

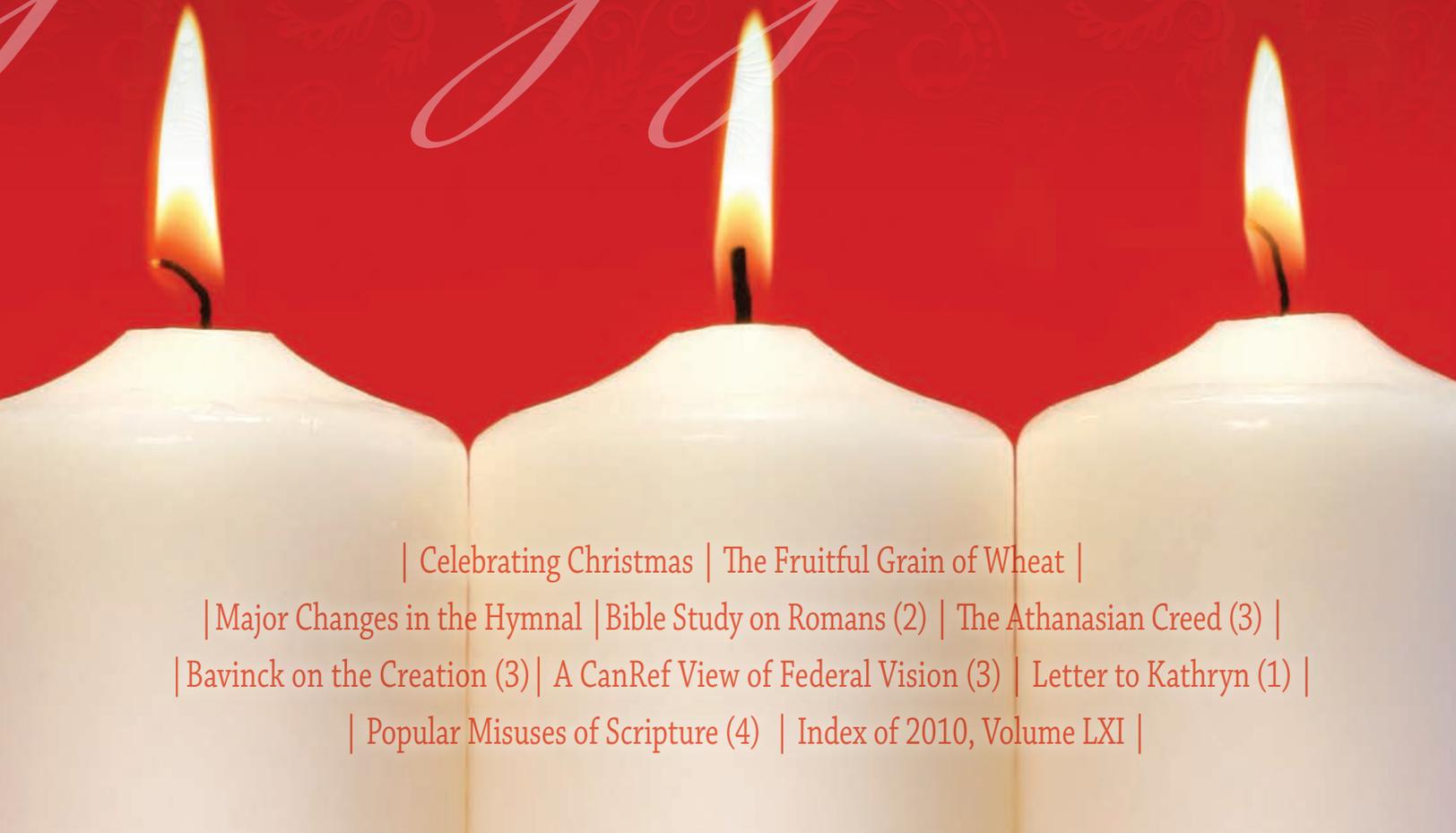
The Outlook

NOV/DEC 2011

Volume 61 | Issue 6

Dedicated to the Exposition and Defense of the Reformed Faith

*I bring you
good tidings
of great joy*



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“And the three companies blew the trumpets. . . and held THE TORCHES in their left hands, and THE TRUMPETS in their right hands. . . and they cried, ‘The sword of Jehovah and of Gideon’.” (Judges 7:20).

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Send all copy to:
Editor, Rev. Wybren Oord
PO Box 1191
Coalhurst, Alberta T0L 0V0
Email: editor@reformedfellowship.net
Website: www.reformedfellowship.net

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Editor: Wybren Oord

Contributing Editor: Dr. Cornelis P. Venema

Business Manager: Shellie Terpstra

Art, Design & Production: Jeff Steenholdt

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Editorial Office

Rev. Wybren H. Oord
PO Box 1191
Coalhurst, Alberta T0L 0V0
Email: editor@reformedfellowship.net

Circulation Office

3500 Danube Dr. SW, Wyoming, MI 49418-8387
(877) 532-8510 Phone Toll-free in US and Canada

Business Mailing Address

3500 Danube Dr. SW, Wyoming, MI 49418-8387
Email: office@reformedfellowship.net

*I bring you good tidings of great joy
which will be to all people.*
— Luke 2:10b

In this day and age, as we enter the holiday season, it is not superfluous to ask whether or not we truly understand the meaning of Christmas—even among churchgoers. Though this holiday is celebrated throughout the world and increases in popularity every year, that does not mean that it is properly understood. Although the true importance of Christmas can never be separated from the gospel, the gospel has no appeal for many who want to celebrate the holiday. If some law were passed that Christmas could only be celebrated in the true Christian manner, many would turn away in disappointment and disgust.

Some celebrate Christmas at the holiday counter of commercialism. Certainly the exchange of gifts is not inherently wrong. Storekeepers fill their stores with decorations and merchandise long before the holiday arrives in hopes that people will get their Christmas shopping done early. Perhaps that should be required of Christians so that they can

have the time to meditate properly on the supreme wonder of the divine grace of God made manifest in the flesh. We certainly cannot blame store owners for the vast amount of Christmas merchandise and the plethora of sales that are popular this time of year. For many, the Friday after US Thanksgiving is the day they hope financial rehabilitation takes place in their store and they are once more turning a profit.

Combined with the holiday commercialism, we have the romance and tradition of Christmas: Santa Claus and his reindeer, stockings on the fireplace, holly and mistletoe, trees and trimmings. Some may regard these things as rich symbols of the holiday; others love them for the nostalgia that comes with them. Still others prize them as mere decorations. Whatever their value may be, Christians must admit that they have very little connection with the great redemptive event that took place many years ago. All too often, they distract from the attention that should be placed on the Son of God made flesh. We must be intent on resting our joy not on the holiday frills plastered all over the countryside but on the glorious theme of Jesus' birth.

Still others come so close to the true meaning, yet miss it altogether. They celebrate the "cuteness" of Christmas.

For them the baby in the manger with the shepherds and wise men gathered around is a symbol of the beauty and innocence of childhood. They linger so long at the improvised bed in the little town of Bethlehem that they fail to see Christ in action. While they sing about the little boy Jesus, asleep on the hay, they do not recall that He was given that name because He would save His people from their sins. Not a word is spoken about human sin and the need of a Savior. Not the slightest suggestion is made that the newborn baby in the manger is the Eternal Son of God from heaven.

There is only one genuine Christmas, and that is the Christmas of God's holy Word. It is the Word become flesh. It is not a message of human goodness but one of wretched sinners and the inescapable misery that is ours without Christ. The appearance of the incarnate God in a manger is a loud testimony from God that mankind cannot save itself. The child in the manger was not our product, not the gift of man to God, not the flower of the human race. He is the supreme gift of God to man.

Christmas is the greatest miracle of the ages: the appearance of God Himself, the second person of the Trinity, in a human body; the union of God and man in one person. He was and remains God's marvelous provision for a bankrupt and fallen world, for a helpless and hopeless humanity. The Savior came to us as a baby, not to show us how cute and innocent little babies can look when lying in a manger, but to cover the guilt into which every baby is conceived and born. He became a child so that children as well as adults might be able to inherit salvation.

The coming of God's Son in the flesh bears fruit in heart-regeneration and character-transformation. If we have the Spirit of Christ, we shall express our love to Him and also to one another. Yet, the love we express to one another is more than mere "goodwill." It is a love that must be more than good wishes, kindly feelings, and occasional coins dropped into a bell-ringing Santa's kettle. The love that Christ brings is a love that is sacrificial in that, while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us.

No angel sang about the goodwill of one man toward another. The goodwill of which the angels sang was the goodwill of God toward the fallen human race. God's goodwill is His sovereign good pleasure. It is the peace that God bestows on those He calls His own. The recipients of that good pleasure are those whom He has called to save through His Son, Jesus. Real Christmas cheer can only be brought by pointing to Him who is the Lamb of God and the light of the world.



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

*“Pity the nations, O our God, Constrain the earth to come;
Send Thy victorious Word abroad, And bring the strangers home.”*
—Isaac Watts, *“How Sweet and Awesome Is the Place”*

As servants of the Lord Jesus Christ living on this side of the cross, we labor with joy in the dawn of the new creation—praying for God’s mercy upon the nations, that He would constrain the earth to come, and that He would send forth His Word and bring the strangers home. We pray these things with confidence and boldness, based on the finished work of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, for it is His finished work that compels us to plant churches. Many themes, texts, and teachings of Scripture, of which the reader is quite likely aware, demonstrate the need for church planting. For our purposes, however, we will consider this theme in John’s gospel, specifically in 12:20–26, where we see the biblical foundation for

church planting in Jesus, the fruitful grain of wheat, who died in order to produce much fruit—the salvation of men and women from every nation, tribe, people, and tongue.

When Jesus began His earthly ministry, John the Baptist proclaimed Him as “the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!” (John 1:29). Following Jesus’ meeting with the woman at the well, the Samaritans confessed, “This is indeed the Christ, the Savior of the world” (John 4:42). After Jesus raised Lazarus from the dead, Caiaphas, the high priest, prophesied that Jesus would die not only for the Jewish nation, “but also

that He would gather together in one the children of God who were scattered abroad” (John 11:51–52). After Jesus’ triumphal entry, the Pharisees—His mortal enemies—were compelled to say, “The world has gone after Him!” (John 12:19). Jesus’ ministry and work are for people of all nations, tribes, and tongues. John the Baptist proclaimed it. The Samaritans recognized it. Caiaphas prophesied of it. Even the Pharisees confessed it. Jesus did not make all of these statements, however; others did. It is not until John 12:20–26 that Jesus Himself declares such things. In this pivotal passage, Jesus connects the work He is about to accomplish on the cross with the gathering in of the nations, describing Himself as the fruitful grain of wheat.



The Time of Harvest Has Come

John begins this text in a most arresting fashion, fixing our eyes on the Gentiles: “Now there were certain Greeks among those who came up to worship at the feast” (12:20). The Jews had once complained among themselves: “Does He intend to go to the Dispersion among the Greeks and teach the Greeks?” (John 7:35). Their complaint reveals their blindness, for even now Jesus is beginning to draw all peoples to Himself. The Greeks come to Jesus.

John does not want us to miss the irony here. These “certain Greeks” were “among those who came up to worship at the feast” (12:20). The feast to which John is referring is the great feast of the Jews, the Passover, which celebrated the deliverance of the infant Jewish nation from the land of Egypt, from the house of bondage. Not only did this feast look back on the great redemptive act of the Old Testament, but it also looked forward in hope to the nation’s future redemption.¹ It was a thoroughly nationalistic feast that commemorated God’s separation of the Jews not only from the Egyptians but also from all the other peoples of the earth. The means by which God separated the Jews from all others was the blood of the lamb. Meredith Kline writes:

The picture in Exodus 12 is . . . one of God’s . . . coming to them and abiding with them through the dark night of judgment on Egypt. Like a hovering bird spreading its protective wings over its young, the Lord covered the Israelite houses, keeping watch over them. He was their gatekeeper, their guardian against the entrance of the angel of death. . . . The Lord shielded his people from his own wrath by himself intercepting the death angel’s thrust as he stood guard

at the door of their dwellings. . . . The lamb’s blood on these sanctuary tombs presaged their becoming empty tombs in the morning. Their blood-covered doors would be opened and their redeemed occupants would emerge as the children of the resurrection day.²

The annual celebration of the Passover should have reminded the Jews of their unique status as those who lived in the freedom of a new day.

Though we do not know what these Greeks were doing at this Jewish feast, we do know they wanted to see Jesus and perhaps begin to enjoy the freedom of a new day themselves: “Then they came to Philip, who was from Bethsaida of Galilee, and asked him, saying, ‘Sir, we wish to see Jesus’” (12:21). The Greeks came to Philip, most likely because Philip was one of only two disciples with a Greek name.³ The point, however, is not that they came to Philip. The point is their request: “Sir, we wish to see Jesus.” The implication is that these Greeks were not satisfied with the Jewish feast. The Jewish feast left them empty, unfulfilled, and in the shadows. These Greeks were hungry and longed to be filled; they sought the Light of the World. They wanted to see Jesus.

Here, John gives us a hint of the history of redemption as he takes us from the Old Testament shadows of a Jewish feast to the New Testament reality of Jesus. John is signaling to us that in Jesus the dawn of the new age has arrived—an age in which men and women of every nation, tribe, tongue, and people will be counted among the children of the resurrection day. Though the new age is already intruding in history here in John 12, it has not fully arrived. Notice that the Greeks do not yet come to Jesus; they come to Philip. Nevertheless, they do come to *see* Jesus.⁴ Remarkably, the Greeks understand, though only

in part, that this Jewish feast is but a shadow. Jesus is the reality. Thus, the Greeks understand—and appear ready to accept—what the Jews do not: Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the living God.

Philip receives the request of the Greeks, proceeds to tell Andrew, and in turn Andrew and Philip tell Jesus (12:22). Thus, John does something remarkable in this text: he fixes our eyes on the Gentiles in order to fix our eyes on Jesus. John’s only purpose in introducing other characters in his gospel is to point us to Jesus, that we might behold His glory. Raymond Brown comments, “The coming of the Gentiles is so theologically important that the writer never tells us if they got to see Jesus, and indeed they disappear from the scene.”⁵ The Greeks disappear from the scene so that we might see Jesus. He is, after all, the Great Harvester who draws all peoples to Himself. Now we see Jesus.

The Great Harvester

Jesus receives the report from Andrew and Philip that the Greeks have come with a request to see Him. Remarkably, Jesus does not address the Greeks. Instead, He simply says, “The hour has come that the Son of Man should be glorified” (12:23). Jesus interprets the coming of the Greeks as the arrival of His hour.

Everything in John’s gospel has been pressing toward this hour. At the wedding feast of Cana in Galilee, Jesus says to His mother, “My hour has not yet come” (John 2:4). John tells us later that no one could lay a hand upon Jesus “because His hour had not yet come” (7:30). We find the same thing in 8:20. In the opening half of John’s gospel, Jesus’ hour has not yet come. But now, with the Gentiles drawing near to Him, Jesus says, “the hour has come.”

The hour to which Jesus is referring, of course, is the hour of His death. We learn that from John 13:1, where “His

hour” is defined in terms of Jesus’ departure from this world. We see it again in John 17:1 as Jesus begins His High Priestly Prayer with those words anticipating His death: “Father, the hour has come. Glorify Your Son, that Your Son also may glorify You.” The hour of which Jesus is speaking—the hour that has now come—is the hour of Jesus’ death, and it is the drawing near of the Gentiles that signals its arrival. Thus, the inclusion of the Gentiles is brought about through the Jewish rejection of Jesus. The Greeks wish to see Jesus, and the Jews wish to see Jesus no more. Jesus’ hour—the hour of His death—has come.

The connection Jesus draws between the coming of the Gentiles and the arrival of the hour of His death on the cross is vital to church planting. Prior to Jesus’ work on the cross, the message of the gospel was proclaimed almost exclusively to the Jews. From henceforth, however, it goes forth to Jew and Gentile alike—to men and women from every nation, tribe, tongue, and people. The gospel is to be “declared and published to all nations, and to all persons promiscuously and without distinction” (Canons of Dort, 2.5).

This leads us to one of the most profound ironies of John’s gospel: the hour of Jesus’ death is the hour of Jesus’ glory. In John’s gospel, Jesus is not merely glorified after His death on the cross but *in* His death on the cross. John wants us to fix our eyes upon Jesus, hanging on the cross, and to see there His glory!⁶

Jesus refers to the hour of His death as the hour “that the Son of Man should be glorified” (12:23). Picture the scene of Jesus’ crucifixion. The place itself conjures up the most disturbing images; it is called “the Place of a Skull,” in Hebrew, “Golgotha” (John 19:17). Here the soldiers pierced Jesus’ hands, nailing them to the horizontal bar. They pierced His feet, fastening them to the vertical bar. They lifted Him up on the cross between two

thieves. Above Him they fastened the title “JESUS OF NAZARETH, THE KING OF THE JEWS” (19:19). The soldiers stripped Him of His garments and cast lots for His clothing. Where is the glory in all of this?

How can the hour of Jesus’ death be the hour that the Son of Man is glorified? Jesus tells us in John 12:24: “Most assuredly, I say to you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the ground and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it produces much grain.” The hour of Jesus’ death is the hour of His glory, because at the cross, Jesus actually saves His people, securing their redemption for time and eternity.⁷ He dies in order to produce much fruit, and the fruit of His death is the salvation of men and women from every nation, tribe, people, and tongue. Jesus explains, “And I, if I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all peoples to Myself” (John 12:32).

In John 12:24, Jesus indicates the absolute necessity of His death if there is to be a church. “*Unless* a grain of wheat falls into the ground and dies, *it remains alone*” (emphasis added). The implication is clear. If Jesus does not die, there will be no church; but He does die, and so He brings forth His church, in which He reveals His glory. In fact, as Raymond Brown has pointed out, “The parable is concerned not with the fate of the grain but with its productivity.”⁸ Such is the love and compassion of Christ for His church, that His glory is bound up with His fruit—that is, with the church. Though He is all-glorious in and of Himself, His glory is revealed and demonstrated most powerfully in the salvation of His church.

By His death, Jesus produces much fruit. In His being lifted up, He draws all peoples to Himself. This season of harvest was anticipated from the beginning of the world and will not cease until the world’s end. The Belgic Confession states, “This church has existed from the beginning of the world and will last until the end, as

appears from the fact that Christ is an eternal King who cannot be without subjects” (BC, art. 27). The Confession goes on to state, “This holy church is not confined, bound, or limited to a certain place or certain persons. But it is spread and dispersed throughout the entire world, though still joined and united in heart and will, in one and the same Spirit, by the power of faith” (BC, art. 27). The Heidelberg Catechism echoes the Confession when it states, “The Son of God, through his Spirit and Word, out of the entire human race, from the beginning of the world to its end, gathers, protects, and preserves for himself a community chosen for eternal life and united in true faith” (HC, Q&A 54). The Westminster Standards (WCF 25, WLC, Q&A 61–64) use similar language, stating that the “universal Church” consists “of the whole number of the elect . . . from all places in the world.”

This, then, is the purpose for which Jesus came and died: to produce a great harvest, His church. Francis Turretin observed, “He came into the world and performed the mediatorial office for no other reason than to acquire a church for himself and call it (when acquired) into a participation of grace and glory.”⁹ The growth of the church from a small band of disciples in Acts 1 to the ends of the earth in Acts 28 is proof, as Johannes VanderKemp puts it, that “the satisfaction of the Son cannot be frustrated.”¹⁰ Our Lord Jesus Christ is a most successful harvester. He calls the church into existence by His messianic acts.¹¹ This is the point Jesus is making when He compares Himself to a grain of wheat that falls to the ground and dies, and by that death produces much fruit. By His suffering and death Jesus produces the church and now calls her to be fruitful.

The Fruit of His Labor

The fruit that Jesus produces by His death resembles Him. An apple

seed produces apples. A pear seed produces pears. A grain of wheat that falls to the ground and dies produces grain. In other words, Jesus' church is conformed to Him. Listen to the words with which Jesus concludes our text: "He who loves his life will lose it, and he who hates his life in this world will keep it for eternal life. If anyone serves Me, let him follow Me; and where I am, there My servant will be also. If anyone serves Me, him My Father will honor" (12:25–26).

Here Jesus speaks of conformity to His image. He produces His image in His people—and His people are made like Him. The true church of Jesus Christ resembles Him. This means that as He died to self in order to produce much fruit, so His church, in conformity to Him, dies to self in order to produce much fruit for His glory. The pattern that we observe in Jesus—dying that others may live—He now reproduces in His church. In Him His church lives and moves and has her being. Sometimes it is said that couples who have been married for a long time come to resemble each other. So also here, the bride resembles her Bridegroom; the church resembles Christ. And the church counts this her joy, delighting to live as "children of the resurrection day." As the Heidelberg Catechism puts it, "By His power we too are already now resurrected to a new life" (HC, Q&A 45).

Thus, the principle of "death to self / life in Christ" articulated by Jesus in John 12: 25–26 is the paradigm not only for the life of Christian discipleship but also for the life of the church. Though this pattern is found in every facet of the church's life, perhaps it is most profoundly seen in the work of the church planter and in the corporate life of the church plant.

Not only the church planter, but the church body as a whole, must die to

self. Luther once stated, "The Church is misery on earth."¹² He also stated that the church "is like unto her bridegroom, Christ Jesus, torn, spit on, derided, and crucified."¹³ Indeed, this is the way it must be so that we do not depend upon ourselves, but always upon Christ—that the glory may never be ours, but that it may always be His. Luther went on to say, "We tell our Lord God plainly, that if He will have His Church, He must maintain and defend it; for we can neither uphold nor protect it. If we could, indeed, we should become the proudest asses under heaven. But God says: I say it, I do it."¹⁴ Calvin also recognized the need for the church to be conformed to the image of her Savior: "The Church, so long as she is a pilgrim in this world, is subjected to the cross, that she may be humble,

and may be conformed to her Head. . . . Her highest ornament and luster is modesty."¹⁵ The church's greatest glory is to be found in her conformity to Christ, and that means death to self and life in Him.

How does the church planter die to self? He dies to self each time he gives up another evening of precious time he would otherwise spend with his wife and children to encourage struggling members of the church. He accepts a much smaller salary than he would receive in a larger church. He refuses to build the church upon his personality, choosing instead to decrease that Christ may increase. He gladly spends and is spent for the life of the congregation. He imparts to the congregation not only the gospel but also his life.

How does the church plant die to self? The church plant dies to self by refusing to be discouraged by small numbers. It refuses to give up when the funds are low and instead seeks help from sister churches that are more established. It foregoes its desire for a nice, large building, choosing instead to meet in less-than-ideal quarters, even though each time it gathers the members have to set up chairs for the worship service again. The church plant dies to self as it refuses to promote itself, choosing instead to proclaim Christ to a lost and dying world.

Edmund Clowney reminds us that this is precisely the work to which the servants of Christ Jesus are called: "Jesus came to gather, and to call gatherers, disciples who would gather with him, seeking the poor and helpless from city streets and country roads. . . . Mission is not an optional activity for Christ's disciples. If they are not gatherers, they are scatterers."¹⁶ Conformity to Christ means the difficult work of missions and evangelism and church planting. Christ came to seek and to



save the lost—not the righteous, but the unrighteous—and that work cost Him His life. Even as Christ came to serve sinners, so in Him we are called to serve sinners (John 13:14–17). Clowney goes on to state the great danger for those churches that fail to conform to Christ in terms of seeking the lost: “The congregation that ignores mission will atrophy and soon find itself shattered by internal dissension. It will inevitably begin to lose its own young people, disillusioned by hearing the gospel trumpet sounded every Sunday for those who never march.”¹⁷ A church that does not die to self in service to Christ will necessarily turn inward and thereby lose her life. The work of missions, evangelism, and church planting is vital to the life of the church—through it she dies to self and lives to Christ.

As the church dies to self, she begins to experience the transforming power of the gospel, for in dying to self she lives to Christ—better yet, Christ lives in her. She becomes an instrument in the Redeemer’s hands as He works in her and through her.¹⁸ In his letter to the Colossians Paul says, “To this end I also labor, striving according to His working which works in me mightily” (1:29). It is no coincidence that Paul, who was the great church planter of the New Testament, writes of these themes of death to self and life to Christ often. In his second letter to the Corinthians, for example, he writes,

In all things we commend ourselves as ministers of God: in much patience, in tribulations, in needs, in distresses, in stripes, in imprisonments, in tumults, in labors, in sleeplessness, in fastings; by purity, by knowledge, by longsuffering, by kindness, by the Holy Spirit, by sincere love, by the word of truth, by the power of God, by the armor of righteousness on the right hand and on the left, by honor

and dishonor, by evil report and good report; as deceivers, and yet true; as unknown, and yet well known, *as dying, and behold, we live*; as chastened, and yet not killed; as sorrowful, yet always rejoicing; as poor, yet making many rich; as having nothing, and yet possessing all things (2 Cor. 6:4–10, emphasis added).

In fact, later in the same letter, Paul defines the marks of a true servant of Christ in these same terms:

Are they ministers of Christ?—I speak as a fool—I am more: in labors more abundant, in stripes above measure, in prisons more frequently, in deaths often. From the Jews five times I received forty stripes minus one. Three times I was beaten with rods; once I was stoned; three times I was shipwrecked; a night and a day I have been in the deep; in journeys often, in perils of waters, in perils of robbers, in perils of my own countrymen, in perils of the Gentiles, in perils in the city, in perils in the wilderness, in perils in the sea, in perils among false brethren; in weariness and toil, in sleeplessness often, in hunger and thirst, in fastings often, in cold and nakedness—besides the other things, what comes upon me daily: my deep concern for all the churches. Who is weak, and I am not weak? Who is made to stumble, and I do not burn with indignation? If I must boast, I will boast in the things which concern my infirmity. The God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who is blessed forever, knows that I am not lying. In Damascus the governor, under Aretas the king, was guarding the city of the Damascenes with a garrison, desiring to arrest me; but I was let down in a basket through a window in the wall, and escaped from his hands (2 Cor. 11:23–33).

The persecutor of the church became persecuted for the church’s sake—including churches he had planted. The persecutor of Christ became persecuted for Christ’s sake. Yet in this suffering and death, Paul found glory and life. In so doing, he tasted of the power of God, as God’s strength was made perfect in weakness. Therefore Paul could most gladly boast in his infirmities, for in these infirmities the power of Christ rested upon him. Therefore he took pleasure in infirmities, in reproaches, in needs, in persecutions, in distresses for Christ’s sake. For when he was weak, then he was strong (2 Cor. 12:9–10).

This paradigm of death to self and to life in Christ is not unique to the apostle Paul; it characterizes the life of all true servants of Christ. Indeed, it characterizes the life of the church herself. As the church is conformed to Christ, she proclaims Him in Word and deed, and Christ Himself is then at work producing still more fruit. Thus, as a statement from the Mission to North America points out, “From the beginning of the established church, missionaries have started new congregations from which to share the Gospel to a desperate and hurting world.”¹⁹

But why should mission work take the form of church planting? The answer is simple: Church planting is essential because the risen Christ has bound Himself to the assembly of His people on the Lord’s Day. It is in the assembly that He has promised to work through the preaching of the gospel to create faith in our hearts and through the sacraments to strengthen that faith (HC, Q&A 65–68). Michael Horton writes,

The church is first of all a place where God does certain things. . . . Christ, both Lord and Savior of his church, appointed an official ministry . . . so that he could continue to serve his covenant people and extend his kingdom of grace to the ends of the earth by his Spirit. Even in the

present—every time we gather—it is God who summons us in judgment and grace. It is not our devotion, praise, piety, or service that comes first, but God’s service to us. This is why we must assemble at a place where the gospel is truly preached, the sacraments are administered according to Christ’s institution, and there is a visible form of Christ’s heavenly reign through officers whom he has called and sent.²⁰

It is through the “ordinary means” of the church’s ministry—namely the foolishness of preaching and the weakness of water, bread, and wine—that Christ has promised to work, bringing sinners to salvation in Christ through repentance and faith in Him.

Geerhardus Vos states, “The church actually has within herself the powers of the world to come. She . . . forms an intermediate link between the present life and the life of eternity. . . . The consummation of the kingdom in which all is fulfilled began with [Jesus’] resurrection and ascension.”²¹ And so, by God’s grace, we press on in planting churches, proclaiming Christ, that sinners may be ushered into the life of the world to come. And as they begin to taste the powers of the age to come, they too lay down their lives in service to Christ, knowing that these present sufferings are not worthy to be compared with the glory that shall be revealed in us. As Calvin notes, “The afflictions of the Church are always momentary, when we raise our eyes to its eternal happiness.”²² Thus, in all our labor, we echo the words of Paul: “I press on, that I may lay hold of that for which Christ Jesus has also laid hold of me. . . . For our citizenship is in heaven, from which we also eagerly wait for the Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ, who will transform our lowly body that it may be conformed to His glorious body, according to the working by which He is able even to subdue all things to Himself” (Phil. 3:12, 20–21).

Conclusion

Jesus Christ is the fruitful grain of wheat who died in order that He might produce much fruit. The church is His fruit, and she exists to bring glory and honor to Him. Thus, the biblical foundation for church planting is the glory of Christ Jesus our Lord. Therefore, as Vos comments, “The joy of working in the dawn of the world to come quickens the pulse of all New Testament servants of Christ.”²³ As we long for the fullness of the day when we behold the Sun of Righteousness in all of His glory, let us go forth and plant churches with the words of Isaac Watts’s hymn in our hearts:

We long to see Thy churches full,

That all the chosen race

*May, with one voice and heart
and soul,*

Sing thy redeeming grace.

1. *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, s.v. “Passover.”

2. Meredith Kline, “The Feast of Cover-Over,” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 37, 4 (December 1994): 497–510.

3. The other disciple with a Greek name was Andrew, the one to whom Philip went in verse 22 (William Hendriksen, *The Gospel of John* [Grand Rapids: Baker, 1954], 194).

4. This is likely a pregnant term in John’s gospel, indicating far more than a desire to see Jesus physically. Implied here is a desire to follow Jesus as disciples (cf. John 1:39, 46, 50, 51) (James T. Dennison, “Come and See,” *Kerux* 9, 2 [September 1994]: 23–29).

5. Raymond E. Brown, *The Gospel According to John I–XII* (New York: Doubleday, 1966), 470.

6. It is noteworthy that in John’s record of the crucifixion there is no reference to the three hours of darkness. This is remarkable, for of all the gospel writers, John develops the imagery of light and darkness most fully. Perhaps John doesn’t record the three hours of darkness at Golgotha, however, because he wants us to focus only on the glory of Christ, the Light of the World.

7. For a recent, helpful discussion on definite atonement, see Joel Beeke, *Living for God’s Glory* (Orlando: Reformation Trust, 2008), 74–100.

8. Brown, *The Gospel According to John*, 472.

9. Francis Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology* (Phillipsburg, N.J.: P&R, 1997), 3:1.

10. Johannes VanderKemp, *The Christian Entirely the Property of Christ, in Life and Death: Exhibited in Fifty-three Sermons on the Heidelberg Catechism*, trans. John M. Harlingen (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 1997), 1:427.

11. Geerhardus Vos, *The Kingdom and the Church* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1958), 78.

12. Martin Luther, *Table Talk* (Gainesville, Fla.: Bridge-Logos, 2004), 255.

13. *Ibid.*, 253.

14. *Ibid.*

15. As quoted in Graham Miller, *Calvin’s Wisdom* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1992), 52.

16. Edmund Clowney, *The Church* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 1995), 159.

17. *Ibid.*, 160.

18. Cf. Paul Tripp, *Instruments in the Redeemer’s Hand: People in Need of Change Helping People in Need of Change* (Phillipsburg, N. J.: P&R, 2002).

19. “Frequently Asked Questions,” Mission to North America (PCA), accessed July 2008, www.pca-mna.org/churchplanting/faqs.php.

20. Michael Horton, “No Church, No Problem?” *Modern Reformation* 17, 4 (July/August 2008): 17.

21. Vos, *The Kingdom and the Church*, 84–85.

22. As quoted in Miller, *Calvin’s Wisdom*, 61.

23. Geerhardus Vos, *Grace and Glory* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1994), 90.

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

In this third article of the series analyzing the Hymn Proposal [HP], I will look at some of the hymns of the blue Psalter [PH] that have been drastically changed in the HP. The title of the cover page of the HP is: “The Hymn Proposal presented by The Psalter Hymnal Revision Committee of the United Reformed Churches of North America July 2010.” What follows is an examination of some of the major revisions proposed.

One song that has been completely rewritten is “Our Father, Clothed with Majesty.” Only about thirty-five of the original 400 words are the same in both the PH and the HP and/or appear in the same place within the same verse.

Compare verse 4:

1976 Blue Psalter Hymnal		HP#	URCNA Hymn Proposal
431	Thy will be done, Thy will alone, On earth below as round Thy throne. Thy precepts all are wise and true; Thy holy will we pray to do. May all, then, humbly stand in awe And gladly keep Thy perfect law.	211	O Father, may Your will be done on earth below, by everyone. May we deny our wilful way, and, with-out murm-uring, You obey. In all our duties, Lord, may we, like heaven's angels, faithful be.

In the following list, the title of the song is not given, only the page numbers. The list gives some of the lines where one theological/Biblical word has been changed for another. Please note that this is not nearly a comprehensive list of such changes within the HP.

1976 Blue Psalter Hymnal		HP#	URCNA Hymn Proposal
120	... Bless Our God	5	...Praise Our God
120	...tell His glorious praise	5	...tell His glorious works
388	Save from guilt	30	save from sin
415	Thy covenant kindness did of old	40	Your covenant blessing did of old
419	Thus saith the mercy of the Lord	42	This is the promise of the Lord
419	I'll bless thy numerous race and	42	I'll bless your children and to them
386	To Thee, O Lord , alone	88	To You, O Christ, alone
389	Thy grace alone, O God	96	Your voice alone O Lord
389	To me can pardon speak	96	can speak to me of grace
389	can this sore bondage break	96	can all my sin erase
334	My rest shall be serene	120	My peace shall be serene
350	Save in the death of Christ	141	save in the grace of Christ
360	Glory to the Three in One	143	Glory be to God on high
356	Following our exalted Head	144	Following our victorious Head
368	And take His servants up	162	to gather all His saints
365	He has vanquished sin and Satan	163	He has conquered sin and Satan

411	. . . thy trials to bless	177	. . . in trouble to bless
411	Upheld my My gracious . . . hand	177	upheld by My righteous . . . hand
470	my guide and stay can be	187	my guide and strength can be
470	Hold Thou Thy cross before	187	Hold now Your Word before
449	Loving and blessing those who hate	197	forgiving freely those who hate
481	of tender charity	225	of steadfast faith
36	All earth to Him her homage brings	252	All earth to Him her worship brings
370	. . . the trumpet's awful sound	256	. . . the trumpet's fearful sound
488	In glory that excel (2x)	271	His glorious deeds excel (2xs)

In the section below, the three columns [A B C] tally the approximate number of changes per song. It is sometimes difficult to categorize each change specifically, since often a phrase change becomes an actual sentence change due to the nature of songs and poetic writing. Below each column is the page number and title of the song; then the approximate number of changes per song per category. In brackets after each song is one example of each change, with the original words of the PH in italics and the words of the HP following the = sign. Comments and/or questions by the writer regarding some of the changes are in bold.

	A words	B phrases	C sentences
385 "Tis Not That I Did Choose Thee 95	A 39	B 4-7	C 4-7
There are about 100 words in the entire song; more than a third of them are changed			
B [<i>before Thee</i> =above You] C [<i>'Twas sovereign mercy called me</i> =Unless Your grace had called me]			
Why change <i>mercy</i> to <i>grace</i>? Is <i>grace</i> more biblical than <i>mercy</i>? Why eliminate this wonderful word: <i>sovereign</i>?			
432 I Greet Thee Who My Sure... 89	A 66	B 5-7	C 7-9
B [<i>upon Thy promise free</i> =on every promise, Lord] C [<i>Our hope is in no other save in Thee</i> =Our hope is founded on Your holy Word]			
The PH words put the emphasis on the fact that God is <i>our hope</i> . That is so true. The HP words declare that hope is founded on God's Word. That is also true. But why change the meaning and emphasis in the song?			
332 My Soul Doth Magnify the Lord 119	A 49	B 3-4	C 5-7
B [<i>to me</i> =for me] C [<i>And smote the rich with poverty</i> =but empty sent the rich away]			
334 Now May Thy Servant, Lord 120	A 50%		
This song has only two verses; the entire second verse has been changed; it is no longer recognizable.			
347 Thine Arm O Lord in Days of Old 130	A 50	B 6-7	C 5
B [<i>great Deliverer</i> =mighty healer] C [<i>Give wisdom's heavenly lore</i> =Your healing wisdom pour]			
The Bible clearly teaches that God is our <i>great Deliverer</i>. We know He is our Healer. But why must the Name <i>Deliverer</i> be eliminated? God often speaks of the fact that He saved His people with His <i>arm</i>; that is what we sing with the words of this PH song. But the HP uses the words Your hands. Why the substitution?			
474 Hours and Days and Years 75	A 113	B 6	C 10-14
B [<i>our fatherland</i> =everlasting peace] C [<i>Faithful will our God remain</i> =God our Father will remain]			
The PH words stress that our God remains <i>faithful</i>, which is so comforting to God's people. The HP words mean that God is eternal. That is true. But why is it necessary to take away the emphasis re God's faithfulness as per the PH song? Note: the third verse is completely rewritten, and most of the second and fourth verses.			

369 Hail, Thou Once Despised Jesus 159 A 63 B C 10

C [*Thou didst free salvation bring*=hope and joy and peace to bring]

Jesus did bring *free salvation* to us. What a wondrous fact, stressed by the PH words. So why change those words? Yes, Of course He did bring hope, joy and peace. They are included in His *free salvation*. Why delete *free salvation* in the song when God clearly teaches that concept?

464 Christian, Dost Thou See Them 215 A 6 B 5-7 C 8

C [*Christian, dost thou see them*=Christian do you struggle]

Note: all three stanzas begin with questions; the questions of the HP song are totally different from those in the PH.

481 O Perfect Love 225 A 55 B 4-6 C4-9

B [*O perfect Love*=O gracious Lord] C [*Lowly we kneel*=we humbly come]

471 Jerusalem the Golden 258 A 58 B 5-7 C5-7

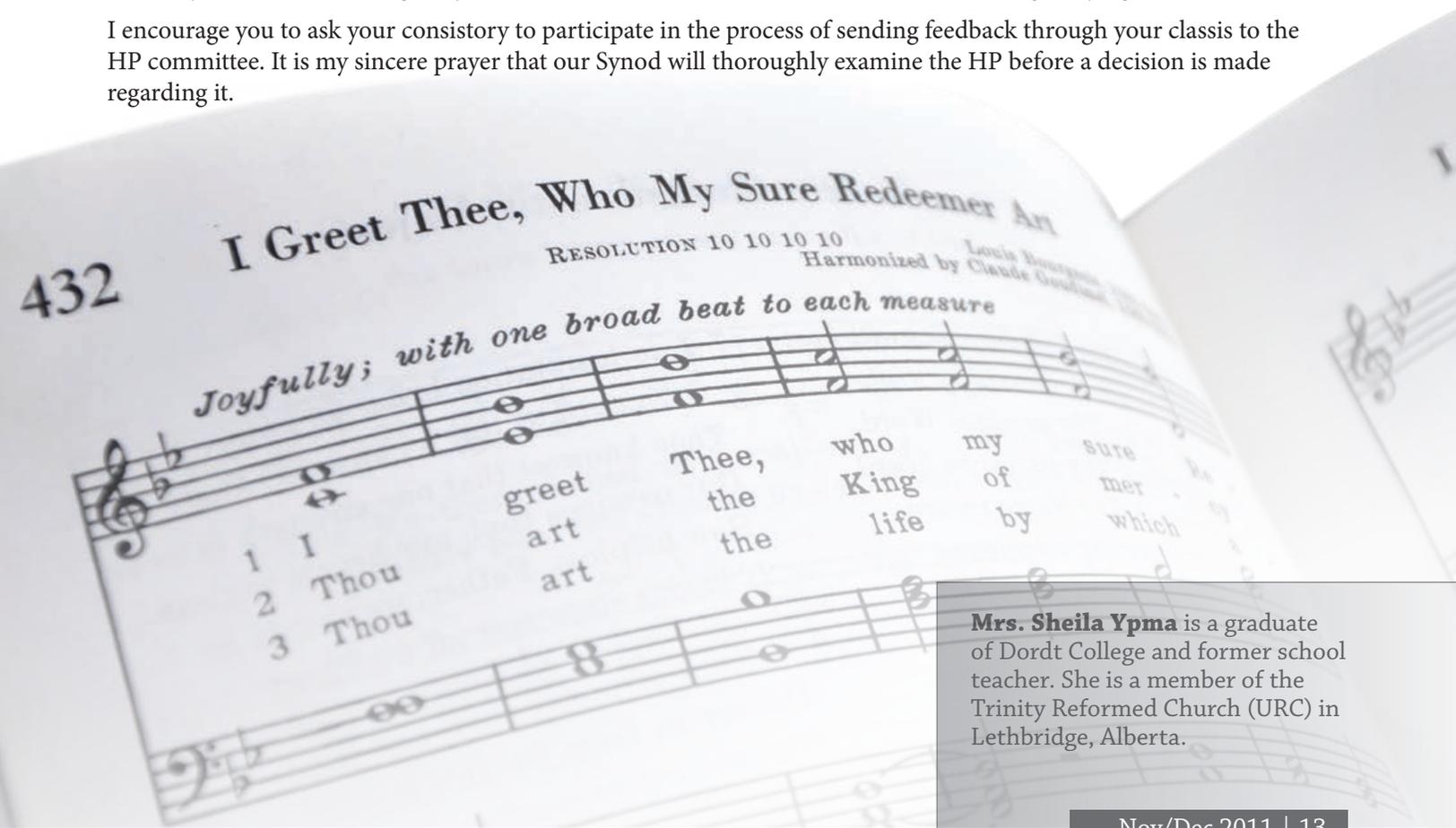
B [*The pastures of the blessed*=where tree of life and healing] C [*Who art, with God the Father and Spirit ever blest*=where Father, Son, and Spirit are worshiped evermore]

Many times the Bible speaks of the *pastures* where God feeds His people. That concept is contained in the PH song, but taken out in the HP. Nor does the HP call God's people *the blessed*. The Bible commands the people of God to bless the Lord. It also tells us to worship Him. Does the change of words in the HP song imply that it is better for God to be worshiped than to be *blest*?

I will end this article by asking some general questions:

When word and/or phrase and/or sentence changes are made, will those changes edify us when we will sing these songs? Were those changes made because the PH songs are not biblical and so require such significant changes? However, if the original words in the PH songs are indeed biblical and Reformed, should there be all these changes? Do the many and major changes within the HP, such as the changes presented in this article, make the HP far more biblically correct and theologically sound than the PH? Will the HP be much more God-glorifying than is the PH?

I encourage you to ask your consistory to participate in the process of sending feedback through your classis to the HP committee. It is my sincere prayer that our Synod will thoroughly examine the HP before a decision is made regarding it.



Mrs. Sheila Ypma is a graduate of Dordt College and former school teacher. She is a member of the Trinity Reformed Church (URC) in Lethbridge, Alberta.

Bible Studies on Romans

Lesson 3: Every Minister's Decree (2)

Romans 1:13–17

Rev. Wybren H.
Oord

TIn the last lesson we learned how Paul, like all ministers, desired the strengthening of the faith of his readers. In this lesson we read how Paul's desire was to preach the gospel to those who are in Rome.

Years ago, when I was at college, a professor who knew my theater background offered me an independent study on worship. He offered all kinds of ideas for alternate worship styles including opera, plays, and puppet shows. What he wanted was substitute methods for bringing the gospel that could replace the sermon.

While researching the paper, I became convinced of the necessity of preaching. It is through preaching that the Holy Spirit awakens the heart and mind to faith in Jesus Christ's sacrifice. No shortcuts, novelties, or gimmicks are necessary, nor were they ever employed by the Spirit. Neither were they ever used by Jesus in His ministry, nor by the prophets, apostles, or Paul. For the preacher to be faithful to his calling he must preach the gospel.

While defending my research, I was asked about psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs. Certainly they can be spiritually uplifting. I have yet to lead a worship service where a congregation mumbled through "It Is Well with My Soul." Such songs, however, only have an impact on the singer when they understand the gospel. An unbeliever attending the worship service cannot sing with any understanding: "My sin—O the bliss of this glorious thought!—My sin, not in part but the

whole, Is nailed to the cross and I bear it no more; Praise the Lord, praise the Lord, O my soul!" It has no meaning for him. That is not to say that God can not use other means to soften the heart, but, generally speaking, it is through the preaching of the gospel.

Preaching of the Gospel

Today preaching has fallen on hard times. Often what people want is simplified messages that easily degenerate into moralistic, self-help talks that cut out the heart of the gospel. True preaching is not several illustrations woven together, nor is it "warm fuzzies" delivered to a passive congregation.

In verse 17, Paul presents the key theme to his epistle—the gospel. It is a gospel of which he is unashamed. Paul had been imprisoned in Philippi, chased out of Thessalonica, smuggled out of Berea, stoned and left for dead in Lystra, and laughed at in Athens for proclaiming the good news of the resurrection. Jews abhorred the gospel because it subverted the law. Greeks despised it because it was considered foolish. Pagans branded Christians as atheists—something no Pharisee would ever have been able to tolerate. Yet, this was the Word Paul would never give up preaching. Paul was not intimidated by the religious leaders in Jerusalem or the influential pagans in Athens. How unfortunate that we are often ashamed of the gospel because we may face a little criticism or ridicule.

Through the Holy Spirit, the gospel does what no human reasoning can do. It demands of people that they face the reality of their sin and guilt and that they turn to the atoning

sacrifice of Jesus Christ to survive the judgment of God. While the justice of God demands that God not leave sin unpunished, the love of God could not leave the human race without a Savior. The heart of the gospel is the righteousness of God revealed in Jesus Christ. That righteousness is offered to all apart from the law and is obtained by faith. In all of Paul's writings, the righteousness of God is always a free gift from God consisting of the forgiveness of sins, accomplished by Christ, and received by faith.

Throughout the book of Romans faith-righteousness stands opposed to our works-righteousness. Because of our totally depraved nature, we cannot save ourselves. Isaiah points out that even our best works are like filthy rags and stained with sin (Isaiah 64:6). Never can we live up to the perfect obedience God requires of us. God, however, in His mercy and love, has clothed believers with the righteousness of His Son. Only by His righteousness can we be declared righteous. That righteousness is obtained by faith in the sacrifice made for sin by Jesus Christ, God's Son.

This is the message ministers are called to proclaim each Lord's Day. The worst insult a homiletics professor could ever give a student in his preaching class is, "That sermon could have been preached in a Jewish synagogue." Although, just as an aside, one minister I know reported that as he was shaking hands after the service, he once had a parishioner make no mention of the sermon. He just said, "That was a beautiful text you preached on, Dominee."

Power of the Gospel

The message proclaimed by Paul (and hopefully all preachers) is one of great power. It is not the power of weapons and warriors; it is the power of the Word. Words contain great power. The oft repeated phrase, “The pen is mightier than the sword,” is not spoken in vain. Occupied countries during World War II knew the meaning of the words, “Loose lips sink ships.” Many man-made words are spoken to try to help others feel better about themselves. All kinds of philosophies and lifestyles are promoted so that we no longer feel guilty about our besetting sin. Self-help books can be picked up at garage sales for a dime a dozen. Proverbs 18:4 says, “The words of a man’s mouth are deep waters, but the fountain of wisdom is a bubbling brook.” If human words can contain such weight, how much more the words of God!

Paul wrote that the gospel is the power of God. While it is brought by men who have many shortcomings, the word that is brought is effective to salvation. It is not an old-fashioned worldview that is now being replaced by humanism. The gospel brings about salvation through Jesus Christ. The gospel of Jesus Christ transforms a person from death to life, from darkness to light, from bondage to sin to the freedom of being a child of God.

Faith in the message requires a complete surrender to the means supplied by God for salvation. When God declares a sinner to be justified, it is not because God has found

something in the sinner that makes him right. It means God treats the sinner as if he had never sinned in the first place. Through faith, a person is restored to a right relationship with God.

Hearing of the Gospel

Paul freely offers the gospel to all who will hear him. First he lists the Greeks and the barbarians (v. 14), then the Jews and the Gentiles (v. 16). For the Greeks, there were only two kinds of people in the world—Greeks and everybody else. Likewise, for the Jews, there were only two kinds of people in the world—Jews and Gentiles. That they could come together where the gospel was being proclaimed illustrates that for God there are only two kinds of people, as well—the saved and the lost.

In Paul’s day the majority of Jews hated the message of the gospel. Paul taught a way that was the exact opposite of their self-righteous salvation. The Jewish leaders wanted people to bear the burden of their own sins and gain salvation through obedience to the law and their good works.

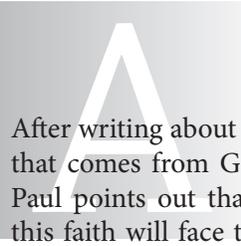
Paul offered salvation through the grace of God by trusting that Jesus of Nazareth was God’s Son who came to bear the burden of their sin. You can imagine the anger this must have raised in the camp of the Pharisees and scribes. If the people would turn away from a religion of works to a religion of grace it would mean the end of their religious tyranny over the people.

On the other hand, the Gentiles also hated the gospel. Brought up in a polytheistic culture, they could not understand how Christians could claim that there was only one God. Paul points out how foolish the gospel sounds to the world in 1 Corinthians 1:21–25.

Yet it is to both Jews and Gentiles that the gospel must be preached, because it is the only way to be reconciled to the one true God. It was to the Jews first because they had been entrusted with the oracles of God. To them belonged the heritage, the glory, the covenants, the law, and the promises (Romans 9:4, 5). It was also for the Gentiles. The gospel does not discriminate between Jews and Gentiles; both must be reconciled to God in the same way—through Jesus Christ.

Despite the fact that the news of their faith had spread throughout the land, the Christians in Rome needed further instruction in the gospel if they wanted to strengthen their faith. Believers must hear the gospel again and again because we are prone to stumble and fall. Although we would never claim to be self-righteousness, we often pride ourselves in our conduct and our keeping of the law rather than boasting in Jesus Christ. The gospel has the power to do what we cannot do—save us. That is why it is such good news! That is why we should never be ashamed of the gospel. It is about our salvation. We must hear again and again that our salvation rests in Christ alone so that we can find joy and comfort in the fact that through Christ alone it is well with our souls.

1. Is preaching the only way in which the gospel brings people to the knowledge of salvation?
2. Why might Paul have been ashamed of the gospel? Are you ever ashamed of it?
3. To whom does Paul feel obligated to preach the gospel?
4. Is all preaching true preaching? Must all preaching be Christ-centered?
5. What is the gospel?
6. Why is gospel preaching so important? Who is it for? Why?
7. Why should Christians continue to place themselves under the preaching of the gospel?
8. Comment on the following statements:
 - a. It is difficult for me to talk to others about my faith. I am afraid that, if I talk about Jesus to my neighbors, they will look down on me.
 - b. I don't like to talk about the sermon after church because people will think I'm trying to be pious.
 - c. I know the gospel already. I don't have to go to church any more.



After writing about the righteousness that comes from God through faith, Paul points out that those who lack this faith will face the wrath of God. Many people today are inclined to downplay the wrath of God and speak only of His love. They claim that the wrath of God is an Old Testament idea that no longer applies since Christ has come. Paul makes very clear in these verses that to ignore the wrath of God is to misrepresent the justice of the sovereign Lord. Sin is antithetical to God's nature. So strong are His love toward the human race and His anger toward our sin that, rather than leave it unpunished, He poured out His wrath on His Son, Jesus Christ. How can His wrath not kindle against those who reject His salvation? There would be no explanation for the gospel if there were no wrath against sin.

General Revelation

God has made Himself known. Paul makes very clear that “what may be known about God is plain . . . because God has made it plain” (v.19). All people everywhere live in God's world. He created it. Creation shouts out about God. I have lived in many parts of this continent from Louisiana to New Jersey; from Michigan to Alberta. I have backpacked through Europe. Everything God made points to Him. Indeed the Psalmist was correct when he wrote: “The heavens declare the glory of God; the skies proclaim the work of His hands” (Psalms 19:1). John Calvin wrote that the hand of God in creation is very visible when a person wears the spectacles of faith.

Unfortunately, mankind chose to remove those spectacles in the garden by eating from the forbidden tree. Left to himself, no longer can man discern the presence of God in creation. I once heard the illustration that if God would arrange the stars so that they wrote out “I AM,” Christian churches would be filled for a time. Eventually, people would become so used to God's revelation of Himself in the skies that they would no longer be in awe of His revelation or of Him. Church attendance would dwindle and people would return to pursuing their own natural desires. The simple truth is God has left His imprint on the stars, and the human race refuses to see it because we love the darkness rather than the light.

Not only does God reveal Himself in nature, but He also makes Himself known through history. In man's history we often focus only on wars, conquests, world leaders, and politics. God's history reads between the lines and tells us that, in spite of man's history, all things work together for the good of those who love the Lord. In our own lives we can see how God takes events that seem insignificant and uses them for His glory. We see how God averts all evil from us or turns it to our profit.

In addition, God reveals Himself in science. Many today want to argue that science and religion are in conflict with one another. They are not. We need to differentiate between science and speculation. Unfortunately, in an effort to stay respectable in a world that considers itself wise, self-

acclaimed scientists often refuse to acknowledge the handiwork of God in spite of their findings. Several years ago scientist determined that the Sahara Desert was once completely under water. This is something that the children of God have known since the days of Noah. Yet, even as we can rejoice in the fact that once more general revelation confirmed the truth of God's Word, the article concluded with the scientists/archeologists emphatically stating that they did not believe their finding was at all related to the great deluge. Even in their emphatic denial of a global flood, they prove the truth of the Scripture they seek to suppress.

Finally, God reveals Himself through our consciences. We know the law. It is written on our hearts. We know right from wrong. If I would walk into our church's nursery with a hammer and bludgeon a three-month-old baby to death, what court would not convict me of murder? And rightly so! Yet there are all kinds of laws to protect a doctor who would have torn that same child apart limb from limb four months earlier. To my knowledge, no politician has ever been elected that spoke positively about abortion. Rather, they want to limit abortion; they want to maintain a woman's right to choose whether or not to have an abortion. They know it's wrong. Yet they suppress that truth in favor of personal gain and personal comfort.

Man's Condition

Through general revelation the human race can know God. I believe every human being comes to a point

in life where he is confronted with God and with the purpose of life. The very fact that existentialists claim that there is no purpose to life indicates that they have considered what that purpose might be. The false gods of the Old Testament and the idolatry of today prove that there is a vacuum within the heart of man that longs to be filled and, as Augustine said, can only be filled by God.

Left to themselves, however, people refuse to acknowledge or worship God. The problem is not with God or with a lack of evidence that points to God. What may be known about God has been made plain since the creation of the world.

Recently, I was chatting with a young Christian who was pursuing his master's degree in philosophy. The head of the philosophy department was a humanist. The young man challenged the professor's presuppositions for his humanistic view of life. After being shown how the logic of his worldview failed, the professor retorted, "I don't believe in God because I don't want there to be a God."

The humanist professor is a prime example of Romans 1. There Paul describes man's exchange of God's truth for the foolishness of the world. God reveals His existence and eternal power in general revelation. Rather than seek God and hold ourselves accountable to Him, natural man, in sin, does not glorify Him. Instead we glorify ourselves, and, if we feel the need to worship something, we build

gods in our own image (Psalm 115). We fail to acknowledge that every good gift comes from God. In failing to give thanks to God, we boast in our own accomplishments and become filled with futile thinking. Like Nebuchadnezzar, we look over our self-made kingdoms and exclaim, "Is this not the great Babylon I have built?" (Daniel 4:30). As with the king, so it is with us. We blind ourselves to the benefits of God and, although we profess to be wise, we become fools. Since we have rejected God, God gives us over to our own sinful desires until we are no better—and perhaps worse—than the beasts that do not bear His image.

Broken Relationships

Having been turned over by God to their own desires, natural man creates gods of his own image—gods that permit him to be free of any moral restraint. Paul lists idolatry and homosexuality as evidence of God's wrath being poured out on those who fail to revere His Name. These two gross sins point us directly to the law of God. Having abandoned God, natural man also rejects His law, resulting in broken relationships between man and God and man and his neighbor.

Too often when reading this passage in Romans, we focus on homosexuality to the point where idolatry is forgotten. We must, however, not ignore the relationship we have with God. One of the great battles fought during the Reformation was the cleansing of the church of all its icons and false worship. According to the Heidelberg Catechism we must



avoid and shun all idolatry, lest we endanger our very salvation (LD 34 Q&A 94). And yet, we often fill our homes and churches with images and pictures of God. We add to our worship services that which God has not commanded. The only permissible images we are to bring into worship are the water of baptism and the bread and wine of Communion. They are the signs instituted by Christ for worship. Anything else becomes idolatry.

Ministers should understand that one of the worst sins against the third commandment is a bad sermon. Worshippers should understand that the third commandment is most often violated during worship. If you doubt that statement, ask someone in the narthex after the service what songs they had just sung. Were they sung in praise to God or did they just mumble the words and thereby misuse the name of God? A broken relationship with God is part of the downward spiral of the natural man.

Broken relationships between man and his neighbor begin when the

natural man places his own desires ahead of others. No longer loving his neighbor as he loves himself, he pursues unnatural relationships. Among those relationships, Paul speaks very clearly against homosexuality. Paul would not have fit in with today's new religion of tolerance. He speaks out boldly against the sin of homosexuality in 1 Corinthians 6:9–10 and 1 Timothy 1:9–11. His most devastating argument against it is found in Romans 1.

So severe is the exchange of God's truth for a lie, that many try to use the very words of Paul against him in an effort to have the church condone the sin of homosexuality. The wisdom of the world argues that a homosexual lifestyle should be permitted because some people are born with a mental predisposition toward it. They claim it is genetic. Paul would argue that everyone has an evil predisposition for sin: "There is no one who does good, not even one" (Romans 3:12). Moses wrote already in Genesis 6 that the heart of man is only evil all the time. Sin is genetic. We inherited it from Adam after the fall—but that does not excuse it. That is the very

reason why we need to fight against the old nature. All it does is lead us further and further into sin—inexcusable sin! Romans 1 makes very clear that homosexuality is sin because it violates God's design for sexual intimacy between husband and wife.

Paul's epistle to the Romans points out that sin can be forgiven in Christ. He died to save His people from their sin—all sin. Those who suppress that truth and turn away from God's one method of salvation will be without excuse. He will pour out His wrath on them regardless of what the foolish wisdom of the world may teach. Those, however, who come to God through Christ will be forgiven. The gospel of Christ is able to deliver sinners out of a lifestyle of idolatry and sexual impurity of any kind and restore the elect to a proper relationship with God and with one another.

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

Points to Ponder and Discuss

1. Do many Christians oppose the idea of the wrath of God? How would you respond to them?
2. Against whom does God reveal His wrath?
3. What is the difference between "ungodliness" and "wickedness"?
4. How does God make Himself known through general revelation? Give examples.
5. List and describe the stages of man's rejection of God's truth and its consequences.
6. What common excuses do people have today to avoid God and religion? Does the church often allow for these excuses?
7. What sins have become "respectable" even within the church today?
8. Is an unbeliever to be pitied for his ignorance or condemned for his sin? Explain.

The Athanasian Creed is named after the great champion of Nicene orthodoxy, Athanasius (AD 293–373). In the previous article on the Nicene Creed we mentioned the contribution of Athanasius and his defense of the Trinity against Arius.¹ But Athanasius did not write this creed and in fact it deals with controversies that arose and were settled long after his death. Another name for this creed is *Symbol Quicumque*. This name comes from the opening words of the creed: “*Quicumque vult salvus esse*” (“Whosoever will be saved”). It dates not later than the sixth century and its origins are unclear.

In contrast to its history, the content of the confession is wonderfully clear. Structurally the creed is composed of forty-four carefully formulated articles that can be divided into two sections, the first dealing with the One-God-in-three-persons (Trinity), and the second, with the person of Christ.

The Holy Trinity

Articles 3–28 set forth the orthodox confession of the Holy Trinity. Both the Apostles’ and the Nicene creeds leave undefined the interrelations between the three persons of the Godhead. The Athanasian Creed, drawing on the theology of Saint Augustine, defines for us more precisely the absolute unity of the Divine Being and the tri-personality of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. It excludes any attempt to subordinate the Son to the Father, and the Holy Spirit to both (subordinationism), by affirming the full equality of all three persons:

(6) But the Godhead of the Father, of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit is all one, the glory equal, the majesty co-eternal.

(10) The Father eternal, the Son eternal, and the Holy Spirit eternal.

(11) And yet there are not three eternals, but one eternal.

(15) So the Father is God, the Son is God, and the Holy Spirit is God;

(16) And yet they are not three Gods, but one God.

(19) For like as we are compelled by the Christian verity to acknowledge every person by himself to be God and Lord;

(20) So are we forbidden by the catholic religion to say: There are three Gods or three Lords.

God is one God in three persons, and each person expresses the fullness of the Godhead and possesses all the divine attributes. The term *persona* does not mean manifestation, nor does it mean independent, separate being or individual. These views would lead either to the heresies of Sabellianism or tritheism.² Philip Schaff describes the interrelations of the three persons of God as confessed in the creed beautifully when he says: “The divine persons are in one another, and form a perpetual intercommunication and motion within the divine essence. Each person has all the divine attributes that are inherent in the divine essence, but each also has a characteristic individuality or property that is peculiar to the person and cannot be communicated; the Father is unbegotten, the Son begotten, the Holy Ghost is proceeding. In this Trinity there is no priority or posteriority of time, no superiority or inferiority of rank, but the three persons are co-eternal and coequal.”³

The truth just stated is far greater than

we can ever comprehend or adequately express in words. Augustine articulated this human insufficiency well: “God is greater and truer in our thoughts than in our words; he is greater and truer in reality than in our thoughts.”⁴

The Person of Christ

The second part of the creed (Article 29–44) succinctly formulates the orthodox doctrine concerning the relationship between the humanity and divinity of Jesus. Without hesitation, the creed affirms that in the incarnation there was a union of two distinctly different natures, the divine and the human, each complete in itself, without either losing its identity. It says:

(30) For the right faith is that we believe and confess that our Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God, is God and man.

(31) God of the substance of the Father, begotten before the worlds; and man of the substance of His mother, born in the world.

(32) Perfect God and perfect man, of a reasonable soul and human flesh subsisting.

(33) Equal to the Father as touching His Godhead, and inferior to the Father as touching His manhood.

(34) Who, although he is God and man, yet He is not two, but one Christ.

(35) One, not by conversion of the Godhead into flesh, but by taking of the manhood into God.

(36) One altogether, not by confusion of substance, but by unity of person.

(37) For as the reasonable soul and flesh is one man, so God and man is one Christ;

The human nature and the divine nature are combined, and yet Jesus still is only one person. The difference between the two natures is maintained, while at the same time the creed affirms the single personhood of Jesus Christ. In this way all the old heresies about Christ are beautifully denied:

The creed thus repudiates the teaching that Christ had but one nature (Sabellianism), or that the human nature was incomplete (Apollinarianism), or that the divine nature was inferior to that of the Father (Arianism), or that in the union of the two natures, the identity of the one was lost so that the result was simply one nature (Eutychianism).⁵

And to this we can add that the heresy that separated the two natures of Christ and denied their unity in the one person, called by the church Nestorianism, is also denied.

Conclusion

So we see that this creed with clarity and forcefulness sets forth the biblical teaching that the church has confessed concerning the Trinity and the incarnation. These doctrines are not peripheral to the Christian faith but at the heart of our faith. If they were to be denied or tampered with, then our salvation would truly be in peril. It is from this perspective that the controversial damnatory clauses at the beginning and the end of the two sections must be understood (cf. Articles 1–2, 28, 44). The intent of these statements is not that one must understand all the theological details to be saved or that one must express himself only in the language of the creed. But as J. F. Johnson explains: “What was intended is the fact that the Christian faith is distinctly Christocentric, trusting Christ as Savior. The church knows no other way of salvation and therefore must reject all teachings which deny his true deity or his real incarnation.”⁶

1. See John Piper, *Contending for our All, 2006:35-75 (Crossway)* for a brief biography of Athanasius and his struggle for the faith.

2. Sabellianism, also known as modalism, said that Father, Son and Holy Spirit were but three different names, faces or modes of the one God that revealed himself successively first as Father, then as Son and finally as Holy Spirit. Thus they deny the three persons of the Godhead. Tritheism denies the unity of God and says that we have three gods, the Father and Son and Holy Spirit. Each one is unique and distinct.

3. *The Creeds of Christendom*. Vol. 1: *The History of Creeds*. Baker: 1998:38.

4. Quoted in Philip Schaff, *The Creeds of Christendom*. Vol. 1: *The History of Creeds*. Baker: 1998:38.

5. J.F. Johnson. *Athanasian Creed*. In *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, Ed. by Walter A. Elwell. Baker, 1984: 94.

6. *Athanasian Creed*. In *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, Ed. by Walter A. Elwell. Baker, 1984: 94.

Rev. Jacques Roets is the pastor of Redeemer United Reformed Church in Dyer, Indiana.

Bavinck the Dogmatician: The Doctrine of the Image of God

Dr. Cornelis P.
Venema

To complete our exposition of Bavinck’s treatment of the doctrine of creation, we need to consider his understanding of the doctrine of the image of God. In our earlier consideration of his doctrine of the covenant, we observed that Bavinck views the relationship between the triune God and human beings, whether before the fall or subsequent to the fall, to be a thoroughly covenantal relationship.

The “destiny” of human life according to God’s purpose and design is the blessedness of life communion with the living God in a state of glory. However, before Bavinck describes the nature of the covenant relationship between God and Adam, the covenant representative and organic head of the entire human race, he addresses in two chapters the topic of human origins (chapter 11) and human nature in the image of God (chapter 12).

It is evident from the way Bavinck orders his treatment of the doctrine of the creation of man as an image-bearer of God that he wishes to underscore the uniqueness of human beings among all God’s creatures, and that he views the creation of man in God’s image as indispensable to the realization of his destiny in covenant with God.

Human Origins

Though we have had occasion already to summarize Bavinck's interpretation of the biblical account of creation in Genesis 1, in his chapter on human origins Bavinck revisits the subject of evolution, especially in respect to the biblical understanding of the origin and unity of the human race. In his treatment of the subject of human origins, Bavinck offers an extensive critique of Darwinian evolutionism, which he maintains is incompatible with the biblical view in a number of important respects.

In the biblical account of creation, the creative work of God culminates on the sixth day of the work-week of creation with the creation of man in God's image (RD 2:511). While the description of God's creation of all living creatures in Genesis 1 suggests an appropriate "kinship" between the animal and human kingdoms (both owe their existence and life to God and exhibit his handiwork), the creation of humanity occurs as a final act that completes the creation, and is portrayed as the result of a special deliberation and intention on God's part (Gen. 1:26, "let us make man . . ."). The culminating and climactic character of God's creation of man in his own image is underscored not only by the sequence that represents the creation of humanity as the ultimate of God's creative acts, but also by the further account of man's creation in Genesis 2. For Bavinck, the account of the creation of man in God's image in Genesis 2 is not a second, alternative account of the creation of man, but a further elaboration of the distinctiveness of human beings among all God's creatures as image-bearers of God, both as male and female. Whereas in Genesis 1 man is represented as the "end of nature," in Genesis 2 man is represented as the "beginning of history" (RD 2:512). What we find in the account in Genesis 2 is a more elaborate description of the distinctiveness of man as the image

of God, and of the divine purpose to create man as male and female.

Creation or Evolution

After his brief summary of the special creation of man in the image of God, and as male and female, Bavinck observes that the divine origin of humankind has "never been questioned in the Christian church and in Christian theology" (RD 2:512). However, outside of the realm of special revelation, many "conjectures" concerning human origins have been proposed in pagan religions and philosophies. In recent history, the emergence of Darwinian evolutionism has wrested the biblical understanding of human origins from its foundations in Christian theism. The approach to human origins within Darwinian evolutionism has grown out of the soil of a "pantheistic or materialistic system" (RD 2:513). Rather than viewing human origins within the framework of a theistic worldview, which acknowledges God's special creation of man within his sovereign purposes, evolutionary naturalism views man as the product of a purposeless and mechanistic process wherein higher life forms emerge from lower life forms over the course of vast periods of time.

Now then, by Darwinism we must understand the theory that the various species into which organic entities used to be divided possess no constant properties, but are mutable; that the higher organic beings have evolved from the lower, and that man in particular has gradually evolved, in the course of centuries, from an extinct genus of apes; that the organic, in turn, emerged from the inorganic; and that evolution is therefore the way in which under the sway of purely mechanical and chemical laws, the present world has come into being. That's the thesis, or rather, the hypothesis. (RD 2:514).

Although Bavinck acknowledges that there are a variety of expressions of Darwinian evolutionism, some of which are more seriously in error than others, he offers a sustained critique of the "hypothesis" of the evolutionary origins of the human race. This hypothesis is not only in conflict with crucial features of the biblical understanding of human origins, but it is also unsustainable in the face of several arguments that can be registered against it.

First, the emergence of life at some point in the course of evolutionary history remains completely unexplained and unexplainable. How an inanimate and material world could spontaneously give birth to an animate creature continues to bewilder those scientists who hazard to explain it. Some scientists simply posit the co-existence of organic life forms from the beginning. Others, who subscribe to some form of "vitalist" philosophy, assert the eternal existence of life forms that presumably become more complex over vast periods of time. But the emergence of life within the framework of an evolutionary and materialistic worldview remains a riddle without solution (RD 2:517).

Second, Bavinck observes that the differences in form and physiology between different kinds of species are too great to suggest that transitions between them may occur in evolutionary history. These differences of kind between species are the fruit of God's wise omnipotence, and reflect something of the diversity and complexity of God himself. They cannot be reduced to one original kind of living being. Nor has the evolutionary hypothesis been confirmed by any known or observed transition from one species of animal or plant to another. Furthermore, the kinds of changes within species that are alleged to have produced new species are so slight as to provide no real advantage in the survival of the species (the principle of "natural

selection”)(RD 2:518). The mechanism usually offered as an explanation for the emergence of higher forms of life, namely, “natural selection” or the “survival of the fittest,” does not explain the diversity and complexity of life forms. It simply acknowledges that such diversity exists.

Third, no evidence actually exists to prove the origin of humanity from animal ancestry. The so-called evidence for the origin of human life from animal ancestry largely depends on the assumption that the mechanism of natural selection has over time produced the human species as a higher, more complex form of life. The theory of evolution is based on “piecing” the evidence of the fossil record together, on the assumption that human beings must have emerged from early, animal ancestry (RD 2.519).

And fourth, Bavinck maintains that evolutionary naturalism is incapable of explaining the emergence of humanness in “its psychic dimension” (RD 2.519). It strains credulity to insist that human intelligence (the “mind”) is the product of brute and unintelligent matter. “Like the essence of energy and matter, the origin of movement, the origination of life, and teleology, so also human consciousness, language, freedom of the will, religion, and morality still belong to the enigmas of the world that await resolution” (RD 2:519).

On the basis of these kinds of arguments, Bavinck concludes that the theory of animal ancestry for human life, which is an integral feature of evolutionary naturalism, is indemonstrable and untenable. The worldview that this theory expresses is hostile to the biblical worldview, which views human beings as image bearers of God. In the biblical worldview, human beings are exalted to a special place of importance in God’s work of creation and redemption. In the worldview of naturalism and materialism, human

beings are debased and degraded. “The theory of the animal ancestry of humans violates the image of God in man and degrades the human into an image of the orangutan and chimpanzee” (RD 2:520).

In the remainder of his chapter on human origins, Bavinck also considers three features of the doctrine of evolution that are at odds with the scriptural doctrine of human origins: the age of humanity, the unity of the human race, and the original abode of humanity. In the estimation of scientists contemporary with Bavinck, some form of life has existed on the earth for at least 300 million years. Even though these scientists acknowledge that human life is much less remote in time, they generally suggest that human life emerged in some form many thousands of years before the coming of Christ. In his evaluation of these claims about the age of humanity, Bavinck argues that they are based on uncertain and conflicting scientific theories, and appear unlikely from the standpoint of biblical and other historical data.

The claim of some evolutionary scientists that the human race may have emerged in a diversity of times and places is also at odds with the testimony of Scripture. The Bible teaches that the whole race stems from one original pair of progenitors, Adam and Eve, and the organic unity of the human race is an integral feature of biblical revelation. As Bavinck remarks,

It [that is, the unity of the human race] is, finally, not a matter of indifference, as is sometimes claimed, but on the contrary of the utmost importance: it is the presupposition of religion and morality. The solidarity of the human race, original sin, the atonement in Christ, the universality of the kingdom of God, the catholicity of the church, and the love of neighbor—these

all are grounded in the unity of humankind. (RD 2:526)

On the question of the precise location of the original abode of human beings, Bavinck offers a brief survey of the speculation on the matter among anthropologists of his day. On this question, as with the questions of the age of humanity and the unity of the human race, there is nothing that Christian theology teaches on the basis of Scripture that is at odds with the assured findings of science.

Though Bavinck’s treatment of the subject of human origins often reflects the state of the discussion and scientific theories of his own day, it remains a good model for contemporary discussion. In recent years, even within the circle of confessionally Reformed churches in North America, some theologians and scientists have argued that the human race must have originated from animal ancestry. Similarly, it is argued that the biblical progenitors of the human race, Adam and Eve, are merely “literary figures” in the biblical story of redemption. In the opinion of these theologians and scientists, it is no longer possible to maintain the Scriptural teachings of the special creation of man from the dust of the earth, the organic and biological unity of the human race, and the representative role of Adam as the appointed covenant head of the entire human race. These challenges to biblical teaching illustrate how, just as in Bavinck’s day, theologians in the Reformed churches continue to be obliged to defend the biblical view of human origins against serious and fundamental attacks on biblical doctrine.

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

Editor's note: This is the third part of a three-part article. RFI plans to make the entire article available in booklet form.

Recasting the Doctrine of Justification

The Reformation doctrine of justification states that God declares us righteous (justified) through faith alone, only on account of what Christ has done, and by grace alone. However, many FV advocates do not appear to be content with this formulation or they revise the terms to mean something other than how they have traditionally been understood. They feel compelled to add (as the FV Joint Statement does) that faith is never alone in justification and that it must be a “living, active, and personally loyal faith.”

Norman Shepherd is widely acknowledged as an influential figure in FV circles. On the one hand, he affirms justification by faith alone. But he also insists that good works are necessary for justification. This is thesis 23 of his “Thirty-Four Theses on Justification in Relation to Faith, Repentance and Good Works”:

Because faith which is not obedient faith is dead faith, and because repentance is necessary for the pardon of sin included in justification, and because abiding in Christ by keeping his commandments (John 15:5; 10; 1 John 3:13; 24) are all necessary for continuing in the state of justification, good works, works done from true faith, according to the law of God, and for his glory, being the new obedience wrought by the Holy Spirit in the life of the believer united to Christ, though not the ground of

his justification, are nevertheless necessary for salvation from eternal condemnation and therefore for justification (Rom. 6:16, 22; Gal. 6:7–9).³⁵

It is not clear why Shepherd felt compelled to include obedience as necessary for justification. Neither is it clear why he would not be satisfied with traditional correlations between justification and sanctification.

In other places, Shepherd has affirmed justification by faith alone but then proceeds to redefine “faith.”³⁶ Obedience is subsumed under the essence of faith. Traditionally understood as resting, trusting, and receiving, faith becomes *faithfulness* in Shepherd's doctrine of justification. With this reworking of the terminology, works are smuggled in the back door as part of the instrument of justification.

Similarly, Rich Lusk has written of multiple instruments in justification, including referring to faith and works as co-instrumental. Like Shepherd, he alleged that Paul and James were referring to the same thing when speaking of justification. He also confused the justification of believers through faith alone in Christ alone with the vindication of believers at the last day. Using those two category mistakes he argues that “*in some way* works are instrumental in justification as well as faith.”³⁷



The Westminster Confession (14.2) rightly says that trust (“accepting, receiving, and resting”) is the principal act of saving faith. When investigated by his presbytery, Jeff Meyers was asked whether he believed trust to include personal loyalty. He affirmed this, saying that personal loyalty draws out the “trust” contained in classical Reformed definitions of faith.³⁸ According to Meyers, personal loyalty (a human work) is therefore an essential part of the faith that justifies.

This injection of loyalty into the definition of faith is also found with Peter Leithart. After affirming that faith is indeed trust, Leithart goes on in *The Baptized Body* to say that it also includes entrustment and allegiance. Then we read this: “Faith is keeping

the notion of good works as part of its definition or essence. Likewise, with the Heidelberg Catechism in Lord’s Day 23, we confess that we can be justified “by faith only.” Lord’s Day 7 shows us what that justifying faith looks like in its essence, following the classic trio of understanding, assent, and trust. One will search in vain in the Catechism for the inclusion of works in any way with respect to the doctrine of justification.

To be sure, both the Belgic Confession and Heidelberg Catechism teach that faith will and must bear fruit. However, they do not include that fact in their formulation of the doctrine of justification. It does not belong there. It is one thing to speak about works as necessary evidences of the

only through that of Christ.”⁴¹

In a sermon on Lord’s Day 7, Clarence Stam identified faith’s activities as consisting of sure knowledge and firm confidence.⁴² When preaching on Lord’s Day 23, Stam rightly drew attention to the receptive character of faith in justification.⁴³ J. Van Bruggen likewise excluded human works from the essence of justifying faith: “Faith is not an achievement on our part in consequence of which we become entitled to God’s favour. There is nothing meritorious about faith.”⁴⁴ In his commentary on Belgic Confession article 22, Van Bruggen explicitly rejected the notion of including works in the definition of faith. He noted that Luther was correct for using the word “alone” in his translation of Romans 3:28. Then he went on:

We hold on to this word in contrast to the Roman Catholic notion that not faith alone but “faith formed through love” justifies. This faith formed through love (*fides informis* and *fides formata*) is faith *plus* its works and *this* justifies us. The Roman Catholics have their own ideas of what faith is. They use the same word as Scripture but mean something entirely different by it. For them “faith” only expresses an intellectual knowledge. It is no more than an initial act that only brings you as far as the threshold. In order to have true communion with Christ this “faith” must proceed to action. The bare tree of “faith” must be decorated with “our”(!) good works. Luther rightly called this error a hellish poison. There is no such thing as “*fides informis*.” This too is a scholastic fabrication. In this manner the basis for acquittal is again sought in our works.⁴⁵

Van Bruggen went on to point out that true faith always results in good works, but the two are nevertheless to

The Belgic Confession insists in article 22 (with Romans 3:28) that “we are justified by faith alone, or by faith apart from works of law.” There is no mention whatsoever of faith including the notion of good works as part of its definition or essence.

faith, being loyal to the troth that is pledged in our marriage to the Son.”³⁹ According to Leithart, in its essence faith is not only *believing*, but also *acting*.⁴⁰ In other words, human actions, what Paul calls “works of the law,” are included in justifying faith.

Lusk, Shepherd, Meyers, Leithart, and other FV writers are, at the very least, ambiguous and confusing on the doctrine of justification. It certainly appears as if they are reworking this doctrine. Doing this, of course, does have a lengthy pedigree in broader Christian theology (think: Roman Catholicism). However, it is an innovation in confessionally Reformed theology.

The Belgic Confession insists in article 22 (with Romans 3:28) that “we are justified by faith alone, or by faith apart from works of law.” There is no mention whatsoever of faith including

faith that justifies—it is quite another to describe works in some way as being instrumental in justification. The Reformed teaching is that the instrument is faith alone apart from works of law.

On this point too, we should compare how the FV measures up to what was taught by Klaas Schilder and others from the Liberated tradition. In his lecture notes on articles 22 and 23 of the Belgic Confession, Schilder discussed the instrument of justification. He noted that the only instrument was faith. He did not include works. In fact, he mentioned good works in this context only in a negative sense. He wrote, “People have to do it for themselves—so said the Pharisees. They taught that justification comes through one’s law-keeping. But we hold fast to the evangelical position: it does not happen through my law-keeping, but

be distinguished. Justification by faith alone rules out human effort.

Unfortunately, it has to be admitted that there has not always been clarity in the Liberated heritage on this key doctrine. In a sermon on Lord's Day 7, Benne Holwerda affirmed the classic Reformed understanding of justifying faith. He maintained that true faith is "an acceptance of God, just as he speaks in his Word; it is to say, 'Your Word is the truth.'"⁴⁶ Earlier in the same sermon, Holwerda insisted that faith and what faith grants are both *gifts* of God. He proclaimed, "It is given: it is not from me; not out of works, so that no one boasts."⁴⁷ Regrettably, in another sermon on Lord's Day 23, Holwerda woefully confuses matters. He argued that God's justification is not a one-time declaration, but an ongoing process in the covenant. At the very least there is ambiguity here:

Does God speak one time, and I believe then one time, and is justification then completed? Oh no! We live in the covenant with God and that is a living relationship (*verkeer*); as I believe, then God comes again with his word of acquittal to the people, who now believe, and drives him so to works of thankfulness: justification by faith. And as he does this, then God appears again and declares him truly acquitted, he justifies him then also through works, says James.⁴⁸

Sadly, this does sound similar to what Norman Shepherd would say many years later. It also sounds akin to what Luther called a "hellish poison." It is regrettable that Holwerda did not appear to believe that Paul and James were speaking of justification in two different senses. Paul was speaking of justification in the sense of righteousness in God's courtroom. James was speaking of it in terms of vindication before the watching world.

Unfortunately, there remains confusion, also in our Reformed churches, on the role of good works in the Christian life. Some of this confusion can be traced to difficulty in understanding the difference between justification and sanctification. Justification is God's declaration that we are right with him. Let me say it again: our good works have *absolutely no place* in our justification. As already mentioned above, justification is by faith alone (resting and trusting in Christ; receiving Christ's merits) apart from works of law. What we do cannot contribute *one iota* to our righteous standing before God—it is all of Christ. The nature of faith's activity in justification as resting, trusting, and receiving underlines that fact.

When the apostle Paul taught this doctrine, he anticipated an objection: "What shall we say, then? Shall we go on sinning, so that grace may increase?" (Rom. 6:1). Whenever the gospel of free grace is truly proclaimed, this objection can be expected. D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, a well-known defender of the Reformed doctrine of justification, once said, "If no one ever comes to you after you preach the gospel and asks, 'So should we sin that grace may abound?' you have probably never preached the gospel."⁴⁹ Paul's answer to that question reflects the absolute necessity of good works in sanctification. To remind you: sanctification is the process by which we are increasingly being conformed to the image of Christ. Obedience to the law belongs in the life of the Christian as a fruit of faith, as a sacrifice of thankfulness, as evidence of love for God, and as a natural outcome of our union with Christ. Romans 6:2 reminds us, "We died to sin; how can we live in it any longer?" So, yes, we keep the law, but not as a means of measuring up or as a way to earn anything from God. We do not keep the law with the idea of preserving our place or status as

justified people. Rather, it is entirely out of thankfulness and love. The FV does not help us in preserving this biblical, Reformed emphasis. Moving the discussion of obedience to justification is not only confusing, it is also dangerous for God's people.

Rejecting or Minimizing the Doctrine of the Imputation of the Active Obedience of Christ

Related to the preceding point is the fact that some FV advocates either deny or minimize the doctrine of the imputation of active obedience of Christ. We are speaking here about the teaching that Christ kept the law in our place and that his meritorious law-keeping is credited to our account in the event of justification. Concerning that doctrine, Rich Lusk has written, "The notion of Jesus' thirty-three years of Torah-keeping being imputed to me is problematic."⁵⁰ James Jordan likewise has asserted, "Merit theology often assumes that Jesus' *earthly* works and merits are somehow given to us, and there is no foundation for this notion."⁵¹ He furthermore asserted that "There is no 'merit' theology in the Bible."⁵²

Whereas Lusk and Jordan outrightly deny this doctrine, the Joint FV Statement minimizes its importance. The Statement denies "that faithfulness to the gospel requires any particular doctrinal formulation of the 'imputation of the active obedience of Christ.'" The Statement does say that Christ's perfect, sinless life is credited to us. At the very least, there is a discomfiting ambiguity on this point.

On this doctrine article 22 of the Belgic Confession is clear: Christ "imputes to us all his merits and as many holy works as he has done for us and in our place." P. Y. De Jong comments, "A significant emphasis is at stake. The Reformed churches wanted to make it clear that believers receive *all* the benefits of Christ's

work.”⁵³ Commenting on this article, Klaas Schilder contrasted Adam’s disobedience with Christ’s obedience. He noted that whatever Christ has done is imputed to the believer.⁵⁴ N. H. Gootjes went further and insisted that the Belgic Confession is unambiguous in its confession of the imputation of the Christ’s active obedience.⁵⁵

James Jordan may claim “there is no ‘merit’ theology in the Bible.” However, there is certainly such a theology in the Three Forms of Unity, which we confess to summarize faithfully the teachings of the Bible. I have already mentioned article 22 of the Belgic Confession. Merit is also mentioned in article 23: “We do not claim anything for ourselves or our merits, but rely and rest on the only obedience of Jesus Christ crucified; His obedience is ours when we believe in Him.” In Lord’s Day 7 of the Heidelberg Catechism we confess that all the benefits of salvation come to us “only for the sake of Christ’s merits.” Similarly, in Lord’s Day 23, believers are not accounted righteous because of their merits but because of Christ’s. In the Canons of Dort, Rejection of Errors 1.3, the Synod of Dort addressed an Arminian error that deprived “Christ’s merits of all efficacy.” Finally, in Canons 5.8, we confess that the merit (singular) of Christ cannot be nullified. Again one wonders how Jordan and others can sincerely claim allegiance to these confessional documents when they so clearly speak with the language of merit and explicitly affirm the doctrine of the imputation of the active obedience of Christ.

The denial of this doctrine is not a new challenge for Reformed theology. It has been alleged that Zacharias Ursinus came to adopt a position contrary to this doctrine. Yet his Large Catechism of 1561 bears witness that around the time of the writing of the Heidelberg Catechism he held to the

imputation of the active obedience of Christ.⁵⁶ We likewise know that Caspar Olevianus, also involved with the writing of the Heidelberg Catechism, held to this doctrine.⁵⁷ It is therefore reasonable to understand also the Heidelberg Catechism as speaking of this doctrine in Lord’s Day 23 when it refers to the imputation of the “perfect satisfaction, righteousness, and holiness of Christ.” His obedience is subsumed under his righteousness and holiness. This is certainly the way in which the Catechism was understood by some of its earliest commentators.⁵⁸

Yet it is true that David Pareus, a student of Ursinus, came to a position at odds with this doctrine.⁵⁹ This is also true of another prominent German Reformed theologian, Johannes Piscator. Still, we should not forget that their views were controversial. Lengthy discussions were held as to whether these views should be tolerated within the Reformed churches of Western Europe. This discussion took place, for instance, within the Reformed churches of France. There was correspondence with Piscator in an effort to understand his position. In 1607, the Synod of La Rochelle concluded that Piscator’s denial of the imputation of active obedience of Christ fell outside the Reformed confession.⁶⁰ The Synod of 1612 decided to have all French Reformed ministers sign a statement which affirmed the following:

That our Lord Jesus Christ was obedient to the Moral and Ceremonial Law, not only for our good, but also in our stead, and that his whole Obedience yielded by him thereunto is imputed to us, and that our Justification consists not only in the forgiveness of sins, but also in the Imputation of his Active Righteousness.⁶¹

In the face of ongoing resistance, the Synod of Tonnein in 1614 reaffirmed this decision.⁶²

This doctrine was also under pressure in the Netherlands. Gootjes related that there were even theologians at the Synod of Dort (1618–19) who wished to have the Belgic Confession changed on this point to accommodate a denial of this doctrine. A discussion of this took place towards the end of the Synod, after all the foreign delegations had left. In the end, all the Dutch delegates except two voted this down and instead decided to strengthen the statement about this matter, indicating the degree of importance accorded this doctrine.⁶³

Now it has sometimes been argued that the dissent of those two delegates proves the Synod never meant to exclude those with scruples regarding this doctrine. After all, they say, one of the two delegates was Johannes Bogerman—the chairman of the Synod! However, in 1633 Bogerman became a professor of theology at Franeker. We know for certain that this position required him to subscribe the Belgic Confession (and the Catechism and Canons) and he did so with no reservations. He was never known to publicly attack or undermine the doctrine found in the amended article 22. It seems fair to conclude that, with further reflection, Bogerman brought his views in line with the Belgic Confession as amended by the Synod of Dort.

While there was debate during the second half of the sixteenth century, by the late seventeenth century the debate was long over. The Genevan theologian Francis Turretin then spoke of the imputation of the active obedience of Christ as being the received opinion in Reformed churches.⁶⁴ Official synodical pronouncements had defined this as the orthodox Reformed doctrine and the weight of those pronouncements should not be minimized or taken for granted. If heresy is defined as a false teaching condemned by synodical

The obedience of Christ is imputed to us (credited to us; considered to be ours). As it says in Article 22 of the Belgic Confession: ‘Christ our righteousness . . . imputes to us all His merits and as many holy works as He has done for us and in our place.’

authority, the denial of the imputation of the active obedience of Christ falls under that category.

Before concluding this section, I must make a brief response to a statement of Norman Shepherd on this doctrine. Shepherd says, “The doctrine of the imputation of Christ’s active obedience is embraced in tandem with the development of the doctrine of a covenant of works. The two go hand in hand and necessitate each other.”⁶⁵ It could be argued that the imputation of the active obedience of Christ is best accounted for within some kind of pre-fall covenant along the lines of that described in the Westminster Standards. It is true also that a doctrine of the covenant of works invariably requires the imputation of Christ’s active obedience. However, the reverse certainly does not hold. Proof of that is found within Lutheranism. Lutherans do not have a well-developed covenant theology or anything like a doctrine of the covenant of works. Yet the Augsburg Confession and the Formula of Concord both contain the imputation of Christ’s active obedience as part of the doctrine of justification.⁶⁶ Therefore, contrary to Shepherd’s assertion, holding to that doctrine does not bind or lead one inevitably to a doctrine of the covenant of works.⁶⁷

It is not characteristically Canadian Reformed to deny or minimize this doctrine, nor does it comport with Reformed orthodoxy of any confessional tradition. Here too, many FV advocates are patently out of step with faithful Reformed theology. As a result, they weaken the goodness of the good news. The imputation of Christ’s active obedience is a doctrine

that gives us much comfort, joy, and strength. In a sermon on Lord’s Day 23, Liberated theologian Dr. R. H. Bremmer aptly said:

It does not stop with the satisfaction of Christ. God imputes to me his righteousness also, says your confession. We have not kept any of God’s commandments, have we? We sin also in omission, don’t we? Isn’t it true—we not only break God’s commandments, but also fail to keep them? Now therefore answer 60 speaks also of the imputation of the righteousness of your Saviour. He completely obeyed God’s commandments. He fulfilled them up to the cross. Also there he had perfect love for God and the neighbour. We have a term for that in theology: Christ’s active obedience, his righteousness in doing God’s commandments. He even prayed on the cross for his murderers. Well, now the LORD says, “Does it bother you that your life falls short as you neglect to keep my commandments? Listen: I cover it over with the perfect righteousness of my Son. I give that to you and impute that to you, just like that, out of free grace.”⁶⁸

Similarly, Canadian Reformed pastor George van Popta stated it beautifully:

The obedience of Christ is imputed to us (credited to us; considered to be ours). As it says in Article 22 of the Belgic Confession: ‘Christ our righteousness . . . imputes to us all His merits and as many holy works

as He has done for us and in our place.’ Believers receive all the benefits of Lord’s work. Not only of his suffering, but also of his righteous obedience. Not only does his death on the cross benefit us, but also his life of obedience benefits us. The whole life of Christ, from his birth to his death on the cross, benefits us and is important for our redemption . . . Christ’s obedience to the first commandment in the third temptation is one of the holy works he did for us and in our place.⁶⁹

That’s good news! We should not let the FV rob us of it.

Paedocommunion

Paedocommunion is the position that children should be admitted to the Lord’s Supper apart from a profession of faith. Proponents of paedocommunion argue that membership in the covenant community automatically qualifies one for admission to the Lord’s Supper. It should be noted that this is not the same as arguing that we should expect and encourage profession of faith (and admission to the supper) at a younger age than is our current practice.

Not all men associated with the FV hold to paedocommunion, but a significant number do. Tim Gallant, for instance, has written a book-length defense of this position entitled *Feed My Lambs*. Other proponents include Peter Leithart, Douglas Wilson, Steve Wilkins, Rich Lusk, John Barach, and Mark Horne. The Joint Federal Vision Statement affirms paedocommunion as a basic plank of the Federal Vision theology: “Unless there has been lawful disciplinary action by the Church, *we affirm* that any baptized person, children included, should be welcome at the Table.” Similarly Peter Leithart wrote, “Nothing more than the rite of water baptism is required for access to the Lord’s Table . . . Paedocommunion teaches that baptism ingrafts a child into the body of Christ, and that all



members of the body of Christ are welcome at the Lord's Table.⁷⁰

Those looking for a careful biblical analysis of this position should refer to Cornelis P. Venema's helpful book *Children at the Lord's Table: Assessing the Case for Paedocommunion* (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 2009). For our purposes, it should suffice to note that article 35 of the Belgic Confession warns that no one should come to the Lord's Supper "without careful self-examination." Since infants cannot reasonably examine themselves, it is fair to conclude that paedocommunion falls outside the bounds of our confessions. Likewise, Lord's Day 30 of the Catechism speaks of those who can come to the table of the Lord. We confess that those should come "who are truly displeased with themselves because of their sins and yet trust that these are forgiven them and that their remaining weakness is covered by the suffering and death of Christ, and who also desire more and more to strengthen their faith and amend their life." Obviously we cannot expect infants to meet these criteria. Since our confessions speak clearly on this point, we should not be surprised if the Canadian Reformed Churches and the Liberated tradition have never said otherwise. Clarence Stam, in fact, repudiated paedocommunion when he wrote:

While Holy Baptism is also for infants who have not yet come to faith, the Lord's Supper is ordained and instituted for those whom Christ "has already regenerated and incorporated into the family which is His Church," i.e. for those who have come to faith, to a sound knowledge of the Gospel and a true confession of Christ's Name.⁷¹

It scarcely needs to be added that men like Schilder and Holwerda were not sympathetic to paedocommunion.

Our United Reformed sister churches have been forced to deal with this issue. After graduating from Mid-America Reformed Seminary, Tim Gallant was not yet firm on paedocommunion. It was an open question for him when he pursued candidacy in the URCNA. He was examined at the Classis Western Canada held in June 2000. It is best to let his website tell what happened:

By the time of the classis meeting, Tim had studied enough to be unsure of his position on the issue, and wished to ensure that he would not fall outside the bounds of the confessions to which he needed to subscribe, should he come to embrace paedocommunion. Consequently, he requested that his pastor, William Pols, bring up the matter before classis, to determine whether such a

view was allowed by the confessions recognized by the URC (i.e. the Belgic Confession, Heidelberg Catechism, and the Canons of Dort). The body ruled that these confessions required a profession of faith prior to participation in the Lord's Supper. Mr. Gallant's response was to decline to sign the Form of Subscription, which allows for no exceptions. As a result, the classis was unable to declare him eligible for call. (Tim subsequently appealed this decision in June 2002 at Classis Ponoka. The earlier decision was upheld.⁷²

It was decided that this man could not be a minister in the URCNA if he held to paedocommunion. Why? Because the Reformed confessions are clear.

Postmillennial Eschatology

This concern is left for last for the very reason that it does not rank high in importance. Most FV advocates hold to a postmillennial eschatology (doctrine of the last things). Postmillennialism refers to a belief that there will be a coming age of glory for the church before Christ's return. This is the millennium described in Revelation 20:1–10. Our Lord Jesus will return after (post-) the millennium. This view of the last things often appears to have a more positive view of the future. Rather than expecting things to get worse before the return of the Saviour, postmillennialists believe the best days are yet to come and they will come in this age.

A postmillennial eschatology is evident in this affirmation of the Joint FV Statement:

We affirm that God did not send His Son into the world to condemn the world, but rather so that the world through Him would be saved. Jesus Christ is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world—He is the Savior of the world. All the nations shall stream to Him,

and His resting place shall be glorious. *We affirm* that prior to the second coming of our Lord Jesus, the earth will be as full of the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea.

Other figures associated with the FV have also been vocal in their support for the postmillennial view. This should be expected from those who, like Steve Schlissel, were/are affiliated with the Christian Reconstruction movement.

There are three things to note with regard to postmillennialism. First, it should be regarded as an *error*. I do not have the space here to make a refutation from the Scriptures. Those interested in such a refutation (along with a positive case for a more biblical approach) should read Kim Riddlebarger's *A Case for Amillennialism: Understanding the End Times* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2003).

Second, while variants of the postmillennial position have been held by Reformed theologians within the Liberated tradition, the consensus has been for the amillennial position. Amillennialism is the position that Revelation 20 is speaking of the present moment. Dr. Jelle Faber was known for saying that this position would better be described as "nunc-millennialism," 'nunc' being the Latin word for 'now.' The millennium is now. Clarence Stam summarized the consensus when he wrote:

The Reformed view concerning the "thousand years' reign" and the "binding of Satan" (Revelation 20) is simply that Christ rules supreme from His ascension to His return, and that Satan cannot conclusively guide the history of the world to prevent the gathering of Christ's Church. We believe that Christ will return only "when the number of the elect is complete" (see 2 Peter 3:9).⁷³

This same kind of thinking about eschatology is in evidence with Benne Holwerda as well.⁷⁴

Third, while it has been and should be regarded as an error, postmillennialism has never been regarded as something contrary to the Three Forms of Unity. I readily grant that a man could be a postmillennialist and be a minister in the Canadian Reformed Churches. The error is one not explicitly ruled out by our confessional standards nor has it ever been repudiated by a synod as a false teaching.

Still, there is another concern with the Joint Federal Vision Statement in the area of eschatology. It has to do with this statement:

We deny that eschatological views are to be a test of fellowship between orthodox believers, but at the same time we hold that an orientation of faith with regard to the gospel's triumph in history is extremely important.

At first glance, given what I just wrote, this might appear to be a reasonable statement. Yet, there are more eschatological views than postmillennialism and amillennialism. There is also the premillennial position. The premillennialists believe that Christ will return before (pre-) the thousand years of Revelation 20.

The dispensational variety of premillennialism posits a distinction between the New Testament church and the Old Testament people of Israel. This position is contrary to what we confess in article 27 of the Belgic Confession: "This church has existed from the beginning of the world and will be to the end, for Christ is an eternal King who cannot be without subjects." Similarly, all varieties of premillennialism believe there is a thousand years between the second coming of Christ and the last judgment. The Reformed confessions, however, say that the second coming

is when the last judgment takes place (see BC article 37 and HC Lord's Day 18 and 19). While postmillennialism falls within the bounds of our confessions, premillennialism does not.

The Three Forms of Unity establish the bounds of fellowship between orthodox Reformed believers. To say that eschatological views should not determine whether someone is inside or outside of those bounds is, at the very least, unhelpful. Clearly there are some eschatological views that do fall outside of confessional orthodoxy and would prevent someone from being an office bearer in a Reformed church, if not a member. Again, the Joint Federal Vision Statement gives lip service to the Reformed confessions, but when it comes to concrete issues such as eschatology, there are disconnects.

Conclusion

Initially, I was guardedly enthusiastic about the FV. For a time, it seemed this was indeed a movement for Canadian Reformed believers to welcome warmly. Some of the emphases resonated with our tradition. However, as the debate continued, my initial enthusiasm was proven to be misplaced. There are several significant issues, not the least of which is the manner in which justification and the imputation of the active obedience of Christ are being compromised.

Men associated with the FV outwardly claim allegiance to the Three Forms of Unity. Yet their allegiance is difficult to take seriously. Where they do not outrightly deny what our confessions teach, they confuse matters or minimize.

Advocates of the FV also claim they are in the line of the theological heritage of the Canadian Reformed Churches. Again, there are a few points of similarity. But the points of difference are far greater. Our

tradition has seldom been weak on justification or the imputation of the active obedience of Christ. We have never promoted paedocommunion. Most of our theologians have been amillennialists.

If we value the gospel and the Reformed confessions, we have to conclude that the Federal Vision movement is an aberration, a deviation from the orthodox faith. There is a good reason why, for most confessionally Reformed and Presbyterian churches on our continent, this debate is over. My prayer is that we in the Canadian Reformed Churches would realize the FV for what it is and soundly reject it. May Christ continue to gather, defend and preserve his Church through the truth of his Word!

35. Available online at: <http://www.hornes.org/theologia/norman-shepherd/the-34-theses>

36. See, for instance, theses 11–13 of the 34 Theses.

37. Rich Lusk, “Faith, Baptism, and Justification,” available online at: <http://www.hornes.org/theologia/rich-lusk/faith-baptism-and-justification>

38. Quoted here: <http://www.weswhite.net/2011/02/sola-fide-or-sola-fidelit>

39. Peter J. Leithart, *The Baptized Body* (Moscow: Canon Press, 2007), 85.

40. Leithart, *The Baptized Body*, 84.

41. K. Schilder, *Christelijke Religie: over de nederlandse geloofsbelijdenis* (6e druk) (Kampen: Copieerijrichting v.d. Berg, 1977), 78. Translation mine, WB.

42. Clarence Stam, *Living in the Joy of Faith* (Neerlandia: Inheritance Publications, 1991), 51.

43. Stam, *Living in the Joy of Faith*, 160–161.

44. Van Bruggen, *Annotations to the Heidelberg Catechism*, 162. This receptive character of faith is also evident in his discussion of Lord’s Day 7; see *Annotations*, 72.

45. Van Bruggen, *The Church Says Amen*, 128.

46. Prof. B. Holwerda, *De dingen die ons van God geschonken zijn* (1) (Goes: Oosterbaan & Le Cointre, 1953), 108. Translation mine, WB.

47. Holwerda, *De dingen* (1), 105. Translation mine, WB.

48. Holwerda, *De dingen* (2), 162. Translation mine, WB.

49. Quoted by W. Robert Godfrey in “Faith Formed By Love or Faith Alone? The Instrument of Justification” in *Covenant, Justification and Pastoral Ministry*, ed. R. Scott Clark (Phillipsburg: P&R, 2007), 280.

50. Rich Lusk, “A Response to ‘The Biblical Plan of Salvation,’” in *The Auburn Avenue Theology*, 140.

51. James B. Jordan, “Merit versus Maturity: What Did Jesus Do for Us?” in *The Federal Vision*, 194.

52. Jordan, “Merit versus Maturity,” 195.

53. P. Y. DeJong, *The Church’s Witness to the World* (St. Catharines: Paideia, 1980), 136.

54. Schilder, *Christelijke religie*, 76.

55. N. H. Gootjes, *Teaching and Preaching the Word*, 77.

56. See especially Question and Answer 139. The Larger Catechism may be found in Lyle D. Bierma, *An Introduction to the Heidelberg Catechism* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2005), 163–223.

57. Caspar Olevianus, *In epistolam d. pauli apostoli ad galatas notae . . .* (Geneva: Eustathium Vignon, 1578), 57. See also his *In epistolam d. pauli apostoli ad romanos notae . . .* (Geneva, 1579), 196, 197, 205, 206, 209, 210.

58. See for instance Jeremiah Bastingius, *In Catechesin Religionis Christianae* (Dordraci: Iohannes Caninius, 1588), 202; William Ames, *A Sketch of the Christian’s Catechism* (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 2008), 119.

59. Perhaps it is of significance that Pareus was the editor of Ursinus’ commentary on the Catechism. This commentary is the source of the allegation that Ursinus waffled on the imputation of the active obedience of Christ.

60. John Quick, *Synodicon in Gallia Reformata*, volume 1 (London: T. Parkhurst and J. Robinson, 1692), 265.

61. John Quick, *Synodicon in Gallia Reformata*, 348.

62. John Quick, *Synodicon in Gallia Reformata*, 401.

63. N. H. Gootjes, *The Belgic Confession: Its History and Sources*, 152.

64. Francis Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*, volume 2 (Phillipsburg: P&R, 1994), 445, 454–455.

65. Norman Shepherd, “The Imputation of Active Obedience,” in *A Faith That Is Never Alone*, ed. P. Andrew Sandlin (La Grange: Kerygma Press, 2007), 262. Earlier in this essay Shepherd denies that the Belgic Confession affirms the imputation of the active obedience of Christ. He seems to be unaware of the historical background of the amendment to article 22 at the Synod of Dort.

66. See article 4 of the Augsburg Confession and Formula (Solid Declaration) III:14–16. These items can be found in *Concordia: The Lutheran Confessions, A Reader’s Edition of the Book of Concord* (Second Edition), ed. Paul Timothy McCain (Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2005), 32–33; 538.

67. Also see the way Johannes Maccovius develops this doctrine in his *Scholastic Discourse* 9.20–25. Maccovius asserts that the Heidelberg Catechism says that man “is obliged to either punishment or obedience.”

68. R. H. Bremmer, *52 open vensters* (Niezijl: Boekhandel Dijksterhuis, 1991), 207–208. Translation mine, WB.

69. George van Popta, “Preaching on the Active Obedience of Christ,” in *Koinonia* 19.2 (Fall 2002), 23.

70. Peter Leithart, “A Response to 1 Corinthians 11:17–34: The Lord’s Supper,” in *The Auburn Avenue Theology*, 298.

71. Clarence Stam, *Everything in Christ: The Christian Faith Outlined According to the Belgic Confession* (Winnipeg: Premier, 1979), 129.

72. This can be found online here: <http://www.timgallant.org/personal/bio.php>

73. Clarence Stam, *Everything in Christ*, 148.

74. B. Holwerda, *The Church in the Last Judgment* (London: Inter-League Publication Board, 1993).

Dr. Wes Bredenhof serves as the pastor of the Providence Canadian Reformed Church in Hamilton, Ontario.

Letters to Kathryn (1)

Dr. Harry
Arnold

*Dr. H. Arnold presents the first of two letters—
written to a Jehovah's Witness—pointing to Jesus as the eternal Son of God.*

LETTER TO KATHRYN

Dear Friend,

I will remember our “chance” meeting each other for the first time. I was out for an evening walk along the beach at Deerfield Beach, Florida. You handed me a tract as we passed each other. After I got back to our motel room and examined it, I realized it was a *Watchtower Tract* from Jehovah's Witnesses. Our paths did not cross again until a year later. In fact, it was on the evening of February 7, 2006, when I was again out for my after-supper walk. As I came to the south end of the beach walkway, I again met you as you offered me a tract. I recognized you and said: “Oh, I met you last year; you are a Jehovah's Witness.” And you answered: “That's right. I've been one for the last twenty-eight years.”

I then engaged you in conversation about Jesus and stated that Jesus was the “eternal” Son of God; and asked, “Do you believe that?” You responded, “I believe that *eternal* means *forever*.” And I countered by saying: “No, *eternal* means *without beginning or end*. Thus, Jesus is *eternal* as God the Father is.” At that point you hesitated and made no response.

I continued, “Do me a favor; read the gospel of John. Underline every place where Jesus is referred to as *Son of God* and count them. Also go to the First Letter of John (1 John) and do the same. Then take note that in the gospel of Mark, the demons recognize Jesus for who He is and they call Him *the Son of God*. If you do this,” I said, “you cannot fail to be impressed by what you will find. The truth that Jesus is, indeed, God's *one and only Son* becomes amazingly clear.”

You seemed to become anxious to move on and said to me: “May I tell you something? I have a problem that if I stand too long I lose my balance.” You then added: “Honest to Jehovah, I really have to go now before I lose my balance.” So I bade you farewell, commending you for your zeal and encouraging you to do as I had asked. You gave me the impression that you would comply with my request.



A few weeks passed before we happened to meet again. In fact, it was the 28th of February—somewhere between 6:30 and 7:00 P.M.—when I was out for my last evening stroll along the beach before leaving for home the next morning. As God’s providence would have it, our paths crossed again as you offered me a tract—which you always did to countless numbers of people who walk the beach at night. Apparently you did not recognize me immediately, so I mentioned our conversation of a few weeks before. You then remembered our conversation. My question to you was simple and direct: “Did you do what you promised me you would do?” Your response was: “What was that?” So I reiterated that I had asked you to read the gospel of John and First John, underlining all references to Jesus as *Son of God*. In this way you would come to realize who Jesus really is—*eternal Son of God* as well as Son of Man, the promised Messiah. You then confessed that you had forgotten to do that.

I recall clearly, Kathryn that you affirmed that you believed in Jesus as God’s Son and Savior from sin. But your understanding of *Sonship* was clearly that of meaning *first created being*. That kind of sonship is not sufficient to save us from sin, Kathryn. We need a Savior who is the perfect and righteous man—that is, without sin—so that He can die for us and make atonement for our sins. This is necessary because since it was man who sinned, man must also die for sin. That’s what Jesus did for mankind. If that is so, why does Scripture insist that Jesus is also *Son of God*? This is necessary because as *eternal Son of God*, the atonement He made for sin in human nature now has **infinite value** and is sufficient to make atonement “for the sins of the whole world.” (1 John 2:2). Now you can see, Kathryn, why it is essential that we rightly know who Jesus really is. A truly righteous person could only save himself because his righteousness would only atone for his own sins. However,

Jesus—as sinless and righteous—is able both to make a perfect atonement for mankind’s sin, and—as *eternal Son of God*—is able to give **eternal value** to His sacrifice, so that anyone who believes in Him may be saved from sin and live forevermore.

The apostle John beautifully expresses this union of the divine and human natures in Jesus Christ. He begins his gospel by writing: “In the beginning was the Word with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning. Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that was made” (John 1:1, 2). Thus, John immediately sets forth the eternal nature of Jesus the Christ *as God*. But, as noted above, the Savior must also be perfectly human in order to die for mankind’s sin. The apostle sets forth this truth a dozen verses later when he writes: “The Word became flesh and lived for a while among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son who came from the Father, full of grace and truth” (John 1:14). And so, because the eternal Son of God took on human nature, He was able to be “delivered over to death for our sins and was raised to life for our justification” (Romans 4:25). That’s the kind of a Savior we need, Kathryn, who even when clothed in our human nature still remained God’s *one and only Son* so that He could bear the name “*Immanuel*”—“*God with us*.” In fact, the very name that the angel instructed Joseph to give him—JESUS—means literally: “*Jehovah Saves*.”

That God acts in behalf of His people’s salvation is nothing new to the student of the Holy Bible. Isaiah speaks beautifully and prophetically of God Himself as being the One who acts to save His people when none else is able, or even willing, to rescue them. Isaiah quotes God as saying:

I looked, but there was no one to help, I was appalled that no one gave support; so my own arm worked salvation for me, and my own wrath sustained me (Is. 63:5).

The prophet is so amazed at the wonder of God’s salvation that he reacts by saying:

Since ancient times no one has heard, no ear has perceived, no eye has seen any God besides you, who acts on behalf of those who wait for him (Is. 64:4).

These Old Testament prophetic texts take on new meaning for the believer’s salvation when we see them fulfilled in Jesus Christ. Jesus is “the Word” who was “with God” and “was God.” He is the eternal God who acted “on behalf of those who wait for him,” and He “became flesh” (that is, took on human nature) “and lived for a while among us” (John 1:1, 14). What Isaiah spoke of prophetically, the apostle John speaks of as having been fulfilled in Jesus Christ of Nazareth—*God’s Son and Mary’s Son*. That’s the kind of Savior we need, Kathryn! That’s the Savior I believe in for my own salvation from sin and hope of everlasting life. That’s also the Savior of Whom I bore witness when we spoke together the few times our paths happened to cross. Now once more I urge you to put your trust in Jesus Christ as the Scripture clearly presents Him to us: God’s Son in human nature, the only Savior and hope of a lost mankind.

Well, Kathryn, my guess is that you still may not have gotten around to doing what I asked you to do at our first and subsequent meetings. Therefore, allow me to give you the benefit of some study that I myself have done. First of all, I went through the gospel of John with the help of Strong’s *Exhaustive Concordance of the Bible* and looked up all references under the heading of “Son” in reference to Jesus. Here is what I found.

Aside from the fact that the apostle John begins his gospel with a reference to Jesus as God and Creator (1:1–3), who also took on human nature (1:14), he also includes the testimony of several other people who confessed Jesus as *Son of God*. The first person

John names is John the Baptist, the forerunner of Jesus (1:15). John the Baptist is very explicit in testifying about Jesus as God's Son. He tells us that he recognized Jesus as the long-promised Messiah because "the Spirit came down on him [Jesus] and remained on him" (1:33). Thus, the Baptist knew that Jesus was the One that he should baptize. And the Baptist adds: "I have seen and I testify that this is the Son of God" (1:34). A little further in chapter one, the apostle John includes the testimony of Nathanael to Jesus' divine Sonship, when he says to Jesus: "Rabbi, you are the Son of God" (1:49). The apostle also records the testimony of Martha when Jesus came to raise Lazarus from the grave. Jesus asked Martha if she really believed that "he who believes in me will live, even though he dies; and whoever lives and believes in me will never die" (11:25, 26). Martha's response was simple and plain: "Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Christ, the Son of God, who was to come into the world" (1:27). Further, we must not overlook another significant witness that John adds to confirm the truth of Jesus as *Son of God*. Thomas, himself an apostle of Christ, doubted that Jesus was actually seen by the other apostles after the resurrection. Therefore, Jesus made it a special point to appear to Thomas in the presence of the other apostles so that his doubts would be removed. Thus, when the resurrected Lord appeared before them, He confronted Thomas and invited him to examine His hands and side to determine that He had really risen from the dead (20:27). No longer could Thomas doubt that Jesus had conquered death and was very much alive. Instead, he confessed without hesitation: "My Lord and my God." Finally, the apostle John states that the purpose for which he wrote his gospel is "that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing you may have life in his name" (20:31).

The Outlook

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In summary, Kathryn, the author of the gospel of John not only sets forth his own view of Jesus as God's very own Son, but he includes the testimony of at least three other people to the deity of Jesus Christ. These testimonies are more than adequate to meet the biblical requirement that "a matter must be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses" (Deut. 19:15). We may regard it, therefore, as an established fact that the gospel of John sets forth Jesus as God's "one and only Son." Remember, my friend, that the human authors of Scripture were guided by the Holy Spirit so that what they set forth is really the Word of God Himself (2 Peter 1:20, 21).

But wait, there is more to learn from the gospel of John about Jesus as being the Son of God. The opponents of Jesus understood very well that His words and actions made clear to them that Jesus claimed to be the long-awaited Messiah and God's Son. Thus, the Jews tried on one occasion to kill Jesus because "not only was he breaking the Sabbath, but he was even calling God his own Father, making himself *equal with God*" (5:18, italics added). Moreover, when the Jews wanted Pilate to deliver up Jesus to be crucified, they made this charge against Him: "We have a law, and according to that law he must die, because he claimed to be the Son of God" (19:7). This additional testimony of Jesus' opponents should open our eyes to the fact that Jesus was clearly claiming deity for Himself. Let us then, also unashamedly bear our testimony to the reality that Jesus is *the Son of God and the Savior of sinners*.

There is also another matter we should still consider, namely, "What did Jesus say about Himself?" We must raise this question because some critics of the Bible have said that Jesus only considered Himself an ordinary person. It was the disciples of Jesus, they say, who—after a period of time had passed—began to idolize Him as God's Son; and the church continues to perpetuate the "myth" of Jesus'

divinity. Well, my friend, let's see what Jesus really did say about Himself.

In conversation with Nicodemus, Jesus refers to Himself as *Son of Man* who "came from heaven" (3:13). As Son of Man who "came from heaven" Jesus says that He "must be lifted up [that is, "die"] that everyone who believes in him may have eternal life" (3:15). Jesus goes on to tell Nicodemus that it was God's love for the world that motivated Him to "give his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life" (3:16). Jesus certainly considered Himself God's special and exclusive envoy to a lost world. For He adds: "Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe stands condemned already because he has not believed in the name of God's one and only Son" (3:18).

After Jesus healed a man who had been an invalid for thirty-eight years (5:5), "the Jews persecuted him because Jesus was doing these things on the Sabbath" (5:16). After that, Jesus speaks at length of His intimacy with God as His Father (5:17–30). In so doing Jesus asserts that all that He does is simply doing what He has seen his Father doing (5:19). In fact, He declares that He will "raise the dead and give them life" (5:21). Jesus affirms that "the Father judges no one, but has entrusted all judgment to the Son, that all may honor the Son just as they honor the Father" (5:22, 23). So Jesus is really saying that He may be honored and worshiped even as God Himself is. If Jesus is not the eternal Son, equal with the Father, then such honor and worship would be idolatry, something strongly condemned in Scripture. For no creature, no matter how pure and holy, is worthy of divine worship and honor.

It must be getting rather obvious to you by now, dear friend, that Jesus believed Himself to be God's Son, who was sent on a special saving mission to this lost, sinful world. For example, He claimed to have come "from heaven" (6:41), and that the Father

"sent him" (6:44), and that He alone "has seen the Father" (6:46). Further, Jesus plainly states that He relates to us "what I have seen in the Father's presence" (8:38), and He claims to be an ever-living, eternal being just as God is—"before Abraham was born, I AM" (8:38). Moreover, Jesus defended Himself against the Jews' charge of blasphemy by saying, "I am God's Son" (10:36). His answer to their charge was to challenge them to believe in Him because His miracles demonstrated "that the Father is in me, and I in the Father" (10:38). Again, before Jesus raised Lazarus from the tomb, He told the disciples: "This sickness will not end in death. No it is for God's glory so that God's Son may be glorified through it" (11:4). Finally, when Jesus engages in prayer with God on the night of His betrayal, He addresses the "Father" and refers to Himself as "your Son" (17:1).

There are still more things we could consider about Jesus from John's gospel, but we have uncovered enough evidence to leave no doubt that Jesus believed Himself to be the *eternal Son of God*. This is the message Jesus proclaimed, and He called others to believe it and to follow Him. Now either Jesus was a deluded maniac, a pathological liar, or, in fact, the very Son of God clothed in human nature. For myself, I believe Jesus was the Son of God and my Savior from sin. My prayer is that you will also believe in Him as Scripture portrays Him and know the full joy of His salvation.

Cordially yours in Christ's behalf,

Dr. Harry G. Arnold

Dr. Harold Arnold

is a retired minister in the Christian Reformed Church living in Portage, Michigan. He is a member of Grace Christian Reformed Church in Kalamazoo, Michigan.

Pop Evangelism's Misuse of Scripture

The Savior is Waiting to Enter Your Heart (4)

Rev. Nollie
Malabuyo

During my high school and college years, one of the favorite songs in our youth revival meetings was this 1958 hit by Ralph Carmichael:

*The Savior is waiting to enter your heart,
Why don't you let Him come in?
There's nothing in this world to keep you apart,
What is your answer to Him?
Time after time He has waited before,
And now He is waiting again,
To see if you're willing to open the door:
O how He wants to come in.*

Like many evangelicals today, I grew up with this picture, both literally and mentally, of Jesus standing before a door and knocking, the door being symbolic of an unbeliever's heart. Where did this idea come from? Everyone agrees it is from the Bible, from Revelation 3:20. So let us look at the text.

Chapters 2–3 of the book of Revelation consist of seven “letters” to “the seven churches that are in Asia” (Rev. 1:4). These churches were *real* churches in *real* cities with *real* people who were going through *real* difficulties, particularly false teachings and persecutions. To be sure, their situations sound similar to those of churches throughout this age. But they were not merely

symbolic of churches in different epochs, since they actually existed in the first century.

Each letter follows a certain pattern: (1) the author; (2) a diagnosis of the church's condition; (3) a word of comfort and commands stemming from the diagnosis; (4) a command to hear and obey; and (5) a promise of blessing to those who “conquer.”

“I Will Vomit You Out!”

The church in Laodicea is the recipient of one of these letters, and the letter they receive is not very complimentary—a letter of severe rebuke, in fact. Christ's warning is about more than just being lukewarm in their commitment to him, because being cold—not only being hot—is also acceptable. As he rebuked or commended the other six churches for their witness, Jesus also wants them to be “faithful and true witnesses” to the idolatrous city, zealous to proclaim his name.

Like those today who are deceived by prosperity gospel false teachers, the Laodiceans must have assumed that their material wealth indicated God's blessing and approval. Their complacency and dependence on their riches harken back to Israel's condition before the Babylonian exile: “Ephraim has said, ‘Ah, but I am rich; I have found wealth for myself; in all my labors they cannot find in me iniquity or sin’” (Hosea 12:8).

Because of this loss of fervor for his name and idolatrous worship of riches, when they were actually “wretched, pitiable, poor, blind, and naked,” they were in real danger of being vomited—not just spit—out of their Savior's mouth.

In saying that he would spit them out if they remained lukewarm, Jesus is warning them of sure judgment if they remained unrepentant and disobedient. All of the churches in Revelation 2–3 were warned in this way. The Bible is full of warnings to believers that they must remain faithful and zealous for God and persevere in the faith, and in this way he preserves those whom he has chosen (Heb. 3:12, 10:26–31; Phil. 2:12; Heb. 6:4–6).

“Be Zealous and Repent!”

So Jesus commands them to come to him and seek his mercy by “buying” everything they need from him (Isa. 55:1–3) because they are poor and have nothing. They are to be “zealous” witnesses of Christ and “repent” of their pride and sin, because he “reproves and disciplines” the people he “loves” (Rev. 3:19; Heb. 12:6). Jesus then follows up on his command to be zealous for him, repent, and turn back to him, with an invitation to all in the Laodicean church for close communion with him.

Behold, I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and eat with him, and he with me.

–Revelation 3:20

Christ's invitation to the church to return to him has a sense of its present urgency. The picture of the Judge "standing at the door" (Jas. 5:9), and of Jesus being "near, at the very gates" (Matt. 24:33) both have a sense of urgency and being at hand. When the master comes and knocks, the servants are to open the door immediately (Luke 12:36).

"I Will Sup with You"

Revelation 3:20 alludes to several other biblical texts. It is certain that John uses Jesus' words as he spoke of himself as the Good Shepherd in John 10, where he said, "*The sheep hear his voice . . . and the sheep follow him, for they know his voice*" (vv. 3, 4). Those among the Laodicean church, as well, who know the voice of the Great Shepherd will hurry when he comes calling them to open the door so he may enter in.

Jesus also likens faithful believers to "men who are waiting for their master to come home from the wedding feast, so that they may open the door to him at once when he comes and knocks" (Luke 12:36; see also Mark 12:34). When he finds the servants ready, the master himself will "*have them recline at table, and he will come and serve them*" in a feast (Luke 12:37).

G. K. Beale likens this picture of Jesus knocking at the door of the church in Laodicea to the husband knocking on the door of the bedchamber, entreating his wife to open the door to her beloved¹. The parallelism to Song of Songs 5:2 is striking: "*the voice of my beloved, he knocks on the door. Open to me, my beloved*" (*Cantique des Cantiques, by Andre Feuillet*). In the same way, Christ the Bridegroom is entreating the church, his Bride, to resume her full communion with him.

This communion is signified in having supper together, with Christ serving them their food and drink while they recline at the table, reminiscent of the Last Supper. Here,

John's use of the verb *deipneo* ("eat," "sup," "dine") alludes to the Holy Communion instituted by Christ in Luke 22:20 and quoted by Paul in 1 Corinthians 11:20, 21, and 25.

The Promise to Conquerors

In all these seven letters, those who repent, heed Christ's warnings, and continue to hold fast to that which has been revealed in the gospel obtain Jesus' promise that they will "conquer" or "overcome" (Rev. 3:21). The one who "conquers" (*nikao*) describes Jesus conquering the world of sin and death (John 16:33; Rev. 5:5, 17:14).

But it is used as well of Christians who persevere in the faith, those who overcome sin, suffering, persecution, and even death on account of their faith (1 John 2:13, 14, 4:4, 5:4, 5). The book of Revelation is mostly about encouraging Christians in the first century who were going through severe persecution. Christ promises them that after they have conquered they will be granted permission to "*eat of the tree of life, which is in the paradise of God*" (Rev. 2:7), with their conquering Lamb serving them at the table of feasting (Rev 19:6–9).

The Call to Those Who have Ears to Hear

But are not unbelievers present even in the churches? To be sure, the church, the covenant people of God, is made up of true believers and professing believers. Jesus was addressing local churches that have largely become disobedient and apathetic. This was also how God addressed his people Israel when they were disobedient. And even when they were punished, God still called Israel his people, "*My people are destroyed for lack of knowledge*" (Hos. 4:6).

In the same way, in Revelation 3:20, he was addressing the covenant community, the church in Laodicea, who were unrepentant and disobedient, whether they were believers or not. The call to repent

was made to both believers and unbelievers within the church—not to pagans outside the church—those who have "ears to hear" (Rev. 3:22).

Revelation 3:20 then is Jesus' call to the Laodicean church to repent and renew their fellowship with him. This letter is written to their congregation to remind them that they are to renew their relationship with their Lord and Savior Jesus Christ or face judgment. This is how we, two thousand years on this side of the cross, are to heed his call to the church in Laodicea: to be zealous and repent as well.

Conclusion

Is Jesus the Savior waiting and waiting for us to let him in of our own accord? This picture of Jesus the King of the universe as a helpless Savior begging a sinner to let him in is a total absurdity. This is the consequence of making the human will sovereign over God's sovereign will. On account of man's inability and unwillingness to save himself, this poor Savior would really be waiting . . . and waiting . . . and waiting, since no one would open the door to let him in of their own will alone (John 8:47, 10:27; Rom. 3:11, 8:7; 1 Cor. 2:14).

Is the Savior waiting to enter your heart? No, the Bible nowhere says that a person will be saved by letting Jesus "come into my heart." Regeneration is never described in Scripture as Jesus entering a person's heart, but as God softening a hard heart (Ezek. 36:26) or the Lord opening the heart of a sinner (Acts 16:14). Thanks be to God for his great salvation!

1. *New International Greek Testament Commentary: The Book of Revelation*, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999, p. 308

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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