

The Outlook

MAY/JUNE 2011

Volume 61 | Issue 3

Dedicated to the Exposition and Defense of the Reformed Faith

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Some Pages from the Past (2)

On Family Worship

Avoiding Chronological Snobbery

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(ISSN 8750-5754) (USPS 633-980)

“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).

Journal of Reformed Fellowship, Inc.

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The publishers of this journal express their adherence to the Calvinistic creeds as formulated in the Belgic Confession, the Heidelberg Catechism, the Canons of Dort, and the Westminster Confession and Catechisms.

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Subscription Policy

The Outlook (USPS 633-980) is published six times per year (bi-monthly) by Reformed Fellowship, Inc. Annual subscriptions are \$25.00 per year in the United States; outside the US, \$33 per year (foreign subscribers please remit payment in US Funds; Canada add GST). Unless a definite request for discontinuance is received, it is assumed that the subscriber wishes the subscription to continue without the formality of a renewal order and he will be billed for renewal. Anyone desiring a change of address should notify the business office as early as possible in order to avoid the inconvenience of delayed delivery. Zip Code should be included. Periodicals postage paid at Wyoming, MI and an additional office. POSTMASTER:

Send address changes to *The Outlook*, 3363 Hickory Ridge Ct. SW, Wyoming, MI 49418-8301;

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“They will make war against the Lamb, but the Lamb will overcome them because He is Lord of lords and King of kings—and with Him will be His called, chosen and faithful followers.”

—Revelation 17:14

Contrary to what you may read in the newspaper and the way everything seems today, the world is not out of control. And, no, it is not the devil that is in control. The fact of the matter is the Lamb is on the throne. To Him alone has all authority been given to open the seven seals that are on the Book of Life.

The world may not acknowledge that to be the case, but it is still true. It is a truth that they, along with the elect, will acknowledge at the end of time when every knee shall bow and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord.

So often we visualize the Christ on the cross. We see Him in all the garb of humility and shame. His arms are stretched out. His hands are nailed to the wood. He seems to us the victim of Jewish malice and the scorn of Roman soldiers. We must see there, however, the Lamb of God who is the Son of God making the once-for-all sacrifice for sin. And we must also know that He arose from the dead and ascended into heaven where He is now on the throne, clothed with power and dominion.

Sadly, some people act as if Christianity may as well surrender. They claim that the Islamic faith is rapidly growing and that the church is weak while her foes are great. The days of spiritual conquest are over,

and the days of failure and disaster are at hand. Many within the church are filled with fear for the future of the church.

Don't you believe it for a minute!

Yes, there is a great battle taking place. Yes, that battle will be fought to the end and will increase in magnitude. Never forget, however, who sits on the throne. The Lamb shall overcome and all—even the great beast—shall bow down before Him.

The Horrible Woman

In this chapter of Revelation, John is carried away by the Spirit into a wilderness. In a vision he sees an adulteress sitting on a scarlet-colored beast. The beast was full of names of blasphemy. It had seven heads and ten horns.

As peculiar as these figures may seem to us, they were very familiar to those who first read this book. They should be familiar to readers of the Old Testament, as well. God had punished the ten tribes of Israel with captivity because, as the prophet Jeremiah put it, they played the harlot. Isaiah lamented how the faithful city had become a harlot (Isaiah 1:21). Who could forget the dramatic tale of Hosea who was instructed by God to wed a prostitute as an illustration of what Israel had become? In Leviticus

20 God had warned the people what would happen to them if they would prostitute themselves and run after false gods.

And yet, this woman riding on the beast is no ordinary street-corner prostitute. She appears to have great wealth. And it is not merely her extravagant wealth made by her sin that distinguishes her; her wealth seems to go hand in hand with her cruelty. The woman is drunk with the blood of the saints and the blood of the witnesses of Jesus.

Rev. Vos's excellent study of the Book of Revelation, which *The Outlook* has been privileged to publish, has made very clear the contrast that is made in Revelation between the true church and the false church. The true church is the Bride of the Lamb. The false church is the harlot of this chapter—the false wife.

The symbolism of this vision illustrates the great differences between the faithful true bride of Christ and the faithless who profess to be servants of Christ but have sold out to the world. The woman on the beast is not the true church. She is a caricature of the false, counterfeit church who has apostatized herself from her true husband and now consorts with the enemy.

In this context, the harlot is a woman who has sworn faithfulness to her husband but has shamefully and shamelessly forsaken him to pursue other men. Like Gomer of the Old Testament, she is the unfaithful, deceitful woman who breaks the sacred marriage pledge. As I read different commentaries on this

(v. 6). Notice that John was not astonished by the great beast on which the woman rode. Nor was he astonished by the treatment received by the saints. He fully expected that there would be martyrs. But when John saw the scarlet woman and came to understand all that she stood for, as he saw in her the development of the

The Great Beast

The harlot—that is, the false church—will ally herself with the beast—worldly power and the anti-Christ—and they will make unrelenting war against the Lamb and His flock. The false church and the beast on which she rides have been seen in the syncretism of the Old Testament



passage written in different periods of history, it was interesting to see how each period had its own harlot—its own false church—that the true church was battling.

Throughout history there have always been faithless people who allied themselves with the world while professing to be followers of Christ. In certain periods of history the faithless elements have been very strong. They seemed to dominate the church. Sometimes the organized church allied itself with the world and with worldly powers. It even armed itself with the weapons of the world. At times, the church ruled over kings and nations. She persecuted and killed the faithful followers of the Lord. Indeed, the so-called church became drunk with the blood of the saints.

John's reaction to the vision is "When I saw her, I was greatly astonished"

Christian religion on this earth and all the atrocities done in the name of Christianity, he was filled with amazement.

The only church John knew was the poor church, the persecuted church. It was despised, hunted, and hated. For a person even to mention the name of Jesus was cause to be brought before the Roman provincial judge and then to be burned at the stake, decapitated, or crucified.

The organized church that John saw in his vision was rich. It controlled governments. It was dressed in purple and flaunted her precious stones. She crowned and uncrowned kings. No wonder John was astonished! Such a church could change the world. It could put an end to persecution. Christianity could grow as it did at the time of Pentecost. What John saw instead was a return to martyrdom more cruel and terrible than it had been—and, horror of horrors, it was the church that was doing the killing.

Israel with her temple prostitutes and sacrifices to Molech, in the Jezebel found in the New Testament Church of Thyatira, in the organized church that nailed the Savior to the cross, in the church that persecuted Luther and killed Wycliffe, in Islam, and in the religion of tolerance that is being proclaimed by many churches today.

Through it all, the true church can be comforted in this: that the beast and the harlot who rides on it will be defeated and will return to the abyss from which they came. The true Bride of the Lamb need not fear! Even though the enemy may appear strong, and even at times on the brink of triumph, their doom is certain.

The faithful may have to suffer at their hands, but so did our Savior. The enemy nailed the Lamb to the cross. He did not stay there! He arose victorious from the grave. As His faithful followers, we can expect to suffer with Him, but we, too, shall be

raised victorious. Just as death could not contain Jesus, so it is unable to contain those who trust in Him.

The world hates the true followers of Christ. The false church will hate us, as well, because she loves the world. Jesus told us as much. Throughout the history of the church, faithful Christianity has always faced conflict

And all of this the beast does without so much as breaking out into a sweat. His influence on us is often unseen, intangible, and indescribable, but it is just as deadly to the soul as were the bloody executions of the first martyrs in Rome. What kind of worthless things do you set before your eyes? How often have you

she brought into the church turns on her and rends her asunder.

The beast will have no trouble devouring the false church until she is consumed by the world. No longer will you be able to tell the difference between her and the amusement and entertainment of the world. You will not, however, be able to find Christ



with the world. We may live in a country where we do not face open hostility, but we are constantly pressured, even seduced, by a seemingly friendly society that wants to drag us down into the same abyss in which she will find herself.

With great fury the beast fights against the Lamb. He kills holy habits like Bible reading, devotions, prayer, and theological discussions. He offers us all kinds of legitimate excuses for skipping any real opportunities for spiritual growth. He wounds our consciences so that we can justify our sinful behavior. He convinces us that we are not born in sin, nor are we guilty of sin, so we do not need a Savior. He stuns our religious sensibilities so that we no longer care about the true church. He mocks our religious earnestness until our friends refer to us as holy rollers or the frozen chosen.

caught yourself using the language of the world? What part of your life have you claimed for yourself and closed off to God? Do not kid yourself—the beast is alive and well. He and the false church wage war against the Lamb, and their desire is to drag you right along with them.

The Victory

This vision was given to John to show him and the true church that however fearful the warfare may become, the Lamb has overcome the beast and the harlot. “But the beast was captured” (Revelation 19:20a). Christ has won the victory, and the gates of hell will not prevail against His church.

Revelation 17 tells us that the power of the false church will be broken. The beast on which she rides devours her. That is what is in store for the faithless part of the church. The world to which she clings, from which she seeks her amusements, to which she seeks to draw nearer and nearer—the world

in her, because He has removed His candlestick from her midst.

The beast cannot do that with the true church. It cannot consume her. It cannot even touch her. Try as they might, the false church and the beast on which she rides will fail. The Lamb will come again, and they will be consumed by the breath of His mouth. At that time, no one will doubt His kingship or question His authority.

Those who are faithful shall overcome by the power of the Lamb who sits on the throne. May we be counted among those from every tribe and nation, every people and language, who have been found faithful to our Savior and Lord, Jesus Christ.

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This is the second half of an article reprinted from the July-August 1968 issue of The Outlook (then known as the Torch and Trumpet) in commemoration of the sixtieth anniversary of the founding of Reformed Fellowship, Inc. in April, 1951.

The deliberations and decisions of Dort

The synodical sessions were officially opened with appropriate ceremonies on November 13, 1618. While awaiting the arrival of the foreign delegations who were to assist in settling the Arminian controversy, synod decided to proceed with and dispose of ecclesiastical business that was the more direct concern of the Dutch churches alone.

Likely we may find in the order of business evidence of some basic Reformed convictions. The matter of a sound Bible translation was first discussed at great length, the delegates being committed to the position that only the most accurate as well as perspicuous rendition of the Holy Scripture in the Dutch language would serve the churches well. Having decided on this, they could proceed to a consideration of preaching and teaching as it should be conducted among them. Here catechism preaching, established in the earliest years of the Reformation, was discussed.¹⁷ In not a few congregations this had, in spite of repeated decisions by classes and provincial and even a national synod, been greatly neglected. In addition, the incessant clamor of the

Arminians that the catechism stood in need of some revision and that it was simply a man-made document cast a dark shadow. Here the foreign delegates, whose advice was not obtained until after synod took its decisions, unanimously commended the practice of the Dutch churches as regulated by the *Church Order* and urged its continuation.

From that discussion to a consideration of the catechesal instruction of children, young people, and others whose knowledge of the Christian religion was deemed deficient but who were willing to receive such teaching was a short step. For how could the gospel as presented in this systematic and thorough way be communicated effectively, unless the people were somewhat prepared to understand what was being preached?

This subject of the proper instruction of catechumens was introduced by the president, Johannes Bogerman. A summary of what he said on that occasion has been preserved for us by the English secretary Hales, whose *Letters* still provide interesting and instructive comments on the synodical proceedings.

The Praeses first spake many things learnedly of the necessity of Catechizing, that it was the basis and ground of Religion, and the sole way of transfusing the principles of Christianity into men; that it was very ancient, practiced by the Patriarchs, by the Apostles, by Origen, and approved by the consent of the Fathers; that from the Neglect of this came the ignorance of the

common sort, and that multitude of sects among them, of Papists, Anabaptists, Libertines, &c. whereas if an uniform course of teaching them their first Principles had been taken up, there would not have been so many differences; that there now was greater necessity than ever of reviving this custom, because of the Jesuits who mightily labour in this kind, as appeared by some of their Acts lately in Frisia . . .¹⁸

Immediately the foreign delegations were requested to present their advice on this. The president limited the initial discussion to the manner of catechizing, postponing any consideration of the manual or manuals to be used until later. The influence of the foreign delegations on synodical decisions was substantial. Thereafter the professors and the delegations from the several provincial synods submitted their judgments. All of these were discussed, not the least the view of the Remonstrant delegation from the province of Utrecht, which urged that a catechism be composed consisting solely of Scripture quotations.

Thereupon synod took its decisions. Since these are found in detail form in the *Acta*, only a summary of the main points will be given.

Dort declared that in order that Christian children and young people may be more thoroughly instructed in the true religion, three kinds of catechesis should be maintained: in the homes by the parents, in the schools by the teachers, and in the churches by the ministers, elders,

or assistants such as *lezers* (readers) and *ziekentroosters* (comforters of the sick).

The responsibility of parents was to teach their own children the first principles of the Christian faith. This was to be done regularly and faithfully according to the abilities of each child. Especially the “practice of godliness” was to be the concern of parents, who were to admonish and encourage their children in the fear of the Lord. Only by these means, so synod judged, would they learn to accustom themselves to family devotions. Parents were also to take their children to church regularly and review with them the content of the sermons, especially those preached according to the order of the Heidelberg Catechism. Children were not only to be stimulated at home to memorize basic Scripture texts; these were to be explained to them by their parents, in order that the children might be better prepared to receive the catechesal instruction given in schools and churches. All who were negligent should be warned by the officebearers of the congregation. If this did not avail, then such parents would be subject to church discipline.

With respect to catechizing in the schools much that had been practiced and decided by the Reformed churches in earlier times was reiterated. Everywhere the churches were urged to encourage the civil magistrates to establish and maintain schools throughout the land. Only those should be appointed as teachers who were members of the Reformed church, sound in doctrine and godly in conduct. They were to subscribe to the Belgic Confession and Heidelberg Catechism, pledging themselves to teach the children with great care and precision the fundamentals of the Christian religion “according to the catechesal method.”¹⁹ Such instruction was to be given at least twice each week. In addition, the

schoolmasters were responsible for taking their pupils to divine worship, especially when the catechism was preached, and thereafter to discuss with them what had been heard.

For this catechizing in the schools synod judged that three manuals of instruction were necessary. Herein it clearly recognized that accommodation must be made to various levels of age and understanding. Yet it was not minded to undermine unity in teaching, urging as it did a “threefold manual” (*drieerlei leerboek*). This is plain especially from the details that were delineated in the decision. For the very young children a simple manual comprising the six basic parts of the Christian religion, together with a few prayers, some simple questions and answers following the order of the “three parts” (*drie stukken*) of the Heidelberg Catechism, and some Scriptural passages exhorting to godliness was to be used. For the more advanced there was to be a summary or compendium of the Heidelberg Catechism after the fashion of either the abbreviated catechism of the churches of the Palatinate or the *Compendium* (1608) of Faukelius, which had won widespread approval, especially among the churches of Zeeland. All the older catechumens were to be instructed in the Heidelberg Catechism itself. Other manuals were to be prohibited, and the civil magistrates urged by the churches in their respective localities to remove from the schools all Roman Catholic and other dangerous writings.

The tasks of the ministers of the Word with respect to catechizing were also specified. Much attention was to be given to catechism preaching. Here the pastors were admonished to speak in simple language and with appropriate brevity, bearing in mind that they were to preach for children as well as adults. In addition to supervising the catechesis given by

the schools, they were to direct special attention to those no longer attending school but whose knowledge of the Christian faith was still deficient. These were to be catechized by the minister in the presence of an elder each week, either at home or in the consistory room of the church. Those who desired to profess their faith publicly in the church were to receive final and detailed instruction for a period of some weeks preparatory to taking this step. All such catechizing was to be opened and closed with appropriate prayers.

Having adopted these decisions, synod now faced three questions proposed by the president. Were certain persons to be appointed for the purpose of drawing up these proposed abbreviated manuals of instruction? In the preparation of such manuals, were the words of the Heidelberg Catechism to be preserved as much as possible? Was this work to be undertaken immediately, so that upon its completion synod might express itself officially on what was being proposed? To all three questions synod responded affirmatively, reminding itself in the course of taking its decisions of an earlier directive adopted by the synod of Middelburg (1581).

Now a committee was appointed to prepare such manuals, which would later be submitted to synod for its judgment and thereupon be officially approved for use in the churches and schools.

The original committee consisted of Polyander, professor at Leiden; Gomarus, professor at Groningen; Hermannus Faukelius, who had drawn up the *Compendium* of 1608 and served the church at Middelburg; Ralthasar Lydius, the pastor of Dordrecht; and Godefridus Udemannus, the pastor of the church of Zierikzee. To this number was added some time later Antonius

Thysius, who served as professor at Harderwyk.

At the 177th session on May 27, 1619, after the foreign delegations had already left for home, synod again took up the matter and dealt with the

work of the committee. Meanwhile, however, at the 148th session, when the Heidelberg Catechism again was officially approved, synod took a position that was not completely consonant with its earlier judgments. It now declared that this catechism was not only “in all respects an accurate summary of the orthodox Christian doctrine;” it also insisted that it was eminently suitable to serve as a manual for instructing those of tender years as well as the more mature.²⁰ Thus the necessity of elementary manuals of instruction appeared upon further reflection less urgent.

All this can be understood when we remember what took place at synod. Repeatedly the Arminians and those who to a degree sympathized with them had undermined the influence of the Heidelberg Catechism. Heyngius, secretary of the Political Commissioners appointed to serve at the synod, explains in his report that many of the delegates feared that the smaller manuals, if adopted, would come to be regarded as “new catechisms and thus would provide occasion for confusion in the congregations and for discrediting the Heidelberg Catechism which had again been approved.”²¹

Yet synod could not rescind a decision adopted in the presence and with the cooperation of the foreign delegations. Thus it tacitly sought a satisfactory compromise. The shortest catechism was read and approved upon condition that a few matters drawn from the Heidelberg Catechism would be included. Bogerman judged that the summary to serve those somewhat more advanced in years and understanding seemed too long to be read. Thereupon synod decided that the churches might be permitted to use either the proposed summary of the committee or the *Compendium* of Faukelius, which had already gained quite widespread acceptance. Actually, therefore, the Heidelberg Catechism remains as

the only manual that has complete official endorsement in the Reformed churches. The “A.B.C book” for the youngest catechumens remained in use in the schools until early in the nineteenth century. The *Compendium* of Faukelius, twice recommended by the synod at its sessions, received no competition in the churches from the summary drawn up by the committee. Since 1637 this work of Faukelius has been included in the Dutch psalter to find its way into countless homes and hearts. In this rather strange and surprising way synod concluded its considerations with respect to catechesis.

Evaluation of the work of synod

Since that assembly—which met three and a half centuries ago—has so strongly influenced the life and labors of Reformed churches ever since, we do well to reflect on its work.

At the outset it should be remembered that we have no right to fault synod for failing to provide the churches with an exhaustive set of regulations for this work. Such an attempt, according to the polity prevailing in the Reformed churches, would have threatened the rights and responsibilities of local congregations. To these first of all has Christ entrusted the teaching ministry of his church on earth. Synodical regulations, no matter how well-intentioned and solidly grounded, can never make up for deficiencies and derelictions that are allowed to continue by the churches themselves.

But when this is observed, there still remains grave inadequacy in what Dort said and did.

First of all, synod adopted too much without reflection a pattern that had developed throughout the Reformed ecclesiastical world since the days of Calvin. While insisting that all education in the Christian religion should be unified and integrated, so



that home and school and church would speak the same language of faith, it did not clarify to any helpful degree the contributions that each could and should make. Not a few of the practical problems that plague catechesis to this day, even though they assume a somewhat different shape than three centuries ago, stem from this. It may well be questioned whether the schools, even when sustaining a close and cooperative relationship to the churches, should ever provide instruction in the confessional standards of the church. The issues surrounding the proper relation between church and school demand much more attention than they are receiving also among us today.

Closely connected with this is synod's description of the duties devolving on the church, more specifically, on the minister of the Word. Much of his catechesal responsibility was limited on the one hand to catechism preaching and on the other hand to supervising catechesis in the schools. Thus the unique pastoral care that the church through the ministry of the Word should exercise in the lives of children and young people was obscured. Parents and school teachers were required to inquire into what the children remembered of the sermon and, if necessary, to explain this more clearly. But this task actually belongs to the pastor first of all. If we take seriously what Reformed churches have always maintained—that preparation for profession of faith requires an introduction of the catechumen into the living confessional language that the church employs as it seeks to communicate the gospel—then an official representative of the church should be charged with providing this.

Undoubtedly because of this decision of Dort catechesal classes for all baptized children did not become common ecclesiastical practice until the days of the Secession (1834). The three or four weeks of special instruction required immediately

prior to making such public profession were totally inadequate to make church membership truly meaningful for those who received it.

The Achilles' heel of Dort's decisions with respect to catechesis, however, must be found in its ambivalence on the score of the suitability of the Heidelberg Catechism as a manual for catechumens of all ages. While understanding the difficulties in which it was placed by continued Remonstrant carping, we can hardly justify what it did. No justice was done to the decision taken in the presence and upon the advice of the foreign delegations. Nor can it be regarded as honorable that synod, having assigned a specific task to its committee, failed to deal openly and conclusively with its proposed manuals.

The consequences of this ambivalence have haunted the Reformed churches ever since. Here it is impossible to enter into a detailed discussion of the question itself, namely, whether the Heidelberg Catechism can or cannot serve well in instructing younger and less-advanced catechumens. In its final decision, which recommended for use some elementary manuals, Dort showed that it was not wholly committed to what had been declared in the 148th session. To be sure, synod insisted that the number of catechetical manuals was to be kept to those specifically recommended. But because there was no officially authorized "small catechism," the doors in time swung open to give entrance to a multitude of manuals, most of which did not consistently follow the pattern that synod itself sought to safeguard in the interest of a unified and sound program of catechesis. Biesterveld employs strong language when decrying this practice, which is also current in the Christian Reformed Church today. According to him, and with this judgment we concur, all such manuals that neglect or obscure or minimize giving direct attention to Scripture and to the

Heidelberg Catechism (including the approved *Compendium*) do disservice in a confessional and confessing church by confusing the catechumens through a multiplication of the materials to be memorized, discussed, and appropriated. It may well be that we accomplish too little in our catechesal classes because we attempt too much.

Yet in making up the balance sheet, we may not forget the contributions of Dort. Correctly it insisted that catechesis is primarily an ecclesiastical responsibility. No church can long remain sound in Christian doctrine and conduct if it neglects its teaching responsibilities to the baptized children and young people. Its emphasis on "unified material" to be taught faithfully and perseveringly to all within the church's reach also deserves praise. The church should learn to speak "with one mouth and heart" concerning the mighty works of God in Christ for man's salvation. This should alert us to the far-from-imaginary danger of teaching Bible stories in isolation from the total context of God's progressive redemptive self-revelation to his people, or of teaching Christian doctrine by means of a proof-text method that so frequently ignores the underlying unity of the Scriptures. Meanwhile it should be underscored that Dort warned sharply and strongly against a purely intellectualistic approach to catechesis. The goal that it clearly championed was that of instruction "in the faith unto faith," a faith explicated in the Heidelberg Catechism as "not only a sure knowledge, whereby I hold for truth all that God has revealed to us in His Word, but also a firm confidence, which the Holy Spirit works in my heart by the gospel, that not only to others, but to me also, remission of sins, everlasting righteousness, and salvation are freely given by God, merely of grace, only for the sake of Christ's merits" (Lord's Day VII, 21).

No one can rightly accuse Dort of paving the way for a cold, impersonal, abstract scholasticism in the catechesal classes. It inveighed against both human speculation that spends its time in seeking answers to illegitimate questions raised by either catechete or catechumen and sterile orthodoxy that contents itself when children have learned words and phrases without understanding their meaning. Both of these threaten Reformed catechesis in our day. And against both of these, continuing faithful in this respect to Dort, we should warn ceaselessly.

But the challenge of Dort goes deeper. Little is more appalling than the doctrinal latitudinarianism prevalent in much present-day Christianity. This has not left the Reformed churches unscathed. In all areas of learning men urge greater precision—in logic, philosophy, economics, sociology, psychology and especially the “physical” sciences; in matters of Christian teaching almost every notion is not merely tolerated but even openly defended. What is impermissible in office and factory receives accolades in the churches as new, stimulating, relevant! This should alert us to the extent to which irrationalism, existentialism and subjectivism in various subtle forms are sucking the life-blood of the church which, according to Scripture, is “pillar and ground of the truth.”

Against this Dort took its position. Nor was this position inspired by a narrow-minded and uneducated provincialism. Among the delegates were men who stood head and shoulders above most European scholars of that day. Their knowledge of Greek and Hebrew, of literature and astronomy and jurisprudence, and—last but by no means least—of Christian theology in all its branches was nowhere excelled at that time. Philip Schaff, himself no advocate of its decisions, pays this tribute to Dort,

It was undoubtedly an imposing assembly; and, for learning and piety, as respectable as any ever held since the days of the Apostles. Breitingner, a great light of the Swiss Churches, was astonished at the amount of knowledge and talent displayed by the Dutch delegates. . . . Even Paoli Sarpi, the liberal Catholic historian, in a letter to Heinsius, spoke very highly of it.²²

What concerned Dort when it spoke of catechesis was “the doctrine which is according to godliness.” The spiritual consolation of the individual, the unity of the confessional and confessing church, and the praise of God for his rich grace in Christ Jesus compelled it to speak as it did. Here the best (i.e., the clearest and purest expression of the gospel) was none too good. In season and out of season it was to be taught. No bare intellectual assent to a series of propositional truths, but a vibrant, intelligent and heart-full faith-response is what it sought to cultivate in the lives of young and old. And for a century and more this endeavor of Dort bore rich fruit.

Some fifty years after synod convened, the lines of decadence began to be etched on the face of the Dutch congregations. Prosperity unknown before charmed the hearts and lives of the members. Although not a few warned against the worldliness that threatened to engulf the churches, the majority of ministers as well as members smiled benevolently at the “prophets of doom.” The next century and a half proved their words altogether too true. What men wanted and got was a “reasonable religion,” much after the fashion advocated by the Remonstrants. Respectability became the chief mark of church membership. And throughout that period, catechesis continued as a venerable tradition, but one that set little stamp on the lives of the people.

These are the incontrovertible lessons taught by history. The church today

does well to take heed, lest it repeat in its negligence the sins of omission and commission that would condemn it in God’s sight as “holding a form of godliness, but having denied the power thereof.” The possibility of such corruption lies wide open. Against it one remedy has been given—that of faithfully preaching and teaching the Word that makes men wise unto salvation.

17. That “catechism preaching” was no invention of the Dutch or for that matter of the Reformed churches is evident from Reformation history. Early Lutheran church orders make mention of it as mandatory, although within a few decades it was discontinued. Even the catechizing of children soon was dismissed by pastors as beneath the dignity of their learning and position; hence it was assigned in many places to the church custodian. In the earliest Reformed churches it was introduced as either a second public worship service on the Lord’s Day to replace “vespers” in the Roman Catholic Church or as a sermon held during the week. The clearer distinction between catechism preaching and catechesis came some decades later.

18. H. Kaajan, *op. cit.*, p. 173; quoted from John Hales: *Golden Remains* . . . (London: Tho. Newcomb, 1673), pp. 9, 10.

19. Subscription by the schoolmasters to the Belgic Confession was already stipulated by the Synod of Dordrecht (1574) in art. XXII, 4 (Biesterveld and Kuyper, *op. cit.*, p. 69) and to the Catechism by the Synod of The Hague (1586) in art. XLVIII (*Ibid.*, p. 205).

20. Quoted by Kaajan, *op. cit.*, p. 211.

21. *Ibid.*, pp. 211, 212. The relation of this decision to the repeated Remonstrant criticisms of the Heidelberg Catechism is considered by H. H. Kuyper: *De Post-Acta of Nahandelingen van de Nationale Synode van Dordrecht* (Amsterdam-Pretoria: Hoveker & Wormser, 1899), pp. 316–324. He also quotes Breytinger as judging these objections as “frivolous” and Hales as saying that they were “a poor, impertinent stuff,” p. 322.

22. Schaff, *op. cit.*, vol. I, pp. 514, 515.

Dr. P. Y. De Jong (1915–2005) wrote frequently for *The Outlook*. He is well-remembered as a prolific writer, professor at two seminaries, and brilliant preacher of God’s Word.

TIf a comparison between peaceful images of Puritan families gathered around the table and your own family rushing through endless daily activities as you are juggling teething babies and sleepy teenagers makes you want to dismiss the thought of family worship, don't despair. Pictures of Puritans families are just that—pictures. The Puritans had teething babies and sleepy teenagers too, as well as harsher living conditions, with illness and death as daily companions. Each age has its own challenges.

Pressing schedules and family fragmentation are worldwide problems today. “The greatest difficulty,” said Rev. Andrea Ferrari, pastor of Chiesa Evangelica Filadelfia, a URC church plant in Milan, Italy, “is the pace of life in Milan and the growing necessity (fostered by the economic crisis) for women to work outside the home.”

Perhaps surprisingly, the problem is not limited to Western families. Rev. Sutjipto Subeno, pastor of Reformed Evangelical Church of Indonesia, Surabaya-Andhika branch, has to work hard to inspire the families in his congregation to set aside a regular daily time to worship together. “It's easier for families with young children, because when they are older they usually have many activities of their own. And here, we are mostly not familiar with eating together at the dinner table. Maybe it still happens in small villages, but the habit has been lost in the big cities like Jakarta, Surabaya, Medan, and Densapar. Every person has his or her schedule for eating.”

As in other areas, many evangelical churches have responded to this modern challenge by adapting to the times. To busy, fragmented families, they have offered personalized programs and activities for different age groups, adding more engagements to the family schedule. Instead of equipping the parents with sufficient theological instruction to fulfill their biblical mandate to disciple their children, they have attempted to lift that burden by providing weekly or bi-weekly instruction.

Confessional Reformed families, on the other hand, are aware of the importance of worshiping God as a family. The Westminster Confession of Faith teaches us to conduct worship “in private families daily” (21.6), and modern editions of the Westminster Standards normally include the 1647 “Directory for Family Worship.”

Facing the Challenges

For Reformed pastors, the challenge is not so much to convince families of the importance of this long-standing Christian practice as it is to encourage them to embrace it and persevere in spite of the obstacles.

“In talking to families here, when I ask about family worship, they feel ashamed that they don't do more,” said Rev. Shane Lems, pastor and church planter at the United Reformed Church in Sunnyside, Washington. “We should feel bad when we fail, but sometimes our expectations are too high. I remind the family that sometimes kids are just not in the mood for a ten-minute Bible lesson, so a short prayer and a Scripture song might be all you do for one night.

Sometimes when we hear ‘family worship’ we think of twenty minutes or more of Bible, song, and prayer. It would be great, but a lot of families have a tough time doing that. My children have a CD with kids singing a few Bible verses,” he continued, “and they learned them well, so when they have ants in the pants we only sing one song and let them go. I also tell the families that saying the Lord's Prayer or the Apostles' Creed together as a meal ‘counts’ as family devotions, as does a short prayer before the kids get on the bus.”

M.D. Meiser, father of three, agrees that, as with any habit, it's important to be patient and to avoid setting unobtainable goals. “We found that making small steps in family worship served us best and caused more consistency while keeping the expectations simple,” he said. “The dinner table functions well, as everyone listens as they eat. I ask soul-searching questions, such as ‘Do you love Jesus more today because of what He has done? Are you amazed by grace?’ and more information questions like, ‘What are the things Jesus said while on the cross?’—with follow up questions like, ‘what does it mean that Jesus said he thirsted?’ This is a great avenue to repeat the gospel. Every night I read with the kids and rotate books to keep it interesting. At least once a week, we turn on the music and sing together. We could do better. My summary would be that the grace of God covers over our failings, and making small steps like praying with the kids before bed will work wonders, and the gospel will do its work.”

As with any habit, it's also important to establish a regular time and to keep it. The sooner this is done in a child's life, the easier. Children who are brought up knowing that the family gets together at a certain time to read God's Word and pray learn to expect it and will miss it on the few occasions when it becomes impossible.

“I was touched a few days ago when I found my twenty-three-year-old daughter and a friend reading Scriptures and reviewing their catechism questions over a meal,” said Elizabeth James, a mother of six at Christ URC in Santee, California. “It was wonderful to see two young women doing spontaneously what they had done all their lives—worshiping God together at the table.” In fact, family worship is not limited to families with children. Establishing this habit before the children are born gives parents a head start, setting an element of daily schedule that becomes non-negotiable. “Whether you have children or not, you and your spouse are a family and need to feed together on the Word of God,” said Lisa, a mother of four. “It seems to be part of the husband loving his wife and the wife respecting her husband. We find in Scriptures an expectation for husbands and wives to come together to pray.”

Those who started family worship late, however, should not despair. Modern movies and TV shows have convinced many parents that teenagers don't want to spend time with their families, but we don't have to buy that. Countless studies show otherwise. Again, small steps help to ease into the habit. On the other hand, it's also important for parents to simply announce, “This is what we are going to do.”

There are, of course, other challenges. In some homes there is only one parent, or at least only one parent is available to lead family worship.

There are widows, broken families, fathers who are forced to work at all hours just to make ends meet, and fathers who just relinquish their role of spiritual head of the home. In those cases, it's common for mothers to feel inadequate or—if the husbands are in the home—fearful to be usurping their roles. All situations are unique and must be faced with wisdom, in counsel with the family's pastor and elders. The bottom line, however, is that family worship must go on.

“If the father says he is a Christian but refuses to go to church and lead his family in worship, then he is manifesting a life of unbelief and the mother has to take over the spiritual leadership,” said Rev. Michael Brown, senior pastor at Christ URC in Santee, California. “I certainly appreciate the fact that a proper head of the home is the father. But if there is no father, a mother and her children are still a family. And if she is leading them in devotions, then it is family worship or family devotions.”

Some like to make a distinction between the two terms—“family worship” when the father is leading, in his role of priest over his house, and “family devotion” whenever the family meets to read Scriptures, sing, and pray without him. “I am not sure we should be so technical,” Rev. Brown continued. “Family worship (even with a father leading) is still a form of devotions, not worship in the same way as the worship service on the Lord's Day.”

In view of this, we should all pray for single parents—fathers and mothers alike—in our congregations. The challenges can be disconcerting, especially when the parent has to work outside the home. “My kids leave very early in the morning so that time does not work for me. Any time after dinner and before bed is usually my best time,” said Jeanette Oliver, mother of three at Conroe, Texas. “My problem is that now that I work more, I am more tired and then

I struggle between wanting to relax (because I'm talking to people all day) and be faithful to teach the kids.”

The answer again is simplicity and persistence, doing what we can but constantly and at the same time, day after day. We need to see family worship as a necessity just like eating meals or washing laundry. It just needs to be done. We would never question “what's the point” of feeding our children daily, nor would we skip serving a meal because we don't feel inspired to cook. We might buy fast food once in a while, and we might make do with a prayer together instead of a full devotion on some occasions, but our children will know that there will always be food on the table and that the family will always meet daily, at whatever time is appointed, to worship God together, even if briefly.

Mutual Encouragement

Pastors know the importance of family worship, not only for the individual families but for the life of the church. “The family is the core of society and also of the church. The church is as healthy as its families are healthy. If the family life is sick, then the church is also sick,” says Rev. Subeno, who is faithful to remind parents from the pulpit of the need of family worship. He also encourages families to share their experiences with family worship whenever they meet, in casual encounters or at area fellowship meetings.

Every family is different, and every parent has unique gifts and ideas, and discussing these can be very useful. Some families, for example, are musical and like to set catechism answers to music. Others focus on visual aids, especially for younger children, such as a biblical time chart or “family tree.” Elizabeth James used some prayer cards (she called them “prayer helps”) to teach her children how to pray when they were younger. “They had short phrases written

on them,” she said, “for example, ‘Thank you for the gospel,’ ‘Forgive our sins,’ ‘Strengthen our faith.’ I added more every so often, getting ideas from the pastor’s sermons and prayers. Actually, we have gone over these things (and others) so much, that the kids don’t really need these cards anymore.”

Some pastors provide families with yearly plans to study the Bible together or with weekly bulletin inserts listing thought-provoking questions to review the main points of the sermon on the Lord’s Day or throughout the week. They may choose a “hymn of the month” and encourage families to sing it daily at home, or email their congregation the liturgy for the upcoming Lord’s Day worship to help them to prepare.

For a while, in our own family, we devoted the first two or three mornings of family worship to a review of the previous Lord’s Day (morning and evening sermons) and the following two or three to a preparation for the following public worship. Reading the Scripture texts ahead of time helped the children to listen more carefully to the sermon. We would ask questions like, “What do you think the main point of the sermon will be?”

Reviewing the sermons gives children a good chance to participate in family worship as they share the notes they have taken. Besides, it ensures that they take notes, since no one wants to be the one with nothing to say. Usually, to keep everyone’s full attention through the reading of notes, the youngest children read theirs first and the others had to be careful not to repeat, when reading theirs, something that had already been said.

The church bulletin can be used in other ways during family worship—for example, praying through the list of requests, teaching the children concern for those in need, and

discussing ways in which the family can help. “We know from Scripture that the family is the place where God is glorified through loving our neighbor,” Meiser said.

“Family worship has a way of focusing us on the love of God and service to others as we daily submit ourselves to his story for us and pray for his will in our lives and in the lives of our covenant family and the unsaved,” Lisa agreed.

For parents who are still unsure of their abilities to teach theological truths, reinforcing the pastor’s words and answering the children’s questions is a simple plan that requires little preparation. (Of course, equally simple is the systematic study of a catechism, by itself or using some books such as *Training Hearts, Teaching Minds* by Starr Meade).

The possibilities are countless, as each family explores the best way to make family worship an exciting and engaging time. “Once in a while

my seven-year old takes his turn preaching from a text, and I ask him questions along the way as he preaches to find out his understanding of the gospel,” Matthew Meiser said.

The James family, on their hand, has set a time of private reading before family worship, and when they get together they each share one of the verses from the passage they have read.

The important thing is to make it an enjoyable time, and much of this comes from parents’ excitement for the Word and prayer and for what God is doing in the children’s lives. “In our home, it has been absolutely thrilling to hear the children’s questions about wherever we are reading in Scripture,” said Lisa. “I believe it is paramount to view the time as interactive. Otherwise, what is the point? Have we fulfilled a duty to ‘do’ family worship or have we loved God and our neighbor (in this case our spouses and our children) by truly meditating on the Word of Life?”



“I hate to foster a legalistic attitude towards family worship,” Rev. Lems added. “I have a friend who forces his kids to sit like statues for thirty minutes while he gives a doctrinal lesson, and they learn a new song each week. He has good motives, but the kids will grow up thinking Christianity is quite rigid and stiff. We’re a bit more laid back. We’ll do a Bible story, Creed, or a few Westminster Shorter Catechism questions and answers, and if the kids ask questions, we’ll answer them all night. If not, we pray and clean up the table.”

Remembering the Big Picture

Another important way in which pastors encourage family worship is a regular schedule of family visitations, when the elders discuss with the parents any problems or impediments to this practice, and encourage them to persevere. Rev. Ferrari also finds useful to invite church members to his home for dinner, where they can see a sample of family worship. Besides, every year he devotes a weekend to a conference on family issues, helping parents to re-evaluate their priorities and to focus on the important task of teaching their children daily.

As with every habit, it’s essential to periodically remind ourselves why we are doing it. When the inspiration seems low and it feels like everyone is just going through the motions, we must remember that, in our prayer together, we are fulfilling, as

the Heidelberg Catechism teaches us, “the most important part of the thankfulness God requires of us,” growing in grace and strengthened by the Holy Spirit, given “only to those who pray continually and groan inwardly, asking God for these gifts and thanking him for them.”

“We are not only holding up an example of prayer, adoring God, getting to know Him and his Word and caring for others to our children,” Lisa explained. “We are doing those things then and there. We are praying and adoring and growing in our knowledge of Christ. It is happening as we do it! It is in these very activities that the Spirit of God is at work in our hearts, and in the lives of those we are praying for.”

Besides, we are reminding ourselves and our children daily of the gospel, a message that is so alien to our natural minds that needs to be constantly repeated. “As a Papa, I encourage everyone to preach the gospel to yourself first throughout the day,” said Meiser. “This is the foundation. Then we must preach it to each other.”

Soon we will see the gospel message reverberate in our children’s lives as we redirect their vision daily, teaching them their life is part of a bigger story where God says, “I will be your God and you will be my people.” We are not our own, but belong to our faithful Savior Jesus Christ and every day we recognize that truth in our worship.

“Family worship is the way in which we and our children daily confront the reality that, no matter what is going to happen or has happened in our lives during those twenty-four hours, as Christians we belong to a part of a bigger story where our sovereign, loving God has orchestrated the events in history to save a people for Himself and for their ultimate good,” Lisa continued. “He orchestrates the minutes of our lives in his working

out of our salvation for his glory and our good. A worldly perspective leads us to believe that every decision we make in life is all about us, that we and our happiness are the bottom line. The biblical perspective reorients us from an inward to an outward focus. I see family worship getting us into the habit of looking forward, pressing toward the mark, seeing our lives in an eschatological way.”

No one can deny that family worship is hard work. Reading plans have to be prayerfully prepared and then re-evaluated from time to time. Circumstances and even our children may seem to fight against us. Still, the rewards are great, and God is often gracious enough to allow us to see them soon. When our children start reminding us that “it’s time for devotions,” when their prayers become more meaningful and mature, when they take good notes of the sermons without being reminded and share them during family worship, when the older children help to answer their siblings’ questions or even lead devotions in the few occasions when one parent is absent and another is ill, we can look with thankfulness to God who has used our small efforts to accomplish his purposes. “Nothing is more humbling and produces more gratefulness than to see before your very eyes God’s faithfulness to the promise that he would be our God and the God of our children,” Lisa concluded.

For an excellent and more exhaustive explanation of the need for family worship and how to persevere, see Rev. Michael Brown, “The Only ‘Youth Group’ Your Children Need: Some Thoughts on Family Worship and Catechesis,” <http://tinyurl.com/449pbn2>

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Avoiding Chronological Snobbery: A Call to Add Church History to a Healthy Spiritual Diet

Rev. William
Boekestein

Many of us may struggle with the feeling that the church is already too old-fashioned. If so, why should we study church history? Shouldn't we stop looking backward to the sixteenth century and start living in the twenty-first century?

Contrary to our concerns, the church has always realized that a forward-looking church is also a backward-looking church. Likewise, well-balanced, progressive Christians will be students of church history.

The Bible supports this. Christianity, as revealed in Scripture, is inescapably a historical religion. The Christian conception of time itself is linear not cyclical. That is, time has a beginning, a middle and an end. It is within this spectrum of time that the great themes of the Bible are all rooted. The creation, fall, redemption and restoration of humanity are not merely ideas; they are real events that remind us of the importance of history.

Most Christians would agree that it's important to study *this* history, that is, the Bible's history of redemption. But God's actions in history are significant and worthy of study whether they

are recorded in Scripture or not. Consider the words of the Psalmist: "I remember the days of old; I meditate on *all your works*; I muse on the work of your hands" (Psalm 143:5, emphasis added). Along the same lines, the apostle John ends his Gospel with these words: "And there are also many other things that Jesus did which, if they were written one by one, I suppose that even the world itself could not contain the books that would be written" (John 21:25). We don't know all of those works, but they are real history, as are all the other works of God.

The word "remember" is used 164 times in 39 of the 66 Bible books. In repeating this word, God is saying, "Don't neglect the past." Or as C.S.



Lewis so memorably put it, “Don’t be a chronological snob,”¹ only valuing the era in which you live. Henry Ford exemplified such snobbery when he said, “History is bunk.” It’s not. Instead, it’s filled with meaning that God calls us to learn in our day.

In 1 Corinthians 10, Paul reviews a portion of Israel’s history, particularly their exodus from Egypt and their subsequent desert exile. Paul tells us in verse eleven that “all these things happened to them as examples, and they were written for our admonition.”

Similarly, Stephen’s sermon (Acts 7) is one monumental history lesson. It begins with the call of Abraham, moves to the people’s bondage in and deliverance from Egypt, and an account of the construction of the tabernacle and temple. The point of this lesson is that the Jewish leaders have not learned from history. Instead they have perpetuated the sins of their fathers.

Not only are we to learn from history, we must also be teachers of history. Psalm 145:4 says, “One generation shall praise our works to another, and shall declare your mighty acts.” The

result of this command to teach God’s history is recorded in Psalm 44:1. “We have heard with our ears, O God, our fathers have told us, the deeds You did in their days, in days of old.”

History’s beginning is recorded in Genesis 1 and its end in Revelation 22. Everything that happens between can be linked to a work of God and is worthy of study by his children.

There are also practical considerations that urge us to study God’s history.

The following six reasons help demonstrate the value of learning from and teaching history.

Knowing history helps us:

Appreciate the Sovereignty of God

If you were to spend just one hour reading an accurate overview of church history, you might wonder how the church has continued to exist at all. From the Roman persecutions of the first three centuries to the Spanish Inquisition of the sixteenth century to the Armenian genocide in the twentieth century to the unholy war presently being waged against Sudanese Christians, the church has undergone tremendous opposition.

The study of church history helps us understand Christ’s words when he said, “I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it” (Matt. 16:18, cf. Belgic Confession, Art. 27).

Apply Debated Biblical Teachings

We look to the practices of the early church to help us understand such important issues as church membership, baptism, worship, and government involvement.

For example, how do we know *on which day* we should rest from our labors and join together with other believers for worship? Not everyone agrees that the Bible answers this question with absolute clarity. But when we consider that the early Christians worshipped on the first day of the week and that this pattern has continued in a nearly unbroken string for 2,000 years, it lays a very strong precedent for modern churches to consider.

Defend Against Heresies and Cults

Take Athanasius for example. He fought a vigilant battle in the fourth century against the teachings of Arius, who denied that the Son is essentially equal to the Father. In the mind of Arius, Christ was neither fully God nor fully man, but belonged to an entirely different category.

Athanasius argued that only by the real Godhead coming into union with the full manhood in Christ could fallen men be made right with God. In other words, Jesus can only save if he is God.

Given that the Jehovah’s Witnesses are modern-day, self-conscious followers of Arius, understanding Athanasius’s arguments (especially in his book *On the Incarnation*) is extremely valuable today.

Resist Being Captivated by Fads

Author Brett McCracken has outlined the modern church's obsession with trendiness. Many churches today are desperately trying to overhaul their image to be more hip. Churches seek to impress by embracing cultural fads of style, technology, music, movies and even shock-jock approaches to sexuality.

Responding to this approach on behalf of the younger generation, McCracken says with confidence, "When it comes to church, we don't want cool as much as we want real. If we are interested in Christianity in any sort of serious way, it is not because it's easy or trendy or popular. It's because Jesus himself is appealing, and what he says rings true. It's because the world we inhabit is utterly phony, ephemeral, narcissistic, image-obsessed and sex-drenched—and we want an alternative. It's not because we want more of the same."²

"Church history tends to [help us] separate the transient from the permanent, fads from basics."³ To paraphrase Isaac Newton, Christians transcend fads by standing on the shoulders of the giants of the faith who have gone before.

Reevaluate Common Church Practices

Ever wonder why, in some churches, when a minister gives a call to repent and believe the room becomes filled with sentimental music? Those stirred by religious sentiment are encouraged to come forward to make a decision. Why?

Likely, these are a few remnants of Charles Finney's nineteenth-century revival techniques, which at the time were considered "new measures" of evangelism. There was, of course, a theological reason for the introduction of these new measures. Finney believed that God could not regenerate a person without that person's help. From this context it makes sense to encourage people to "give God permission" to save them.

A more expansive view of history would help us to understand that *true* revivals have come about not by novel advertising techniques or psychological manipulation but by the regular, powerful expository preaching of God's Word.

Live Courageous Christian Lives Today

Isaac Watts, the eighteenth-century British hymnist, asks a number of powerful questions, making the point that the study of church history can be a spur to faithfulness:

"Am I a soldier of the cross, a follower of the lamb, and shall I fear to own his cause, or blush to speak his name? Must I be carried to the skies on flowery beds of ease, while others fought to win the prize and sailed through bloody seas? Are there no foes for me to face? Must I not stem the flood? Is this vile world a friend to grace, to help me on to God? Since I must fight if I would reign, increase my courage, Lord; I'll bear the toil, endure the pain, supported by Thy Word."⁴

Until the Lord comes again, the church is appropriately called the church militant. Many before us have fought well. But the fight continues.

Studying the history of the church soberly reminds us that we take our place in the ranks of the army of God. We take up the same battle-beaten armor that the saints of old used. We use the same weapon, the gospel of Jesus Christ. And we fight not only to continue our heritage but to leave a lasting legacy for future generations as well.

1. C.S. Lewis, *Surprised by Joy: The Shape of My Early Life* (1955; repr., New York: Harcourt Trade Publishers, 1966), 204, 205, 211, 214.

2. McCracken, Brett. "The Perils of Hipster Christianity." *The Wall Street Journal*. 13 August, 2010. Newspaper on-line. Available from <http://online.wsj.com> Accessed 8 September 2010.

3. Bruce Shelly, *Church History in Plain Language*, Updated 2nd Ed. (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1995), xvi.

4. "Am I a Soldier of the Cross?" *Psalter Hymnal*, 1976.

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Bible Studies on the Life of Abraham

Lesson 17: The Death of Sarah

Genesis 23

Rev. Wybren H.
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In this chapter we have the first biblical reference to mourning for the dead and burial. Sarah is also the only woman whose age is recorded in the Scriptures; she was one hundred twenty-seven years old. The marriage of Abraham and Sarah is the first godly marriage the Bible unfolds for us. Sarah had been Abraham's companion for almost three quarters of a century. Throughout their marriage, she had shown herself to be a faithful, submissive wife (1 Peter 3:3-6) in times of prosperity and poverty, sickness and health, joy and sorrow. They had gone through many trials together in pursuit of God's calling. Many times they were victorious over the trials set before them; other times they had led one another astray. They were by no means perfect, but they were one flesh, united in marriage by God, and upon Sarah's death, Abraham mourned and wept.

The Final Enemy

Genesis 23:2 indicates that tears and mourning are perfectly appropriate responses to grief. While we do not grieve as those who have no hope (1 Thessalonians 4:13), we still acknowledge that death is the final enemy. It is so for several reasons.

First of all, death is something we know nothing about. All that we can understand or imagine is based upon either

our experience or the experience of others. No one who has died during our lifetime has ever come back to tell us about it. They die and are seen no more. Death is the great unknown.

There are all kinds of books written about what happens at death. One author claimed to have spent several minutes in heaven. His book became so popular that another author wrote about the several minutes he spent in hell before being revived by doctors. Have you ever noticed that all of the books written about the afterlife were written by people who were still alive?

For the Christian, however, there is One who has gone beyond the veil of darkness that is the grave who returned. Jesus says, "I am the Living One; I was dead, and behold I am alive for ever and ever! And I hold the keys of death and Hades" (Revelation 1:17, 18). Jesus has experienced death and tells all who trust in Him that they need not be afraid.

Only Jesus was dead and buried. He alone came back from the dead to tell us about it. He appeared to His disciples and told one of them, "Put your fingers here; see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it into my side. Stop doubting and believe" (John 20:27). The fact that Jesus rose from the dead should change our whole perspective on death because He proved that it has no power over those who love and serve Him.

A second reason most people recoil from death is because they instinctively know, as the Bible teaches, that after death comes the judgment (Hebrews 9:27). When a person dies, that person shall reap whatever he has sown here on this

earth. Everyone will be repaid for all they have done and every word they have spoken. Those who have rejected Christ, lived in sin, and mocked God will be judged by God.

That is a very frightening thought even for the Christian because we know that we are all sinners. Yet for the servant of Christ, the sting of death has been removed (1 Corinthians 15:56). It is removed not because we are better than others, but because the Christian has been clothed in the righteousness of Jesus Christ who paid the penalty for sin with His own precious blood.

Finally, most people fear death because they see it as nothing more than the chilling anticipation of the end. All activity is finished. There is no more. The glorious resurrection of Jesus Christ, however, proves otherwise. His resurrection is not just an illustration to show us that resurrections are possible. Instead, His resurrection is a guarantee of our resurrection.

The resurrection of Jesus Christ is described by Paul as the firstfruits of them that sleep (1 Corinthians 15). If He is the first fruit, there must be a second fruit. The farmer who cuts his hay in the spring refers to it as the "first cutting" because he fully anticipates that there will be a second cutting. So also, with Christ as the first fruit of the resurrection, there will be a second fruit. Those who believe in Him are the full harvest.

A Place in the Promised Land

In spite of the many times God had promised Abraham the land, Sarah's death presented a problem. For sixty

years Abraham had lived in the land God had promised would one day be his. Still, Abraham did not own any land—not even a small plot in which he could bury his beloved wife. He still has to identify himself as a stranger and sojourner in the land.

In preparations for a proper burial, Abraham approached the sons of Heth and asked for a plot of land. When the sons offered one of the choicest from among their own graves, Abraham refused, asking instead to buy the cave of Machpelah owned by Ephron the Hittite.

Not to be outdone by the sons of Heth, Ephron also offered the land to Abraham as a gift. Abraham ignored the offers to receive the land as a gift. He rejected the suggestion that his wife be buried among the dead of another nation who worshipped false gods. When Abraham insisted that the Ephron accept payment for the land, Ephron announced the value of the land and acted as though he were doing Abraham a favor by accepting the money given.

Abraham could not have expressed his faith in a stronger way than to

purchase this first piece of ground as a grave for his wife. First of all, in refusing to bury his wife among the Hittites, Abraham distinguished himself from them. This was to become the family plot. It was where Abraham would be buried when he died (Genesis 25:9); it is more than likely the place where Isaac was buried. The comment that Isaac “was gathered up to his people” (Genesis 35:29) points back to the purchase of this cave years earlier. In addition to Isaac, Rebekah his wife, along with



Jacob and Leah were buried in this same plot of land (Genesis 49:29–32). To be buried among one’s own people was extremely important in ancient times. It was to be among one’s children and grandchildren forever. The purchase of a separate burial plot by Abraham was an expression of faith that neither he nor his descendants would be counted among the Hittites or Canaanites. They would become a separate nation.

In addition, the purchase of the land expressed a trust that the separate nation would dwell in this particular land. This became a down payment to the guarantee that the promise God had given would one day be fulfilled. When Abraham received a clear title to the land in front of many witnesses, the cave in Machpelah became the firstfruits of the everlasting possession that God had promised in Genesis 17:8.

This was the only part of the promise that ever became real to Abraham; it was the only piece of land that he ever owned. Yet, he did not doubt that one

day all the land would be his. By faith, Abraham intended to stay in the land. He was determined that Sarah would be buried in the land he owned. His wife would be buried in land he purchased until the time when God would give to him all the land. Abraham would not become a debtor to those who were to be dispossessed of the land in the future.

Looking to the Future

The cave of Machpelah became the bond that bound the descendants of Abraham together. When the Israelites were in slavery in Egypt centuries later, this cave drew their hearts to the land of promise as with magnetic power. It was with the same confidence that Abraham had, that they were assured that their time in Egypt was temporary. One day they would return to the land. It was the place where the ashes of their ancestors rested. Even prior to their slavery, Abraham’s grandson Jacob, while enjoying the plush fields of Goshen, insisted that upon his death he be buried in Machpelah (Genesis 50:5, 13). Even the second in command in Egypt, Joseph, who enjoyed all the

luxury the world had to offer, asked the sons of Israel to bury him in the land of his father upon their return to the land promised to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob (Genesis 50:24, 25).

Many commentaries claim that the price Ephron charged for the land was as much as ten times higher than property values at the time. In addition, Ephron insisted that Abraham take not just the cave but also the field and trees that surrounded it. Perhaps he thought he could take advantage of a man grieving the loss of his wife; perhaps he asked a high price expecting Abraham to dicker as he had done earlier with God (Genesis 18). Without negotiating the price, Abraham counted out the coins and paid Ephron. Who got the better deal? Ephron walked away with a pocket of silver he could not take with him to the grave; Abraham received a grave that was a symbolic reference to the inheritance he could not lose.

Points to Ponder and Discuss

1. How is Abraham’s response to Sarah’s death a model for us?
2. How is the Christian’s grief different from that of the non-Christian?
3. Where was Abraham living when Sarah died? What problem did her death present to Abraham?
4. Why is death considered to be the final enemy? How has Jesus Christ removed the fear of death from the believer?
5. Why would Abraham refuse to have Sarah buried among the Hittites?
6. Why was Abraham insistent on paying for the land that was offered to him for free?
7. What is significant about Abraham’s purchase of some land?
8. To what did the cave of Machpelah bear witness? What was the significance of this site for Abraham’s descendants in the following centuries?

Bible Studies on the Life of Abraham

Lesson 18: A Bride for Isaac

Genesis 24

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Genesis 24 is the longest chapter in the book of Genesis. In it, the same story is told twice—once as it happens and once as it is reported by Abraham’s servant. God’s testing of Abraham is now complete, and we see the focus shift from the patriarch to his son, Isaac. Redemptive history is beginning to move toward the second patriarch. This move is made complete at the end of the chapter when the new bride, Rebekah, enters Sarah’s tent, thereby declaring herself as the new matriarch of Israel. God’s concern in Genesis is ever moving

toward the fulfillment of the promise to its completion.

After Sarah’s death, Abraham still had one more task of faith for which he felt responsible. At one hundred forty years old, Abraham was wealthy enough to retire and anchor himself in the present. Instead, he looked to the future—to the promises of God—and acted on those promises. He knew that the promises God had given to him would be carried through his son until the day of their fulfillment. Isaac was not only the twice-given miraculous gift of God’s faithful love,

he was also the heir to the promises God had given to Abraham. How necessary, then, for his son to have a wife who believed in God and who would be bound to the promises of God. Abraham, however, lived in country surrounded by godless Canaanites whom his ancestors would one day dispossess of their land. If Isaac married one of them, her ties to her family would make such dispossession difficult. In addition, she would bring false gods into the family. Nor could Abraham permit Isaac to leave the land of promise lest



he fail to return. His solution was to send a trusted servant to find a wife for Isaac. As surely as God had provided the ram in thicket earlier for Isaac (Genesis 22:13), so also God would provide the perfect bride.

The Servant's Commission

Scripture does not identify the servant Abraham entrusted with the task of finding a wife for his son. Most likely it was Eliezer of Damascus whom Abraham had once planned on making his heir (Genesis 15:2). Whoever he was, he was a pious man who believed in the power of prayer. He was loyal to his master and insistent on seeing his responsibility through to the end.

In faith, Abraham's servant set out with ten camels loaded with jewelry, garments, and other gifts, perhaps as a dowry or to illustrate Isaac's ability to support a wife. After traveling about four hundred fifty miles to the city of Nahor, the servant bowed before God in prayer, requesting a set of stipulations in determining success. Some have compared this prayer to that of Gideon (Judges 6ff.); others to the prayer of Elijah at Mount Carmel (1 Kings 18). Gideon, on the one hand, had no reason to make any request of God. An angel of the Lord had told him that he was the one who would defeat the Midianites. Instead of acting in faith, Gideon responded improperly by proposing a series of tests for God to answer. On the other hand, Elijah never doubted the will of God and forcefully called for fire from heaven to prove God's omnipotence.

Abraham's servant acknowledged his own weakness and sought divine guidance from God. Unlike Gideon, he did not ask for a miraculous sign from God. Instead, he rested in the providence of God to use ordinary events to reveal His will for Isaac's bride. In his prayer he asked for an industrious, hardworking woman who was also hospitable and who

embodied the traits of the godly woman described in Proverbs 31. With this prayer, the servant placed himself in complete reliance on God, for only the sovereign God could steer events in such detailed fashion.

God answered the servant's prayer before he was even finished presenting it before God. A young, beautiful girl offered him water. After he had finished drinking, she drew water for all the camels. This was no small chore. Camels can drink twenty to thirty gallons of water—each! Ancient wells were large, deep holes in the earth with steps leading to a spring. Each drawing of water would require substantial effort on the young lady's part. If Rebekah's water jar was typical for the day, it would only hold about three gallons of water. That meant that Rebekah had to take between eighty to one hundred trips down and up the stairs to the spring to water the thirsty camels.

After the chores were completed, the servant discovered that God had led him to the right family as the young girl was a relative of Abraham. Immediately, the servant bowed down and worshipped God. The servant's mention of Abraham's name also triggered a glad response from Rebekah. She was so filled with excitement that she ran off to tell her family, leaving Abraham's servant behind.

Meeting the Family

Arriving at the home of Abraham's relatives, the faithful servant of Abraham retold the events that had taken place, carefully including Abraham's commission to find a bride for his son, his bride-finding quest to Nahor, and his providential encounter with Rebekah. The servant of Abraham was convinced that if Rebekah's parents understood how God had led him to their daughter, they would have no choice but to let Rebekah return with him to be Isaac's bride. Although they showed great

hospitality to the servant of their distant relative and acknowledged that the matter was from God, the family was reluctant to send Rebekah off immediately. Her mother and brother asked that Rebekah remain with them a few days (or months) before she embark on such a lengthy journey.

Already in this chapter we received hints as to the cunning of Rebekah's brother, Laban. He showed Abraham's servant great hospitality—after he saw the ring and bracelets Rebekah had received (Genesis 24:30). He also made special mention of the camels (v. 31), animals considered to be a luxury even for the wealthy. No doubt Laban was already planning ways to unburden the traveling servant of Abraham of his possessions. Whatever plans he may have had, present or future (Genesis 29, 30) to gain materially from that which rightfully was promised to Abraham, God used him to supply three wives to the offspring of the patriarch, thus moving the promises further to their completion.

Rebekah, on the other hand, saw the hand of God in the earlier events of the day. Like Abraham decades earlier, she knew that God was calling her to leave her own country, her family, and her father's house to go to a land of which she knew very little. "Rebekah" sounds much like the Hebrew word for "blessing" (*berakah*). The blessing Rebekah received on leaving her home was very similar to God's promise given to Abraham. The blessing included the promise of many descendants, possession of cities, and dominion over enemies. Although she did not realize it, the future bride of Isaac was receiving the same blessing that God gave to Abraham after he had offered her future husband as a sacrifice to God (Genesis 23:17).

Rebekah and the Church

One can only imagine the conversations Rebekah had with

Abraham's servant during that month-long trip to Canaan. How curious she must have been about her future husband, about the land to which she was traveling, about the customs, and so much more. Early church fathers have portrayed the search for Isaac's bride as analogous with the bride of Christ.

The arranged marriages that were the custom in the ancient near east illustrate a pattern of grace. Abraham is said to represent God the Father seeking a bride for His Son, Jesus Christ. In His grace, the sovereign God initiated our journey into the church by choosing to take a bride for His Son (Ephesians 1:4). Jesus speaks of those whom He saved as those whom the Father gave Him (John 17:6–12).

Isaac, the son, is said to represent Jesus Christ. Isaac had submitted himself to be sacrificed by his father. Whereas Abraham did not have to

complete the sacrifice, God's Son paid a great price for the redemption of His people—not silver or gold, but His own precious blood was shed for His bride (1 Peter 1:18, 19). Now, the ascended Christ waits for that glorious time when He and the bride are united forevermore (Revelation 19:7–9).

According to the early church fathers, the servant of Abraham represents the Holy Spirit. Even as the servant never spoke on his own behalf but always pointed to the father and son, so also the Holy Spirit draws the church to the Father through the Son. It is the Holy Spirit who convicts those within the church of their sin and misery, reveals that deliverance is available through Jesus Christ, and then calls them to live in gratitude to God for the salvation He has provided.

And finally, Rebekah represents the church as she trusts what she has learned concerning the son from the

servant, trusting that his word is true, and that her voyage is safe as long as she follows his leading. As Rebekah left all behind for her groom; so the church travels through this barren land looking ahead to city whose architect and builder is God. Even as Rebekah must have listened eagerly to the servant tell her about her soon-to-be groom and the promises God had given to Abraham's family, the church eagerly listens each Lord's Day to the work accomplished by the Groom on the cross of Calvary, knowing that through Him come the promises of reconciliation, forgiveness, and life eternal.

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Points to Ponder and Discuss

1. Consider the following options open to Abraham in finding a bride for his son.
 - a. He could marry Isaac to the daughter of a local Canaanite chieftain.
 - b. He could send Isaac out of Canaan to Haran for a bride.
 - c. He could send his trusted servant to his brother to find a bride.
2. Where do you suppose the servant learned to pray and worship as he did?
3. Was the prayer of the servant a testing of God? May we ask of such things of God?
4. How are we to determine God's will for our lives?
5. Why did Abraham's servant feel confident that the first girl who offered a drink to his camels was the wife that God had chosen for Isaac?
6. Who is Laban and how did he respond to the speech of the servant?
7. How does Rebekah's response remind you of Abraham's faith? What similarities do you see between the blessing Rebekah receives and the blessing God gave to Abraham?
8. Do you think the comparison of this chapter to the Church of Jesus Christ is appropriate?
9. In what ways does Genesis illustrate Proverbs 3:6?

Are you ready to meet Him? Are you ready to meet the One like the Son of Man? Are you ready for the Day of Judgment? Are you ready for the end of the world? Are you ready to meet Jesus Christ at His second coming?

Revelation 14:14 begins in the same way as Revelation 14:1. Both passages begin with the words, “Then I looked, and behold!”

And yet while there is similarity between verses 1 and 14, there is also significant difference. In verse 1, John looks and beholds a Lamb. In verse 14, John looks and beholds One like the Son of Man. In verse 1, John looks and beholds a Lamb standing on Mount Zion. In verse 14, John looks and beholds One like the Son of Man sitting on a white cloud. The context makes clear that the Lamb of verse 1 and the One like the Son of Man in verse 14 are one and the same Person, namely, Jesus Christ. But that doesn’t account for the fact that in verse 1 the Lamb *stands*, while in verse 14, the One like the Son of Man *sits*.

What accounts for this difference in posture? Why does Christ stand as a Lamb in verse 1 only to sit like the Son of Man in verse 14? The difference is this: whereas chapter 14 begins in this present time (the time between Christ’s first coming and His return), chapter 14 ends with the end of time (when Christ returns to judge the living and the dead). Thus in verse 1 He appears as a Lamb, standing before the throne in the posture of an

Advocate—One who pleads the cause of His people before the throne of God—while in verse 14, He appears as One like the Son of Man, sitting on a white cloud in the posture of a Judge—One who is coming to judge the living and the dead.

Verse 14 is pushing us to the end of the world. In view here is the great and terrible day of the Lord, the day of judgment. In view here is the second coming of Jesus Christ. Jesus has completed His work of advocacy in heaven; now at last He comes as Judge.

The details of verse 14 bear this out. He comes sitting on a cloud. You may recall the words of Acts 1:9–11, “Now when He had spoken these things, while they watched, He was taken up, and a cloud received Him out of their sight. And while they looked steadfastly toward heaven as He went up, behold, two men stood by them in white apparel, who also said, ‘Men of Galilee, why do you stand gazing up into heaven? This same Jesus, who was taken up from you into heaven, will so come in like manner as you saw Him go into heaven.’” As Jesus ascended into heaven with a cloud receiving Him, so He will come again with clouds. Revelation 1:7, “Behold, He is coming with clouds!” These verses make it clear: in view here is the end of the world, the great and terrible day of the Lord, the day of judgment; in view here is the return of Jesus Christ!

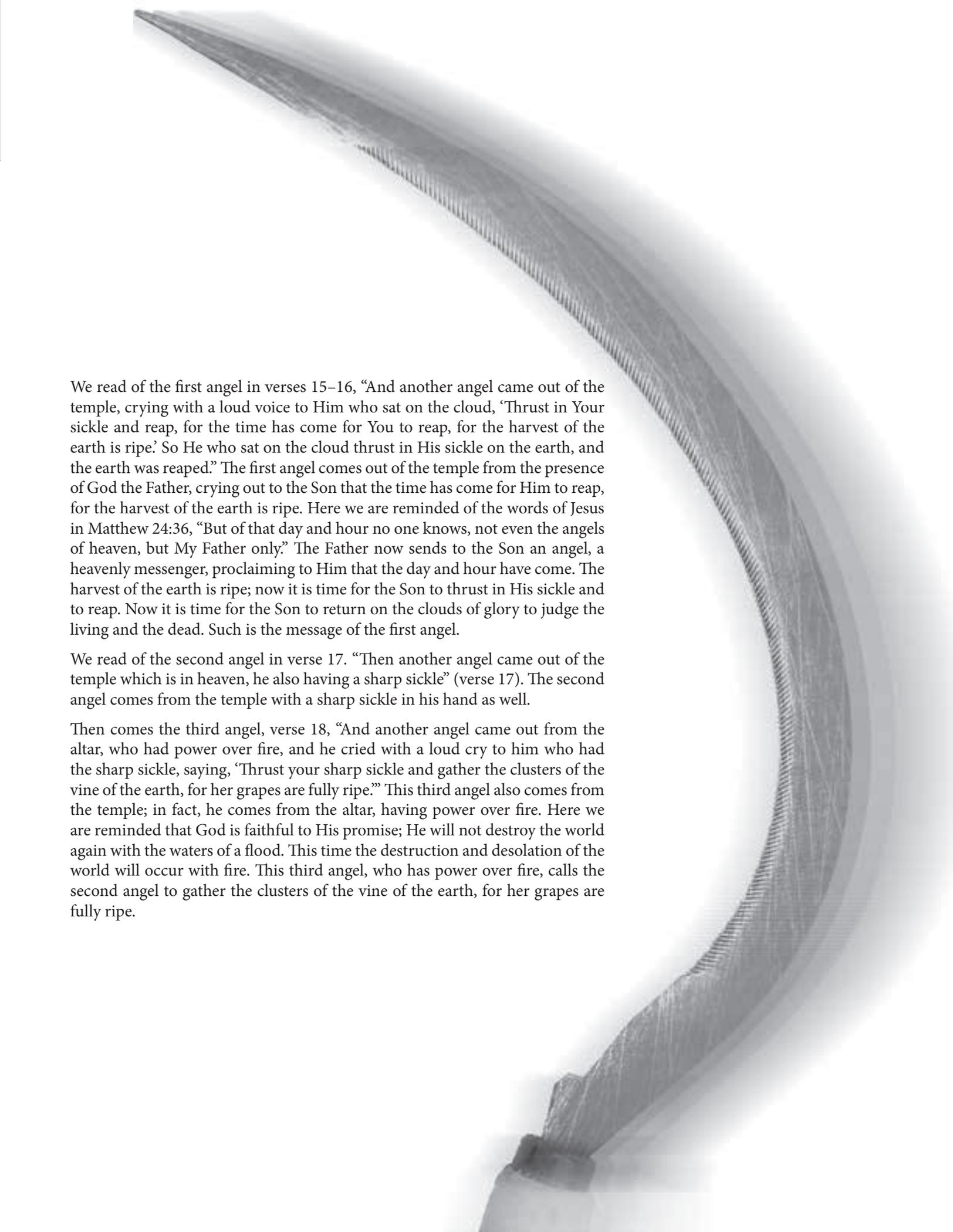
You’ll note furthermore that He wears on His head a golden crown. Gone is the crown of thorns. He comes now with a golden crown. When He comes, our glorious King, He will come as Lord over all—the One

before whom every knee must bow and every tongue confess. Then He will be seen and confessed for who He is: the King of kings and Lord of lords.

But then note one more feature of verse 14: He holds in His hand a sharp sickle. A sickle is a curved instrument used in harvesting for cutting down. Here the sickle serves as an instrument of judgment. He is coming again not to bear sin but to judge.

That’s verse 14, but then we come to verse 15. Here John writes of “another angel.” In fact, John will write of “another angel” three times in verses 15–20. We read of the first angel in verses 15–16, of another angel in verse 17, and of yet another angel in verses 18–20. There are three angels in verses 15–20. What are we to make of this? Again, we see similarity between these verses and verses 6–13, where we also read of three angels: the first angel being mentioned in verses 6–7, the second in verse 8, and the third in verses 9–11.

And yet while there is similarity between the three angels of verses 6–13 and the three angels of verses 15–20, there is also significant difference. In verses 6–13 the angels came with the everlasting gospel, warning those who dwell on the earth of the judgment to come. Now in verses 15–20, the angels are no longer proclaiming the gospel and warning of judgment; now the judgment has come!



We read of the first angel in verses 15–16, “And another angel came out of the temple, crying with a loud voice to Him who sat on the cloud, “Thrust in Your sickle and reap, for the time has come for You to reap, for the harvest of the earth is ripe.’ So He who sat on the cloud thrust in His sickle on the earth, and the earth was reaped.” The first angel comes out of the temple from the presence of God the Father, crying out to the Son that the time has come for Him to reap, for the harvest of the earth is ripe. Here we are reminded of the words of Jesus in Matthew 24:36, “But of that day and hour no one knows, not even the angels of heaven, but My Father only.” The Father now sends to the Son an angel, a heavenly messenger, proclaiming to Him that the day and hour have come. The harvest of the earth is ripe; now it is time for the Son to thrust in His sickle and to reap. Now it is time for the Son to return on the clouds of glory to judge the living and the dead. Such is the message of the first angel.

We read of the second angel in verse 17. “Then another angel came out of the temple which is in heaven, he also having a sharp sickle” (verse 17). The second angel comes from the temple with a sharp sickle in his hand as well.

Then comes the third angel, verse 18, “And another angel came out from the altar, who had power over fire, and he cried with a loud cry to him who had the sharp sickle, saying, ‘Thrust your sharp sickle and gather the clusters of the vine of the earth, for her grapes are fully ripe.’” This third angel also comes from the temple; in fact, he comes from the altar, having power over fire. Here we are reminded that God is faithful to His promise; He will not destroy the world again with the waters of a flood. This time the destruction and desolation of the world will occur with fire. This third angel, who has power over fire, calls the second angel to gather the clusters of the vine of the earth, for her grapes are fully ripe.

Verse 19, “So the angel thrust his sickle into the earth and gathered the vine of the earth, and threw it into the great winepress of the wrath of God.” The angel takes his sickle and gathers the vine of the earth, and then casts it into the great winepress of the wrath of God. Verse 20, “And the winepress was trampled outside the city, and blood came out of the winepress, up to the horses’ bridles, for one thousand six hundred furlongs.” We have a vivid prophecy of this very thing in Isaiah 63:1–6. “Who is this who comes from Edom, with dyed garments from Bozrah, this One who is glorious in His apparel, traveling in the greatness of His strength? I who speak in righteousness, mighty to save. I have trodden the winepress alone, and from the peoples no one was with Me. For I have trodden them in My anger, and trampled them in My fury; their blood is sprinkled upon My garments, and I have stained all My robes. For the day of vengeance is in My heart, and the year of My redeemed has come. I looked but there was no one to help, and I wondered that there was no one to uphold; therefore My own arm brought salvation for Me; and My own fury, it sustained Me. I have trodden down the peoples in My anger, made them drunk in My fury, and brought down their strength to the earth.” The Lord Jesus Christ Himself treads the winepress of the wrath of God.

And notice where it is trampled: it is trampled outside the city. Those who are trampled have no place inside the city, the heavenly city, the city of God. They are trampled outside.

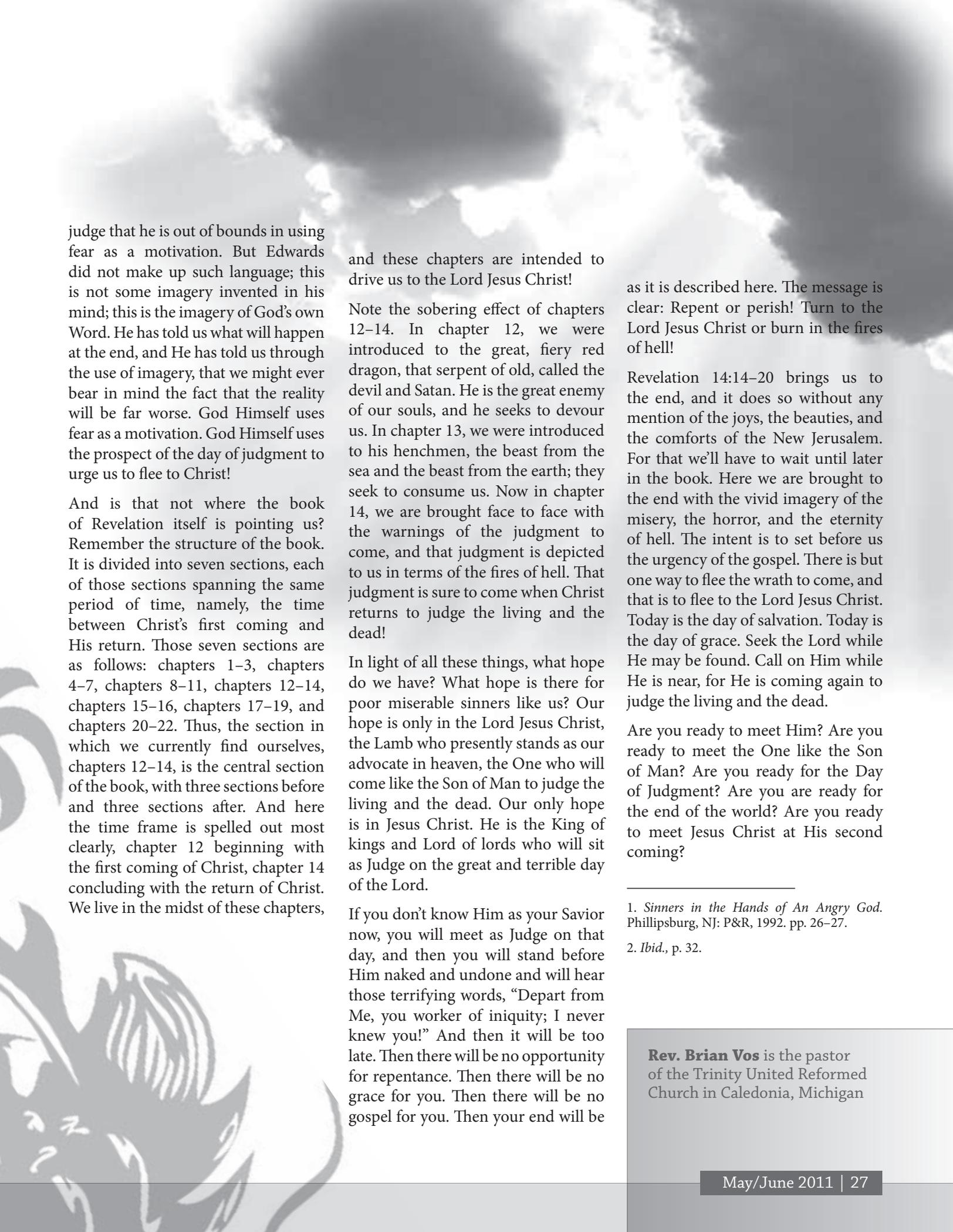
As the wicked are trampled in the winepress of God’s wrath, outside the city, notice what comes out: not grape

juice, not wine, but blood! Do you think there is no pain for the damned in hell? Would you conceive of that pain only in terms of spiritual pain? While spiritual pain is no doubt there, and while such pain is great, there is physical pain as well—great physical pain—as blood flows out of the great winepress of the wrath of God. That blood never stops flowing, for the damned in hell are ever dying but never dead. There is something worse than death; it’s called hell, for there the great winepress of the wrath of God is trampled!

The picture becomes more horrific still, as we are told that blood came out of the winepress up to the horses’ bridles, for one thousand six hundred furlongs. Pictured here is a sea of blood, five to six feet in depth, covering nearly two hundred miles! And yet the numbers here are not to be taken literally; they are symbolic of the universal scope and completeness of the judgment. In his sermon, “Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God,” Jonathan Edwards has captured the imagery well: “Now God stands ready to pity you; this is a day of mercy; you may cry now with some encouragement of obtaining mercy. But when once the day of mercy is past, your most lamentable and dolorous cries and shrieks will be in vain; you will be wholly lost and thrown away of God, as to any regard to your welfare. God will have no other use to put you to, but to suffer misery; you shall be continued in being to no other end; for you will be a vessel of wrath fitted to destruction; and there will be no other use of this vessel, but to be filled full of wrath.

God will be so far from pitying you when you cry to him, that it is said he will only ‘laugh and mock.’ . . . If you cry to God to pity you, he will be so far from pitying you in your doleful case, or showing you the least regard or favor, that instead of that, he will only tread you under foot. And though he will know that you cannot bear the weight of omnipotence treading upon you, yet he will not regard that, but he will crush you under his feet without mercy; he will crush out your blood, and make it fly, and it shall be sprinkled on his garments, so as to stain all his raiment. He will not only hate you, but he will have you in the utmost contempt: no place shall be thought fit for you, but under his feet to be trodden down as the mire of the streets.”¹ Is it any wonder that Edwards concluded that sermon with the words, “Let everyone that is out of Christ, now awake and fly from the wrath to come . . . Let everyone fly out of Sodom: ‘haste and escape for your lives, look not behind you, escape to the mountains, lest you be consumed.’”²

We may scorn Edwards as being hopelessly unenlightened. We may



judge that he is out of bounds in using fear as a motivation. But Edwards did not make up such language; this is not some imagery invented in his mind; this is the imagery of God's own Word. He has told us what will happen at the end, and He has told us through the use of imagery, that we might ever bear in mind the fact that the reality will be far worse. God Himself uses fear as a motivation. God Himself uses the prospect of the day of judgment to urge us to flee to Christ!

And is that not where the book of Revelation itself is pointing us? Remember the structure of the book. It is divided into seven sections, each of those sections spanning the same period of time, namely, the time between Christ's first coming and His return. Those seven sections are as follows: chapters 1–3, chapters 4–7, chapters 8–11, chapters 12–14, chapters 15–16, chapters 17–19, and chapters 20–22. Thus, the section in which we currently find ourselves, chapters 12–14, is the central section of the book, with three sections before and three sections after. And here the time frame is spelled out most clearly, chapter 12 beginning with the first coming of Christ, chapter 14 concluding with the return of Christ. We live in the midst of these chapters,

and these chapters are intended to drive us to the Lord Jesus Christ!

Note the sobering effect of chapters 12–14. In chapter 12, we were introduced to the great, fiery red dragon, that serpent of old, called the devil and Satan. He is the great enemy of our souls, and he seeks to devour us. In chapter 13, we were introduced to his henchmen, the beast from the sea and the beast from the earth; they seek to consume us. Now in chapter 14, we are brought face to face with the warnings of the judgment to come, and that judgment is depicted to us in terms of the fires of hell. That judgment is sure to come when Christ returns to judge the living and the dead!

In light of all these things, what hope do we have? What hope is there for poor miserable sinners like us? Our hope is only in the Lord Jesus Christ, the Lamb who presently stands as our advocate in heaven, the One who will come like the Son of Man to judge the living and the dead. Our only hope is in Jesus Christ. He is the King of kings and Lord of lords who will sit as Judge on the great and terrible day of the Lord.

If you don't know Him as your Savior now, you will meet as Judge on that day, and then you will stand before Him naked and undone and will hear those terrifying words, "Depart from Me, you worker of iniquity; I never knew you!" And then it will be too late. Then there will be no opportunity for repentance. Then there will be no grace for you. Then there will be no gospel for you. Then your end will be

as it is described here. The message is clear: Repent or perish! Turn to the Lord Jesus Christ or burn in the fires of hell!

Revelation 14:14–20 brings us to the end, and it does so without any mention of the joys, the beauties, and the comforts of the New Jerusalem. For that we'll have to wait until later in the book. Here we are brought to the end with the vivid imagery of the misery, the horror, and the eternity of hell. The intent is to set before us the urgency of the gospel. There is but one way to flee the wrath to come, and that is to flee to the Lord Jesus Christ. Today is the day of salvation. Today is the day of grace. Seek the Lord while He may be found. Call on Him while He is near, for He is coming again to judge the living and the dead.

Are you ready to meet Him? Are you ready to meet the One like the Son of Man? Are you ready for the Day of Judgment? Are you are ready for the end of the world? Are you ready to meet Jesus Christ at His second coming?

1. *Sinners in the Hands of An Angry God*. Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 1992. pp. 26–27.

2. *Ibid.*, p. 32.

Rev. Brian Vos is the pastor of the Trinity United Reformed Church in Caledonia, Michigan

III Have you ever dreamed of impacting history? Has it ever been your desire to leave a major mark upon future generations? Well, the opportunity to do just that is before us within the United Reformed federation. At the invitation of the synodically-mandated songbook committee, you can leave a lasting and enduring legacy for your children, your grandchildren, and your great-grandchildren.

You can leave this life-changing legacy by encouraging your church's elders to participate in the comment period set up by the songbook committee for the songs that have been put before the churches in the Hymn Proposal. Time is of the essence in this, however, as the deadline for participation in this endeavor is quickly coming upon us.

A Brief History

In 1999 Synod Hudsonville first voted to organize a committee to produce a new songbook for our United Reformed Churches. The delegates to that synod were confronted with the reality that our tried and true blue *Psalter Hymnal* found in our pews was fast becoming more and more worn out and that new ones were no longer being printed by the Christian Reformed Board of Publications. Because those delegates also realized the great spiritual value for our churches to sing from a common hymnal, and also because they recognized how long it takes to produce a songbook of our own, Synod Hudsonville authorized

the organization of this songbook committee and gave it the mandate to produce a *new* songbook for our churches. Synod wanted not just a simple and slight reworking of the old blue *Psalter Hymnal*. Rather, they were asked to create our own new and unique songbook, which our people could use to praise our God for years and decades to come.

Over the past twelve years since synod formed this committee, because of intense demand for more blue *Psalter Hymnals*, the Board of the Reformed Fellowship has worked with the Board of Publications of the Christian Reformed Church to

produce several limited reprintings of the old Blue. In fact, the Reformed Fellowship is currently taking orders right now for another such reprinting. However, with each new order placed with the CRC the price for the book dramatically increases.

The Board of the Reformed Fellowship has even looked into purchasing the copyrights to the old blue *Psalter Hymnal*, but because CRC Publications does not own the rights to the music and lyrics but merely licenses them from the original sources, they cannot sell the rights to anyone else. So the need in our federation for a songbook all our own is still urgent.



The Present Situation

Finally, after many years of intense labor, our songbook committee presented the first part of its work to the URC Synod of 2010 held in London, Ontario. Last summer the delegates of each organized church represented at Synod were given three binders with copies of the hymn selections that the committee was proposing to our churches. Each church plant was given two copies of these hymn selections. This book is called the Hymn Proposal (hereafter HP).

This HP has raised concerns among some of our churches. As an article by another writer in the last issue of this magazine so clearly showed, these concerns are legitimate. The HP is not a perfect work. It needs our constructive input!

Knowing how powerful and personal the music of the church is to godly worshipers, Synod 2010 set down a clear process for how the HP can be improved and modified. If you have access to the Internet, you can see this process explained clearly in questions 6 and 7 in the Frequently Asked Questions section of the Songbook Committee page on the URCNA website at www.urchna.org. Look for the Psalter Hymnal link in the left column.

To summarize this process, the committee is basically asking for the people of our churches to look over the HP and to bring their thoughts for improvement to the elders of their church. The elders then evaluate the pros and the cons of these suggestions, and if they deem them to be valid, the consistory is to prepare an overture to bring to their next classis meeting. In order to help the elders with this task, a sample overture is conveniently included in Question and Answer 7 of the FAQ page. If, after considering the proposal together, the delegates to that respective classis meeting also determine that the suggestion is a good one, then the overture is sent along to the songbook committee to be processed.

What You Can Do

It is important that you take notice that this whole process begins with *you!* Here is how you have the opportunity to impact the history of the spiritual formation of generations yet unborn. Martin Luther is well known for saying that second only to the preached Word, it is the songs of the church that the Holy Spirit uses in order to touch and change lives for Jesus Christ.

By looking over and examining closely the HP presented by our songbook committee, you can begin the positive process set out by Synod, which will result in a finished product that God the Holy Spirit will use to mold and shape your children, grandchildren, and many more generations to come as well.

Even if you are not familiar with or trained in music theory yourself, you can yet encourage your church's elders to work closely with the musical accompanists of your church to sit down and do the hard work that it will take in order to have a book that all of our churches can not only call their own, but can also jointly use to praise our great and glorious triune God together.

As I mentioned, however, time is of the essence. The songbook committee has asked that these finalized classical overtures be sent to them by the end of October of this year (2011), so that they can present a finalized list of hymns to Synod 2012 in New Jersey. This means that each individual classis will have to hold a meeting to go over the various overtures presented to them by the elders some time in late summer or early fall. This means that individual consistories need to be consulting with their accompanists and formulating these beginning overtures even right now. So there is no time to lose.

Find those Hymn Proposals that came home with your church's delegates to Synod. Look them over closely. Be part of the process that the Lord will use to impact history!

Rev. Edward Marcusse is pastor of Faith URC in Holland, Michigan. He is a member of the board of trustees of Reformed Fellowship.



In my previous articles on Bavinck's doctrine of the covenant and election, I took something of a detour in my exposition of his *Reformed Dogmatics*. Rather than turning to Bavinck's treatment of the doctrine of creation, which deals with the first of the triune God's works in the realization of his sovereign counsel or decree for all things, I spent some time on the way Bavinck articulates the covenant relationship between God and his people. In the actual sequence of topics in his dogmatics, however, Bavinck deals with the doctrine of the covenant after the doctrine of creation in a section entitled "human destiny." The purpose and fulfillment of human life requires the blessedness of fellowship and communion with God, which is only effected by way of the covenant that God establishes between himself and his people. Bavinck also deals with the doctrine of the covenant in the third volume of his *Reformed Dogmatics*, where he takes up the topic of God's work of redemption in Christ. Through Christ, the "last" Adam, God aims to restore his people to covenant fellowship and thereby achieve his ultimate aim for human life in the state of glorification.

Though it was fitting to consider Bavinck's view of the covenant within the setting of his doctrine of election, we need to return to the order that Bavinck

follows in his dogmatics and consider now his doctrine of creation. The triune God's work of creation is the *first* of the great works of God in the accomplishment of his eternal counsel or decree. The work of creation is also the *foundation* and *presupposition* for all of God's subsequent works in time whereby he glorifies himself and infallibly achieves all that he has willed for the course of history. In Bavinck's estimation, the doctrine of creation is an integral and basic feature of the biblical worldview and therefore of all Christian theology. Therefore, it requires our attention and careful reflection.

In order to summarize accurately Bavinck's treatment of the doctrine of creation, we will consider three topics in this and subsequent articles. First, in this article, I will offer a sketch of Bavinck's theological formulation and reflection on the doctrine of creation in general. Second, in a subsequent article, I will pause to consider the way Bavinck interprets the biblical account of creation in the book of Genesis. Bavinck's handling of this sensitive and difficult topic is a model of careful scholarship and biblical fidelity, which deserves our attention and respect. And third, I will conclude my treatment of Bavinck's doctrine of creation with an article on his understanding of the creation of human beings in the image of God.

Creation and Its Religious Alternatives

Bavinck begins his treatment of the doctrine of creation, not with an exposition of the biblical account of creation in Genesis, but with a comprehensive theological reflection

on some of the key features of the doctrine. After observing that the "realization of the counsel of God begins with creation," Bavinck emphasizes the pivotal and preeminent place of the teaching of creation in Scripture (RD 2:407). The teaching of Scripture places the doctrine of creation at the foreground, not as a theoretical explanation of the "problem of existence," but as a primarily "religious" and "ethical" teaching. The biblical authors are not interested in creation as the solution to a problem of the mind (Why does anything exist? What accounts for the existence of the world?). Rather, in the biblical approach to the doctrine of creation, the emphasis lies on the implications of this teaching for the worship and service of God as the Creator of all things. The teaching that God is the sovereign Creator of all things, and particularly of human beings as his image-bearers, summons believers to a life of radical dependence on God and undivided devotion to his service. To paraphrase Calvin's well-known emphasis on the inseparability of the knowledge of God and of ourselves, Bavinck observes that to know God as Creator is tantamount to knowing oneself as a creature with all that such knowledge entails for life in a world that belongs wholly to God.

In his exposition of the doctrine of creation, Bavinck first contrasts the biblical doctrine with its religious alternatives. Though the Roman Catholic Church insists that the doctrine of creation can be known "from nature by reason" (RD 2:408), the history of religions and the traditional views of philosophers

believe this claim. In the course of human history, a variety of alternative religious and philosophical views to the biblical doctrine of creation have been advanced. These views are substantially at odds with the biblical understanding of creation. According to Bavinck, the principal alternatives to the Christian understanding of creation fall into one of three broad types: first, various pagan “cosmologies” or “theogonies” that view the creation as the product of the work of “god” or the “gods”; second, a number of “pantheistic” views that conceive of the creation as a kind of “overflow” of the divine life or being of God; and third, the emergence in the modern, post-Enlightenment period of various forms of “materialism,” which deny the existence of a distinct Creator and ascribe the world’s existence to naturalistic forces inherent in the material world itself.

In the history of paganism, a variety of polytheistic explanations of the world’s existence have been embraced. In pagan mythologies such as the *Enuma Elish*, the Chaldean alternative to the biblical account of creation in Genesis, the world is created (perhaps better: birthed) through the co-operative labor of the “gods” (polytheistic) who fashion the “stuff” of the world into its present form. Or in the tradition of ancient Greek philosophy, the world is not so much created as it is formed by the influence of “spirit” on “matter,” or the action of the philosopher Plato’s divine “Demiurge” who crafts the world after the pattern of the eternal ideas much as a child fashions sand into the form of a castle at the beach. In all of these pagan doctrines of creation, the world is thought to have obtained its present state of existence through the actions of the gods, or the interaction of mind and matter. But in none of them do we find the strict idea of creation, namely, an act of God’s power and wisdom in which all things are called into existence “out of

nothing” (*creatio ex nihilo*). To some degree, all of these pagan doctrines of creation view the world as the product of the “gods” fashioning a kind of primordial stuff into its present form, or as the “birthing” of a world through the (sexual) union of the “gods.” Such alternative views of creation invariably reflect polytheistic, dualistic (matter precedes the act of creation), or “theogonic” (the world represents the coming-to-be or birthing of the gods) conceptions of the world’s existence.¹

According to Bavinck, a second alternative to the biblical view of creation is *pantheism*. Throughout the history of human thought, pantheism has taken a variety of forms. In the more recent history of philosophy, pantheism is often associated with the German philosophers, Schelling and Hegel, who viewed the world and its history as the self-expression of the divine Spirit. Even though pantheism can take a great number of forms, all of these forms deny the idea of creation as a distinct act of God’s sovereign will and power. The relation between God and the world is similar to the relation of the soul to the body, or the mind to its thoughts or expressions. Rather than the creation being distinct in being from God, who alone exists in radical independence from all things and on whose will everything depends, the creation is a necessary self-expression of the divine Spirit or the Absolute. In pantheism, all things exist “in” God and all things “are” a necessary manifestation or overflow of the divine being. In order for God to be God, he needs the world, even as the world exists as a revelation or manifestation of the divine being. Accordingly, pantheism denies that the world is the result of a distinct act of God’s will or that God could be who He is without creating the world. The world and God are ultimately one and the same in being, and the history of the world is the history of God’s “becoming” or of his self-development through time.

In the modern period, a third alternative to the biblical view of creation has emerged in materialism. Though materialism represents itself as the fruit of modern science and its study of the mechanism of material and chemical processes, it actually exceeds the boundaries of scientific study of the created order and amounts to a “philosophy” or “worldview” that is naturalistic and anti-theistic in spirit. According to Bavinck, materialism is a worldview that endeavors to seek the “final elements of all being in eternal (without beginning) and indestructible material atoms, and attempts to explain all the phenomena of the entire universe in light of atomic processes of mechanical and chemical separation and union in accordance with fixed laws” (RD 2:412).

In spite of materialism’s claim to be a strictly scientific view of the world, materialism illegitimately transgresses the boundaries of legitimate science. The task of science is to proceed from the world as it actually exists, to describe and account for its characteristics and properties, and to interpret the phenomena of the various sciences in terms of their objective qualities and patterns. But when science proceeds to go beyond these limits it becomes a form of “metaphysics,” a religious or pseudo-scientific endeavor to explain how the world came into existence and assumed its present form. Like pantheism, materialism is a worldview that aims to explain how the world came into existence (or always existed). Whereas pantheism tries to explain the existence of the material world as a product of a universal Mind or Spirit, materialism tries to explain the existence of the mind and the ordered character of the material world by appealing to the random action of “atomic particles” and mechanistic physical systems. Neither worldview can offer an account of the world’s existence that compares with the biblical worldview and its

doctrine of creation. As Bavinck observes regarding materialism, it “remains utterly unable to explain how purely material, and therefore unconscious, inanimate, unfree, aimless atoms could produce that spiritual world of life, consciousness, purpose, religion, morality, and so on, which surely thrusts itself upon our inner consciousness with no less force than the physical world upon our senses” (RD 2:415).

Creation “Out of Nothing” (*creatio ex nihilo*)

Contrasting the religious alternatives to the biblical doctrine of creation, Bavinck emphasizes the unique feature of the biblical view that is expressed in the traditional formula, “creation out of nothing” (*creatio ex nihilo*). None of the alternatives to the biblical worldview truly expresses the strict idea of creation, namely, that God as Creator called the world into existence and gave it the form and character that it exhibits.

In his discussion of the traditional formula, “creation out of nothing,” Bavinck acknowledges that it uses language that is not expressly found in the Bible. However, this language is proper expression of what the Bible teaches, since creation is an “act of God through which, by his sovereign will, he brought the entire world out of nonbeing into a being that is distinct from his own” (RD 2:416). In the account of creation in Genesis 1, the Hebrew verb, *bara*, “to create,” is a word that is only used to describe what God does in creating and forming the world, and it does so without ever being accompanied by an “accusative of the matter from which something is made” (RD 2:416). God’s action in creation is utterly different from human action in forming or fashioning a pre-existent material into a new shape or form. When God is represented in the Genesis account as the Creator of heaven and earth, he is not presented

as a “cosmic sculptor who, in human fashion, with preexisting material, produces a work of art, but as One who merely by speaking, by uttering a word of power, calls all things into being” (RD 2:417). For this reason, Christian theology has always used the language of “creation *out of nothing*” to distinguish clearly the biblical idea of creation from the well-known dictum of the Greek philosopher, Aristotle, who claimed that “out of nothing, nothing comes” (*ex nihilo nihil fit*).

When Christian theology uses this expression, it means to affirm that the world has no other cause for its existence than God’s distinct act of creating. The preposition, “out of,” in the phrase “out of nothing,” has the sense of “after” or “post” nothing. Before the world was called into existence, it had no existence or reality of any kind. It expresses the insuperable difference between God, who is self-existent and independent of all that which he creates, and the creation, which is radically and wholly dependent on God for its existence and form.

The Triune God Is the Creator

Though there is something profoundly mysterious and incomprehensible about the idea of “creation out of nothing,” Bavinck argues that God’s work of creation has its ultimate foundation within the triune being of God. This is the third feature of the biblical doctrine of creation: God can communicate himself to the creation that he calls into existence precisely because he eternally communicates within his own triune life as Father to Son, and as Father and Son to the Holy Spirit. The Scriptures teach a kind of “twofold communication of God,” the one communication being the eternal fellowship that obtains between the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, and the other communication being the creation of the world. We may speak of this twofold communication

as an “emanation” within the being of the triune God, and a “creation” in which God, in a manner of speaking, “goes outside of himself” and calls the world into existence. The first of these communications belongs necessarily to God’s being the God he is; the second of these communications belongs to God’s freedom in choosing to create the world as a distinct act of his will and power.

But Scripture, and therefore Christian theology, knows both emanation and creation, a twofold communication of God—one within and the other outside the divine being: one to the Son who was in the beginning with God and was himself God, and another to creatures who originated in time; one from being and another by the will of God. The former is called generation; the latter, creation. . . . Still, the two are connected. Without generation, creation would not be possible. If, in an absolute sense, God could not communicate himself to the Son, he would be even less able, in a relative sense, to communicate himself to his creature. If God were not triune, creation would not be possible. (RD 2:420).

In the biblical understanding of creation, all three persons of the holy Trinity are simultaneously and harmoniously engaged in creating, ordering, and perfecting the world. On the one hand, the unity or oneness of the Trinity allows us to understand the unity and harmony of the whole creation as the one, undivided work of the three persons. For this reason, in the history of Christian theology, it has always been maintained that the works of the triune God are indivisible. But in the work of creation, we may and even must distinguish the unique working of the three persons. “It is one God who creates all things, and for that reason the world is a unity, just as

the unity of the world demonstrates the unity of God. But in that one divine being there are three Persons, each of whom performs a task of his own in that one work of creation” (RD 2:422). It is the peculiar office of the Father to “initiate” the work of creation, of the Son to “mediate” the work of creation as the One through the Father’s purpose is achieved, and of the Holy Spirit to “perfect” or “enliven” the creation in bringing it to its appointed end. In this way, the three persons of the Trinity conspire together to bring forth a world that is a reflection of God’s unity and diversity. And thus “the world finds its idea, its principle (*archē*), and its final goal (*telos*) in the triune being of God” (RD 2:425). In creation as well as re-creation or redemption, all things are “of,” “through,” and “unto” God, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

Creation and Time

The fourth feature of the biblical doctrine of creation that Bavinck takes up is the difficult question of the creation and time. In the language of Scripture and of common experience, we often speak of “the beginning” of all things or of a time “before” the foundation of the world. When we use this language, we are unavoidably using a temporal form of speech, which implies that time itself conditions all things, including the work of God in creation. If this language were to be pressed in a literal direction, it would suggest that God himself is subject to the passage of time, that he has a history of “before” and “after” in the same way we do as creatures. Such language also implies that time encompasses and limits all things, not only the creation itself but also the Creator. But if this were the case, if God himself were subject to the passage of time and therefore had to create the world “in” time, then God would no longer be the unchangeable or immutable God of the Scriptures. Nor would God be eternal in the sense that he transcends



and is not subject to the limitations of time, of past, present, and future.

In his consideration of the problem of creation and time, Bavinck observes that it has received a variety of answers. Pantheism attempts to resolve the problem by affirming that God and the creation are inseparable; there never was a time when the world, as a self-expression of God or the divine Spirit, did not exist. Some Christian theologians even argued that, because it is inconceivable that God should have ever been idle or unrelated to the creation, the act of creation is eternal even as God is eternal. Neither of these answers is acceptable. Because there is an insuperable difference between God’s eternal being and the limitation of creation by its “beginning” in time and its subjection to time, we must view the act of creation to include the creation of time itself.

Following the lead of the church father, St. Augustine, Bavinck insists that time itself is created with the creation. God’s eternity and created time are not to be conceived like two parallel lines, the one infinitely extended in two directions (were that even conceivable) and the other a shorter line that has a point of beginning but no ending. Rather, we should think of God’s eternity as a kind of “immutable center that sends out its rays to the entire circumference of time” (RD 2:229). As Bavinck attempts to explain it, “Time is the necessary form of the existence of the finite. It is not a separate creation but something automatically given with the world, co-created with it like space. In a sense, therefore, the world has always existed, for as long as time has existed. All change, then, occurs in it, not in God. The world is subject to time, that is, to change. It is constantly becoming, in contrast with God, who is an eternal and unchangeable being” (RD 2:429). Once we recognize that time itself is co-created with the world and limits all created things, though

God is eternal and the Creator of all things, we will refuse to entertain idle questions like the one posed to St. Augustine, “What was God doing before he created the world?” In the spirit of Proverbs 26:5 (“Answer fools according to their folly”), we will respond with Augustine that he was “making a hell for fools who ask such questions”!

Creation’s Goal

If the creation owes its existence and form to God’s voluntary decision to call it into existence, the inevitable question arises: what moved God to create the world, particularly since the world’s existence is neither necessary nor something that enriches God or makes him to be more than he would otherwise be? In his consideration of this question, Bavinck observes that the most immediate answer must be one that appeals to God’s freedom. The simple and most ultimate answer to this question must be one that appeals to God’s sovereign will and good-pleasure. God was not constrained by anything outside of himself, nor was he moved by any lack in his own being that required the creation of the world.

Whereas Christian theism appeals to God’s will as the ultimate explanation of the world’s creation, pantheism is required to offer a different explanation. On the one hand, pantheism tends to view the creation as a necessary and inevitable “overflowing” of God’s being. God is so “superabundantly rich” that he must express himself in the world and its history (RD 2:430). Creation in this pantheistic framework is not a free act of God’s sovereign will, but a necessary self-expression of God. Alternatively, pantheism sometimes offers a rather different explanation of the reason for God’s expression of himself in creation. On this explanation, God stands in need of the world. God’s “poverty” in

himself requires that he be enriched or “become” more than he would otherwise be by going out of himself into the world. The world’s history is a necessary part of the self-development and growth of God through time. In Bavinck’s assessment, neither of these forms of pantheism is compatible with the biblical conception of God’s relation to the creation.

While the ultimate answer to the question, what moved God to create the world?, appeals to God’s sovereign will or good-pleasure, Bavinck does not end his discussion of the goal of creation at this point. Because God’s will is never “arbitrary,” but a will that corresponds to his nature and attributes, God’s free determination to create the world does express his “goodness and love” (RD 2:431). Precisely because God does not need the world to be who he is, his free decision to create the world was not born out of any lack or poverty in his being. God’s voluntary creation of the world is, accordingly, an act of super-abounding goodness in giving the world a distinct existence of its own. In a manner of speaking, God’s act of creation, because God is as perfect and inexhaustibly full as he can be, is an *absolutely selfless* act of benevolence and love. “God could not be conceived as needing anything; he could not have created the world to receive something from it but only to give and communicate himself. His goodness, therefore, was the reason for creation” (RD 2:431). In creating the world, God provides a splendid exhibition of all his attributes and perfections, and thereby glorifies himself in all the works of his hands. Contrary to the humanism that so often corrupts human thought and even some theological formulations, we must view the creation as an act of God’s sovereign power and goodness that has the glory of God as its central and primary goal. God does not exist for the creation’s good, nor does he exist for the sake of human beings as his image-bearers. The whole of

creation and the existence of human beings as image-bearers of God find their final end in the glory and praise of God.

Bavinck concludes his treatment of the goal of creation by noting two questions that often arise when the glory of God is said to be the final goal of all things. The first question that arises is: does this answer not make the ultimate reason for God’s act of creation a “selfish” one? If the goal of God’s act of creation is to glorify himself, does this not ascribe a kind of “self-centeredness” to God? Bavinck replies to this question by noting that God cannot, in the nature of the case, aim for anything other than his own glory. God has “no alternative” in a sense to seeking his own glory, since he is the greatest and highest good. For God to seek anything else before his own glory would be an act that would amount to a denial of his own perfection.

The second question that the idea of God’s glory as the final goal of creation raises is: does this not “devalue” the creation in general, and human beings as God’s image-bearers in particular? To this question, Bavinck responds by noting that God’s glory is not at odds with the creation’s good or human well-being. Because God delights in his creation and thereby delights in the works of his hands, he is pleased to reveal his goodness through his creation. The suggestion that the glorification of God would somehow be injurious to the creature’s well-being fails to reckon with who God is in all of his excellencies of goodness, righteousness, and holiness.

A Creation-based Worldview

Bavinck concludes his summary of the main features of the biblical doctrine of creation with a brief treatment of the creation-based worldview that this teaching requires. When Christian theology proceeds from the standpoint of the biblical doctrine

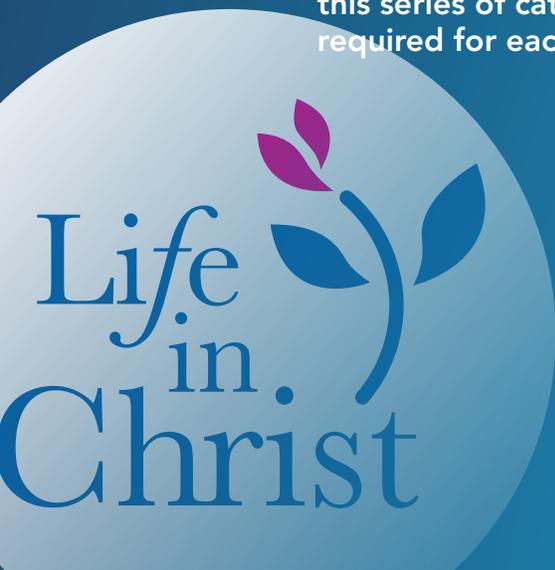
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In 2006, the consistory of First United Reformed Church in Chino, California, asked their pastor, Rev. Ronald Scheuers, to begin preparing a new coordinated curriculum for children and young people in grades 5 through 12. This curriculum was to cover the Three Forms of Unity (The Heidelberg Catechism, The Belgic Confession, and the Canons of Dort), and where possible, also to reference the Westminster Confession and Catechisms. The costs of this project were funded by generous donations from many churches and individual donors. With the help of other authors, editors, and contributors to this effort, First Chino URC is preparing to go to press, with books expected to be in print by late July of 2011.

This new curriculum is designed to instruct young people in the precious biblical Reformed faith in a format that uses sections of explanation, memory work from the confessions and Scripture and questions for discussion. Each lesson also includes space to answer the questions, a high-lighted box of key words and concepts, and personal application of the theme. Each of the volumes comprises twenty-five lessons in an 8-1/2" x 11" spiral-bound study-guide/workbook. Teacher Tips, helps for teaching the lessons, will also be available for most of the volumes.

First Chino URC has arranged with Reformed Fellowship, Inc., to distribute this series of catechism books. The regular price of each workbook (one required for each student for each year) is \$15.00 (US) plus shipping.





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URCNA Ministers' Conference

Rev. Wybren
Oord

In a very enjoyable gathering, close to forty ministers from all over the continent met together for the first URCNA Ministers' Conference. The theme of the conference was focused upon the necessity of humility in the pastorate. It began on the evening of May 12 with an address by Dr. Joel Beeke, the President of the Puritan Reformed Seminary in Grand Rapids, Michigan, where the conference was held.

The next day, Dr. Tim Trumper of Seventh Reformed Church in Grand Rapids, Michigan presented a sermon on Revelation 1:12, 13, which was followed by an address from Dr. Bob Godfrey of Westminster Theological Seminary in Escondido, California. Dr. Godfrey challenged ministers to be filled with humility in their calling, certainty, and charity. He warned against a false holiness and vain curiosities.

Dr. J. Mark Beach of Mid-America Reformed Seminary in Dyer, Indiana challenged his colleagues to focus on humility not only in their lives but also in their preaching, reminding them that all sins flee from God but pride alone. He offered some necessary remedies for ministers who think too highly of themselves, such as prayer, service, and suffering.

Dr. Richard Gamble spoke on the theme of serving the Lord with a humble systematic theology, stressing personal piety in the ministry. Dr. Arjan de Visser of the Theological School in Hamilton, Ontario offered a lecture on church planting. The conference came to a close on Saturday, May 14 with Rev. Trumper offering a sermon on Revelation 1:14-16.

The conference also provided time for ministers to visit the various Christian bookstores in the Grand Rapids area, visit with friends, and get acquainted with others. It was a blessing to see ministers from New Jersey and

British Columbia get together for spiritual nurture. Too often the only time for such opportunities to get together is for the business of synod and time spent on committees. At the conference, ample time was given for fellowship with brothers who yearn to be faithful to their calling. A variety of topics were covered on how to work in the kingdom of God with a heart that seeks to serve the Lord in humility.

A special word of appreciation is given to Rev. Harold Miller and Rev. Harry Zekveld for taking the initiative to head up so noble a project as putting together the first conference for URCNA pastors. This is a huge step for the URCNA to take as she moves away from the baby steps we have been taking to acknowledge ourselves as a growing group of churches that need to be brought together in ways other than ecclesiastical meetings. We trust that the positive aspect of this conference will inspire more URCNA ministers to participate in future years.



Joshua 24:15 is a very popular verse used in evangelistic meetings to call people to “choose” God, to make a personal “decision” for Christ.

Joshua 24 tells us that Joshua gathers God’s people Israel at Shechem before his death for a renewal of God’s covenant with them. Going back just one verse sheds much light on verse 15. In verse 14, Joshua asks the people to make a vow of obedience to the LORD and put away pagan gods:

Now therefore fear the LORD and serve him in sincerity and in faithfulness. Put away the gods that your fathers served beyond the River and in Egypt, and serve the LORD.

He calls them to worship God only, and put away the gods their fathers served when they were still pagans: Abraham in Ur of the Chaldees

(“beyond the River”) and their fathers in Egypt. But Joshua tells them that if they do not want to worship God, then they should choose another:

And if it is evil in your eyes to serve the LORD, choose this day whom you will serve, whether the gods your fathers served in the region beyond the River, or the gods of the Amorites in whose land you dwell.

He gives them two choices: (1) the pagan gods of their fathers from beyond the River; or (2) the pagan gods of the Amorites who lived among them in Canaan. Then Joshua declares to them his allegiance to Jehovah, “But as for me and my house, we will serve the LORD.”

So Joshua 24:15 is taken out of context when used to appeal to people to “choose God this day” and be saved; they are told, your salvation depends

on your own decision. How could sinful human beings make such a decision by their own “free will” when they are unable and unwilling to come to God (1 Cor. 2:14–15)? Jesus flatly declared this, “You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you” (John 15:16). Paul emphatically denies this “decisional regeneration” when he says, “So then it depends not on human will or exertion, but on God, who has mercy” (Rom. 9:16).

Moreover, the choice is not even presented to unbelievers, but to God’s chosen people Israel. So it is a grave misuse of Scripture in evangelism to use this verse to tell unbelievers to make a decision for Christ. The right use of this text is within the context of a church, asking those who worship other gods to serve the Lord of Joshua and his house.

“*If it is disagreeable in your sight to serve the LORD, choose for yourselves today whom you will serve: whether the gods which your fathers served which were beyond the River, or the gods of the Amorites in whose land you are living; but as for me and my house, we will serve the LORD.*”

–Joshua 24:15

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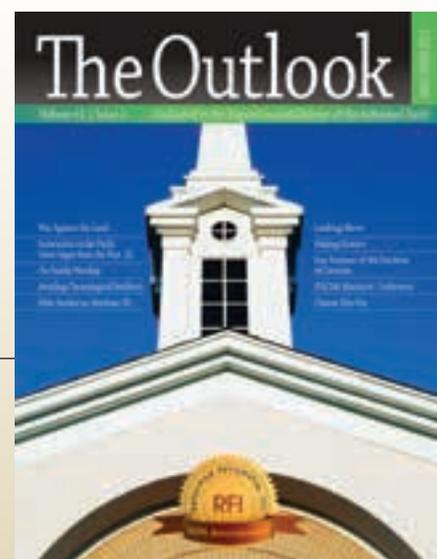
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