

The Outlook

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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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“After the Lord Jesus had spoken to them, He was taken up into heaven and He sat at the right hand of God.”

Mark 16:19

Christmastime brings with it poinsettias and pageants. Easter comes with snow-white lilies. Ascension Day, however, usually comes and goes without a trace. There are no special flowers, no dramatic plays, or special songs. There is no day off from work; the mail still comes. There is hardly any recognition of this day. Yet, it is certainly a day worth celebrating, for it commemorates a great event!

The ascension of Jesus was witnessed only by His disciples on the Mount of Olives. Three New Testament passages tell us what happened on that day. Mark wrote that after Jesus commissioned His disciples, Jesus was received up into heaven and sat at the right hand of God. While this phrase may sound literal to us, it is best understood as a metaphor for the supreme place given to the Son of God. All power and authority were given to Jesus at His arrival into heaven. The ascended Jesus reigns with the sovereign authority of God.

The author of Hebrews confirms this when he wrote, “The point of what we are saying is this: we do have such a high priest who sat down at the right hand of the throne of Majesty in heaven, and who serves in the sanctuary, the true tabernacle set up by the Lord, not by man” (Hebrews 8:1,2).

Jesus had prayed in His high priestly prayer, “Father, glorify Me in Your presence with the glory I had with You before the world began.” That prayer was answered in the ascension.

The second person of the Trinity now participates in the glory He shared with the first person of the Trinity before the world was created.

The Cloud Took Him

For forty days after His resurrection, Jesus spoke to His disciples about the kingdom of God. He instructed them to await the coming of the Holy Spirit in Jerusalem. Then we are told that a cloud received Him out of their sight.

Some might think that Jesus leaving this earth would be a tearful event. After all, Jesus bid farewell to His disciples, signaling to them that He would no longer be physically present with them. For those who had been with Jesus for three years and then witnessed the horror of the crucifixion, forty days may have seemed very short.

If the disciples were dabbling tears from their eyes at all, it was not for long. The ascension proved a far greater blessing. Luke ends with the disciples rejoicing and praising God for the ascension. It had finally dawned on them what they had witnessed. Not only had they been part of a wonderful friendship, but they had witnessed the fulfillment of the Old Testament prophecies. They realized that they had been in presence of God.

Many artists have pictured Jesus disappearing from the disciples by rising up into the sky on a cumulus cloud. We must understand that this

was no ordinary cloud. Just as the cloud in the Old Testament was a sign of God’s presence and glory, the cloud that received Jesus refers to the glory and presence of God. In the Old Testament, the cloud would cover the tent of meeting, and the glory of the Lord would fill the tabernacle (Exodus 40).

The cloud that took Jesus into heaven is the same cloud that led the Israelites through the wilderness. It represented the glory of God and the presence of God with the people of God. The disciples witnessed a cloud that escorted their Master into the presence of the Father. The crucified Christ, risen from the dead, has been lifted up out of His suffering and has entered into glory, no longer to be visibly observed by His gathered community. A new relationship had begun.

The Door to Heaven

Paul wrote that Jesus ascended into heaven in order that He might fulfill all things (Ephesians 4:10). John Calvin points out that Christ left us in such a way that His presence might be more useful to us. The presence that had once been confined in a human vessel of flesh was now raised above the heaven in order that His spiritual presence might be unlimited. His power and energy now spread beyond all the bounds of heaven and earth.

Christ’s ascension inaugurated the kingdom of God on earth. The “age to come” has arrived. Like the fairy

tale Prince Charming, the Prince of Peace has awakened His cursed and sleeping people and brought them into God's happily ever after.

The way to heaven, once blocked by our own sin, has been opened. The thorns and thistles have been cleared by the work of Jesus Christ. Through His obedience, death, resurrection and ascension, the door of fellowship with God has been opened. Paul wrote, "God raised us up with Christ and seated us with Him in the heavenly realms in Christ Jesus" (Ephesians 2:6).

Through His ascension, Christ has become our Advocate and Intercessor. The author of Hebrews wrote, "He is able to save completely those who come to God through Him because He always lives to intercede for them" (Hebrews 7:25) As our Intercessor, Jesus is able to change the Father's way of looking at us because He has stood in our place, dying for our sin on the cross. Instead of looking at our sin, which has already been paid for, God looks at Christ's righteousness with which we are clothed. We remain sinners, but we have become redeemed sinners saved by the blood of Jesus Christ.

We are now received by God's grace as God's children because of what Christ has done. We have One who acts on our behalf, representing those truths to the Father already in the ascended Lord. He has opened the way for us to approach the first person of the Trinity without fear.

In addition, the ascension of Jesus gives to the Christian the power of Christ. Quoting Psalm 68, Paul wrote "When He ascended on high He led captives in His train and gave gifts

to men" (Ephesians 4:8). From His position in heaven, Jesus lavishes spiritual gifts upon His people every day. We are given power for the present—power to fight against Satan and his forces, power to withstand the temptations that taunt us daily. The same power that directs the cosmos is available to God's people through the Holy Spirit.

The ascension of Jesus certainly encourages us to look forward to His ultimate triumph and reign at the end of time, but for now we are given the power of His love. In that power we move forward, rejoicing in Christ in every occasion.

A Day Worth Celebrating

Indeed, Ascension Day is a day for celebrating. It is a day we lift up our hymns to Christ's kingship and His rule over us and all creation. It is a day in which we picture Christ as our advocate before God and pray to Him as our only Mediator. It is a day where we focus our worship on Christ's presence through the Spirit.

The ascension of Christ also means that our future is secured in God's kingdom. Paul tells us our future glory is beyond our comprehension. John wrote about a city of gold; a place where there was no pain, no sorrow, and no tears. What an incredible day it will be when we see heaven and we stand in the presence of the risen and ascended Savior, Jesus Christ.

You Shall Be My Witnesses

Rev. Wybren Oord

“But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be My witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.”
Acts 1:8

When Jesus had accomplished all that He had come to do, He ascended into heaven. Ten days later, on Pentecost, came the outpouring of the Holy Spirit. It marked the beginning of the great harvest prepared by the Son of God’s work on while He was on earth. The Holy Spirit would apply all the work that Jesus had accomplished to the hearts of God’s elect. Through the Spirit, they would be born again and become spiritually minded.

The Call from Christ

Just before Jesus ascended into heaven He told His disciples what they were to do when they received the Holy Spirit. They were to be witnesses of all they have seen. This was not an option; they were commanded by their Master to go into all the world and proclaim the glorious gospel message that reconciliation with God was available through Jesus Christ.

By implication, the church receives the same mandate from the Son of God. Led by the Holy Spirit, the church brings the same message as the apostles of old: it is Christ and Him crucified. In addition, when

the Holy Spirit of God convinces a person that God has opened the way of reconciliation to Himself through His Son, that person will become a witness for Christ.

We live today in an age when the opportunity to do mission work is greater than ever before. The Word of God can be proclaimed not only in the synagogue and the amphitheatre; it can be brought to millions of people by means of print and mass media. As technology develops, so do methods of evangelism and missions. Television and radio have been replaced by the Internet and iPod. Millions of people have the gospel available to them as they download sermons by the simple click of a mouse.

Christian programs are bouncing off of satellites everywhere, even in countries where Christian missionaries are banned by the government. We can bring the glorious good news of salvation to any part of the world for those who have never heard it as well as those who long to hear again.

The Call to the Church

Unfortunately, much of this is done in a very informal way as far as many church members are concerned. Many members of many churches do not even know the names of the missionaries their denomination or federation supports. In fact, if you would question some people outright, there are many people who do not even know the missionaries that their own church supports.

Certainly, most churches are willing to send money. They take an offering once or twice throughout the year and say, "God bless you in your work. Here is some money to help you," but they really do not know the missionaries they support.

When I began the ministry years ago, the churches I served would have a Mission Emphasis Week with missionaries speaking at well-attended breakfasts and luncheons, leading chapels at schools and worship services at the church. Today, if a missionary is invited to speak after a worship service at a supporting church, many make a hasty exit because they have other plans. Fear of hierarchy has prevented at least one federation from establishing a mission board that could distribute information about the needs of her own missionaries.

Individuals give generously to all kinds of mission support endeavors but seldom have gone out to speak to their unbelieving neighbor across the street or at work. Volunteering for Daily Vacation Bible School, jail ministry, or visiting with the homeless is often left to someone else.

The Lord spoke to His people saying, "You are my witnesses" (Isaiah 43:10). This was addressed not only to the leaders or prophets of Israel. God was addressing the Israelites as a whole nation. They were to be witnesses to all the world of the mighty acts of God who had brought them into the Promised Land.

In Acts, Jesus may be speaking first and foremost to the disciples, but through them He is addressing all believers. Certainly, we want to reach the people in Toronto for Christ; we want to bring the gospel to those in Trinidad and the good news of salvation to India. But we must also be witnesses of the mighty acts of God in our lives, in our homes, workplaces, and wherever God leads us.

The Call to Witness

A witness is a person who gives testimony of a certain fact or event. Those facts are given to people who do not have knowledge of them. Suppose you witnessed a car accident.

You saw the whole thing clear as day. The police come to the scene of the accident. They did not see what had taken place. How do they know who is in the right and who is in the wrong? They ask witnesses. You, as a witness, would give your testimony as to what you saw take place. Based upon the evidence of your eye-witness account the police issue a citation to the person who was in error.

John begins his first epistle with these words: "That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked at and our hands have touched—this we proclaim concerning the word of life" (1 John 1:1). The apostle John was an eye-witness! Based upon his testimony we know some of the facts concerning the life of Jesus of Nazareth. We can read about his life, death, resurrection, and ascension. We can read about how his life affected those around Him.

John wrote near the end of his gospel: "These things have been written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God; and that believing you may have life in His name" (John 20:31).

In our generation, Christians are to bring the same message as John. We are to speak to others about Jesus Christ who arose from the grave, ascended into heaven, and now holds the keys of heaven and hell. He is alive. He is real. Of this we must give testimony. But how can Christians today know that these things are true? Certainly no one today can claim to have seen the stone rolled away or the Son of Man ascend into heaven.

Are we merely to accept the words of men whom we do not know from Adam, who claim to have witnessed an incarnation, death, and resurrection, as gospel? Would you accept an astounding message of a

recent death and resurrection from your best friend?

There is more to it than that. The Spirit of God who came on Pentecost convinces us as to the facts of the Jesus of Nazareth. The fellowship we have with the Spirit through faith convinces us of the truth of the gospel and the saving work of Him who is the Christ. Knowing the facts surrounding the birth, life, death, resurrection, and ascension of the Son of God to be true, we believe in Him, and we are to tell others about Him.

In this connection, there are two very interesting passages in the Bible about the role of witnessing. As you read through the Book of Jeremiah, you soon discover that the prophet suffered many things because of his testimony and his preaching. He was threatened so often that he came to a point in his life where he decided to be silent and preach no longer.

After being silent for a while, the prophet wrote, "But if I say, 'I will not remember Him or speak anymore in His name,' then my heart becomes like a burning fire shut up in my bones; and I am weary of holding it in, and I cannot endure it." (Jeremiah 20:9). Jeremiah could not keep still!

In the New Testament, Peter and John were threatened by the Sanhedrin. They were basically told that could continue to heal people and go on with their preaching; they just could not do it in the name of Jesus. Peter and John reply: "Whether it is right in the sight of God to give heed to you rather than to God, you be the judge; for we cannot stop speaking of what we have seen and heard" (Acts 4:19, 20).

They could not stop! They were irrepressible witnesses. They had seen

and heard the Lord Jesus. How could anyone expect them to stop witnessing for Him when they knew Him to be the long promised Messiah? They knew Jesus of Nazareth was the one for whom all of Israel waited.

How can we stop bearing witness of our Savior when we know He is the *only* way to heaven? There is no other! Jesus said that those who truly believe in His saving work accomplished once for all at Calvary will be His witnesses. We can do no other.

Our witnessing has to become a very personal thing. The trouble today is that so many of us think that we are witnessing for Christ whenever we talk about religion or about the church. Witnessing to others is not going around telling people we are getting new pews in the church. Witnessing to others is not talking about the differences between denominations and federations. It is not talking about religion, or about church, or even talking about some of the doctrines of the church. Witnessing to others is bringing them to an understanding of how much they need Jesus as their Savior. That means making them aware of the fact that they have sinned against a most holy God and they need to be reconciled to Him.

If you take the time to read Peter's sermon on that first Pentecost, you will notice he does not mince his words. He is very straightforward in what he tells the crowd that has gathered. "This Jesus, whom *you* crucified," he tells the crowd. People have to know that they cannot go on living in sin and expect God to save them. You know that's true, don't you? Then why aren't you telling people about that?

Paul tells people everywhere about what God has done for him through Christ. He is a changed man because

of Christ. As a Christian, you are a changed person, as well. The power of Christ and the work of the Holy Spirit have changed you! How can you keep such good news to yourself?

"You will be my witnesses," Jesus said.

The Power to Witness

When you witness for Christ, you are not on your own. Jesus said, "You shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you" (Acts 1:8). That power comes from Christ. The wicked rulers who told Peter and John no longer to speak about Jesus marveled over the courage and ability these men had. Here's the way Acts 4:13 puts it: "Now as they observed the confidence of Peter and John, and understood that they were uneducated and untrained men, they were marveling, and began to recognize them as having been with Jesus."

They had been with Jesus. Even the Sanhedrin had to acknowledge that a special power was enabling these men to do what they did. That power is the person of the Holy Spirit.

In Luke 11:13 the Lord promises that special power to the church. He freely gives the Holy Spirit to whoever will ask for Him. Through the Holy Spirit, you will be witnesses of the glorious good news of the gospel.

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Christian Unity: Exposing Counterfeit Unity (3) How Is It Possible?

Rev. William D.
Boekestein

When you hear the word “unity,” is your local church the first picture that pops into your mind? The Bible suggests that it *should* be. Towards that end, we are exploring the Bible’s vision for living in communion with the saints.

In the previous articles in this series, we examined two main points. First, we emphasized the *importance* of unity and concluded that the children of God *will* be both interested and concerned about this topic. Second, we gave several illustrations of what unity is not. We learned that there must be no inappropriate unity. That is, it must be enjoyed *with believers*. We also learned that Christian unity must not be superficial or merely formal or sentimental. Unity must certainly not be hypocritical. Having explained what Christian unity is *not*, what it *is* becomes much clearer. Christian unity is the *state of deep and genuine harmony between believers*.

As we look again to Ephesians 4:1–6 we see Paul’s emphasis on oneness:

I therefore, the prisoner of the Lord, beseech you to walk worthy of the calling with which you were called, with all lowliness and gentleness, with longsuffering, bearing with one another in love, endeavoring to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called in one hope of your calling; one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of



all, who is above all, and through all and in you all.

Seven times in these verses Paul uses the word “one.” Believers are to be united as one. As Christian marriage makes the two into one, in a similar way, membership in the family of Christ makes many one.

The question we hope to answer is, “How is this possible?” If unity is difficult in a marriage, how is it possible for the entire church body to be one? How is it that people with such diverse backgrounds, personalities, and different levels of maturity can be one? Experience demonstrates that unity does not come naturally. The principle of entropy applies to our relational lives as well as to the physical universe. For any true human unity to exist, there will have to be a powerful unifying force greater than our ethnic heritage, our skin color, our media interests, or our age.

The answer to these questions will always elude the world and those

who seek a humanistic peace. True unity is only possible by virtue of the mutual union of individual believers to the triune God. Christian unity is the state of harmony between believers by virtue of their *mutual union* to the triune God; it is the only way.

Suppose you were asked *how* you are related to your siblings. You would inevitably mention someone else, namely a parent. You might say, “I am his brother *because* we have the same father. You cannot begin to talk about how you are related to your siblings without mentioning your parents. The point is this: the basis of brotherhood is

not a horizontal relationship. It is first and foremost a shared vertical relationship. In the Scripture passage above, Paul showcases each person of the Trinity and how a relationship with each person serves as the basis for unity with other believers.

Unity with the Holy Spirit

Paul urges us to “keep the unity of the Spirit.” He reminds us that there is “one Spirit” (Eph. 4:3, 4). The basic point that Paul is making here is that there is one Spirit and that he is the Spirit of *unity*.

The Spirit of God is a unifying Spirit because he dwells within every child of God. Before his death, Christ spoke of the coming of the Holy Spirit. He told the disciples, in John 14:16, “I will ask the Father, and he will give you another counselor to be with you forever.” The “you” is plural. John 16:7, 13 also speaks of the Spirit coming to and guiding *you* in the

plural. The Holy Spirit is a unifying Spirit precisely because He, the Spirit of God, lives within every child of God. The Bible, on this point, militates against the Pentecostal teaching on the second blessing of the Spirit. This error teaches that the Spirit is not given in the same way to all believers. According to that system he is not a Spirit of unity but of division. The truth is that the indwelling of the Holy Spirit is one reality all Christians have in common.

Through the Spirit Christians become “kindred spirits.” We mean by using this phrase, that two people have a similar nature or character, a similar animating principle within them. They think with the same mind and are guided by the same inclinations. Perhaps you have wondered if you have a kindred spirit. If you are in Christ, you do. In fact, you have millions of kindred spirits!

Do you communicate this reality by the way you live with other Christians? There are likely Christian people in your life about whom you have said, “I don’t get him. We don’t click. We are not kindred spirits.” This is wrong. If the two of you are in Christ, then you are kindred spirits. On the surface you might not be able to tell. Still, you are unified to that person in the Spirit.

Ephesians 4 speaks of the “unity of the Spirit in the *bond* of peace.” The word “bond” refers to a cord that binds a pile of wood or the ligament connecting bones to other bones. There is no tighter bond than the unity of the Spirit. There is no tighter unity than that which exists between believers by virtue of their unity to the Holy Spirit. You have heard the phrase, “blood is thicker than water.” What people usually mean by that is that family relations are stronger than any others. And as nice as that sounds, it is not true. The bond of peace that unifies believers is much stronger than the bond that unites blood relatives. How can this be true? Let just one witness

speak: death. Death permanently severs the bond between a believing daughter and her unbelieving sibling. Death permanently severs the bond between a believing son and his unbelieving father. But nothing can sever the bond of peace through which believers are united in the Spirit. If you want to be truly unified to your family members, pray to God that he would send them the one Spirit of unity.

Unity with the Son

Speaking of the Lord Jesus Christ, Paul says, “There is . . . one Lord” (Eph. 4:5). The Bible teaches that Christians are brothers because they each have Jesus Christ as their brother. When Jesus was told that his brothers and sisters were looking for him, He motioned to his disciples and said, “*Here* are My mother and My brothers! For whoever does the will of My Father in heaven is My brother and sister and mother” (Matthew 12:49, 50). What an amazing comfort it is to be able to say, “Jesus is my brother.” But do not miss the corresponding reality: His *other* brothers are also my brothers.”

Consider Hebrews 2:11, 12. “For both He who sanctifies and those who are being sanctified are all of one, for which reason He is not ashamed to call them brethren, saying: ‘I will declare Your name to My brethren.’ I am related to my brothers because I share with them a common brother. Christ says, “I am not ashamed to call them brethren.”

In this connection, we should reevaluate the phrase “blood is thicker than water.” Earlier, we said that this phrase was not necessarily true. Consider, however, the form of ancient Near Eastern covenant making. A covenant was made by two people cutting an animal in two and then walking in the blood between the two pieces. During this ceremony, the two would take this oath: “May this be done to me if I do not keep this covenant.” These covenant makers would become blood brothers. In that

case, the blood is thicker than the water of a mother’s womb.

In Genesis 15 God told Abraham to take a heifer, a goat, and a ram and cut them in half and place the pieces opposite each other. The words, or terms of the covenant were then spoken. God said, “I will be your God and you will be my people.” Custom required that the two parties entering the covenant were to walk through the blood. We read in Genesis 15, however, that Abraham fell asleep. God went through with the ceremony anyway. In the form of a smoking firepot and blazing torch, God passed between the pieces. In so doing He took upon himself both sides of the covenant; blessing and obedience. He took also the oath saying in effect, “May this be done to Me if either side of this covenant is broken.”

Apply this to the Lord’s Supper. In his death, Christ took upon himself the curse of this Abrahamic covenant. His body was broken. His blood was shed. Certainly God had not violated the covenant! Abraham and his seed did. As we celebrate the Lord’s Supper we are reminded again that we are blood brothers. The same blood that washed away your sins washed away my sins. True unity is sealed in the blood of Christ. Christ said, “This cup is the new covenant in my blood.” When you drink the cup, be reminded not only of your union with God through the shed blood of Christ but also of your union with each other through that same blood.

Unity with the Father

Scripture explains how we are related to God by using two primary metaphors. First, there is the metaphor of the new birth. Christians are united together in relation to their heavenly Father as children are related to their earthly father. Of course, God has only one natural Son, the Lord Jesus. Still, God gives birth, as it were, to all of his children; not a

natural birth but a spiritual birth. We have been given a “new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead” (1 Peter 1:3). This is why we are brothers! The word “brother” comes from a compound word meaning “from the womb.” Sinclair Ferguson explains that “the ‘womb’ which has given us new life is the empty tomb of Jesus.”¹ As Christ sprang from that tomb, all of the elect were with him. This “new birth” is experienced when the Lord regenerates us.

Second, there is the metaphor of adoption. Here God takes orphaned and rebellious children and makes them his sons and daughters. In adoption we become his real children, receiving all of the benefits of sonship.

We need to remember that fellow Christians have been chosen by God just as we have. That Christian man who gets on your nerves because he loves to talk about himself—is your brother. That teenage girl who gives the impression that she is better than everyone else—is your sister. Some may feel like second-class citizens in the kingdom of God. There’s no such thing. God chose each and every believer to give new life to them and adopt them into his family.

True Christian unity is a powerful reality because it is undergirded by the saving work of God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit.

Why Does this Unity Matter?

In the next article we hope to get more specific and applicatory. But let me suggest a few preliminary applications.

To Those Outside of the Family

If you are not a born-again Christian, please realize that in your present state you can never enjoy true unity. If you are honest, you would admit that you know this to be true in your relationships with others. But please also know that you are foundationally

alienated from the triune God as well. *This is your greatest need: to be reconciled with God.*

To Christian Family Members

If you are a Christian, you are related to God. This also makes you part of a family. With this relationship come numerous blessings and responsibilities.

First, Christians must love their family. Our Reformed liturgy speaks of this family love in connection with the Lord’s Supper.² After having explained that the Holy Spirit unites us to Christ, the form goes on to say,

By this same Spirit we are also united as members of one body in true brotherly love, as the holy apostle says: *Seeing that we, who are many, are one bread, one body: for we all partake of the one bread.* For as out of many grains one meal is ground and one bread baked, and out of many berries, pressed together, one wine flows and is mixed together, so shall we all who by true faith are incorporated in Christ be all together one body, through brotherly love, for Christ our dear Savior’s sake, who before has so exceedingly loved us, and show this towards one another, not only in words but also in deeds.

Do you have a true love for my brothers and sisters? “Be kindly affectionate to one another with *brotherly love*,” wrote Paul (Rom. 12:10). This is not “I love you, but I don’t like you.” This is the love that is patient and kind. It is love that will keep unity from becoming formal or hypocritical.

The reality of Christian unity also requires us to love our “family” members when they fail. Sinclair Ferguson explains that, “only when we realize that the church is a family, that we are brothers and sisters in that family, will we have a right perspective from which to view those who fail badly, and a right motive to see them disciplined faithfully,

and welcomed back with many reaffirmations of our love.”³

Second, Christians must defend their family. A few years ago, in the high school from which I graduated, two freshmen girls assaulted a fourteen-year-old fellow student. The surveillance video showed what appeared to be a premeditated ambush on the targeted victim, who was pulled to the floor by her hair before being beaten. During the assault, a group of around twenty-five students watched, but did not intervene. What if that was your sister who was being beaten? Would have you intervened? Of course! Yet, we often fail to lovingly intervene when members of our own spiritual family are attacked and left hurting.

Third, Christians must nurture their family members. Christian unity has three goals: the glory of God, the reputation of the church in the world, and the building up of the body. In Ephesians 4 unity is described as building up of the body of Christ—the entire body. The goal of church unity is not to have a few upper-class spiritual people, a bunch of middle-classes and some spiritual poor folk. The goal of unity is the maturity of every person. We are to work for that. If someone in this church remains immature, that is a problem of unity. Each one of us is responsible for the well-being of the others. Are *you* contributing to the unity of the body of Christ, namely to its building up?

1. Sinclair Ferguson, “Children of the Living God,” p. 54.

2. CRC “Form for Lord’s Supper” (1957).

3. Ferguson p. 62.

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Bible Studies on the Life of Abraham

Lesson 4: War of the Kings

Genesis 14:1–16

Rev. Wybren
Oord

Lot had noticed the green pastures of the valley. Upon the invitation of his uncle he had chosen the most advantageous site for the thriving of his flocks and herds. Certainly fertile plains were better than the rocky hills. In the lush, albeit wicked, valley his family would surely prosper. Lot, however, was not the only one who had noticed great wealth to be found in this area of the world. Several years earlier, Chedorlaomer, king of Elam, had succeeded in establishing lordship over several western regions, including the cities of Sodom, Gomorrah, Admah, Zeboim, and Bela. Much like the Romans in the period of the Gospels, King Chedorlaomer held undisputed sway over the petty princes who ruled the nations in the Jordan valley. For twelve years, these city-states paid tribute to the eastern monarch. In the thirteenth year they rebelled, refusing to meet the demands of their oppressor.

The sudden loss of tribute no doubt infuriated the king whose name meant “Ravager of the West.” Taking a year to plan his strategy, King Chedorlaomer gathered his allies and together they unleashed their fury over the entire region from southern Syria to Sinai, brutally annihilating and plundering the cities in their wake. This was no small battle or squabble between local chieftains; it was a major invasion of one area of the world by invading soldiers from another area of the world.

The invasion route was the same as that taken by Terah and Abram in their migration; their intent, however, was totally different. The patriarch had come in response to the sovereign call of God; King Chedorlaomer came to demand that his sovereignty over the land be reinstated and recognized

by all. The ambitious king could not bear the loss of his reign over the land he had conquered by his might. He would soon discover his mighty arm was defenseless against the One who is truly Sovereign.

Less than twenty miles away was Abram, the man of God. Unlike Lot, who had allied himself with the notorious Sodomites, Abram lived in peace in Mamre, where he had built an altar to God. The allies of King Chedorlaomer either did not know Abram existed or did not believe attacking him in the hills was worth their effort. Genesis 14:13 tells us that “one who had escaped came and reported this to Abram the Hebrew.” This is the only place in the Old Testament where Abram is referred to as “the Hebrew.” Still considered a foreigner in the region, Abram was living peacefully in the mountains. He had lost no investment in the invasion, nor did he have any interest in its outcome.

The Response of Abram

However, along with the report of the great invasion came the news that his nephew, Lot, had been taken captive. Living with the Sodomites, he had faced the same fate they did. Abram could have found many reasons not to go into battle. After all, his relationship with his nephew had been dissolved. Lot had no reason to complain; Abram had done him no wrong. He had trusted more in the walls of Sodom and his untried friends than he did in Abram and the living God. Abram could even have reasoned that this was God’s way of clearing the land and preparing it for his descendants.

Whereas King Chedorlaomer went to war out of selfish ambition and

pride, Abram set off to battle for the sake of his loved ones. His affection for the family along with the grace of God reigning in his heart did not permit him to cherish any secret satisfaction in connection with Lot’s captivity. He responded immediately, leaving his herds and family to risk his own life for the sake of his nephew. What a powerful contrast we see between the Abram who sheepishly went to Egypt because of a famine and this Abram who does not hesitate to pursue the kings of the East.

With three hundred eighteen men Abram set out to liberate his nephew. These men were not trained military men, but trained in domestic duties. The battle was not fought with military genius or generals; it was a battle fought by faith. With the advantage of surprise and darkness, Abram defeated an army that had gone undefeated for more than a decade.

It is ironic that the one who was referred to as “the Hebrew” and viewed as a foreigner in the land is the God-ordained possessor of it. As such, Abram took upon himself the role of king to squelch the enemy and bring freedom to the captives. This event foreshadows the fulfillment of the promise God had given to the patriarch that one day the land would be his and the people therein his offspring. As such, we see the nomad Abram as the true, divinely appointed king of Canaan. If Abram with his small army could defeat the invincible Chedorlaomer, the descendants of Abram would most certainly be able to take courage once they entered the Promised Land years later. They could defeat the Canaanites when it was finally time to settle in the land.

It also foreshadows the role that Jesus Christ plays in our salvation. Like Lot, we are more enamored with the plush

valleys of Sodom than the altar at Bethel. Like Lot, we may not be aware of the tribute that must be paid to the one who holds us captive. Nonetheless, should we rebel against his tyranny, we find ourselves to be helpless. It is only when the One who is truly king comes to our rescue and defeats the pseudo-king that we can be truly set free. Like Abram, the Son of God did not need to come to our rescue. He could easily have left us in our captivity. He who is truly King of kings, however, left the glory of heaven to rescue His people from destruction.

The Purpose of Abram

While Abram may not have consciously recognized himself as the true king of Canaan, the foreshadowing of the great kinsman-redeemer is too obvious to be overlooked. When Abram's brother Haran had died, Abram had provided for Lot. They had moved together to the Land of Promise; they had become wealthy together in Egypt. While the departure of his nephew must have been difficult for Abram, he saw it as the best way to resolve family conflict. Abram, no doubt, felt a certain responsibility toward Lot.

As kinsman redeemer, Abram was responsible for the welfare and well-

being of his nephew. Without thinking of how it might jeopardize his own peaceful life, Abram set out at once to save Lot. In that way, Abram is a type of the great Kinsman-Redeemer who took upon Himself the responsibility of our salvation. In His person, the Lord Jesus Christ, like Abram, was the kinsman of those whom He delivered out of bondage. The work He undertook was our delivery out of the hands of Satan, whom He overthrew. The motivation that prompted Jesus to take on such great warfare was His love for His kinsmen. Jesus fought the battle that redeemed us from certain ruin. The great Prince of Peace took upon Himself the obligation that secured our freedom.

The Response of Lot

In the next lesson, two kings approach Abram to acknowledge him as the great victor in the battle against King Chedorlaomer. There is no record, however, of Abram's nephew, Lot, expressing any gratitude for the rescue his uncle provided. He remains passive and powerless when compared to his courageous and powerful uncle. He was unable to maintain the vast wealth he had hoped to accumulate in the plush plains while Abram rescues him with a handful of herdsmen.

One cannot help but wonder what must have been going on in the young man's mind. Once more, his uncle had provided. Once more, his uncle proved the wiser and the braver of the two. Instead of acknowledging the wisdom of his rescuer, however, Lot returned to the shallow, worldly life of Sodom. Instead of taking warning in what might have proven his ruin, he returned to the plains. There is no hint of appreciation expressed to Abram, no sacrifice of thanksgiving offered to Abram's God.

How often do we respond in the same manner to our Kinsman-Redeemer? Through the Holy Spirit, we have our sin pointed out to us. We come to understand that we have slipped into the worldly mindset of Sodom; held captive by the Prince of Darkness. Upon receiving the good news that we have been rescued through the powerful redemptive work of our Savior Jesus Christ, how do we respond? All too often, instead of running to the altar of thanksgiving, we move back to Sodom just as Lot did. Our lives must rather reflect a thankful spirit that seeks to bring glory to the King who gave Himself up to become our Savior.

Points to Ponder and Discuss

1. The word "king" appears twenty-eight times in Genesis 14. Why do you suppose this word is repeated so often?
2. Why do you suppose Abram is referred to as "the Hebrew" in this passage?
3. What possible excuses could Abram have used for not going into battle?
4. Having described the power of the kings of the East, what does the author of Genesis want us to know about Abram in verses 13–16?
5. Compare and contrast King Chedorlaomer and Abram and their reasons for going to war.
6. How does Abram take upon himself the role of king? How does it foreshadow the kingship of Christ?
7. Compare and contrast the kinsman-redeemer aspect of Abram with that of Boaz.
8. What does the battle between Abram and Chedorlaomer foreshadow?
9. What do we find missing at the end of this passage?

Bible Studies on Abraham

Lesson 5: An Encounter with Two Kings

Genesis 14:17–24

Rev. Wybren
Oord

In the portion of Genesis that we consider in this lesson, a man who was called Melchizedek seems to appear out of nowhere. He is introduced as the King of Salem; he blessed Abram and received a tenth of the spoils Abram had won in the battle, and then he disappeared as quickly as he arrived. The name Melchizedek is referred to again twice in Scripture, once in the Old Testament (Psalm 110) where he is described as “a priest forever,” and once in the New Testament (Hebrews 7) where he is described as a priest of God “without father or mother, without genealogy, without beginning of days or end of life.”

Melchizedek is a most mysterious person! Speculation about who Melchizedek was has been debated through the centuries. Origen (185–254) thought Melchizedek was an angel. Ambrose (339–397) believed Melchizedek to be a preincarnation of the Second Person of the Trinity. This view is still popular today even though Hebrews declares Christ to be “one in the order of Melchizedek” and not equal to Melchizedek (Hebrews 7:11). Martin Luther understood Melchizedek to be Shem, the son of Noah, who lived thirty five years beyond the death of Abram. One could argue, however, that we could rule this theory out because we know who Shem’s father was. John Calvin wrote that Melchizedek was a man in the land, alone and upright; a sincere cultivator and guardian of the true religion.

While we are told by Paul not to concern ourselves with endless genealogies (1 Timothy 1:4), it was considered important by the Jewish leaders. Priests were to come exclusively from the tribe of Levi. Diligent records were kept to insure

that those anointed as priests were true descendants of Levi. If a person’s lineage could not be traced all the way back to the third son of Jacob and Leah, that person would not be permitted into the priesthood. Yet, Melchizedek was a priest long before Levi is even born! Hebrews points out that he was a priest, not by lineage, but by the appointment of God. He is probably the last official representative of the pre-Abramic religion who came to meet and welcome the new representative of the true faith.

Abram and the King of Salem

While it may be entertaining to spend time discussing who Melchizedek really was, we must be careful not to let our discussion hinder us from discovering the importance of the encounter between the two men of God, Abram and Melchizedek. While we may not know many things about Melchizedek, we certainly do know a few things about him.

Melchizedek blesses Abram



He and Abram lived in a day and age known for its corruption and violence. The kings in the plains were kings of unrighteousness, ruling over cities that were known for their promiscuity and perversions. In their midst was a man, whose name means “King of Righteousness.” He was the king of Salem, considered by many to be the future site of Jerusalem. “Salem” means “peace.” After giving great details of an incredible battle, Genesis introduces us to a man of peace. Melchizedek had not been part of the battle, nor was he among those who had been defeated.

In addition, Melchizedek was a priest. He brought bread and wine to celebrate Abram’s victory and then blessed Abram by bringing praise to God Most High. As Abram came over the horizon of his homeland, he brought with him all the freed slaves and the spoils of battle. He might well have seen this as the way Jehovah would give to him the land. He could have claimed as his not only the hills in which he lived but also the plush plains of the valley and all the people. He had conquered it all. If such thoughts had entered the mind of Abram, his encounter with Melchizedek put an end to them. Melchizedek celebrated with Abram and declared that it was Abram’s God who had given the victory. Abram returned from battle the same way he went into battle: a humble servant of God.

Their time together was not just a time for feeding the weary army. This was a formal celebration prepared for the victors by the King of Salem. Martin Luther insisted that the few words recorded in Scripture that are credited to Melchizedek (vv. 19, 20) were part of a sermon extolling the great God that both he and Abram worshiped. Afterwards, Abram acknowledged the priesthood of

Melchizedek by giving him a tithe of all the spoils. The Patriarch and the Priest must have spent several pleasant hours together sharing what they understood concerning the God Most High.

Abram and the King of Sodom

Through the blessing Abram received from Melchizedek, he was introduced to the world around him. No one had thought much of Abram before his victory over King Chedorlaomer. He was a nomad wandering from place to place. Now, however, since he had defeated the enemy and freed the captives, everyone came running to him. One who came running was the defeated king of Sodom. He had lost all his possessions to the eastern confederacy and they, in turn, had lost all their possessions to Abram. This defeated king realized that Abram was a powerful man in Canaan. Everything by right belonged to Abram.

No doubt he had also observed the victory celebration. The tithe that Abram gave to Melchizedek must have aroused his interest. Instead of offering bread and wine, Bera, king of Sodom, acknowledged the power of Abram and approached him with a way in which the patriarch could divide the spoils. He came with what appeared to be a most generous offer: “Give me the people and keep the goods for yourself.”

For a lesser man this would have been a great temptation. Bera had offered him a very practical solution that would leave Abram with great wealth and fame. He would have been recognized as a gracious warrior by not keeping the people as slaves, as King Chedorlaomer would have done. He could have reasoned that this was the way that God was going to make him the possessor of the land. Whereas the King of Salem focused on Abram’s dependence on God for victory, the king of Sodom focused upon earthly success.

Abram refused the offer. He saw the offer of Bera as a temptation. It was an attempt by the king of Sodom to gain for himself some of the glory of Abram’s victory. Abram saw very clearly, however, that it was not his victory, but God’s victory. If he kept any of the goods from Sodom, he would never be able to say that he had depended entirely upon the Lord for his blessings. Abram wanted to stand out as a man who prospered, not because he was given possessions by an earthly king, but because of his faith in the heavenly King. He made very clear that it was God who was to receive the all of the glory—not Bera or Abram. So emphatic is the commitment of Abram to God Most High that in his reply to Bera he twice said, “I will take nothing.” There was absolutely no way the King of Sodom would be able to take any credit for anything that happened in Abram’s life.

Abram and the God Most High

While the King of Sodom came in his own name hoping to achieve personal fame; the King of Salem came in the name of the God Most High. The greatest battle in Genesis 14 was not that of the invading armies and their defeat by the patriarch’s men, but that Abram had to decide where his help was to be found. Would it be in his own courage and strength, or would he depend upon the strength of the God who had promised the land would one day be his?

By faith Abram was convinced that the spoils of battle were nothing compared to the promises of God. Beyond the potential wealth and success, Abram sought to glorify the name of God. Abram understood that anything that would detract from God’s glory and honor was wrong and something he wanted to avoid.

One of the great weaknesses in the church today is that there are so few within the church to make such an absolute and consistent commitment to God Most High. Abram had every right to the spoils but gave them up for the honor of God. What are you willing to give up that God might be truly glorified in your life? Are you spending more time on Facebook than you are with His Book? Are your Twitter messages longer than your prayers? Do you talk more about your favorite sports team than about Christ's sacrifice? Do you play Xbox so much that you can avoid the fiery darts of the Phantom Force yet you have no defense against the fiery darts of hell? Dare we confess that we have attached ourselves to the possessions offered by the King of Sodom rather than entrusting ourselves to the King of Salem?

The priest of the God Most High called Abram to give the glory to God. One greater than Melchizedek

has called you to bring honor and glory to the Living God. He calls you to put aside your trust in the things that the world has to offer and place your hope and trust in Jesus Christ who is the true King of Peace. We are to commit ourselves to worship, trust, obey, and serve Him as He has called us to do.

Such a commitment takes faith. A true faith in Jesus is able to recognize the difference between Melchizedek's blessing and Sodom's offer. It is able to resist strong temptation by withstanding the false honor paid by the king of the world, seeking rather to bring honor to the King of kings. Such faith finds her hope in Christ, and Christ alone.



Points to Ponder and Discuss

1. Who is Melchizedek and why are the two positions he held significant?
2. God is not mentioned in the first twenty seven verses of Genesis 15. How do the words and actions of Melchizedek and Abram put the previous battle into perspective?
3. Melchizedek and Abram spent time together praising the Most High God. How can Christians enjoy that same type of fellowship with others? How can we encourage one another in the Lord?
4. What decision was placed before Abram as he faced the two kings? What does his decision reveal about his faith?
5. Why did Abram refuse to take the spoils of the battle he had won?
6. Why did Abram refuse the offer made by the King of Sodom?
7. Why is it important for us to realize that ultimately it is God alone who is to be our Provider and King?
8. In what ways can we honor God Most High for the blessings and victories He gives us?
9. In what way is Jesus a priest like Melchizedek and therefore a High Priest greater than those descended from Levi?

Bible Studies on the Life of Abraham

Lesson 6: The Covenant – Part One

Genesis 15:1–6

Rev. Wybren
Oord

Abram was a man who lived by faith. He had heard God's calling in Ur, witnessed God's faithfulness in Egypt, and seen God's power in the battle against the kings of the East. Every time Abram went through a period of crisis, God was there to renew His promises. In the crisis of leaving home, God had promised Abram a new home; in the crisis of Lot choosing the fertile land, God promised Abram all the land; in the crisis of war, God promised to be Abram's shield. It is interesting to note that God told Abram that everywhere the patriarch put his feet would one day be his. Then God has Abram pursue the kings of the East—forcing him to move his feet.

God's promise to be Abram's shield came as a comfort to Abram after he battled against the four kings from the East. Prior to the battle, the kings had not bothered to attack Abram because they considered him not worth their time. Certainly vengeance would be foremost on their minds after he had defeated them. God would be Abram's shield against his enemies and for his future.

Comforted as he may have been by this assurance, Abram had other things on his mind. Ten years earlier, God had promised him offspring "like the dust of the earth." He was seventy-five years old at the time. He was not getting any younger. Virtually all of the promises that God had given to Abram for the future depended on him having a son. Now it seemed as if one of his servants, Eliezer of Damascus, would inherit Abram's estate.

Mindful of our human frailty, God does not chastise Abram saying, "I told you once already that you would have offspring!" Rather, God

graciously repeats His promise. He assures Abram that Eliezer will not be the beneficiary of His promises, rather one coming from Abram's own body, a son, would be his heir. Then, to reassure Abram of the depth of His promise, God takes him outside on what must have been a very clear night and encourages him to count the stars. "So shall your offspring be," God promised.

Romans 4 tells us that Abram faced the fact that his body was as good as dead. He was, after all, about a hundred years old. He faced the fact that Sarai's womb was also dead. Yet God had promised that a son would be born from his own body, and his descendants would be as numerous as the stars in the sky. As Abram looked up he realized that he could not count the stars—but God could. In fact, God not only knows the number of stars in the sky, He has given a name to each one of them (Psalm 147:4). On that clear night, and every subsequent clear night, Abram would be reminded of the great promise that God had given to him.

Abram Believed

With this introduction—God as Abram's shield; God's great promise; the starry night—we read these words: "Abram believed the Lord, and He credited it to him as righteousness" (Genesis 15:16). Read that verse and read it again. Commit it to memory. Paul quotes this verse twice—once in



Romans 4:6 and again in Galatians 3:6. James looks back upon it in James 2:23. This is a pivotal verse, for it introduces us to the glorious truth of justification by grace through faith. Martin Luther wrote that the church stands or falls through its understanding of this verse. John Calvin said that this truth is the main hinge upon which all religion turns.

The ultimate question in the life of Abram (and in the life of every human being) was whether he believed the promises God had given. Many people today think that they need only to believe in God and they will



be saved. Without a doubt, Abram believed in God. That is not what saved him! James points out that even the demons believe in God (James 2:19). According to Mark, the demons were among the first to acknowledge that Jesus was the Son of God (Mark 1:24, 3:11). Adam and Eve believed in God, but that did not keep them from eating the fruit of the forbidden tree. It is not enough to know that there is an Intelligent Designer of the universe; we must know who He is and how we can be restored to a right relationship with Him.

What Abram (and everyone before and after him) needed to believe was the gospel promise. It was not just the new land or an earthly child from his own body that Abram had to believe; it was that every nation would be blessed by him (Galatians 3:8). Abram had to believe that through his son would come the Messiah. Three times God promised Abram that his seed would be a blessing to those who blessed him. In that promise, the word “seed” is singular. Although his offspring would be as numerous as the stars in the sky, Abram had to believe that from among them would come one who would restore things as they once were in the garden of Eden where mankind enjoyed complete fellowship with God. One would come who would save His people from their sin. Jesus said, “Abraham rejoiced at the thought of seeing My day; he saw it and was glad” (John 8:56).

Three Words

Paul encourages his readers to follow the example of Abram (Romans 4:18–25). In order to do that, we have to understand three very important words:

Faith. Everyone has faith. Every time you sit down, you exercise your faith. You have faith that the chair will not collapse. It is, however, not your faith in the chair that holds you up when you sit down. It is the chair that holds you up. It is your faith that makes

you move into the chair, but it is the strength of the chair that holds you up. Years ago, I was pastor of a church that met in a gymnasium. Each Sunday, members exercised their faith by sitting in folding chairs. On more than one occasion members found their faith had been misdirected as the chair collapsed underneath them.

Nowhere does the Bible teach that a person is saved because of his faith. You are not saved because you have faith, nor on the basis of your faith. Scripture teaches that a person is saved *through* faith. It is not enough to have faith. Your faith must be in the right thing. It will do you no good to place your faith in a false god, no matter how strong that faith may be. For that matter, it will do you no good to place your faith in a false concept of Jesus.

True faith is focused upon a statement, a doctrine, and a promise. The statement is that Jesus Christ is the Son of God who died, rose again, and now sits at the right hand of God the Father. The doctrine is that the death of Jesus Christ was the all-sufficient sacrifice given once for all for all your sins. The promise is that your sins are forgiven and the righteousness of Jesus Christ has been imputed to all who truly repent of their sins and shelter themselves in the atoning sacrifice of Jesus Christ.

Credited. People who maintain a checkbook understand what this term means. Suppose you have written a number of checks and suddenly find yourself \$100 short in your checking account. There are a number of things you can do. You can close the checkbook and pretend nothing is wrong. That would certainly be ineffective. You could write a deposit of \$100 into the deposit column so that everything in the checkbook balances. While that may look good, unless you actually deposit the \$100 your checks will not be covered. You must actually go to the bank and credit

your account with \$100 or the checks you have written will not be cleared.

As people created in His image, we are called by God to be righteous—without sin. Yet the Bible very clearly teaches that no one is without sin (Romans 3:10; 1 John 1:8). Putting our sin in banking terms, we have written bad checks against our account with God. In fact, the Heidelberg Catechism teaches us that we increase our guilt (debt) every day. Nevertheless the Psalmist writes, “Blessed is the man whose sin the Lord does not count against him” (Psalm 32:2). This verse speaks of a sinful person, yet, the Lord does not look at his negative balance.

What happened to that negative balance? What happened to our sin? Surely God does not just forget about our sin. God’s justice demands that sin be punished. While the penalty for insufficient funds at the bank may involve overdraft fees, Paul wrote that the penalty against us because of our sin is death (Romans 6:23). Someone has to die for our sin. Either we have to die, or we must find a suitable substitute. That Substitute is Jesus, the Son of God. When our faith is in the substitutionary sacrifice of Jesus Christ, God takes our sin and charges them to the account of His Son. Jesus

paid sin’s penalty when He died on the cross. God takes our filthy deeds and removes them from our account and placed them in Christ’s account.

Righteousness. This term focuses our attention upon our standing before God. God will not permit sin to stand in His presence. If we are to have a positive relationship with God, He must view us as being without sin. If we are left to ourselves, that is impossible; even our best deeds are like filthy rags in His sight. We cannot be righteous; we must be declared righteous by a gracious God. Even as our sin was imputed to Jesus Christ as our substitute, so also His righteousness was imputed to us. God, in His great love, credits those who have faith in His Son’s sacrifice with the perfect righteousness of His perfect Son.

Abram’s Righteousness

Abram was not righteous because he lived a perfect life. He was and remained a sinner all his life. Nor was he righteous because he knew God and the promises of God. He did not become righteous because of his faith. Because Abram believed that God was able to bring life out of death, the Sovereign God credited Abram’s faith to him and declared Abram righteous.

Salvation, even in Abram’s case, was not of works but of grace—grace freely given by God who implanted a true faith into Abram.

Abram no longer looked at the promise; he was looking at the Giver of the promise. He saw God as the shield that would protect him not only against his earthly enemies, but the shield that would guard him against Satan. Today we have the fulfillment of that promise! We can believe that our sins are forgiven and eternal life is ours because of the sacrifice made by God’s Son, Jesus Christ. His shed blood covered our sin. His righteousness is imputed to all who truly trust in the work He accomplished at Calvary. We have not only the Word of God; we have the Word of God made flesh.

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Points to Ponder and Discuss

1. In what way is God a shield for His people today?
2. Why would being childless have been a major concern for Abram?
3. What unspoken questions were behind Abram’s concern?
4. Why would it have required faith to believe the promises of Genesis 15:4, 5?
5. Why is Genesis 15:6 considered to be a pivotal verse?
6. In what way does Abram’s faith in God become a model for us today?
7. Explain in your own words what you understand by the words “faith,” “credited,” and “righteousness.”
8. What did Abram believe?
9. What must we believe?

Meeting Jesus At The Feast

Rehearsing Rest: The Sabbaths—Part 2

Leviticus 23:1–3

Dr. John
Sittema

It's All About Rest

At the base of Sinai, God would give his people seven festivals that would function like individual frames in a reel of film, a series of feasts that would serve to give them glimpses of Messiah's shadow. There was an additional feast, however, one established at the same time and in the same biblical passage, that was distinct from the other seven and, in fact, framed all of them. Leviticus 23 begins with this feast, a celebration known as *Sabbath*. Its name suggests the idea of rest, and its commemoration would shade all the other feasts with a unique hue. Redemption in its rich and variegated dimensions—as seven festivals would soon show—was about the bringing of rest and the restoration of *shalom*. If the Bible is a story, its dramatic movement is from restlessness toward Sabbath rest.¹

Sabbath was not only one day per week. Actually, there were *Sabbaths*, plural, as Israel was soon to learn, and they were to be commemorated every seventh day, every seventh year, and, in the year of Jubilee, the Sabbath of Sabbaths, a year-long celebration following the seventh cycle of seven years.

Keeping the Sabbaths involved first of all heeding the call to remember. But what was Israel to remember? In its first appearance in Scripture (Genesis 2), the *Sabbath* was a remembering of creation. God himself rested and remembered with delight the work he had done in creating the heavens and the earth. Later, in the first giving of the Decalogue (Exodus 20:8–11), God grounded Israel's Sabbath-keeping

in this creation rest: "Remember the Sabbath day by keeping it holy . . . For in six days the LORD made the heavens and the earth, the sea, and all that is in them, but he rested on the seventh day. Therefore the LORD blessed the Sabbath day and made it holy."

However, in the second giving of the law, God laid a different foundation for the Sabbath feast (Deuteronomy 5:12–15). Here rest was linked to remembering *deliverance* from Egypt: "Remember that you were slaves in Egypt and that the LORD your God brought you out of there with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm. Therefore the LORD your God has commanded you to observe the Sabbath day."

The twin reasons for the feast flavor the subtle but rich recipe of God's gift of rest.

Remembering and Resting: Creation

In calling Israel to remember creation, God wanted her to do more than recall Genesis 1 and the fact that he had made all things. God wanted her to grapple with the wondrous truth that all aspects of creation took their *meaning* and *purpose* from the One who called it into being. Sabbath thus became a gift that defined Israel's notion of work and gave her a sense of holy vocation. From her stewardship of beasts of burden to her management of servants and employees, Israel was to sense that she was a people on a peculiar mission in the name of her God. Noortzij observes: "The rhythmic character that the Sabbath gave to the Israelites' life, which is met with nowhere else in the ancient Near Eastern world, contributed to distinguishing them as

a peculiar people, and it at the same time exerted an extremely favorable influence both on their capacity for work and on their manner of life in general."²

If the weekly Sabbaths became routine, every seventh year would jump-start an even stronger memory. Remembering creation was more than a mental exercise; God put legs and feet under the command. On Sabbath *days*, men and animals were to take a day off to taste God's gift of rest in their weary world, recalling that work was not supposed to be toil. But in Sabbath *years*, even the soil would be allowed to remember the goodness it once enjoyed before weeds choked the dirt or invaders salted it. All of creation, including its very soil, had once been good; it bore a divine voiceprint because it had been created by the word of the Lord.³

In a delightful portrait of faith and life in rural Iowa in the 1930s, poet Sietze Buning helps us understand a rest that touched all of creation:

*Into the daily swill of skim milk
and cornmeal*

*Dad stirred an extra number-two
canful*

*of Peet's Perfection Mineral
Supplement*

*on Saturday nights for the pigs'
Sunday breakfast.*

*It always foamed over the barrel
by Sunday morning*

*and turned so crusty on top you
had to cut it with a spade.*

*It was like slopping the pigs on
Sunday with coffee cake.*

Roy, Bob, Frank, and Snoodles,
our four horses,
each got an extra gallon of oats
on Sunday morning;
every cow an extra half-gallon of
shelled-corn meal;
the chickens an extra gallon of
shelled corn on the ground . . .
Not even during threshing did our
overweight horses
need extra oats, although they
gladly feasted . . .

Dad's explanations:

*"We look to God as animals look
to us.*

*We're their idea of God, their
image of God.*

*God's love to animals flows
through us to them.*

*How will they know God's love
unless we show them?*

*How can they tell the Lord's Day
from another?*

*How can we comfort animals
except by food?*

*They groan for eternal Sabbath
with all creation."⁴*

Remembering and Resting: Deliverance

Deliverance colored the second giving of the Sabbath command and was the second focal point of all the Sabbaths. This required remembering, too: Israel was to recall and retell the story of the patriarchs—and especially the story of the Exodus—to the rising generations. But it also involved wrestling in faith to see glimpses of the redemption to come more fully on a future day. For the Sabbaths tilted Israel forward to the coming Messiah, one who would finally bring authentic rest. His name was Jesus; all the Sabbaths of the Old Testament would find their meaning in him.

"Come to me, all you who are weary

and burdened," he would cry, "and I will give you rest" (Matthew 11:28). In the very next verses, he called himself "Lord of the Sabbath," validating his claim by healing a man with a shriveled hand on the Sabbath day. Defiantly rejecting the Pharisees' demand that Sabbath was honored by the avoidance of work, he insisted that *his work brought rest*.

His rest did not come because he healed a man or plucked grain *on* a Sabbath day, thus offering people an example that stretched the traditional understanding of Sabbath behavior. The central teaching of Jesus about the Sabbath is that no one finds rest by his own efforts, by what Scripture calls "observing the law," even Sabbath laws. The Old Testament prohibition against work on the Sabbath—under penalty of death, no less (Exodus 31:15)—anticipated that truth. God wanted his people to know—in every generation—that seeking rest by their own effort was a doomed enterprise, for no rest is to be found at the end of such a quest. Thus he forbade them from working to find it.

Jesus' words and Jesus' Sabbath-keeping hung a neon sign in a public place, a sign for all generations to see: *working at rest won't bring it—don't even try!*

Only God can give rest, and it will come only through Christ. God's rest would be secured by Jesus' death on the cross as a punishment for our sin and as the end of the guilt that makes our souls so very restless. Paul would instruct the Romans that Jesus "was delivered over to death for our sins" (4:25) and that "our old self was crucified with him so that the body of sin might be done away with, that we should no longer be slaves to sin" (6:6). He explained this more fully in his letter to the Galatians: "I have been crucified with Christ, and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me" (2:20).⁵ He assured them that, justified by faith, we have "peace with God" (Romans 5:1). His conclusion was that, in light

of the cross of Christ, "there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus" (8:1).

Such rest runs deep, for it releases our souls from the burden of guilt both for sins committed and obedience omitted, seals the tear in the fabric of our personal history, and gives each of us a new purpose and meaning that is tied to a new life enjoyed in the love of God.

Yet keen eyes and sensitive hearts know well that the restlessness of the world and in the human soul are not yet completely done away with. People still hurt, they still cry, and they still die, all marks of the old restless order of things.

James and Rebecca were the model couple. Newly wed and in their late twenties, they are handsome, their wedding picture the sort that could have adorned frames for sale at the neighborhood Walmart. And with a new baby, life before them had a sweet cast to it. James had been a Navy diver, was well trained, and was physically a specimen the likes of which would inspire jealousy in all men over the age of forty. They were partners in a new business venture that promised a solid and prosperous future.

But when James suffered nine days of relentless, brutal headaches, it was not only Rebecca who was concerned; the doctors shifted into diagnostic overdrive. They dug deep, ordering tests that bewildered and frightened everyone. The tests confirmed the worst fears: James had a brain tumor.

The diagnosis launched a series of bewildering but rapid actions: the immediate surgery was radical, leaving visible scars; the follow-up radiation killed cells indiscriminately, destroying healthy hair follicles as well as malignant cells; and chemotherapy brought a weariness that young men are unprepared for. Tears gave way to fears, and fears gave way to more tears as the unknown trumped the known. At first, the tumor was seldom

discussed, a pink elephant everyone knows is in the room but which no one wants to acknowledge. Gradually, as they grew in faith, and with the support of family and friends, the tumor became a reality to be dealt with, a factor in daily life, but not the defining factor.

James and Rebecca are resting in Christ. Like the rest of us, they do not know the future. But if asked, they'll tell you, without hesitance, that all is well.

Stories like this remind us that there is an undeniable *not yet* to our rest in Christ. We inhabit a broken world; those who follow Christ walk with both a limp and a tilt, hobbled both by cosmic brokenness and by personal sin, always leaning toward the new order of things his resurrection promises. Even though people who come to Christ really do find forgiveness, joy, and hope because of the finished redemption his cross provides, they don't always heal completely—not this side of glory, anyway. Our sins don't disappear overnight; neither do their consequences. Some brain tumors are completely healed; but sometimes, the medical journey is a hard one and the outcome sad. Sinful marital patterns—twisted out of shape over decades—don't untangle easily; memories aren't quickly purged of cruel treatment or harsh words, and hearts cringe in desperate fear for years following physical or verbal abuse. One may be set free from addictions, but a rotten liver may well be the price of decades of overindulgence. A bright young mind may have limitless potential, but a self-image crippled by the cruel names children call out or damaged by parental criticism that never showed unconditional love or approval may well be hobbled for life—life this side of the grave, anyway.

We already taste rest, but we haven't yet been seated at the table for the full feast. "There remains, then, a

Sabbath-rest for the people of God" (Hebrews 4:9).

Twisted Sabbaths, Weary Rest

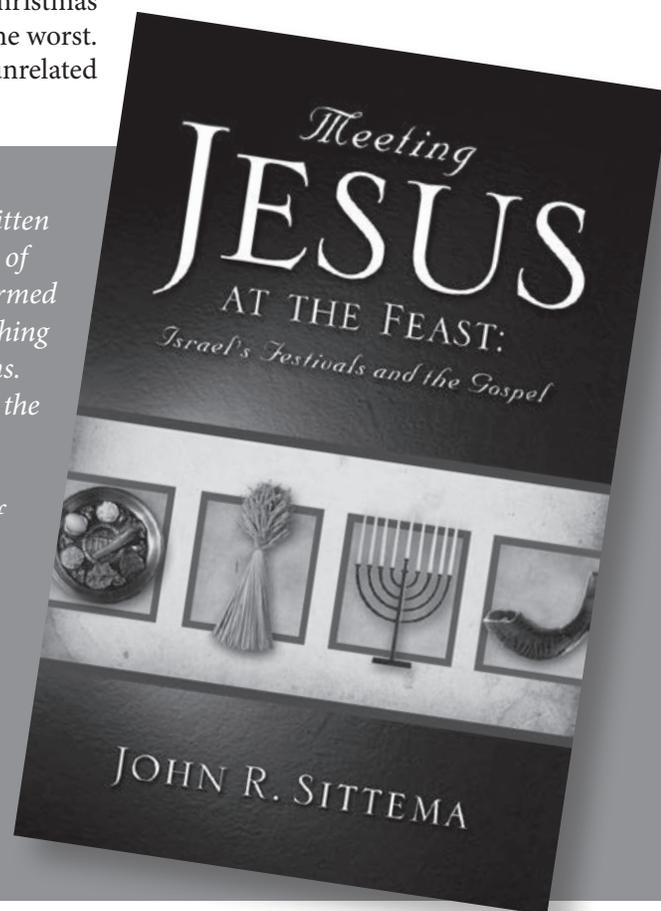
Ever been invited to a party at someone's home, only to discover that there was no reason for the party? There is nothing to celebrate, nothing drawing this particular group of people together except the personalities of the hosts. In such gatherings, most mill around for a while, but leave early. With all due respect to the hosts, nothing keeps them there.

Parties without meaning are empty; they have no purpose other than fun, a pale counterfeit for real joy. The truth is that it is easy to lose the purpose of a celebration. A wedding anniversary can be shared with friends, with a first-rate dinner at a five-star restaurant and a card or gift, while the first love that bloomed into wedding vows shrivels after years of neglect, cold hearts, and quiet desperation. In our culture, Christmas commemorations are often the worst. Traditions like gift-giving—unrelated

to the birth of Christ in Bethlehem of Judea but essential to the commercial extravaganza December 25 has become—drape the holidays with stress and financial pressures that make them prime time for painful family crises and bleak seasonal depression. In today's commercialized culture, the incarnate Son of God has become as easy to miss in December as a mustard seed in a shopping mall.

The meaning of the Sabbaths was easy to lose too. Over the centuries, Israel distorted the biblical gift of rest by reducing Sabbath to duty and tying it to a twenty-four-hour period beginning at dusk on Friday. She worked the day to death and "turned the permission to rest into an imperative."⁶ She scrupulously obeyed the rules and drew out the implications but never found the rest the day proclaimed. She worked hard at not working; her rabbis identified "Sabbath day journeys" that limited the distance a person could walk

Dr. John Sittema has written a new 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 second half of chapter 1, in which Dr. Sittema considers the meaning of the Sabbath Day.



without his steps becoming laborious. A housewife was permitted to take one stitch in a garment, but two constituted work and thus broke the law. Some knots might be tied on a Sabbath, but others—any that would be “lasting” knots, like a camel-driver’s knot or a sailor’s—were prohibited. If a stone lay on the mouth of a jar, the jar could be tipped so that the stone fell off. But the stone itself could not be lifted; such would constitute labor.⁷

Modern people react variously to the notion of Sabbath. Many ignore it altogether, giving Saturday to Sunday no spiritual significance except as a recreational weekend.⁸ Some Christian communities see no compelling connection between Sunday and the Sabbath. They reason that the age called Law is past and another called Grace has arrived, and with the change in epochs, Sabbath became a relic of the former dispensation.

Other Christian fellowships are convinced of a different logic: Sabbath is tied to the fourth of God’s Ten Commandments. Sunday has replaced Saturday and is now the Christian Sabbath, and keeping the Sunday-Sabbath is a matter of obedience. Believers are to follow God’s laws against unnecessary work or commerce on the Lord’s Day.

Those who so easily disconnect Sabbath from Sunday risk forgetting that Sabbath did not start out as a complex of rules but as a celebration of rest that echoed God’s own, a rest that enjoyed fellowship between a creation and its Creator. They also risk forgetting that Sabbath remembers redemption—once in the Exodus and more fully in Christ alone. Remembering God as Lord of creation and as Redeemer through Christ grounded two thousand years of the church’s pattern of faith: they gathered communally each Sunday to rest in Him.

Those who suggest that rest can be

found by following Jewish Sabbath proscriptions—applicable now to Sunday instead of Saturday—also run a risk. They risk forgetting that any rest that has to be obtained by human efforts—even Sabbath-keeping ones—is not really rest at all.

The hard part of honoring Sabbath today is sorting out what is rehearsal and what is truly feast, what was temporary and what is eternal, what is shadow and what is the substance that cast it.

Such struggles are not new. John Calvin, the sixteenth-century reformer, provides a helpful perspective. He warns against “superstition” in regard to Sabbath-keeping:

By the Lord Christ’s coming the ceremonial part of this commandment was abolished. For *he himself is the truth*, with whose presence all figures vanish; he is the body, at whose appearance the shadows are left behind. *He is, I say, the true fulfillment of the Sabbath . . .* Christians ought therefore to shun completely the superstitious observance of days [emphasis added—JRS].⁹

In the same paragraphs in which Calvin argues that the “ceremonial part” of the fourth commandment should be abolished, he affirms two valid reasons for “observing Sabbath.” The first is a call to gather “on stated days” for worship and instruction in God’s Word, which will help us to rest in Christ and turn away from seeking to earn rest by the works of the flesh; the second is a call to treat employees well, giving them a day of rest to show the holistic grace the kingdom of God brings.¹⁰

Calvin’s balanced warnings are fresh and timely for believers in this generation. Any view or practice of Sabbath that puts its focus on our behavior one day of the week instead of placing the focus on the accomplished work of redemption by grace in Christ

is off target. Jesus Christ is the true Sabbath; all the Sabbath requirements in the Old Testament point to the rest he alone would provide for his people by the cross and resurrection. Learning to rest in the salvation that Jesus brought—without adding our own efforts—is the way we embrace Sabbath rest. All the weight of salvation is borne by Christ alone, given to us by grace alone, embraced by faith alone.

My wife and I recently enjoyed the privilege of a working sabbatical. I was working on this chapter, in fact, so Sabbath rest was in the forefront of my mind and heart. So we were excited one Sunday when we visited another church and read in the bulletin that the preacher would preach about “Keeping Sabbath.” Very articulate and most persuasive, he touched on important issues. He charged us to “get off the merry-go-round” of stress to find freedom from the tyranny of the urgent. He recited compelling statistics showing how busy we are as a culture and how desperately we need to find balance by taking time off from the demands of work. He lamented that our expanding list of labor-saving devices merely adds to our stress levels by seducing us to think we can get more done than ever.

But his solution—“Keep the Sabbath; take Sundays off!”—missed the mark. Not a word was spoken about resting *in Christ alone*. Not a word pointed us to the cross and the resurrection as the ground of our peace. Time management was offered as a substitute redeemer.

As we left, I couldn’t help thinking that the same talk could have been delivered by an Orthodox Jew steeped in the Sabbath regulations of the Mishnah or a secular business consultant advising an overworked client. Perhaps the word *Sabbath* would have appeared in the Jew’s presentation and been absent from the consultant’s, or even a different day proposed for it. Yet the message

would have been the same: if you take a day off you will achieve schedule and relationship balance, be able to say no to overcommitment, and you will invest more time in marriage and family. The benefits will be well worth the effort.

Few will disagree that a day off can benefit stressed people and that renewing your commitment to a busy family shows love and provides nurture to a generation of children themselves showing the strain of this pressured life. But the currents of *rest* run deep, its spring bubbling from a place far beyond human obedience. Going to church faithfully on Sundays does not itself fix the greed that drives people the other days. Making a commitment not to go shopping on Sunday and not to buy or sell or go to the office that day could be driven by a desire to honor the Lord more purely. But it may as well be driven by tradition, custom, or even fear of reprisal—from the Lord, your parents, or your church community. Ultimately, keeping Sabbath by such behavioral commitments is no guarantee at all that you rest in Christ or that your labor the other six is “unto the Lord.”

To find rest in a world of relentless change, stress, and the tyranny of the urgent, people need a new heart, one emptied of self-reliance and unburdened of frustrating duty, one desperate for God’s grace. They need redemption of a kind that will set the world right once again.

The Sabbaths in Leviticus 23 showed the movement of the plot of God’s redemption: he would bring *rest* to a restless world. The redemption would prove to be something mysterious, different from anything Israel could imagine. In fact, it would take seven feasts to help her dream.

1. C. Vonk speaks of the “idea of rest” as being the “signature” of all of the feasts, not only of Sabbath. *De Voorzeide Leer: Leviticus*, vol. 1b (Uitgave: Drukkerij Barendrecht, 1963), 635.

2. *Bible Student’s Commentary: Leviticus* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing Corp., 1982), 230.

3. Brueggeman, Walter, *The Land: Place as Gift, Promise, and Challenge in Biblical Faith* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1977), 49.

4. Buning, Sietze, “An Open Letter,” in *Style and Class* (Orange City, Iowa: Middleburg Press, 1982), 56–7.

5. The verb tells the story: it is in the perfect tense, stressing completed action with ongoing results.

6. Noortzij reminds us that the prohibition of all work was not absolute. *Leviticus*, 230.

7. For a glimpse at the extensive rabbinic tradition surrounding Sabbath laws, see Shabbath 15.1 in *The Mishnah*, trans. Herbert Danby (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1933), 113.

8. Ironically, what our culture refers to as *recreation* (meaning by the term weekends, sports, and play) is rooted in the biblical concept of redemption, the bringing of the new creation—and with it, rest.

9. *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. McNeill, bk. 2, chap. 8:32 (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1967).

10. *Ibid*, 8:32. For Calvin, Sunday has no special claim as the day of rest but is an accommodation to our weakness, only advisable because we do not worship every day. He comments, “Would that we were privileged to do so!”

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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?

The Glory of God: Archetypal and Ectypal

Part One: The Theophanic Glory

Mark W.
Karlberg

The discipline of Reformed biblical theology—one that accents the progressive, historical unfolding of redemptive revelation—requires us to see Christ in all of Scripture.

The famous dictum of Augustine regarding the two Testaments is that the New is in the Old concealed, the Old in the New revealed. Reformed teaching on this subject, accordingly, is of ancient pedigree. The apostle John speaks of the crucial tie between the two Testaments in terms of shadow and reality, the apostle Paul in terms of promise and fulfillment (after the pattern of Old Testament teaching itself). Of course, it is Christ himself who instructs his disciples in learning to see Christ in the Law, the Prophets, and the Psalms (Luke 24:27, 44–49).

Christology, the doctrine of Christ in the Bible viewed as a whole, is inextricably bound to typology, the study of typical, symbolic precursors of the person and work of Jesus Christ in connection with sundry Old Testament events, persons, and institutions. The most important manifestation of God in the midst of his people, however, is the Glory-theophany, which makes its appearance at numerous times throughout biblical history. The theophanic Glory is a complex, *eschatological* phenomenon, an anticipation of the Eschaton, the close of history and entrance into the eternal kingdom of righteousness and life. From the outset, the Glory-theophany bears the Immanuel imprint—God with us—supremely so in the incarnate life of God’s Son (the incarnation became requisite for the redemption of fallen humankind as decreed by God since the foundation of the worlds). At times the Glory-cloud manifestation is distinct from the second person of the Trinity; at other times it is an appearance of Christ himself in his supernal existence as the exact radiance of the Father (Hebrews 1:1–4). It is the coming of God to humanity that is the focus of this article (much of the material developed here builds upon the exegetical and theological analyses of Geerhardus Vos and Meredith G. Kline).

We begin with the portrayal of the Glory of God given by the psalmist:

The Lord reigns, let the earth rejoice;
Let the many islands be glad.
Clouds and thick darkness surround Him;
Righteousness and justice are the foundation of His throne.
Fire goes before Him

And burns up His adversaries round about.
His lightnings lit up the world;
The earth saw and trembled.
The mountains melted like wax at the presence of the Lord.
At the presence of the Lord of the whole earth.
The heavens declare His righteousness,
And all the peoples have seen His glory.
The Lord reigns, let the peoples tremble;
He is enthroned above the cherubim,
Let the earth shake!
Exalt the Lord our God
And worship at His footstool;
Holy is He.
Moses and Aaron were among His priests,
And Samuel was among those who called on His name;
They called upon the Lord and He answered them.
He spoke to them in the pillar of cloud;
They kept His testimonies
And the statute that He gave them.
O Lord our God, You answered them;
You were a forgiving God to them,
And yet an avenger of their evil deeds.
Exalt the Lord our God
And worship at His holy hill,
For holy is the Lord our God.
(Psalm 97:1–6; 99:1, 5–9)



This manifestation of God—his advent—is a heavenly intrusion into the earthly realm, heaven come to earth. It is the very dwelling place of God (in anthropological depiction, since both God and angels are incorporeal). God the Father is seated upon the throne, Christ at his right hand, surrounded by the seraphim, cherubim and myriad angels. Taken together, it is the Counsel of God which has called all earthly things into being and which sustains all things by his powerful arm (see Genesis 1:2). The angels are attending spirits, commissioned at first in God's work of creation and later in redemption. Though they are created beings, the angels partake in the creative/recreative work of God as purely ministering spirits, not having divine

power unto themselves. God alone is Creator; the angels are subservient creatures. Upon the establishment of the post-diluvian covenant with all creation, what is a modification of the original covenant made at creation, God promises to uphold his handiwork until the close of history, until the extension of his spiritual kingdom throughout all the world has been completed. The retreating storm clouds leave the rainbow in the sky, a sign of God's (common) grace to fallen creation. Never again will God interrupt the course of human history with so catastrophic a judgment as this; the (final) Day of the Lord—the eschatological appearance of God in Glory—will bring his purpose in creation and redemption to its decreative conclusion.

To understand aright the spiritual realm of God's sovereign Presence as

a pre-eschatological intrusion into the earthly realm, it is necessary that we make note of its strategic role and appearance over the course of history. Prior to the creation of Adam and Eve, God had fashioned the spiritual world of angels, which at the beginning of time was placed on probation. The angels, as image-bearers of God (hence, "sons of God"), were likewise in covenant relationship with God. Unlike Adam, who would later be placed under similar probation, each angel stood in the integrity of his own act of obedience or disobedience. No federal representation here, and no redemption for those angels who transgressed after the instigation of Lucifer. Subsequent to the fulfillment of angelic probation, the heavenly kingdom of light and righteousness breaks forth into the earthly realm

at the very start of its formation, the earthly kingdom appearing as a replica of the heavenly Glory. This Spirit-theophany hovered over the unformed mass at the beginning of the physical creation; the same Spirit comes in the garden of Eden in judgment and in prophetic announcement (as regards the promise of salvation to Adam and Eve, the mother of all living, and judgment upon the Serpent). These events mark the opening history of the theophanic Word and revelation—the revelation of God mediated by the Son through the Spirit.

Given all that we have noted thus far, the theophanic Glory is *Trinitarian* in essence. The revelation of the (Christian) doctrine of the Trinity is deeply embedded in the biblical record right from the outset. Assuredly, it would be a matter of time before the full, final manifestation of the triune God would appear in the person of Jesus Christ incarnate and in the outpouring of the Pentecostal Spirit. Over the course of biblical history the Glory-theophany is identified by the following terms (among others): Spirit, Presence, Face, Hand, Arm, Eyes (cf. “the seven eyes of the Spirit”), Angel (the pre-incarnate bodily manifestation of Christ), Word, and Temple (in anticipation of the consummate arrival of the final heavenly, eternal dwelling of God with his people). This is indeed a complex, awesome manifestation of the divine for finite humanity to apprehend!

The expression to be “caught up in the Spirit” has immediate reference to communication of the prophet with the Lord of Glory. Likewise, the expression “walked with God” (after the fashion of Enoch and Elijah) denotes intimate communion with God the Spirit as the eternal Word and source of resurrection life. Comprehensively, Old Testament history and prophecy are written

in anticipation of Christ’s coming, and are thus preparatory in nature. Encounters with the spiritual world are replete throughout Scripture. The following is but a partial sampling (including instances cited above).

In the Law

At the ratification of the covenant with Abraham, God manifests himself by theophany, as a smoking oven and flaming torch. This is an aspect of the Glory-representation, one that features both the awe of God’s presence and the holiness of his cleansing power in the salvation of sinners (cf. Malachi 4:1–3 and John 3:11–12). Having been cleansed and renewed in divine sonship, Abraham converses with God by way of the theophanic Word of revelation, through the mediation of the One who is identified as the Angel of the Lord (Genesis 22:15). This is no ordinary angel, nor even one having special standing within the angelic kingdom, like Gabriel or the seraphim. The Angel of the Lord is the Lord Christ, also called Michael, the Prince of the army of God (cf. the references in Daniel 12 and in Revelation 12). He is the victor over the enemies of God, the One who conquers sin and death. In John’s Gospel (8:56), Jesus declares that Abraham had seen the Lord of Glory (as an instance of the “Day of the Lord,” which occurs periodically throughout redemptive history until its consummate realization at the Eschaton). Likewise, Stephen recounts that the God of Glory appeared to Abraham when he was yet in Mesopotamia (Acts 7:2).

Similarly, Jacob encounters the angelic revelation of God in pre-incarnate Personage; he wrestles with God until he receives the blessing proffered (Genesis 32:26). Earlier in the account, Jacob was confronted by Theophany, when “the angels of God met him” (Gen 32:1). Jacob calls the place God’s encampment, his dwelling with humanity. Depicted here is the divine Counsel, the sovereign Lord

in the company of his ministering angels. From this encounter, Jacob in turn sends out messengers to prepare the way for his meeting with Esau, an important event in the outworking of Israel’s corporate election and the redemption of those who are recipients of God’s decretive election in Christ, the true Israel of God. Jacob’s (i.e., Israel’s) election has both individual and corporate ramifications (see Romans 9).

The pivotal moment in theocratic Israel’s formation and subsequent history comes at the revelation of God’s law upon Mount Sinai, another instance of the appearance of the Glory-theophany in cloud and fire (Hebrews 12:18–24 compares the revelational encounter between God and humankind in terms of two contrasting covenants, the Mosaic and the New). Prior to the giving of the Law—what is a covenant of works on the typological level of temporal life in the land of Canaan, wherein prosperity is contingent upon Israel’s keeping of the Law—Moses meets the Angel of the Lord on the occasion of the blazing fire in the bush, what he describes as a “marvelous sight” (Exodus 3:3). Moses stands on Holy Ground, the Rock of salvation. Ascending Mount Sinai, Moses meets God in the presence of his angels, in an encounter with the divine Counsel (Exodus 19:3, 16–20; cf. Galatians 3:19). This same Presence (namely, the Angel of the Lord) will go before Israel, bringing her into the land of promise (Exodus 23:20). The portable tent was the earthly, symbolico-typological place of meeting with the Lord God, a site overshadowed by the pillar of cloud by day and the pillar of fire by night (Exodus 33:7–11). Descending the mountain, Moses’ face was aglow with the radiance of God’s own Glory (Exodus 34:29–35; see 2 Corinthians 3:6–18, again comparing and contrasting the Old and New Covenants).

In the Prophets

The experience of prophetic encounter with the God of Glory is resumed in the life of Joshua, who leads Israel into the holy land (Moses had been disqualified entrance into the land because of his transgression of a command of the Lord in the days of wilderness wandering). On that day the provision of manna ceases, and Israel begins to enjoy the fruits of Canaan. At this moment Joshua engages the Captain of the Lord's host, the pre-incarnate, theophanic Angel, who is the Christ of Glory (Joshua 5:12–15). Like Moses, Joshua stands on Holy Ground. The prospect of covenant-breaking looms large in Joshua's farewell address (Joshua 23; see also chapter 24). Life, blessing and prosperity in the earthly, temporal land of promise is contingent upon the keeping of the law of Moses (eternal life, on the other hand, is secure, based exclusively upon the future, messianic work of God's Son by means of fulfillment of his probationary testing as second Adam).

The prophetic office arises from humanity's estate of sin and covenant-transgression. Originally, as image-bearer and covenantal son of God, Adam was commissioned to rule creation with priestly devotion, hence the twofold offices of priest and king. The role of the prophets is to convey God's word of judgment and sovereign determination; that Word climaxes in bringing God's covenant lawsuit against a disobedient people. The prophet Elijah, whose life and work anticipated that of John the Baptist in the days of Israel's final ultimatum to turn from sin and cleave to Jesus the Messiah in true faith and repentance, encounters the living Presence of God in his awesome theophanic power and judgment. This occasion is clearly reminiscent of Moses' experience on Mount Sinai (1 Kings 19:11–12). The sound of the Lord on this occasion, like the sound of God's advent in the

Garden after the sins of our first parents and like the sound of God's meeting with Moses upon the mountain, was thunderous and terrifying (not the "still small voice," as commonly translated in the biblical text). It was Isaiah who saw the Lord high and lifted up, seated upon a throne surrounded by the seraphim crying out, "Holy, holy, holy, is the Lord of hosts" (Isaiah 6:1–7). The cleansing power of God's sanctifying grace is what qualifies and equips the prophet for service in the kingdom. The forgiveness that Isaiah experiences is the fruit of the messianic Lord who is coming to deliver Israel and bring peace to the nations, in fulfillment of God's promise to Abraham.

Eschatological Fulfillment

The Gospels and other books of the New Testament canon record and interpret the inauguration of the new and everlasting covenant in the blood of Jesus Christ. The Temple of God with humanity is identified as Christ and his body, the church. The revelatory Word comes as God's abiding Presence in the midst of his people, his dwelling among his sons and daughters, the Spirit-Temple of God. The Glory-theophany is thoroughly Trinitarian; the kingdom of saints is the beneficiary of God's gracious salvation, accomplished and applied over the course of redemptive history by the Father, the Son, and the Spirit (Colossians 1:13–20; 2:9–15; Ephesians 2:19–22; 2 Corinthians 3:17–18; and 1 Corinthians 15:47–49). The book of Revelation, the capstone of inscripturated revelation, details in apocalyptic imagery developments to take place in the latter days, the period extending from the first to the second advents of Christ. The revelation given to John begins with his rapture into heaven, the Glory-Presence of God (Revelation 1:10).

Glory-theophany makes several appearances in New Testament times (for example, at the time of the birth of Christ, at his baptism and

temptation, at the Transfiguration, at Pentecost, and at Saul's conversion and subsequent "third-heaven" experience). The future prospect of every believer is that he will likewise see God "face to face," by way of the Glory-Presence. Heaven will come to earth, and the eternal Temple-Kingdom will be consummated in all its reflective Glory, which is the Glory of the Lord God himself. The sons of God, God's image-bearers, will be transformed and glorified, fit for eternity. Oh, what a Day that will be!

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much of the church today is slipping into the morass of complacency, formalism, and compromise. In many cases the churches have a form of godliness but deny the power thereof. One of the greatest spiritual plagues afflicting the church is the theory of evolution. Ironically, this erroneous concept was originally conceived and presented to the world, not from a generally paganistic background, but from the Bible-influenced British Isles. As a consequence, Europe and North America, once strongly Reformation-influenced, are now a mere shadow of their former selves.

Darwinian concepts are influencing new legislation promoting what the Bible so vividly describes as “calling evil good and good evil, woe unto them!” (Isaiah 5:20). The devastating family- and nation-destroying evils of abortion, homosexuality, and euthanasia are now almost universally protected by law. Never before has civilized humanity enacted and enforced so many godless laws.

Curricula based on evolution have had a devastating effect on all public education, to the point that this false view is now being taught to the exclusion of almost anything contrary. As a consequence, evolution has completely dominated all secular thinking, leaving no room for debate.

Horace Mann, a Massachusetts lawyer and state legislator, often considered to be the father of public education, stated in his Report On Education for 1845: “It becomes then a momentous question, whether the children in our schools are educated in reference to themselves and their private interests only, or with a regard to the great social duties and prerogatives that await them in later life. Are they so educated, that,

when they grow up, they will make better philanthropists and Christians, or only grander savages?”

The theory of evolution is by no means innocent. It has caused many a child of the covenant to waver and others to fall away completely. The devil is very subtle! Darwin’s theory of evolution seems rather impressive, often almost plausible. His English phraseology is quite magnificent; at times he appears to be almost apologetic. At one point he confesses that: “To suppose that the eye with all its inimitable contrivances for adjusting the focus to different distances, for admitting different amounts of light, and for the correction of spherical and chromatic aberration, could have been formed by natural selection seems, I freely confess, absurd in the highest degree.” And yet, he vigorously maintained and defended the folly of evolution throughout his life, to the very end.

The nineteenth and twentieth centuries saw the development of very serious social consequences directly related to the rapidly spreading evolutionary mindset of new leaders of both Communism and Nazism. Both Karl Marx and Lenin were supporters of Darwin and his evolutionary theories. Marx went so far as to send a copy of his book *Das Kapital* to Darwin. Karl Marx’s work was based on a material view of the world that showed natural causes and effects for all aspects of human society and economy. He recognized that Darwin’s work provided a similar explanation for all of nature (natural selection), thus supporting Marx’s world view. Marx, Lenin, and Engels were the primary and original developers of what later became the Russian form of Communism, which was ultimately brought to full fruition

by Joseph Stalin. This terrible dictator seems never to have had a moment of regret concerning the millions of people who died a most cruel death under his dictatorship. It has been estimated that by 1959 some twenty million of the Soviet population had been murdered outright.

In his *Descent of Man*, Darwin warns that measures must be taken, “to prevent the reckless, the vicious and otherwise inferior members of society



from increasing at a quicker rate than the better class of men.” Both Stalin and Hitler took this to heart and indeed made it their creed to live and govern by. Less than a century after Darwin’s demise, Hitler described the struggle for existence in Darwin’s terms in his chapter on “Nation and Race” in his book *Mein Kampf*: “The stronger must dominate and not blend with the weaker, thus sacrificing his own greatness; only the born weakling can view this as cruel, but he after all is only a weak and limited man; for if this law did not prevail, any conceivable higher evolution of organic living beings would be unthinkable.”

Darwinism considers humanity to be but one small step above their

pet dog, rabbit or goldfish. Even in this country, early on, this scourge infected the mindset of a number of responsible individuals. Mandatory sterilization in the spirit of Darwin’s theories was at one time approved by the Supreme Court. Concerning the Virginia compulsory sterilization law focusing on “feeble minded” women, Supreme Court Associate Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes in 1927 wrote his infamous line: “Three generations of imbeciles are enough.”

Margaret Sanger was a eugenicist who wanted to eliminate the races in this country that she believed to be inferior. At a March 1925 international birth control gathering in New York, Dr. S. Adolphus Knopf warned of the menace posed by the ‘black’ and ‘yellow’ peril. Knopf was a member of Margaret Sanger’s American Birth Control League, which along with other groups eventually became known as Planned Parenthood, now a powerful pro-abortion organization. Margaret Sanger’s crusade for legalized birth control eventually spurred the Women’s Liberation movement.

To date at least forty-six million pre-born children have been murdered in this country, either by abortion or infanticide—partial birth abortion! This number probably already surpasses the number of murders committed by Stalin and Hitler combined.

It is horrendous how far humanity is able to sink apart from the grace of God. When the things done as medical experimentation in the German concentration camps during the Hitler regime came to light at the 1949 Nuremberg trials, the world stood absolutely aghast! Now, a little over sixty years later, these very same things are taking place in one form or another on a daily basis. Not only are they taking place, they are protected by law without causing as much as a stir.

The worst of these scourges, at least to date, is the terribly inhuman and

heinous sin of partial birth abortion. This murder process requires the attending killer in a white coat to turn the baby within the birth canal so that he is born feet first, in the hope that the child will smother before being entirely ejected. While the baby is yet feebly kicking in a desperate attempt to cling to life, the murderer extracts the child just far enough so that the base of the skull is exposed; he then proceeds vigorously to penetrate the skull at its base with a sharp instrument such as a scissors and subsequently suctions out all brain matter so that the skull collapses. By doing this, in the eyes of secular law, he prevents the baby’s transition from a so called “fetus” to a “child.” The baby is then considered stillborn.

The evolutionistic view of humanity also reveals itself in its attitude toward the elderly. In a number of countries that have adopted socialized medicine, those elderly who are considered to have become an excessive expense and burden on society are routinely starved and dehydrated to death. If this is too slow, an overdose injection is administered. In the small principality of Luxembourg, until recently, no law could go into effect without the formal consent of ceremonial ruler Grand Duke Henri. When he refused to give his blessing to a new law allowing euthanasia, he was stripped of this veto power.

Currently the animal rights movement is attempting to raise the rights of animals to the level of human rights. Many proponents of animal rights hold that if animals and humans have the same nature, then we cannot withhold protective rights from animals. Spain recently enacted a law providing apes equal rights with humans. If you shoot a chimp, you will stand trial for murder. Switzerland’s Supreme Court is considering similar laws.

This God-defying evolutionistic thought has infected a considerable number of formerly strong, Bible-based Reformed churches to one degree or another. As a consequence, our Christian institutions of higher learning have suffered as well. In many once-solid churches and schools some aspects of Darwinism are tolerated, at times incorporated into the teaching of certain tenets of the God-revealed truth of the Scriptures, and in some cases adopted outright. Often, those in opposition are too kind in their condemnation of this evil to take a strong and positive stand against evolution.

Over the years theologians, preachers, and teachers have compromised themselves in one way or another and introduced various erroneous concepts. A primary stumbling block is the confession of six literal, twenty-four-hour creation days. The following views stand out most vividly:

Co-Creation: allows for long periods of time, incorporating the evolutionary process. It claims that God, at times, used natural processes of selection to bring everything into being.

Framework Hypothesis: asserts that the biblical account of creation in Genesis 1 is not to be taken literally. Instead, proponents say that it should be viewed as being poetic, thereby allowing for a more liberal interpretation of God's creation work.

Theistic Evolution: directly incorporates evolution into the creation as the tool used by God.

Gap Creationism: posits that the biblical creation account is historically accurate, but that there was a gap of time between two distinct creations in the first and second verses of Genesis.

The common thread in all of these views is that they are innovations put forth by those who have been influenced by the modern intelligentsia

advocating secular Darwinism; consequently they seem to have a problem accepting the biblical record of how God created the universe. Many advocates of these concepts will say that these views should not be troublesome because they do not directly affect our Christianity, nor are they salvation issues.

However, if we have a problem with what God tells us in the first few verses of the Bible, can we not expect to run into the same problem elsewhere? Since the problem seems primarily to involve periods of time, if we will not accept instantaneous creation out of nothing, then how can we accept any of the instantaneous actions of God? How can we accept the miracles described elsewhere in the Scriptures? What about the events described in Joshua 10:12, when the sun stood still, or in Isaiah 28:8, where the sun actually turned back ten steps or degrees? Considering that the earth's rotation is at a rate of a little over one thousand miles per hour at the equator, imagine what would happen to us and everything else on this earth if it came to a sudden stop! Without God's direct intervention this could never have happened; none of us would be here today! What of the parting of the Red Sea? Christ's return will be in the twinkling of an eye, and we will all be changed. What of our Lord's miracles: the instant healings, raising the dead, walking on water, and calming the storm?

These concepts derived from evolutionary thought, applied to the scriptural account of creation and God's control thereof could never have been *conceived, originated, or developed* within the seriously God glorifying, Christ-honoring Christian mindset. Sadly, they are compromises consisting of derivatives of Darwinism. Any compromise must be considered to be a feeble attempt to make the church of Jesus Christ appear palatable to the world, thereby limiting the absolute omnipotence

and holiness of almighty God. To say that this thinking does not affect our salvation is mere folly!

Dr. Frank Turek of Crossexamined.org makes the following claims concerning most modern institutions of higher learning: "Seventy to seventy-five percent of Christian youth leave the church after high school. Intellectual skepticism is the reason they walk away. Most Christian students are unequipped to resist rabidly anti-Christian college professors who are intent on converting their students to atheism. More than half of all college professors view evangelical Christian students unfavorably."

Churches today must reevaluate their position; they must regain their spiritual strength; they must be pure and reassert themselves, to be the light of the world as they were intended to be! Simply stated, we *must* believe and be convinced that the Bible is the *absolutely* infallible Word of almighty God. Not one iota will fall away until all that is written has been accomplished. We must believe and vigorously defend the fact that all of Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting, and training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work.

We must acknowledge that every sphere of life, secular as well as spiritual, is under the constant scrutiny, indeed the absolute control of God, and that at the last trumpet *every* knee shall bow before the Lord. The church's calling therefore is to call *all* of mankind to repentance.

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Bavinck the Dogmatician: The Doctrine of the Covenant (part 1)

Dr. Cornelis P.
Venema

In Bavinck's view of God's counsel or decree, the doctrine of election deals with God's eternal purpose to save his people in Christ. In his purpose of election, God intends nothing less than the redemption of a new humanity within the context of his comprehensive work of re-creation. In Bavinck's treatment of the doctrine of the covenant in distinction from that of election, he focuses upon the manner in which God accomplishes his purposes for human beings in the course of history before and especially after the fall into sin.

Bavinck treats the doctrine of the covenant primarily in two places in his dogmatics. The first occasion for a consideration of the covenant between the triune God and human beings follows Bavinck's consideration of the creation of man in God's image. The covenant is not to be regarded merely as a post-fall means whereby God restores fallen sinners to fellowship with himself. Rather, the covenant is the divinely appointed instrument whereby from creation onward the triune God chooses to enjoy communion with his image-bearers. The second occasion, which provides a considerably more lengthy treatment of the doctrine of the covenant of grace, is Bavinck's introduction to the doctrine of the person and work of Christ.

As was true of our summary of Bavinck's handling of the doctrine of election, our summary of his doctrine of the covenant will only identify the most important features of Bavinck's view. Once we have a clear sense of Bavinck's respective doctrines of election and covenant, we will take up the critical issue of their interrelation.

The Covenant with Adam ("Covenant of Works")

Bavinck introduces his discussion of the covenant before the fall into sin between the triune God and all of humanity in Adam by noting that, in the original state of integrity, Adam did not possess the image of God in isolation from the organic unity of the human race. Nor did Adam possess immediately the image of God in the fullest sense. In the scriptural conception of humanity, a clear distinction is evident between Adam and Christ, the second or last Adam. Even in the state of his original integrity, the first Adam did not yet possess the fullness of life that is only secured through Christ in the final state of glory. "As such, Adam, by comparison to Christ, stood on a lower level. Adam was the first; Christ the second and the last. Christ presupposes Adam and succeeds him. Adam is the lesser and inferior entity; Christ the great and higher being. Hence, Adam pointed to Christ; already before the fall he

was the type of Christ. In Adam's creation Christ was already in view" (RD 2:564). This relationship between the first Adam and Christ, the last Adam, is of special importance to a proper understanding of the original covenantal relationship between God and humanity. Only through the work of Christ, the second Adam, does the fullness of God's dwelling and communion with humanity—first given in the original covenant relationship between God and man before the fall—find its eschatological realization and fulfillment.

In his introductory comments on the pre-fall covenant relationship, Bavinck observes that the doctrine of the pre-fall covenant is based upon several scriptural and theological themes that have deep roots in the history of Christian theology.

In the scriptural representation of Adam's relationship with God before the fall, it is apparent that Adam's condition was "provisional and temporary and could not remain as it was. It either had to pass on to higher glory or to sin and death" (RD 2:564). When Adam was placed by God under a probationary command of obedience (Gen. 2:16–17), he was threatened with death in the event of his transgression, and he was simultaneously promised a reward of life in the event of his obedience to this command. The reward of eternal life that was set before Adam is consistently regarded throughout the Scriptures as the goal and outcome of the original covenant and as well the covenant of grace (cf. Rom. 6:23; Rev. 2:7).

(Author's note: *In this and subsequent articles on Herman Bavinck's Reformed Dogmatics, I will address Bavinck's view of the covenant, including its relation to the doctrine of election. Though I am skipping over for now the section on the doctrine of creation, including the creation of man in God's image, I will return to this topic at a later point, D.V. Due to the continued diversity of opinion among Reformed believers on election and covenant, I believe this part of Bavinck's dogmatics is of special importance.* CPV)

Even though the express language of “covenant” is not used in the Genesis account of Adam’s relationship with his triune Creator, Bavinck notes that it may be termed a covenant in Hosea 6:7, and it is certainly the case that the apostle Paul draws a clear parallel between Adam and Christ in Romans 5:12–21. Just as the disobedience of the first Adam brings condemnation and death to the whole human race whom he represented as covenant head, so the obedience of Christ brings justification and life to those whom he represented as covenant head in the covenant of grace. In the history of Reformed theology, the formulation of the relationship between God and Adam in terms of the idea of covenant was largely based upon theological reflection that sought to do justice to this parallel between Adam and Christ. Though Christian theology did not always recognize the implications of this parallel for the formulation of the original relationship between God and Adam as a covenant relationship, it was always implicit in the long-standing tradition since Augustine of distinguishing Adam’s state before the fall and the believer’s state in Christ after the fall. The Augustinian distinction between Adam’s ability not to sin (*posse non peccare*) and not to die (*posse non mori*) before the fall, and the inability to sin and die (*non posse peccare et mori*) that is graciously granted to the elect in Christ, requires the formulation of a pre- and post-fall covenant (RD 2:566–7).

In the history of Reformed theology, the pre-fall covenant between God and humanity in Adam has been variously designated. Sometimes it is termed a “covenant of nature,” since this covenant required obedience to the moral law of God that man knew by nature and was able to obey by virtue of the created gifts and integrity with

which he was originally endowed. However, it is most commonly designated a “covenant of works,” since the eternal life promised in the covenant was only able to be obtained “in the way of works, that is, in the way of keeping God’s commandments” (RD 2:567). Bavinck admits that the terminology of a pre-fall “covenant of works” is not employed in the Reformed confessions as it is in the Westminster Standards. However, the absence of this terminology does not alter the fact that all of the elements or components of the doctrine are present “materially” in Articles 14 and 15 of the Belgic Confession, in Lord’s Days 3 and 4 of the Heidelberg Catechism, and in Head of Doctrine III/IV of the Canons of Dort. In these confessional articles, clear testimony is provided of the original state of humanity in Adam, the obligation of perfect obedience to the law of God, the promise of life upon condition of such obedience, and the consequence of Adam’s sin and fall for the whole human race. Because Adam transgressed the covenant, he forfeited for himself and all his posterity any possibility of eternal life in unbreakable communion with God. Now the only way to obtain such life is through faith in Christ, the last Adam, who alone is able to grant the fullness of glorified life to those who belong to him. In Bavinck’s estimation, the fact that the Scriptures do not explicitly term the pre-fall state as a “covenant” relationship should not deter Reformed theologians from employing this term. In the Scriptures, it is common to speak of “covenant” as the “fixed form in which the relation of God to his people is depicted and presented” (RD 2:560). Therefore, however much the word may be in dispute, it ought to be acknowledged that the “matter is certain” (*de vocabulo dubitetur, re salva*).

After his introductory comments on the propriety of viewing the original pre-fall relationship between God

and man as a covenant, Bavinck offers several significant arguments for regarding all of the triune God’s dealings with his image-bearers as covenantal in nature. The doctrine of a pre-fall covenant of works expresses a truth that is basic to the whole teaching of Scripture, namely, that “[a]mong rational and moral creatures all higher life takes the form of a covenant” (RD 2:568). Whether in marriage, family, business, science or art, human social relationships and interaction invariably take the form of covenants in which there is mutual obligation and inter-communion. This is no less true of the highest and all-embracing relationship that obtains between God as Creator and man as his creature and image-bearer. Indeed, there is no possible way whereby human beings could enjoy blessedness in fellowship with God other than by way of a covenant relationship.

In the first place, the “infinite distance” that obtains between God as Creator and man as creature confirms that there is no possibility of communion with God without covenant. In order for God to commune with his image-bearer, not only as a “master” to “servant” but also as “Father” to “son,” he must “come down from his lofty position, condescend to his creatures, impart, reveal, and give himself away to human beings” (RD 2:569).

In the second place, the idea of covenant always implies a relationship of mutual obligation and commitment. As a mere creature, however, man does not possess of himself any “rights” before God. The creature may never place the Creator in his debt or under obligation, unless God first freely and graciously grants him rights within the context of a covenant relationship. “There is no such thing,” Bavinck argues, “as merit in the existence of a creature before God, nor can there be since

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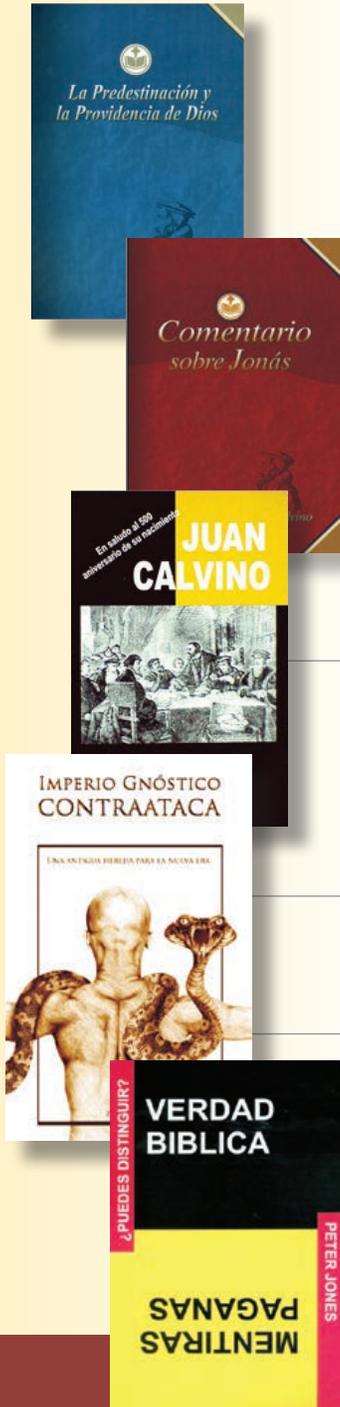
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Herman Bavinck illustration by Erik G. Lubbers

the relation between the Creator and the creature radically and once-for-all eliminates any notion of merit. This is true after the fall but no less before the fall” (RD 2:570).¹ In the pre-fall covenant as well as the covenant of grace after the fall, God grants, by virtue of his condescending goodness and unmerited favor, rights and privileges that would otherwise be beyond man’s reach.

And in the third place, Bavinck argues that the idea of covenant corresponds to the nature of man as a moral and rational creature, whom God treats and with whom he interacts in a way that respects the unique capacity of his image-bearer to respond to God in the way of free and heartfelt obedience (RD 2:570–1). In all of his dealings with his image-bearers, God never treats human beings as he would an irrational or inanimate object. The beauty of the covenant is that it provides a framework within which a fully personal and responsible engagement may transpire between God and human beings, which is similar to the engagement of a husband and wife, or of a parent and child.

Bavinck argues, in the concluding section of his consideration of the pre-fall covenant, that Reformed theology alone has adequately captured the biblical understanding of this covenant. In historic Roman Catholic theology, the doctrine of man’s state before the fall included the idea that God as Creator added to man’s natural state the “free gift” (*donum superadditum*) of original righteousness and the promise of eternal life. Though this idea bears some formal resemblance to the Reformed understanding of the covenant of works and rightly acknowledges that eternal life remains an “unmerited gift of God’s grace,” it differs from the Reformed view by its radical distinction between nature and grace and particularly by its reintroduction of the idea of “condign merit” in the context of man’s free cooperation with God (RD 2:571–2). In the Reformed conception of the pre-fall covenant, greater recognition is given to God’s sovereign initiative in the “unilateral” origin of the covenant relationship and in his gracious promise of eternal

life. In the Reformed view, man as creature remains wholly dependent upon his Creator and finds a greater blessedness of glorious communion with God only in the way of obedience to the moral law of God.

Moreover, unlike the traditional view of Lutheran theology, namely, that Adam possessed in his original state of integrity the “highest possible blessing,” the Reformed view never exaggerated the original state of Adam. In the Reformed conception, which alone does justice to the emphasis upon covenant as the means of communion and blessing for man in relationship to God, salvation in Christ brings more than the restoration through the forgiveness of sins of fallen man to his original state (RD 2:572). Rather, through the work of the last Adam, all who belong to him by faith and participate in the blessings of his saving work are granted the fullness of glory in the immutable state that is eternal life. Only in the Reformed conception do we find a proper understanding of the parallel between the first Adam and Christ.

Christ does not [merely] restore his own to the state of Adam before the fall. He acquired and bestows much more, namely, that which Adam would have received had he not fallen. He positions us not at the beginning but at the end of the journey that Adam had to complete. He accomplished not only the passive but also the active obedience required; he not only delivers us from guilt and punishment, but out of grace immediately grants us the right to eternal life. (RD 2:573)

An interesting feature of Bavinck’s treatment of the doctrine of the pre-fall covenant is an emphasis that we previously observed in his consideration of the doctrine of election. Just as God’s purpose of election terminates not upon an aggregate of individuals but upon the

whole organism of a new humanity in Christ, so God's intention in the covenant is to bring the whole of humanity to its appointed destiny in unbroken and glorious communion with himself. The image of God, which Adam possessed but in a less-than-perfect or consummate form, is only fully expressed in the whole human race in its organic unity. Adam was not created alone or as an isolated individual, but he was created and ordained by God to be the covenant representative of the whole human race. God's journey with mankind begins with Adam, but this beginning is not to be confused with God's intended goal, which was that his image would be perfectly expressed only in his "fully finished image." "Only humanity in its entirety—as one complete organism, summed up under a single head, spread out over the whole earth, as prophet proclaiming the truth of God, as priest dedicating itself to God, as ruler controlling the earth and the whole of creation—only it is the fully finished image, the most telling and striking likeness of God" (RD 2:577).

The whole of humanity was by God's ordinance united both juridically and ethically in the first Adam. Therefore, by virtue of Adam's sin and fall, the entire human race has come under the judicial sentence of condemnation and death, and all of Adam's posterity has inherited a sinfully corrupted human nature. This also provides an explanation for the unity of God's covenant with humanity, whether before the fall in the first Adam or after the fall in the last Adam. Christ, who is the one Mediator of the covenant of grace, is the "antitype" of the first Adam. By virtue of Christ's mediatorial work of perfect obedience to the Father and substitutionary endurance of the penalty of violating the law of God, all those who belong

to Christ by faith constitute the new humanity in which God's original and abiding purpose is realized. In Christ believers are restored to union and communion with God, and upon the basis of his entire and perfect obedience are entitled to eternal life in consummate blessedness. Thus, Bavinck concludes that "[t]he covenant of works and the covenant of grace stand and fall together. The same law applies to both" (RD 2:579). In the overarching purpose of God, Christ is the appointed Mediator who redresses all of the consequences of Adam's sin and transgression, and procures for believers the fullness of their covenant inheritance, which is life in unbreakable and perfected communion with the living God.

The Covenant of Grace

The way Bavinck concludes his treatment of the pre-fall covenant between God and all humanity in Adam provides a natural link with his subsequent treatment of the covenant of grace in the context of an extended consideration of the person and work of Christ as Mediator in the third volume of his *Reformed Dogmatics*. Rather than viewing the work of Christ merely as a remedy in the post-fall situation for the consequences of Adam's sin, Bavinck views the work of Christ as the realization of God's original intention for covenant communion with his image-bearers. Through Christ, the last Adam and the only Mediator of the covenant of grace, fallen human beings are restored to covenant fellowship with God and obtain the consummate blessing of indefectible life in the community of Christ's body, the church. By means of the salvation of the elect in union with Christ, all of the great and encompassing purposes of God in creation and in redemption reach their fulfillment and goal. Before we turn to Bavinck's particular handling of the relation between God's purpose of election

and the covenant he establishes with his people in Christ, therefore, we need to consider at this point the principal elements of Bavinck's conception of the covenant of grace.

As the language of "covenant of grace" clearly indicates, the first principal feature of this covenant in its historical manifestation is that it reveals God's favor and disposition to enter into renewed communion with undeserving and fallen sinners. Through the sin and disobedience of Adam under the pre-fall covenant of works, all of his posterity has been plunged into ruin and despair. There is no way back to communion with God by the covenant of works. However, God in his undeserved grace takes the initiative, immediately after the fall into sin, to restore his fallen image-bearers to union and communion with himself. In this the uniqueness of the Christian religion is exhibited over against all forms of paganism. Rather than the fallen creature working to enter into communion with God, the great emphasis of biblical teaching rests upon the initiatives of God's grace in coming to his fallen creatures to redeem them from the consequences of their sin and misery. "[I]n Scripture the grace of God comes out to meet us in all its riches and glory. Special revelation again makes God known to us as a Being who stands, free and omnipotent, above nature and has a character and will of his own" (RD 3:197). Because Adam transgressed the law of God and forfeited for himself and his posterity any right under the original covenant to obtain the inheritance of life in communion with God, the grace of God after the fall always comes to expression in the form of a *new* and *gracious* covenant that "arises, not by a natural process, but by a historical act and hence gives rise to a rich history of grace" (RD 3:197).

Following a long-standing tradition in Reformed theology, Bavinck appeals to the account of God's dealings with Adam after the fall in Genesis

3, especially verse 15, as the first and embryonic revelation of the covenant of grace in history. Indeed, though the terminology of covenant is not found in this passage, it contains in seed-form something of a foreshadowing of the entire history of the covenant of grace and its ultimate realization in Christ, the true “seed of the woman,” who would finally crush all opposition to and enmity against God. When God comes to Adam after the fall, he pronounces his curse, to be sure, but he does so in the context of a promise of blessing that triumphs over human sin. Through the fall into sin, Adam and Eve, in a manner of speaking, “covenanted” with Satan, the arch-enemy of God. Through the “mother promise” of Genesis 3:15, however, God declares that he will break the bond of fellowship between Satan and the seed of the woman, his people, and join this people to himself in an irrevocable communion of life and blessing. In doing so, “God graciously annuls it [the covenant between Adam and the power of evil], puts enmity between the seed of the serpent and the woman’s seed, brings the seed of the woman—humanity, that is—back to his side, hence declaring that from Eve will spring a human race and that that race, though it will have to suffer much in the conflict with that evil power, will eventually triumph” (RD 3:199). In the promise made to Adam, God assures him of the continued propagation, development and salvation of the human race. When Adam embraces this promise with childlike faith, God reckons his faith to him as righteousness. And so begins the course of redemptive history, which is the history of God’s work of salvation in Christ and by means of the covenant of grace.

Though it is not germane to our purpose to provide a complete account of Bavinck’s tracing of the covenant of grace throughout history, it is significant that Bavinck, also following the tradition of earlier

Reformed covenant theology, gives special attention to the meaning of the language of “covenant” in the Scriptures. Contrary to the trajectory of critical biblical scholarship in his day, which often argued that the theme of covenant emerges for the first time late in the history of Israel, Bavinck maintains that the idea of the covenant emerges at the inception of God’s work of redemption. Upon the basis of a careful analysis of the usage of the Old Testament term for “covenant” (*berith*), Bavinck concludes that, when it refers to God’s covenanting with his people, it contains three principal features: “an oath or promise that includes the stipulations agreed upon, a curse that invokes divine punishment upon the violator of the covenant, and a cultic ceremony that represents the curse symbolically” (RD 3:203). When God enters into covenant with his people, he establishes a relationship of fellowship with himself that, by virtue of the accompanying oath of self-malediction, places his people “under the protection of God and so achieves a kind of indissolubility” (RD 3:203).

To the question whether the covenant relationship is a kind of mutual “agreement” between parties (bilateral) or a sovereign disposition or grant (unilateral), Bavinck answers that it depends upon how we view the nature of the covenant parties. Since the covenant of grace is initiated and sovereignly established by God, it must be regarded as entirely unilateral in its origin and administration. God graciously bestows his covenant blessing upon his people, imposes simultaneously the obligations of the covenant, and upholds the covenant in faithfulness in spite of the faltering and unfaithfulness of his people.

In this firmness and steadiness of the covenant of grace lies the glory of the religion we as Christians confess . . .

If religion is to be a true fellowship between God and humanity, fellowship in which not only God but also the human partner preserves his or her independence as a rational and moral being and along with his or her duties also receives rights, this can come into being by God’s coming down to humans and entering into a covenant with them. In this action God obligates himself with an oath to grant the human partner eternal salvation despite his apostasy and unfaithfulness, but by the same token, the human partner on his or her part is admonished and obligated to a new obedience, yet in such a way that ‘if we sometimes through weakness fall into sins we must not despair of God’s mercy, nor continue in sin,’ since we have an everlasting covenant of grace with God. (RD 3:204–5)

Because the covenant of grace is unilateral in origin and ultimately rendered effective unto salvation by virtue of God’s abiding faithfulness, the most common rendering of the Hebrew term in the Septuagint is *diatheke* (“disposition”) and not *suntheke* (“agreement”) (RD 3:205). This linguistic convention confirms that the covenant is ultimately a sovereign bestowal of God whose faithfulness ensures the inviolability of the covenant relationship and guarantees that its promises will be realized in spite of the frequent infidelity of God’s people. In this connection, Bavinck also observes that, though the language of the covenant is only infrequently rendered by the term, “testament,” which suggests the guarantee of the reception of an inheritance upon the death of the testator, the biblical understanding of the covenant of grace includes the idea of a “testamentary disposition.” In the sovereign working of God, Israel’s unfaithfulness did not prevent the God of the covenant from gathering



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in her place “the spiritual Israel, which according to God’s election was gathered from all peoples, receives the goods of salvation from the Son as by a testamentary disposition, stands in a child-Father relation to God, and expects salvation from heaven as an inheritance” (RD 3:206).

Summary

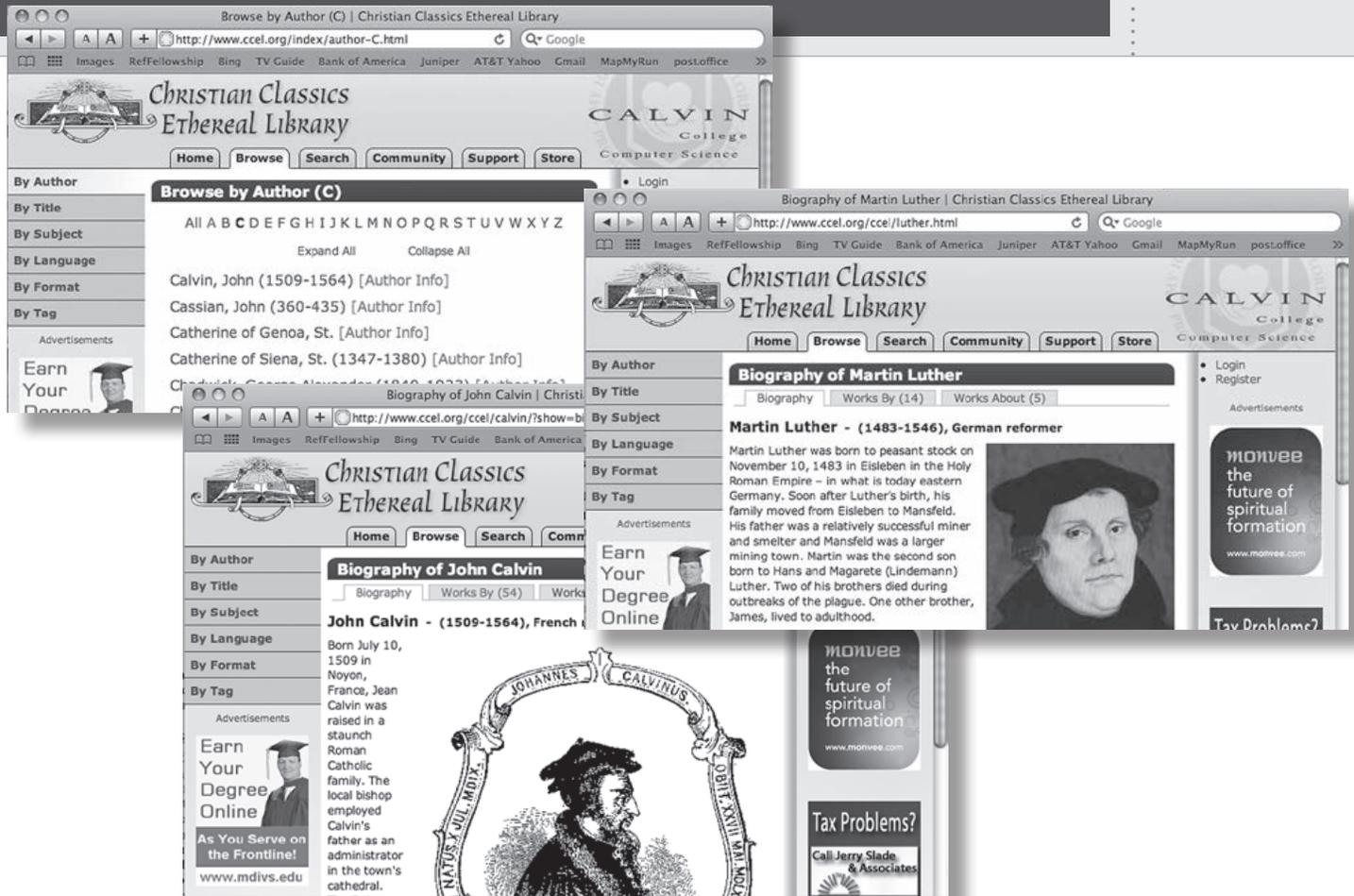
In Bavinck’s understanding of the teaching of Scripture, the doctrine of the covenant is of central and abiding importance. From the beginning to the culmination of God’s dealings with human beings, communion and fellowship between the triune God and his people has always been mediated by way of covenant. In the pre-fall relationship between God and the human race in Adam, the covenant head and representative of all his posterity, God sovereignly (without any human deserving) placed Adam in a relationship of union and communion with himself. In doing so, God treated Adam, whom he created as a moral and rational (and, therefore, responsible) creature, not merely as a servant but also as a son. In the administration of this covenant relationship, God required from Adam perfect conformity to his moral law, promised him eternal life in unbroken communion with himself upon such obedience, and threatened him with (spiritual and physical) death in the event of his disobedience. In the original covenant relationship between God and Adam,

we already see that God’s intention for the human race was to be realized only in the way of a covenant of friendship and communion between himself and his people. Though the pre-fall covenant was only a beginning and not the perfection of this covenant fellowship, it already prefigured the fullness of human life in unbroken, eternal life communion with God.

In Bavinck’s understanding of the pre-fall covenant, Adam was only a “type” of Christ, the last Adam, in whom God’s intention for fellowship between himself and his people would ultimately be realized. After the fall into sin, all of Adam’s posterity were subjected to God’s just condemnation and spiritual death. Only through the work of Christ, the Mediator of the covenant of grace, is it now possible for any of the sons and daughters of Adam to be restored to covenant favor and fellowship with God, and to be the rightful recipients of the covenant inheritance of eternal life. Christ, the last Adam, is the One through whom a new humanity will be restored and perfected in fellowship with God. Despite the sinfulness and unworthiness of his people, the triune God has graciously condescended in Christ to obtain the perfection of glorified life for his people in the covenant. Through his perfect and entire obedience, both to the positive precepts and the negative sanctions of the law, Christ has secured for those who are joined to him by faith the blessings of acceptance into favor with God and the sure promise of unbroken fellowship with him. In this way, the covenant of grace is the means whereby the triune God intends to realize his purpose for the renewed organism of the human race.

1. Bavinck rejects the idea of “merit” in the relationship between the creature and the Creator, particularly the traditional Roman Catholic distinction between two kinds of merit, “condign” and “congruent” (meritum de condigno, meritum de congruo). In Roman Catholic teaching, “condign” merit is true or full merit and is based upon the good work of the Holy Spirit in the individual believer; “congruent” merit is a half-merit or human work that does not truly merit God’s grace, but receives its reward on the basis of God’s generosity. See Richard Muller, *Dictionary of Latin and Greek Theological Terms* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1985), pp. 190–2. Bavinck does not deny, however, that, whether we use the term “merit” in this context or not, the creature does have a right to the promised inheritance by virtue of the conferral of this right through the divinely initiated covenant relationship. Though Bavinck shies away from using the terminology of “merit” in the pre-fall covenant relationship, his position is consistent with earlier writers of the Reformed tradition who spoke qualifiedly of a kind of “covenant merit” (meritum ex pacto). Bavinck does not hesitate to employ the language of “merit,” however, to describe the obedience of Christ as the last Adam, who fulfills all of the obligations of the law on behalf of his people and thereby justly procures their covenant inheritance. For a summary of the traditional Reformed view that Bavinck affirms, see Francis Turretin, *Elenctic Theology* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian & Reformed, 1992), 1:569–86, esp. 2:712–24. Turretin allows that we may speak broadly and improperly of “merit” in the relationship between Adam and God, if we mean only to say that, by virtue of the covenant relationship, Adam’s obedience would justly secure his inheritance of eternal life.

Dr. Cornelis Venema is the President of Mid-America Reformed Seminary in Dyer, Indiana. He is also a contributing editor to *The Outlook*.



I am about to tell you something that might make some Christian publishing houses a little angry with me. But, that is just a risk I am going to have to take in writing this column. So here goes.

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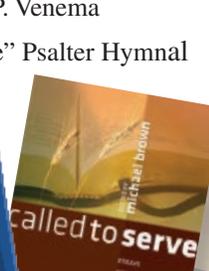
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