

# The Outlook

JULY/AUGUST 2011

Volume 61 | Issue 4

Dedicated to the Exposition and Defense of the Reformed Faith

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of the Lamb

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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.

Send all copy to:

Editor, Rev. Wybren Oord

PO Box 1191

Coalhurst, Alberta T0L 0V0

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those who profess it, to promote the spiritual welfare and purity of the Reformed churches and to encourage Christian action.

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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*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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*“Let us rejoice and be glad and give him glory! For the wedding of the Lamb has come, and his bride has made herself ready. Fine linen, bright and clean, was given to her to wear.”*

*—Revelation 19:7–8*

The imagery of marriage is one that is often used in the Scriptures. A marriage celebration was one of the greatest social events of biblical culture. Wedding preparations and celebrations of ancient times were more elaborate and more involved than they are today. They consisted of three distinct stages that a person would go through from the time one was single to the time the couple was married and declared husband and wife.

The first stage was the betrothal or engagement. This was usually arranged by both sets of parents and was legally binding. Joseph and Mary were in this stage when Mary was found to be with child. The two were betrothed but not yet married as husband and wife. Even in this stage of the relationship, one could only sever ties with the other by means of divorce. That was exactly what Joseph had planned to do, had the angel not intervened. During the betrothal there were the years of preparation for marriage. The young man would learn a trade—usually his father’s trade—and the bride-to-be would learn all about maintaining a home.

The second stage of the wedding preparation was the presentation of the bride and groom to one another. Although they may have known one another before this stage, they were formally introduced to each other as future husband and wife. This was a time of festivities that would take place before the actual wedding ceremony. The festival could last up to a week or more, depending on the economic and social status of the bride and groom. The wedding feast at Cana, where Jesus performed His first miracle, took place at this particular stage.

The third—and most significant—stage of the wedding was the actual ceremony, during which the vows were exchanged. Then the groom and bride were officially pronounced husband and wife.

In the vision that John received in Revelation 21, the church that had earlier been redeemed by the precious blood of Jesus Christ is the bride of the Lamb. As long as she is here on earth, she is the bride in the betrothal period—promised to the Lamb and awaiting the great wedding feast. Upon the return of Christ, she will be His wife, and the great ceremony of the bride and the Lamb will take place. After that they will never be separated again. They will be one forever.

## **The Great City**

In Revelation 19, we witness the marriage of the bride and the Lamb. The betrothal period is over; the time has come for the wedding. Just a few chapters later we read about the new heaven and the new earth—the bride has finally and officially become the Lamb’s wife. In that familiar chapter, John is carried away in the Spirit to a great and high mountain on which he

sees the holy city of Jerusalem come down out of heaven from God. The city is protected by the encircling walls of God's power. Its foundations are strong and immovable. Everything about the city is magnificent and full of grandeur—gates of pearl and streets of gold.

This is the city that the Lamb has prepared for His bride—their new home as husband and wife. In John 14, Jesus had said, “I am going to prepare a place for you.” This is the place He has prepared. In this city darkness is banished forever. There is neither death nor pain, only life everlasting in perfect joy and peace. This is what the bride of Christ—the church—has to look forward to! In the meantime, as long as the bride is here on earth, she is absent from her Bridegroom. The church is in the first stage—the betrothal.

### **The Chosen Bride**

The betrothal imagery between Christ and the church is very significant for us. First of all, just as it was the custom of the day for the parents to select a bride for their son, so also God the Father has chosen the bride for His Son. The union of love between Christ and the bride did not begin with the bride. The Son of God loved us first. “We love because he first loved us” (1 John 4:19).

In our society, when a young man sets out to choose a bride, he looks at several qualities that might attract her to him—spiritual maturity, looks, and personality. When we were first introduced to the Son of God, He found us to be altogether unlovely. We were filthy, vile, and loathsome. In fact, when we were first formally introduced to our future husband, we hated Him and wanted nothing to do with Him.

The beauty of Revelation and the joy of the gospel is that for some reason the Lamb set His heart on us and chose us to be His bride. He showered us with His love—not because we were charming or beautiful, but to make us charming and beautiful. The Lamb's desire is to sanctify and cleanse His bride and to present her to Himself without spot or blemish, holy and blameless (Ephesians 5:25–27).

Jesus did not just approach the guilty, rebellious, sin-stained bride and say, “Now you are mine” and everything was fine. Long before the words in Revelation are fulfilled, the Bridegroom shed His blood to save her. Jesus suffered the agony of the cross and plunged Himself into the sorrows of hell so that His beloved bride might be set free. The church was made pure by His grace. Through the wondrous grace of God she is given a new wedding dress.

The cross shows us to what great lengths the love of the Lamb went for His bride. Love nailed Him to the cross. Love permitted the nails to be driven into His

hands and feet. Love kept Him on that accursed tree as the wrath of the Father for our sin was poured out on Him. Love went to the grave. Love rose triumphantly from the dead on resurrection morning. It is this irresistible love that the Lamb showers on the bride that draws the bride to Him. As we become overwhelmed by so great a love, we cannot help but respond to it with love.

The bride of Christ was purchased at an unspeakable price. “For you know that it was not with perishable things such as silver or gold that you were redeemed from the empty way of life handed down to you from your forefathers, but with the precious blood of Christ, a lamb without blemish or defect” (1 Peter 1:17–19).

### **The Glorious Day**

Betrothed since before the beginning of time, purchased almost two thousand years ago on the cross, the bride awaits with her Groom the great wedding feast of Revelation 19. To be sure, during this time of engagement there is another who seeks to woo the bride—Satan, the rival of the Lamb. He offers luxury, fame, and power to the bride. Everything the world has to offer, he offers to the bride. Sometimes, it seems, he may even captivate her for a while.

At long last the Bridegroom will come, and He will banish Satan forever and rescue His bride out of the world and deliver her from the power of sin. Then the great marriage supper for which the redeemed of every age have prayed will take place. This will be the glorious day God has been preparing for already before the world began. It is the day that Satan has been trying to prevent since the dawn of time. It is the day Christ made certain with His own precious blood. It is the day for which the Holy Spirit has gathered the redeemed from every kindred, every tribe, every people, and every nation. It is the day that has been the subject of thousands of prophecies.

The corridors of heaven will ring with the mighty voice of the multitude, saying, “Hallelujah! Salvation and glory and power belong to our God!” The saints of every age will be there. All the chosen, redeemed descendants of Adam and Eve will gather together for this blessed reunion.

Yes. It will be a grand reunion with many loved ones. At the wedding, however, to whom does the bride look? Whom does she look for and long for more than anyone else? Out of all those invited to the great wedding feast, the bride will have eyes only for the Bridegroom. He will be there. He will take His bride by the hand and present her to the Father holy and blameless. The father will welcome the bride into His kingdom—forever to be the wife of the Lamb.

Even so, Lord Jesus, come quickly!

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Psalm 36 seems a little strange at first. The stanzas do not seem to fit well together. The first stanza is a horrific condemnation of the sinfulness of sin, the second is an overflowing praise of the Fountain of Life, and the third is about the downfall of sinners. Is there a mistake here? Should we sing these parts separately as if they are separate songs?

No. David does not make a mistake. Rather, he uses opposites to teach us a vital truth about how God's light relates to sin's darkness and how God's "steadfast love" relates to mankind's sin. Keep the idea of contrast in mind as we consider this Psalm.

## David's View of Man

David begins by delivering a prophetic judgment against the sinfulness of sin. The prophetic character of David's message can be seen in three ways.

First, the inscription describes David as "the servant of the LORD," a title applied to David in only one other Psalm—Psalm 18. Not only is "the servant of the Lord" the same title that God gave to Moses and Joshua, but it is also reminiscent of the title that the Lord gave time and again to His prophets: "My servants, the prophets" (e.g., Jeremiah 7:25).

Second, David's message is an "oracle" (lit. "an oracle of transgression"). This particular construction is unique throughout the whole Hebrew Bible. Some Bible translations try to find another way to translate the opening verse. However, if we follow the more literal rendering of the NKJV, then the

prophetic nature of David's message is highlighted. This makes good sense, since "oracle" is a special prophetic term. It appears hundreds of times throughout the prophets, usually in combination with God's name. For example, the common prophetic phrase, "declares the Lord," contains this word. Also, the inscription to Psalm 110 is the only other place in the Psalter where the word "oracle" is used. This is significant, since Psalm 110 is both highly prophetic in nature and is one of the most frequently-cited Old Testament passages in the New Testament. Therefore, the use of this unique "oracle" in the first verse carries strong prophetic overtones.

Third, David is described elsewhere in Scripture as speaking oracles. In 2 Samuel 23:1–2 (ESV) we read, "Now these are the last words of David: The oracle of David, the son of Jesse, the oracle of the man who was raised on high, the anointed of the God of Jacob, the sweet psalmist of Israel: 'The Spirit of the LORD speaks by me; his word is on my tongue.'"

Do not let me lose you in all these details. The point is this—by paying attention to the prophetic nature of this Psalm, we see that it is not a sweet little ditty that we can sing around the campfire while strumming the guitar. Instead, David, "the servant of the Lord," *demand*s that we give our attention to his "oracle . . . concerning the transgression of the wicked."

David declares the *content* of this oracle at the end of verse one: "There is no fear of God before his eyes." David's judgment is devastatingly simple. There is only one thing that explains the way sin works, only

one thing that can be said about the irrationality, stupidity, and wickedness of sin, and that is this—*The sinner does not fear God!*

But why is this so? How could it be that the lack of fearing God is the root of all sin? David gives several reasons: First of all, when he finds out his iniquity, he flatters himself in his own eyes (v. 2). Simply put, the sinner lies to himself (lit. "He is smooth to himself"). Many times Scripture describes lying words as "smooth words." For example, Paul's warning in Romans 16:17 is to avoid those who speak "smooth words." Isaiah condemns prophets who speak "smooth" prophecies (Isaiah 30:10). The sinner is deceived by "smooth words."

But there is more. The lie in David's oracle is doubly heinous, for this sinner is not deceived by someone else. Rather, he lies "in his own eyes"—he lies to himself! This self-deceit of sin is a double death. For, to be blind and to know it is one thing, but to be blind and to insist that you see clearly is utter folly and shame! This is why sin never makes sense and can never make sense, for all sin is self-deceit.

Just think of some of the ways in which the Scriptures describe the sinner. Isaiah 1 describes the sinner as dumber than an ox, for even the ox knows his own master, but the sinner does not. In Jonah 4 God pities the Ninevites, who are so blinded by sin that they cannot discern their right hands from their left. In the Bible's view sin is inherently irrational; sin is stupid!

David says further that the sinner “flatters himself . . . when he finds out his iniquity.” In other words, at the very point when he should be most afraid of God—when he sees his own sin and senses his own guilt—at that very moment he lies to himself: “I’m okay.” In the sinner’s “smooth” words everything is upside down: vice becomes virtue, guilt becomes grace, and darkness becomes light. This is why sin is so foolish—the sinner thinks he sees, but his light is darkness and his darkness light! “He flatters himself in his own eyes.”

As bad as this seems, David’s oracle gets worse. The sinner is never content with his own “flattery”; rather, he insists on living out his foolish beliefs. David describes the sinner’s life in vv. 3–4: “The words of his mouth are wickedness and deceit; He has ceased to be wise and to do good. He devises wickedness on his bed; He sets himself in a way that is not good; He does not abhor evil.” In other words, the sinner is totally corrupt. Just as bad trees produce bad fruit, so also false sight yields a false life. Stupid is, stupid does!

If we read David’s explanation of the sinner’s life within the context of the Psalms as a whole, we get a fuller sense of the total corruption in view here. The righteous man says, “The LORD is . . . to be feared above all gods” (Psalm 96:4), but the wicked man has “no fear of God before his eyes.” The righteous man says, “My eyes are ever toward the LORD” (Psalm 25:15), but the wicked man “flatters himself in his own eyes.” The righteous man prays, “Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable in Your sight, O LORD, my strength and my Redeemer” (Psalm 19:14), but the smooth words of the sinner’s mouth are all “wickedness and deceit.” The righteous man declares, “I will behave wisely in a perfect way” (Psalm 101:2), but the wicked man “has ceased to be

wise and to do good.” The righteous man prays, “When I remember You on my bed, I meditate on You in the night watches” (Psalm 63:6), but the sinner restlessly “devises wickedness on his bed.” The blessed man does not “stand in the path of sinners” (Psalm 1), but the sinner “[sets] himself in a way that is not good.” The righteous man prays, “I hate and abhor lying, But I love Your law” (Psalm 119:163), but the sinner “does not abhor evil.”

In summary, David’s oracle is a perfect school of depravity. He strings together these contrasts from the Psalms in order to announce a condemnation that is as devastating as it is total: Though the sinner thinks he sees correctly, his *whole life* is a wicked lie! If we further allow Scripture to interpret Scripture, David’s oracle here reminds us of God’s own judgment against the sinfulness of man in Noah’s day. “Then the LORD saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every intent of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually. And the LORD was sorry that He had made man on the earth, and He was grieved in His heart. So the LORD said, ‘I will destroy man whom I have created from the face of the earth, both man and beast, creeping thing and birds of the air, for I am sorry that I have made them’” (Genesis 6:5–7). Moses highlights not only the totality of man’s wickedness, but also that it deserves total punishment.

Paul uses David’s oracle to make a very similar universal condemnation of humanity’s sin in Romans 3. Paul’s horrifying list of charges begins “There is none righteous, no, not one,” and ends with David’s oracle “There is no fear of God before their eyes.” The connection, then, between Genesis 6 and Psalm 36 is Romans 3. For just as God universally condemned the sinfulness of mankind in Noah’s day, so Paul—using David’s oracle—declares a universal condemnation on

mankind’s sin. For all these reasons David’s oracle is therefore totally devastating.

### David’s View of God

Yet, lest we lose all hope, we come next to David’s great and surprising contrast. Directly juxtaposed to this devastating oracle is a most beautiful, gracious, heartening catena of praise to God’s “steadfast love”: “Your mercy, O LORD, is in the heavens; Your faithfulness reaches to the clouds. Your righteousness is like the great mountains; Your judgments are a great deep; O LORD, You preserve man and beast” (Psalm 36:5, 6).

Note the radically new focus. No longer does David speak of man and man’s sin, but of God, God, and more God. Seven times he directs our attention to God: “Your mercy,” “Your faithfulness,” “Your righteousness,” “Your judgments,” “You preserve,” “Your lovingkindness.”

David further contrasts God’s bigness with the sinner’s smallness. Even though the sinner is totally corrupt, he is limited. He is on his bed. God’s light, however, shines much brighter than man’s puny darkness, for God’s mercy shines all the way into the heavens, His faithfulness to the clouds; His righteousness is as mighty as the mountains, His judgments as terrible as the deepest sea.

Through these contrasts David wants us to see that where sin abounds, God’s “steadfast love” abounds even more! This is the reason why David did not make a mistake in placing this praise of God’s faithfulness just after the horrible judgment against man’s sin. In fact, *the contrast is the message*. Why? Because God’s mercy, His faithfulness, His righteousness, His judgments are greater than man’s sin, and God preserves man and beast despite, against, and contrary to man’s sin. Sin’s lie cannot conquer God’s light!

Let me show you why this contrast is such wonderful news by calling your attention back to Noah. The Lord was prepared to destroy His creation. Man's sinfulness was so extreme that God poured out His horrible judgment waters on all of creation—man and beast were judged together. Later in the story, as God's judgment waters begin to cover the earth, it looks like sin is winning the day. But then God causes the judgment waters to recede, and He reveals a *renewed* creation. God then makes a covenant with Noah and with "every beast of the earth"; never again will God judge the earth with a flood (Genesis 9:10). God put His rainbow in the cloud as the sign of His covenant faithfulness. The point is this—*despite the overwhelming sinfulness of sin*, God has preserved man and beast!

Such good news calls for praise! No wonder, then, that Noah's first act after leaving the ark is an act of worship. Likewise, returning to Psalm 36, in light of God's preservation of "man and beast," David sings God's praise: "How precious is Your lovingkindness, O God! Therefore the children of men put their trust under the shadow of Your wings. They are abundantly satisfied with the fullness of Your house, And You

give them drink from the river of Your pleasures. For with You is the fountain of life; In Your light we see light" (Psalm 36:7–9).

David praises God for His "lovingkindness." This word can also mean "steadfast love," "mercy," or even "covenant faithfulness." He repeats the word in verses 5, 7, and 10 to highlight God's "steadfast love" toward His entire creation. The faithful Father hovers over all the children of men as a strong defender, and He feeds His children with the overflowing abundance of His creation. The children of men drink, as it were, out of the Father's tender hand. In contrast to the sinner, who is a fountain of lies, the faithful Father is the Fountain of Life—all life is His gift. Just as the sun fills the whole earth with light, so the Father's life-giving light enlightens everything.

God's "steadfast love" toward His creation in Psalm 36 is similar to the faithfulness that God displayed to Noah. For just as the Father shields the children of men with His protective wings, so also God faithfully preserved Noah in the ark. Just as the Father provides abundant food and drink for His children from the bounties of His creation, so God provided abundantly for Noah in His

promise at the end of Genesis 8 that the earth would continue to provide its seasonal harvests.

Genesis 9:3 highlights God's abundant provision even further. God tells Noah, "Every moving thing that lives shall be food for you. I have given you all things, even as the green herbs." After the flood, God—the Fountain of Life—poured out superabundant bounties on Noah, his family, and all of mankind, and He covenanted with Noah to uphold the renewed creation.

The key connection is this: In both Genesis 6–9 and Psalm 36, God's "steadfast love" toward His creation triumphs over the horrible corruption of creation caused by mankind's sin. In both passages God teaches this by means of a stark contrast: in Noah's case God's horrible judgment in Genesis 6:5–7 is the backdrop for God's overflowing provision for mankind after the flood; and for David in Psalm 36, the oracle against the sinfulness of sin sets the stage for the praise of the faithful Fountain of Life.

For this reason the strange juxtaposition of judgment and praise in Psalm 36 is not a mistake. These two stanzas are not separate songs; rather, the contrast between them is the main point. It shows us the nature of God's grace: grace, by definition, is contra-conditional; it is de-merited favor. Grace must contradict and conquer sin since grace is the very



thing that sinners do not deserve. David's contrast is therefore our school of grace.

With confidence in God's "steadfast love," David offers his pleas: "Oh, continue Your lovingkindness to those who know You, And Your righteousness to the upright in heart. Let not the foot of pride come against me, And let not the hand of the wicked drive me away. There the workers of iniquity have fallen; They have been cast down and are not able to rise (Psalm 36:10–12).

David asks God to continue His "steadfast love" in a special sense "to those who know You." Then he narrows his scope even further by asking God for personal protection against the arrogant and the wicked. He also confidently affirms that the sinner has been defeated and cannot be victorious. David's two pleas prompt us to ask how God answered David's prayer. How has God continued His "steadfast love" specifically toward His church and toward His anointed king?

### God's Answer

Looking to the Scripture, we see that God has answered in two ways: by sending His Son and by sending His Spirit.

We see how God answers David in relation to Christ when we follow how Paul applies David's oracle in Romans 3. After Paul uses the oracle to condemn mankind's unrighteousness, he continues with a great contrast of his own: "But now the righteousness of God apart from the law is revealed, being witnessed by the Law and the Prophets, even the righteousness of God, through faith in Jesus Christ, to all and on all who believe. For there is no difference; for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, being justified freely by His grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God set forth as a propitiation by His

blood, through faith, to demonstrate His righteousness, because in His forbearance God had passed over the sins that were previously committed, to demonstrate at the present time His righteousness, that He might be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus" (Romans 3:21–26).

"But now," says Paul. In other words, there is something radically different about the way in which God demonstrates His righteousness now than before Christ came. A great change has taken place. Remember that in Noah's time God demonstrated His righteous judgment against mankind's sin by destroying all men except one—Noah and his family. "But now," says Paul, God demonstrates His righteousness by judging one man to save all.

What a magnificent answer! David prayed that God would continue His "steadfast love" and His "righteousness" to the church, and God has answered David's request by sending Christ, Who is Himself God's "steadfast love" and "righteousness" to reveal the "righteousness of God apart from the law." Therefore, because of "the redemption that is in Christ Jesus" through "propitiation by His blood," Christ himself is our Fountain of Life; He is the Light by which we see light.

What is more, Christ is our Light *despite* and *against* our darkness. Paul highlights this contrast later in Romans 5:8: But God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that *while we were still sinners*, Christ died for us. This is the reason why Psalm 36 is one song and not two: the strange contrast does not confuse the message; it *is* the message. Just as in Noah's day and David's day, so also in our own. God's Light always shines *in the darkness*; grace is always de-merited favor; "*while we were still sinners*, Christ died for us."

God answers David's plea not only by sending His Son, but also by

sending His Spirit. In relation to David's oracle—"There is no fear of God before his eyes"—there is another great reversal, one that we see primarily in the book of Acts: *Since the sinfulness of sin erases man's fear of God, the righteousness of faith restores it.*

Throughout the book of Acts, the Spirit is the primary restorer of the fear of God. In Acts 2:42–43, for example, the Spirit-empowered doctrine, fellowship, breaking of bread, and prayers took root in the church, "fear came upon every soul." After Ananias and Sapphira were judged for lying to the Spirit, "great fear came upon all the church and upon all who heard these things" (Acts 5:11). In Acts 9:31 the bountiful peace and prosperity of "the churches throughout all Judea, Galilee, and Samaria" went hand in glove with "walking in the fear of the Lord and in the comfort of the Holy Spirit." In these and many other places in the New Testament we find that wherever the Spirit-empowered gospel of Christ spreads, there the fear of God spreads, too. In this way the Spirit reverses David's oracle by restoring the fear of God in the church.

God's message in Psalm 36 is this: God is faithful despite your sin. God's Light in Christ and in the Spirit contradicts and conquers all your darkness and restores the fear of God in you. So, set your feet firmly in the way of Light and enjoy all the bounties of your Father's house, to the praise of His "steadfast love." All other sight is blindness; all other life is death. Put away your darkness, and worship the triune God Who is your Fountain of Life, the only Light that gives true sight.

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# Your Lovingkindness is Better than Life: A Meditation on Psalm 63

Miss Vanessa  
Rubingh

For several years I have been fascinated by the psalms. The more I study and meditate on them, the more I see their practical application and beautiful promises. Psalm 63 has been a personal favorite for some time. The following meditation is the result of an airplane ride when I thought through the verses of this psalm.

*“A psalm of David when he was in the wilderness of Judah.”* The wilderness of Judah was where David and his men were hiding in a cave. When Saul entered the cave, David cut off a corner of his robe. David was in a dangerous position when he was in the wilderness of Judah. He was being continually pursued. Yet in the midst of danger he composed a beautiful psalm of trust and reliance on God. This psalm is full of practical application for us today. It starts with:

*“O God, You are my God.”*

What a comfort! Jehovah is a personal God! I can claim Him for my very own. He is not far away and distant, the God of my nation or church or family. No, He is my God.

*“Early will I seek You.”* The word “early” is translated in Spanish as “*madrugada*.” “*Madrugada*” means “between midnight and six o’clock A.M.” David seeks God early—before it is even morning. What an example this is! We must seek God with diligence, not merely in our leisure time. We must make an effort to seek Him by rising early.

*“My soul thirsts for You; My flesh longs for You in a dry and thirsty land where there is no water.”* David is in

the wilderness. The wilderness is an unpleasant place in which to be. There is no water, and he is thirsty. However, he uses these physical discomforts to drive himself to God. In the same way that his body longs for water, so his soul longs for God. It is a continual longing, one that does not go away. When you are thirsty and you get a drink, you are thirsty again very soon. So David longs for God repeatedly.

*“So I have looked for You in the sanctuary, to see Your power and Your glory.”* David finds God in the sanctuary. Our modern culture downplays the importance of church. Modern evangelicals seem to think that church is “something you should do” but many people do not place a high priority on church attendance. They fail to understand the reason for going to church. They think that once a Sunday is enough. We go to church because God calls us, and also, we go because the sanctuary is where God reveals Himself to us. Staying home for Bible study and prayer instead of going to church is not sufficient for our spiritual growth. We are to be seeking God in the sanctuary, where He reveals His power and glory to us. Going to church is not optional!

*“Because Your lovingkindness is better than life, my lips shall praise You.”* What an incredible statement! *“Your lovingkindness is better than life.”* What a difficult thing to believe and put into practice. God’s lovingkindness is better than life. Do I really believe this? Am I willing to give up all my hopes and dreams in return for God’s lovingkindness? Am I willing to rest on His lovingkindness when my prayers are not answered the way I would

like? Am I willing to keep on living even when I am suffering? Can I say that because of God’s lovingkindness, every disappointment in this life is insignificant? As I wrestle with God in prayer, I must continually remind myself of His lovingkindness, no matter what His answer to my prayer may be.

*“Thus I will bless You while I live; I will lift up my hands in Your name.”* There are two immediate responses I will have to God’s lovingkindness. One is that I will bless His Name. I will bless Him for who He is. This blessing is not based on His answer to my particular prayer. The second thing I will do is *“I will lift up my hands in Your name.”* This reminds me of the benediction in our worship services. The minister lifts up his hands in God’s name and blesses the people. I think this psalm is saying we are to bless God, and then we are to bless others in God’s name, as a response to God’s lovingkindness to us.

*“My soul shall be satisfied as with marrow and fatness, and my mouth shall praise You with joyful lips.”* Because of God’s lovingkindness, I shall be satisfied. I shall not want anything more. It is as if I had just eaten a delicious meal. I no longer want anything. I will also praise God—and I will praise Him joyfully! I will not begrudge Him the praise with the thought, “Well, I guess I’d better praise God now.” No, my praise will be joyful and heartfelt.

*“When I remember You on my bed, I meditate on You in the night watches.”* This phrase directs us back to the second phrase in the psalm: *“Early will I seek You.”* David was in distress,

in the wilderness. He was away from his home and his comforts. He was not sleeping very well. He had a lot of things on his mind—plans to make, troubles surrounding him. Yet when he awoke during the night, he actively chose to set his mind on God. We, too, must make a conscious decision to use the unwanted “awake time” during the night as a chance to pray and remember God. Try meditating on this psalm for a good beginning!

*“Because You have been my help, therefore in the shadow of Your wings I will rejoice.”* David praises God for what He has done, and then bases his future confidence in God as well. The phrase “shadow of Your wings” brings to mind the picture of a mother hen sheltering her chicks under her wings. In order to be in her shadow, her chicks must be close to her. It is not enough for them to look across the barnyard and see her in the distance. No, they must be right there, following her. The next phrase in the psalm indicates that we must be close to God in the same way:

*“My soul follows close behind You; Your right hand upholds me.”* When David was close to God, he did not have to rely on his own strength. God’s hand upheld him in his time of desperate need.

*“But those who seek my life, to destroy it, shall go into the lower parts of the earth.”* David is confident that God will deliver him. He is confident even to the point of predicting his enemy’s descent into hell.

*“They shall fall by the sword; they shall be a portion for jackals.”* David was content to let God work in His own timing. David could have taken justice into his own hands by killing Saul when he had the chance. Instead, David chose to trust God to vindicate him in His own way.

*“But the king shall rejoice in God.”* David is showing his confidence in God’s deliverance by calling himself “king” while he is still fleeing for his life.

*“Everyone who swears by Him shall glory”* All those who put their trust and confidence in God alone will be triumphant in the end. David’s deliverance does not affect him only, for it is for the good of the whole church as well.

*“But the mouth of those who speak lies shall be stopped.”* Truth and justice

will prevail. We do not have to take the law into our own hands for God’s purposes to be realized. We do not have to see an immediate answer to our prayers to be confident of God’s lovingkindness. We can, instead, wait patiently for His plan and concentrate on giving Him the glory.

Psalm 63 is a psalm of great beauty and practical application. I would highly recommend memorizing it as a great way to begin learning the psalms, or as a way to continue meditating on God’s Word.

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When the editor of *The Outlook* first asked me to write a series of articles on parenting issues, I knew the only way I could do it was by reporting what others say and do. Even being the mother of eight children, I still don't feel qualified to give helpful suggestions. By God's grace and through the graciousness of many, it has been fairly easy for me to interview others.

My questions about the Lord's Day, however, have been met by a very different response—mostly silence or fervent apologies. I'm not surprised. After all, we are talking about one of God's commandments, and one that seems particularly challenging today. Besides, most of us are aware that the standards of Sabbath observance often vary from family to family.

## Some Challenges

“I am no example,” most people said when I asked what they were doing to make the Lord's Day special for their children. Many parents, exhausted after a long week, just tried to get as much rest as possible after the morning service. I talked to a pastor and church planter who had to pastor for two years on a part-time basis, while spending from forty to sixty hours a week in a full-time job. “After preaching and leading worship, my Sabbath was pretty much a matter of falling asleep,” he said.

Lisa, a pastor's wife and mother of four young children (all under seven years of age), told me that her Sunday afternoons are basically filled with the challenging task of making that time special for her little brood as her husband rests in preparation for the evening service. “Often, we all

ride our bikes together,” she said. “It's something that we don't do on any other day of the week, and we can take advantage of the beautiful surroundings to praise God for his creation.”

Billie Moody, another pastor's wife, spends her Sundays following her husband as he preaches in two different locations. “We are currently planting two churches in two different cities,” she said, “so our Lord's Day is spent driving in the car.” She tries to make the most of the situation. “Being in the car for three and a half hours each Sunday gives us a chance to have great family discussions,” she continued. “We talk about the sermon and what the children learned in Sunday school, how they can apply what they learned to their upcoming week, and so on. It also gives us an opportunity to have a lot of uninterrupted family time as we sing together, talk together, and enjoy each other.”

Of course, these challenges are not unique to pastors and their families. As I look around my church on Sunday, watching mothers holding a newborn in one arm and pulling along a toddler with the other, I remember those exciting but difficult days. Even now that my children are grown, things are not always easier, and the Sunday afternoon nap is still a necessity—dictated maybe less by exhaustion and more by aging.

“Of course, I sanctify the day primarily through the celebration of Word and sacrament,” my church planter friend added. “I do think, following the Heidelberg Catechism, that it is primary.” And he is right.

If we just manage to arrive in church with our children in unmatched socks, weary from a last minute tug-of-war over our teenagers' dress choices, God will refresh us and give us the rest and nourishment we need.

That's why attending church twice on the Lord's Day can be so helpful. While there is no scriptural injunction to worship the Lord publicly morning and evening, this pattern is established in the Old Testament and has been followed throughout church history.

“One great practical benefit of having both morning and evening worship is that it provides an excellent structure to help families sanctify the Lord's Day,” wrote Rev. Michael Brown, pastor at Christ United Church in Santee, California. “The two worship services become like bookends on the Sabbath, allowing the Christian more easily to keep the day holy as we are commanded, rather than merely sanctifying a couple of hours in the morning. (Despite what is popular in our culture, it is still the Lord's Day, and not ‘the Lord's Morning.’)”

While attending two services on the same day may sound challenging for families who live far from the church, others have found a solution by spending the afternoon with families who live closer to the church. In those cases, a meal together and a prolonged time of fellowship can add to the celebration of the day. Older children can help to watch the younger ones, and there are always enough arms to pass the babies around. Joseph Pipa, author of *The Lord's Day*, suggests some activities for these particular occasions. For example, the children may prepare

a small drama or musical entertainment for the family and guests.

This extended Sunday fellowship can even work at a church level. “We are thinking of asking the consistory to keep the church facilities open on Sunday afternoon for those who want to stay the whole day,” Lisa said. “It would be a great way of getting to know other families better.” After all, this is what many Christians did in the past, when churches were fewer and people had to travel far to attend the weekly services.

### Setting Priorities

As with every challenge, it’s important to realize that many problems are simply caused by excessive or inadequate expectations or by incorrect priorities. The Word and sacraments are the priority on the Lord’s Day. If between services sometimes we can do nothing more than nap, let’s enjoy our naps. If we can’t always fill our children’s afternoons with meaningful activities, let’s just make sure they are happy and safe. If, in spite of our good intentions, we have not laid out their clothes the night before and they have to come to church wearing play-pants, let’s spare them our frustrations.

“After a long and painful search for shoes on Sunday morning,” Lisa said, “my seven-year old son reminded me, ‘Mom, it’s not about clothes.’ He was right, so he went happily to church with sandals on his feet.” As in everything else, giving up on a less important front may provide the opportunity to emphasize what is truly essential and non-negotiable, focusing on the joy and rest of the Lord’s Day.

It is helpful to remember that the Lord’s Day is most of all a day for receiving God’s gifts and for remembering that the small dimension in which we have been struggling all week is not the whole of our lives, and that it’s not a day to be filled with restrictions

or impositions. We have probably all seen parents who strictly confined their children to their rooms on Sunday afternoons, with the only options of sleeping, reading Christian books, or writing Grandma. As much as those activities can sound appealing to us parents, particularly at some stages of our lives, children normally need some form of physical activity, even on the Lord’s Day.

We have also heard stories such as that of James Watt, the eighteenth-century inventor who formulated the idea for a steam engine on a Sunday, and had to wait until the next day to write it down. As a person whose mind is filled with more ideas than can be put in action, I have the feeling that Watt kept thinking about his discovery all day and night. It might have been better to write it down and get on with the celebration of the Lord’s Day.

“The Sabbath is not cessation from activity,” explains Dr. Michael Horton in *A Better Way*, “but cessation from a particular kind of activity—namely, the six-day labor that is intrinsically good but has suffered the curse after the fall. God did not rest because he was tired; rather, it was the rest of completion, the rest of a king who has taken his throne.”

“If God’s ‘rest’ is a royal enthronement rather than a cessation of activity,” Dr. Horton continues, “the same is true for us. As kings under God, we take our place with Christ in heavenly places, setting our minds on things above where our true inheritance lies. The Father and the Son are working redemption, which the healings represented. It is resting from creation-labor and from our sins, not cessation from activity, that the Sabbath envisioned for us as well as God.”

On the other hand, we have also seen families frantically filling the Lord’s Day with occupations and duties, so much that they start the work week

already exhausted. Maybe we belong to one of these categories of people—or maybe to both.

“When I was growing up, the Lord’s Day was always full of activity, so there was no idea of resting from worldly labors,” said Timothy Massaro, a student at Westminster Seminary, California. While he is thankful that his parents gave him a strong foundation of faith, taking him week after week to church to hear God’s Word in fellowship with other believers, he remembers his attitudes were not always right. “I often did not appreciate the Lord’s Day for the right reasons,” he continued. “I saw opportunities to ‘serve’ as a means for getting out of the church service, see my friends, and have a good time in youth group.”

Finding a balance can be easier if we remember that the Lord’s Day is just that—His day, when He calls us to worship in order to feed us with His word and sacraments, to announce His promises, and to renew His covenant with us. In fact, our view of this day will do more to give our children a true appreciation of its meaning than anything we may say or do. While actions usually speak louder than words, sometimes our attitude is even louder. In spite of our frailties and failures, our children know what is really important to us.

### Let’s Celebrate

Free from a slavish observance of the fourth commandment, we can set our minds to grasp the undeserved realities that God spreads in front of us, basking in the fullness of the “already” and experiencing the thrilling anticipation of the “not yet.” A fuller appreciation of the Lord’s Day will cause us to wait for it with eagerness and to enjoy it with excitement, and communicating that excitement to our children is more important than any plans or checklists we may make for that day.

“What if each week we could really ‘taste of the powers of the age to come’ by sustained attention to what God has done, is doing, and will do for us by his Spirit in Jesus Christ? Wouldn’t we become better parents without hit-and-run sermons on parenting?” asks Dr. Horton.

Our attitude towards the Lord’s Day is also something our children will remember vividly throughout their lives. “My parents have always set Sundays apart as a day for us to spend time as a family,” said Madeline Taylor, a sixteen-year old at Christ URC in Santee, California. “One of the most memorable aspects of Sundays (aside from the means of grace, of course) is eating lunch all together on Sunday afternoons and discussing the sermon and what we learned in catechism. That relaxing, slow, pleasant meal and discussion really made (and still makes) the Lord’s Day special and set apart from all the other hectic days of the week, in addition to church on Sunday mornings and evenings.”

We may all try to come up with great programs and activities to fill our children’s Sundays, but it’s interesting that what Madeline remembers now—besides the means of grace—are the small, unassuming things—the quiet hours, the long discussions, and the food. Food, as many other common gifts of God’s bounty, can play a great part in making our Lord’s Days a time of celebration, especially when it’s served and consumed leisurely.

Sebastiano Sclafani, a member of Filadelfia Evangelical Reformed Church in Milan, Italy (a URCNA church plant), agreed that one of the joys of the Sabbath is to spend more time with his family and being able to talk to his children more than on any other day. Of course, Italians are masters at creating an atmosphere



of warmth, joy, and celebration with food—even in the simplest meal. In fact, just as he was describing to me his typical Lord’s Day, his wife Rosa rushed to remind him that she prepares croissants on Sunday morning, filled with either chocolate or jam. That simple gesture reminds the children that the Sabbath is a celebration, a day unlike the others.

“So many people consider Sabbath observance as an obligation to be performed,” Dr. J.V. Fesko wrote in his book, *The Law of Love*, “yet they look forward to birthdays, anniversaries, holidays, and other

special days. If we can rejoice in such earthly celebrations, shouldn’t we rejoice even more on the days that celebrate the work of Christ and our redemption?”

Aly Brown, Rev. Michael Brown’s seventeen-year old daughter, has similar memories of Lord’s Days past. “My mom has made it a tradition to make cinnamon rolls for breakfast each Sunday morning, so we have known from the time we were very young that Sunday is a special day,” she explained. “Then, after coming home from the service, my family has



always been sitting together for lunch. When I was young, my mom worked while my dad was in seminary, so this was usually one of the few times we ate together as a family.”

Of course, food was just a part of the festivity in the Browns’ home. “During the afternoon, we were (and still are) encouraged to do something relaxing, and take a break from the stressful things of the week, such as homework.” In fact, the excitement of the day started the night before. “On Saturday nights

my dad would always (and still does) tell us in a very enthusiastic, excited tone that the next day was the Lord’s Day, and we had the privilege to go and worship at ‘His house.’”

#### **What Else Can We Do?**

Lord’s Day activities can include service to others and works of mercy, which are often difficult to include in the week’s schedule. Some families, for example, spend their Sunday afternoons visiting the elderly in nursing homes. If this works for your family, it provides a wonderful opportunity to teach your children that, on the Lord’s Day, we receive

from the Lord in abundance and then share of our fullness with others.

Jolene Korpan, pianist at Christ URC in Santee, has kept a long tradition of Sunday visitations. Her father, Rev. Ken Meilahn, faithfully cultivated in his eight children both a sincere love for God and musical talents. Since they were young, he took them to a retirement home every Sunday afternoon to sing for the guests before and after he shared the gospel message. Jolene and her husband John have done the same with their three daughters, who now hold fond memories of those times. “I remember how much the guests loved our visits,” said Jolene’s daughter Jeanette, who has just ended her teenage years. “It was a good experience.”

We can also take walks and talk to our children about God’s creation. In *A Timbered Choir—The Sabbath Poems*, author Wendell Berry has collected the poems he has written during his Sabbath walks around his Kentucky farm from 1979 to 1997. Joseph Pipa lists many more ideas in his book, emphasizing the importance of parental involvement.

There are, of course, also some things that we don’t want to do on a Sunday. As we mentioned earlier, some rules of what to do or not do on that day may vary from family to family. While Scripture is clear about church attendance and about ceasing from the common labors of the week and from sin, other issues may be a matter of Christian liberty.

In *Law of Love*, Dr. Fesko offers a good rule-of-thumb for deciding what is allowed on the Sabbath. “What is the best way to observe the Lord’s Day? A simple way to answer this is to ask, ‘Does my activity promote or hinder my celebration of the life, death, and resurrection of Christ?’ Corporate worship, reading the

Scriptures, prayer, singing psalms and hymns, meditating upon Christ, fellowshiping with the body of Christ, visiting the sick, and attending the needs of others help us celebrate Christ's work. Watching ball-games, shopping, doing homework, and working around the house do not promote our celebration of Christ's work because these are activities that we do every weekday. They do not help us to meditate on the completed work of Christ."

Our children may have to turn down some invitations, especially if they happen to be at the same time as the Lord's Day services. They will have to make some sacrifices, but if they have been attending faithfully the means of grace and have been raised with a sincere appreciation of the wonder of the Lord's Day, they will understand. In fact, these occasions can become opportunities to teach them that we belong to Christ and, as His people, we cannot march by the world's tune.

"I remember when my sister and I were in seventh grade," Aly Brown said. "We were involved in ballroom dance classes, and the spring dance was on a Sunday night. We had both looked forward to this dance very much, and were distraught when my dad told us we weren't allowed to go. I was angry at my parents, not at God or the institution of church services on Sunday, seeing as other parents (even in our church) allowed their children to attend similar events even when they occurred on the Lord's Day. I think it just took me time to understand and fully appreciate the strictness of my parents' rules regarding Sunday. As I got older, I began to realize and appreciate the break that Sunday provided me from the culture of the world."

Aly, who is also a talented young musician, noticed a visible change in her attitude when she had to give

up an even more enticing invitation. "Recently, my sister and I were asked to sing as the opening act of a well-known comedian's television show," she explained. "It was a huge deal and probably would have given us much exposure to music producers had it not been for the fact that the show was on a Sunday night during evening worship. While this was probably a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity, we didn't take it. This time, however, I was not bitter, because then I realized the importance of attending the means of grace on the Lord's Day, the only day I truly got to detox, so to speak, from the culture being shoved down my throat the other six days a week."

It may take a while for our children to come to that realization, but these stories encourage us to keep trying. Things will be difficult at times. In spite of our good intentions, there will be days when our best-laid plans go awry. "We try to avoid shopping and cooking on the Lord's Day," explained Janie Brown, Aly's mother, sipping a tiny cup of espresso on a church pew after the evening service, "but it doesn't always work out. We also try to rest every afternoon between services, but there are times like today when we just can't do it, and that's why Mike and I are so exhausted. Still, our children know that these are the exceptions and not the norm."

As Dr. Horton teaches in *A Better Way*, "this day was given to us not because we are strong but because we are weak."

"The commandment should also remind us that we enter that rest, not by our works, for the wages of sin is death, but by grace through faith in Christ and His work," Dr. Fesko writes. "Let us therefore welcome the fourth commandment as a reminder to mourn our failures to fulfill its demands and to flee to

the completed work of Christ. Let us rejoice in the knowledge that Christ has completed the work of the Father on our behalf. Let us also consider the fourth commandment as a guide for holy living, remembering that each Lord's Day offers us a taste of heaven itself. Let us rejoice every Lord's Day until we finally and completely enter the eternal seventh day of God's rest."

Some helpful resources:

Joseph A. Pipa, *The Lord's Day*, Christian Focus Publications, Geanies House, Fearn, Ross-shire, GB, 1997.

This is the most complete book on the Lord's Day I have found. It comprises the meaning of the Sabbath, its observance in history, practical ways to celebrate it (including planning ahead), prayers for the Lord's Day, and suggested reading lists.

Bruce A. Ray, *Celebrating the Sabbath, Finding Rest in a Restless World*, P&R Publishing, Phillipsburg, NJ, 2000.

Michael Horton, *A Better Way, Rediscovering the Drama of God-Centered Worship*, Baker Book House, Grand Rapids, MI, 2002.

This is a book about worship in general, with a very inspiring chapter devoted to the observance of the Sabbath (chapter 11, "Taking a Break from the Buzz").

J.V. Fesko, *The Rule of Love, Broken, Fulfilled, and Applied*, Reformation Heritage Books, Grand Rapids, Michigan, 2009.

A view of the fourth commandment in the context of the whole Decalogue and in reference to Christ.

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# Bible Studies on the Life of Abraham

## Lesson 19: The Death of Abraham

### Genesis 25:1–11

Rev. Wybren H.  
Oord

The final chapter in the life of Abraham ends the same way his life began. In Genesis 12, God began with the promise to bless Abraham; at the end of this passage we see those blessings continued in Abraham's son, Isaac (Genesis 25:11).

God gave Abraham 175 years of life on this earth, and then he breathed his last “at a good old age and full of years.” Not only was it a life full of years, but it was a life filled with trials and temptations, failures and victories, tears and laughter. As we reflect on the life of Abraham, we are compelled to ask if Abraham's journey was worth all the trouble he endured. God had made several promises to Abraham. Called by God when he was seventy five years old, Abraham traveled with God for the next one hundred years. Through his pilgrimage he became known as the friend of God. Was living as a nomad in a foreign land worth giving up the wealth and luxury of the metropolis in Ur? What did his faith accomplish for him?

He was promised the whole land of Canaan, yet at his death all he owned was a cave. He was promised that he would be the father of a multitude; at his death all of his sons but Isaac had been sent away. As he had lived, so also Abraham died—a man of faith. During his life he saw only the beginning of the

promises God had given him fulfilled, but he trusted that He who began a good work in him would see them to completion.

### Father of a Multitude

The death of Abraham is sandwiched between two genealogies. The first lists Abraham's children by his second wife, Keturah; the second lists his grandchildren, the twelve sons of Ishmael. At the age of 125 years, Abraham was surrounded by preschoolers and teenagers. His two oldest grandchildren were born to Isaac and Rebekah—Jacob and Esau—and were already fifteen years old. In addition, Abraham, who thought he was too old to father a child at the age of one hundred (Genesis 17:17), became the father of six more sons through Keturah. These two genealogies are strategically placed to illustrate that God had indeed been faithful to His promise. Certainly Abraham had to be keenly aware that God had made him “exceedingly fruitful” (Genesis 17:6).

Although the opening verse of this chapter identifies Keturah as Abraham's wife, she is referred to as a concubine a few verses later and again in 1 Chronicles 1:32. It is possible that she lived in Abraham's home during the time of Sarah, much like Hagar. Like Hagar, she would have had certain rights within the family structure, but not those of Sarah, who had been the primary wife.

None of the sons born to the concubines of Abraham would be allowed to interfere with the covenant promise that God had given to the patriarch. That promise was for Isaac alone (Genesis 21:12). To insure that

the promise would go to the one whom God intended, Abraham gave his other sons various gifts—dividing his material inheritance among them—and sent them on their way as he had done with Ishmael. There was no pleading with God that these children, too, would receive God's blessing as he had done with Ishmael before Isaac was born (Genesis 17:18). There was no keeping aside any of the sons should something tragic happen to Isaac. There was complete faith that the promise would continue and that it would be through Isaac alone.

Keturah's sons moved east, where they established their own households, multiplied, and fulfilled God's promise to Abraham that he would be the father of many nations. Isaiah prophesied that some of the sons of Keturah would one day return to the land of the promise to bring praise to God. They would be riding camels, bringing with them good news and gifts of gold and frankincense (Isaiah 60:6, 7). It is interesting to notice that while all the other sons established themselves in “the land of the east,” Isaac, the son to whom all the land is promised, was left without any real estate to call his own.

### Abraham's Death

The Bible often ascribes old age as a reward to those who are special servants of the Lord. Those who died “full of years” were God-fearing, ever-trusting people. Abraham had accomplished all that God had called him to do. He had set off to an unknown land and had been a blessing to those around him. Abraham had seen the very beginnings of the



fulfillment of the promises God had given to him.

The phrase “gathered to his people” could not mean that Abraham was buried with his family, because Sarah’s body was the only one in the family tomb. This phrase, often used in the Scripture, is the first indication that there is life beyond the grave. It refers to the destiny of the spirit rather than the destiny of the body.

Abraham did not doubt that his Friend would be faithful even in the end of his life. He did not doubt that the blessing of the nations would come through his offspring. With peace of mind, having lived most of his life in obedience to the Lord, Abraham was content to leave this world behind and gain entry into the eternal city not built by human hands, but built by God.

### The Return of Ishmael

Abraham’s two sons, Isaac and Ishmael, buried their father in the cave of Machpelah where his wife had been buried earlier. Years earlier, when God told Abraham that Ishmael was not the promised son, Abraham had asked for a blessing on the son whom

he dearly loved. At that time, God promised Abraham that he would bless Ishmael. He would become the father of twelve rulers and be a great nation. Even though Ishmael was not the child of the promise, God kept His promise to Abraham.

The last time the brothers had seen one another had been many years earlier at the feast celebrating the fact that young Isaac had been weaned (Genesis 21:8). At that time Sarah insisted that Hagar and her son be sent away because she had seen the young teenager mocking Isaac.

That young teenager returned to bury his father—except that he was now ninety years old and had twelve sons of his own. The two brothers put aside whatever differences may have remained to honor their father. Years later, the cave of Machpelah would be opened again as two feuding brothers, Jacob and Esau, put aside their differences to bury their father, Isaac.

### Conclusion

After tying up all the loose ends, as it were, the Book of Genesis is ready to move the covenant promises to the next generation. Rebekah had entered

Sarah’s tent as an indication that she was the new matriarch (Genesis 24:67). Not only had Isaac taken over the family farm, but given to him were the covenant promises with all their responsibilities. The focus shifts to Isaac as the next patriarch. Being full of years, Abraham breathed his last. His satisfaction in life came not from the years that God had given him, but from the faith he had in the one, true, living God. Like Simeon in the New Testament, he could say:

“Sovereign Lord, as you have promised, you now dismiss your servant in peace.

For my eyes have seen your salvation, which you have prepared in the sight of all people, a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to your people Israel” (Luke 2:29–32).

Like Abraham, we must live by faith. All around us we see death and decay. We witness the effect of sin all around us and within us. We cry out for peace, but there is no peace to be found in the world. Like Abraham, we must look to God for salvation.

Paul writes, “Now we see but a poor



reflection as in a mirror; then we shall see face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known” (1 Corinthians 13:12). How great are the promises that God has given to us—forgiveness of sin and eternal life. That is the gift that has been promised to all who trust in the sacrifice that Jesus, God’s Son, made on the cross at Calvary.

Like Abraham, we still have to face death, but it is only to shed our mortal, sinful bodies in anticipation of the new, perfected, and glorified body. Death has lost its sting; Christ has won the victory. Faith must look beyond this present world and see the joy of everlasting life prepared for us through the death of Jesus Christ.

“By faith Abraham, when called to go to a place he would later receive as his

inheritance, obeyed and went, even though he did not know where he was going. By faith he made his home in the Promised Land like a stranger in a foreign country; he lived in tents, as did Isaac and Jacob, who were heirs with him of the same promise. For he was looking forward to the city with foundations, whose architect and builder is God.” (Hebrews 11:8–10).

## *Points to Ponder and Discuss*

1. Did God fulfill all the promises that He gave to Abraham? Which ones did Abraham live to see? Which ones did he hold on to by faith?
2. Who was Keturah?
3. How are the opening verses of this chapter a surprise to the reader?
4. How did Abraham handle the distribution of his inheritance? How does that relate to the promises God had given to the patriarch?
5. Do you think that Abraham was ready to accept his approaching death? Why?
6. What covenantal responsibilities were passed on from Abraham to Isaac?
7. Was it more difficult for Abraham to walk by faith than it is for us today?
8. What promises has God given to you? Has He fulfilled those promises? How?

**W**ith this article, we begin the next section in the book of Revelation, namely, chapters 15–16.

Before we delve into these chapters, however, it is good for us to re-orient ourselves to the structure of the book. There are seven sections in the book of Revelation, and those sections are as follows: chapters 1–3, 4–7, 8–11, 12–14, 15–16, 17–19, and 20–22. These seven sections are parallel sections; that is to say, each of the seven sections covers the same period of time, namely, that period of time between Christ's first coming and His second coming. This means that each of the seven sections covers the time period in which we live. We are there in the text. Our story and our history are there in the text. We are not merely spectators sitting up in the stands watching the events unfold before our eyes. We are participants in the arena. We are involved in the action. Thus, we cannot help but read the book of Revelation with the greatest of interest, as each section of the book gives us a snapshot of the history of the church as she lives between the first coming of Christ and His return.

The book of Revelation must not be surrendered to the premillennialists. The events of Revelation are not to be understood only as future events—events that occur just prior to the return of Christ. Such a view renders the book largely irrelevant for the church today. Such views must be left behind.

But neither should the book of Revelation be surrendered to the postmillennialists. The events of

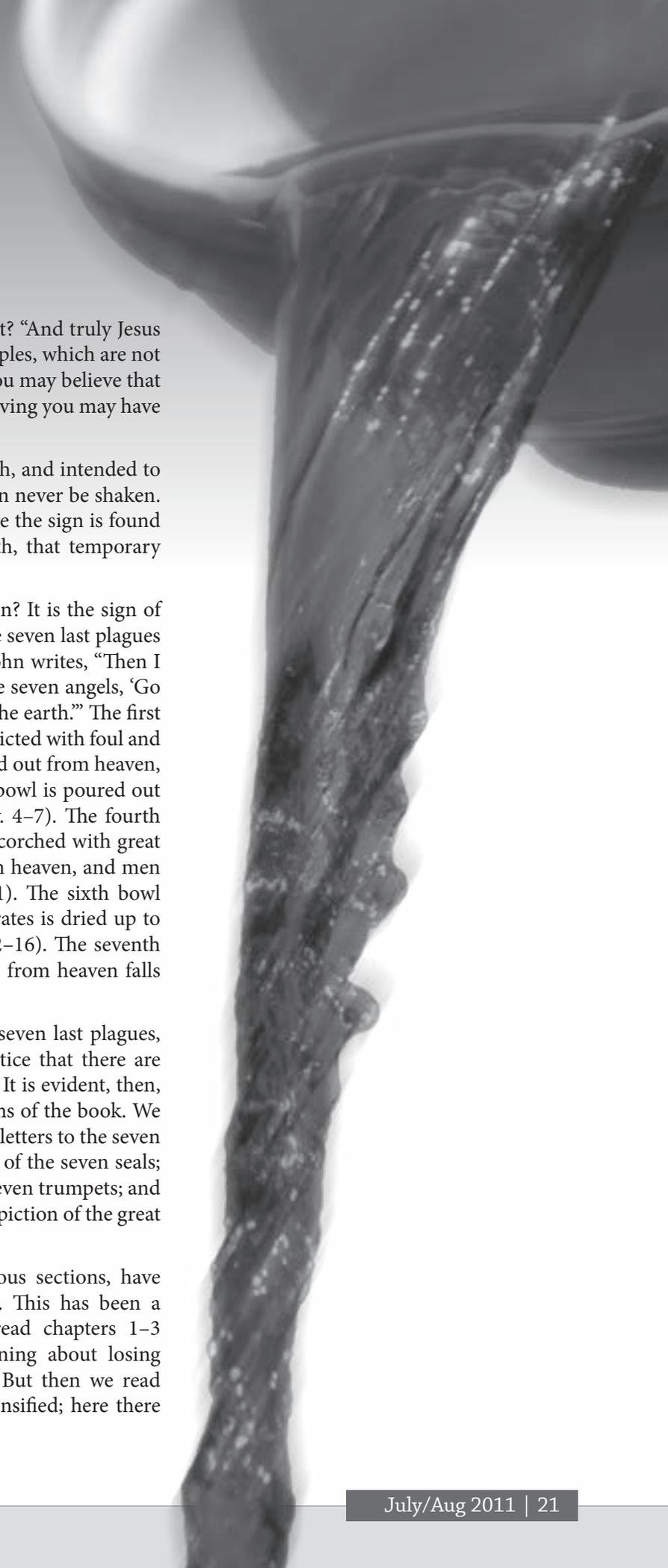
Revelation are not to be understood only as past events—events that occurred just prior to the destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70. Such a view renders the book largely irrelevant for the church today. Such views are little more than Jewish dreams.

It is the amillennial view alone that does justice to the book of Revelation in understanding it as the spiritual history of the church as she lives between the first coming of Christ and His return. Such a view sees the supreme relevance of the book for the church today. This is the view we must embrace, for it is the view that the book of Revelation itself sets before us.

Since the seven sections of Revelation are parallel sections, all describing the same period of time, we fully expect to see connections between them. And indeed, we do. In chapters 1–3 we find the seven letters to the seven churches; in chapters 4–7 we read of the opening of the seven seals; in chapters 8–11 we hear the seven trumpets; now in chapters 15–16, we come to the seven angels with the seven last plagues. Chapters 15–16 are connected then with chapters 1–3, 4–7, and 8–11 by means of the number seven. And what of chapters 12–14? Note how chapter 12 begins, “Now a great sign appeared in heaven . . .” Compare this with the beginning of chapter 15: “Then I saw another sign in heaven . . .” Chapters 15–16 are connected to chapters 12–14 by virtue of the way in which they begin. John, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, sees “another sign.”

Before we consider the sign itself, we need to take note of the location of the sign. John tells us: “Then I saw another sign in heaven . . .”

You may recall that signs are of the utmost importance in John's Gospel; in fact the first half of John's Gospel has been rightly identified as the “Book of Jesus' Signs.” These signs performed by Jesus on earth were intended to point beyond themselves to the reality of heaven. In His first miracle-sign, Jesus turned water into wine, thereby pointing to the abundance of heaven—there is nothing but abundance in heaven. In His second miracle-sign, Jesus healed a sickly boy, thereby pointing to heaven—there is no sickness in heaven. In His third miracle-sign, Jesus healed a man lame for thirty-eight years, thereby pointing to heaven—in heaven the lame leap for joy. In His fourth miracle-sign, Jesus fed the five thousand, thereby pointing to heaven—in heaven we shall feast for all eternity on, and with, the Bread of Life. In His fifth miracle-sign, Jesus walked on water, thereby pointing us to heaven—in heaven the redeemed of the Lord stand on the Sea of Glass. In His sixth miracle-sign, Jesus healed a man born blind, thereby pointing to heaven—in heaven there is no blindness; in heaven we shall see Jesus face to face. In His seventh and final miracle-sign, Jesus raised Lazarus from the dead, thereby pointing us to heaven—in heaven there is no death; in heaven we shall live a deathless life. The intent of Jesus' signs performed on earth in John's Gospel was to point us to heaven, to the life of heaven, and



above all, to heaven's King. How does John put it? "And truly Jesus did many other signs in the presence of His disciples, which are not written in this book; but these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing you may have life in His name" (John 20:30–31).

In the Gospel, the signs were performed on earth, and intended to direct us to heaven, to that eternal world that can never be shaken. In Revelation 15–16, everything is reversed. Here the sign is found in heaven, and is intended to direct us to earth, that temporary world that will be utterly shaken.

What exactly is the sign that John sees in heaven? It is the sign of seven angels having the seven last plagues. These seven last plagues are then described for us in chapter 16. There John writes, "Then I heard a loud voice from the temple saying to the seven angels, 'Go and pour out the bowls of the wrath of God on the earth.'" The first bowl is poured out from heaven, and men are afflicted with foul and loathsome sores (v. 2). The second bowl is poured out from heaven, and the sea is turned to blood (v. 3). The third bowl is poured out from heaven, and the waters turn to blood (vv. 4–7). The fourth bowl is poured out from heaven, and men are scorched with great heat (vv. 8–9). The fifth bowl is poured out from heaven, and men are afflicted with darkness and pain (vv. 10–11). The sixth bowl is poured out from heaven, and the river Euphrates is dried up to make way for the battle of Armageddon (vv. 12–16). The seventh bowl is poured out from heaven, and great hail from heaven falls upon men (vv. 17–21).

This is the sign of the seven angels having the seven last plagues, for in them the wrath of God is complete. Notice that there are seven last plagues, the number of completeness. It is evident, then, that we have moved beyond the previous sections of the book. We have moved beyond chapters 1–3 with the seven letters to the seven churches; beyond chapters 4–7 and the opening of the seven seals; beyond chapters 8–11 and the sounding of the seven trumpets; and even moved beyond chapters 12–14 and their depiction of the great spiritual battle.

Chapters 15–16, while parallel with the previous sections, have progressed further than the previous sections. This has been a recurring theme throughout the book. We read chapters 1–3 with the warnings given to the church—warning about losing the lampstand—and we are sobered by them. But then we read chapters 4–7, and we find that things have intensified; here there

are not merely warnings; here we find descriptions of seals being opened—seals that unleash the four horsemen of the Apocalypse, the cries of the martyrs, and the chilling cries of unrepentant man crying out for the hills and mountains to fall on them—these things are terrifying. But then we read chapters 8–11, and we find that things have intensified further still; here there are not merely the opening of seals; here are the blasts of trumpets—trumpets in which a third of the earth is struck, a third of the waters, a third of the rivers, a third of the heavens, trumpets that open the bottomless pit, unleashing the hordes of hell, trumpets that cause men to endure hell, as it were, through brutality and horror of war—these things are horrific beyond description. But then we read chapters 12–14, and we find that things have intensified further still; here there is not merely the blasting of trumpets; here the curtains are pulled back, and we see firsthand the spiritual warfare that exists, as Satan and his cohorts—the beast from the sea and the beast from the earth—wage war against the church. These are things that will keep us awake at night, for here is a depiction of evil, the like of which even Hollywood cannot portray.

But then we read chapters 15–16, and we find that things have intensified further still. Here we reach a new level. These chapters bear the stamp of finality. Note again the number seven: seven angels, seven plagues, seven bowls. That number indicates completeness. Note also that these seven plagues are expressly called “the seven *last* plagues”; nothing less than the termination of the world as we know it is being set before us. In these

seven plagues “the wrath of God is complete.” A loud voice accompanies the pouring out of the seventh bowl from heaven, saying, “It is done!”

There is an end to this world. This world will not endure forever; it is not eternal. This world is temporary, fleeting away. This world will be shaken and removed. It will be burned up in the fires of judgment. This world has an end, and that end is coming. And it comes from the throne of God. Even as the windows of heaven were opened in the days of flood—God pouring forth His judgment upon the earth from heaven—so the wrath in view here is being poured out from heaven upon earth. The wrath of God is being poured out from heaven upon earth.

In fact, God’s wrath is being poured out even now. Revelation 15–16, while bearing the stamp of finality, also speaks of the wrath that is presently being poured out. These bowls are being poured out from heaven today. Paul speaks of that in Romans 1:18–32. “The wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men who suppress the truth in unrighteousness.” (Romans 1:18). Here is the picture of God reaching an end with sinners and giving them up to uncleanness (Romans 1:24), giving them up to vile passions (Romans 1:26), giving them up to a debased mind (Romans 1:28). The wrath of God is even now poured out on the earth, and it will reach its completion in the great and awful day of His wrath, when this world shall reach its end.

And yet all of this is intended for our comfort. The wrath of God, described so vividly and powerfully here in Revelation 15–16, cannot and will not touch us. How do we know that? We know it because wrath originates in heaven—it originates from the throne of God—it originates from that very throne before which we are forever accepted through the finished work of Jesus Christ. Christ has borne the wrath of God in our place. Christ is our propitiation. There is no more wrath for us. Christ endured the complete, unmitigated, and unrestrained wrath of God in our place once and for all.

Chapters 15 and 16 make this very point by the way they are structured. Note that while the seven last plagues are introduced in 15:1, these plagues are not actually poured out until chapter 16. And what do we find in between? We find verses 2–4, where the redeemed of the Lord stand on the sea of glass, singing the song of Moses and the Lamb. The point is this: in Christ Jesus we shall never be exposed to the wrath of God.

O dear church of Jesus Christ, let not the day of judgment confound your heart; let not the termination of this world strike fear within you. Our home is an eternal home. Our home is heaven, and it is secure. For our Savior is there already, and He will never give us up, for He is, even now, preparing a place for us.

May it be with this confidence and comfort in Christ that we turn our attention to this next section in the book of Revelation.

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Every Lord's Day we recite one of the creeds together in our worship service. Have you ever wondered where these creeds came from, and why we recite them over and over? When I was a young Christian, newly converted, filled with zeal, I thought this was just a formal act, a bad "tradition." It was just a ritual of a dead faith. Since growing in grace I have become ashamed at my youthful folly and have come to see the benefit and importance of this good tradition.

Much of my opposition to the recitation of the creed was based on ignorance of the history and the role of creeds in the church of Christ. In a series of three articles I want to review some of the history and the importance of each of the three ecumenical creeds that we confess: the Apostles' Creed, the Nicene Creed, and the Athanasian Creed.

In this article we will begin by looking at the Apostles' Creed.

## Its Origin

The Apostles' Creed receives its name from a legend that ascribes authorship of the creed to the twelve apostles themselves. According to the legend, the twelve apostles were together in Jerusalem. Before they departed in different directions, they decided to formulate a statement of their common faith. This would prevent them from each preaching something different. So being filled with the Holy Spirit, each apostle contributed one of the articles. That is why there are twelve articles, one for each apostle. As wonderful as this story is, the apostolic authorship of the creed has been shown to be a legend.

The truth is much more mundane. The current creed, which dates from the seventh or eighth century, has its roots in a much older creed that was already in use in the church in Rome around AD 150. This Old Roman Creed states:

I believe in God the Father Almighty. And in Jesus Christ his only Son our Lord, who was born of the Holy Spirit and the Virgin Mary; crucified under Pontius Pilate and buried; the third day he rose from the dead; he ascended into heaven, and sits at the right hand of the Father, from thence he shall come to judge the quick and dead. And in the Holy Spirit; the holy Church; the forgiveness of sins; the resurrection of the flesh.<sup>1</sup>

It is easy to see how the current creed developed out of this statement of faith.

Creeds originated in the churches because of baptism. Since many of the early believers were converts out of paganism, the church had to catechize them thoroughly in the Christian faith, and they had to confess their faith before they could be baptized into the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit (Matt. 28:19). To teach these disciples and to give them a basis for their confession of faith, the churches wrote creeds.

## Its Confession and Use

At the end of the nineteenth century, church historian Philip Schaff beautifully described the character and value of this creed:

As the Lord's Prayer is the Prayer of prayers, the Decalogue the Law of laws, so the Apostles' Creed is the Creed of creeds. It contains all the fundamental articles of the Christian faith necessary to salvation, in the form of fact, in simple Scripture language, and in the most natural order—the order of revelation—from God and the creation down to the resurrection and life everlasting. It is Trinitarian, and divided into three chief articles, expressing faith—in God the Father, the Maker of heaven and earth, in his only Son, our Lord and Savior, and in the Holy Spirit . . . the chief stress being laid on the second article, the supernatural birth, death, and resurrection of Christ.<sup>2</sup>

Schaff brings out the wonderful elements of this creed. It briefly yet comprehensively sets forth the Christian faith. It follows the story line of God's word, which is the outline of history in general: Creation, Incarnation, Salvation, Re-creation and Consummation. The creed's one central confession is the Trinity:

I believe in God the Father, Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth.  
I. And in Jesus Christ, His only begotten Son, our Lord,  
II. Who was conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the Virgin Mary,  
III. Suffered under Pontius Pilate; was crucified, dead, and buried;  
IV. He descended into hell;  
V. The third day He rose again from the dead;  
VI. He ascended into heaven, and sitteth at the right hand of the Father Almighty;  
VII. From thence He shall come to judge the quick and the dead.  
VIII. I believe in the Holy Spirit.

One God in three persons. The main emphasis falls on the work of the Son as our Savior.

The central truths of Christianity are set forth here. So in this creed we have a very basic summary of the Christian faith. That is why it is so useful in teaching new Christians the heart of the Christian faith. But this basic summary also helps to guard the church from error and to guide her in the truth. It is impossible to confess this creed and to deny creation, or the humanity and deity of Christ, or to deny his supernatural birth and resurrection, to name but a few errors exposed by this creed.

Since the Apostles' Creed is such a fundamental summary of the Christian faith, it is not surprising that churches for many centuries have used it in its worship services as a basic affirmation of its faith. This tradition is of immense value for the church. By this practice, the faith of each of

God's people is strengthened every week as they, in obedience to Christ, profess their faith before the world (cf. Matt. 10:32-33; Rom. 10:8-10). The constant repetition also assures that the younger generation learns the core teachings of the Christian faith, which God in his mercy often uses to assure the future of the church. So the Apostles' Creed has been a wonderful instrument in Christ's hands to bind his people together in a common profession.

Philip Schaff sings the praises of this creed by showing its value and place in the Christian church:

It is by far the best popular summary of the Christian faith ever made within so brief a space . . . It is not a logical statement of abstract doctrines, but a profession of living facts and saving truths. It is a liturgical poem and an act of worship. Like the Lord's Prayer, it loses none of its charm and effect by frequent use, although by vain

and thoughtless repetition, it may be made a martyr and an empty form of words. It is intelligible and edifying to a child, and fresh and rich to the profoundest Christian scholar, who, as he advances in age, delights to go back to primitive foundations and first principles. It has the fragrance of antiquity and the inestimable weight of universal consent. It is a bond of union between all ages and sections of Christendom.<sup>3</sup>

1. O.G. Oliver, Jr. *Apostles' Creed*. In *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, Ed. by Walter A. Elwell. Baker, 1984: 72.

2. *Creeds of Christendom*. Vol. 1: *The History of Creeds*. Baker: 1998:14-15.

3. *Creeds of Christendom*. Vol. 1: *The History of Creeds*. Baker: 1998:15.

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In my previous article on Bavinck's exposition of the key features of the doctrine of creation, I observed that conservative Reformed believers often are preoccupied with debates regarding the interpretation of Genesis 1, and particularly the issue of the length of the creation days. Unlike Bavinck, who begins his treatment of the doctrine of creation with a more comprehensive, theological reflection on the significance of the doctrine, many contemporary treatments of creation focus almost exclusively on controversies relating to the interpretation of Genesis 1, and the extent to which such interpretation should be shaped by attempts to harmonize Scripture and modern scientific theories about evolution and human origins.

Though differences of opinion may remain regarding the precise understanding of some aspects of the Genesis account of creation, Bavinck's approach reminds us that it is most important to affirm the foundational significance of the Bible's teaching that the triune God created all things out of nothing by his sovereign goodness and power. In the biblical worldview, a sharp distinction must be drawn between the triune God, who eternally and necessarily exists in the fullness of his being and attributes, and all creation, which owes its existence, qualities, and history to the free and wise counsel of its Creator and Lord. God alone is self-existent and independent. The creation is utterly dependent and wholly subordinate to God's glory. In the context of contemporary discussions of how to read the account of creation in Genesis 1, we must not neglect the profound implications of the doctrine of creation for a biblical worldview.

While Bavinck does not begin his discussion of the doctrine of creation with a reflection on the creation account in Genesis 1, he does turn to this controversial subject in a chapter in his *Reformed Dogmatics*, which bears the title, "Earth: The Material World." In this chapter, Bavinck offers an extended interpretation of Genesis 1. In the course of his interpretation of the account of creation, Bavinck seeks to avoid the dangers of an inappropriate deference to the theories of modern science on the one hand, and of an undue dogmatism about the interpretation of some features of the creation account on the other. The interpretation of Genesis 1 must be governed by the

ordinary requirements of responsible biblical exegesis. But at the same time interpreters of the account of creation in Genesis 1 must be aware of the challenges of modern scientific theories. It is no more advisable for interpreters of Genesis 1 to be prematurely and excessively dogmatic about their understanding of its teaching than some scientists are regarding their preferred theories.

## **Biblical and Non-biblical Accounts of Creation**

Bavinck opens his consideration of the biblical account of creation with an interesting observation about human knowledge of the material world. Whereas the doctrine of the creation and being of the spiritual world, including the existence of angels, is one that can only be known through divine revelation, "the material world is visible to all and comes up for consideration in philosophy as well as in theology, in religion as well as in science" (RD 2:474). Because the knowledge of the visible creation is shared by theologians, philosophers, and scientists alike, it is not surprising that there are often clashes among them regarding the origin and nature of the created order. Such clashes can scarcely be avoided by an artificial division of labor, which proposes to restrict the range of theology to questions of ethics or religious truth, and to grant to philosophy and science an exclusive access to the knowledge of the visible world. According to Bavinck, such a division is "theoretically as well as practically" impossible. "Just as every scientific system is ultimately rooted in religious convictions, so there is



not a single religion that does not bring with it a certain view of the created world” (RD 2:474). Though it is tempting to resort to such a division of labor, there can finally be no absolute separation between religious and scientific knowledge. The biblical doctrine of creation is itself the foundation for all knowledge and understanding. And so Christian theology has an obligation to address whatever apparent differences there may be between theology and science, especially on the doctrine of creation.

After noting the inescapable need to address apparent conflicts between theology and the other sciences on the subject of creation, Bavinck addresses the tendency among many theologians and historians of his time to draw comparisons between the biblical account of creation and the creation stories among the ancient Babylonians. With the translation and publication in 1876 of the Babylonian story of creation, the *Enuma Elish*, many theologians and students of biblical history were inclined to find a variety of parallels between them. Since the Babylonian civilization that produced the *Enuma Elish* existed centuries before the emergence of the people of Israel as a distinct nation, “many scholars wondered whether all that was uniquely Israelite could not be explained in terms of Babylon” (RD 2:374).

In his evaluation of the “pan-Babylonianism” of biblical scholarship among his contemporaries, Bavinck acknowledges that there are apparent parallels between the Babylonian account of creation and that found in Genesis. However, these parallels are often exaggerated and then seized on in order to undermine the uniqueness and authority of the biblical account. Rather than explaining the sources that lie behind the biblical account of creation, the Babylonian account (and similar accounts among other ancient peoples) is best explained

as a corruption of the biblical story of creation, the rudiments of which continued to be known in an adulterated form among the ancient peoples of the earth. Despite the similarities between the biblical and the Babylonian account of creation, the biblical account remains in many respects a unique and unparalleled recounting of God’s work of creation. “The creation narrative in Genesis is utterly unique; it is devoid of any trace of a theogony [a story of creation that is the story of the ‘birthing’ of the gods], is rigorously monotheistic, teaches a creation out of nothing, and knows nothing of primary matter. It therefore is unbelievable that the Jews, in exile or even earlier in Canaan, borrowed this story from the Babylonians” (RD 2:477). Rather than downgrading the biblical account of creation, we should regard it as the source of alternative accounts, which often corrupt the story of creation that was only “preserved in its purity in Israel” (RD 2:478).

### **The Creation Account of Genesis 1**

After his introductory comment on the inevitable clash between biblical and unbiblical accounts of creation, Bavinck turns his attention directly to the account of the creation week in Genesis 1.

The first point that Bavinck emphasizes in his treatment of Genesis 1 is that “the first verse needs to be read as an account of an independent fact” (RD 2:478). In this opening verse, we are immediately informed that the entire cosmos was created by God. Then in the second verse of Genesis 1, we are told what the created world was like before God in the six days of the work-week of creation further fashioned the world into a form with which he was pleased. When the original state of the created world is described as “without form and void,” we should not mistake this to mean a world of “chaos” or a world that had

become “disordered” by comparison to an earlier, more perfected state. “The state of the earth in Genesis 1:2 is not that of positive destruction but of not-yet-having-been shaped. There is no light, no life, no organic creature, no form and configuration in things” (RD 2:378).

In Bavinck’s understanding of the opening of the Genesis account of creation, we need to use an old distinction in Christian theology between what is called “first creation” (*creatio prima*) and “second creation” (*creation secunda*). The first two verses of the account provide a concise statement of the “first creation,” the act whereby God called immediately the entire heaven and earth into existence out of nothing. In the act of “first creation,” there is no divine work of preservation or providential government, no process in which God makes use of the stuff of creation that already exists and that requires further ordering or perfecting. In the remainder of the account of Genesis 1:3ff., which describes the six successive days of God’s acts of further creation, we have a description of the “second creation.” Subsequent to God’s original act in calling the creation into existence, God creates the light and separates the light and the darkness, calling the light “day” and the darkness “night.”

One important implication of Bavinck’s use of the traditional distinction between “first” and “second” creation is that the duration of the original state of the earth in its formlessness and emptiness remains unknown to us. Because Bavinck regards the language of verses 1–2, which record God’s act of immediate and direct creation of the world out of nothing, to describe the state of the world “anterior to the first day” that is described in verses 3–5, he claims that we cannot know how long the world existed in its original state of

formlessness before God began to order and adorn it during the work-week of creation. Perhaps the period of time between the “first” and “second” creation was short; perhaps it was a period of more extended duration. But however long this period, it seems that it “certainly lasted for some time” (RD 2:478). Though Bavinck resists the temptation to offer an opinion about the relative “age” of the earth at this point, he interprets the Genesis account of creation in a way that argues against undue dogmatism about a “young” versus an “old” earth view. In Bavinck’s reading of Genesis 1:1–2, since the biblical account leaves the question of the age of the earth open, theologians ought to avoid the temptation to undue dogmatism regarding it.<sup>1</sup>

The account of creation in Genesis 1:3ff. primarily focuses on God’s work on the six successive days of the creation week, which constitutes a divinely authorized sabbatical pattern for human life and conduct. The six days of the creation week constitute God’s work of “second creation,” which proceeds on the basis of his prior work of “first creation.” In the six days of the creation week, God as Creator begins to transform the formless and empty creation into an ordered and richly furnished world. While Bavinck acknowledges that some interpreters distinguish the six days of creation into two sets of three days or *ternaries* and emphasize the parallels between them, he prefers the “old division of the overall work of creation into three parts” (RD 2:480): first, God *creates* the cosmos (vv. 1–2); second, God *separates* on the first three days between light and darkness, heaven and earth, land and sea; and third, God *adorns* the earth on the last three days with all kinds of living entities. This three-fold division of the creation account reflects more accurately the progress of God’s work of creation, and does not exaggerate

the alleged parallels that obtain between the first and second set of three days.<sup>2</sup> Through the sequence of six days in Genesis 1, we see “a clear progress from a lower to a higher level, from the general conditions for organic life to this organic life itself in its various forms” (RD 12:480). In a beautiful economy of words, we are taught how God brought the world, which he first called into existence instantaneously and immediately, to its finished state of beauty and perfection. Only after the completion of his work on the six successive days of the work-week of creation does God declare the creation to be good, corresponding to his sovereign design and purpose.

Though we cannot do justice to the details of Bavinck’s treatment of the Genesis account, he offers the following summary of the creative work of God in these six days:

- On the first day, God creates the light, separates the light from the darkness, and declares the alternation of light and darkness “day” and “night” (verses 3–6).
- On the second day, God separates the firmament (the sky and the clouds, which appear to our eyes as a kind of “tent” [cf. Ps. 104:2] or “curtain” [cf. Isa. 40:22]) from the earth with its waters (verses 6–8).
- On the third day, God separates the earth and water, land and sea, and the earth becomes “a cosmos with continents and seas, mountains and valleys, fields and streams” (verses 11–13; RD 2:481). The first three days of the creation week prepare the distinct realms for the rich diversity of life-forms that will subsequently fill and adorn the earth.

- On the fourth day, the sun, the moon, and the stars “have to be readied” (verses 14–19). Regarding this day, Bavinck observes that “this does not imply that the masses of matter of which the planets are composed were only then called into being, but only that all these planets would on this day become what they would henceforth be to the earth” (RD 2:481).
- On the fifth day, “by a divine word of power” God causes the waters to bring forth aquatic animals and the sky is filled with an “assortment of bird species” (verses 20–23; RD 2:481).
- Finally, on the sixth day, God first creates the land animals and then culminates his creative work with the creation of man upon the basis of a “specific counsel” (verses 24–31; RD 2:482). At the completion of the work-week of creation, God “took great delight in his own work and for that reason rested on the seventh day” (RD 2:482).

At the conclusion of his overview of the Genesis account of God’s work of creation in the space of six days, Bavinck observes that Christian theology “has always treated this six-day period with special fondness” (RD 2:482). Throughout the course of church history, the majority of interpreters of the Genesis account adhered to a “literal” view of the creation week. However, there was also a second school of thought in the church that “rejects the temporal character of the six days, for the most part ascribes visionary significance to them, sees the entire world as being created simultaneously at a single stroke, and frequently arrives at a variety of allegorical interpretations” (RD 2:483). Interestingly, Bavinck, who generally adheres to a more

literal reading of the account of creation in Genesis 1, argues that this latter school of thought, represented by the church father Augustine, “was consistently discussed with respect and never branded heretical” (RD 2:483).

Bavinck also offers a further important observation about the history of the interpretation of the account of creation in Genesis 1. Prior to the time of Copernicus, most Christian theologians proceeded on the assumption of an older Aristotelian-Ptolemaic worldview, which taught that the earth was a fixed body at the center of the universe and that all the expanse of the heavens rotated around the earth (RD 2:483). In this worldview, all the stars and planets were fixed in space, and the earth was surrounded by a series of rotating spheres that carried the stars and planets with them. With the discoveries of Copernicus, however, the earth was no longer viewed as the center of the universe, and the older explanation of the interrelation of the stars and planets was overthrown.

Though the history of the transition from the older Aristotelian-Ptolemaic to the Copernican worldview is often told as though it were a conflict between the biblical worldview and modern science, Bavinck argues that the biblical account of creation does not depend on either of these distinct scientific worldviews. The language of the Scriptures is not “scientific” but observational in character. Therefore, the opposition of many in the church to the Copernican revolution in science was not based on the authority of Scripture, but was largely due to an adherence to the older Aristotelian view of the universe to which many of the church’s theologians were committed. However, the biblical worldview, which properly regards the earth as “central [to the universe] in a religious and an ethical sense,” does not depend on or require adherence

to either of these distinct scientific positions. Though the biblical worldview requires a certain kind of geocentricity, which recognizes the unique place and importance of the earth to God’s purposes in history, it does not require adherence to a particular scientific worldview.

For Scripture indeed always speaks geocentrically and also explains the origin of things from a geocentric viewpoint, but in this matter it uses the same language of ordinary daily experience as that in which we still speak today, even though we have a very different picture of the movement of the heavenly bodies from that which generally prevailed in the time when the Bible books were written. (RD 2:484)

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1. Toward the end of the chapter, Bavinck does return to the question of the age of the earth and appeals to the distinction between God’s work of “first creation” and his subsequent work of “second creation” to leave the question open, at least from the standpoint of the biblical evidence (RD 2:498–90).

2. The view Bavinck has in mind when he speaks of those who emphasize the “parallels” between the two sets of three days in Genesis 1 anticipates in some ways the view that is known today as the “framework hypothesis.” Bavinck downplays the alleged parallels between these two sets of three days and interprets the six days as six successive periods of time in which God ordered and adorned the world according to his purposes. For a presentation of the “framework” view, see Meredith G. Kline, “Because it Had Not Rained,” *Westminster Theological Journal* 20 (1998): 1–21.

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## Introduction

This article was originally prepared as a paper for my previous congregation in Langley, British Columbia. Members there had been struggling with questions about the subject of Federal Vision. They were hearing, for instance, that Federal Vision theology is basically repeating what we have been taught by theologians from our own tradition. They were hearing that Canadian Reformed church members should feel comfortable with the Federal Vision. They were wondering whether this was all true and asked me to address it. As one of their pastors, I felt compelled to provide whatever leadership I could on the issue. The issue has not disappeared and so again I feel compelled to write on the matter, this time in a more public fashion.

The issue has had my attention for a while. In 2002, I had coffee with a United Reformed pastor in southern Alberta. He and I had been acquaintances from before our seminary training and so this was a time for catching up. He told me he'd been invited to speak at the Pastors' Conference at the Auburn Avenue Presbyterian Church in Monroe, Louisiana.

The conference organizers had originally asked Norman Shepherd, but when he was unavailable, John Barach was asked to take his place. John told me what he'd be speaking about and I had a suspicion it would create waves. So it did—and not only what he said, but also the others: Douglas Wilson, Steve Schlissel, and Steve Wilkins. This created a controversy in Reformed circles originally known as the “Auburn Avenue Theology,” but in more recent times “The Federal Vision.” “Federal” refers to the covenant; therefore, this is a movement that has its eyes on formulating its theology with a view to the covenant.

What precipitated this movement? According to Steve Wilkins, the

original conference speakers were united by a concern that many Christians have neglected the covenant. Consequently, rather than trusting Christ, they trust their own experiences for the assurance of salvation. Moreover, “the gospel has been abstracted and reduced to a collection of propositional statements about Christ which require intellectual assent.” The church becomes merely a place of potential blessing. Many take a purely symbolic view of the sacraments. Finally, the confessions of the church have calcified into theological systems standing above the Word of God rather than in submission to it.<sup>1</sup>

Undoubtedly some of these concerns are valid, particularly in the broader Presbyterian context. Even in confessionally Reformed churches like the Canadian Reformed, one can find those who take a purely symbolic view of baptism and the Lord's Supper. While the covenant has seldom been ignored in our circles, it could be argued that the gospel has been stripped down in our churches too. However, the question must be asked: how should these concerns be addressed?

The manner in which those associated with the Federal Vision have addressed these issues has come under intense scrutiny since 2002. Several confessionally Reformed and Presbyterian churches, including the Reformed Church in the United States and the Orthodox



Presbyterian Church, have spoken definitively against various Federal Vision formulations.<sup>2</sup> The United Reformed Churches have also come to share the consensus of their sisters, as have any number of Reformed seminaries.<sup>3</sup> It is fair to say that the consensus is in and the Federal Vision has been judged aberrant. If we in the Canadian Reformed Churches are going to break ranks with the consensus of other North America Presbyterian and Reformed Council (NAPARC) churches, we should not only be carefully doing our homework, but also realizing the implications for our ecumenical efforts and relations.

In this article, I will briefly examine some of what those associated with the Federal Vision have been saying. I will demonstrate why, in the big picture, we should regard it as a deviation from confessional Reformed orthodoxy. In my estimation, it is naïve to suggest that the Federal Vision is simply repeating what we were taught by Schilder, Holwerda, and others. If Canadian Reformed believers truly value the faithful summary of Scripture in our confessions, they will not feel at home with the Federal Vision. Moreover, we ought to applaud the diligent efforts of the URCNA and other faithful Reformed and Presbyterian churches to address these teachings.

Before we proceed, a word about sources. In 2007, eleven figures associated with Federal Vision theology issued a confession of sorts, “A Joint Federal Vision Profession,” or the “Joint FV Statement” as it is often called. Any responsible treatment of the FV needs to take this statement into account. However, I do not believe it is necessary to restrict ourselves to this statement. For various reasons, Steve Schlissel was not able to sign the statement, yet he is universally regarded as an FV

figure. Similarly, Norman Shepherd was originally invited to speak at the Auburn Avenue Conference and is also often identified as belonging to the FV movement, even if his name is not affixed to the statement. Therefore, I have interacted not only with the Joint FV Statement, but also other materials issued by those who either identify themselves as FV or are obviously to be identified with it. It is also important to note that FV adherents often speak of the diversity within their movement. I have tried to focus on points of commonality, but where there are distinct positions held by individuals I have endeavored to identify these as such.

### **Continuities and Discontinuities with Klaas Schilder & Co.**

Some figures associated with the FV allege that they are simply restating what was taught by Klaas Schilder and others in the “Liberated” Reformed Churches. For instance, James Jordan claimed that he and others in the FV have benefited greatly from “the Liberated movement.”<sup>4</sup> There may appear to be some validity to this claim. After all, it is true that Schilder and other Liberated figures sometimes questioned the legitimacy of terms such as “covenant of works.” Dr. Jelle Faber even publicly defended Norman Shepherd’s views in the early 1980s. It is equally true that they stressed the unity of the covenant from Genesis to Revelation and the importance of the covenant for all of life. But there is more to be said.



Let us begin with the definition and nature of the covenant of grace. According to Steve Wilkins, “The covenant is not some *thing* that exists apart from Christ or in addition to him (another means of grace)—rather, the covenant *is* union with Christ. Thus, being in covenant gives all the blessings of being united to Christ.”<sup>5</sup> This hyper-objective manner of thinking about the covenant of grace inevitably leads to the conclusion that there is only one way in the covenant of grace: union with Christ (which implies reception of all his benefits). Consequently, all covenant members, all those who are baptized, are united to Christ. Jeffrey Meyers goes so far as to say that all covenant children are “forgiven, justified, adopted, etc. by means of their baptism into the church.”<sup>6</sup>

In ages past, some Reformed theologians spoke about an internal/external distinction with respect to the covenant of grace. Some (the elect) were internally in the covenant, while others (the reprobate) were only externally in the covenant. Schilder and others exposed what they believed to be the exegetical and doctrinal problems with this formulation. However, Schilder did propose another distinction in its place, one that maintains that there are in fact *two ways* of relating to the covenant of grace. He wrote of a vital aspect and a legal aspect to the covenant. Nelson Kloosterman elaborates on that, using this distinction,

He taught that all baptized children are legally in the covenant of grace, and therefore all children are genuinely addressed by its promises, demands, and threats. By the work of the Holy Spirit through the Word of God, some of these baptized children come to faith, whereby they appropriate the promised blessings of the covenant of grace in vital union with Jesus Christ.<sup>7</sup>

*Dr. Klaas Schilder*

In other words, some relate both legally and vitally to the covenant of grace, while others relate only legally.

This manner of stating things is found more often in the writings of Schilder. As an example, in an article in *De Reformatie* in 1947, Schilder criticized those in the Synodical church who confused these matters. Schilder insisted on a difference between sharing in a promise and sharing in what is promised. Sharing in a promise (through God's address at baptism) is a legal reality. Sharing in what is promised takes place through the Spirit—it involves a vital union with Christ through faith. Schilder alleged that those who confuse these two end up fantasizing about people possessing things that they do not, in fact, possess.<sup>8</sup>

This legal/vital distinction is undoubtedly in the background of several "Liberated" treatments of the position and responsibilities of children in the covenant of grace, as well as the nature of the promises signed and sealed in baptism. Take the example of J. Van Bruggen. In his commentary on the Belgic Confession, he was critical of the internal/external distinction. He maintained that God's covenant applies to all baptized children. All baptized children receive the promises of the covenant.<sup>9</sup> However, in his commentary on the Heidelberg Catechism, Van Bruggen clarified that this does not mean all baptized children receive *what is promised*:

Some will say that baptism does not assure us that I am entitled to forgiveness of sins, but that I *have* forgiveness. They point to the fact that the Catechism says in Answer 69 that water *washes* the dirt away, and in Answer 73 that we *are* cleansed from our sins spiritually. But we must not forget that those are the answers of a believing confessor, that is, someone

who has accepted his baptism. Our entitlement to the forgiveness of sins is like a cheque. When you have a cheque for \$1000, you do not have \$1000, but you are entitled to it. The cheque is evidence of your entitlement. The payee, who believes the cheque to be reliable, is apt to say, "I have \$1000." But the cheque is not the same as \$1000. Rather, it is the evidence and assurance of his right to the money.<sup>10</sup>

Similarly, Gootjes deals with the promises of baptism and examines the promises of the triune God that are outlined in the first part of our Form for Infant Baptism. He especially focuses on the promise that the Spirit will dwell in us. He asks, "Can these words be applied to all children that are baptized? Does the Spirit dwell in all of them?"<sup>11</sup> Carefully he works through the historical, confessional, and biblical data, coming to the conclusion that the Form does not assert an existing situation, but summarizes what is promised to the covenant people of God.

There was a controversy in the Reformed Churches in the Netherlands (Liberated) about this very point in the 1960s. Rev. L. E. Oosterhoff of Beverwijk argued that all who are baptized receive not only the promise, but also *what* has been promised. So, for instance, he maintained that the forgiveness of sins is a reality for each and every baptized child. It was then possible for the baptized child, through unbelief, to lose this and the other benefits of Christ. Synod Rotterdam-Delfshaven 1964–1965 judged this to be in conflict with the teaching of Scripture and the Reformed Confessions.<sup>12</sup> Synod Amersfoort-West 1966 confirmed this judgment. Liberated theologian C. G. Bos even went so far as to call this a heresy. As he explained it, "All the benefits God has promised are ours only if we

accept them with a believing heart. We have these benefits in the promise. However, those who do not accept and use this promise in faith do not receive these benefits."<sup>13</sup>

So, according to what has just been outlined, all baptized children of believers receive the promises of the covenant of grace. The Father promises to take them for his children and heirs, the Savior promises to save, and the Spirit promises to dwell in them all—*head for head*. We can recognize this as what Schilder called the *legal* aspect.<sup>14</sup> However, each child is obligated to receive those promises in faith—in the words of Van Bruggen, to take the cheque to the bank. What is promised can only normally be received in the way of faith—of course, we recognize exceptional circumstances such as children who die in infancy (cf. Canons of Dort 1.17). But normally, children must grow up and embrace the promises in faith and thereby receive all the benefits of Christ: justification, adoption, sanctification, glorification, and so on. We can recognize that as relating to the covenant of grace in a *vital* manner. Only those who relate to the covenant of grace in that way are truly and savingly united to Christ.

Moreover, so far as I have been able to determine, Schilder never described the covenant as being "union with Christ" in the manner of Wilkins and other FV advocates. If anywhere, you might expect to read this in Schilder's booklet, *The Main Points of the Doctrine of the Covenant*.<sup>15</sup> But it is not there. Schilder just does not go in that direction.<sup>16</sup> In fact, in his book *Untempered Mortar (Looze Kalk)*, Schilder defines the covenant as follows: "The covenant is a mutual agreement between God and His people, established by Himself, but maintained (by virtue of His gracious

work) by Himself and His people as the two ‘parties.’”<sup>17</sup> There is no mention of union with Christ.

Kloosterman writes about the mistaken impression sometimes given that “the name and thought of K. Schilder should and can easily be associated with the errors of Rev. N. Shepherd and those connected with ‘the Federal Vision.’”<sup>18</sup> As mentioned earlier, there are some similarities in regard to covenant theology. However, it is not quite as cut and dried as some have made it out to be. Moreover, as we proceed, we will see how advocates of the FV have departed from confessionally Reformed orthodoxy in a way that Schilder never did.

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1. Steve Wilkins, “Introduction,” in *The Federal Vision*, ed. Steve Wilkins and Duane Garner (Monroe: Athanasius Press, 2004), 11–12.

2. For the RCUS report of the “Study Committee on the Federal Vision’s Doctrine of Justification,” see <http://tinyurl.com/RCUSONFV>; for the OPC “Report on Justification,” see <http://tinyurl.com/OPCFV>

3. For a representative example, see Mid-America Seminary Faculty, *Doctrinal Testimony Regarding Recent Errors* (Dyer: Mid-America Reformed Seminary, 2007). [For the official URCNA response to FV, see <http://bit.ly/iswgRq>]

4. *Christian Renewal*, August 22, 2007, letter to the editor.

5. *The Auburn Avenue Theology: Pros & Cons*, ed. E. Calvin Beisner (Fort Lauderdale: Knox Theological Seminary, 2004), 262.

6. Quoted here: <http://bit.ly/iLeKzG>

7. Nelson D. Kloosterman, “For the Sake of Accuracy: Berkhof, Schilder and the Legal/

Vital Distinction,” in *Christian Renewal*, May 2, 2007. In personal correspondence, Kloosterman noted that it is important to emphasize a distinction between: 1) an external covenant and an internal covenant; 2) external members and internal members of the covenant; and 3) an external aspect and an internal aspect of the covenant. Though like Vos and Berkhof he did not like the terms “external” and “internal,” Schilder essentially affirmed the third distinction (and rejected the first two), replacing “external” and “internal” with the better terms “legal” and “vital”

8. K. Schilder in *De Reformatie* 18 (22 March 1947), 185.

9. J. Van Bruggen, *The Church Says Amen: An Exposition of the Belgic Confession* (Neerlandia: Inheritance Publications, 2003), 200–202.

10. J. Van Bruggen, *Annotations to the Heidelberg Catechism* (Neerlandia: Inheritance Publications, 1991), 180. Clarence Bouwman asks whether “every child also automatically receive the contents of the promises?” He then uses the same illustration as Van Bruggen and concludes, “I need to respond to my baptism! This response is faith. In faith I need to embrace what God promises me. If I fail to believe those promises, I will not receive the contents of those promises.” Clarence Bouwman, *The Overflowing Riches of My God* (Winnipeg: Premier, 2008), 368.

11. Nicolaas H. Gootjes, *Teaching and Preaching the Word: Studies in Dogmatics and Homiletics* (Winnipeg: Premier, 2010), 184.

12. *Acta van de Generale Synod van de Gereformeerde Kerken in Nederland Gehouden te Rotterdam-Delfshaven van 7 April 1964 tot 28 Januari 1965* (Rotterdam: N.V. Firma Groenendijk, 1965), 199–202 (Artikel 449b).

13. C. G. Bos, *Believe and Confess* (Vol. 2) (London, ON: Inter-League Publication Board, 2004), 125.

14. See also Klaas Schilder, *Extra-Scriptural Binding—A New Danger* (Neerlandia:

Inheritance, 1996). Schilder is here discussing the words, “the promise is for all” in the Form for Baptism: “If the words ‘are for’ mean that the promise creates a legal connection and acknowledges the already existing connection and also puts the baptized person individually under legal claims, then we say the promise is for all. If, however, someone wants the expression ‘are for’ to be understood in the sense that one will receive for all eternity the promised contents, down to the last cent, then we assure you that the promise is only for the elect” (90–91). Later, Schilder also writes about the promises signed and sealed in baptism: “To *this child* it is said, ‘You, child, under the condition (that is to say under emphasized assurance and stipulation) that **your faith will be and must be the only way in which all this will happen** (therefore you are called and *obliged* to this), the Father *will* provide you with all good and He *will* avert all evil or turn it to your benefit, the Spirit *will* impart to you what we have in Christ” (145—italics original, bold emphasis added).

15. K. Schilder, “The Main Points of the Doctrine of the Covenant,” translated by T. VanLaar, available online at [www.spindleworks.com](http://www.spindleworks.com)

16. Cf. S. A. Strauss, “Schilder on the Covenant,” in *Always Obedient: Essays on the Teachings of Dr. Klaas Schilder*, ed. by J. Geertsema (Phillipsburg: P & R, 1995), 19–33.

17. K. Schilder, *Looze Kalk* (Groningen, 1946), 66. Quoted in translation in J. VanGenderen, *Covenant and Election* (Neerlandia: Inheritance Publications, 1995), 97.

18. Kloosterman, op.cit.



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# Press Release from the CERCU Committee

Press Release of the meeting of the combined committees of the Canadian Reformed and United Reformed Churches to propose a common church order held June 21–24, 2011 at the Ebenezer Canadian Reformed Church, Burlington, ON

Present were: Rev. William Pols, Rev. Ronald Scheuers, Rev. Raymond Sikkema and Mr. Harry Van Gorp representing the United Reformed Churches in North America (URCNA), and Dr. Gijsbert Nederveen, Mr. Gerard J. Nordeman, Rev. John VanWoudenberg and Dr. Art Witten of the Canadian Reformed Churches (CanRC).

Dr. Nelson Kloosterman was absent with notification. In view of this, the meeting appointed Rev. Scheuers to function as chairman.

Rev. Scheuers opened the meeting with a brief meditation on Ephesians 1, prayer, and a word of welcome.

A general discussion took place on the specific mandates received from the respective synods. The CanRC Synod Burlington 2010 charged the committee to discuss with the

URCNA brothers the comments and feedback received from the churches as well as a general direction regarding a few articles in the PJCO. The URCNA Synod London 2010 mandated the committee to continue working closely with the church order sub-committee of the Canadian Reformed Churches to draft joint regulations for synodical procedure and to address matters yet unfinished. The committee was also mandated to develop Forms of Discipline for a united federation. Regarding the latter, the CanRC brothers, after consultation with the CanRC Liturgical Forms committee, agreed to work on this as well.

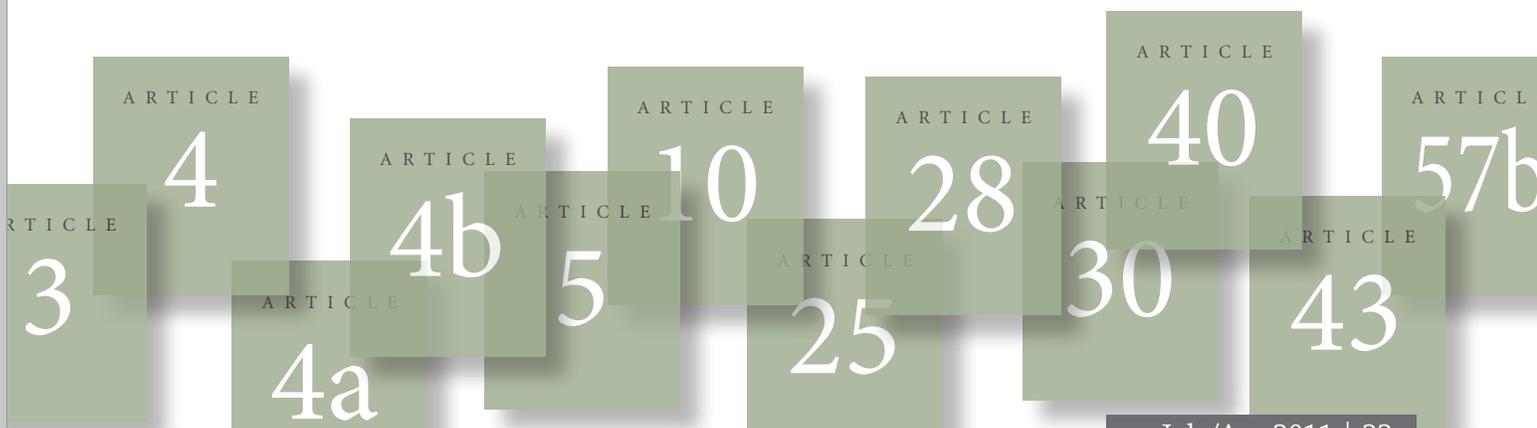
The minutes of the July 28–30, 2009 meeting were reviewed and approved, as were the agenda and timetable for the next four days.

Synod Burlington 2010 had received forty-five letters from the churches outlining various concerns and recommendations for changes to the PJCO. The CanRC brothers prior to this meeting reviewed these submissions and proposed a number of amendments. While in several instances it was decided to retain the

proposed article as submitted to the churches and the respective synods, in other instances some changes for improvement were agreed to. Some were of a minor grammatical and formatting nature and could be adopted without much debate. Others took considerable study and deliberation. The following is a brief overview of the more significant amendments agreed upon.

Art. 3—The duties of the Minister—was changed to remove any possible misunderstanding about the minister lording it over the elders.

Art 4—Preparation for the Ministry. The synods of both churches had mandated the combined committee to finalize this article. In particular section 4a Theological Education. Concerns have been expressed about synodical boards over which the churches actually have no control whatsoever. Also, in the past, institutions for theological training controlled by the churches have become corrupted and unfaithful to biblical teaching. The committee concluded that the responsibility



for allowing this to happen actually lies particularly with the churches that were to oversee and control these institutions. Reflected in this is the faithfulness or lack thereof of the churches. It is important that the churches take full control of theological education specific to the confessions and creeds of the churches. The committee therefore decided to adopt the following wording for PJCO 4a:

#### A. Theological Education

*To train men for the ministry of the Word, the churches shall maintain and support a theological seminary that is properly accountable to the churches.*

*Competent men shall be encouraged to study for the ministry of the Word. A man aspiring to the ministry must be a member of a church in the federation and must evidence genuine godliness to his consistory, who shall ensure that he receives a thoroughly reformed theological education. This consistory with the deacons shall also help him ensure that his financial needs are met, if necessary with the assistance of the churches of classis.*

Regarding Art 4b—Licensure—a number of churches raised questions about a student being able to exhort after only completing one year of theological education. It should be kept in mind that students may come from different seminaries. Some already have taken at least three courses in Homiletics in their first year of studies. The committee further considered that typically no sermon is delivered that has not first been passed by the student's supervisor. Also, no student can exhort before he has passed a licensure examination. It is decided to leave this part of the article as is.

Art. 5—Calling a candidate—had undergone extensive editing with the result that it reads awkwardly. The revised wording now also includes the terminology “approbation” of the congregation and “advice” of the counselors.

Art. 10—Support and Emeritation of Ministers. The wording “shall contribute towards his retirement” does not obligate the church to look after the needs of the minister upon his retirement. This has been changed to “shall provide for his retirement.”

The wording in Art 25 has been changed to be consistent with Art 17. It now reads in both articles: “schooling that is in harmony with the Word of God as summarized in the Three Forms of Unity.”

Also the wording in Art 28—Regional Synod—and Art 30—General Synod—has been harmonized. In addition, art 28 was changed to allow for the convening of a regional synod to be cancelled if the convening church, in consultation with its classis, concludes that no matters have been submitted by the classes that would warrant the convening of a regional synod. Cancellation of a regional synod shall not be permitted to occur twice in succession.

The committee was persuaded by the arguments presented that the wording of Art 40—Public Profession of Faith—could be improved upon. The revised article now reads:

*Those who desire to profess their faith and thereby be admitted to the Lord's Supper shall be evaluated by the consistory regarding their motives, their knowledge of the Three Forms of Unity, and their walk of life. This profession of faith shall occur after proper announcements to the congregation, and with the use of the adopted liturgical form.*

Regarding Art 43—Admission to the Lord's Supper—Synod Burlington 2010 of the CanRC had asked that the committee consider the fact that the admission of visitors from churches with which we maintain ecclesiastical fellowship is best served by a letter of testimony, but it should be understood that very few churches in North America are familiar with such a practice. The admission of visitors from other churches has historically been viewed as an exception to the rule and needs to be regulated by the elders. The criterion “Biblical Church Membership” was considered nebulous by this synod and several churches that had written. The committee agreed and has changed this article as follows:

The consistory shall supervise participation at the Lord's Supper.

To that end, the consistory shall admit to the Lord's Supper only those members who have made public profession of the Reformed faith and lead a godly life.

The consistory may also admit visitors who profess the Reformed faith provided that it secures from them a satisfactory testimony in either written or verbal form about their doctrine, life, and church membership.

Art. 57B—The Departure of Members—was discussed in view of comments from the churches and Synod Burlington 2010 of the CanRC. The stipulation that a request for a letter of testimony be made in writing has been removed. The question of membership was considered at length. One becomes a member of a local congregation, not the federation. A transfer of membership is therefore not possible. To send the letter of testimony to the consistory of another

church could be interpreted as a transfer. The onus and responsibility of the individual is a fundamental principle. A person departs and freely joins a church. On the other hand, the spiritual care of an individual must be transferred from one consistory to another. There has to be a safeguard that a person does not fall between the cracks in this process. In view of these considerations, the committee agreed to the following wording for this section of the article:

*Upon their request, a letter of testimony shall be given to those members who are departing to a church with which the federation has ecclesiastical fellowship. The consistory shall send a copy of this letter to that church, requesting it to accept them under its spiritual care.*

*Departing members remain under the supervision and care of their consistory until they are received as members into that church.*

*The departure of members shall be properly announced.*

The regulations for various examinations were once more reviewed for correctness, consistency, and language. This resulted in some changes to four sets of regulations.

The committee spent the last two days of its meetings on developing a set of forms for discipline. They consist of: 1. Form for excommunication of communicant members; 2. Form for readmission; and 3. Form for excommunication of non-communicant members.

The existing forms were considered as a basis for the proposed forms, and various commentaries were consulted in the process. The committee is grateful that a set of forms including prayers can be presented to the

synods and churches of the respective federations. The proposed forms will be included as part of the report of the committee with the recommendation that they be adopted and the committee be relieved of this task.

The mandate to develop regulations for synodical procedures was discussed and the regulations currently in use by the respective federations were compared for similarity. However, due to the different structures of the respective synods and the history of the churches, there are some procedural differences between the two sets of regulations. New regulations will be drafted that reflect the wording of the new PJCOA. General agreement was reached on what should be included in the regulations. A sub-committee consisting of the six brothers living in Ontario was appointed to prepare a tentative set of regulations while keeping the full committee informed of its progress. These proposed regulations will be presented to the respective synods with the recommendation that the present committee be re-appointed to finalize the regulations when the PJCO is adopted and union of the two federations is indeed planned.

The committee will now draft its final report to the respective synods. This should as much as possible be one report. The committee will also present the synods and churches with another 2-column document that contains only the changes to the PJCO 2010, as well as a clean copy of the complete PJCO 2012. Also included will be a brief document with comments on the reasons and deliberations that led to the changes.

In closing comments the committee members reflected on the many hours spent together on this work for the churches. The common thread again was the appreciation

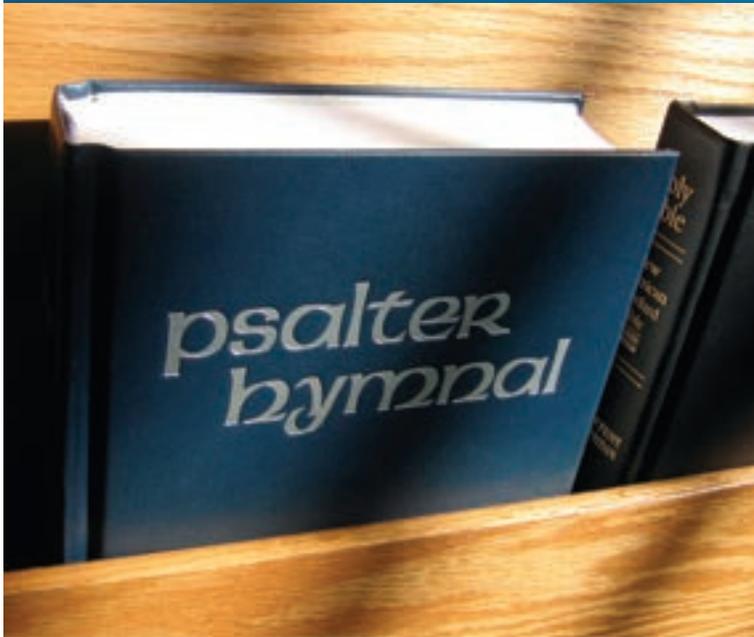
for the harmonious and brotherly atmosphere in which the committee could perform its task. Dr. Jack the Jong was remembered for his contributions in the early years and the sadness felt when illness forced him to resign. Appreciation was expressed for the contributions of Nelson Kloosterman to the work of the committee. His leadership and his gifts and talents were much appreciated by the members of the committee.

With this the committee considers that it has completed the tasks given to it by the synods of the respective federations. It is the prayer of the committee that the Lord will be pleased to use these labors to the benefit of the churches, and, if it is His will, for a combined federation. To God be the praise and the glory. Following prayer of thanksgiving, Rev. Scheuers closed the meeting.

This press release, as well as copies of previous releases can be found at the following web sites: <http://sites.google.com/site/churchorderpjco> and <http://www.canrc.org/resources/press/index.html>

For the committee  
Gerard J. Nordeman

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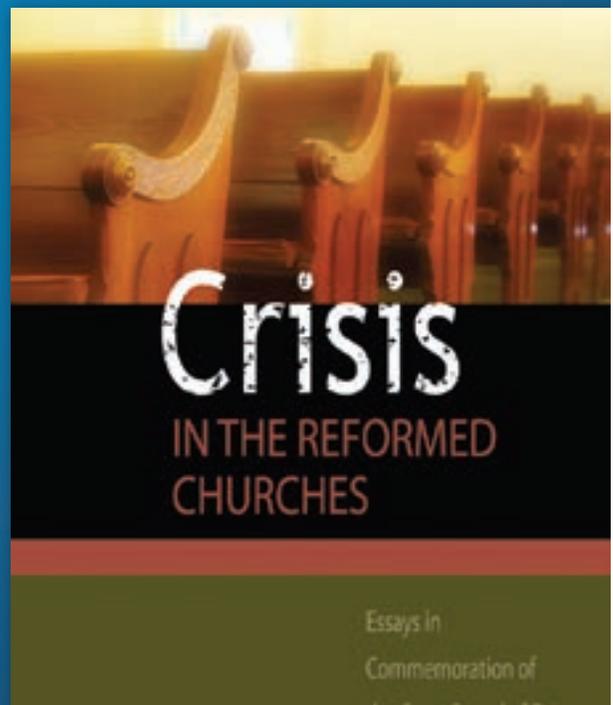
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# Letter to the Editor

July, 2011

Dear Editor,

I am writing today to express gratitude for the article in the March/April edition of *The Outlook* written by Mrs. Sheila Ypma regarding the proposed URCNA hymnal. I'd also like to thank Mrs. Ypma for her hard work, the countless hours spent, and for sharing her concerns over the changes made to so many of the songs, specifically relating to the gender-inclusive language.

With this article as a springboard, I began doing some investigating of my own. I have looked into the original mandate to the hymnal committee and find that in several areas they seem to be going well beyond synod's parameters. Nowhere does their mandate say that they were asked to remove "archaic" language, to add or remove stanzas, or to change words referring to the male gender—not only for humans, but also for God. Even there, they have been inconsistent, and it seems that in their inconsistency, they have in reality voided their rationale for making the changes at all. For if children or new believers can be expected to sing and understand archaic language in one song, why not in another? And if the gender is allowed to remain unchanged in one hymn, why must it be removed in the next?

There is so much beauty, richness, and depth of meaning in these songs that we find now have been altered. Having grown up in the CRC, I find within these songs a shared history with saints who have gone before us—our parents, grandparents and great-grandparents—and we know many of the songs from memory. In fact, we have often seen young children sitting around us in church, too young to read, that are singing these rich songs along with us. Do they understand them yet? Most likely not; yet these songs will live in their hearts and minds for many years and become part of their spiritual heritage, as they have ours.

My family recently joined the URC because over the years the denomination to which we belonged at the time—both in its doctrine and music—has become more and more watered-down in order to be "seeker-friendly." We are so blessed to be singing again the dear songs we grew up with as we offer praise to our Heavenly Father, which makes it very difficult for us to accept the changes that are being proposed for the new hymnal.

Thank you, again, to *The Outlook* and Mrs. Ypma for this informative article; we look forward to the follow-up articles on the proposed hymnbook.

*In Christ,*  
Norma Mulder  
Hudsonville, MI

# Pop Evangelism's Misuse of Scripture – Part 2

## “God loves you...”

Rev. Nollie  
Malabuyo

John 3:16—“For God so loved the world . . .”

Most evangelicals understand “world” in John 3:16 as “every person” in the world. But there are ample reasons why this is a wrong understanding.

First, in John 3:16 (see also Eph 1:4), “world” means God’s “whole order of things”—his whole creation—which he so loved that he was willing to send his only begotten Son to a humiliating, cruel death so it will not suffer his wrath. What many Christians forget is that God’s redemptive plan is not just for mankind, but for His whole creation (Rom. 8:21, 23; Eph. 1:10; Col. 1:13–20). John 3:19–21 even alludes to “light” and “darkness” of Genesis 1:2–4 to emphasize God’s redemptive plan for his creation.

The context shows that the meaning of “world” is God’s creation. Immediately following John 3:16, verse 17 says that “God did not send his Son into the *kosmos* to condemn the *kosmos* . . .” Which meaning of *kosmos* here would make more sense: every person in the whole world, or the created world in general? Verse 17 continues, “. . . but in order that the *kosmos* might be saved through him.” Is it possible that God sent Christ into the *kosmos* so that every single person in the whole world “might be saved”?

Second, grammatically and theologically, *kosmos* in John 3 as every person is untenable. Did God

send his Son into the world to make salvation possible for everyone or to save everyone who believes in him? The language of John 3:16–18, 36 has the answer. In the original Greek, John uses *pas ho pisteuon*, which translated literally says “everyone who believes,” and does not mean “whoever believes.” This is how several English Bibles translate it—Holman, NRSV, NLT, ISV, GOD’S WORD, Young’s Literal (1862), and Wyclif’s Bible (1395).

The Greek for “whoever” is *hostis* not *pas*, and is translated as such, for example, in Luke 14:27 (“whoever does not bear his own cross”), and James 2:10 (“whoever keeps the whole law”). If John wanted to say, “Whoever believes,” he would have used *hostis* instead of *pas*. “Whoever” (*hostis*) has an indefinite, uncertain and contingent notion, while “everyone” (*pas*) has a very definite, sure sense.

So Christ was sent into “the world” in order to save “everyone who believes,” not to merely make salvation possible to everyone. Do you see the difference? The former affirms that Jesus actually accomplished the salvation of “everyone who believes”—his chosen people. The latter says that Jesus did not accomplish anything in his death other than to make salvation possible for everyone.

In John 3:16–19, *kosmos* appears five times. But clearly, *kosmos* in verse 17 (“God did not send his Son into the

*kosmos*”) and in verse 19 (“the light has come into the *kosmos*”) cannot in any sense mean “every person in the world.” It can only make sense if it refers to the created world or earth.

Third, *kosmos* in the New Testament has many senses, including: all the nations (Matt. 26:13), the fallen world (John 1:10), and the ungodly world (John 7:7 and 1 John 2:15–17). To be sure, sometimes *kosmos* in the New Testament refers to all people in the world (Rom. 3:19). But more frequently, *kosmos* in Scripture means only some people in the world, not all of mankind, as in Luke 2:1 (“world” is the Roman Empire), John 7:3–4 (Jesus could not show himself to every individual in the whole world), and John 12:19 (not every individual in the whole world was following Jesus).

Does God love everyone? Yes, in a providential and common grace way. He governs, upholds, and nourishes his whole creation (Matt. 5:45, 6:26–30), so if God withheld his providential care from the world, it would be destroyed in no time. But did God intend to save everyone in order to show his love to all mankind? No, he savingly loves only those whom he intended to save.

So it is bad exegesis—and practice—to think “every single individual who ever lived” when “world” is mentioned in the Bible, and then tell every stranger you meet, “God loves you . . .”

*For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish, but have eternal life.*

–John 3:16

**Rev. Malabuyo** is an associate pastor of Trinity URC in Walnut Creek, CA, and serves as a missionary to the Philippines.

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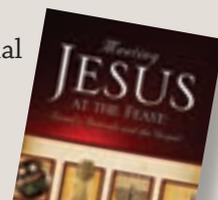
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