The Outlook

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Volume 60 | Issue 5

Dedicated to the Exposition and Defense of the Reformed Faith

The Wrath of the Lamb	Christian Unity (5)	The Exclusive Goal
Bible Studies on Abraham (4)	Psalm Singing in Calvin and the Puritans (2)
Review of the URCNA Synod 2010	Review of the Heritage Reformed Synod
The Reformation in Italy	A Site to Behold

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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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Editor, Rev. Wybren Oord
c/o Trinity Reformed Church
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Lethbridge, Alberta T1H 6B7
Email: editor@reformedfellowship.net
Website: www.reformedfellowship.net

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Editorial Office
c/o Trinity Reformed Church
1100 40th Ave. N.
Lethbridge, Alberta T1H 6B7
Email: editor@reformedfellowship.net
Circulation Office
3363 Hickory Ridge Ct. SW
Wyoming, MI 49418-8301
(877) 532-8510 Phone Toll-free in US and Canada
Business Mailing Address
3363 Hickory Ridge Ct. SW
Wyoming, MI 49418-8301
Email: office@reformedfellowship.net

The Wrath of the Lamb
Meditation

Rev. Wybren H. Oord

They called to the mountains and the rocks, "Fall on us and hide us from the face of Him who sits on the throne, and from the wrath of the Lamb! For the great day of their wrath has come, and who can stand?" Revelation 6:16,17

It is not a pretty picture that these two verses paint for us. God is a God of truth, and He reveals things as they are and as they will be. Cheap and worldly optimists cry out words of peace when there is no peace. They will paint a rosy picture of human nature and how the human race is constantly getting better, even though God says it will end with destruction. False leaders may deceive, but God says, "This is the future." He unveils it for us so that we might be prepared and that our souls might be delivered out of the tribulation.

A Strange Picture

The picture we have before us in Revelation 6 is of the opening of six of the seven seals that were upon the scroll. Only the Lamb was able to open the scroll. The opening of the seals ends with people shouting for the mountains and the rocks to hide them from Him who sits upon the throne and from the wrath of the Lamb.

We usually associate lambs with meekness and humility. They are tender and mild little creatures. Other animals are associated with wrath and considered ferocious. We would think the Lion from the tribe of Judah would be a more fitting image to depict the Christ at this point. Lions are fierce. No one would care to meet a lion unless he was armed with a weapon. One would not, however, take a weapon to protect himself against a lamb.

While we may tend to downplay the wrath of the Lamb of God, the Bible does not let us forget it. Revelation makes clear that, although Christ defers punishment, there comes a time when His patience is exhausted. He waits long—but at last His righteous anger is aroused, and He breaks forth in all the fury of His wrath. The Bible is clear that when the measure of Man's iniquity is full, we shall be ripe for judgment. Sin will have run its course.

The enemies of God have attempted their worst. They have united their forces against Him and against His people. Suddenly, like a thief in the night, His anger will break forth like lightning. His indignation will burn like fire. The great day of His vengeance will come. The day of judgment will be upon all those who have stubbornly refused to bow their knees before Christ or confess His lordship over their lives.

So great will be the wrath of the Lamb that men will cry out for the mountains to fall upon them and the rocks to cover them. Those who fall under the wrath of the Lamb would rather be annihilated—destroyed completely—than face the wrath of God and the Lamb. Their cries, however, will be fruitless. They will face Him who sits upon the throne. They will acknowledge the Lamb that was slain.

A Stark Contrast

What a switch! Contrast the wrath of the Lamb in that day of judgment over against the meekness of the Lamb upon the cross. At Calvary, Jesus Christ the Lamb offered no resistance. He was abused but made no complaint. He bore it all in patience and majestic silence.

Jesus, the sacrificial Lamb, could have stepped down from the cross at any time. He could have consumed His enemies with a single word. The same angels who sing praise to Him who is worthy in Revelation 5 were at His beck and call ready to come to His aid should He have desired them to do so. In spite of all the torment and anguish, Jesus stayed on the cross and died.

The enemy certainly seemed triumphant then! It was his hour—the hour of darkness. Satan was holding high carnival as the Son of God died upon the cross. It was the day of his power. He seemed to be in control. Oh, how he must have laughed with hellish glee when the Lord of life breathed His last and succumbed to the power of death.

But Christ did not stay in the tomb. Death could not hold Him. He is risen and now sits upon the throne in heaven. That is news the devil does not want anyone to know. All through history he has been trying to convince the world that he was the victor instead of Christ. So convincing has been his argument that the followers of the Lamb have been persecuted and terrorized throughout history. How often the streams of the martyrs' blood have been made to flow. It is no wonder that they cry out as they do in verse 10, "How long, Sovereign Lord, holy and true, until you judge the inhabitants of the earth and avenge our blood?"

How often the Master has replied, "Wait." Rest for a while longer until the number is complete. Wait until your fellow servants follow you into martyrdom. The good news of the gospel is going to be proclaimed to all the nations (Matthew 24:14). It will be proclaimed by a generation willing to die for the sake of reaching the unreached. Today we see inroads being made in what were once Hindu and Islamic strongholds. Where the gospel was once forbidden, it is now being proclaimed. Those strongholds are being pried open by the blood of martyrs—ordinary people who are willing to die for their profession of Christ as Lord. In nations like Sudan, Iran, Iraq, and Pakistan the ground has already been receiving the blood of martyrs—our brothers and sisters in Christ.

Where are you in all of this? A Gallup poll tells us that there are over sixty million born-again Christians in North America. How committed are they? Tell them to renounce Christ or have their head blown off and then count again. I dare say that Mr. Gallup would, like Gideon, find his troops drastically dwindling. The sad truth is that the price probably would not even have to be that great. Threatening to take away their televisions would probably yield the same results. Faith is cheap when it is easily pawned.

The gospel is worth our lives! It is worth everything we have. No cost is too great to be a follower of the Lamb. Jesus Christ died to bring us forgiveness, and now He demands absolute obedience. We are to love Him with heart, mind, and soul.

One day the measure of the world's iniquity will be full, and all our guilt and shame will be exposed. That day of vengeance will come. The sun will be black and the moon will turn the color of blood. Stars will fall from the sky. The sky itself will be split apart and opened like a scroll. Every mountain and island will be moved.

If you have at that time not already given your life to the Lamb, terror will seize your heart. You will be as those at the end of Revelation 6 who cry out for death to come and for an end to the suffering and agony. You will call for the mountains to fall upon you and the rocks to cover you. That will be the day of the Lord. You will meet the Judge—the Christ whom you have rejected—and you will face His fury.

A Striking Admission

Like Adam and Eve, those who call for the mountains to cover them wish to be hidden from the wrath of Him who sits upon the throne. Remember that Adam and Eve knew who God was! This proves that those who make their plea to the mountains have known all along that God is supreme and sovereign over them. It has been written on their hearts.

This warning is not just for the unbelieving world. It is for those who claim they know God but have failed to acknowledge the Lamb on the throne as the Lord of their lives. They have ignored the gospel call to repent, believe, and be saved. For them, it will be too late—the day of His wrath has come; the day of grace is past.

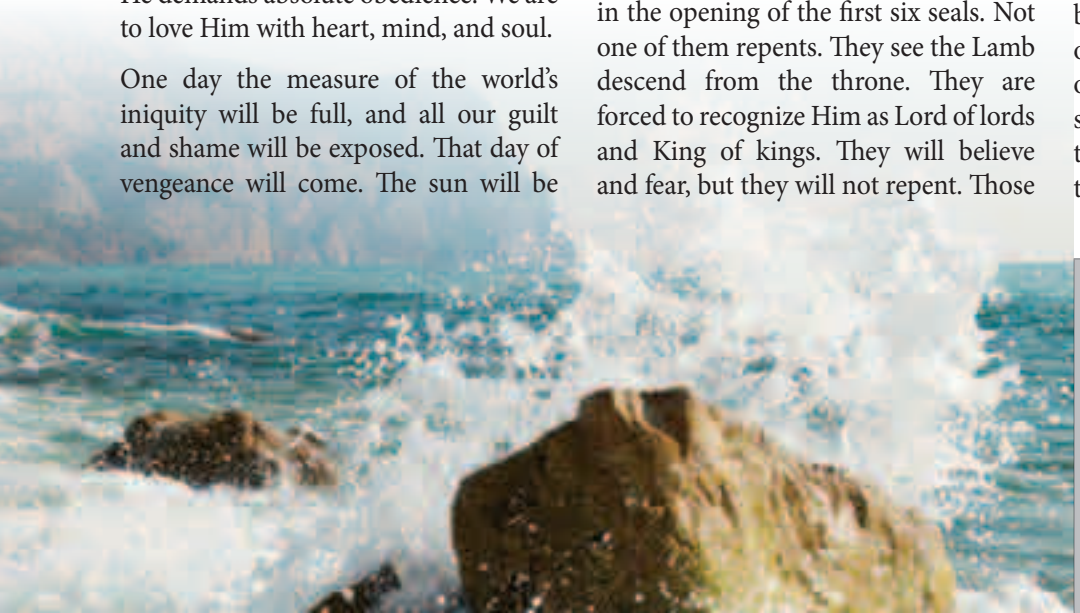
The most pathetic thing in this entire chapter is the reaction of the unbelieving world to the terrors that are unleashed in the opening of the first six seals. Not one of them repents. They see the Lamb descend from the throne. They are forced to recognize Him as Lord of lords and King of kings. They will believe and fear, but they will not repent. Those condemned under the sixth seal pray not to the God who could save them but to the rocks that they hope will destroy them.

Revelation 6 ends with a frightening question: "For the great day of their wrath has come, and who can stand?" It is a scary question, isn't it? But notice that is asked by those who are disobedient to God's will—those who are filled with fear.

As horrible and frightening as the opening of the first six seals may be, it is not hopeless. The question that ends Revelation 6 is answered in Revelation 7. Revelation 7 is an intermission. It is an aside written by John between the opening of the sixth seal and the opening of the seventh seal. It answers the question, "Who will be able to stand?" Revelation 7:9 answers, "After this I looked and there was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people, and language standing before the throne and in front of the Lamb."

Standing before the throne are the servants of God who have washed their robes in the blood of the Lamb who sits upon the throne. Even though the earth gives way and the mountains fall into the heart of the sea; even though the waters roar and foam and the mountains quake with their surging, these servants stand without fear before the throne because they stand upon the immovable Rock of Ages.

And that Rock is Jesus—the Lamb who sits upon the throne. They will stand because upon their foreheads is the seal of God that assures them that the blood of Christ has saved them from all their sin. He will remain with them through the opening of the seventh seal even to the close of the age.



Rev. Wybren H. Oord is the co-pastor of the Trinity United Reformed Church in Lethbridge, Alberta, Canada, and the editor of *The Outlook*.

Christian Unity: Living in Communion with the Saints (5) An Encouraging Example

Rev. William D. Boekestein

The goal of these articles thus far has been to expand our understanding of Christian unity. I also hope that they have challenged our own practice of Christian unity. Of course, it is possible that we have been so stretched and tested that we might doubt whether such a lofty ideal is attainable. Sometimes when we are presented with a daunting task we are prone to despair. We say, "There is no way that we can do this. There is no way that I can be part of a unified, dynamic group of believers." In this concluding article we examine the biblical example of the early churches as an answer to this concern. The church in Acts 2 says to you "Yes, you can be part of a dynamic, unified Christian community, and we are proof."

One of the purposes of biblical examples is that they remind us that our situation is not entirely unique. They remind us: "Others have done this before you." Jay Adams illustrates this point in his book, *Preaching with Purpose*. "There is a sign at the 'Narrows' in the Garden of the Gods, just outside Colorado Springs, where the road disappears into a narrow crack in a rock cliff—so narrow that it looks as though you couldn't drive a VW through it. But just as you are about to turn around, you spot the sign that says, 'Yes you can—millions of others have.' That's all the encouragement most people need" (p. 95). The example of others having "made it" gives us the perspective that we need to walk God's way in our own day.

The Characteristics of Church Unity

The early church exhibited at least six traits of unity.

1. They Were One in Worship

The early church demonstrated their unity in corporate, temple worship. "They continued daily with one accord in the temple . . . praising God" (vv. 46, 47). The main components of their corporate worship will be highlighted below. But it is worth noting that their solidarity in worship not only sets a pattern for congregations but also for families.

This is evident in the regularity of their worship. The Christian community continued in *daily* worship (vs. 46). Now in their case they went to the temple. We no longer have an earthly temple, nor is it practical for us to meet for worship at church every day. But this does not mean that God's expectation of daily worship has ceased. It simply means that daily worship has become the prerogative of the family.

The nineteenth century Scottish Pastor, James Hamilton, aptly entitled a pamphlet on family worship, *The Church in the House*.[1] Each of us has a church in our home, whether it is a church of one or two or many more people. Hamilton gives several practical suggestions for conducting family worship, but the most basic element is a daily opening of the Word of God. Our own church (and family) has found it helpful to use a daily reading calendar to assist us in our family worship. The unifying benefits of such an approach are delineated by Robert Murray M'Cheyne (the organizer of the calendar we use). First, " . . . Friends . . . when they meet, will have a subject for profitable conversation in the portions read that day." As you meet, you can rejoice over the plainer passages and mutually wrestle with the more difficult ones. Second, "The pastor will know in what part of the pasture the flock is feeding." He will thus be enabled to speak more suitably to them both on the Lord's Day and in house visitation. Third, "The sweet bond of Christian love and unity will be strengthened." As you read through the Bible together you will be led to think of the others who are reading the same passages with you. "We shall pray . . . over the same promises, mourn over the same confessions, praise God in the same songs, and be nourished by the same words of eternal life."[2]

The early church calls us to worship (both congregationally and familial). Unless there are weighty and justifiable reasons that prevent us, we should be careful not to "forsake the assembling of ourselves together, as is the manner

of some. . . ." (Hebrews 10:25).

The example of the apostolic church not only demands a *regularity* of worship but also a devoted *manner* of worship. They were *devoted* to worship. Worship ought to define us at least as much as some of the other things we are passionate about.

2. They Were Devoted to Doctrine (v. 42)

Here is an ingredient you do not often find in recipes for church unity. No doubt you have heard the common assertion that "doctrine divides." But here we learn that doctrine *united*. This small group of saints knew that they were united only on the basis of the "one faith" spoken of in Ephesians 4. The first Christians did not demonstrate their devotion to doctrine by simply sending their children to catechism class. Rather, they all devoted themselves to plumbing the depths of the Word of God upon which they stood together. Doctrine unites.

The doctrinal standards of the Dutch reformed churches are appropriately called *The Three Forms of Unity*. We are united upon the truth of the Word of God summarized for us in our confessions. We, too, recognize that our doctrine unites us. It is doubtful though, whether we always use our forms in this way. Too often our doctrinal standards are merely used as fodder for accusation and division. It may be a bad sign of our spiritual health when we use our precious doctrines in this way.

Of course, in a very real sense doctrine does divide. It divides truth from error. The doctrine that the believers devoted themselves to was none other than that of the *apostles*. It was the clear and indisputable doctrine which God himself gave to the apostles (cf. Jude 3). Many churches today have abandoned *apostolic* Christianity. For this reason we do not recognize the Roman Catholic establishment as a true church because they have abandoned apostolic Christianity. I hope you sense the irony here. They claim to have a continuous apostolic presence through the Pope, but they have abandoned the teaching of the apostles! Many of their central doctrines were invented long after the apostles' deaths. Purgatory was invented in 593. The title of "Pope" was first given in 607. Praying with the rosary was not instituted until 1090. The Apocryphal books were officially added in 1546. The infallibility of the Pope was proclaimed only in 1870. Finally, Roman Catholics codified the bodily ascension of Mary in 1950.[3]

I mention this because Protestants are given the impression that we have abandoned apostolic doctrine. Not at all. The Protestant Reformation was a recovery of apostolic doctrine.

3. They Were Given to Generosity (vv. 44,45)

Giving is a free and joyful act of worship that promotes unity. This passage has often been used to "prove" forced sharing or communism. But the fact is, those who were able shared with others "as every man had need." The giving of the early church was a need-based giving. Of course, given the tithing precedent laid down in the Old Testament and the fact that there is always a need, generous giving is a mandate for every Christian.

One hardly has to imagine how this generous giving promotes unity. The giver and the receiver are united in a bond of loving inter-dependency. The effectiveness of a church often goes hand-in-hand with its generosity.

4. They Participated in Prayer (v. 42)

If we hope to achieve meaningful unity in our churches it is imperative that we pray with other believers. That is what the early Christians believed. "They continued steadfastly . . . in prayer." Something intimate happens when believers pray together. In prayer, there is a mutual opening of our souls before the God who sees through our skin.

The early church teaches us three things about unifying prayer. First, we must pray together in all seasons. That is to say, many of us need to break out of the rut of only praying at standard times. "They *continued steadfastly . . .*" Second, we should pray in such a way that those who listen (both God and others) realize that we are baring our souls before a loving Savior. In our prayers we are *modeling* prayer to others. We must do away with unfeeling, unvarying and apparently irrelevant prayers. Third, we should allow others to pray. *They,* that is all of the believers continued in prayer. We should be careful of restricting prayer to the "experts," whether the pastor in the church or the father in the home. Despite their expected "flaws," we should also encourage our children and others when they do take the initiative to pray aloud.

5. They Celebrated the Sacraments

Baptism is mentioned in verse 41 and the Lord's Supper is alluded to in verse 42. Both sacraments are eminently unifying phenomena. Baptism is an initiatory event that visibly unites *covenant* members of Christ's church to one another. The Lord's Supper is a continuous event that unites *confessing* members of Christ's church to one another. Your church will have both biblical and practical requirements for participation in these sacraments. But if you are not presently experiencing the unifying (and other) benefits of the sacraments you should be pursuing those requirements as God enables.

6. They Focused on Fellowship

The word for fellowship in verse 42 is the familiar *koinonia*. This word denotes a close relationship or intimacy. Importantly, it is used to describe the intimate fellowship that believers have with the triune God himself (cf. 1 Cor. 1:9 and the Son; 2 Cor. 13:14 and the Spirit; 1 John 1:3 and the Father).

In applying the word *koinonia* to the early church, Luke was explaining that the believers were intentional about group gatherings; they were not just together in the same room. They were truly fellowshipping. Recent cultural trends have confused the meaning of

fellowship. True fellowship means not simply being connected or accessible, it means sharing in personal and meaningful ways. To promote unity, take the initiative to do things with others that promote thought sharing, require vulnerability and create interdependency. The fleeting time that God has given us with others is precious and should be used well. Some suggestions: When you break bread with others (v. 46) make sure you actually converse about meaningful things. Do something out of the ordinary. Plan a picnic. Take a hike. Turn off the TV and read good literature together. Use these fluctuations from the ordinary to move beyond the superficial to real personal involvement.

The Consequences of Church Unity

Even if you were not familiar with Acts 2 you would expect that such expressions of unity would make a significant impact on the surrounding culture. And of course, they did.

1. Fear Came upon Every Soul (v. 43)
The "every soul" here probably refers to those outside of the church. God was working powerfully among them. There was something so shocking about this work that onlookers were afraid. We may not exactly be working to build scary congregations, but this fear was a means that *God* used to protect the church.

We should desire a little more fear of the church today. As Christians we tend to feel funny if people are intimidated by us. But if God is really working powerfully among us unbelievers will be a bit uncomfortable around the church. The church will serve as an unsettling reminder that they are living ungodly in God's world.

2. They Had Favor with All the People (v. 47)
The church had a good reputation. Does this surprise you? Acts 4:34 says, "No one lacked a thing." Do you think that went unnoticed in a society where much of the population lived in poverty? In addition, the members of the church *enjoyed* each other. If there is one thing that unbelievers will notice about you it will be your fellowship.

It is true that we should beware when all men speak well of us (Luke 6:26). But it is also true that we should strive, as individuals and as churches, to have a good reputation among those who are outside (1 Tim. 3:7).

3. The Lord Added to their Number (v. 47)
Notice how God blessed this unity as he promised he would in Psalm 133. This church was fertile soil for gospel growth because it was unified. "For there the Lord commanded the blessing, even life forevermore" (v. 3). People wanted to have what the Christians had. One of the ways that the church reaches out to others is by making them jealous. Conversely, says Calvin, "When the church loses numbers it is due to our laziness and wickedness" (*Commentary,* Acts 2:47).

Conclusion

Unity is a difficult calling. This is exactly what we are taught in Scripture; fulfilling our calling requires effort. We should be " . . . not lagging in diligence, fervent in spirit, serving the Lord. . . ." (Romans 12:11). Be diligent; be serious in working hard for unity.

Despite the challenges, there is hope in the gospel. The good news is that the gospel changes people. This may not sound like good news, because we often do not want to change. But it *is* good news first, because we *need* to change, and second, because union with Christ actually changes us. In Christ we are saved from the punishment due our sins. We are also being renewed in harmony with God and others.

One final encouragement: The work of unification of the church is the prerogative of our sovereign God (Acts 2:47). In the history of the world we can see two decisive points at which mankind deteriorated from unity to disunity. At both points God provided a solution.

In the fall, two people who had dwelt together in unity from the day they met began to argue. But God promised a reversal of the curse of sin. This promise was realized in Christ who is our peace. He "came and preached peace . . ." (Ephesians 2:14, 17). And he made peace by breaking down the barrier between us and God and us and others.

On the Plain of Shinar a once-unified people was scattered by God to the point they could not even finish a construction project. This linguistic division persisted until the events recorded in Acts 2. Pentecost was the anti-Babel. Here the Spirit spoke to every believer that was gathered in Jerusalem that day in his own language. The church, then, became a reversal of the divisiveness that had characterized the world since Babel.

Heaven is the grand illustration and reality of God's work of unification. We have the encouragement that, for the Christian, when this life ends an eternity of unity begins. God is working among us to unify us. This will not be perfected until we end this life. But it must begin in this life. Our prayer is that God would begin to make this a reality in our lives and churches.

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1. Request this free pamphlet on the "Free Books" page of *LifeReformation.org*.
2. A printable PDF of M'Cheyne's calendar can be found at: *http://www.chapellibrary.org/literature/mccheynes-daily-bible-readings.php*
3. Loraine Boettner, *Roman Catholicism,* pp. 7,8

Rev. William D. Boekestein is the pastor of Covenant Reformed Church (URCNA) in Carbondale, PA, and author of *Life Lessons from a Calloused Christian: A Practical Study of Jonah with Questions*, available from Reformed Fellowship.

The Exclusive Goal of Christian Education

Rev. Greg Lubbers

Introduction

At times within the Christian community, a practice can become so common that one begins to lose sight of its basis. The danger of this is that as time passes individuals grow ignorant of why they do what they do. From this ignorant position, it is a small step to cease doing what one did so long in ignorance. As one surveys the landscape of the Reformed churches of North America, there is reason to question whether such ignorance about the basis of Christian education is common.

Nevertheless, many Christian parents continue their Reformed forefather's practice of insisting on Christian education for their children. They do so by viewing the value of Christian education by measuring the cost of Christian education in light of the beauty of Christian education. Their proper conclusion is that Christian education is valuable because nothing else is designed to accomplish what Christian education is designed to accomplish.

The Exclusive Goal of Christian Education

What is the goal of Christian education? This question demands a clear answer. As with any sizeable and costly endeavor, it is profitable to analyze the personal and corporate perception of the goal of one's labors and clearly identify, corporately and personally, what this goal is or ought to be. Simply put, we must know exactly what we are doing in order to do it well.

The Christian community must clearly identify the goal of Christian educational labors for two primary, related reasons. First, there is a vital connection between one's perceived goal of education and the techniques employed in education. What one is after in their children's education will determine what one uses to get there. Put simply, the job one faces determines the tools one selects. The clear identification of the goal of Christian education will impact the everyday decisions such as faculty appointments, curriculum selection and design, and offer a valuable criterion for examining extra-curricular activities.

Second, there is the ever-present danger of the subtle creeping in of unbiblical goals within Christian schools. These goals are not foreign to so-called "Christian" schools, and the Christian community must examine whether or not they have infected the perception of the goal of education and therefore the tactics employed in instruction. To avoid the creeping in of unbiblical goals into the Christian school community, there must be the ability to identify the goals of secular education as contrasted with Christian education.

The goal of Christian education is not *intellectualism.* The Christian school should not have a primary interest in producing mere academic giants with good MEAP or SAT scores. Good MEAP or SAT scores can and ought to be a subordinate goal in the pursuit of the ultimate goal, but it can never be the ultimate goal of educational efforts. Neither is the goal of Christian education *materialism.* Christian education is not simply a tool to produce skilled graduates who are ready to enter well-paying careers. Christian education cannot aim toward *humanism.* The Christian school must avoid creating students who have been convinced of their own inherent excellence. The secular goal of *hedonism* or producing young adults who are prepared to grab the best life has to offer must also be avoided. The Christian school that subtly slides towards these goals loses its distinctive Christian perspective and characteristics.

What then is the goal of Christian Education? Reflecting upon Scripture passages such as Psalm 34:11, "Come, you children, listen to me; and I will teach you the fear of the Lord," one could summarize the goal of Christian education as being the student's maturing recognition of and response to the Lordship of Jesus Christ.

Christian education is not simply the attachment of a Bible class curriculum to a secular system of study, nor is it the mere inclusion of chapels, devotions, and prayers into the daily schedule. Christian education is not simply a strict dress code and high moral expectation. Rather, *Christian education is instruction with a radical, permeating focus upon the reality of the Lordship of Jesus Christ being unfolded and applied by the teacher to the student in a variety of its aspects.* Therefore, the goal of Christian education includes Christ as both the object and the subject.

Christ as the Object of Christian Education

When we state that Christ is the object of Christian education, we use the word "object" as it has the meaning of "the end toward which effort or action is directed." The design and maintenance of the Christian academic institution ought to focus on the goal of teaching its students concerning Christ. However, what is that institution to teach the children concerning Christ?

The primary thing parents and teachers must teach children concerning Christ is the absolute sovereignty of Christ. This is the exclusive goal of Christian education that the secular school can never achieve. This phrase "sovereignty of Christ" includes the realities of Christ's comprehensive power and authority over every aspect of creation. Christian parents, Christian teachers, and Christian institutions for learning must inform their students that Christ is the absolute Master in every single subject of study. Therefore, they must inform and unfold for their students the reality of a radical, divine sovereignty as it applies to language, mathematics, science, geography, history, physics, music, and physical education.

A math class does not become a Christian math class because it begins in prayer. Neither does a physical education class become a Christian physical education class because one monitors the language more carefully than the secular institution down the road. Rather, these class subjects, and all the others, take on a distinctive Christian character when the design of the curriculum and instruction highlights and reveals the sovereignty of Christ as it relates to the matter at hand. Christian education has

not accomplished its task when the students are academically above average in a certain discipline. It has accomplished its task when the students have seen the Lordship of Christ.

If the primary thing the Christian parents and teachers must teach the child concerning Christ is the absolute sovereignty of Christ, the question is how students encounter this absolute sovereignty of Christ. Children encounter the absolute sovereignty of Christ when they see the work of Christ, for Christ displays His sovereignty through His work.

However, this is not all. The task is not complete when the child has seen the sovereignty of Christ in the work of Christ. Upon showing the child the sovereignty of Christ in the work of Christ, there must be the call for, guidance in, and encouragement towards the student's appropriate response to that encounter.

To illustrate, a Christian schoolteacher has not completed a Christian civics course when he has elaborately demonstrated the divine delegation of authority. While this point must certainly weave throughout the course, the Christian civics teacher must also guide the students in the appropriate response to the divine delegation of authority. For example, Christian education in civics will include practical discussions upon the practices of revolution, rioting, and demonstrating, as well as the study of the implications from the demand and promise of the fifth commandment.

In essence, Christian education must instruct the student in the proper response to the sovereignty of Christ as revealed in Christ's work. That proper response is the filial fear of Christ. Christian education must strive to teach children to fear Christ by responding to His absolute sovereignty as revealed in His works by humbly bowing before Him in the obedience of holiness. This is the exclusive goal of Christian education. This is what gives it inestimable value. Where this is understood, there will be an invisible caption written above every classroom of Christian instruction and every page of Christian curriculum quoting Ecclesiastes 12:13, "Let us hear the conclusion of the whole matter: Fear God and keep His commandments, for this is man's all."

With this goal in mind, the Christian instructor must address the whole child rather than merely his intellect. While there is a certain primacy of the intellect, Christian education must address the heart of the child in every single subject. Parents and teachers cannot rest satisfied when the children pass the spelling test. There must be a looking for the child to see the sovereignty of Christ over language and the related using of language in a God-glorifying manner. The ultimate goal of Christian education is not realized when the student can name the planets in the solar system, but when the student scans the heavens and bows in humble adoration of the handiwork of a sovereign Christ.

The passing of the spelling tests and the naming of the planets are instrumental steps in the proper use of language and of the adoration of God in reflection of heavenly luminaries. Nevertheless, they cannot be a substitute for the overall goal, the student's expression of the fear of Christ demonstrated by a sober recognition of the sovereignty of Christ in His various works.

While not negating the role of the MEAP tests, Iowa scores, SAT numbers, GPA's or college applicant percentages, a belief in the above-mentioned goal will radically affect the whole of a Christian academic institution, making it exclusively peculiar when compared to a secular academic institution. A faithful pursuit of this goal will guide students to a humble bowing underneath the sovereignty of Christ.

Christ as the Subject of Christian Education

How then does the student actually learn his lesson? This question brings a transition from Christ as the object of Christian education to Christ as the subject of Christian Education. Here when we use the word "subject" we do so with its meaning of "referring to the one performing the action." The goal of teaching children and students to bow humbly with godly fear before the sovereignty of God as recognized in His works is too great for a mere human parent or teacher to realize. It is a lesson only Christ Himself can teach.

This is a necessary reminder as it points the Christian community to depend on, look for, and anticipate the work that Christ does within the realm of the historical administration of the covenant, the realm that is the exclusive setting of Christian education.

This is also a necessary reminder because it understands Christ is pleased to do something peculiar within the halls and classrooms of a faithful Christian school as compared to a secular school. Especially, not exhaustively nor exclusively, within the covenantal context that includes Christian education, Christ imparts His divine instruction, revealing His absolute sovereignty to the hearts of children, bringing them to bow in humble fear.

Christ accomplishes this work through the mediating agent of the Holy Spirit. Ultimately, it is the mysterious operation of the Holy Spirit within the heart of the child that reveals the sovereignty of Christ and brings the appropriate response to that sovereignty, filial fear. For example, the Holy Spirit teaches a child to use speech in a God-glorifying manner and to bow with adoration at the sight of the heavenly luminaries. The Holy Spirit teaches the student to live as a mature Christian within civil society. The Holy Spirit teaches the students to employ their bodies in an acceptable fashion as temples.

With this in mind, the Christian parent and educator must labor with a sense of dependency upon the applicatory work of the Holy Spirit evidenced in prayerful petitions for the work of the Holy Spirit. This will be in stark contrast to the ignorant activities of the secular educator.

In addition, with this in mind, the Christian parent and educator will labor along the way the Spirit is pleased to work. Divine sovereignty never negates human responsibility, but rather the recognition of divine sovereignty motivates human responsibility. The Spirit is pleased to use the instrumental means of godly parents and teachers to teach students the fear of the Lord. As the human teachers present the reality of the sovereignty of Christ to the senses of the student through instruction, the Spirit, or divine teacher, is pleased to move the heart of the child to respond in humble adoration, thus effectually realizing the goal of Christian education.

Summary

Anyone who has observed faithful Christian education must admit that it is a beautiful thing. Yet, anyone who has participated within faithful Christian education will acknowledge it is a costly thing. It is only the one who sees the exclusive goal of Christian education in having Christ as its object and subject who will be convinced it is a valuable thing. Those who are convinced that faithful Christian education is a valuable thing ought to display a certain commonality toward Christian education

This ought to include the recognition of the common goal of confronting covenantal children with the sovereignty of Christ, expecting that they will bow to that sovereignty in filial fear. Within Christian education societies, there is much we do not hold in common in our personal backgrounds, occupations, financial ability, denominational association, and character traits. However, as a Christian education community, there must be unity in laboring forward as parents and instructors in a common goal. Motivating this common labor must be the common conviction that this common goal is something exclusive of faithful Christian education.

In addition, there ought to be a basis for a common evaluation of what comprises the education provided for covenantal children. The litmus test of Christian education programs ought to be whether classes, instruction, and various programs serve this common goal of confronting children with the sovereignty of Christ and calling for the appropriate response to that sovereignty.

Furthermore, there must be presentations of petitions for a common result as a Christian community recognizes that only the work of the Holy Spirit can accomplish the goal of Christian education.

Finally, the Christian Church ought to be marked by an unshakeable dedication to a common cause as it supports and labors for and in the faithful Christian education of covenantal children.

Christian education is valuable because it is exclusive, in that it seeks to do something nothing else does in bringing the student face to face with a sovereign Christ as He evidences His sovereignty through His work, calling for a response of humble fear. While only eternity will fully reveal the results of such labor, may the Christian community, by the grace of God, labor on with immovable hope that God will crown faithful Christian education with His blessings.

Rev. Greg Lubbers is the pastor of the Covenant United Reformed Church in Byron Center, MI. He also teaches at Zion Christian School in Byron Center.

Bible Studies on the Life of Abraham
Lesson 9: The Covenant—Part 3
Genesis 17:1–14

Rev. Wybren H. Oord

In Genesis 17 God identified Himself as the God Almighty (El Shaddai) for the first time. The name appears thirty-one times in the book of Job and seventeen times in the rest of Scripture. Each time it appears, God's children are going through very difficult times. They are in need of some special reassurance from God that His strength will support them.

The difficult time that Abram and Sarai were going through was that they had taken the matter of having a son into their own hands. As a result, Ishmael was born to Sarai's maidservant, Hagar. Then for thirteen years God was silent. Abram was ninety-nine years old. Sarai was ninety years old. Evidently they had become reconciled to the idea that the Lord had fulfilled his promise with the birth of Ishmael. God was about to correct that mistaken idea.

God Almighty confronted Abram with these words: "Walk before me and be blameless." God called upon His servant to live and move in His divine presence. He called upon Abram to be set apart; to be holy, even as He is holy. After demanding that Abram walk blameless before Him, God did three things: He confirmed His covenant with Abram, established the sign of the covenant, and changed the names of His partners in the covenant.

The Covenant Confirmed

The word "covenant" is not new to the reader of Genesis by the time he gets to Genesis 17. It has been used in Genesis 6, 9, and 15. In this chapter, however, it is used twelve times, and every time it is spoken by God. One must get the impression that it is extremely important.

We have already seen how the covenant is unilateral (one-sided), eternal (forever), and irrevocable (unchanging). We see in this chapter how it is also gracious. If the promises of God were to depend upon help from the human race it would be utterly worthless. We do not deserve it, nor are we capable of doing anything. It is the love and mercy of our great God that establishes covenant with His people.

It is one thing, however, to say that the covenant is unilateral—that is, that God initiated it and established the terms for it. It is another to say that He established it with His people. In one way or another, His people have to relate to that covenant. In Genesis 17, God gives instruction as to how His people are to relate to His covenant.

In verse 4, God said, "As for Me, this is my covenant with you . . ." For the next several verses, as Abram lay reverently upon the ground, God repeated and amplified His covenant. While the promises were the same, there were some items Abram had not heard before. He was to be the father of many nations; kings were to come from him; the covenant was to endure forever.

Then God said to Abram, "As for you, you must keep My covenant." God was not implying that His will is dependent upon Abram's actions nor that He would not keep His part of the covenant if Abram and his descendants were negligent in their duty. It is no less true, however, that Abram must respond to the covenant, as must the descendants of Abram.

The Sign of the Covenant

The covenant was not only to Abram, but to his children and to his children's children—forever—to all generations. Not only were Abram and Sarai set apart by God and called to be holy, so were their children and all within their household. As a sign of the covenant (and the keeping thereof) Abram was commanded to circumcise every male in his household. That included Abram, his offspring, all within his household (including servants and herdsmen), and all those whom he bought with money. Those born

Seven times God said, "I will . . ."

"As for Me . . .

" . . . I will confirm My covenant . . .

" . . . I will greatly increase your numbers . . .

" . . . I will make you very fruitful . . .

" . . . I will make nations of you . . .

" . . . I will establish my covenant as an everlasting covenant . . .

" . . . I will give you this land as an everlasting possession . . .

" . . . I will be the God of your descendants."

into the extended household were to receive the mark of the covenant when they were eight days old. While the infant was a passive recipient, the sign would remain upon him for as long as his life lasted, as a constant reminder that he was a child of the covenant. One could ignore and rebel against the covenant, but he could never deny its effect or its promises.

God's ordinary way of maintaining and growing those within His covenant is through His relationship with the descendants of believers. Not just Abram's lineal descendants, but all in his household were to receive the sign of the covenant. All were to be instructed in the ways of the Lord. A responsibility was placed upon parents to teach their children the ways of God and upon children to learn.

This aspect of the covenant is largely ignored by many evangelical churches today. God's "As for Me . . ."—that is, His unilateral, eternal, irrevocable, and gracious covenant promises—are for all within the household of Abram and Sarai. The promises are from above: God making promises to His covenant children, not from below: parents making promises to God about their children.

No symbolic significance was placed upon the sign of the covenant when Abram received these instructions. While God could have commanded the sign of the covenant to be cutting off of a finger, an ear, or some other needed body part, He commanded Abram to cut off from each male a useless piece of genital skin. Yet it is cut from the part of the body from which many actual sins occur and where the propagation of original sin begins. It becomes, then, an appropriate place to apply the seal of God's gracious covenant for the forgiveness of past sins and the removal of unwanted future sins.

The physical rite was a formality that spoke of something deeper. Circumcision signified a separation from a life of sin and impurity and a dedication to God in a life of obedience and sanctification. Those in the covenant were called to circumcise their hearts (Deuteronomy 10:16, 30:6; Jeremiah 4:3; Romans 2:29). A person who refused to be circumcised showed that he despised the covenant and was cut off from the promises of God, considered as worthless as a useless piece of skin.

The Partners in the Covenant

How does one, however, keep the terms of the covenant? How can one who has been set apart by God be holy even as God is holy? To walk before God means that we are to relate all we do to God and strive to do His will. To be blameless may not mean moral perfection or sinlessness (of which we are incapable), but uprightness, single-mindedness, and wholeheartedness in serving the Lord. Even as much as we may like to obey, we cannot, for even our most righteous deeds are as filthy rags before a holy God.

Abram Abraham

Here again God came to the rescue. Before He laid out the responsibility of the covenant keeper, the great I AM THAT I AM changed the name of the patriarch—from Abram to Abraham. While Abram means "exalted father," Abraham means "father of a multitude" referring to the number of offspring that would come from the father of all believers.

Even more significant than the meaning of the name is the actual syllable that was added. The breathy "HA" sound represented the very breath of God. When God created the heavens and the earth, the "HA" of God hovered over the waters (Genesis 1:2). When man was created, He breathed into his nostrils the "HA" of life (Genesis 2:7).

When God changed the name of the father of all believers, He was imparting to the patriarch some of His own Spirit. God was joining His name to Abram's name. If Abram ever doubted that he could hold up his end of the covenant, he needed but remember that to his new name was added the name of God—not by his own power, but by the power of the great El Shaddai in him.

It is not difficult to carry this into the New Testament. We confess that God justifies the ungodly by grace alone and through no merit of our own. It is entirely the work of God done for us by Jesus Christ's sacrifice and the Holy Spirit's work in our lives. God, however, never justifies a person without also regenerating that person. When conversion truly takes place, the sinner recognizes his sin, repents thereof, and seeks forgiveness in Christ alone. God's application of grace upon the sinner yields the automatic response of joyful obedience. Jesus said, "If you love Me, you will obey My commandments" (John 14:15).

Like Abraham, Christians are united to God through faith in Jesus Christ through the power of God's "HA"—the Holy Spirit. The same God who joined His breath to Abram has also joined His Holy Spirit to all who believe in Jesus Christ. When we enter into the covenant that God has established with His people through baptism (which has replaced circumcision), it is God imparting Himself to us. We are able to keep covenant with God, not through our own ability, but through the ability of the God who has joined us to Himself. It is by drawing on the strength of the El Shaddai that we have the strength to live as children in God's covenant.

Points to Ponder and Discuss

1. How does God as El Shaddai instill both fear and comfort in you?
2. As the Lord reaffirms the covenant with Abram, which promises have been mentioned before and which ones are new?
3. With whom did God establish the covenant? Who is included?
4. Describe the Abram's responsibility for keeping the covenant.
5. How is circumcision an appropriate sign of the covenant?
6. Up to this point the covenant focused exclusively on Abraham and his offspring. Why do you suppose the Lord commanded that "even those who are not your offspring" be circumcised?
7. How does God's command of circumcision anticipate His concern for those who were not physical descendants of Abraham—both then and today?
8. How does the Old Testament sign of circumcision relate to the New Testament sign of baptism?
9. What is significant about the change of the patriarch's name? Has the name of all Christians been changed (cf. Lord's Day 12, Q&A 32)?

Bible Studies on the Life of Abraham

Lesson 10: As for You . . .

Genesis 17:15–27; 18:1–15

Rev. Wybren H. Oord

The promises that God gave to Abram were for future generations. The promises God gives, however, are not only for some eventual fulfillment; they are for the present as well. After changing Abram's name to Abraham, God addressed the rest of the patriarch's family.

As for Sarai

The member of the covenant family God mentioned first was Abraham's wife. Having changed Abram's name to mean "father of a multitude," the sovereign God changed Sarai's name to Sarah. Both names mean "princess." The change, however, was significant. "Sarai" pointed to a past noble descent; "Sarah" pointed ahead to the promises that God was yet to fulfill. God promised Abraham that his wife would be the mother of nations, kings, and peoples. By doing so, God affirmed His continuing presence and purpose in her life.

There are different ways to interpret Abraham's laughter toward the promise given to Sarah. Some interpret Abraham's laughter as an indication of his unbelief; others as a man whose faith is still weak. He could not see how he, at one hundred years old, and Sarah, at ninety years old, could possibly have a child together. Abraham then pointed to Ishmael, telling God that he was content that the terms of the promise God had given to him were fulfilled in his one son born to him through Sarah's handmaiden.

Others teach that Abraham's laughter was an expression of thanksgiving and gladness. His questions, then, are asked not from doubt but from surprise and wonder. With keen understanding that the child born to Sarah would be the child of the promise, Abraham then asked God to provide a blessing for his son Ishmael, as well.

Sarah's laughter (Genesis 18:12) on the other hand, was different from that of Abraham. Her laughter came more out of unbelief that God could still use her to fulfill His promise. After all, she was ninety years old, well beyond the childbearing years. It almost seemed more a scoff than a laugh. To scoff before God is sin. Sarah had been looking at circumstances rather than God. For a dozen years she believed that God had already fulfilled the promise through Ishmael. When confronted with her sin, she denied her laughter, leading to more sin.

Yet God was merciful. He responded with the words, "Is anything too hard for the Lord?" (Genesis 18:14). Sarah was promised that within the year she would have a son. And so it came to pass. Her scoffing laughter was turned into true laughter (Genesis 21:6, 7) and she named her son Isaac, which means "laughter."

As for Ishmael

At Abraham's request, God also informed the patriarch as to the blessings that Ishmael would receive. As Abraham's son, God would bless Ishmael, making him the father of twelve rulers. His descendants would become a great nation. Conspicuously missing from the blessing that God gave concerning this child of the patriarch were any covenant or redemptive promises. All that was promised to Ishmael were worldly and temporal blessings.

God made abundantly clear to Abraham that the covenantal blessings would be carried on through the son born to him by Sarah. Isaac was to be the channel of redemption and, in the fullness of time, the promised Messiah would come through him. Every time they called their son to the dinner table, they would remember the doubt they had once had and the faithfulness of God to His promises.

As for Abraham

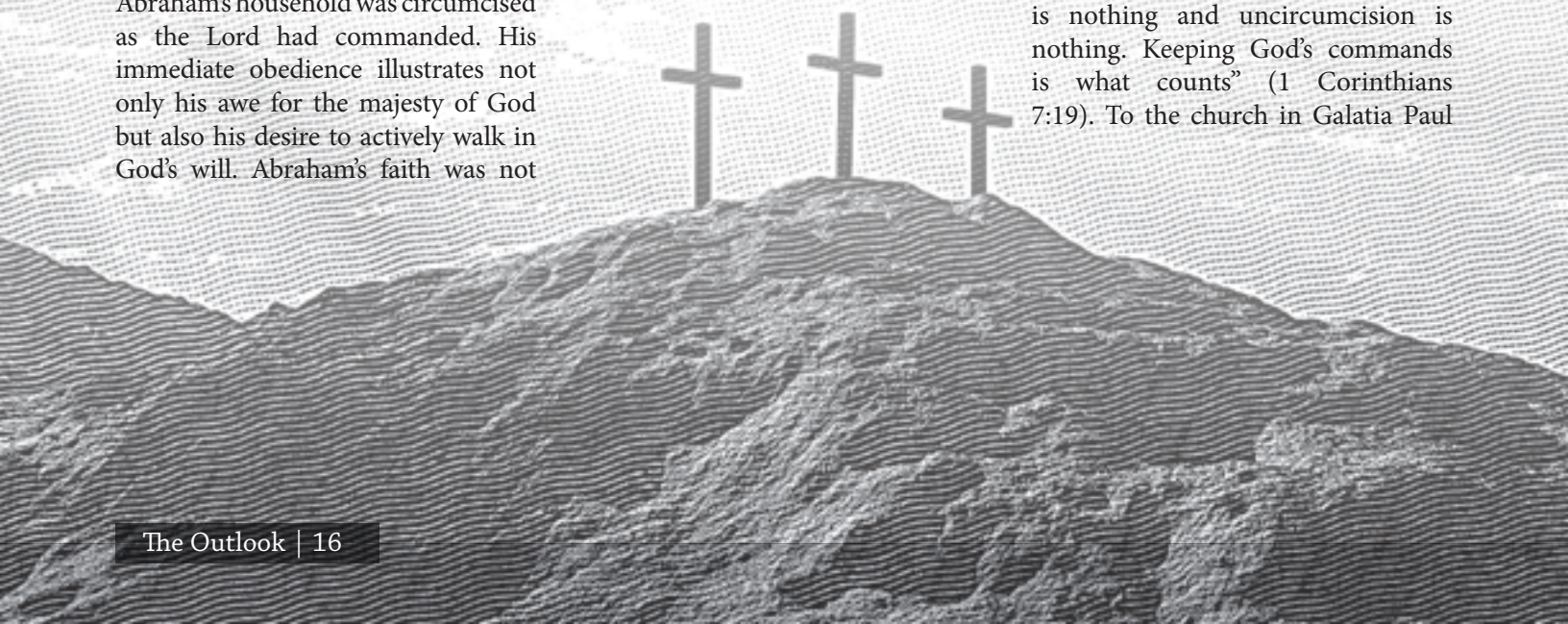
On that very day every male in Abraham's household was circumcised as the Lord had commanded. His immediate obedience illustrates not only his awe for the majesty of God but also his desire to actively walk in God's will. Abraham's faith was not something that came out only when God Almighty revealed Himself to Abraham. It was not only in worship as he lay face down before the presence of God; Abraham's faith penetrated every area of his life, even to the most personal area of his life.

Many Christians today view their Christian walk as though they only need to follow Christ on the Lord's Day—and then only for a few hours. They give an hour of worship to God in His house and then go their merry way. The rest of the day and the rest of the week is theirs to do as they please. As long as they go to church, follow the Ten Commandments, and stay away from certain worldly things, they are living in obedience to God. True obedience, however, is to love the Lord with heart, mind, and soul. To love someone is more than refraining from harming that person; it is positively promoting that person's good. It is more than not stealing from him; it is giving to the one you love all that is yours. To love God is more than denying oneself a life of sin; it is actively pursuing a life that brings glory to God. Reading pornography, for example, is not only rejected; it is replaced by reading the Bible. Spending time in prayer is considered of greater value than spending time on Facebook. It is alarming how many hours we can fritter away on worldly activities and how little time we spend nurturing ourselves spiritually in devotion to God. Loving God is actively seeking His will and doing it.

As for Circumcision

The condition of the everlasting covenant placed upon Abraham was that he was to circumcise every male in his household. This he did, as would every future generation of those within the Old Testament covenant. The mark of the covenant certainly did not mean that all those who received the mark were automatically saved. Ishmael was circumcised on the same day as Abraham, but he showed no evidence of a heart renewed by the grace of God. Abraham's grandchildren, Esau and Jacob, both received the mark of the covenant, yet Malachi makes clear that God hated the one and loved the other. Although these two children of the covenant bore the signs of that covenant, they were not ultimately part of God's covenant people. They rejected the promises of salvation that God had given to them and were cut off from the people like a worthless piece of foreskin.

Throughout the Old Testament, it was made clear that the followers of the sovereign God were to have their hearts circumcised—that they are to be cut off from the world, a separate nation devoted to God. In the New Testament, Paul made clear that it was not the cutting away of the foreskin that brought one into the covenant. He wrote, "Circumcision is nothing and uncircumcision is nothing. Keeping God's commands is what counts" (1 Corinthians 7:19). To the church in Galatia Paul



wrote, "For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision has any value. The only thing that counts is faith expressing itself through love" (Galatians 5:6).

Paul based this upon the fact that Abraham received the covenant promises and was declared righteous prior to his circumcision (Romans 4). It was not Abraham's circumcision that saved him. It was his faith in the promises of God—that one day God in His grace would provide the ultimate bloody sacrifice that would restore His people to Himself. The receiving or rejection of that promise—not the sign of the promise—determined one's standing before God. All the sign did was to remind the Israelites that God would one day replace the bloody ritual with the blood of His own Son.

That still holds true today. Our faith must be the same as that of Abraham. We must trust that God in His grace has provided the ultimate bloody sacrifice that has restored His people to Himself. That sacrifice was made by God's Son, Jesus Christ, on the cross of Calvary. The covenant-keeping God has replaced the bloody rite of circumcision with the sacrament of baptism (Colossians 2:11–13). It is not the water of baptism that saves. The water points us to the blood of Jesus Christ. At every baptism we should hear the words: "As surely as water washes away dirt, so sure can we be that the blood of Jesus Christ washes away our sins."

That this sacrament is applied to all within the covenant should be obvious. Just like the future promise of a Messiah was given to all within the Old Testament, so also the promise fulfilled is for all within the New Testament—young and old alike. Just as Old Testament parents were to teach their children about the promise of the coming Messiah, New Testament parents are to teach their children of Messiah who has come.

Notice how those promises are from God. With believer's baptism the promises are made by the individual promising that he will come to church, obey the Law, and serve God. On what can he base those promises? A totally depraved person can make all kinds of promises to serve God, but he is incapable of keeping any of them on his own. With covenantal, infant baptism, God makes the promises. As real as the promises are to the parents, so they are real and true to the children. The almighty God who walked between the carcasses of the animals declares to His people, "May it be done to Me as it was done to these animals if I do not keep My promises." He promises that as real as is the water of baptism, so real is the blood of His son shed for our sin; so real His faithfulness to those who keep covenant with Him.

How absolutely amazing that this God who said to Abraham, "I am God Almighty; walk before me and be blameless," promises to make us blameless when we trust in the bloody sacrifice of His Son. Through His grace we are brought into the covenant, by His grace we remain in the covenant.

Rev. Wybren H. Oord is the co-pastor of the Trinity United Reformed Church in Lethbridge, Alberta, Canada, and the editor of *The Outlook*.

1. How would you interpret Abraham's laughter in v. 17? What does your interpretation indicate about Abraham's faith?
2. Why would Abraham ask for a particular blessing upon Ishmael?
3. How does God have the last laugh by calling the promised son "Isaac," which means "laughter"?
4. How is it significant that God promised to be a God not only to Abraham, but also to his seed?
5. How can Abraham's obedience be a model for Christians today?
6. Why is circumcision no longer considered part of the eternal covenant?
7. Explain the difference between circumcision and baptism.
8. How was Abraham's faith identical with ours?
9. What is the fundamental difference between infant baptism and believer's baptism?

Psalm Singing in Calvin and the Puritans (2)

Dr. Joel R. Beeke

This is the second half of a chapter in *Sing a New Song,* a new book that covers the topics of psalm singing in history, psalm singing in Scripture, and psalm singing and the twenty-first-century church. Among the contributors are W. Robert Godfrey (foreword), Joel R. Beeke, Terry Johnson, D. G. Hart, Derek Thomas, and John V. Fesko. It will be available fall 2010 from Reformation Heritage Books (*www.heritagebooks.org*).

John Cotton (1584–1652), the well-known New England Puritan who may have written the preface to the *Bay Psalm Book,*[1] wrote an important treatise in 1647, typical of Puritan thought: *Singing of Psalmes: A Gospel-Ordinance Or A Treatise, Wherein are handled these foure Particulars. 1. Touching the Duty it selfe. 2. Touching the Matter to be Sung. 3. Touching the Singers. 4. Touching the Manner of Singing.*[2] This was "the first major work by a New Englander on psalmody and worship."[3] It is one of the best sources for the study of Puritan psalmody, as it carefully addresses the main issues in psalm singing. For most of the remainder of this chapter, we will follow Cotton's four-step order.

The Duty of Singing Psalms

On the title page of the *Bay Psalm Book,* Cotton states that psalm singing is a gospel ordinance. His grandson Cotton Mather called psalm singing a "holy, delightfull and profitable Ordinance in the Church or Household."[4] The Westminster Assembly divines said in their "Directory for the Publick Worship of God" that it is the duty of all Christians "to praise God publickly, by singing of psalms together in the congregation, and also privately in the family."[5]

Cotton points out that Christ sang a psalm with His disciples after "the administration of the Lords Supper" (Matt. 26:30).[6] Matthew Henry remarks: "Singing of psalms is a gospel-ordinance. Christ's removing the hymn from the close of the passover to the close of the Lord's Supper, plainly intimates that he intended that ordinance should continue in his church, that, as it had not its birth with the ceremonial law, so it should not die with it."[7]

When Cotton Mather published *Accomplish'd Singer* in 1721, his father, Increase Mather, wrote an endorsement for the book, remarking that psalm singing was "somewhat lost in many places."[8] The problem was not new. Cotton had already dealt with it in *Singing of Psalmes* (1647). In the first section of this volume, Cotton specifically addresses the issue of vocal psalmody. He says there are "Antipsalmists, who doe not acknowledge any singing at all with the voyce in the New Testament, but onely spirituall songs of joy and comfort of the heart in the word of Christ."[9] In arguing for vocal psalms, Cotton cites two classic texts on singing psalms: Ephesians 5:19 and Colossians 3:16. He says that in these verses Paul exhorts us to sing not only silently in our hearts but also audibly with our voices.

Cotton further argues that lifted voices should be understandable, so

John Cotton

Cotton Mather

Increase Mather

Richard Mather

that even uneducated hearers "might be edified, and say, Amen, at such giving of thankes" (1 Cor. 14:14–15).[10] Psalm singing should bless not only the singer but also the listener. Yet, edification should not be the chief aim in singing—it should be God's glory. As Cotton Mather declares, "Let a sincere View to the Honour of God (the great End of Psalmody) animate and regulate your Endeavors to attain this worthy Accomplishment. Let all be done after a godly Sort, that even by this common action you may please and glorify God."[11]

Because God's glory is psalmody's supreme goal, the Puritans believed that singing in worship should be robust rather than reserved, as some have caricatured their singing. While the Puritans sang out of duty, they did so with profound joy and delight in their souls. That is why Mather calls psalm singing a "delightful ordinance."

The Matter to Be Sung

Should singing in public worship be confined to the book of Psalms? Should congregations sing the songs of Moses, Mary, Elizabeth, and other biblical saints? And should the church be allowed to sing hymns composed by spiritually gifted believers? Cotton addresses these questions in the second part of his book.

Cotton says the singing of uninspired hymns should not be allowed in public worship.[12] Quoting Ephesians 5:19 and Colossians 3:16, he says that when Paul exhorts or commands us to sing, he instructs us to sing "psalms and hymns and spiritual songs," which, for Cotton, are "the very Titles of the Songs of David."[13] To stress his point, Cotton says that the word *hymn* in Matthew 26:30 is "the generall title for the whole Book of Psalmes."[14] Therefore, Paul was directing us to sing not hymns or spiritual songs written by any believer, but specifically the psalms of David. In Cotton's mind, the title "Psalms or Songs of David" refers to all 150 psalms, even though David did not write all the psalms.

Other Puritans supported Cotton's interpretation of Ephesians 5:19 and Colossians 3:16. In commenting on Colossians 3:16, Edward Leigh argues: "As the Apostle exhorteth us to singing, so he instructeth what the matter of our Song should be, viz. Psalmes, Hymnes, and spirituall Songs. Those three are the Titles of the Songs of David, as they are delivered to us by the Holy Ghost himself."[15] Similarly, Jonathan Clapham, maintaining the worth of singing David's psalms, says, "The Apostle, Eph. 5 and Col. 3, where he commands singing of Psalmes, doth clearly point us to David's Psalms, by using those, Psalmes, hymnes, and spirituall songs, which answer to the three Hebrew words, *Shorim, Tehillim, Mizmorim,* whereby David's Psalmes were called."[16]

Thomas Ford, a member of the Westminster Assembly of Divines, also affirmed this view. He asserted in his *Singing of Psalmes: the duty of Christians under the New Testament. Or A vindication of that Gospel-ordinance in V. sermons upon Ephesians 5. 19. Wherein are asserted and cleared 1. That 2. What 3. How 4. Why [brace] we must sing* (1653):

> I know nothing more probable then this, viz. That Psalmes, and Hymns, and spiritual Songs, do answer to Mizmorim, Tehillim, and Shirim, which are the Hebrew names of David's Psalmes. All the Psalmes together are called Tehillim, i.e. Praises, or songs of praise. Mizmor and Shir are in the Titles of many Psalmes, sometimes one, and sometimes the other, and sometimes both joyn'd together, as they know well who can read the Originall. Now the Apostle calling them by the same names by which the Greek Translation (which the New Testament so much follows) renders the Hebrew, is an argument that he means no other then David's Psalms.[17]

Ford's statement is important because it indicates that when the Westminster Confession of Faith says that "singing of psalms with grace in the heart" is a part of "the ordinary religious worship of God" (21.5), it means exclusively the book of Psalms.[18]

Nick Needham, however, suggests that the framers of the confession did not intend the word *psalms* to mean only the psalms of David.[19] Needham argues:

> If only they [the composers of the confession] had written 'David's psalms,' that would be an end of the matter. But they did not write 'David's psalms.' From a purely linguistic standpoint, it is therefore wholly possible and legitimate to interpret the unqualified word 'psalms' in 21.5 either as David's psalms, or as religious songs in general.[20]

This would thus allow for uninspired hymns.

Matthew Winzer, who understands the term *psalms* in the confession to refer strictly to the book of Psalms, challenges Needham's view. Winzer concludes that Needham "failed to properly represent the view of the Westminster Assembly when he claims that exclusive psalmody is the least probable historical-contextual interpretation of the reference to 'singing of psalms' in Confession 21.5."[21] Winzer's argument seems to hold more weight than Needham's.

Though Cotton made a strong case for the exclusive psalmody interpretation of Ephesians 5:19 and Colossians 3:16, he was not a strict advocate of exclusive psalmody. He stated: "Not onely the Psalms of David, but any other spirituall Songs recorded in Scripture, may lawfully be sung in Christian Churches, as the song of Moses, and Asaph, Heman and Ethan, Solomon and Hezekiah, Habacuck

and Zachary, Hannah and Deborah, Mary and Elizabeth, and the like."[22]

As for doctrinally sound uninspired, or extra-scriptural, hymns, Cotton says they should not be sung in public worship, but they may certainly be sung in "private houses."[23] He instructed,

> We grant also, that any private Christian, who hath a gift to frame a spirituall Song, may both frame it, and sing it privately, for his own private comfort, and remembrance of some speciall benefit, or deliverance: nor doe we forbid the private use of an Instrument of Musick therewithal; So that attention to the instrument, doe not divert the heart from attention to the matter of the Song.[24]

Cotton does not deny "that in the publique thankesgivings of the Church, if the Lord should furnish any of the members of the Church with a spirituall gift to compose a Psalme upon any speciall occasion, he may lawfully be allowed to sing it before the Church, and the rest hearing it, and approving it, may goe along with him in Spirit, and say Amen to it."[25]

In a word, Cotton sanctioned singing newly composed religious songs, but only in special gatherings. He was concerned that only David's psalms and other Scripture songs be sung in worship services.[26]

The Singers

Who must sing these divinely inspired songs? Should an individual be allowed to sing for the congregation, or should the entire congregation sing? Should men and women sing, or men only? Should unbelievers be allowed to sing with believers? Should people who are not church members be allowed to sing? Cotton addresses these kinds of questions in the third section of his book.

While solos might be appropriate in other settings, Cotton says that in public worship God wants the entire congregation to sing together. Intriguingly, Cotton explains that after partaking of the Lord's Supper, Jesus and His disciples—a sort of congregation—sang a psalm. Likewise, in the Old Testament, "Moses and the children of Israel [who were a body of people] sang a Song of Thanksgiving to the Lord" (Exod. 15:1).[27]

Cotton says women may sing along with men in congregational singing, citing Exodus 15:20–21, which says that Miriam and other women sang God's praises along with men. For Cotton, this passage is sufficient ground "to justifie the lawfull practice of women in singing together with men."[28]

Cotton spends much time addressing the questions of whether believers who are not members of the local church and unbelievers are allowed to sing with believing church members in public worship. Some people in Cotton's day believed that only professing church members had the right to sing during a worship service. Cotton's response was that since psalm singing is a moral duty of all Christians, every person, whether a church member or not, is "bound to sing to the praise of God."[29] He says psalm singing is a "generall Commandment"; thus, as the psalms themselves make clear, everyone in the world—including unbelievers—is called to lift up their voices to the Lord. Scripture is plain: "O sing unto the Lord a new song: sing unto the Lord, all the earth" (Ps. 96:1); "Make a joyful noise unto the Lord, all ye lands" (Ps. 100:1); "Sing unto God, ye kingdoms of the earth; O sing praises unto the Lord; Selah" (Ps. 68:32).[30]

Not all Puritans agreed with Cotton on granting unbelievers the right to participate in congregational singing. For example, this issue surfaced in John Bunyan's Bedford meeting house. Two years after Bunyan's death, the Bedford church met and "discussed the subject and gravely decided . . . that Publick Singing of Psalms be practiced by the Church with a caution that none others perform it but such as can sing with grace in their Hearts according to the command of Christ."[31]

The Bedford congregation's conviction was not uncommon among separatist churches, which said a local church should consist only of believers; thus, in public worship, only believers should sing. But Cotton made it clear that on the basis of the general nature of the command to sing to the Lord, none is "exempted from this service."[32] Most Puritans agreed. However, Cotton acknowledged that "the grounds and ends of Singing . . . peculiarly concerne the Church and people of God and therefore they [the believers] of all others are most bound to abound in this Dutie."[33] While the unsaved are commanded to make melody to the Lord, the redeemed should delight in this command.

The Manner of Singing

In the final segment of *Singing of Psalmes,* Cotton addresses the issue of whether it is lawful to sing psalms in meter to tunes invented by men. Using common sense, Cotton reasons that if it is "the holy will of God, that the Hebrew Scriptures should be translated into English Prose in order unto reading, then it is like sort his holy will, that the Hebrew Psalmes, (which are Poems and Verses) should be translated into English Poems and Verses in order to Singing."[34] Practically speaking, Cotton says a metrical psalter makes "the verses more easie for memory, and more fit for melody."[35] Hence, singing David's psalms in meter is not only proper but also wise.

As for tunes, Cotton says that since the Lord "hath hid from us the

Hebrew Tunes, and the musicall Accents wherewith the Psalmes of David were wont to be sung, it must needs be that the Lord alloweth us to sing them in any such grave, and solemne, and plaine Tunes, as doe fitly suite the gravitie of the matter, the solemnitie of Gods worship, and the capacitie of a plaine People."[36] God gives us freedom to compose reverent tunes for the Psalms, so long as the rhythm and tunes are pleasing to God and edifying to His people.[37] We should never use this liberty to satisfy our selfish desires.

Cotton suggests that a minister read each line of a psalm before asking the congregation to sing it. Though the Bible does not require this practice, Cotton found it helpful "that the words of the Psalme be openly read before hand, line after line, or two lines together, that so they who want [lack] either books or skill to reade, may know what is to be sung, and joyne with the rest in the dutie of singing . . . and by Singing be stirred up to use holy Harmony, both with the Lord and his people."[38]

The Westminster divines similarly advise:

> In singing of psalms, the voice is to be tunably and gravely ordered; but the chief care must be to sing with understanding, and with grace in the heart, making melody unto the Lord.
>
> That the whole congregation may join herein, every one that can read is to have a psalm book; and all others, not disabled by age or otherwise, are to be exhorted to learn to read. But for the present, where many in the congregation cannot read, it is convenient that the minister, or some other fit person appointed by him and the other ruling officers, do read the psalm, line by line, before the singing thereof.[39]

A "Puritan" Baptist Exception

As Puritanism waned at the close of the seventeenth century, a Puritan-minded Baptist preacher named Benjamin Keach (1640–1707) introduced hymns, in addition to psalms and paraphrases, into the English Nonconformist churches. He began by allowing one hymn after each administration of the Lord's Supper, and then moved to one hymn per Sabbath.[40] Eventually he became "a pioneer of congregational hymn singing."[41]

In response to Isaac Marlow's *A Brief Discourse Concerning Singing in the Public Worship of God in the Gospel Church* (1690), which argued that hymn singing was a distraction from the plainness of Puritan worship,[42] Keach wrote his first book on the subject: *The Breach Repaired in God's Worship; or Singing of Psalms, Hymns, and Spiritual Songs, Proved to Be an Holy Ordinance of Jesus Christ* (1691). Keach argued for hymn singing based on examples from David, Solomon, and others, and its "educational value." This book, together with Keach's *Spiritual Melody; containing near Three Hundred Sacred Hymns* (1691), created quite a stir, even in Keach's own church, where nine people withdrew their membership. That, however, was the tip of the iceberg. Marlow responded with an appendix to his own book even before Keach's *The Breach Repaired* was

Benjamin Keach

Isaac Watts

available to the public, moving Keach to add an appendix to his own book. That sparked pamphlet war among a number of pastors, most of whom supported Keach. Despite this, Keach lost an additional twenty members to Robert Steed, who wrote against the congregational hymn singing in *An Epistle Written to the Members of a Church in London Concerning Singing* (1691).[43] The following year the issue of hymn singing reached the General Assembly, which censured both sides for their uncharitable reflections against their brethren; with that, the pamphlet war ceased for four years.[44]

In 1696, pamphlet war began again after Keach published *A Feast of Fat Things; containing several Scripture Songs and Hymns.* In all, Keach himself wrote nearly five hundred hymns and promoted hundreds more by publishing hymnbooks that circulated throughout the United Kingdom and North America. His work paved the way for Isaac Watts (1674–1748), often called "the father of English hymnody," whose renowned *Hymns and Spiritual Songs* (1707) dealt a serious blow to the fading Puritan convictions about Psalm singing in public worship.[45] For the first time in church history, man-made hymns replaced psalm singing.[46]

Conclusion: Practical Benefits of Psalm Singing

Albert Bailey rightly concludes that Calvin's theological beliefs about the Psalter helped unite the Reformers

Robert Sanderson

and Puritans around the conviction that "only God's own Word was worthy to be used in praising Him."[47] Psalm singing was important to Calvin and the Puritans, however, not only because it is biblical and historical and is our theological and moral duty to God, but also because of the gracious effects it has upon those who sing. Here are some spiritual and practical benefits of psalm singing:

Psalm singing comforts the soul. It lifts up the spiritually downcast and provides spiritual riches that are Christ-centered and experiential. Cotton says psalm singing "allayeth the passions of melancholy and choler, yea and scattereth the furious temptations of evill spirits, 1 Sam. 16.23."[48] It "helpeth to ass[u]age enmity, and to restore friendship favour, as in Saul to David."[49] Increase Mather observes "that musick is of great efficacy against melancholy." Mather says, "the sweetness and delightfulness of musick has a natural power to [overcome] melancholy passions."[50]

For Calvin and the Puritans, a psalter is what Robert Sanderson (1587–1662) called "the treasury of Christian comfort."[51] Sanderson, Bishop of Lincoln, ejected from his professorship at Oxford and imprisoned by Parliament, found great comfort through difficult times in the psalter. Subsequently, he wrote that a psalter is

> fitted for all persons and all necessities; able to raise the soul from dejection by the frequent mention of God's mercies to repentant sinners: to stir up holy desire; to increase joy; to moderate sorrow; to nourish hope, and teach us patience, by waiting God's leisure; to beget a trust in the mercy, power, and providence of our Creator; and to cause a resignation of ourselves to his will: and then, and not till then, to believe ourselves happy.[52]

Psalm singing cultivates piety. Lewis Bayly included a section on psalm singing in *The Practice of Pietie*. He set down five rules for psalm singing:

> 1. Beware of singing divine Psalmes for an ordinary recreation; as do men of impure Spirits, who sing holy Psalmes, intermingled with prophane *Ballads*. They are Gods Word; take them not in thy mouth in vaine.
>
> 2. Remember to sing Davids Psalmes, with Davids Spirit.
>
> 3. Practice Saint Pauls rule: I will sing with the Spirit, but I will sing with the understanding also.
>
> 4. As you sing, uncover your heads, and behave your selves in comely reverence, as in the sight of God, singing to God, in Gods owne Words: but bee sure that the matter makes more melody in your hearts, then the Musicke in your Eares: for the singing with a grace in our hearts, in that which the Lord is delighted withal. . . .
>
> 5. Thou maist, if thou thinke good, sing all the Psalmes over in order: for all are most divine and comfortable. But if thou wilt chuse some speciall Psalmes, as more fit for some times, and purposes: and such, as by the oft-usage, thy people may the easilier commit to memory.[53]

Finally, psalm singing helps us glorify God, as the Reformation and post-Reformation divines tell us repeatedly. Wilhelmus à Brakel, a primary Dutch Further Reformation divine, writes: "Singing is a religious exercise by which, with the appropriate modulation of the voice, we worship, thank, and praise God."[54] Therefore, let those who sing, sing for the praise of God! "Sing praises to God, sing praises: sing praises unto our King, sing praises. For God is the King of all the earth: sing ye praises with understanding" (Ps. 47:6–7).

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1. Ibid., 18. Perry Miller and Thomas Johnson, on the other hand, believe Richard Mather wrote the preface. See their *The Puritans* (New York: American Book, 1938), 669.

2. London: Printed by M. S. for Hannah Allen, at the Crowne in Popes-head-alley: and John Rothwell at the Sunne and fountaine in Pauls-church-yard, 1647. Hereafter, *Singing of Psalmes.*

3. David P. McKay, "Cotton Mather's Unpublished Singing Sermon," *New England Quarterly* 48, 3 (1975): 413.

4. "Text of Cotton Mather Singing Sermon April 18, 1721" in ibid., 419.

5. "The Directory for the Publick Worship of God," in *Westminster Confession of Faith* (1646; Glasgow: Free Presbyterian Publications, 1997), 393.

6. *Singing of Psalmes*, 7.

7. Matthew Henry, *Commentary* (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson Publishers, 1991), 5:318.

8. See "An Attestation from the Very Reverend Dr. Increase Mather," in Cotton Mather, *Accomplish'd Singer* (Boston: Printed by B. Green, for S. Gerrish at his Shop in Cornhill, 1721).

9. *Singing of Psalmes*, 2.

10. Ibid.

11. "Text of Cotton Mather Singing Sermon April 18, 1721," in McKay, "Cotton Mather's Unpublished Singing Sermon," 422.

12. *Singing of Psalmes*, 32.

13. Ibid., 16.

14. Ibid., 25.

15. Edward Leigh, *Annotations upon all the New Testament philologicall and theologicall wherein the emphasis and elegancie of the Greeke is observed, some imperfections in our translation are discovered, divers Jewish rites and customes tending to illustrate the text are mentioned, many antilogies and seeming contradictions reconciled, severall darke and obscure places opened, sundry passages vindicated from the false glosses of papists and hereticks* (London: Printed by W. W. and E. G. for William Lee, and are to be sold at his shop, 1650), 306.

16. Jonathan Clapham, *A short and full vindication of that sweet and comfortable ordinance, of singing of Psalmes. Together with some profitable rules, to direct weak Christians how to sing to edification. And a briefe confutation of some of the most usual cavils made against the same. Published especially for the use of the Christians, in and about the town of Wramplingham in Norf. for the satisfaction of such, as scruple the said ordinance, for the establishment of such as do own it, against all seducers that come amongst them; and for the instruction of all in general, that they may better improve the same to their spiritual comfort and benefit* (London: [s.n.], Printed, anno Dom. 1656), 3.

17. Thomas Ford, *Singing of Psalmes: the duty of Christians under the New Testament. Or A vindication of that Gospel-ordinance in V. sermons upon Ephesians 5. 19. Wherein are asserted and cleared 1. That 2. What 3. How 4. Why [brace] we must sing* (London: Printed by A. M. for Christopher Meredith at the Crane in Pauls Church-yard, 1653), 15, 16.

18. *Westminster Confession of Faith*, 92.

19. Nick Needham, "Westminster and Worship: Psalms, Hymns, and Musical Instruments?" in *The Westminster Confession into the 21st Century*, ed. J. Ligon Duncan (Fearn, Ross-shire: Mentor, 2003), 2:250–53.

20. Ibid., 253.

21. Matthew Winzer, "Westminster and Worship Examined: A Review of Nick Needham's essay on the Westminster Confession of Faith's teaching concerning the regulative principle, the singing of psalms, and the use of musical instruments in the public worship of God," *The Confessional Presbyterian* 4 (2008): 264.

22. *Singing of Psalmes*, 15.

23. Ibid., 32.

24. Ibid., 15.

25. Ibid.

26. For Thomas Manton's similar view, see William Young, *The Puritan Principle of Worship* (Vienna, Va.: Publications Committee of the Presbyterian Reformed Church, n.d.), 27–28.

27. *Singing of Psalmes*, 40.

28. Ibid., 43.

29. Ibid., 44.

30. Ibid., 45.

31. Scholes, *The Puritans and Music in England and New England*, 268.

32. *Singing of Psalmes*, 45.

33. Ibid.

34. Ibid., 55.

35. Ibid.

36. Ibid., 56.

37. Ibid., 60.

38. Ibid., 62–63. For more on Cotton's view, see Young, *The Puritan Principle of Worship,* 20–27.

39. "The Directory for the Publick Worship of God," in *Westminster Confession of Faith*, 393.

40. J. R. Watson, *The English Hymn: A Critical and Historical Study* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997), 110; cf. Horton Davies, *Worship and Theology in England from Andrewes to Baxter and Fox, 1603–1690* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1975), 510.

41. Hugh Martin, *Benjamin Keach, Pioneer of Congregational Hymn Singing* (London: Independent Press, 1961).

42. For Isaac Marlow, see Davies, *Worship and Theology in England from Andrewes to Baxter and Fox,* 274–75.

43. James Patrick Carnes, "The Famous Mr. Keach: Benjamin Keach and His Influence on Congregational Singing in Seventeenth Century England" (M.A. thesis, North Texas State University, 1984), 59–61.

44. Robert H. Young, "The History of Baptist Hymnody in England from 1612 to 1800" (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Southern California, 1959), 43–44.

45. Carnes, "The Famous Mr. Keach," 94–95. For a succinct study of Watts, see Watson, *The English Hymn: A Critical and Historical Study,* 133–70; cf. Darryl Hart's chapter in this volume.

46. LeFebvre, *To Sing the Psalms, Again,* 14.

47. Albert Edward Bailey, *The Gospel in Hymns: Backgrounds and Interpretations* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1950), 17.

48. *Singing of Psalmes*, 4.

49. Ibid., 4.

50. Increase Mather, *A History of God's Remarkable Providences in Colonial New England* (1856; reprint, Portland, Ore.: Back Home Industries, 1997), 187.

51. Cited in Rowland E. Prothero, *The Psalms in Human Life* (1903; reprint, Birmingham. Ala.: Solid Ground Christian Books, 2002), 176.

52. Cited in ibid.

53. Lewis Bayly, *The Practice of Pietie* (London: Printed by R. Y. for Andrew Crooke, 1638), 233–34.

54. Wilhelmus à Brakel, *The Christian's Reasonable Service*, trans. Bartel Elshout, ed. Joel R. Beeke (Morgan, Pa.: Soli Deo Gloria Publications, 1995), 4:31.

Dr. Joel R. Beeke serves as President and Professor of Systematic Theology, Church History, and Homiletics at Puritan Reformed Theological Seminary. He is a prolific author and is also pastor of Heritage Reformed Church in Grand Rapids, MI.

Report on URCNA Synod 2010

Mr. Myron Rau

Synod London 2010 made for long days and short nights. Synod began Monday evening with a worship service and prayer for Synod, which was over by 9:30. Breakfast began at 6:45 each morning and the morning sessions at 8:00. On Monday and Tuesday evenings we convened until 10:00 P.M., on Thursday evening until 11:30, and Synod concluded Friday evening at 11:15 P.M.

Synod was represented by one-hundred-eighty delegates from ninety-eight churches. Four churches that have joined since the last Synod were ratified to officially become churches of our federation. They were: Covenant Reformed Church of Carbondale, PA; First United Reformed Church of Oak Lawn, IL; Redeemer Reformation Church of Regina, SK; and Trinity United Reformed Church of Visalia, CA. There were additional fraternal delegates from nineteen Reformed denominations with whom we have ecumenical relations, who were given ten minutes each to address Synod. Some of these traveled thirty-five hours to be with us and were from places as far away as the Congo, South Africa, New Zeeland, Scotland, and Indonesia. Church planters present also were given five minutes to talk about their work. The singing in all our opening and closing devotions by over two hundred men was most inspirational, to say the least.

Synod was held on the large campus of the University of Western Ontario in London, Ontario, convened by the Cornerstone URC of London. We ate our meals in the dorm building, where the committee meetings were also held. There was about a three-quarter mile walk from the dorms to the auditorium where the plenary sessions were held, which we walked several times each day.

Synod was ably guided by Rev. Pontier as chairman, Rev. Scheuers vice chairman, Rev. Barnes first clerk, and Rev. Nymeyer second clerk.

Most of the first two days were spent on committee work. Most delegates were assigned to committees, with late registrants given the option of which committee they would serve.

Each church was given three copies of the proposed songbook, containing only the hymn selections at this time, with the psalms yet to be added. Consistories are to review the proposed hymns and request changes by way of overtures to the next Synod. Some concern was raised over wording, "that the song book will be purchased and used by all URCNA churches." The Liturgical Forms Committee had submitted its completed forms for the new songbook at the last Synod and encouraged churches to utilize them and continue giving feedback to the committee while they continue working on the remainder of the forms.

A view of Synod from the back row

Rev. J. Tuinstra and Rev. K. Davis confer with one another on a point

Continued work on the joint hymnbook with the Canadian Reformed Church has been discontinued for now by this Synod. The committees have been at an impasse with the CanRef on hymns and theological education. However, continued dialogue and interaction with the Canadian Reformed brothers is urged. The churches are also to continue studying the proposed Joint Church Order with the Canadian Reformed Church, and to submit changes to Synod by way of overtures.

A change in Church Order was adopted, that any change needing ratification will take effect after it has been ratified by the churches rather than after the next Synod. Another change in Church Order was adopted which makes clear the method of receiving a church and its minister into the federation. These changes must now be ratified by two-thirds of the churches before taking effect.

Synod urged all office-bearers to repudiate Federal Vision teachings where they are not in harmony with the Three Forms of Unity. This was affirmed without dissent along with a list of fifteen teachings from Scripture and the Three Forms of Unity regarding Federal Vision and Justification. An appeal that Synod 2007 erred on procedural grounds in the way it adopted the nine rejections of error on Federal Vision, and to declare that action null and void, failed, but not without dissent.

A study committee was appointed to evaluate the need for a part/full-time or volunteer missions coordinator, as well as a committee to provide advice on the membership status of retired ministers. The study committee's recommendations on doctrinal commitment for church membership were sent back to the committee for refinement. A procedure was adopted for voting on ministerial examinations held at classes. Regulations for Synodical Procedure were also adopted in order to ensure that the business of Synod is transacted in an orderly way.

We call ourselves United Reformed, but it is quite clear that on organic union with the Canadian Reformed Church, we are not united, but divided, it appears almost in half. There are so many things interrelated on the proposed merger and our phases of ecumenicity, that heated discussion continually crept up, and a close vote requiring a show of hands indicated the division of almost one-half split existing. It seems that we are so intent on unity with others that we are dividing our own family in the process. We are selecting stages of ecumenical relations with nine churches which are a part, along with us, of NAPARC (North American Presbyterian and Reformed Churches) as well as a host of foreign Reformed sister churches.

The federation's budget was increased from $55,775 to $58,243, a $2,468 increase, for a total of $10.53 per family, which remains just under $300 per church if all churches contribute. By percentage of churches, the U.S. share is 65% and the Canadian share is 35%. Synod meetings expenses are not a part of this budget; rather each church pays per delegate based on expenses anticipated for that individual Synod.

The next Synod is scheduled in two years instead of three as has been done in our more recent history, and will be held in eastern U.S and convened by the Reformed Bible Church of Pompton Plains, New Jersey. The new stated clerk of our federation is Rev. Brad Nymeyer of Sioux Center, Iowa, and the newly appointed webmaster is Gary Fisher of Classis Michigan.

It was a very taxing but rewarding week, and we trust that our feeble efforts also can be used in building up the church and in keeping her faithful to our Lord, who is the head of the church. May He add His blessing to what was accomplished during that week.

The officers of the Synod 2010: Rev. B. Nymeyer, Second Clerk; Rev. R. Pontier, Chairman; Rev. R. Scheuers, Vice Chairman.

Myron Rau is an elder at the Covenant United Reformed Church in Kalamazoo, Michigan. He was a delegate to the 2010 URCNA Synod.

"Let's Just Be Friends for Now"
A Personal Assessment of the New CanRC-URC Relationship

Dr. Gerhard H. Visscher

Often in the world of inter-church relations, the metaphor of courtship and marriage is used. Churches are said to be "getting to know each other," "courting," etc., with a view to an eventual union. In our relation with the United Reformed Churches in North America, such terms have also arisen. While metaphors of this sort are certainly limited, they can be helpful. In that vein, while the Canadian Reformed General Synod of May 2010 wrote to the URCNA synod and expressed its commitment to the eventual union, the URCNA General Synod of July 2010 responded and basically suggested that the two federations should "just be friends" for a while. There was no clear commitment to eventual union; neither was there a clear breaking off of the relationship. That's the way it goes when a courtship breaks down. People are not really sure where to go from there.

Now let me point out that no synod ever put it quite like that. This is only my interpretation. Let me also point out that I am writing this purely as private opinion. I had some official roles to play recently and therefore was present at this last URCNA synod for several days; I will explain those below. Still, the opinion expressed below is my own. The official report will be written later by our official fraternal delegates. The issue however is weighty and urgent enough for me to voice an opinion already now.

A Role

In various ways in the last number of years, I have been involved in the process. As a professor of the Theological Seminary and as a minister without pastoral responsibilities, I regularly preach on URCNA pulpits and have as a result certainly become acquainted with many fine URC brothers and sisters. I rejoice in them and their commitment to the truth.

Last January, I became more involved when our Committee for Church Unity asked Dr. Jason Van Vliet and me to travel to California and appear before the Classis Southwest of the URCNA in order to answer specific questions that the Classis had about the Canadian Reformed Churches. Most of these questions had to do with our understanding of the Federal Vision controversy, the views of Klaas Schilder and our general theological approach. Those questions and answers have since been published and can also be found online at http://www.pupilsofchrist.com. The response to the answers given, by the way, was all very positive. The visit went a long way towards removing misconceptions and wrong impressions of the CanRC churches. It is noteworthy that subsequently there were no formal objections raised by this Classis.

More recently, the CanRC Synod mandated Dr. Jason Van Vliet and me to attend the URCNA synod and, if invited, answer on their floor questions that the URC churches might still have. This was a reciprocal arrangement, as members of the URC CERCU committee were also given the same privilege at the Canadian Reformed synod in May 2010. The questions that Dr Van Vliet and I were asked to answer were considerably less weighty than the questions raised in California; the issues had do with views on creation, degree of uniformity, nature of preaching, approach to communion and discipline, admonition of youth. There were also questions that had to do with perceptions about excessive drinking, immodest dress, and lack of Christian behavior on the hockey arenas. Judging by the response thereafter, however, many URC delegates were clearly uncomfortable with these last questions as a great number of delegates apologized to us as they felt that the same kind of charges could be leveled at them. Our response to these questions, by the way, was that we do not condone them and we continue to preach and admonish on these points, but we do recognize that these things happen, and we should not be surprised. The nature of a covenantal community is such that those who are weak in the faith and less eager to put it into practice are also among us, and we hope that sometime in the future the Lord will cause them to work out all the consequences of the Christian faith more fully. The challenge in our day, I suggested, was to remain faithful to the doctrine of justification by faith alone as well as to the Reformed position of children and youth in the covenant. Let us not, in reaction to the former point, move in a baptistic direction on the latter.

I was also involved with this URC synod in another capacity. For the first time in the history of the Theological

College, we were invited both to put up a display table at the URC Synod and to speak some words of introduction about the seminary to the synod. We gladly accepted and made use of both invitations. Hence, some of our other seminary professors were also at the URC synod. Since there was no one to speak with at the display table during sessions of synod, we took the opportunity to listen in on the sessions. It meant several busy days of catching the flavor of the URCNA through interacting personally, speaking, and listening to the debates on the floor of synod.

Again, it is important to realize, this is not a report from the principal of the seminary to the Board, nor from a professor to a synodical committee. Nor does this view necessarily reflect that of any Board or committee. It is just my personal opinion and reflections for the benefit of members of the Canadian Reformed Churches. The question that will be large on our minds will be: where do we go from here?

Nine Points

Besides asking the URCNA whether they were still committed to the relationship, the Canadian Reformed synod also asked the URCNA about the status of the Nine Points of Schererville 2007. While I doubt that the URC synod actually answered that question in a formal letter to us, it was the subject of lengthy debate, since the Hills URC sought the rescinding of the Nine Points on procedural grounds. Hills URC argued that the Nine Points did not come from a specific church and therefore were not lawfully on the table of the 2007 synod. After a heated debate, the Hills URC appeal was defeated and the Nine Points stood. Some will ask, "What do I think about that?"

Two points here regarding the Nine Points. First, it is necessary to understand that while I think the Nine Points should have been more carefully considered and presented by Schererville, I have no significant objection to them. There was considerable concern raised about them initially when they were first published because many Canadian Reformed persons understood them as a critique of the theological positions they had learned from K. Schilder and others. When one reads them against the backdrop of what is being said among Federal Vision proponents, however, they become much clearer and even quite acceptable to us. For more on this, see the article "CanRC Answers to URC Questions" on *www.pupilsofchrist.com*.

Second, concerning the procedural question, there was a very interesting debate on the floor of synod. It was a rare moment when the chairman and the vice-chairman asked for the floor shortly after each other. The chairman, Rev. Ralph Pontier, rose first to warn about the danger of matters being discussed at synod that did not adequately come from the churches. No minor assembly discussed the Nine Points before Synod did; they did not come from there. Later, the vice chairman, Rev. Ronald Scheuers rose to argue that the matter of Federal Vision was legitimately on the agenda of synod, having been placed there by the churches, and that the Nine Points were nothing more than an answer to the FV questions. What do I think? I think both of these fine brothers were correct. Synods may not make up their own agendas, but the Federal Vision matter was placed on the agenda in a proper manner, and the Nine Points were an answer to the FV question. Just as our synods often write lengthy observations and considerations in response to matters and those observations and considerations are not derived directly from the churches, so here. Frankly, the existence and confirmation of the Nine Points does not, in my judgment, need to pose any significant problems to the Canadian Reformed Churches.

Similarly, it should be noted here that, without dissent, the URC Synod accepted the more lengthy report on Federal Vision and Justification.[1] Again, I have no significant problem with that. While I am not sure that the body of the report accurately reflects the views of Federal Vision writers, that is something that such persons will need to address themselves. The conclusions of the Justification report however are largely quotations from the Three Forms of Unity and hence ones with which Canadian Reformed people would wholeheartedly agree. The only criticism I have is that, given the nature of the areas of the final fifteen recommendations, it would have been good to affirm that the covenant promises are extended to all covenant children and not just to those who respond in faith; this, however, is not something FV people deny, but it would have been a helpful affirmation of the teaching of Lord's Day 27.

In any case, I believe that if we have not adequately done so thus far, the Canadian Reformed Churches would do well to express solid agreement with the URCNA on the matter of justification. There should be no doubt about the fact that we stand shoulder to shoulder with these brothers on this most significant doctrinal point. Justification is solely through faith alone on the basis of the perfect righteousness of Jesus Christ alone.

Three Committees

This URNA synod also had on its agenda Overture 13, which urged synod to conclude the work of the URCNA's Phase 3 Unity Committees.

Let me quote from Overture 13 at length. The Classis wrote:

> This overture calls us to express appreciation for the work that has been accomplished by these committees while acknowledging that our federations are not yet

ready to enter into Phase Three of our Guidelines for Ecumenicity and Church Unity. . . . we wish to set forth two principles with absolute clarity.

First Principle: We believe that the Lord of the church does call His people to pursue unity of heart, mind and purpose (Eph. 4:1–6; John 17:20–23). However, a combination of sinfulness and cultural distinctions sometimes prevents or indefinitely delays *complete* unity among like-minded groups of believers. *We should never be satisfied with such a situation.* But neither should our longing for fuller expressions of unity cause us to sacrifice the unity the Lord already has granted within our existing federations.

Second Principle: We love and respect our Canadian Reformed brothers, and we regard their congregations as like-minded sister churches. *Please do not read anything in this overture as a contradiction of this*. Since the inception of the URCNA, we have appreciated the encouragement, fellowship, and example of our brothers in the Canadian Reformed Churches. We consider the Canadian Reformed Churches to be a federation of true churches which serve the Lord faithfully and admirably. We desire to continue serving the Lord alongside of them, just as we serve alongside our brothers in the Reformed Church in the United States and in the Orthodox Presbyterian Church (with which we also enjoy Phase 2, or "sister church," relationships).

Division in the Process of Uniting

But, after nearly a decade of struggling to find a way to merge the URC and the CanRC into a single federation, we believe that the process is having a detrimental effect on both federations, as well as on their relationship with one another. In fact, we have become convinced that continued efforts to merge at this time will result not in one federation, but three—because a substantial number of congregations from both existing federations seem almost certain to refuse to remain in a merged federation.

Surely, that unwillingness to manifest a greater degree of federational unity is due in part to our sinfulness. But whose sin is it? Time and again, we find ourselves unable to answer that question. We believe the question is unanswerable because many of our differences are rooted not in sin, but in historical and cultural differences. These differences have left both federations with perspectives to which we hold tenaciously—not because of sinful pride, but because we truly believe that our perspective reveals the proper course for the churches to follow.

Overture 13 then went on to suggest that the work of three significant committees be concluded.

> *A Common Songbook?* Whereas there was a time in our relationship wherein we had one joint committee to work towards a common songbook to be used by a new united federation, Synod Schererville 2007 already moved away from that direction when it shifted their committee's focus away from a common songbook and towards a new URCNA Psalter Hymnal. London 2010 went only a small step further when it decided "to conclude the mandate of the Songbook Committee to produce a common songbook" (*Press Release, July 30 2010).*

Personally, I am not surprised. From my experience on many URCNA pulpits I know that the brothers and sisters there have a deep love and appreciation for many of the psalms and hymns. The same is true of the brothers and sisters in the CanRC with our Book of Praise. To combine these two books into one book that would adequately satisfy the wishes of both groups is a monumental, if not impossible, task. Clearly, if these two federations ever do get together, they will have to be willing to sing out of either or both books. Maybe it's a moot point. As all these songs will undoubtedly be scriptural, our only real concern may be how to carry all these books to church; but by the time we all get together we might just be singing collectively by means of a projector screen anyway. Our electronic age will present us with unifying possibilities!

Theological Education? Overture 13 also suggested that the Theological Education Committee be dissolved. Again, one need not be surprised that London 2010 agreed. The committee had a mandate to resolve the tension between the position of the URCNA, which was against a federational seminary because of bad experiences in the past, with the position of the CanRC, which is very convinced that a federational seminary is the more biblical and proper approach. Burlington 2010 and London 2010 both rejected the committee's final proposal that would allow entrance to the ministry through independent seminaries and place a federational seminary under the jurisdiction of a regional synod. London 2010 declared that the committee had fulfilled their mandate (Press Release, July 28), rejected the model proposed, and suggested that churches that came up with a better model could address a subsequent synod by overture.

Obviously, I have an opinion in this discussion. A federational seminary is not just a Canadian Reformed preference; this has been regarded as the proper route ever since the Secession days in the Netherlands. Training future ministers is not the

business of private enterprise or independent boards; it is obviously the business of the church to prepare future ministers of the Word. Bad experiences with previous seminaries is no reason to reject the principle; when a seminary goes bad it is also the federation that is responsible for failing to govern properly. In Hamilton we are blessed to have both a federation that does govern and a seminary faculty that is willing to be governed and respects the wishes of the federation.

Having a federational seminary certainly has its benefits. In the present we are enjoying a high degree of unity in the CanRC federation, and much of that is due to the fact that almost all our ministers have received the same seminary education. A federational seminary with a high degree of academic rigor also bodes well for the future of the federation. As of 2011 the Canadian Reformed Theological Seminary will have seen a complete change of faculty over a process of no more than ten years, and, under God's wonderful provision, that has happened without the sense or the charge that we have changed direction.

Is it entirely impossible to unite these two approaches to seminary education? I continue to believe that an approach that I have defended before is the most viable option. If there is a willingness to have a federational seminary, a federation could establish a board that would both supervise the federational seminary as well as evaluate the seminary education of those who attend non-federational schools. Such a board could hold seminaries that want federational approval accountable to agreed-upon standards and ensure that the final outcomes are as similar as possible. Such a board could even insist on representation in boards of seminaries seeking support. But that is undoubtedly a discussion for another day.

Joint Church Order? Overture 13 also asked London 2010 to "declare that the mandate of the Proposed Joint Church Order Committee has been fulfilled." Overture 18 likewise asked that this Committee be disbanded. London did not quite do that however. It continued the committee but at the same time decided that any changes to the Proposed Church Order should now be directed to the synod by overture rather than to the committee. While this is an interesting development, it is also quite problematic. It means that the Proposed Church Order would no longer be a jointly agreed upon document as one federation may make changes which might not be agreeable to the other federation. Is the URCNA getting prepared to go to the bargaining table on aspects of the Joint Church Order in case the churches do warm up to the idea of federative unity at some future date?

While I am not sure what all the issues with the PJCO might be for the URC brothers, I have certainly observed one during the time I spent in London. A Canadian Reformed person sitting there listening to over 200 brothers dialogue together in a large assembly will often be struck by the great contrast with the smaller delegated bodies of the Canadian Reformed synods. It became apparent to me that this Synod could complete its agenda in a quicker fashion (1 week) than a CanRC synod (2–3 weeks) also because it has a larger number of committees. But how well will this continue to function if the number of churches and hence the number of delegates continues to grow? Clearly, there was a sense too that every church and every varying opinion wanted to be heard and heard clearly. Perhaps the fact that the larger percentage of the URCNA is American has had an influence on the representational nature of this body. One leaves then very doubtful that any committee will ever manage to convince this federation to operate its broader ecclesiastical assemblies in a delegated rather than representative manner.

Two New Problems?

Of particular interest to the Canadian Reformed federation are a couple of other points.

One was a proposal to define more carefully several terms and the authority given to them. Synod London was presented with terms such as "doctrinal affirmation," "pastoral advice," "study committee reports," and "synodical judgments." Clearly this was an attempt to define both the nature and the authority of a document such as the Nine Points of Schererville 2007. The discussion was quite extensive however, and the emotions ran high. The proposal suggested, for example, that while "doctrinal affirmations" could not be used to bring disciplinary charges against anyone, such affirmations should be respected and upheld by all officebearers. To Canadian Reformed ears, this sounded too much like extra-Scriptural binding which has caused many a division in the past. In the end, it was referred to the standing Synodical Rules Committee for further study and reflection. A federation such as ours would do well, however, to scrutinize very carefully the document that eventually evolves from that process.

Another discussion that took place was about the level of doctrinal commitment expected of the communicant membership of the churches. Is it full assent to all possible doctrines? Is there room for exceptions or stipulations? As the Canadian Reformed have had these kind of discussions as well, with varying answers, it will be beneficial to observe also the results of this discussion.

So what will it take?

Many a young man or woman faced with a broken relationship has asked

the question of the other person, "So what will it take to get us together?" A federation might ask the same of another federation.

For one thing, it will take a strong desire for such a union. Do we really want it? Is it even necessary? While our synod expressed the sentiment that lives within our federation, namely, that we should move forward with the unification process, I am not convinced that anyone in the Canadian Reformed Churches is ready at this point for union with the URC. There are still obstacles, as mentioned above. There is a perception of division within the URCNA. "Better no marriage than a bad marriage," we would say. Perhaps it's time to re-think our ecclesiology. Maybe it's not everything to be one federation. When we joined organizations like NAPARC and ICRC, were we not saying that the Church of Jesus Christ is wider than one or even several federations? We do not feel pressure to become one with the OPC; so why do we exert pressure when it comes to the URCNA? But still, when all things are equal and union with another federation seems almost natural and can happen without much controversy, we ought to unite. Such union is still biblically mandated. But, as Overture 13 suggests, if we try to merge two churches into one but in the meantime actually create three, we have lost much and probably gained nothing.

But in case things change and we want to court this sister again, what should we do in the meantime? Several things, it seems to me.

First, be prepared to sing out of more than one songbook.

Second, be prepared for an extensive discussion about the possibility of having major assemblies that would be representative rather than delegated bodies.

Third, be careful as to how one writes about Federal Vision material. This sister of ours is sensitive on this issue because of the lack of clarity on justification, and that sensitivity is not unjustified. If we care about our relationship, blanket statements of approval of FV material are foolhardy.

Fourth, be creative and prepared for a new discussion on theological education. The idea of a seminary under a regional synod has been rejected, as has the concept of regional synods. The idea of a synodically-mandated board for theological education is worth pursuing.

Fifth, be content to continue to preach on each other's pulpits and exchange attestations. Turning the clock back on these points will only be considered offensive, and will be a sure way to break off the relationship for good.

Let us remember: just because the URCNA is not ready to unite with us, that does not make her our enemy. We are still good friends, brothers in our wonderful Lord, members together of NAPARC and ICRC. The enemy is the devil, and the times are evil. There just may be another day when we need each other more than we do today. If our Lord tarries long, there just may be a day when we unite.

To quote from Overture 13 again:

> We believe the churches of both federations would be better served *at this time* by removing the pressure of our attempts to develop the formal structures of a united federation, which attempts belong to a later stage of the unity process.
>
> Meanwhile, we already acknowledge one another as faithful churches of Jesus Christ. Let us be intentional about assisting one another in the maintenance, defense, and promotion of Reformed doctrine, liturgy, church polity, and discipline. Let us continue accepting one another's members at the Lord's Table; opening our pulpits to each other's ministers; receiving ecclesiastical delegates to our broader assemblies; and encouraging our members to interact with one another. Let us find ways to help one another to pursue the lost, disciple the found, and encourage the saints. And let our CERCU members continue to assist the churches to find ways to dispel fears and increase our mutual recognition of the unity our federations already have, so that future efforts to enter Phase Three might be received with the enthusiastic support of the churches.
>
> And may the Lord use these informal, face-to-face contacts to bind together our hearts, such that our eventual unity of federations will arise as a natural product of our knowledge of and love for each other.

Personally, I believe that those are fine words that we do well to heed. Let us press on together because, regardless of the names of our federations, we *are* one. When we follow the path sketched above, we may just come to a day when we believe that it is possible, wise, and obedient to unite after all.

This article was reprinted by permission from Dr. Visscher's blog at *www.pupilsofchrist.com/church-life/lets-just-be-friends*

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1. The preliminary report as proposed to synod is posted at *http://www.wscal.edu/clark/urcnajustificationrepfinaljune09.pdf*

Dr. Gerhard H. Visscher is professor of New Testament and principal and academic dean at the Canadian Reformed Theological Seminary in Hamilton, Ontario.

Some Observations of URCNA Synod 2010

Rev. Wybren Oord

I had the privilege of being a delegate to the 2010 URCNA Synod in London, Ontario. Cornerstone URC is to be commended for providing synod with facilities that were very accommodating to the needs of the delegates and with volunteers that kept the gears of synod moving. So often overlooked are the men and women behind the scenes who deliver committee reports to the assembly, prepare and repair electronic equipment, and who make sure that the delegates finish their coffee breaks on time and get back to work.

Synod had four days to work through an agenda that was over five hundred pages. Those elected as officers had the daunting task of keeping the delegates focused on matters at hand and following proper procedures to move things along.

The United Reformed Churches in North America seem to be very united on major issues. Historically we appear to be unanimous in anything that militates against Scripture and the Three Forms of Unity. That unity was clear at this synod, as well, as delegates were united in their opposition to Federal Vision. As a federation of churches, we know what we are against.

On the other hand, we are terribly divided on other issues. As one fraternal delegate noted, we are no longer a new federation but in our teen years and, as such, we are an independent lot. This became very evident in two non-theological issues that were discussed on the floor of synod.

The New Songbook

In 1997 the URCNA formed a committee to develop a new songbook for the federation. The committee has spent thousands of hours reviewing songs from a variety of sources. Financial support for this endeavor has been minimal. Some say it is because the churches no longer really want a new songbook; others say it is because, after over a dozen years of meeting, the committee has produced no tangible results. The latter of the two reasons was dispelled at this synod when the Songbook Committee provided delegates with spiral bound copies of proposed hymns. These hymns are to be reviewed by the consistories, who may propose deletions and changes.

One thing the committee failed to do was point out or give grounds for the changes they had already made. Some of the changes already being discussed by the churches include:

Word changes: Why was "Jerusalem the golden, with milk and honey blest" changed to "Jerusalem the golden, descending from above"? Were there theological reasons—bringing the song out of the Old Testament into the New Testament, perhaps? The committee's mandate was not to change phrases that it felt were antiquated. It was to provide synod with songs to approve for a new songbook.

From Thee to You: Another change that took place without any mandate from synod was changing "Thee" and "Thou" to "You" and "Your" in many of the songs. This seems to have been done in a very arbitrary way. While we may still sing "Great is Thy Faithfulness" we are now asked to sing "Jesus, With Your Church Abide."

Arguments for this change have been around since the sixties. I remember a few decades ago the then-editor of *The Outlook* asked the board of Reformed Fellowship to publish an article on why people should pray "You" and "Your." The article made the argument that we need to modernize our language because young people today do not understand the King James language. Such church-exclusive language is not known to the outside world, making the church less user-friendly. One esteemed retired minister challenged the members of the board to find one person in the United States who did not know what "Thee" meant. Then he started singing, "My country 'tis of Thee, Sweet land of liberty, Of Thee I sing." "If the Queen's English can be used to address my country, it certainly can be used to address my Lord," he ended.

If the argument that people no longer understand "Thee" and "Thou" is valid, then the change should be made in every song. Certainly no one would want people to be ignorant when they sing "Great Is Thy Faithfulness."

Gender Friendly: Without explaining why, the committee decided to change "Christ the Lord is risen today,' Alleluia! Sons of men and angels say; Alleluia!" to "Christ the Lord is risen today,' Alleluia! All creation, join to say; Alleluia!" Why was "Sons of men" changed? Why were the feminine pronouns referring to the Church in "Jesus, With Thy church Abide" made into "our" and "us"? Why was "Faith of Our Fathers" completely removed?

In an effort to be young and relevant, the committee has unwittingly alienated many people who have

grown up with a song book they love. A group already wary of any new songbook will quickly recall the Brinkisms[1] that took place twenty years ago when another hymnal was introduced and resoundingly rejected because of many of these same changes.

Of great concern to the delegates of synod was the phrase that the new songbook "will be purchased and used by all URCNA churches." Although eventually approved, this statement was met with resistance, as many felt that synod was overstepping its authority by dictating to elders how to oversee the singing in worship.

Perhaps it might be wiser for the URCNA to produce a supplemental songbook that includes all the songs proposed by the committee. Most all of our churches already have song books in addition to the Psalter Hymnal. If those secondary songbooks could be replaced by the proposed songbook, it would be less threatening to those who currently resist the replacement of the Blue Psalter Hymnal. Over time churches would become familiar with the proposed songbook and wonder why songs such as "How Great Thou Art" and "And Can It Be" are not in the Blue Psalter. As the new book is used more and more, the Blue will eventually simply fade away.

The Canadian Reformed Churches

The other area where the delegates to synod are very united yet incredibly divided is in the federation's relationship with the Canadian Reformed Churches. There is a great love for our brothers and sisters in the CanRef. No one would argue that they are not a true church or that they teach false doctrines. We are indeed sister churches in harmony in our interpretation of Scripture and the Three Forms of Unity.

While everyone agrees that we may be sisters, throughout the week many delegates maintained that we do not have to be identical twins. Rev. Mark Stromberg (Belgrade, MT) said, "We should recognize the unity that is there, not force the unity that is not there." Rev. Christo Heiberg (Sheffield, ON) told delegates, "We are getting close to seeking uniformity, not unity."

A very pleasant fraternal delegate from the CanRef, Rev. William den Hollander, spoke of how Christ had been bringing the two federations together and encouraged us to move ahead in our mutual pursuit of unity. He plead with delegates to take seriously a loving letter promoting unity that was sent to all the URCNA consistories after the URCNA agenda became public. It was a very eloquent and wonderful speech. He ended by asking delegates to vote in a particular way on three matters: the proposed church order, a federative seminary, and the Genevan tunes.

Those are exactly the matters that divide us. Already three years ago, delegates to synod addressed overtures that sought to slow down the merger between the two federations. This time, several overtures sought to end the process completely.

The trouble is that the URCNA is always made to look like the bad guy in this relationship between the two federations. Take for example the federative seminary. The CanRef has proposed that a new united federation have one federative seminary in Hamilton, Ontario and two independent seminaries (Mid-America Reformed and Westminster California) from which to draw ministers for our pulpits. This has been their stand from the beginning. The URCNA has repeatedly argued that there is no biblical basis for a federative seminary. Although the CanRef agree that there is no Scriptural demand for a federative seminary, they argue that the concept is "rooted and grounded in God's Word." Because the CanRef would not budge on this issue, and for the sake of unity, delegates at the URCNA synod considered whether or not the above proposal would be a viable option for a new federation. After a lengthy debate the concept was defeated.

One cannot help but wonder how rooted and grounded this concept of a federative seminary would be if the stakes were changed. Let us suppose that the URCNA had agreed to one federative seminary, but declared that it wanted Mid-America, Westminster, or Greenville to be the seminary of choice. Instead of promoting unity, I dare say that such an agreement with their concept would have caused further division. It seems to be not so much the concept of one federative seminary that is being promoted as it is one particular seminary for the new federation.

Conclusion

The Synod of 2010 recognized the diversity within the URCNA and decided that it would be good to meet again in two years. Responding to different questions about the CanRef prior to Synod, Dr. Visscher wrote that there is a mutual trust within the CanRef between churches. That is missing in the URCNA. We have to get to know one another; we have to learn to trust one another. As Rev. Joghinda Gangar (Walnut Creek, CA) summed up near the end of synod, "We are more interested in what churches outside our federation think of us than we are what churches inside our federation think of us."

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1. Emily Brink was very influential in the editing of three hymnals in the CRC.

Rev. Wybren H. Oord is the co-pastor of the Trinity United Reformed Church in Lethbridge, Alberta, Canada, and the editor of *The Outlook*.

Heritage Reformed Churches Synod 2010 Meetings Summary

The following is a summary of the proceedings of Synod and its related meetings, which took place on April 14 –16, 2010, in Franklin Lakes, New Jersey.

An Office-bearers' Conference took place on Wednesday afternoon. Del Deur from Grand Rapids spoke on the topic, "God's Character— Reflected in My Walk and Talk." The address was a timely call to consistency of word and deed for all Christians, especially office-bearers.

Rev. James Greendyk led the Synod prayer service, preaching from Luke 24:44– 49. His theme was "Post-Resurrection Schooling" and the points were: (1) being Word-centered, (2) understanding the truth, and (3) equipping for a task.

Notable points from the Theological Seminary Committee Meeting held on Thursday include: Dr. William VanDoodewaard was hired as an associate professor of Puritan Reformed Theological Seminary. Mr. David VanBrugge, from the Burgessville congregation, was accepted as an HRC student to the first year of study at Puritan Reformed Theological Seminary. Student Scott Dibbet was declared a candidate for gospel ministry and will be callable after June 15, 2010. Student Marty Slingerland will be declared a candidate upon successful completion of a pastoral internship in the Burgessville congregation. A two-year mentorship program for all new ministers will be drafted by the PRTS Board of Trustees for presentation at our next meeting.

Synod 2010 moderamen (officers) were elected:

Rev. Bart Elshout— Chairman

Rev. Jan Neels—Vice Chairman

Elder James Beeke— Clerk

Elder William Tanis, Sr.— Treasurer

Recording Secretary: Rev. Don Overbeek (2nd term expires Oct. 2010)

Standing Clerk: William Tanis, Sr. (2nd term expires Oct. 2010)

Rev. Overbeek was appointed as Standing Clerk and Neil DenDekker as Recording Secretary.

Synod was formally opened on Thursday morning by Rev. Elshout on behalf of Chilliwack, the calling church. The opening meditation was provided by Rev. Wade Koenen from John 13:1–17. We are called to follow our Master's example by washing one another's feet in humility and servant leadership.

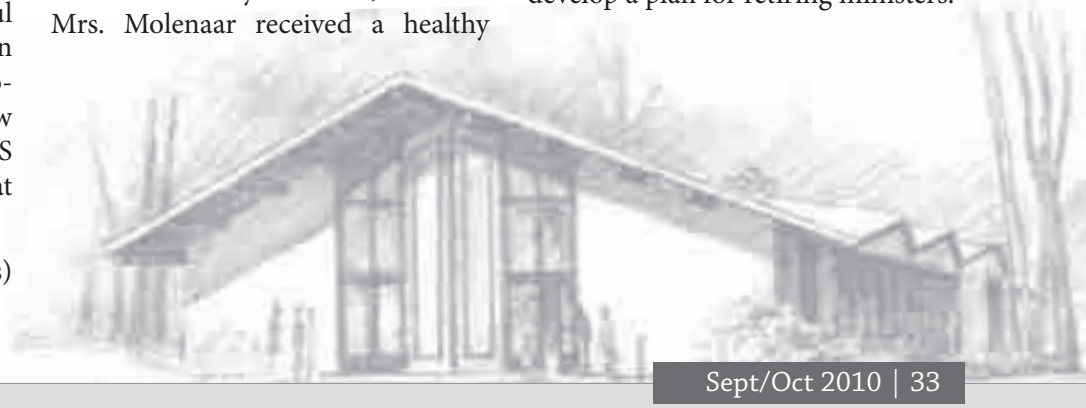
Numerous special events were mentioned as causes for rejoicing. Some examples are: the Bradford consistory was re-constituted in February; Rev. Maarten Kuivenhoven was ordained into the ministry in late February; Rev. Johnny Serafini was installed as pastor of the Franklin Lakes congregation; Dr. Arthur Miskin's recovery of health; Rev. and Mrs. Molenaar received a healthy child; Dr. and Mrs. Brian DeVries were recently married, and Dr. Joel Beeke completed twenty-five years of seminary teaching and editing of denominational periodicals.

Each HRC congregation read a spiritual welfare report sharing how God has been working in the congregation. We thank God for the content of these reports and for the evident unity in the congregations.

Four brothers brought fraternal greetings to Synod on behalf of their denomination. The United Reformed Churches were represented by Rev. Kevin Hossink, The Presbyterian Reformed Churches by Rev. Michael Ives, the Free Reformed Churches by Rev. Lawrence J. Bilkes and elder Ed Laman, and the Southern Presbyterian Church of Tasmania by Rev. Terreth Klaver.

The work of Darryl and Kara Dedert with Logos International in Cambodia was accepted as a denominationally approved missionary endeavor under the oversight of Grand Rapids. This means that the Mission Committee can assist them as they need it and our churches can learn more about their work from articles in Glad Tidings, the HRC mission periodical.

A new Emeritus Fund committee was chosen, with the responsibility to develop a plan for retiring ministers.



Synod accepted the application of the Harrison, Arkansas church plant to become a full member congregation of the HRC with all rights and privileges. This was a joyful moment as God has blessed this group by causing them to persevere and reach this point. Synod established a few steps to guide Harrison as they organize as a church.

A revised policy for Admission of non-HRC ministers into the HRC pulpit ministry was accepted. It is hoped that this policy will provide more clarity and serve the congregations well.

Level 3 correspondence with the Free Church of Scotland (Continuing) was approved. This means that consistories can invite any minister from the Free Church (Continuing) to preach in their churches; members of the Free Church (Continuing) can partake of the Lord's Supper in our churches; and that denominational representatives will address each other's highest level meetings.

Synod approved the Church Correspondence Committee to follow the present guidelines for correspondence with an independent Reformed congregation seeking closer fellowship with the HRC.

Synod approved the dissolution of the Disaster Fund after all the money is distributed appropriately. Each congregation can continue to promptly and directly contribute to worthy causes around the world as they have been doing.

Synod approved the advertising for a Senior Lecturer at Mukhanyo Theological College and encourages anyone interested to contact the Mission Committee.

The position of HRC denominational accountant was created as a volunteer service of Synod. The person serving in this capacity would oversee and organize the financial information submitted to Synod and thereby greatly assist the Standing Clerk.

Synod commissioned Rev. Maarten Kuivenhoven and Elder James Beeke to write a devotional book for teens/young people and to work with Dr. Beeke on editing and publishing it.

As Vice Chairman, Rev. Jan Neels acknowledged the Lord for His guidance and thanked Rev. Elshout for chairing the meeting. Brotherly kindness was evident throughout the day, and may we return to our congregations on our knees and with confidence in God. To God be the honor and glory. — JWB, clerk

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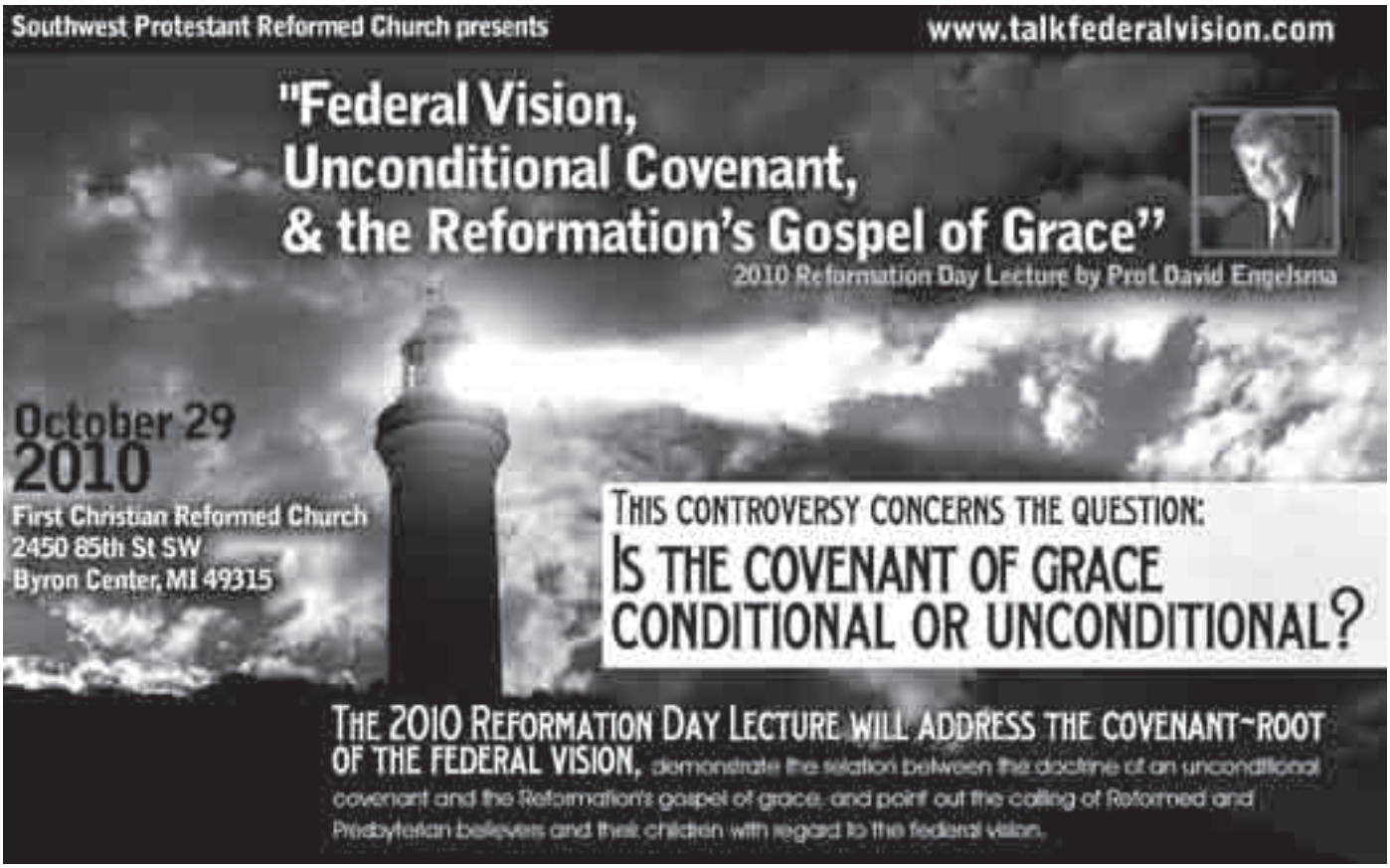

The Italian Reformation: Lost Dream or New Opportunity?

Mrs. Simonetta Carr

The name Italy may suggest images of good food, gorgeous art, and romance more than thoughts of religious reformation. With its large, imposing cathedrals, frequent processions, and well-advertised pilgrimages, that "fair land" still looks like a stronghold of Roman Catholicism. That first impression seems confirmed by statistics. Out of over 60,000,000 Italian citizens, almost 58,500,000 are baptized into the Roman Catholic Church. Still, long before the XVI century, the desire for a reformation of the church had been especially fervent and vocal in that historical and celebrated peninsula, as a natural reaction to the imposing and all-permeating presence of the papacy.

Before Luther

The importance of Italy in the context of the Protestant Reformation, largely underplayed by the Roman Catholic Church, has been underestimated by scholars until the last century. In reality, voices of protest accompanied even the earliest abuses of power and doctrine. Already in the eighth century, Bishop Claudius of Turin publicly destroyed all images of God, Jesus, and the saints in his city as an act of protest against idolatrous Roman Catholic practices. The Augustinians in general upheld their founder's doctrine of grace. Other orders, such as the Franciscans and the Capuchins, were established in answer to the clergy's excesses and abuses.

Especially in Florence, Neo-Platonist philosophers promoted a return to the spiritual, against the weighty apparatus of images, rites, and vestures the church had accumulated

throughout time. Humanists everywhere advocated a return to the classics, including the original biblical sources.

The common people, on their part, reacted to the corruption of the church with a mixture of anger, disappointment, amusement, and resignation. A sample of this attitude can be found in Giovanni Boccaccio's crudely realistic *Decameron*. Before launching into a series of comical portraits of this corruption, Boccaccio tells the story of a Jew who, appalled by what he sees in Rome, surprisingly converts to Christianity, concluding that, if the Christian faith can keep growing in spite of all the church's abuses, it must be the true religion.

There was much that papal authorities were willing to tolerate. They even encouraged monastic orders who emphasized poverty and simplicity of life, enforcing their authority only in cases of perceived heresy, such as that of 12th century Waldensians, who coupled their desire for simplicity with a denial of the existence of purgatory and the authority of the Pope. Girolamo Savonarola's was a case on its own merits, as his preaching in Florence carried along so many civil repercussions on daily life, limiting personal freedom, that the citizens themselves rose up in riots against him.

Reformation and Counter-Reformation

As soon as Luther and other Reformers began to teach and write north of the Alps, books poured into Italy, mostly through Venice, and were received by many with great interest. Finding their doctrines in agreement with orthodox teachers such as Augustine and Thomas Aquinas, several preachers incorporated them into their sermons, carefully wording them in such a way as not to arouse the authorities' suspicions.

Some believers met in secret to study the new doctrines. In Lucca, Tuscany, Peter Martyr Vermigli, an Augustinian prior, opened a school to promote the study of the original biblical texts and to discuss theological matters. In Ferrara, a small but prestigious duchy between Bologna and Venice, Duchess Renée, daughter of King Louis XII of France, opened her castle to religious refugees.

On the other hand, the church's reaction to Protestant teachings continued to intensify, especially when they moved from a purely theological level to a political arena. Finally, in 1542, seeing that a last attempt to

conciliate Roman Catholicism and Protestantism at the Colloquy of Ratisbon had failed, Pope Paul III established the Congregation of the Holy Office of the Inquisition, under the oversight of Cardinal Carafa, who had made his life mission the ending of all heresy everywhere.

That year marked a great movement of Protestants from Italy to the rest of Europe, as it was obviously impossible to continue to conceal one's faith or to express it with caution. Those who decided to stay were eventually killed. Forbidden books were burned everywhere as their list grew week by week.

In spite of this, in 1543 an Italian book was published anonymously, *Del Beneficio di Gesù Cristo Crocifisso* (On the Benefit of Jesus Christ Crucified), which became an immediate best-seller. The success of the book and the slow reaction of the church to banish it were due in part to the fact that, while teaching a sound doctrine of grace alone, it was not disparaging the Church of Rome.

Most Protestant movements within Italy, however, eventually died down. The Waldensians, who had embraced Calvinistic doctrines, were cruelly massacred in the Southern region of Calabria and forcefully converted by the Jesuits in nearby Puglia. A few pockets still left along the Alps—in the regions of Piedmont and Valtellina—were destroyed the following century. The 17th century genocide of the Waldensians has been mourned by John Milton in his poem, *On the Late Massacre in Piedmont.*

After a strenuous and courageous resistance, backed by several European sympathizers, including Oliver Cromwell, the Waldensian refugees were able to regain their territories in Piedmont, where they were tolerated as sub-citizens until February 17, 1848. That date is still remembered today in Italy as the day Protestants were granted common civil rights.

Resurgence

The years immediately preceding and following that date represented a pivotal time in the history of Italian Protestantism. Historically, it was a time known as *Il Risorgimento* ("The Resurgence"), a period of civil and intellectual endeavor for the liberation and political unification of Italy. At that time, Italy was still divided into states, some independent and some under the authority of a foreign power.

The struggle, initially directed against the Austrian occupation of Italian territories in the northeast, soon became a fervent and energizing force uniting a large portion of the population (particularly in the north and center of the country) with great hopes of a brighter future. The project of unification of the peninsula seemed daring but well worth any sacrifice, and most Italian Protestants eagerly joined the pursuit. The perceived united nation was going to be, in their eyes, free from the political, social, and religious oppression of the Pope.

Besides the Waldensian communities in Piedmont, there were at that time a few other isolated groups of Protestants here and there. Some states, such as the Grand Duchy of Tuscany, had allowed the presence of small Protestant churches for their foreign communities, such as Swiss Reformed, British Presbyterian, and Anglican churches, which were generally tolerated. Occasionally, however, there were times of fierce persecution. In 1849, when the Piedmontese army lost the first war of Independence against the Catholic Austrians, patriots throughout the peninsula were sentenced to death, imprisonment, and exile, together with all those who had dared to abandon the Roman Catholic Church.

Italian religious exiles had a tremendous impact in other Europeans countries, particularly in England, where they rapidly awakened public opinion. After a meeting at Bedford where Lord Russell and other politicians protested publicly against the abuses against Italian religious minorities, the press regularly kept readers informed, and religious support was soon accompanied by political aid. According to Italian historical Giorgio Spini, the sad fate of religious exiles had a greater impact on British public opinion than that of political exiles.

Finally, in 1857, in the presence of British, Prussian, Swiss, and American delegates, the foundation stone for a large Waldensian church was laid in Turin. Soon after, churches of various denominations were established in other cities.

The two major denominations at this time were the Waldensians and the Free Italian Churches, similar to the Plymouth Open-Brethren. The two were very different one from the other. Waldensians' pastors had studied at Geneva, where they had received a Reformed training, albeit under the influence of the *Reveil.*[1] They considered essential the adherence to a historical confession and the presence of a duly consecrated pastor, operating under a synod with a well-defined ecclesiastical order. Their official language was French, and they were well known and respected in England, Switzerland, and other European countries.

On the other hand, the Free Italian Churches prided themselves in their independent origins as a truly Italian church and shunned every form of clericalism. They didn't call themselves pastors or ministers, but evangelists. In many ways, they seemed more in line with the political environment of the times, in their pursuit of freedom from all impositions. Inevitably, some friction arose between the two movements.

After the declaration of Vittorio Emanuele as king of Italy in 1861, and particularly after the capture of Rome in 1871, foreign missionaries rushed

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into Italy to establish churches. Bibles, until then rare and forbidden, started to circulate. So-called *colpoltori* (from the French *comporter,* "to peddle") went door to door, or market to market, selling Bibles and tracts. Many of these were in the service of the British or Foreign Bible Society.

Recent Times

The turn of the nineteenth century saw a particular increment of Protestant conversions. In the first decade of that century, the number of Italian evangelicals doubled. Benito Mussolini's march on Rome in 1922, with his declaration of political alliance with the Roman Catholic Church, represented however a new set back. In 1929, an agreement called *Patti Lateranensi* practically ended the 1871 law on the separation of church and state (*Legge delle Guarentigie*), a law that the Pope had refused to recognize. The agreement consented to make the Vatican a separate political state, granted the Church's request to make Roman Catholicism the official religion in Italy (with the consequent institution of Catholic religion as a mandatory subject in all public schools), and gave several civil exemptions to the clergy. Following this agreement, many Protestants in Italy were often seen and treated as subversives.

The problems continued after the end of fascism. During the atmosphere of fear and suspicion generated by the cold war, Protestants in Italy were considered rebels with dangerous socialistic tendencies and were kept at a careful distance by most of the uninformed population. The fact that Protestant churches were opening their doors to many Catholics excommunicated by Pope Pius XII for joining or helping the Communist party didn't help their image.

It has taken centuries for Italian Protestants to become accepted and officially recognized in their own country. Even now, their message is largely unknown. For some, they are still a dangerous presence. For others, absorbed in the current climate of self-satisfied Western secularism, they are a negligible presence. While Christians in other parts of the world are wondering how to retain their purity of doctrine and their numbers in an increasing hostile historical environment, Italian Protestants are wondering how to begin to establish their presence in their country, find unity with each other, and grow.

This struggle for survival and growth has caused many changes—often problematic—within the denominations. In 1975, through a misled desire for ecumenism (and political acknowledgment) the Waldensians, once the confessional stronghold of Reformed Protestantism in Italy, have joined the Methodist church and consequently the World Council of Churches (WCC) and have for some time openly embraced liberal teachings. Many other churches, desperately seeking numerical growth, have adhered to various forms of doctrinally void evangelicalism. The strongest Protestant presence in Italy at this time is the Italian form of the Assemblies of God (ADI).

What Now?

For many of us here in North America, choosing a Reformed place of worship displaying the marks of a true church is often a matter of preference among several options. Even in traditional mission fields like Africa and in some South American countries the percentage of Reformed churches is now often greater than in the USA. On the other hand, it is extremely difficult to find in Italy a Protestant church that is faithfully preaching the gospel and adhering to a historical confession. Just five years ago, however, by a series of providential events, a concerned Italian minister, Rev. Andrea Ferrari, desiring ecclesiastical oversight, sought help from the United Reformed Churches in North America (URCNA). Rev. Ferrari has been ordained as a URCNA minister earlier this year and has been called and commissioned by the consistory of Christ URC in Santee, CA to the long-term mission work of planting confessional Reformed churches in Italy. Presently, his church (*Chiesa Evangelica Riformata Filadelfia*) is the only church in Italy that confesses and adheres to the Three Forms of Unity and the only one that meets the criteria set by the North American Presbyterian and Reformed Council (NAPARC).

Rev. Andrea Ferrari

Don't miss the next issue of *The Outlook* for a detailed explanation of Rev. Ferrari's work in the gospel-deprived country of Italy, his vision, and the challenges he meets every day.

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1. The religious revival or *awakening* (known under the French name of *Reveil*) had its start around the year 1810 in French Switzerland, where British dissenters came and preached the gospel. This religious movement spread over France and also reached Belgium and Holland.

Mrs. Simonetta Carr was born in Italy. She has written biographies of Augustine, John Calvin, and John Owen for young readers. She is a member at Christ United Reformed Church, Santee, CA.

"A Site to Behold"

James Oord

Last summer, I attended one of the plethora of Christian conferences celebrating Calvin's 500th birthday (as I am writing this, I am happily celebrating his 501st birthday – July 10 – and am wondering why there are no conferences celebrating this). I recall one particular session led by Dr. Ligon Duncan called "The Resurgance of Calvinism in America," in which he listed 9 factors for the unexpected, young, and fresh popularity of Calvinism we see in the world today. Number 8 on the list was what Dr. Duncan called "a force of nature named John Piper," who "has no fear and serves only God." Dr. Duncan said that John Piper is "the swelling wave, the visible expression of all the earlier men on the list (men like RC Sproul, Martin Lloyd-Jones, Charles Spurgeon, JI Packer, you get the idea), he channels Jonathan Edwards." High praise indeed, especially coming from an eminent theologian like Ligon Duncan.

So, this radiant endorsement for John Piper, plus all the stunning reviews I had heard (and continue to hear) from friends, professors, and pastors, stuck in the back of my mind. I am sad to say that I did not go right from that session and listen to Piper's sermons or read any of his books. That did not happen until about four months later, when my friend Chuck started always talking about John Piper. When Chuck recommends something, I listen (in fact, I have often wondered why I write this column instead of Chuck, as he is the one who gives me recommendations). What finally made me look John Piper up was when Chuck dramatically reenacted a particularly passionate (and hilarious and now infamous) rant from one of Piper's sermons (I use "rant" in a good way here, meaning a particularly impassioned presentation of God's truth).

Finally, I looked John Piper up. I downloaded some of his sermons onto my iPod and started listening to him at work. Wow! From the very first sermon, I was hooked. I've been listening to two or three Piper sermons every day since. Just ask my co-workers – now it's me who never stops talking about John Piper and what he says.

And so, I thought I would take this opportunity to write about John Piper to you, readers. His website, *www.desiringgod.org*, is a treasure trove of resources for Christians. On this site, you can go to the store and buy books, CDs, and DVDs from John Piper and other teachers. You can go to the blog and learn more about John Piper's ministry, about ways you can serve the kingdom, or read various theological articles (and yes, they had a post celebrating John Calvin's 501st birthday). You can learn more about upcoming conferences and events. Or, you can go to my favorite place, the resource library. Here, you can read articles on many topics, read entire books, find good Christian poetry, listen to conference messages, listen to sermons, and so many other things. There's really no way to waste time in the resource library, because it's all good stuff. And, oh yeah, it's all free. Yes, you can listen to every sermon John Piper has preached from the 1980's until 2010 for free, every sermon from his ordination until now. You can download his sermons onto your computer and make copies for all of your friends. For free. (They just ask that you do not edit the sermons in any way or charge anyone for the copies you make). This is a great resource for evangelism and personal growth.

Desiring God is a great ministry, and one that you should check out. Oh, and the rant that Chuck reenacted that originally got me hooked on John Piper? It's from "Holding Fast to the Word of Life in 2010," preached on January 10, 2010. Look it up and give it a listen. You'll know it when you hear it.

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