to God. Before, in chapter 12, Abram was worried about how he was going to provide for his family and his herd. Now, in chapter 13, he seems to know that he does not have to worry about such matters. He has learned to trust God, knowing that God would provide for him. In that security, Abram allowed Lot to decide which land he would like for himself.

After Abram had allowed Lot to choose what looked like the more prosperous land, God came to the patriarch and reaffirmed the promises given earlier. God told Abram to do the exact opposite of what Lot did. Lot had “looked up and saw the whole plain of the Jordan.” Abram was told by God to lift up his eyes to the promise. God then expanded the promise by declaring to Abram that his descendants were going to be so numerous that to count them would be like trying to count each particle of dust on the earth. This must have been a staggering prospect for Abram, who as yet had no children. Yet how much better the prospect for him than for Lot because behind the promise was the word of God.

After Lot moved his tent toward the wicked city of Sodom, Abram moved his tent to Mamre and once more built an altar to the Lord. Lot had moved for personal gain; Abram moved for spiritual strength.



### *Points to Ponder and Discuss*

1. Both Abram and Lot became wealthy in livestock. How did each respond to his wealth? What is the teaching of the Bible concerning wealth and the Christian?
2. In what ways can the lure of affluence blind us to more important values?
3. Discuss the peaceful way in which Abram resolves the strife.
4. The land in the plain was said to be “like the garden of the Lord” and “like the land of Egypt.” Contrast these two descriptions of the narrator.
5. Lot was tempted when he saw the plush, well-watered plain along the Jordan. Give examples of similar temptations where what you thought was good really turned out to be bad.
6. Second Peter 2:7 describes Lot as a righteous man. Trace Lot’s downfall. What effect did it have on his family?
7. What effect did the decision of Lot have on Abram? What does this lesson teach us about the decisions we have to make in life?
8. How does Lot’s moving away further fulfill the call that God had given to Abram? How does God reassure Abram after Lot had moved away?
9. Compare the promises of God made in 13:14–17 with earlier versions of the promises. How does the wording in this chapter intensify what was said before?

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# Meeting Jesus At The Feast

## Rehearsing Rest: The Sabbaths—Chapter 1

### Leviticus 23:1–3

Dr. John  
Sittema

A few years ago, a Christian friend who is a film producer shared an insight with me that changed the way I watch movies. He observed that most good stories—those that resonate with an audience—seem to have similar plot elements. They open by portraying life lived in happiness and joy. All is well. Conflict soon intrudes, though, in the form of changing circumstances or with the arrival of a new character, and the result disrupts life and brings a dissonance you can feel in your gut. Key to the story is how the conflict is resolved: redemption comes, usually at great personal cost, and it is this cost that is the heart of the story. It is this cost that connects with the viewer.<sup>1</sup>

I've watched films through that lens ever since. I'd bet my friend's observations are true for your favorite films as they are for mine. I have always been a Tolkien fan (my wife would use a stronger word), and although Peter Jackson's films do not do justice to Tolkien's books, the Lord of the Rings trilogy is wonderful, bigger than life in its scope, and complex in its plot, language, and characterization. What makes it so compelling is that it is a story of redemption that comes at a shockingly great cost; it is that cost that makes the end so satisfying.

Of course, redemption stories are not the only popular genre. Quite different is the genre of *tragedy*, a form of literature, theater, or film as old as the Greeks. In tragedies, it is not redemption, but the *misery* of a sinful or broken world that is under close view. In tragedies, the chief character typically meets a disastrous fate, the broader ills of society often exposed in

the tale. I recently viewed *No Country for Old Men*, the Coen brothers' film based on Cormac McCarthy's novel. There is barely time after the opening credits to start the camera before gut-wrenching violence fills the screen. The senseless brutality dominates the film to the end. All the good people die while the wretched murderer survives to destroy another day. The lives of simple people in rural West Texas are depicted as meaningless activity, as they scurry about like ants, seeking to survive, but all the while their lives are actually controlled by a cruel chance. It alone drives their fate; the flip of a coin—several times—is the sole determiner of life or death. Redemption? None comes. The film leaves viewers devoid of hope as the screen snaps black. Everyone in the theater in which I viewed the film sat in stunned silence for several minutes after the film ended, refusing to believe it had ended as it did.

While tragedies have always been an important literary genre, captivating the audiences of the ancient Greeks, Shakespeare, and the Coen brothers today, they *feel* less satisfying because they tell an unfinished truth. Ugliness and evil abound in the real world, to be sure, and their power is horrid. No one is exempt from their reach; good people feel the pain as much as the bad guys. But our souls desperately want to believe that there is more to life than the tragic.

Redemptive themes satisfy us more deeply, not only because we prefer to feel good when we leave a theater, but, suggested my friend, because such movies reflect the fuller truth of God's story. God's story isn't stuck on the tragic; he pursues redemption relentlessly. The

movement of redemption is not only nice, it is normative, shaping our understanding of life because it is the movement of life.

### The Plot

On my mother's knee, I memorized a rhyme that would serve me well as a guide whenever I picked up the Bible. To explain the plot of redemption running through the Bible's two covenants, she taught me, "The New is in the Old concealed; the Old is by the New revealed." Behind this saying



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*A marriage that had begun with a “Wow!” became cloaked in a clumsy leaf-shroud of shame, while a delightful evening garden walk between God and his right-hand man morphed into a guilty game of hide and seek.*

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lay her conviction that the Bible is one story, its narrative like a golden thread that wound its way through the pages of history. The golden thread, of course, is the coming of Jesus the Christ.

The plot of the Bible is dramatic and is set forth in three acts: Creation—Fall—Redemption.<sup>2</sup> The first two acts are very short and, in fact, are presented in just a few pages in the Bible’s first book, Genesis. But their brevity does not belie their significance: understanding creation and fall correctly is essential to a

proper understanding of the rest of the Bible, the divine act of redemption.

### **Creation**

In the opening chapter of the Bible, we read that God “created the heavens and the earth.” No mere polemic against evolution—Darwin was, after all, a long ways off—the issue in the opening words of the Bible is not *whether* or even *when* God created the heavens and the earth, but *who* he is and *what* the world is in relation to him. God is Creator, and creation—“the heavens and the earth” together in harmonious unity—is presented as his domain, his kingdom, and he its sovereign king.

Under his rule, creation has a dynamic character: God assigned active dominion responsibility to the sun (the greater light) “to govern the day” and to the moon (the lesser light) “to govern the night” skies. He established limits for the reproductive processes in the plant and animal kingdoms (“according to their kinds”). God, the greater King, also gave dominion responsibility to Adam, the lesser king, mandating him to subdue the earth and to rule over everything (Genesis 1:28).

Adam was not granted divine permission to do what he wanted with creation; he was to exercise *responsible* dominion, always under God, the Sovereign (Genesis 1:26–28). Under his care, creation was to bring praise to God in new ways. Adam’s *identity* was that of image-bearer of God; his *work* would also image God’s. As God had “separated” light from dark, atmosphere from planet surface, and land from sea, so Adam’s

cultural mandate called him and his seed to separate—to differentiate and develop—the creation entrusted to him. Minerals gathered from the ground would be studied, understood, and combined to produce pigments that would one day, in the hands of Da Vinci, create the *Mona Lisa* (and in mine, paint the garage). Antonio Vivaldi, in hearing, capturing, and reproducing the sounds of the wind and the rain in the changing seasons of the weather, would ultimately give us another kind of *Four Seasons* with which to praise God.

Creation, when God finished it, was perfect. When he surveyed his realm, he spoke with royal voice: “It is very good!” He *rested* the seventh day (Genesis 2:2–3). He wasn’t tired; Sabbath makes its first appearance in the biblical narrative to mark God’s joy, his celebration and delight that creation was just the way it was supposed to be, that it enjoyed *shalom*.

### **Fall**

But the joy was short lived. Sin slithered in through a rebel who challenged the authority of the King of creation by inciting doubt in his royal word (“Did God really say . . . ?”). Corrupting everything God made with horrible effectiveness, sin warped all that had been very good so that it is now “not the way it’s supposed to be.”<sup>3</sup> Theologians call this the fall, but the word hardly does justice to the devastation. A marriage that had begun with a “Wow!” became cloaked in a clumsy leaf-shroud of shame, while a delightful evening garden walk between God and his right-hand man morphed into a guilty game of



hide and seek. In a rapid-fire series of judicial pronouncements, God cursed Satan, sentenced Adam, and then his wife. The woman, created to rest in the tender love of a husband and rejoice in the life-affirming gift of birth, would instead groan in labor and chafe under his dominance. The man, created to be happy and productive in his labor and to rest in the sweet weariness that comes at the end of a long day of work, would now taste the bitterness and frustration of toil. God's gleeful delight in a colorful creation that was deemed "very good" gave way to a bleak wasteland of human hopelessness, rendered now only in shades of gray.

## Redemption

But wait! Peeking up from the rubble of a world gone bad, a fragile light flickered, all the more noticeable because of the strange timing of its appearance. God simply couldn't wait to redeem; his promise of redemption was spoken in the same breath as his curse, the flame of hope lit even before the pronouncement of sentence. Juxtaposing hope over against the cold horror of long warfare, the Royal One declared his intent: he will crush Satan; he will win victory through the "seed of the woman."

God will make right all that sin has made wrong. God will restore *shalom* and give his people rest again. Because of sin, creation had become—and still is—restless. Once thrilled that his creation was "very good," God no longer delights in what *is*; he, and all creation with him, yearn now for what *should be*, for what *will be*.

Restoring joy and bringing rest would involve conflict. In Genesis 3:15, God had promised Satan "enmity between you and the woman." The long war would be for man's benefit: we must know the cost of our sin

and learn in faith to long for God's redemption. But the outcome was never in question. God assured that he would triumph through "the seed of the woman." His promise would allow the fragile candle of hope to flicker, despite the winds of war in a world that would witness fratricide (4:8), terrorist threats (4:23–24), and ethical anarchy: "every inclination of the thoughts of [man's] heart was only evil all the time" (6:5).

## Rehearsals, Types, and Shadows

Once, when my children were small, we vacationed near the Pea Ridge Civil War battlefield in northwest Arkansas. The day was beautiful and the site well preserved. I was not prepared for the frustration we would experience for a full morning. Simply put, we had no clue what we were viewing. The park was enormous, and without a map that showed us what the key locations were and how the battle had progressed, we would remain frustrated.

On the way toward God's rest, his people needed help too. Struggling each day with the tension of enmity, they would easily lose the big-picture perspective of faith. Through the centuries, God sometimes intervened directly with his mighty hand to stimulate their faith, acting in ways both mighty and tender: crushing a mighty foe here, opening a closed womb there. But he also worked in ways more subtle. To shape the daily routines of the people of Israel, a people whose history began well over a thousand years before Messiah and whose faith would therefore need serious staying power, he established festivals that would both structure life and serve as portraits of redemption. These festivals are prescribed in Leviticus 23 and reveal from varying angles the wonder and grace of his redeeming work.

God called his festivals "appointed feasts" and "sacred assemblies" (Leviticus 23:1–2). Several Hebrew words lay behind these English translations. The first of these—the Hebrew word *mo'ed*—defines all the festivals as "set feasts" established by the LORD and regulated by his commands. Among these set feasts were the *haggim*, three pilgrimage festivals requiring Israel to travel annually to a central location. The name is appropriate; the singular *hag* evokes movement and suggests a joyous dance.

In the book of Leviticus, another term nuanced all the festivals. The term *miqra qodesh*—usually translated "sacred assemblies"—suggests a convocation that had a religious purpose, one shaped by hope.<sup>4</sup> To Israel, camped at Sinai at the dawn of her life as a redeemed people, God's sacred assemblies were not established merely to commemorate *past* acts of redemption but also to serve as "rehearsals" of what was to come.<sup>5</sup> When Israel was summoned to one of the pilgrimage festivals or when her families gathered in homes or village streets to celebrate the others, her eye—and her faith—were to be fixed on the future. Israel was not like the nations around her whose cultic gatherings were attempts to pacify the demands of pagan gods, angry for last year's failures, in a desperate form of bargaining for next year's blessings on crop and womb. Israel's feasts would not require her to barter with God. They were established *after* she had been delivered from bondage in Egypt, already freed by God's amazing grace, redeemed by that grace to be his special people. The feasts were designed to lean forward, to give life a future tilt, pointing her relentlessly to the Messiah who would fulfill all that the feasts portrayed.

Each festival was a *type* of Messiah. Derived from the Greek word *tupos*, *type* is commonly understood to refer to the use of the Old Testament to provide models, human figures whose lives serve as examples of Christian virtues or character traits. Thus, Daniel is said to be a type of Christian courage, David a type of godly friendship (Jonathan narratives) or of true repentance (Bathsheba narrative). The word *tupos* is even translated as “example” in most contemporary versions of 1 Corinthians 10:6.<sup>6</sup>

But such a use of *type* is thin. The word actually connotes something much richer, the notion of a foretaste, an advance presentation of the whole.<sup>7</sup> An *example* of tonight’s dinner could be milk and cookies, arranged by a four-year-old and presented with dramatic flair on downsized plastic dinnerware to a gathering of dolls seated neatly around a cardboard dining table. It is a play meal, different in substance from tonight’s family dinner. Not so a *type*. Last Christmas, impatient for the holiday feast still fifteen minutes away, I sneaked into the kitchen like a cat burglar to pilfer a tasty morsel of the standing rib roast that would anchor our family meal. It had just been removed from the oven and was sitting on a rack while the rest of the feast was being prepared. Knowing I’d be alone for just a few

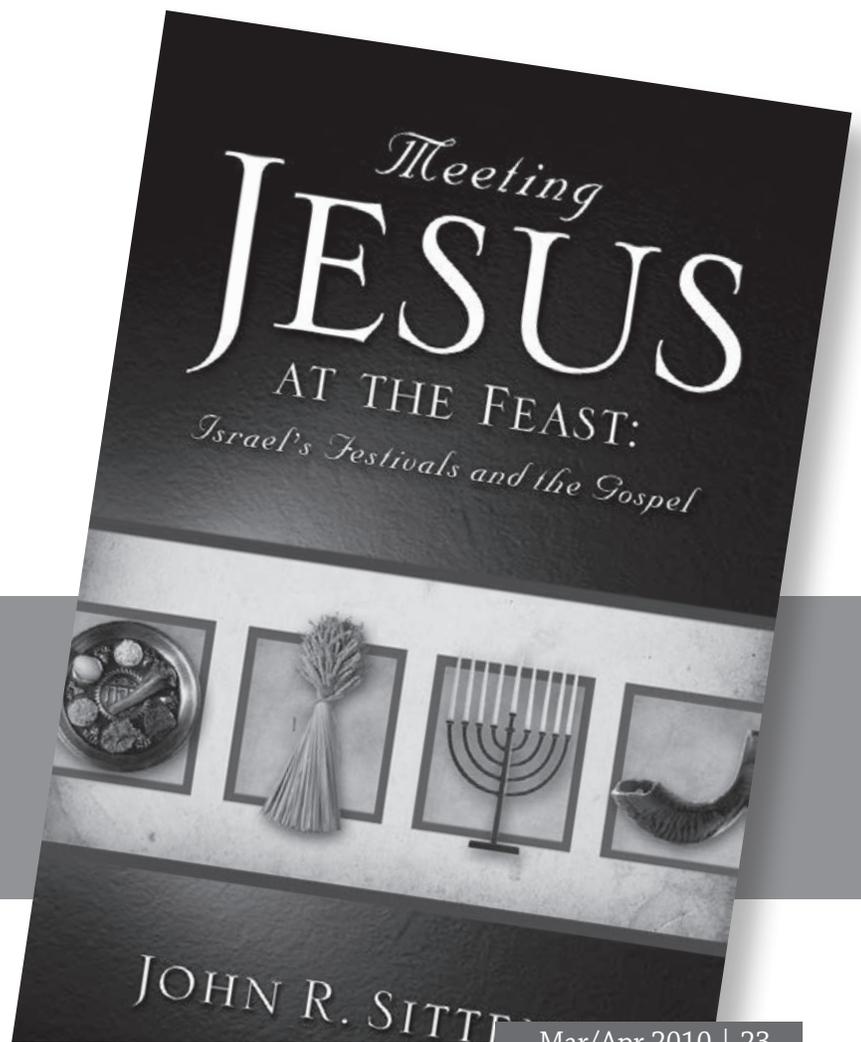
ticks of the clock, I activated both hands in my nefarious plot. With my right, I quickly sliced a not-too-thin corner of the succulent beef—redolent in spices, crusty with caramelized fat, and brimming with roasting juices—and with my left soaked an end piece of crusty sourdough bread in the meat drippings just before using it as a scoop for garlic mashed potatoes—perfectly seasoned and steamy hot—which delivered to my nostrils and my mouth the beginnings of ecstasy. Rudely apprehended by the cook, who shooed me irreverently out of the kitchen, I was shamefully unrepentant. I consumed the evidence slowly, like chewing cud, lost in the reverie and longing for more.

A children’s play party may give an idea of food and drink. A *type*—like my samplings of the beef and potatoes—makes your mouth water because it is an early taste of the actual

feast to come. That’s how the ancient feasts of Israel served the people of God. More than religious play acting, they gave God’s people a real and authentic taste of the redemption Messiah would bring centuries later, a taste that would make them long in faith and hope for the fuller revelation of the gift of God.

Speaking to a different culture a thousand years later, the apostle Paul used another metaphor to make the same point. He called the festivals *shadows* (Colossians 2:17). Think of a man walking westbound on a brilliant sunny morning. As the rising sun warms his back, his shadow stretches out before him, reaching the corner well before he does. His shadow is not merely an *example* of him but is inseparably connected to his very person. It announces that his arrival is at hand. More, his shadow provides many real and telling clues about him, clues like size and shape and the speed

*Dr. John Sittema has written a book on the feasts of the Old Testament. Reformed Fellowship will be publishing this book in a few months. In this issue, we publish the first half of chapter 1, in which Dr. Sittema considers the meaning of the Sabbath Day.*



with which he walks. The clues may be indistinct, but since they are cast by a real person, they are authentic.

The story of the Bible is the story of Jesus the Messiah. He is the main character, the One who cast shadows as he moved relentlessly through history toward his incarnation in Bethlehem of Judea. That shadow appeared to ancient Israel in her sacrifices and festivals, each one awakening expectations about the promised Messiah and the redemption he would bring. Somewhat indistinct, not easily identified in a single glance, always requiring faith and constant explanation, his shadow was nonetheless the promise of *him*, a very real portrayal of “the reality” which “is found in Christ.”

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1. I am indebted to Gregg Easterbrook for this insight.

2. Craig G. Bartholomew and Michael W. Goheen further divide redemption into initiation (Old Testament Israel), accomplishment (Christ’s earthly ministry and that of the missionary church), and completion (Christ’s return). *The Drama of Scripture: Finding Our Place in the Biblical Story* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Academic, 2004).

3. Plantinga, Cornelius, *Not the Way It’s Supposed to Be: A Breviary of Sin*

(Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1996).

4. Swanson, James, *Dictionary of Biblical Languages with Semantic Domains: Hebrew (Old Testament)*, electronic ed., s. v. “miqra,” #5246.

5. Strong, James, *The New Strong’s Dictionary of Hebrew and Greek Words*, electronic ed., s. v. #4744.

6. Notably, the older RSV renders the word as “warnings.”

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## Questions for Further Study and Discussion

1. God established Sabbaths (plural) that blessed animals, servants, and even the land itself with rest. How does this fact shape your thinking about the redemption Christ brought?
2. Re-read Matthew 11:28–12:13. How does the healing of the man with a shriveled hand bring him Sabbath rest?
3. Hebrews 4:9 speaks of a Sabbath rest to come. Will it be a rest tied to a Saturday (Old Testament Sabbath), Sunday (called by many the Christian Sabbath), or neither?
4. Do you rest well in the cross and resurrection of Christ? Does your church? Explain.
5. The chapter refers to the “relentless movement of history from restlessness to rest.” How does this movement affect the way you read the daily news reports? Does it shape the yearnings of your heart? Does it influence the mission strategy of your local church to bring rest to the restless in your community?

# Singing Christ into Our Hearts: The Importance of Good Hymns and the Danger of Bad Ones

Dr. Michael  
Horton

The Apostle Paul exhorted, “Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, teaching and admonishing one another in all wisdom, singing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, with thankfulness in your hearts to God” (Colossians 3:16). We are to be “filled with the Spirit, addressing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody to the Lord with [our] heart, giving thanks always and for everything to God the Father in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, submitting to one another out of reverence for Christ” (Ephesians 5:18–21).

In Old and New Testaments, the people of God have been a singing congregation. The drama of creation, redemption, and the future consummation of Christ’s kingdom give rise to a host of doctrines that fill our hearts with praise and thanksgiving. Of course, the Psalms have always formed the heart and rule for this covenantal response. Filled with the whole spectrum of godly faith, the Psalter gives words to our lament, petition, praise, and longing.

Many in the Reformed tradition have taken “hymns and spiritual songs” simply as synonyms for the inspired “psalms.” I am among those who see precedence in the New Testament itself for godly hymnody that is not only a direct citation of Scripture (or paraphrase), but a meditation on and exposition of biblical teaching. The analogy would be preaching and free prayer, where Scripture is not only read but also expounded and applied. New Testament scholars have identified early Christian hymns, such as Philippians 2:5–11,



which were incorporated in inspired apostolic scripture.

Nevertheless, if the purpose of singing is (1) making the word of Christ dwell in us richly with all wisdom, (2) teaching and admonishing one another, and (3) expressing thanksgiving to God in Christ through the Spirit, then what we sing is of utmost importance. Especially given the fact that, unlike sermons, many of our hymns are repeated over a lifetime in many places, these songs can have a significant impact on the faith and practice of the people of God over many generations. This can be a blessing if they are faithful to Scripture.

The possibility of leading the sheep astray is also evident in the history of hymnody. It is an area that requires wisdom and discretion. Although a musician himself, the Zurich reformer Ulrich Zwingli concluded that it wasn’t worth the trouble: he simply abolished public singing in worship.

Martin Luther held the Psalter in the highest esteem, but also composed hymns based on it, and the Lutheran tradition created some of the brightest gems in Protestant hymnody. Taking a mediating position between Zwingli and the Lutherans, John Calvin favored congregational singing of the metrical Psalms, along with other biblical songs as well as the Ten Commandments, the Lord’s Prayer, and the Creed.

Like the sermons that are preached, the songs that are written reflect their time and place as well as the marvelous truths that unite the saints across all times and places. Many of the hymns that are most beloved of my grandparents’ and even parents’ generations are shaped by the spirit and thought of nineteenth-century America. Some hymn-writers of this era, like John B. Dykes (author of “Holy, Holy, Holy” and “Eternal Father, Strong to Save”) were part of the Oxford Movement—a high church party in the Church of England. Henry Van Dyke, author in 1906 of “Joyful, Joyful, We Adore Thee” (to the tune of Beethoven’s “Ode to Joy”), was a liberal Presbyterian—perhaps even Unitarian—who plied his considerable command of the English language to the celebration of the Romantic Movement. Van Dyke was one of the modernist opponents of J. Gresham Machen. We meet nothing explicitly injurious to the faith in these hymns, but there is an important shift from the earlier hymns of Lutheran writers and Reformed and Anglican writers like Watts, Toplady, Newton, and Wesley. These newer

hymns alluded to biblical images for essentially Romantic themes.

In America, Romanticism had a decisive impact on the “higher” culture of liberal evangelicals like Horace Bushnell. However, it also merged with revivalism on the frontier to create a massive reservoir for the “gospel song” genre. During this era, a host of new songs were produced, like “In the Garden.” In these songs, Jesus is often referred to, but less as the Incarnate Son whose life, death, resurrection, and ascension won everlasting salvation than as the sublime friend, even lover, whose famous portrait (“Solomon’s Head of Christ”) hung over many family tables and Sunday school classes in evangelical circles.

The words of “In the Garden,” by C. Austin Miles (1868–1946), reflect a Romantic—even Gnostic—image of Christ. The believer is alone with Jesus in the garden, “while the dew is still on the roses,” experiencing an utterly unique rapture that “none other has ever known.” “He speaks, and the sound of His voice is so sweet that the birds hush their singing. And the melody that He gave to me within my heart is ringing.” There is nothing about Christ’s person and work; everything turns on the saving impression of his personality. This was a common emphasis in the liberal evangelical (pietist) circles of Germany, England, and America. Although the poetry and melody are not as good, the sentimentality reflects the Romantic era. With all of these songs, a good question to ask is “Could a Unitarian sing these?” In some cases, Unitarians *wrote* them.

Many of the gospel songs that arose in the nineteenth century are more evangelical (in the positive sense), but hail from the revivalistic heritage—especially as it was shaped by the Holiness tradition. Fanny Crosby’s 1873 hymn, “Blessed Assurance,” is one of the most popular examples.

First published in Phoebe Palmer’s *Guide to Holiness and Revival Miscellany*, the hymn reflects theology of the Holiness movement, with its Wesleyan doctrine of perfection (the “second blessing”). According to this view, one may be justified yet not baptized with the Spirit. In order to enter into this second stage of “victory,” one must become “fully surrendered.” In this condition, one may live above all known sin, in perfect love. So verses 2 and 3 of “Blessed Assurance” sing,

*Perfect submission,  
perfect delight!  
Visions of rapture now burst on  
my sight;  
Angels descending bring from  
above  
Echoes of mercy, whispers  
of love.*

*Perfect submission, all is at rest!  
I in my Savior am happy  
and blest,  
Watching and waiting,  
looking above,  
Filled with his goodness,  
lost in His love.*

It is significant that in his famous book, *Christianity and Liberalism* (New York: Macmillan, 1923), J. Gresham Machen discerns the drift from evangelical orthodoxy in the hymnody. His reflections are worth quoting at length:

The Christian doctrine of the atonement, therefore, is altogether rooted in the Christian doctrine of the deity of Christ. The reality of an atonement for sin depends altogether upon the New Testament presentation of the Person of Christ. And even the hymns dealing with the Cross which we sing in Church can be placed in an ascending scale according as they are based upon a lower or a higher view of Jesus’ Person. At the very bottom of the scale is that familiar hymn:

Nearer, my God, to thee,  
Nearer to thee!  
E’en though it be a cross  
That raiseth me.

That is a perfectly good hymn. It means that our trials may be a discipline to bring us nearer to God. The thought is not opposed to Christianity; it is found in the New Testament. But many persons have the impression, because the word ‘cross’ is found in the hymn, that there is something specifically Christian about it, and that it has something to do with the gospel. This impression is entirely false. In reality, the cross that is spoken of is not the Cross of Christ, but our own cross; the verse simply means that our own crosses or trials may be a means to bring us nearer to God. It is a perfectly good thought, but certainly it is not the gospel. One can only be sorry that the people on the Titanic could not find a better hymn to use in the last solemn hour of their lives. But there is another hymn in the hymn-book:

In the cross of Christ I glory,  
Towering o’er the wrecks of time;  
All the light of sacred story  
Gathers round its head sublime.

That is certainly better. It is here not our own crosses but the Cross of Christ, the actual event that took place on Calvary, that is spoken of, and that event is celebrated as the center of all history. Certainly the Christian man can sing that hymn. But one misses even there the full Christian sense of the meaning of the Cross; the Cross is celebrated, but it is not understood (127).

Machen adds,

It is well, therefore, that there is another hymn in our hymn-book:

*When I survey the wondrous cross  
On which the Prince of glory died  
My richest gain I count but loss,  
And pour contempt on all  
my pride.*

There at length are heard the accents of true Christian feeling—‘the wondrous cross on which the Prince of glory died.’ When we come to see that it was no mere man who suffered on Calvary but the Lord of Glory, then we shall be willing to say that one drop of the precious blood of Jesus is of more value, for our own salvation and for the hope of society, than all the rivers of blood that have flowed upon the battlefields of history.

Machen’s critical allusion “the battlefields of history” is directed especially at nationalistic anthems like Julia Ward Howe’s “The Battle Hymn of the Republic” (1861), which blasphemously raises the Union’s triumph in the Civil War to the level of Christ’s last judgment. Machen quite properly wonders how those seeking refuge from the tumult of violence between the clashing armies of this age could be served by such a confusion of Christ and culture. The late eighteenth century in both Britain and the United States saw a profusion of romantic hymns to empire and nation that have no place in the public service where Christ is gathering a remnant from all peoples and nations. There is nothing more dangerous than arousing religious emotion for national causes.

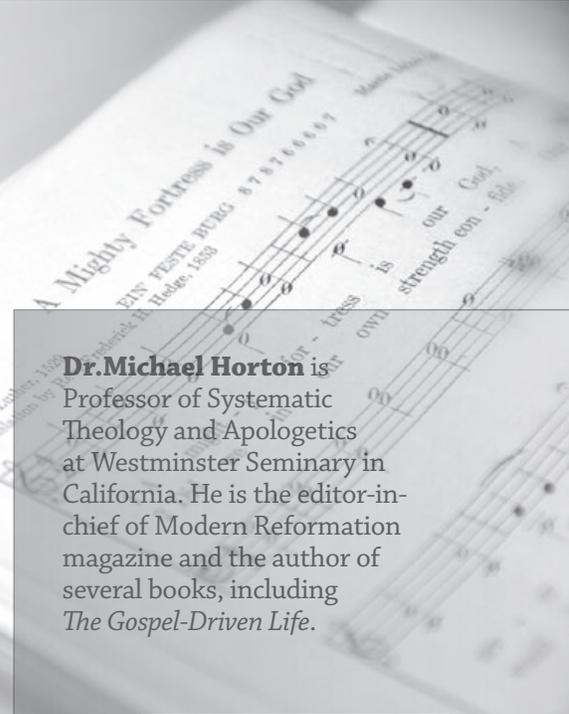
Having studied for a year under the great liberal pietist Wilhelm Herrmann, Machen knew well the subtle shift from the vicarious sacrifice of Christ to an attachment to his meek and gentle personality. Machen writes,

Thus the objection to the vicarious sacrifice of Christ disappears altogether before the tremendous Christian sense

of the majesty of Jesus’ Person. It is perfectly true that the Christ of modern naturalistic reconstruction never could have suffered for the sins of others; but it is very different in the case of the Lord of Glory. And if the notion of vicarious atonement be so absurd as modern opposition would lead us to believe, what shall be said of the Christian experience that has been based upon it? The modern liberal Church is fond of appealing to experience. But where shall true Christian experience be found if not in the blessed peace which comes from Calvary? That peace comes only when a man recognizes that all his striving to be right with God, all his feverish endeavor to keep the Law before he can be saved, is unnecessary, and that the Lord Jesus has wiped out the handwriting that was against him by dying instead of him on the Cross. Who can measure the depth of the peace and joy that comes from this blessed knowledge? Is it a ‘theory of the atonement,’ a delusion of man’s fancy? Or is it the very truth of God? But still another objection remains against the Christian doctrine of the Cross. The objection concerns the character of God. What a degraded view of God it is, the modern liberal exclaims, when God is represented as being ‘alienated’ from man, and as waiting coldly until a price be paid before He grants salvation! In reality, we are told, God is more willing to forgive sin than we are willing to be forgiven; reconciliation, therefore, can have to do only with man; it all depends upon us; God will receive us any time we choose (128–129).

Of course, there are wide disparities between Protestant liberalism, with its attachment to “high culture,” and the evangelical revivalism that created the gospel songs of fundamentalism. Nevertheless, the common denominator is Romanticism: the movement in nineteenth-century Germany, England, and America that turned its focus away from the objective to the subjective, from external authorities to inner autonomy, from truth to experience, and from the orthodox view of Christ’s person and work to a sentimental portrait of Jesus.

The best hymns of the historic Church, modeled on the Scriptures themselves (especially the Psalms) are rich with godly experience, but experience arising directly and explicitly in view of the mercies of God in his Son. When their goal is to make the word of Christ dwell in the saints richly, such hymns train generations of covenant heirs to invoke and to give thanks to the Triune God, not as an expression of autonomous zeal, but as a response to the Word that they hear and embrace. Depending on the wisdom that we exercise in selecting them, hymns can be a blessing or a curse in the church of God.



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# Reformed Worship & Evangelism against Practical Arminianism

Rev. J. Wesley White

Theology affects practice. Practice affects theology. That is inevitable. Reformed theology has a practice of worship and evangelism that is consistent with its theology, and that sort of evangelism and worship reinforces Reformed theology.

Many in the broader Christian world would say that Reformed theology affects evangelism by killing it, but we simply believe that the command of God is motivation enough for evangelism. In other words, the way that Reformed theology affects evangelism is in the use of the simple (as to form) means of God's Word and sacraments. Since we believe that God is the author and finisher of salvation, we also believe that He ordains the means whereby men will come into salvation. Those means are Word and sacrament plus nothing.

Since we do not believe that it is man's will that is the ultimate determiner of the rejection or acceptance of salvation, we believe that what God commands is most important in evangelism and worship. God desires that we simply use the means of preaching Jesus Christ and Him crucified so that the power of the Spirit might be demonstrated and that our faith would not be in the wisdom of men but in the power of God.

Over against this view, Arminianism says that man's will is the ultimate determiner of salvation and, consequently, we must use all possible means to convince men to change their wills. Of course, they will use the Word of God at some point, since men must know what message they are being asked to believe, but all sorts of other things will be added to it. The natural consequence of such a belief is that we must continually be worrying about how our building looks, what type of building we meet in, how the lighting is, how neat things look, what type of music we have, whether or not we are too offensive, or whether or not we are too deep. In addition, we must use all sorts of gimmicks to try to get people in. We all know examples: forty days of purpose, Promise Keepers, popcorn night, concerts, movies, and Superbowl Sunday.

The types of concerns and gimmicks that I have mentioned above are the dominant concerns in most churches today. The reason for that is the dominance of Arminian theology in American churches. They have an Arminian theology, and they follow an Arminian practice.

The sad thing is when Reformed churches act inconsistently with their theology and think it necessary to take on an Arminian practice in order to grow their churches or get people saved. This can happen in two ways.

First, the church puts the focus on the outward presentation and relies on the same gimmicks as the Arminians. This is all too common today. We should not be surprised to see these churches unable to root out Arminianism and ultimately moving toward an Arminian theology.

Second, it happens all too often in the laity. I have talked to members of Reformed churches who were rather zealous for Reformed theology. But they felt awkward about inviting people to church. The reasons they give: it's too deep, it's too offensive to new believers, and people aren't friendly enough.

But they should have faith in the power of the Word. If the Word is preached, then the Holy Spirit will use it for His own purposes. It is only a lack of faith in the power of the gospel that makes us have doubts about inviting people to our churches. It is a practical Arminianism.

# Bavinck the Dogmatician: The Doctrine of Election

Dr. Cornelis P.  
Venema

In our day, we are surrounded by Arminianism and practical Arminianism. We must make great effort to withstand it. Many who come to our churches will not understand why we do things the way that we do them, but we must stand for a practice that is consistent with Scripture and consequently our theology.

Ultimately, at issue here is the glory of God. God has chosen the weak things of the world to confound the wise. Paul deliberately did not use the powerful methods of his day in communicating the gospel but rather came in weakness (1 Cor. 1:26–2:1). The reason was that no flesh should glory in God's presence (1 Cor. 1:29, cf. 2:5).

When we use a fabulous presentation with all of the world's marketing methods, when we bring in all the bands and the lights and the graphics and the cartoons and the humor and the drama that we can to get people into church, then who gets the glory for the "success"? It is man. But when we stick to the simple form of Word, sacrament, and prayer, God gets the credit. The world would never expect that this simple thing would be enough to overturn the world, bring in salvation, and overcome the powers of darkness. Yet it is, but not because it is acceptable to the world (1 Cor. 1:20–24) but rather because it is the power of God (Rom. 1:16, 1 Cor. 2:4).

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In the outline of his *Reformed Dogmatics*, Bavinck follows the usual sequence of doctrinal topics of Christian theology in the western tradition.<sup>1</sup> As we have seen in previous articles, after an introductory volume on theological *prolegomena*, which treats at considerable length the formal questions of the nature of theology as a science and the doctrine of divine revelation, Bavinck turns in his second volume to the doctrines of God and man. Within the sequence of topics treated in the doctrine of God, Bavinck considers the subject of this article, God's eternal counsel or will, only after a lengthy exposition of such topics as the knowability of God, the names of God, the incommunicable and communicable attributes of God, and the doctrine of the holy Trinity.

This sequence of topics within the doctrine of God reflects a pattern in the tradition of Western Christian theology that dates back to the medieval period and the great *Summa Theologica* of Thomas Aquinas. Though there have been exceptions to this rule in the Western theological tradition, Bavinck locates his consideration of the doctrine of God's counsel, including the election of His people to salvation in Christ, within the framework of the doctrine of God. Any true knowledge of the living and triune God, so far as it is derived from inscripturated revelation, must include a knowledge of the triune God's eternal plan or counsel. The triune God who is revealed to us in Scripture is the Lord of history, who realizes His sovereign plan and purpose from the creation of all things to their perfection at the consummation.

## **Distinguishing God's "Being" (Who He is) from His "Works" (What He Freely Does)**

At the outset of his treatment of the divine counsel, Bavinck affirms a traditional distinction in Christian theology between the knowledge of God's *being* as such and the knowledge of God's *works* in relation to creation and history. Even though all human knowledge of the triune God must be derived from God's comprehensive revelation of Himself through His works and words, we must distinguish the knowledge of God as He *necessarily* and eternally exists, and the knowledge of God as He *voluntarily* chooses to act in respect to creation and history (RD 2:342). Human knowledge of God's names and attributes, as well as the "incommunicable attributes" of the persons of the holy Trinity, is knowledge of *who God is*. The knowledge of God's being is comprised of what can be known regarding who God eternally and immutably is in the fullness of His triune life. This knowledge of who God is concerns the "works of God as He is in Himself" (*opera Dei immanentia ad intra*). For example, to affirm God's holiness is to affirm that God is necessarily, immutably, and eternally holy, quite apart from His holy works in relation to the creation He chooses to call into existence and sovereignly rule. Whether the triune God of the Scriptures freely determines to create the world and realize His sovereign purposes in the course of history, God would eternally be who He is, lacking nothing, but possessing the fullness of infinite life and blessedness. In short, to be who He is, God does not need

the world, and His free decision to create the world and direct it to His appointed purposes does not “enrich” or change who He is. When we speak of God’s attributes and of the Trinity, we are speaking of the God who is and ever shall be, world without end.

In addition to our knowledge of who God eternally *is*, we are also given in Scripture a knowledge of what God wills to do in all of His works that concern the creation, history, and the divinely-appointed end of all things. According to Bavinck, when we consider the topic of God’s eternal counsel and will, we are focusing upon what God has revealed to us about His “works” *in relation to the entire creation and history*. These works of God are works in which God, so to speak, “goes outside of Himself” in order to accomplish His purposes in creation and providence (RD 2:342).<sup>2</sup> In the history of Reformed theology, these works in which God “goes outside of Himself” (*opera Dei externa*) are distinguished into two kinds. First, we may speak of God’s “inward works” or His plans or purposes. And second, we may speak of God’s “outward works” or the ways in which He accomplishes His plans. According to Bavinck, we must distinguish “the works of God *ad intra* (inward) and the works of God *ad extra* (outward). The former are usually designated as ‘decrees’ and are all included in the one, eternal ‘counsel of God.’ These decrees establish a connection between the immanent works of the divine being and the external works of creation and re-creation” (RD 2:342). In the strictest sense, therefore, the doctrine of God’s eternal counsel is based upon what the Scriptures teach regarding the works of God that have to do with God’s purpose or plan for creation and re-creation, but that remain inward or are to be distinguished from their realization in the course of the outworking of God’s counsel in history.

Admittedly, the language Bavinck employs here belongs to the technical language of theology. However, the point Bavinck is making can be illustrated rather simply from human experience. Since there is an analogy between God as a tri-personal being and our persons as His image-bearers, we experience in a limited way what it means to speak of our works or actions as being of two kinds. On the one hand, we have “plans,” “intentions,” and “purposes.” These plans may include such items as: going to college, getting married, purchasing a home, and the like. However, *there is a clear difference between our “plans” and their “execution.”* It is one thing to purpose to do something; it is quite another actually to do it. One of the features of human life, especially in its broken and sinful condition, is that many of our plans tend to be frustrated or unrealized. Things often turn out rather differently from what we had planned (cf. “the best laid plans of mice and men . . .”). With God there is also a clear distinction between His “will” or “plan” and its “execution.” But there is no hint that God’s plans or purposes are ever unrealized or frustrated (Ps. 33:11; Prov. 19:21; Isa. 40:9b, 10; Eph. 1:11; Rom. 8:28). When Bavinck distinguishes God’s works into two kinds, those that remain “within” Himself and those that involve God’s going “outside” Himself, he is simply using rather technical language to describe the distinction between God’s works that relate to His eternal plan or purpose and His works that relate to the execution or realization of His purpose in time. All of God’s works, whether His eternal plan or its execution in time, belong to our knowledge of what God has freely chosen *to do*, not to our knowledge of what God always and necessarily *is*.

### **The Characteristics of God’s Counsel or Decree**

Even though there is a similarity between God’s plans and the plans

of human beings who bear His image, there are obvious differences between them. In his treatment of God’s counsel or decree(s), Bavinck observes that God’s plans possess three general characteristics.

First, all the ideas or components of the divine decrees are “derived from the fullness of knowledge that is eternally present in God” (RD 2:342). God knows all things, whether “actual” or “possible.” His knowledge is as inexhaustible and rich as His own being. What God knows about creation, providence and re-creation, therefore, is His knowledge of what will become “actual” by virtue of His free decision, but this knowledge is not as exhaustive as His knowledge of Himself and all that which is possible. Indeed, compared to the latter, God’s knowledge of what belongs to His decrees, however rich and comprehensive it may seem to us, is but a “sketch, a summary, of the depths of both God’s wisdom and knowledge” (RD 2:343). God knows perfectly and completely all that is “actual,” because He has willed to create and make all things what they are. But God’s knowledge is infinitely greater than His knowledge of what comes to pass in accordance with His eternal counsel.

Second, all of God’s decrees are based upon “His absolute sovereignty” and freedom (RD 2:343). God is under no compulsion so far as His divine counsel is concerned. In His self-sufficiency, God does not need the world or find Himself compelled to call the creation into existence in order to enrich Himself (Acts 17:25). In this connection, we must sharply distinguish God’s “knowledge of Himself,” which is necessary to who He is, and God’s “knowledge of the world,” which is based upon His freedom to determine how He will act in respect to the creation and history.

And third, a distinction must be drawn between God’s decrees and their realization in history. There is a

difference between what God in His counsel determines, and what must necessarily follow in the course of the realization of His counsel in history. Even though God's decrees are free and sovereignly determined, when it comes to their realization in the course of history, we must affirm that "in due time they will be realized" (RD 2:343).

In the setting of his treatment of these characteristics of God's counsel and decree, Bavinck offers a broad survey of the controversy in the history of Christian theology regarding this topic. In the early church, the church father, Augustine, expounded the doctrine of God's eternal counsel in opposition to the error of Pelagius. Against Pelagius' insistence upon a certain view of human freedom, which limited the scope of God's sovereign counsel and purpose, Augustine insisted that Scriptural teaching clearly views God's counsel to encompass all things (Gen. 50:20; Ps. 139:16; Isa. 45:7; Acts 2:23; Eph. 1:11). In his summary of Scriptural teaching regarding God's decrees and the historical dispute between an Augustinian and Pelagian conception of God's counsel, Bavinck observes that the New Testament provides a more clear and precise disclosure of the doctrine than the Old, though the teaching of the entire Scripture is consistent regarding the sovereign purposes of God and their realization in the course of creation and re-creation. He also notes that the Augustinian doctrine of God's divine counsel has been the predominant and preferred view throughout the history of the church. In this doctrine, the eternal counsel of God includes the fore-ordination of all things, including the salvation and the non-salvation of those who belong to the fallen human race. Though this view was modified in a "semi-Pelagian" direction during the medieval period of scholastic theology, it was restored to greater purity by the Reformers, Luther and

Calvin, during the sixteenth century, only to be abandoned or corrupted by later Lutheran and Arminian constructions.

In all forms of Pelagian or semi-Pelagian teaching, the counsel or decree of God is limited by the choices of human beings who act at some point without any direct reference to God's fore-ordination. Because Pelagius and his followers affirm a certain human freedom or autonomy, which may be exercised independently of God's will or purpose, they are obliged to place a limit upon the scope of God's counsel or decree. Oftentimes, this limit actually means that God in His counsel simply "ratifies" or knows beforehand what human beings will choose to do. In this view, you might say that history is the teacher and God becomes merely a kind of "student" who learns what will transpire as it occurs.

One interesting feature of Bavinck's handling of the history of dogmatic reflection on the decrees of God is his extensive treatment of the historic debate among Reformed theologians regarding the "order" of God's decrees. In the course of Reformed theology, some theologians adopted what is termed a "supra-lapsarian" view of this order, while others (the majority) adopted what is termed an "infra-lapsarian" view.

"Supra-lapsarianism" is the view of the logical order of the elements of God's decree of predestination that places the decree to elect and not elect "before" (therefore, *supra* or "above") the decree to permit the fall. "Infra-lapsarianism" is the view that places the decree to elect and not elect "after" (therefore, *infra* or "under") the decree to permit the fall. Supralapsarianism appeals to the principle that "what is first in intention is last in execution" (*quod primum est in intentione, ultimum est in executione ultime*). If God's intention was to glorify Himself through the salvation of the elect and the non-salvation of the

reprobate, then this, according to the supralapsarian, must have first place in His eternal counsel. Just as a builder begins with a sketch of the finished building in his mind, so it is with God. Infralapsarianism, by contrast, views the order of God's decrees from the ordinary Scriptural presentation, which assumes the fallen state of humanity as the occasion, even within God's eternal counsel, for the divine plan to save the elect. Bavinck's careful discussion of the differences between supra-lapsarianism and infra-lapsarianism, which includes a delineation of the relative merits and demerits of each view, likely reflects the debates of his period that were often associated with the name of Abraham Kuyper, who favored the supra-lapsarian view, though not without some qualification.<sup>3</sup>

In Bavinck's judgment, there are arguments, pro and con, that can be adduced for both positions, though Bavinck himself opts for a position that views the distinct components of God's counsel in their organic unity rather than in terms of their logical or temporal precedence. In Bavinck's judgment, the decree or counsel of God is an organic unity, and is not subject to the human limits of a logical or temporal order.

### **Predestination and God's Purpose of Election**

For our purpose, the most significant part of Bavinck's treatment of the doctrine of the divine counsel is his definition of the nature of God's decree(s) in general, and his respective definitions of election and reprobation. Bavinck broadly defines the decree or counsel of God as "His eternal plan for all that exists or will happen in time" (RD 2:372). Despite the important differences of understanding that have marked the history of theological reflection upon God's counsel, Bavinck notes how all Christian theology acknowledges to a greater or lesser degree that

history unfolds in accordance with God's sovereign plan or will. Neither pantheism, which identifies what occurs in history with the being of God, nor deism, which views the world's history in relative independence from God's will, are satisfactory viewpoints from the standpoint of historic Christian theism. The counsel of God must be viewed to comprehend "all things that exist or will occur" (RD 2:373). To exclude anything from the scope of God's eternal counsel would compromise God's independent existence and work as the Creator and Lord of all things. Whatever transpires in creation and in the whole subsequent course of providence and re-creation must be encompassed within the decree of God. Moreover, the decree of God reflects the nature of its Author, such that we should think of this decree as "the eternally active will of God, the willing and deciding God Himself, not something accidental in God, but one with His being, as His eternally active will" (RD 2:373). Like the artist who can only "execute his vision in stages," so God executes His one, complex counsel in a series of temporal phases that reveal His nature and purpose (RD 2:374).

Within the broad framework of this general definition of God's counsel, Bavinck distinguishes between the decree so far as it pertains to all creatures and as it pertains to the destiny of humans and angels. In the traditional language of theology, the former and general counsel of God pertaining to all things was termed "providence," while the latter and more particular counsel of God pertaining to humans and angels was termed "predestination."

While the name does not matter so much, what is important is that the decree of God encompasses all things, not just the determination of the eternal state of rational creatures (predestination), but the ordering and ranking of all things

without exception. Predestination, accordingly, was not something considered in isolation, but was a part of God's decree for all things and only a particular application of it. . . . Predestination is providence insofar as it concerns the eternal destiny of humans and angels. (RD 2:375)

The doctrine of predestination, therefore, sets forth the Scriptures' teaching regarding God's plan to save or not to save human beings who bear His image.

Though Pelagianism has historically denied predestination as a component of God's all-comprehensive counsel for fear that it undermines the genuine freedom and responsibility of the creature, Bavinck maintains that Pelagianism is at odds with Scriptural teaching, the history of Christian theology, and human experience. However difficult the problem of the relation between God's counsel and creaturely responsibility, we must maintain that "by the infinitely majestic activity of His knowing and willing, [God] does not destroy but instead creates and maintains the freedom and independence of His creatures" (RD 2:377). Pelagianism finally amounts to a denial of the Christian doctrine of creation, since it asserts that the creature may call into existence an act that is strictly unrelated to God and His will. Moreover, since the Pelagian doctrine of freedom posits an act that is unrelated to God's will or determined by any antecedent factor(s), it also undermines the foundation for God's "foreknowledge." Even God is incapable of knowing in advance an act that is absolutely indeterminate. In Pelagianism, "God's decree has become completely conditional and has lost its character as will and decree. It is nothing more than a wish whose fulfillment is totally uncertain. God looks on passively and adopts an attitude of waiting; humans decide. Caprice and chance sit on the throne" (RD 2:382).

## **Election and Reprobation**

Since predestination refers to God's counsel pertaining to the salvation or non-salvation of humans and angels, Bavinck argues that it must be understood to include both reprobation and election. Since divine election constitutes the culmination of God's purposes in predestination, Bavinck treats reprobation first and then concludes his treatment of the doctrine of the divine counsel with a consideration of election.

In his consideration of the doctrine of reprobation, Bavinck emphasizes that it is supported by the frequent testimony of Scripture that God's works out His will and purpose in all circumstances, including such circumstances as sin, unbelief, death, and eternal punishment (Rom. 8:28ff.; Rom. 9:19–23). In all circumstances and events, even in the unbelief and condemnation of sinners who do not find salvation in Christ, God is actively accomplishing His inscrutable, wise, and just purposes (Eph. 1:11). Despite the apparent attraction of a Pelagian denial of a decree of reprobation, which expresses God's purpose not to save some human beings or angels, Reformed theology must accept the teaching of the Word of God that the will and hand of God are expressed in everything that happens. Without pretending to offer a solution to every problem, or a simple explanation of what appears dreadful to human insight, Calvinism "invites us humans to rest in Him [God] who dwells in unapproachable light, whose judgments are unsearchable, and whose paths are beyond tracing out" (RD 2:395). Even the non-salvation of some must be regarded as an outworking of God's eternal counsel.

However, Bavinck also observes that the decree of reprobation does not fit within the will and counsel of God in the same manner as the decree of

election. The power and will of God in the decree of reprobation may not be affirmed at the expense of a proper view of God's justice. After all, we know from Scripture that, though sin is "not outside the will of God, it is definitely against it" (RD 2:396). Though sin may not be the "efficient or impelling cause of the decree of reprobation"—if it were, all sinners would be reprobated—it is "the sufficient cause and definitely the meriting cause of eternal punishment" (RD 2:396). The decree of reprobation undoubtedly has, as do all things, its ultimate cause within the will of God; but the act of reprobation never takes place apart from sin and culpability on the part of those who are not saved. There is not an exact parallel, therefore, between God's decree of reprobation and His decree of election.

Unlike the work of reprobation, the work of election is one in which God takes particular delight (Ezek. 18:23; 33:11; Eph. 1:3–4; Rom. 8:28–30; 2 Pet. 3:9). In His purpose to grant salvation to some wholly and exclusively upon the basis of His grace, God acts in a manner that mirrors His perfections and achieves His culminating and consummate purpose. In reply to the Pelagian objection that particular election is unjust, Bavinck notes that all would be lost were salvation a matter of justice. "But now that election operates according to grace, there is hope even for the most



wretched. If work and reward were the standard of admission into the kingdom of heaven, its gates would be opened for no one. . . . Pelagianism has no pity" (RD 2:402). The sheer grace of divine election is the only basis for hope on the part of sinners who are incapable, because unwilling, to embrace Christ for salvation.

Furthermore, though it is often objected that election undermines the invitation of the gospel to respond to Christ in faith and repentance, Bavinck observes that no one has the right to conclude that he is outside the reach of God's electing grace. "No one has a *right* to believe that he or she is a reprobate, for everyone is sincerely and urgently called to believe in Christ with a view to salvation. No

one *can* actually believe it, for one's own life and all that makes it enjoyable is proof that God takes no delight in His death. No one *really* believes it, for that would be hell on earth" (RD 2:402). When it comes to the objects of God's decree of election, Bavinck observes that these objects include Christ and those who belong to His body, the church. Christ is appointed within the decree of election to be the Mediator and Redeemer of all those who are His members by faith. For this reason, the knowledge of election is always joined to faith in its embrace of the gospel promise in Christ. Moreover, it is not God's goal to elect simply an "aggregate of individuals" who are saved through the mediation of Christ. The goal and outcome of God's decree of election is nothing less than a renewed humanity in

union with Christ. The elect represent in the purpose of God the realization of a new and glorified humanity in whom the entire organism of the human race is contemplated. In His decree of election, God loves not a loose collection of individuals but an organism that represents and consummates His love for the whole world (RD 2:404).

### Summary

As a Reformed theologian, Bavinck begins his treatment of God's works with an extended discussion of the divine counsel or decree of the triune God. All of the works of God in relation to His creation, its history

and ultimate consummation, are of two kinds: first, God's inward plans or purposes for the creation, which is the subject of God's eternal counsel and will; and second, God's realization of His sovereign purposes throughout the whole course of creation, fall, redemption, and consummation. The triune God of the Scriptures reveals Himself as a personal God Who has plans for His creatures that will infallibly be accomplished. God is not bystander or student of history; He is the sovereign Lord of history who realizes His wondrous and inscrutable counsel without any prospect of frustration or failure. Contrary to all Pelagian or semi-Pelagian doctrines, which idolize a certain kind of human freedom that denies or diminishes God's sovereignty, the Bible teaches that God is the wise Creator of all things, the sovereign Lord of history, the gracious Savior of His people, and the just avenger of human sin and disobedience. The biblical teaching is that God's free counsel and decree are the all-encompassing source of all things. For Bavinck, as for Reformed theologians throughout history, this teaching is not the fearful occasion for despair or discouragement, but the most glorious consolation. For it finds its heart and goal in God's free decision from all eternity to save the elect in Christ, and to constitute the elect a new humanity that will live forever in His blessed presence, serving and worshipping Him as the God of creation and redemption, the Alpha and the Omega.

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1. In the abridged, popular version of his dogmatics, *Our Reasonable Faith*, Bavinck does not devote a separate chapter to the doctrine of election, but briefly treats the "counsel of God" as the basis and source for all of God's redemptive and re-creative work in history by means of the covenant of grace. Within the eternal counsel of God, there are three related components: God's gracious purpose of election; the achievement of the redemption of the elect through the eternal "counsel of redemption" in which the Son is appointed to be the head and representative of his people in the accomplishment of their redemption; and the divine appointment of the Holy Spirit as the One who will work out and apply the redemption of Christ to those whom God purposes to save.

2. The technical language Bavinck employs to distinguish these works or "operations" of the triune God is common to the tradition of Reformed theology. For definitions of the traditional understanding of these terms, see Richard A. Muller, *Dictionary of Latin and Greek Theological Terms* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1985), pp. 211–13.

3. It is instructive to note that Bavinck shares Kuyper's criticism of the older views of the elements in God's decree of election, namely, that they did not give special place to God's purpose in creation but subordinated creation entirely to God's purpose to save the elect

## Book Review

### Simonetta Carr's Christian Biographies for Young Readers: John Calvin and Augustine

Annette J. Gysen

A homeschooling mother of eight children, Simonetta Carr was frustrated by the lack of church history curriculum for children under the age of twelve. There were plenty of books for that age group on presidents, artists, musicians, scientists, and other important figures, and, Simonetta explains, "if a young child can understand Martin Luther King's vision and struggle, he should be able to understand John Calvin's desire to give direction and organization to a young Reformed church or Augustine's conflict of the wills." She tried to persuade some church history graduates in her San Diego, California, congregation to take up the task of writing curriculum and even created a mock-up copy of the books she envisioned with some home-made illustrations. When she could convince no one to take up the challenge, she decided to send her idea to some publishers.

Thankfully, Reformation Heritage Press recognized the value of Simonetta's vision, and the first two books in the Christian Biographies for Young Readers series, *John Calvin* and *Augustine*, released in 2009. Future books in the series will tell the stories of John Owen, Athanasius, John Knox, Lady Jane Grey, John Bunyan, Charles Spurgeon, and others. In a winsome storytelling style and with illustrations that consist of illustrations, photos, maps, and historic artwork, these books

introduce young readers to the lives, thoughts, and writings of the important people of church history.

In *John Calvin*, released in 2009 to commemorate Calvin's five-hundredth anniversary, Simonetta introduces young readers to the great Reformer:

At a time when the church was more interested in riches and power than in its faithfulness to the teachings of the Bible, some Christians fought to return to the truth.

Those who fought for truth were called "Reformers." To "reform" means "to change for the better, and that period in history is referred to as "the Reformation." John Calvin was one of the most famous Reformers.

In language that is within the grasp of readers ages 7–10 yet not condescending, the author traces the events of Calvin's life, describes his accomplishments and his writings, and encourages children to one day soon read Calvin's writings "for yourself."

In *Augustine*, readers are introduced to the church father's life and writings, and the author tackles the difficult subject of the teachings of ancient

heretics, including the Manichees and Pelagius. Where Pelagius taught that "Adam and Eve just left us a bad example," Augustine taught, "We are saved by God's grace, which is a gift that we do not deserve. When Adam sinned, he died spiritually, and since then everyone is born spiritually dead. Only God's grace can bring us to life in Jesus Christ and give us the ability to follow His rules." And in this manner children are introduced to the rich truths of Scripture that have come to light throughout church history.

Other features in each volume include a map on the first page that readers can use to trace the subject's travels, a time line of the subject's life at the end of the book, and a "Did You Know?" appendix with interesting facts about the subject and his culture. For example, did you know that in Calvin's day common people lived on the second floor of two-story houses while their livestock lived on the first floor?

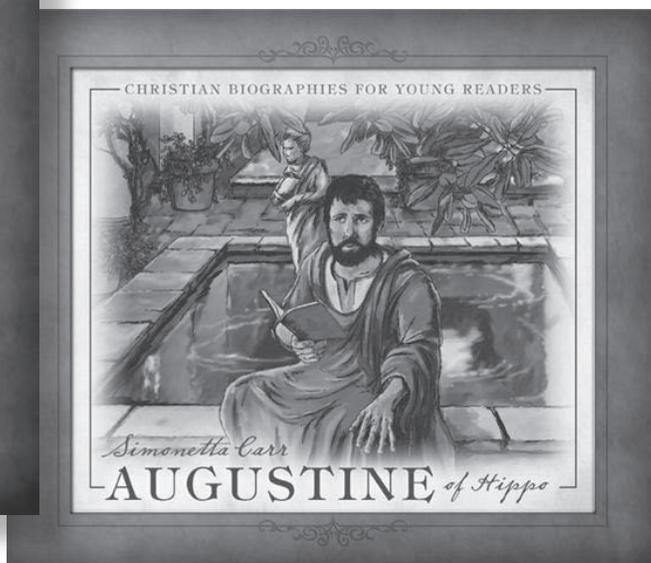
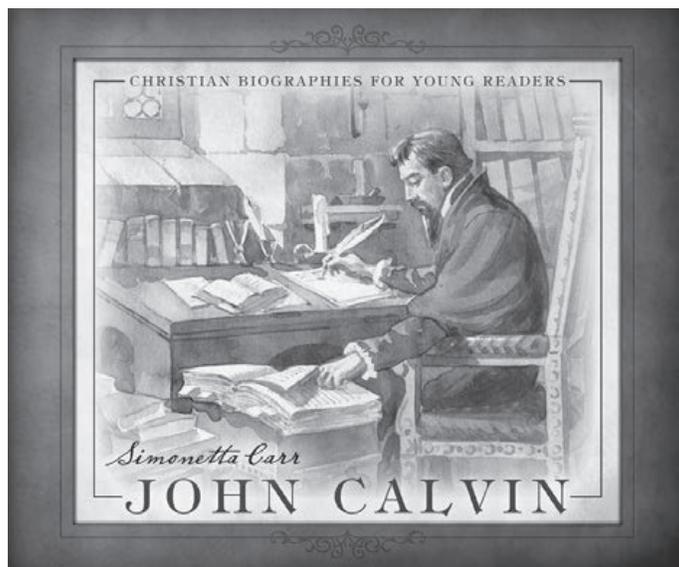
I asked two of my young friends, Benjamin (age 11) and Madeline (age 8) Guis, what they thought of these books. Ben read *Augustine*, and he says he "would recommend it to friends without hesitation." Ben comments,

One of my favorite parts of this book was the full description of Augustine's life. In particular I liked the story of how he turned to Jesus Christ as his Savior. I enjoyed this part of the story because the author was able to write how Augustine was able to come to faith with the help of his mother as well as other important people in his life.

Madeline has good things to say about *John Calvin*. She enjoyed the descriptions of Calvin's travels and thought the author's description of "how he was forced out of Geneva was interesting." She also liked the way the author explained the difficult words that she anticipated her readers might not understand. Madeline was a little disappointed that some of the illustrations in the book were not in color. But she concludes that the book "was interesting and fun in many parts."

Simonetta Carr has provided a valuable resource for children and families of Reformed churches with the Christian Biographies for Young Readers series. Children will be both educated and entertained by these delightful, beautifully illustrated volumes.

Reformation Heritage Books, 2009  
64 pages (hardcover), \$14



# An Interview with Simonetta Carr about Christian Biographies for Young Readers: John Calvin and Augustine

Annette J.  
Gysen

*Book review writer Annette Gysen had the opportunity to ask author Simonetta Carr a few questions about her new Christian Biographies for Young Readers series.*

## **Why are the books in this series particularly valuable for children of Reformed families?**

For children who are taught to see the Bible as an organic drama of God's unfolding revelation, these books bring to light the continuity of Christ's covenant people throughout the centuries and God's preservation of His church. They also provide valuable tools for parents and teachers in their doctrinal instruction of their little ones, bringing theology to life. For example, I am presently writing the fourth book in the series, which is about Athanasius. I have chosen Athanasius because of his importance in the formulation of the Nicene Creed, which our children commonly recite in church. My hope is that after reading this book, the words of the Creed will come to life and acquire fuller meaning as they are placed in their historical context.

## **What makes these children's biographies different from other children's biography series?**

Most children's biographies on the market are written for older children. I am fully persuaded that young children are able to understand theology and history more readily than we often think. In fact, they possess a natural hunger for answers about the world around them. Why do we believe what we believe? Why do we worship a certain way? Many

of these questions find an answer in church history.

I was recently encouraged by a visit to The Cambridge School of San Diego, a classical Christian school for grades K–12. The school's curriculum uses history as its organizing theme, so my books are a natural fit. It was inspiring for me to see the undivided attention these children gave to my presentation and to be able to converse freely with third and fourth graders on Augustine's stand against Pelagius and the decisions he made in his life.

In targeting a young age, I use a simple style and easy vocabulary, and I include many photos and beautiful full-page illustrations, which keep the interest alive. The photos are useful to help the children realize that these people and places really existed. Because of these features, these books are usually appreciated by children of all ages. Younger children love the pictures and illustrations, and older children (and adults) enjoy this fun way to explore the lives of these great men and women of God. In fact, they have been very useful in some other countries as a simple way of introducing church history to all, young and old. Rev. Sutjipto Subeno, Editorial Director of Momentum Christian Literature, told me that the book on John Calvin has been very appreciated in Indonesia in the local language.

These biographies are also different from a few others on the market because they are not written as a way of providing positive role models. There are books written with that intent, and they are very inspirational. My idea is to create a series that allows children to recognize God's hand on His church throughout history and a development of the doctrines we hold dear, hopefully avoiding the same ancient heresies that keep lurking in our hearts. With this view in mind, my books are not elevating these characters to a lofty status, but rather introducing them in their historical and theological context, with particular emphasis on their impact on church history. In this respect, I believe they are filling an important hole.

## **How did you select the subjects of the biographies in the series?**

Calvin was my first title, chosen in honor of his five hundredth anniversary (2009). I chose Augustine as a second title because our doctrine of grace rests heavily on his writings.

## **What will be the next title? When will it release?**

The next title is John Owen. I have a new illustrator for this book, and I feel that it will be an improvement on the former two. It will be released in 2010.



### Why do you think it's important that children read biographies?

Biographies—as opposed to a simple study of theology or church history—have a way to bring the events, convictions, and customs of each generation closer to our

hearts. We can read the history of the English Civil War and the Great Ejection and formulate our opinions (as our minds are always prone to do), but when we see the same events through the life of someone who lived them, like John Owen, we suddenly understand much more on an emotional level. And when we finally come, almost exhausted, to the end of his life, after learning of the death of all his eleven children; his gain and loss of Cromwell's favor; the massacres in Ireland; the devastation of England by war, pestilence, and fire; the consternation of the people at the execution of their king; the dismay of the church at the loss of two thousand ministers in one day; and the frequent and relentless religious disagreements, John Owen's late words ring exceptionally close, "I am leaving the ship of the church in a storm; but whilst the great Pilot is in it, the loss of a poor under-rower will be inconsiderable."

Biographies add a human perspective to history and widen our views, just as talking to a native of a country is much more enriching than simply reading a book about that country. All this, of course, applies also to children.

### Is there anything else that you would like readers of *The Outlook* to know about these books?

I want once more to thank Reformation Heritage for the wonderful edition of these books. Each volume is attractively produced with a clear typeface, high-quality paper, and a hard cover. Overall, the books have an antique look and are a pleasure to handle. They are sturdy enough for little hands and elegant enough to beautify your shelves for generations.

## Romans 4 and the New Perspective on Paul; A Book Review

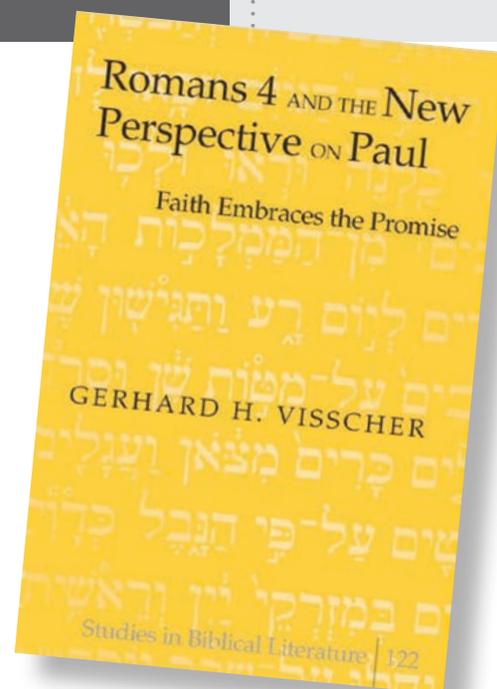
Rev John L. van Popta

Gerhard H. Visscher has published an important book entitled *Romans 4 and the New Perspective on Paul: Faith Embraces the Promise*. Dr. Visscher is the New Testament Professor at the Canadian Reformed Seminary in Hamilton. This book has been published in the influential series "Studies in Biblical literature" as volume 122. The editor of the series writes in a general preface:

This series seeks to make available to scholars and institutions scholarship of a high order which will make a significant contribution to the ongoing biblical discourse.

This book definitely makes a significant contribution to the discussion on the so-called "New Perspective on Paul" (NPP).

In 1977 E.P. Sanders published a book, *Paul and Palestinian Judaism*, in which he challenged the accepted interpretation of Paul concerning the doctrine of justification by faith. He maintained that Martin Luther and John Calvin read Paul's letters (especially to the Romans and to the Galatians) through their own historical context of conflict with the medieval Roman Church. Sanders argued, however, that when Paul was speaking of 'works of the law,' he did not mean that the Jews tried to



justify themselves by keeping the law, but rather, that Israel identified itself by keeping the law. Sanders argued (Visscher tells us) that the Jews of Paul's day taught that "entrance into the covenant community ("getting in") is not through a system of weighing merits against demerits with respect to a person's work, but through God's gracious act of election; remaining in the covenant ("staying in") depends on the divine provision of atonement for sin and on subsequent human obedience (pg 8)." More recently scholars like James D.G. Dunn and N.T. (Tom) Wright developed and promoted this new understanding.

Dr. Visscher surveys five scholars favoring the NPP. Then he surveys five opposing the "NPP." Visscher works especially with a 1988 statement of Stephen Westerholm (of McMaster University in Hamilton, Ontario, Canada). Westerholm writes "that Paul supports his rejection of the 'works of the law' in Romans 3:20, 28 by showing that Abraham was justified by faith, not works (4:1-5) is positively fatal to Dunn's proposal (pg. 3)."

Working out this thesis of Westerholm's, Visscher extensively investigates the context of Romans 4. Then follows a careful exegetical analysis of Romans 4, whereby he shows that the NPP cannot be maintained without substantial revision. Visscher concludes that though the NPP scholars have helped us to understand better some aspects of Palestinian Judaism, Sanders and his subsequent followers have not correctly understood Paul's insistence against Judaism that humans contribute nothing to their salvation (pg 233). Instead, "what Sanders actually portrays is more like the Pelagianism against which Augustine contended, Luther thundered, and Calvin disputed" (234).

This book also includes two helpful appendices. For those who are

"in the know" about N.T. Wright, Visscher's essay, "Works of the Law: Boundary Markers?" is a great help to understanding this phrase and its place in NPP. A second essay "The Law a Barrier to Gentiles?" briefly examines and refutes an aspect of Wright's view.

Anybody who is remotely connected or interested in the discussion about the NPP and is interested in understanding what the proponents of the NPP are promoting, needs to read this book. The concise and thoughtful analysis of the "New Perspective" scholars and their opponents is worth the cost of the book itself. The careful analysis of Romans 4 is a masterful work of Reformed exegesis.

One of the proponents of the "New Perspective" surveyed by Visscher in the book, Terence Donaldson, writes (on the back cover!), "In this thorough and perceptive investigation, Gerhard H. Visscher draws attention to the weaknesses in various New Perspective readings of [Romans 4:4] and thus adds his voice to those that call for a new appreciation of old perspectives."

This book is supported by a comprehensive bibliography of nearly 250 books that can serve as a survey of Pauline studies generally, and NPP specifically. It is rounded out by a very brief index of main ideas and authors.

Dr. Visscher is to be commended for this important and helpful book whereby he makes a significant contribution to the scholarly discussion taking place in the theological academies of the world. But this book is doubly important in that it makes the discussion accessible to pastors, preachers, elders, and to the informed member in the pew.

This book is beautifully bound in hard cover with a sewn binding and lies open on the desk beside me as I write this review, with no

weights or other books holding the book open. It has a good hard cover and supple binding, and the paper meets standards for permanence and durability for book longevity. The downside is the price. At Amazon (at this writing) it can be had for CDN 88.52 / US \$76.95! You have to pay for quality! Perhaps churches could buy this for their libraries so that many people could benefit from its availability. Though there are many Greek references to the New Testament text, for the most, Visscher gives English translations of the terms he is using.

Gospel preachers will benefit greatly from this study so that they too can proclaim the Good News and urge upon God's people that "Faith Embraces the Promise!"

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*Romans 4 and the New Perspective on Paul: Faith Embraces the Promise.* Gerhard H. Visscher. New York: Peter Lang, 2009

Hard Cover, sewn binding, 265 pages. 2 appendices, bibliography and index. CDN 88.52 / US \$76.95

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*More about the author:*

Gerhard H. Visscher is presently the New Testament Professor at the Canadian Reformed Seminary in Hamilton and teaches NT studies at the Theological College of the Canadian Reformed Churches.

He previously has pastored several churches in both Central and Western Canada.

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*About the reviewer:*

John L. van Popta MDiv. is presently pastor of his third charge, Fellowship Canadian Reformed Church, Burlington ON. Previously he pastored congregations in Ottawa, ON, and in Coaldale AB. He enjoys an "empty nest" with his wife Bonita (with whom he has been married for 33 years).

### Ref21 Authors



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**Iain D Campbell** A native of Stormont, Scotland, Iain D Campbell has been called to minister in the Free Church of Scotland. [More about Iain](#)

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## Aspects of Dr Martyn Lloyd-Jones' Legacy: Some Personal Observations

ARTICLE BY JOHN ROSS MARCH 2010

Without entering into a private spat, Carl Trueman's recent cogent and spirited riposte to Iain H. Murray's allegations inclines me to offer some personal observations on some of the effects of Dr. Lloyd-Jones' ambivalence toward some questions of ecclesiology. [continue](#)

### REF 21 BLOG

In these cyber-savvy days, many people blog: people from all over the learning spectrum (ministers, laypeople, teachers, students), people from all over the theological spectrum (Baptists, Presbyterians, Catholics, Methodists, but usually not Amish), and people from all over the world.

A blog is a text-based website where the blogger (the person who blogs) posts daily (or weekly or monthly or sporadic) entries of varying length. A blog is kind of like an online journal, except that anyone can read it. This easy-to-use format (plus the fact that most blogging sites are free) has given rise to an uncountable number of blogs online today. Anyone can blog, and most people do. With so many people blogging, it almost goes without saying that a good blog is hard to find.

Of course, there are many, many religious blogs. Many great theologians

blog (like John Piper and Tim Keller, for example, whose blogs are very insightful and worthwhile). But one of the greatest theological blogs (that is, the most worthwhile, the one that gives you the most “bang” for the time you spend reading it) is Reformation21 ([www.reformation21.org](http://www.reformation21.org)).

Reformation21 is so named because it seeks to bring Reformation truths using a 21<sup>st</sup> century medium. Reformation21 is a joint blog, put together by the Alliance of Confessing Evangelicals, and is contributed to by many solid Christian men. Frequent contributors include Ligon Duncan, Sinclair Ferguson, Carl Trueman, and Phillip Graham Ryken, to name a few (there are actually a large number of outstanding scholars who contribute to this blog). The whole blog is headed and edited by Derek Thomas, who also frequently contributes.

The website includes book and film reviews, theological articles,

meditations, and links to many other great web resources. Last year, in honor of John Calvin's 500<sup>th</sup> birthday, Reformation21 “blogged through *the Institutes*,” encouraging its readers to read through Calvin's *Institutes* in one year. It included a reading plan and meditations for each section, written by a plethora of greatly respected Reformed scholars. You can still access this marvelous commentary on the *Institutes* (and many other treasures) in the blog's archive.

Reformation21 provides a hodgepodge of thoughts from a collection of great thinkers. No matter what your interests, Reformation21 always provides great insights, and is surely a website worth checking out.

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