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He Shall Be Great—
John the Baptist

Four Reasons Why
Christ Came to Earth

Barnabas: The
Encourager

Bible Study on
Romans

RYS Convention
2012: Three
Perspectives

Four (More) Reasons
Why Christ Came to
Earth

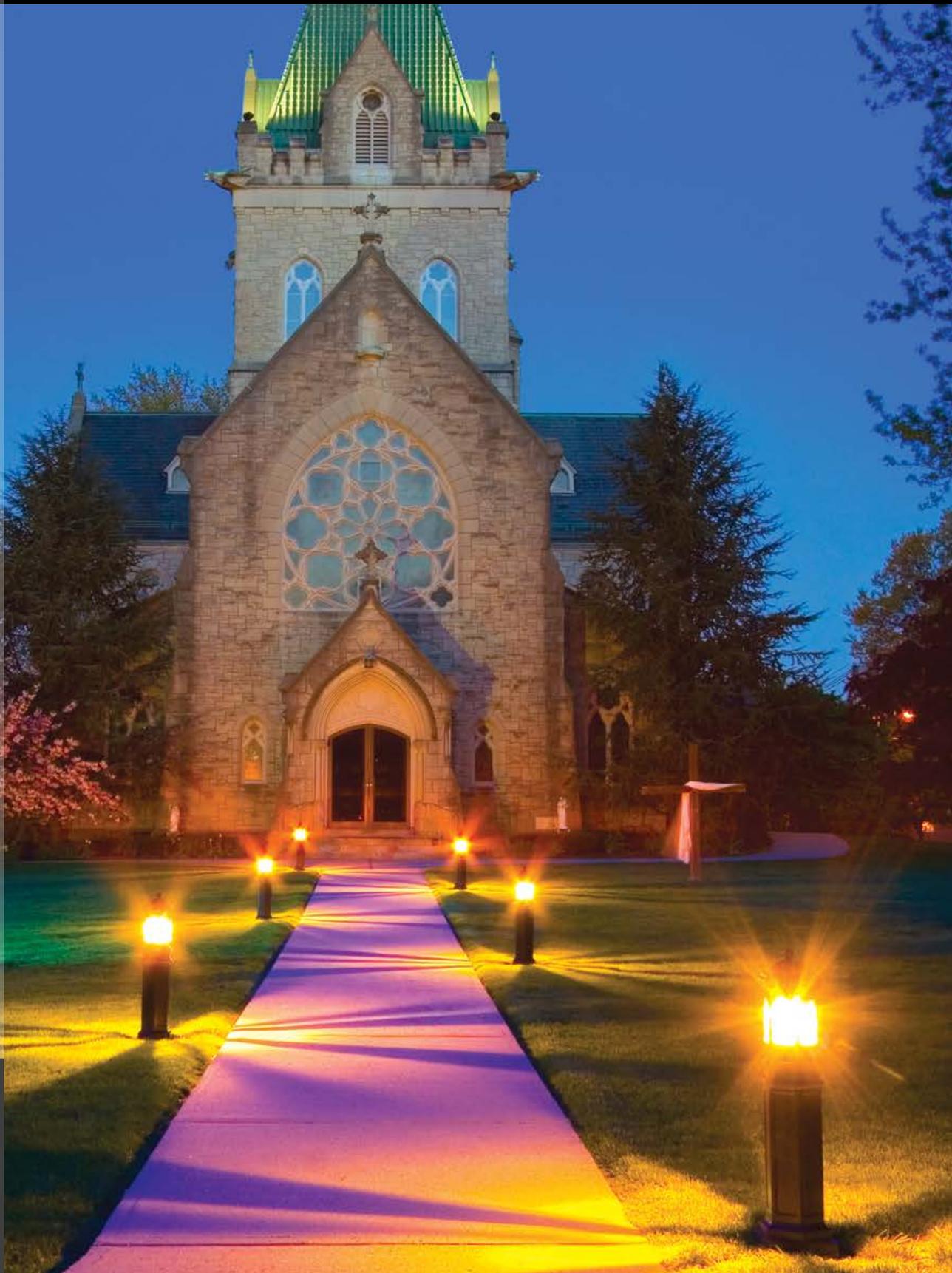
He Shall be
Great—Jesus

Devotionals for
2013

Report: URCNA
Classis Eastern US
Meeting

Index 2012

Today in the city of
David there has been
born for you a Savior,
who is Christ the Lord.
—Luke 2:11



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"Exhorting you to contend earnestly for the faith which was once for all delivered to the saints."
—Jude 3

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**“He will be a joy and delight to you, and many will rejoice because of his birth, for he will be great in the sight of the Lord.”
—Luke 1:14-15**

When the Old Testament prophecy was closed in the day of Malachi some four hundred years before Christ, the prophet had foretold to the people of Israel the coming of two persons. One was the Lord—His name would be Jesus, the promised Messiah. The other was the messenger who would prepare the way of the Lord. His name would be John.

The gospel of Luke begins by telling us how the hope of Israel was finally being realized. The ancient promises were at long last going to be fulfilled.

In the opening chapters of Luke’s gospel we have the delicate blending of these two threads: the promise and birth of the messenger, and the promise and birth of the Messiah. Beautifully they are interwoven as angels announce their imminent births, as the two prospective mothers meet, and as Luke records the Song of Mary and the Song of Zechariah. By beginning his gospel this way, Luke declares that God has renewed His work among His people. His plan is again being taken up in a very direct, very active way. No longer will God be silent.

Herod the Great

The scene is set before us. It was the time of Herod, king of Judea. We so easily read over that, don’t we? We have read these words so often that we fail to understand the significance of them and what they meant to the people of Israel.

This is Herod the Great. He was an Idumean. That means that he was not a descendant of Jacob. His ancestry could be traced back to Esau. He was not a true Jew. Sometime between the Old Testament and the New Testament his ancestors were conquered by the Maccabees. They had been forced to adopt a nominal Judaism. The truth of the matter

remained however—Herod was, pure and simple, a descendant of Esau.

Remember what the Bible tells us in Genesis? Esau hated Jacob. That hatred lasted across the centuries. It still exists today. Who is it that does not want to recognize Israel as a country? It is the descendants of Esau. Why is there so much unrest in the Middle East? It is because the descendants of Esau hate the descendants of Jacob.

Here is another interesting fact: when the twins were born, Esau was born first. And yet the prophecy God had given Rebekah was, “The older will serve the younger.” Esau is the older; Jacob is the younger. According to the prophecy, Esau is supposed to be serving Jacob. However, when the events in the Gospel of Luke are taking place, the line of Jacob is serving the line of Esau.

“It was in the time of Herod, king of Judea . . .” The Israelites had not had a king since their captivity hundreds of years before this. And now, the Land of Promise is ruled by a son of Edom, a descendant of Esau. Truly the scepter had departed from Judah.

Besides that, although he is called Herod the Great, he really was not all that great. Certainly had rebuilt



and enlarged the temple. But he had also built other temples—temples for other gods, the gods of the Gentiles. And because he built them for the Gentiles, the land promised to Israel was swarming with Gentiles just as in the days of Joshua when they first entered the Promised Land.

Another thing Herod the Great had done was appoint Annas and Caiaphas as priests in the temple of the LORD. It was Caiaphas, the high priest, who condemned Jesus to death. But before we even get to that, imagine the humiliation of Israel. A child of Esau had appointed priests to serve in the temple. No wonder the religion of the day had become filled with formalism, and true spirituality seemed have disappeared completely.

Zechariah and Elizabeth

And yet there were some in whose hearts the ancient fire still burned. Luke 1 tells us of two such people: a husband and wife named Zechariah and Elizabeth. Both of them came from the priestly line of Aaron. Both were active in service to the Lord. The only cloud over their happy life together was that they were without children. In the ancient Hebrew culture, being without a child was considered a disgrace and often was viewed as punishment from God.

Even so, in their work and in their lives this elderly couple sought to bring glory to God's name. Even their names represent looking to the promises of God. Zechariah means "Jehovah remembers." Elizabeth means "Jehovah is faithful." Surely God is faithful. He would remember the promises that He gives to His people and send His Messiah.

Zechariah was a priest serving in the temple when he was visited by an angel. Never think that all of this just happened. God ever so carefully, ever so beautifully, orchestrated every

event that led up to the coming of the messenger.

Priests were divided up into twenty-four divisions. Each division would serve at the temple on a rotating basis for two weeks a year. Every day, two priests were chosen to enter the Holy Place. One would go in the morning, the other in the afternoon. They would offer incense on the altar of incense that stood directly before the curtain into the Holy of Holies. Since there were so many priests, lots were cast to see which two priests would serve on any given day. Once a priest was chosen, that would be his turn. He would never be able to go again. This would be the highlight of the priest's life.

By the providence of God, Zechariah was serving in the temple with the rest of the priests in his division. This time, not by chance, but by the direction of God, the lot fell on Zechariah. Understand how incredible this is! It is said that there were eighteen thousand priests in Israel at that time. That means seven hundred fifty priests per division. The odds of the lot falling on you would be one out of 750. Do you see how wonderful our God is? That day the odds of the lot falling on Zechariah were 100 percent. God had chosen him!

With great anticipation and awe Zechariah put on the priestly garments that represented purity. He walked through the temple courts, passing through the crowd of people that had gathered there to pray with him. They would remain in the outer court while he entered into the Holy Place. On his left was the golden lampstand flickering in the darkness. On his right the table of showbread. In front of him stood the golden altar of incense up against the curtain that guarded the Holy of Holies.

He had never done this before. He would never do it again. His heart must have been racing as he lit the incense and offered prayers, interceding on behalf of the people of Israel. His people were under Roman oppression. They had an Edomite as their king.

"O Lord, we are waiting for the ancient promises to be fulfilled. O Lord, we are waiting for the Messiah to come and save your people. Remember us, O great Jehovah. Remember your promises."

"Zechariah! Zechariah!" That was his name; that was his prayer: "Jehovah remember us!"

Scripture also hints that Zechariah had brought the prayers of his home with him. How often he and Elizabeth must have prayed that the Lord would give them a son. Perhaps after praying for the great Deliverer of Israel to come set the people free he looked once more to the altar and to the curtain to whisper a prayer for his wife—that they would have a child. "Yes, Lord, remember Israel. And also remember us."

Suddenly the angel Gabriel appears before him. Gabriel announces the answer to Zechariah's personal prayer: "Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son." This was absolutely incredible. It was unbelievable! Have you ever prayed for something all your life—you are even to the point where you are ready to give up—and then, suddenly, there it is right there in front of you, and you can't believe it?

The four hundred years of silence is broken by God. To say what? To say to Zechariah, "You're going to have a son! In your old age, like Abraham and Sarah, you and Elizabeth will have a son." How absolutely exciting!

Zechariah, whose name means “God remembers”; Elizabeth, whose name means “God is faithful”; and baby John, whose name means “God is merciful.” All are preparing the way for the greatest One of all—the One whose name means: “God saves.”

This is not just an announcement for you, Zechariah. It is not just for Elizabeth. It is more glorious than that. The angel tells Zechariah that his son will “make ready a people prepared for the Lord.” The long-awaited Messiah will come. “And, Zechariah, your son will prepare the way for Him.”

Unbelievable!

That’s exactly what Zechariah says. “How can I be sure of this?”

Every time I read this passage I cannot help but think that Gabriel had to be as astonished by Zechariah’s response as Zechariah was to the news he had heard. The angel replies, “I’m Gabriel. I stand in the presence of God.” Why would anyone ever doubt the message of an angel that stands in the very presence of God Himself?

Indeed, if it is not a shock to the angel, it ought to be to the reader. The people have gathered in the temple. Before they could ever have entered the temple, the necessary sacrifices had to take place on the bronze altar—sacrifices for sin. A confession of sin had to be made, followed by the sin offering on the altar.

Then the people would watch as the priest cleansed himself at the laver before going into the Holy Place. Once cleansed by the water in the laver, the priest would take fire from the bronze altar where the sacrifices had been made and use that fire to light the altar of incense.

As the smoke from the fire that came from the bronze altar rose up from the altar of incense, the priest would pray an intercessory prayer on behalf of the people in the temple, asking God to accept the sacrifices made and forgive them. He would pray that God would provide a Deliverer who would release them from their bondage and that the sin offering on the bronze altar would be accepted by God for the forgiveness of His people.

Having prayed the prayers on behalf of the people, the priest would come and announce that God had heard their prayers. Their sacrifices were accepted; their sins were forgiven. God would remember His promises.

For centuries this was the way it was done. That is what the people expected to hear as Zechariah came out of the temple. Instead, the angel

announced that all the rituals that had been so meticulously done through the centuries were now coming to an end. The Messiah is coming! The King of kings will soon arrive. The One who will free Israel from bondage is on the way!

Poor Zechariah. While God has declared He will no longer be silent, Zechariah was. He had just heard the greatest news that anyone had heard in the last four hundred years. And because of his unbelief, he is struck dumb, unable to tell anyone.

Can you imagine how incredibly frustrating that must have been? Zechariah wanted a sign. God gave him one basically telling Zechariah, “If you won’t believe my gospel, I won’t let you share it with anyone.” When Zechariah returned from the Holy Place and was unable to give the customary priestly blessing, the people knew something out of the ordinary had taken place.

John the Greater

Certainly the announcement of the angel that Zechariah and Elizabeth were going to have a son was good news of great joy. They had waited long for a child. The news was almost too good to be true.

But John’s birth was not to be a source of joy for only Zechariah and Elizabeth. The angel declared that *many* would rejoice because of his birth. There would be widespread rejoicing, because this child would



grow to be great. Maybe he wouldn't have a name like John the Great, but he would be greater than Herod the Great.

His greatness would come not because he would rule over many people; His greatness would come because he would be filled with the Holy Spirit. As the prophet Malachi had foretold, He would go forth in the spirit of Elijah to turn the hearts of the fathers to the children and the disobedient to the wisdom of the just. He would make ready a people prepared to meet the Lord.

If you read the last section of Luke 1, where the child receives his name, you can sense the parents' joy not only in the Song of Zechariah but also in the insistence that his name be John. Friends and family members wanted him to be named after his father. After all, Zechariah was not only a family name but it means "Jehovah remembers." Certainly Jehovah had remembered this elderly couple and blessed them with a son. But Elizabeth insisted his name be John.

The persistent family members took it to a higher authority than the child's mother—the child's father. Much to their surprise he agreed with his wife and wrote on a tablet, "His name is John." It was not open for discussion. An even higher authority than the mother and the father had already named him.

When his mouth is finally opened, Zechariah begins to praise and bless God. While the last words he spoke in the temple were words of doubt, the first words he speaks now are a hymn of assurance.

When everyone had gone home, the three remained: Zechariah, whose name means "God remembers"; Elizabeth, whose name means "God

is faithful"; and baby John, whose name means "God is merciful." All are preparing the way for the greatest One of all—the One whose name means: "God saves."

Conclusion

The story of salvation, as Luke explains it, is an exposition of what God has done for the human race. The angel quoting from Malachi, the silence at the temple, the meaning of the names of the people involved, and the future role of John the Baptist all serve to show us how great the details are that God took in reaching out to save you and me. God didn't just send a Savior; He also sent someone to point the way to the Savior.

We may ask why the Messiah needed a messenger. Why did He need someone to come to prepare the way? Remember what John the Baptist preached—he preached repentance. The people of Israel thought that the Messiah would come to free them from the likes of Herod the Great. He would free them from Roman oppression.

Their need, however, was greater than that, and so they needed a greater deliverer than that. Before the true Savior could come, His way had to be prepared. People had to understand the purpose of His mission. They had to be taught their need. Their true enemy was not Herod the Great. It was the sin they had in their hearts.

True salvation requires repentance from sin. You need to go to the bronze altar and confess your sin—repent of your sins. And then you will be ready to hear about the One who can save you from your sin, that is, the One who is the perfect sin offering for you.

Zechariah understood. Once he got his voice back he sang in Luke 1:76–77,

And you, my child, will be called
a prophet of the Most High;

for you will go on before the Lord
to prepare the way for him,

to give his people the knowledge
of salvation

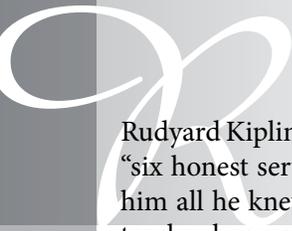
through the forgiveness of their
sins.

John the Baptist prepared the way for the Deliverer by proclaiming repentance, by turning the people's hearts to the Christ. It is through the door of repentance that grace is offered and faith is planted. John would preach repentance. Jesus would preach remission. Jesus would provide the way for a complete remission of all our sins by becoming the acceptable sacrifice to God.

We are called by the forerunner to embrace a new life. We embrace this life not on the basis of our works, but in response to the salvation God has shown to His people—people like all of Israel to whom the promised Deliverer has come, people like Zechariah and Elizabeth to whom He gives a son, people like you and me who are granted the salvation of the Christ who has come.

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Rudyard Kipling called *why* one of the “six honest serving-men” who taught him all he knew. *Why* is a marvelous teacher because it helps us to identify the purposes, reasons, and meaning behind events that we observe. Christ himself frequently employed this “serving man” as he taught about his first coming. Learning the reasons for his advent will help us more deeply celebrate his birth and understand how it is connected with the rest of his life and why it is important for our lives. So why did Christ come to earth? Here are a few reasons.

To Become like His Brethren

“Inasmuch then as the children have partaken of flesh and blood, He Himself likewise shared in the same” (Heb. 2:14; cf. vv. 15–17). Christ came to earth as God to partake of our flesh and blood. This is a profound statement. The baby in the manger had the same human nature as you and I, only without sin. Christ was born as the perfect human. As the perfect man, Christ represents the hope of imperfect men. Sometimes little babies inspire the hope of a fresh start. Much more so *this* little baby.

His incarnation says to us, “You cannot solve your problems on your own. You cannot attain perfection and peace by your own strength. I am what you need.” Christ did not come to earth simply to be our moral example. If he had, he could have come as an angelic being without our flesh and blood. Instead, he came to become like one of us so that he could raise us up to be like him. This purpose of Christ’s coming relates directly to his death, as Hebrews 2 says. Christ came to be like us so that

his death would actually accomplish healing for us.

By faith, when we think of Christ we see ourselves in him. As we glimpse into the manger we can say, “There is my flesh and my blood.” As he grows and matures and continues to do the will of God, we can say, “There is my flesh and my blood.” As he goes to the cross and bleeds and dies, we can say, “There is my flesh and my blood.” When we see Christ seated at the right hand of God the Father Almighty, we can say, “There is my flesh and my blood” (cf. Heidelberg Catechism, Q&A 49). And when we see Christ return on clouds of glory to take us home to be with him we can say, “There is my flesh and my blood.” None of this would be true if Christ had not taken on our flesh and our blood and been born in a crude stable in Bethlehem.

To Bear Witness to the Truth

“Pilate therefore said to Him, ‘Are You a king then?’ Jesus answered, ‘You say rightly that I am a king. For this cause I was born, and for this cause I have come into the world, that I should bear witness to the truth. Everyone who is of the truth hears my voice’” (John 18:37). Christmas is a curious time of year because it tends to bring together people of various backgrounds. Even those who disagree regarding significant truth claims seem to mutually enjoy the so-called “Christmas spirit.” The amazing thing is that Jesus declared to Pilate on a world stage shortly before his death that he came “to bear witness to *the* truth” (and by implication to expose falsehood).

We live in a day where the existence of

truth itself is questioned. Sometimes we may even wonder whether truth matters. When we think about Christ’s coming, we should be considering the truth claims to which Jesus’ birth testifies. He came to testify to the truth that all men are sinners and that God hates sin. But he also came to address the problem of sin through his righteous life and redeeming death. Notice how freeing this truth is. Pilate questions the very existence of truth, and his life bore the fruit of these doubts. He lived in fear of losing his position. He gave deference to the mad requests of the people against his own conscience. He disregarded the sane advice of his wife who urged him to have nothing to do with Jesus’ death. Pilate was in bondage because he didn’t know the truth.

When we look to Christ by faith, we will be overwhelmed by the radical truthfulness of God and the radical deception that is found in each of us. As Paul says in Romans 3:4, “Let God be true but every man a liar.” Jesus said, “The truth will set you free” (John 8:32). Christ came to bear witness to the truth that frees. Have you received his testimony?

To Bring Light to a Dark World

“I have come as a light into the world, that whoever believes in me should not abide in darkness” (John 12:46). There are few things in this world that are more precious to us than light. We take light for granted, but when it’s gone we notice. You may remember the last time you tried to find your way in the darkness. You probably held your arms out in front of you as you groped for something to take hold of (cf. Acts 17:27).

The world into which Jesus came was dark. There was little true religion being practiced, even by God's people. The religious leaders had become little more than legalistic life coaches. A pagan nation, Rome, ruled over much of the world. Men and women lived without a light to guide them.

Every person is conceived into this world under this same darkness. We can't see which way to go because of our spiritual darkness. We can't make sense of our lives until the light of Christ shines into our hearts, leading us to God.

How appropriate that the birth of Christ was marked by a bright star and bright lights. The shepherds were watching their flocks by night. All of a sudden, in the midst of this darkness, "an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them" (Luke 2:9). Later, the magi were directed to Jesus by a bright star (Matt. 2:1–12).

A more glorious light accompanied Jesus' life and ministry. The apostle John says that when the Word became flesh he beheld his glory (John 1:14). Shortly before his death Jesus said, "A little while longer the light is with you . . . while you have the light believe in the light, that you may become sons of the light" (John 12:35–36). In this same context, Jesus says, "If I am lifted up I will draw all peoples to myself" (John 12:32). When Christ was born, the light fell, as it were, from heaven. As Christ ministered throughout his earthly life, the light was held close to the ground. But when that light was lifted up, it shone for all to see! On the cross the spotlight of God was shining on his justice and love.

To Save Sinners

"This is a faithful saying and worthy of all acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am chief" (1 Tim. 1:15). The first coming of Christ was the implementation of a rescue plan

conceived in the mind of God from eternity past. He did not come to promote holiday cheer. He did not come to boost end-of-year sales or to be the central figure in a nativity scene. He came to save sinners. Paul recognizes who that sinner is when he says, "I am the chief of sinners." It's not enough to say that Christ came to save sinners. Each of us needs to affirm that Christ came to save sinners—and that I'm one of them!

Several years ago I sat next to the bed of a man who was in his last years in a nursing home. As we talked about his life, he began to painfully recall some of the sins he had committed. Beginning to weep, he blurted out, "I'm such a terrible sinner. I'm such a terrible sinner." I said to him, "That's wonderful!" He looked at me as if I had misunderstood him so I explained: "You *are* a terrible sinner. But that's wonderful because it was exactly for people like you that Christ came to earth."

Paul doesn't just say that he is a *terrible* sinner. He says he's the *worst*. Isn't he exaggerating? No. Paul refuses to focus on the greatness of the sin of others. He will look only at his own sin. If he had been the only sinner in the world, Christ would still have had to shed every drop of that precious blood to save him.

Great sinners need a great Savior. And that is exactly what Christ is. Christ, says Hebrews 7:25, is able to save to the uttermost—that is, completely! If he can save a Paul who was a blasphemer and a murderer, then he can be a Savior to you. Are you a flesh-and-blood sinner in need of the light of God's truth? Then Christmas is for you.

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**“Joseph, a Levite from Cyprus, whom the apostles called Barnabas (which means Son of Encouragement), sold a field he owned and brought the money and put it at the apostles’ feet.”
—Acts 4:36–37**

When the Old Testament prophecy One of the great blessings God brings into our lives is encouragement. The way God confers that blessing on us is typically through a person who knows how to encourage us. Some Christians have a unique gift of encouraging others. The Bible calls encouraging a spiritual gift (Romans 12:8, NKV). In the molding of our character, in the development of our abilities and talents, in helping us to attain success or to cope with failures and disappointments, and in living a godly life, a great deal of credit often belongs to those persons who have encouraged us along the way.

We may think first of our own parents, who, if they were devout believers in Christ, have probably had the greatest impact on the direction of our lives, especially when we were young and growing up. Once we get married, it is our spouses who typically become our greatest encouragers. In addition to those individuals, we can perhaps also think of others whose encouragement has made a lasting impact on us: a pastor, teacher, friend, coach, counselor, or fellow church member.

The Bible also provides some great examples of encouragers. No doubt, the greatest of them all is our Savior and Lord, Jesus Christ. What person can equal Him in giving us the encouragement we need to “run with perseverance the race set before us” (Heb. 12:1)? Besides Christ, however, Scripture also singles out others who were great spiritual encouragers. One of them even received a nickname in that regard. His name was Barnabas. *Barnabas* meant “son of encouragement.”

Who Was Barnabas?

We first read of Barnabas in Acts 4:36–37: “Joseph, a Levite from Cyprus, whom the apostles called Barnabas (which means Son of Encouragement), sold a field he owned and brought the money and put it at the apostles’ feet.” These verses indicate that Barnabas was not his birth name. His real name was Joseph. He was a Jew, from the tribe of Levi, who hailed from the Mediterranean island of Cyprus. Thus he was one of the dispersed Jews of that time who resided outside the land of Palestine.

However, Joseph had come to Jerusalem. There he became a Christian when the early New Testament church began. He may well have become a believer in Jesus on the day of Pentecost, when over three thousand Jews and proselytes were converted and baptized. Soon he became a key figure in the early church—a leader, a preacher, a teacher, and a missionary. The book of Acts even calls him an apostle alongside of Paul (Acts 14:14), though he was not one of the twelve apostles.



However, the quality for which Joseph will always be remembered more than any other, an attribute that sparkled like a jewel in his life, was his ability to encourage others. He shone so much with that virtue that the early church even gave him a special name, Barnabas. Older Bible translations use the word *consolation*—Barnabas, “the son of consolation.” The Greek word behind *consolation* or *encouragement* is also used of the Holy Spirit in John 14:16, where Jesus assured His disciples that He would ask the Father to send them “another Comforter (or “another Counselor”) to be with you forever, the Spirit of truth.”

Literally, the Greek word for *comforter* or *counselor* means “one who is called to stand next to.” That is what a comforter does for someone in sorrow or distress. The term *counselor* is broader and designates one who stands next to us to lead and guide us. Perhaps the best English term for one who stands next to us is *encourager*, because it covers all the circumstances where we need someone to help us. Barnabas was an encourager in that broadest sense of the word. In fact, the New Testament shows his ministry of encouragement in a variety of ways. Let us note four situations where he was truly a “Son of Encouragement.”

An Encourager of the Materially Needy

The first time we read of Barnabas in the book of Acts, he is singled out as a Christian who show a special concern for the needy members of the early church. Acts 4:37 tells us that he “sold a field he owned and brought the money and put it at the apostles’ feet.” Acts 4 indicates that this money was given to help the poor members of the Jerusalem church, of which there were apparently quite a few. Acts 2:44 states that “all the believers . . . had everything in common. Selling their possessions and goods, they gave to anyone as he had need.” Acts 4 tells us that from time to time the Jerusalem Christians who owned land or houses would sell them and give the proceeds to the apostles, who would distribute the money to those in the church who were needy.

These benevolent acts were not some sort of forced communism. They were voluntary gifts of love for fellow church members who were poor. It should also be noted that there was no government assistance of welfare programs for the poor in those times. The poor were very dependent on the generosity and kind assistance of others in their community. What better community to show that generosity and offer that assistance is there than the church?

Barnabas is singled out as one of those who show such Christian kindness. Apparently he had some wealth, but he willingly sold a field he owned and gave the proceeds to the church to help its poorer members. This is the first indication of what kind of person he was—a man who thought not first about himself, but about others and their needs. Acts 11:24 specifically mentions this quality of Barnabas, as it calls him there “a good man.” When Barnabas helped those in material need, he did not do so to win their

praise. He was imitating Christ. In so doing, he was an encourager to the believers.

Christians today must remember the poor and needy among them as well. Some of us have been more richly blessed materially than others. We must remember those who have to struggle financially, who can barely make ends meet, and help them out with an encouraging gift, willingly and generously offered, not to win praise of men, but to imitate Christ. Galatians 6:2 exhorts Christians to “carry each other’s burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ.” That was the spirit of Barnabas, and his ministry of encouragement, and it is the mark of a loving Christian, a caring church, and a true encourager today.

An Encourager of the Spiritually Needy

Barnabas, however, was also an encourager of the spiritually needy—that is, of those who were young in faith and new believers in the Lord Jesus Christ. This comes out especially in his ministry in the church of Antioch. As the early church expanded beyond Jerusalem, Judea, and Samaria, a new Christian church was established in the city of Antioch. It consisted not only of Jewish converts but also of Gentile converts.

But they had no experienced leaders among them. Thus, when the apostles in Jerusalem heard about this new, fledgling group in Antioch, whom did they send to help them? They decided to send Barnabas to minister to them. They could not have sent a more suitable man, because he was an encourager. That is what new Christians need! “When he (Barnabas) arrived and saw the evidence of the grace of God, he was glad and *encouraged* them all to remain true to the Lord with all their hearts” (Acts 11:23, emphasis added). Through his faithful and dedicated work of preaching, teaching, and

guiding, Barnabas encouraged these new believers to remain committed to Christ. We must remember that they lived in a pagan society, which was hostile to their newfound faith.

The disciples were first called Christians in Antioch (Acts 11:26). But they were not given that label out of respect or honor. Nor was it a neutral name, as it may be in our world today, simply describing one’s religious affiliation. Rather, in Antioch it was a mock word, like the label *right-wing extremists* which secularists often give for Bible-believing Christians in our day. The new believers in Antioch could easily fall away from the faith and return to their former pagan beliefs and ways. But by his diligent instruction in the truths of the gospel and his constant spiritual encouragement, Barnabas helped these new Christians to remain true to Christ. It seems most of them certainly did, for the church in Antioch multiplied in numbers and grew in faith and knowledge.

Such encouragement of new believers is still essential today. There are Christians among us who have a special ability to teach and encourage new converts to remain true to the Lord. They know how to help them face the temptation of forsaking Christ and the church. They know how to stand beside them in their spiritual struggles and disappointments. They know how to teach them and deepen in them a knowledge of God’s Word.

This remains one of the chief callings of Christian parents as they rear their children in the grace and knowledge of Christ. They also are called to be spiritual encouragers, who constantly guide, warn, and instruct their children in a loving yet firm way to remain true to Christ as they grow up in a world hostile to their faith. All Christians must encourage one another at all times to persevere in the faith “once for all delivered to the saints” (Jude 3).

An Encourager of Church Leaders

The New Testament indicates that Barnabas was truly a “son of encouragement” in a third manner. He was that also by interestingly being a “father of encouragement,” that is, a spiritual father to future leaders in the church and kingdom of God. This is evident from Barnabas’s special relationship to one of the church’s greatest leaders and missionaries of all time, the apostle Paul. Behind the rise of this “spiritual giant” stood another “spiritual giant.”

The story of Paul’s conversion on the road to Damascus is well known. But it is important to remember what happened to Paul after his conversion. The leaders of the early church did not trust Paul initially after his conversion, for he had been a fierce persecutor of the Christians. When Paul went to Jerusalem and tried to join the disciples, the church leaders were understandably afraid of him and wondered if he was truly one of them.

Barnabas came to Paul’s aid. Acts 9 indicates that it was Barnabas who introduced Paul to the apostles and convinced them that Paul was indeed a changed man, a genuine disciple of Christ, so that they all accepted him as a Christian brother. Thereafter Paul went back to his hometown of Tarsus for a time, while Barnabas went Antioch. After the church at Antioch had grown considerably under the ministry of Barnabas, he thought again of that capable, potential Christian leader—Paul. So Barnabas went to Tarsus, found Paul, and persuaded him to come with him to Antioch and become his coworker there. The encourager knew Paul’s abilities and was ready to use them. And this was the beginning of an important relationship between the two of them.

Soon after this, Barnabas and Paul were sent out by the church of

Antioch on a missionary journey. We refer to it as Paul’s first missionary journey because it was the first of three he made. Yet we must not forget that it was Barnabas who had been his teacher and encourager. Barnabas receded into the background as Paul came to stand in the foreground.

How blessed the church was, and continues to be, to have those who discern and know how to encourage others to serve Christ with their gifts and abilities. Teachers, pastors, and others have been greatly used by God—not only in their own ministries but also by their encouragement of others—to follow them in the ministry and service of Christ and His kingdom.

An Encourager of Those Who Have Failed

We must note yet one more way in which Barnabas was truly an encourager. Barnabas was an encourager not only of those who came to serve Christ effectively but also of those who failed the Lord and His church at some point and needed to be restored to service. Barnabas gave persons like Paul not only a first chance to prove themselves but also a second chance if they did not succeed the first time.

A young man by the name of John Mark (also called simply John or Mark) was a cousin of Barnabas. He had gone along with Barnabas and Paul on their first missionary journey, but after a relatively short time Mark gave up and left them. He could not or would not continue the work. After Paul and Barnabas had returned to Antioch from their first missionary journey and were ready to embark on a second one, they got into an argument. Barnabas wanted to take John Mark along with them again, but Paul did not (Acts 15:36–40). In fact, Barnabas and Paul disagreed so strongly over this that they parted company themselves. Paul took another companion, Silas,

with him, while Barnabas took John Mark with him to work in Cyprus. Except for a few passing references, that is the last we hear of Barnabas in the New Testament. We can be sure that he remained a faithful servant of Christ to his dying day. Despite his disagreement with Paul, he and Paul no doubt remained steadfast brothers and friends.

I have always admired Barnabas for sticking up for John Mark and being willing to give him another chance. It shows again the nature of a true encourager. Just as I wonder what Paul would have become without Barnabas, I wonder what would have happened to John Mark if Barnabas, like Paul, had given up on him. As it turned out, John Mark became a faithful servant of Christ, too, who later wrote the second Gospel in the New Testament.

What we can learn from Barnabas is to be patient and encouraging with those who may fail, who may for one reason or other be unable or unwilling to continue their service. Was this quality not true of our Lord Jesus Himself? He did not give up on His servants who had failed Him. Think of Peter who had denied Him. Yet Christ restored Peter to his office as an apostle. How wonderful is the encouragement of our Savior for all of us sinners who have failed Him. Christ is still willing to receive us, renew us, and reuse us for His service. Barnabas reflected Him Who is the supreme Son of Encouragement, our Lord Jesus Christ. Let us strive to be such sons and daughters of encouragement as well.

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Bible Studies on Romans

Lesson 15: The Price of Freedom

Romans 6:15–23

Rev. Wybren
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Years ago I wrote a sermon entitled “Jesus the Slave Owner.” While the sermon was well received, people were appalled by the title. We like our independence; we like our freedom. While we freely confess that our only comfort in life and death is that we belong, body and soul, to our faithful Savior Jesus Christ, we refuse to be slaves to anyone.

And yet the simple truth is that we are slaves. Paul writes to believers, “You used to be slaves to sin” (v. 17) and, “You have become slaves to righteousness” (v. 18). This was Paul’s response to those who thought they did not need to change their lifestyles once they became followers of Jesus Christ. In the first half of this chapter Paul responds to those who would ask, “Shall we go on sinning that grace may increase?” In the second half of this chapter Paul responds to those who would ask, “Shall we sin because we are no longer under the law?” To both he exclaims, “By no means!”

Slavery

While the concept of slavery may be somewhat foreign to us, it was not so to the original readers of Paul’s epistles. Today we abhor slavery because of the atrocities that took place in the southern states. The kind of slavery that we are familiar with is similar to that in Rome where the army would capture an enemy, transport him to Rome, and then sell him on the auction block. Such slaves

were considered chattel and were often horribly mistreated.

An older, more common type of slavery was that of voluntary indenture. Those who were very poor would offer themselves up as slaves to someone who, in turn, would provide them with food and housing. People would willingly accept the role of slavery to have someone provide for their basic needs. The Bible repeatedly gives instruction as to how slaves are to be properly treated and, after six years in service, released from their bondage.

There were times when those who were slaves knew they had it pretty good. They had clothes on their backs, food on their tables, and a place to call home where they could raise a family. When their term expired, all of those things would disappear. At that time, a slave could volunteer to remain with his master. If the master agreed, he would pierce the earlobe of the slave. Either the piercing would leave a permanent scar or some type of earring would be placed in the ear indicating that the former slave wanted to belong to this particular master his whole life long.

The Roman Empire was heavily dependent on slaves to provide hard labor and perform menial tasks. Approximately one-third of Rome’s population consisted of slaves. Even as Pharaoh feared the ever increasing number of Israelites living in Goshen (Exodus 1:10), so also the Romans citizens feared a rebellion if the slave

population came to realize their numeric strength. In addition to the slaves, there were many free men in Rome who had once been slaves. Some commentaries propose that well over half the church in Rome consisted of slaves. Indeed, then, every member in that church was keenly aware of what slavery was all about and keenly aware of what Paul was writing about in this chapter.

Masters

Even though we may consider slavery to be far removed from us, it is much closer than we think. Many people are slaves and don’t even know it! To others it is very clear that they are slaves to alcohol, tobacco, pornography, or some other vice. Others are slaves to their jobs or their possessions. The simple truth is that we are all slaves to whatever it is that dominates our lives. We are either slaves to sin, which leads to death; or slaves to obedience, which leads to righteousness. You either serve the devil or you serve Jesus Christ.

Jesus said, “No man can serve two masters; for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to one and despise the other” (Matt. 6:24). While we would not want to disagree with the words of Jesus, we may find this a difficult illustration to understand. After all, an individual is certainly capable of holding down two jobs in a satisfactory manner. As long as he works the allotted hours

and completes the tasks assigned to him, no employer should complain.

What Jesus refers to here, however, and what Paul picks up on in Romans 6, is the master-slave relationship. This is much more than an employer-employee relationship; this is the relationship the slave has with his master. By definition a master has total control over his slave. The slave is owned and completely controlled by his master. It is not only difficult but it is also impossible to serve two masters faithfully and to be equally and wholly devoted to both. Sooner or later, life will boil down to loving one master while hating the other.

Spiritually speaking, we are slaves to one of two masters:

1. *We are slaves to sin.* In the opening chapters of Romans, Paul has described for us the horrible state into which we are born. We are born into bondage to sin through Adam. Many people view this bondage as freedom. Once free from religion, they think

they can do all the things that they were once prohibited by the “do’s” and “don’ts” of the Ten Commandments. This was the type of “freedom” that the Serpent offered Eve in the garden of Eden. He argued that Eve should not be bound by the words of God. Instead, he suggested she and her husband eat from the forbidden tree so that they could be free to discern for themselves that which was good and that which was evil. Ever since the fall, the human race has wanted the freedom to discern for ourselves right from wrong (see Isa. 5:20–24).

Paul rightly asks what benefit those in bondage to sin reap. He points out three aspects that the “wages” of their sin produces. First of all, sin creates a downward spiral in a person’s life that will lead to increasing wickedness (v. 19). The innocent first glance becomes the prolonged look that leads to addiction. After that come the guilt and the shame that wreak their heavy

toll on the body. Finally, the end result of the “freedom” offered by Satan and sin is death. What a hopeless slavery!

2. *We are slaves to righteousness.* Thanks be to God that Christ has delivered us from the power of the devil! To be redeemed by God through Christ means that we have been bought out of our miserable slavery to sin and brought into righteousness. God has made us His possession. It cost Him His Son. Through His death and resurrection, Christ has laid claim on our lives. He is our new Master, and we have become His servants. In other words, instead of being slaves to the devil, we have been made slaves to Christ.

There are many who will say that Christ is a much harder taskmaster than Satan. After all, the devil comes with all kinds of alluring promises, entices us with all kinds of worldly goods, and lets us do all kinds of things. Christ, on the other hand, has rules to follow and expects followers to keep themselves unspotted from



the world. Moreover, we are to walk the narrow path. Jesus spoke of oppression, self-denial, sacrifices, and persecution.

The devil can make sin look delightful and enjoyable before we yield to temptation. Once we have committed the sinful act he drags us into, however, the miserable consequences will attack us without mercy. There are very few high school students who start drinking with the intention of becoming alcoholics. Very few people enter a casino intending to refinance their homes to feed their gambling addictions. Very few brides walk down the aisle thinking, “In ten years, I’m going to dump this bum.” Serving the devil will bring you there! Serving Christ, on the other hand, fills a person’s life with lasting joy and

is always rewarding. It is an act of liberty and love.

Choose You This Day Whom You Will Serve

Paul asked the church in Galatia the following question: “Now that you know God—or rather are known by God—how is it that you are turning back to those weak and miserable principles? Do you wish to be enslaved by them all over again?” (Gal. 4:9). Paul saw the difference between the two masters. One master, the devil, leads to eternal death. The other Master, Jesus, leads to eternal life.

How absolutely incredible is the grace of God. While we were in bondage to Satan, God sent His Son into this world to die for the sins of His people. Through the Holy Spirit, God calls us to be His people—to be the very ones for whom His Son paid the penalty for sin. It is not because we in any way have merited His kindness; it is sheer grace.

We must run, as a people freed from bondage, to Christ to have our ears pierced by Him. As we become His slaves, we discover that while we *must* serve God, being a slave to righteousness is fills us with the *desire* to serve Him. No longer does the believer view the Law as something that we are under obligation to fulfill as duty. Rather it has become the means by which we express our thanksgiving to God for the grace He has shown. Thereby we not only acknowledge Jesus Christ as our Savior but we also readily receive Him as the Lord of our lives. Serving Him becomes our focus and our joy. Interestingly, it is only by being a slave to Christ that we truly become free. Joyfully serving Him leads to love, righteousness, and the free gift of eternal life. “If the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed” (John 8:36).

Points to Ponder and Discuss

1. What images come to your mind when you think about slavery?
2. How is the image of slavery appropriate for our relationship either to sin or to righteousness?
3. What happens when we are slaves to sin?
4. What happens when we are slaves to righteousness?
5. How do you react to the Christian as a slave?
6. How can someone possibly be happy being a slave to anything or anyone?
7. How would you describe the differences between being obligated to keep God’s law, keeping the law to earn God’s favor, and doing good in thanksgiving to God?
8. What is the significance in the words *wages* and *gift* in verse 23?
9. What do we have to be thankful for? What part did God have in this? What part do you have in this?

Bible Studies on Romans

Lesson 16: What Good Is the Law?

Romans 7

Rev. Wybren
Oord

So far, in writing this Bible study on the book of Romans, I have found most of the commentaries I have used to be in basic agreement with one another. There have been some minor differences, but they usually arrived at the same conclusions. To most writers Paul has been very clear in his logic. Romans 7, however, has commentaries going off in a variety of directions. Some use it to establish rules for marriage, divorce, and remarriage. Others use it as an illustration of how perfection can be attained in this lifetime. Differences include everything from opinions on whom the deceased husband represents to what period of life Paul refers to in his struggle with sin.

Since Paul's logic has been very straightforward for the past six chapters, it stands to reason that he would not suddenly deviate into foreign ground. He has been writing about how all are guilty of sin and how those who believe in Christ are freed from sin. He has just finished a chapter on how the believer is dead to sin and is made alive in Christ. Eternal life comes as a gift of grace from God through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Those who knew the law, however, saw *it* as a gift from God. Amid the thunder and lightning at Mount Sinai, God had given the law to the Israelites after delivering them from bondage. They had been set free from slavery to Egypt and given instructions as to how they should live by the One who had freed them. The law set them apart from the godless people around them.

Even though the law was a source of pride for the Israelites, it became a heavy burden for them. The Pharisees had made sure of that. They had piled precept on precept. Their code of ethics went far beyond that which was required by God. Still, every attempt had to be made to gain the favor of God through obedience to God's law. Paul argued that believers have been released from the law's condemning hold on them. For Paul to claim that justification and redemption came apart from the law was a totally foreign concept to them. Was the law, then, of no value whatsoever?

The Law and Separation

Just as Paul had used the analogy of slavery in the previous chapter, in this chapter Paul begins by using marriage as an illustration of how the Christian is free from the law. In marriage, a husband and wife are bound to each other for life. Should the wife marry another man while the husband is alive, she becomes an adulteress. However, once the husband has died, she is released from the marriage bond and free to marry the other man.

Paul does not write these words to introduce us to new rules for behavior in marriage. Paul takes an already existing pattern to explain how believers are no longer subject to the law. Several commentaries try to associate one of the characters in the illustration with a counterpart. For some the husband is the law, the wife is the church or the Christian. When

the husband dies, the wife is free to remarry; therefore, when the law dies the Christian is no longer bound by the law but is now married to Christ. These explanations fall apart because the law does not die. It is in full force within the illustration in that the woman does not remarry until her husband dies, as required by the law. In fact, Paul goes on to explain that the "law is holy, the commandment is holy, righteous, and good" (7:12). It is alive and well. In addition, it is the believer who has died to sin and has risen in Christ (6:2).

The problem arises when we try to make this an allegory instead of a simple illustration. Paul uses this to illustrate that the law can only apply to living people. Once a person dies, there can be freedom from the law. Therefore, when one has died in Christ, he is raised up with Christ into newness of life. Such a person is no longer bound to the law.

At the same time, Paul hints that such freedom can lead a person into a new relationship. Just as the widowed woman could establish a relationship with another man and even bear fruit, so also the Christian is enabled to do good works. In the newness of life, the Christian is no longer bound by the sinful passions aroused by the law. Instead, his desire is to bear good fruit through the Holy Spirit's work in his life.

The Law and Sin

Simply because the Christian has died to sin does not mean that the law is now abolished for the Christian, nor does it make the law evil. The simple truth is that the law reveals and exposes sin. The Heidelberg Catechism puts it very well. Question 3 asks, “How do you come to know your misery?” The answer is this: “The law of God tells me.” Paul writes, “I would not have known what sin was except through the law” (v. 7).

Left to themselves, very few people think of themselves as evil. Recently I was teaching some of the distinctions of the Reformed faith to a class of new believers. They were more than willing to agree that we are all totally depraved. When we got to the teaching of limited atonement, I asked the class if they thought Jesus died for everyone. They were pretty much in agreement that Jesus died for all people everywhere until I wrote the name Adolph Hitler on the board. There was an audible gasp. Did Jesus die for him? “Of course not,” came the reply.

I asked, “Why not?”

“Because he was evil!” one person in the room answered.

“Aren’t you?”

“Not that evil!”

I gave another example of a young man who decades ago was arrested for luring pre-teen boys into his home, where he killed them and ate them. “Did Christ die for him?” Then I told of how this man was converted to Christ while in prison. Before God, the sins of Adolph Hitler and the young man in prison are no greater than our sins. “For whoever keeps the whole law and yet stumbles at just one point is guilty of breaking all of it” (James 2:10). It takes the law of God to show us that our hearts are only evil all the time (Gen. 6:5).

Not only does the law expose our sin but it also provokes us to sin. The public high school I attended in the late sixties was well aware of the drug culture that was sweeping across the continent. On a regular basis the school would hold assemblies for the students to show films and give lectures on the horror of hallucinatory drugs. The trouble was that we heard it so often that many of the young students became curious and started experimenting with drugs.

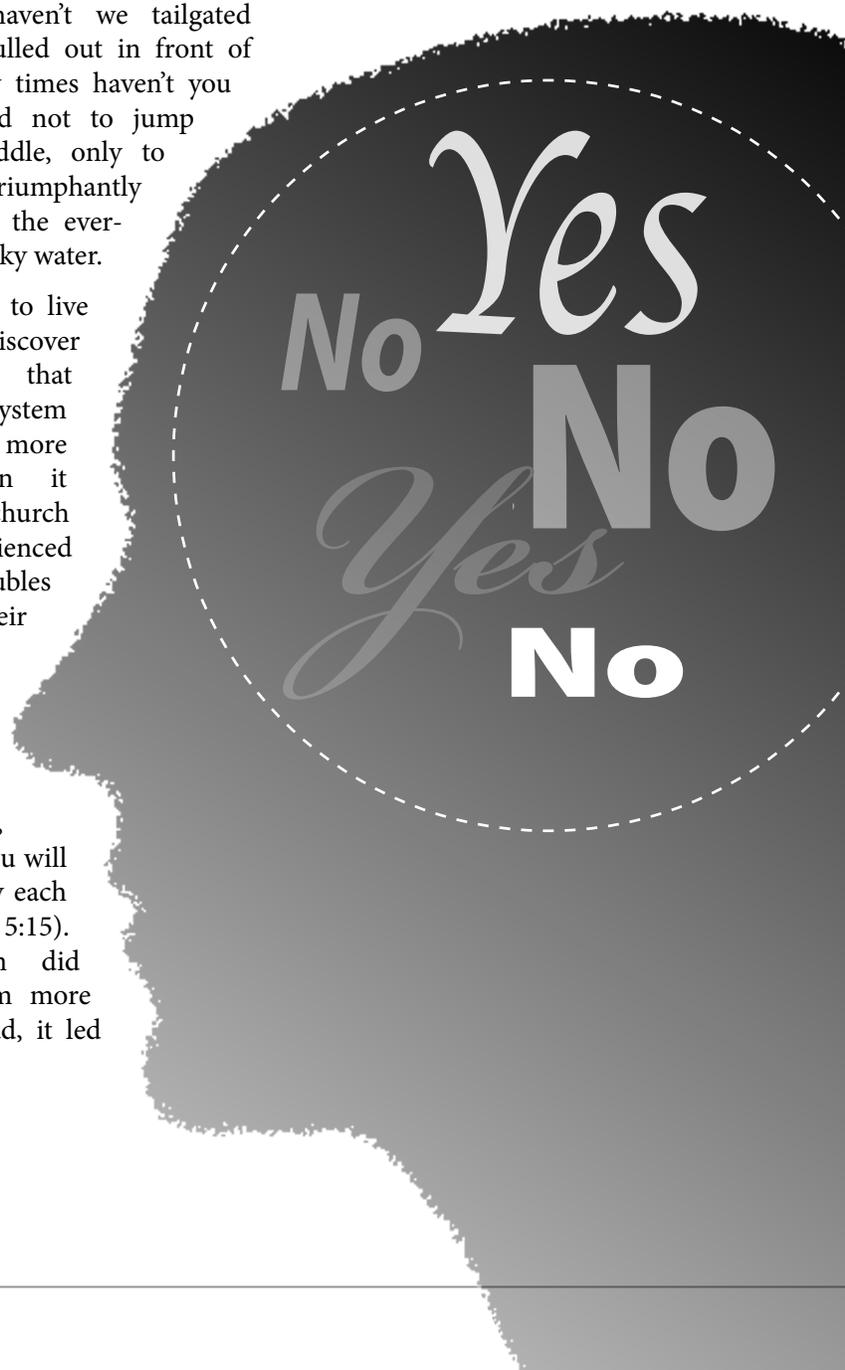
Something within our very nature wants to rebel against the law. How many times haven’t we been tempted to touch the wet paint simply because the sign said, “Do not touch”? How many times haven’t we tailgated the car that pulled out in front of us? How many times haven’t you told your child not to jump in a mud puddle, only to see her triumphantly splash through the ever-deepening, murky water.

Those who try to live by the law discover very quickly that their legalistic system develops more problems than it resolves. The church in Galatia experienced all kinds of troubles because of their legalistic ideas. Paul wrote, “If you keep on biting and devouring each other, watch out or you will be destroyed by each other” (Gal. 5:15). Their legalism did not make them more spiritual. Instead, it led them into sin.

The Law and Self

Paul then goes on to describe the Christian conflict (vv. 14–24). These verses have caused great debates among Bible scholars. As Paul writes about desiring to do good and yet finding himself doing evil instead, is he writing about the unbeliever, his life as a Pharisee before his conversion, his life as a mature Christian, or is he describing the life of a carnal Christian?

Because Paul writes in the present tense, it seems best to read these words as an explanation of the struggle Paul deals with every day of his Christian life. Prior to



conversion, a person would not be concerned about the law nor seek to please God. Nor is Paul reflecting back on when he was a Pharisee. At that time he prided himself in keeping the law and considered himself faultless by legalistic standards (Phil. 3:4–6). Finally, carnal Christians would not understand the struggle that Paul describes in these verses. These verses are a self-portrait of a man who loves the law of God and longs to serve God but finds himself continually falling short of his goal. What true Christian who seeks to serve God has not experienced the very struggle of which Paul writes?

This is the struggle between the old nature and the new nature. When God calls us to be Christians, He calls us to a lifetime struggle against sin. In these verses, Paul wants us to feel the struggle that each Christian goes through as we battle against that old nature.

It is the old nature that not only desires to sin but also seeks to

convince us that we can save ourselves and that we are able to please God. I have met people who use these verses (and especially v. 25) to argue that perfection can be attained prior to the grave. I once even met a man who told me he had not sinned for seven weeks. The simple truth is that it is an impossible battle. We cannot win this on our own. A true understanding of the law convicts us again and again that we have failed.

The Law and Salvation

God's purpose for giving the law was to reveal His will to the Israelites and to prove to them, over a period of fifteen hundred years, that they could not save themselves by keeping the law. That is true for us as well. The struggle against the old nature actually becomes a positive thing because it leads us to the cross. As we realize that we are unable to keep the law perfectly, it points us to the one place where salvation can be found. It is only in the sacrifice of Jesus Christ!

Even though we are dead to sin, the struggle against sin continues throughout the entire life of the

Christian. That is not what we want to hear today. All too often when we hear conversion stories at mission rallies the speaker is someone who lived a horrible life before coming to Christ. Once he was converted, however, everything in his life turned around. It is a wonderful, positive, and motivational fund-raising speech. But the life of the Christian is anything but easy. Paul certainly bore the marks of Christ (Gal. 6:17). Yet he could write, "I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us" (Rom. 8:18). Such good news caused Paul to burst out in the doxology, "Thanks be to God-through Jesus Christ our Lord!" May that be our doxology as well!

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Points to Ponder and Discuss

1. How does Paul use the illustration of a marriage between husband and wife?
2. In the first "marriage" in Paul's illustration, to whom was the Christian once married? Was that an easy or difficult marriage? How did it end?
3. In the second "marriage," to whom are you now married? Is it an easy or difficult marriage? Will it end?
4. What use of the law does Paul explain here?
5. How does the law expose our sin?
6. In what ways has an awareness of sin created more temptation in your life?
7. Describe the Christian conflict between the two natures.
8. Can we go without the law? What is our relationship to the law now?

The heat and humidity of Georgia did not detract from the enthusiasm and excitement of 812 teens and sponsors who converged at Covenant College on picturesque Lookout Mountain. This was the site of the 2012 Reformed Youth Services Convention, which took place from July 22 to July 27. It was another amazing convention, organized for our youth by the RYS director, Ed De Graaf, and the dedicated convention committee. “Soar Like Eagles” was the theme of this convention, a theme taken from Isaiah 40:31 which states, “But those who hope in the LORD will renew their strength. They will soar on wings like eagles; they will run and not grow weary, they will walk and not be faint.”

Rev. Wybren Oord, a pastor from Trinity URC in Lethbridge, Alberta,

was one of the key speakers, leading three of the five main sessions that everyone attends. These inspiring sessions focused on what it takes to soar like an eagle. In the first session, we were instructed to wait on the Lord, even while on life’s difficult paths. Rev. Oord’s second session encouraged us to go to Jesus to obtain true wisdom, the wisdom and power of God. Finally, we were comforted by the reminder that God knows all things and that we are His children under His care. This last session gave a message of reassurance, hope, and conviction to soar. Rev Oord is a gifted speaker, and he kept the students’ attention easily with a mixture of his own brand of humor and the compelling biblical truths he declared. I am not just saying this because Rev. Oord is the editor of *The*

Outlook, nor am I saying it because he is also the minister in my home church. He knows how to engage young people with sincerity, truth and laughter. He even flew in his own Eagle mascot!

Rev. William Godfrey is the pastor in Grace URC in Torrance, California, and he was the second main speaker. Rev. Godfrey took a different approach to this theme and passage, zeroing in on the word *weary*. He first directed us to Malachi, where God describes himself as being weary of worship that is not pleasing to Him. He presented some disturbing statistics of youth leaving the church and stressed the importance of true worship. This was an important message for our youth to hear as they grow up in a world filled with churches seeking to entertain the masses rather than honor God. In Rev.



Godfrey's next session he encouraged the young people not to grow weary of doing good. He spoke of the need for prayer and the proper use of the Word and sacraments to help us in this life. He clearly pointed us to Jesus, who conquered sin and death. Rev. Godfrey's style was straightforward, and he enabled us to hear the clear gospel call. RYS was blessed with two main speakers who both encouraged and uplifted those present.

It was truly a joy to experience the singing at the RYS convention. Julie Bussis selected beautiful hymns and songs with biblical words. Julie, Rip Pratt, and Brent Cooper led the times of singing in such a way that the joy of the Lord was evident. The students participated willingly, and the sound of all those young voices praising the Lord on high was music to everyone's ears. Julie also led the RYS choir, a choir that closed the talent show on Thursday night. With only three short practices, this choir came together and raised the chapel roof in song!

Besides the main sessions, students selected five workshops from a list of ten possibilities. This year's workshop leaders were Rev. Jason Tuinstra, Rev.

Greg Lubbers, Mr. Rip Pratt, Rev. Paul Murphy, Rev. Phil Vos, Rev. Quentin Falkena, Rev. Matt Nuiver, Mr. Tim Scheuers, Rev. Steve Bussis, Rev. Hank Van der Woerd, Rev. Doug Barnes, and Rev. Steve Postma. The workshops covered topics such as putting self-love to death, Christian principles for stewardship, the Reformed Confessions, and training for the Christian life. One of the main comments heard from students is that they wish they could have gone to all the workshops! That is a good problem to have.

Each day at RYS is packed full from start to finish, yet each day began and ended with devotions. This important aspect of the convention set the tone for the day and then closed the day with thanks to our Lord. In between, we all learned from the sessions and workshops, enjoyed delicious food, and participated in many activities. The heat outside did not deter the avid tennis players, die-hard soccer fanatics, or crazy 5K runners from competing. It may seem impossible, but the gym was even hotter than the outdoors, yet the students endured the sweltering conditions and competed

intensely in volleyball, basketball, and dodgeball. Smarter students, no pun intended, beat the heat and played Bible Jeopardy or Minute to Win It in the cool, air-conditioned buildings. Thursday was the Day Away to white water rafting or to Chattanooga. Then the talent show wrapped up that day, ending it with laughter and music.

Friday is always a bittersweet day, as the young people say goodbye to the new friends they made during their time at RYS. It is truly a blessing to have a time and place where Reformed youth from all over North America can come together in faith and friendship. The RYS 2012 Convention was a huge success, and those present were pushed from the nest and taught to soar like eagles!

Mrs. Anne Konynenbelt served as a sponsor to the 2012 RYS Convention. She is a teacher at Immanuel Christian High School and a member of Trinity United Reformed Church in Lethbridge, AB.



A Young Person's Perspective on the RYS Convention

Miss Mary Karsten



In the days leading up to the twelfth annual Reformed Youth Services National Convention (held July 23–27, 2012), over eight hundred conventioners boarded airplanes, buses, and vans to begin their journey to Covenant College on Lookout Mountain, Georgia. Overcrowded vans, long flights, and 36-hour bus rides did nothing to stem the anticipation that filled every vehicle headed toward the convention.

This year's theme was "Soar Like Eagles," which was based on Isaiah 40:31: "They who wait for the LORD shall renew their strength; they shall mount up with wings like eagles; they shall run and not be weary; they shall walk and not faint." Rev. Wybren Oord, pastor of Trinity URC in Lethbridge, Alberta, and Rev. William Godfrey, pastor of Grace URC in Torrance, California, spoke on this theme during each day's main session. Both men exhorted their listeners to hope in the Lord, to worship Him rightly, to serve Him with passion, and to stand firm against the attacks of the devil. Above all, Rev. Oord and Rev. Godfrey urged us to adopt a gospel focus as the foundation of our lives. Rev. Oord encouraged us with these words: "If you want to soar like an eagle, turn to Jesus Christ." This brief statement was the core of the week at convention.

Each day at convention began with the announcement, "We have another busy day ahead of us!" Nothing could have been truer. Each day was jam-packed with activities, including workshop sessions presented by a variety of talented speakers from the Reformed community. Every one of

these topical presentations challenged the young people to grow in their faith and knowledge of the Lord. In keeping with this convention's theme, workshops were titled with names like "God's Flight Plan," "Flying High with Humility," and "How to Soar in a Fallen World."

In addition to the educational aspect of convention, attendees enjoy the Christian fellowship they experience all week long. As the hundreds of conventioners arrived at campus on Monday, happy reunions with old friends took place. Reformed young people whose homes are spread across the U.S. and Canada greatly enjoyed coming together for five all-too-short days of fellowshiping with like-minded youth. Just as old friendships were rekindled, new friendships were formed within the first hours of convention.

The singing that occurred during each main session deserved its reputation as being truly remarkable. It is a blessing to join with hundreds of fellow believers uniting in heartfelt praise to the Lord. The music at convention, for many, is a favorite component of the week.

Each day opened and closed with SONrise and SONset groups—morning and evening devotional meetings. The SONrise gatherings consisted of all males or all females, each member from a different home church. SONrise groups allow the youth an opportunity to meet and talk about spiritual matters with brothers or sisters from across the continent. SONset meetings provided the chance for everyone to share with their own youth group the highlights,



challenges, and blessings encountered in the day just past.

This year, conventioners could choose between two "Day Away" options: whitewater rafting or experiencing historic Chattanooga, Tennessee. Whitewater rafting down Tennessee's Ocoee River was not only beautifully scenic but also intense and exciting. The Chattanooga trip was complete with a stop at America's largest freshwater aquarium, downtown touring, and the opportunity to view an IMAX film.

Everyone looks forward to the extracurricular activities that were available to fill the free time. Some enjoyed a 5K run, basketball, soccer, and volleyball games and tournaments, while others found their forte competing in board games or Bible Jeopardy. No one wanted to miss Thursday evening's talent show, which showcased an enjoyable variety of acts such as instrumental solos and ensembles, vocal numbers, comedy acts, and even a Claymation film.

On Friday, conventioners headed for home tired. Physically tired? Yes—from a combination of lack of sleep and lots of excitement. Spiritually tired? No—just the opposite. All left convention having been spiritually invigorated, encouraged, and fortified in their resolve to "soar like eagles" in the strength of the Lord.

Miss Mary Karsten is a member of the Grace United Reformed Church in Waupun, Wisconsin.

My dear Ryskill,

I have received your report on your student, and I am gravely displeased with your work! You did not prevent your student from making it to the RYS Convention this summer, and now there is a chance he will regress in many of the areas you have been focusing on with him! You do realize, do you not, that Our Master hates this convention and everything for which it stands? These youth are gathered there to seek our Enemy and his will, yet you seem to have allowed your student to come unhindered. And the theme of this year's convention makes my skin crawl: Soar Like Eagles! Our goal is to cause them to scrape about the earth like vermin. This generation is the key to infiltrating the church to work decay and rot from the inside out. The mission is crucial, and you would do well to remember that.

Your description of the first session certainly made me question your ability and wonder about your motivation for your task. Your student seems to have been renewed with hope and was taught to wait on the Enemy as he walks his path in life. Previous to this he was ignorant of his need for forward movement to a desired final destination. He was wading, even back-sliding, in despair and apathy, as are many humans. You must work harder, Ryskill, or you will lose valuable ground with your student.

Although the first day of convention was a short one, the damage report is lengthy. Your student met many like-minded youth who spoke freely of their love for our hated Enemy. You will have to be crafty and subtle in the next days, so that your work will not be detected. Surely there are other students present who could help to drag your student down. Find the complainers or those who reject the dangerous teachings of the Foe and put them in his path. Think, Ryskill!

Your mentor,

D. K. Wroughten

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My dear Ryskill,

It was with horror and disbelief that I read your second RYS Convention report for your assigned student. Have you forgotten my training so quickly? Your student has been growing in favor with the Enemy! Are you incapable of performing even the simplest of tasks? Let me draw your feeble mind towards the errors you made as the convention progressed. You could have made good use of the tool of gluttony, which works so well with many humans. A little overindulgence goes a long way into making your student too sick to glean anything useful from his day. Yet your student fully enjoyed his meals, conversing and fellowshiping with the other youth. He was, in fact, energized for the second main session. A most unfortunate fact, since that message spoke to his heart about true worship of our Adversary. You had been making such headway as far as his attitude towards church went. Until now we didn't even mind his church attendance, since it was generally only in body. This warning he received about empty or self-centered worship is a real concern as it is one of our primary methods of subversion. It has always given me such pleasure to witness the foolishness of humans who believe they are worshipping the Enemy simply because they are in a church building. Redirect your student, Ryskill.

There are plenty of opportunities for you to effect a change of heart. Take the times of singing of which you wrote. While the others may be giving their misdirected praise to our Opponent, you can lead your student into great care about what those around him think of his voice. Stroke his ridiculous human pride, and don't allow him to notice the joyful faces of those musicians at the front. You must understand the human mind and its great capacity for self-love—use this to your advantage, Ryskill!

Your mentor,

D. K. Wroughten

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My dear Ryskill,

It will be difficult to keep your final correspondence from reaching my superiors. Your bumbling efforts throughout this week of your student's convention have not improved, and I am obligated to report this, although it also testifies to my failure in training you. By all indications, you have botched another area of attack. I am fully aware of the fact that attendance at the workshops was a requirement, but your use of this as an excuse for the progress your student has made is wretchedly pathetic. At this precise point, you needed to devour the weak flesh! There were plenty of young ladies present at the workshops whom you could have used to distract your student and prevent him from comprehending the dangerous ideas taught. I realize that the RYS dress code makes this more difficult, but you should have used your imagination and his as well! His tiredness and the oppressive heat could have helped you close his eyes, heart, and mind. Rather, your student was alert and exposed to many truths in these workshops, and I fear for your ultimate success in guiding him to Our Master below.

In one of the workshops, he learned the importance of training for godliness with the same kind of extreme effort

that humans train for physical fitness. This is horrifying, as it counteracts our amazing success with many creatures that we have persuaded to focus on outer beauty and physical fitness to the point where there is no time left for spiritual growth. Don't you see we are being exposed at this convention, Ryskill! Your report even mentioned a workshop quoting the part of our Enemy's Book from 1 Timothy 4:1 which says, "The Spirit clearly says that in later times some will abandon the faith and follow deceiving spirits and things taught by demons." We cannot accomplish our work if they are aware of us! He was also taught financial stewardship and was made conscious of his covetous nature, which in the past often left him with no money for the Enemy's kingdom. However, quite possibly the worst part about your report was your admission that you did nothing when he attended the Me-Monster workshop! Your student has showed classic signs of being a me-monster from a very young age. This workshop clearly brought that out into the light for him. Ryskill, we *hate* light! Our Enemy's Son was foolish enough to make himself nothing; we do not want your student or others imitating his humility. Your student must be ensnared as quickly as possible back into the bonds of vanity and greed.

Ryskill, you have given me very little confidence regarding your ability to lead your assignment away from the clutches of the Adversary and into our fold. Even during your student's free time, time during which you had much more leeway to scheme and deceive, your pathetic efforts were futile. Your charge played Bible Jeopardy, basketball, and volleyball. He made new, solid Christian friends and experienced their so-called "communion of the saints!" The RYS Convention of 2012 has been a complete disaster for your student and, as a result, for you.

Your work is under review, Ryskill. You are fully aware, I expect, of what befalls those who fail our Master. This RYS Convention has been your undoing.

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Your former mentor,

D. K. Wroughten

Mrs. Anne Konynenbelt served as a sponsor to the 2012 RYS Convention. She is a teacher at Immanuel Christian High School and a member of Trinity United Reformed Church in Lethbridge, AB.



Four (More) Reasons Why Christ Came to Earth

Rev. William Boekestein

We've all seen the bumper stickers that say, "Keep Christ in Christmas." Most of us would instinctively agree with that idea. Still, the slogan is a bit vague. If we didn't mind using the whole bumper we might better to say it this way: "How can we celebrate Christ's first advent in a way that honors him better?" One sure way to answer this question is to gain a better understanding of why he came.

It is traditional around Christmastime to think about the story of Christ's birth. It *feels* like Christmas when we can picture the shepherds, the wise men, and the stable. But in order to understand the magnitude of the main point of the story (the Son of God assuming flesh), we need to learn from the rest of the Bible why Christ became incarnate. Answering the *why* question should also enlarge our vision for the Christmas season, helping us answer important questions like, "What is the point of our gatherings? What is it that we are commemorating this season? How can this season bring hope?"

Throughout the Bible, many reasons are given for Christ's first advent, many by Christ himself. In my previous article, I considered four reasons: He came to become like his brothers, bear witness to the truth, bring light to a dark world, and save sinners. We've just scratched the surface. Let's scratch a little deeper.

Christ Came to Reveal Sin

On the night in which he was betrayed Jesus said: "If I had not come and spoken [to the world], they

would have no sin, but now they have no excuse for their sin" (John 15:22). Christ reveals sin as the perfect prophet. God had sent prophets into the world since the beginning. Their primary job was to expose the people's sin and point them to Christ. Nonetheless, the sinfulness of sin was not fully revealed until Christ came to earth (Acts 17:30; cf. Luke 12:48). Part of the reason for God's forbearance in the Old Testament era was because the prophets, priests, and kings themselves were sinners. None of God's earlier messengers embodied the stark contrast between God's holiness and man's sinfulness. Christ's absolute holiness provided the perfect backdrop against which the heinousness of sin could be exposed. This is especially true since the worst sin ever committed was against him who knew no sin.

Each year Martin Luther would compose a hymn for the annual Christmas Eve festival held in his home. The hymn for 1535 contains these words:

'Tis Christ our God, who far on high

Had heard your sad and bitter cry;

Himself will your Salvation be,

Himself from sin will make you free.

Thus hath it pleased Thee to make plain

The truth to us, poor fools and vain,

That this world's honor, wealth and might

Are naught and worthless in Thy sight.

Ah, dearest Jesus, holy Child,

Make Thee a bed, soft, undefiled,

Here in my poor heart's inmost shrine,

That I may evermore be Thine.

How often do we hear newborns described as innocent? The Bible teaches us that this really isn't true of any newborn. "Behold," says David, "I was brought forth in iniquity, and in sin did my mother conceive me" (Ps. 51:5). The same could be said of any other human being. But Christ was born as the innocent one. The glory of the gospel is that the innocent one not only teaches us our sin but he also takes it on himself. He became sin for us.

Christ Came to Destroy Satan's Works

The Devil has always raged against the church (John 8:44). But Jesus' physical entrance into the world heightened the intensity of the battle between God and Satan. In his Revelation, John sees a "great fiery dragon" standing before "the woman who was ready to give birth, to devour her Child as soon as it was born" (Rev. 12:3-4). Eight chapters later that dragon was "cast into the lake of fire and brimstone . . . [to] be tormented day and night forever and ever" (Rev.

20:10). There is a bitter end in store for the Devil and his workers (Matt. 13:39–42; 25:41). Therefore, like a man on death row with no possibility of parole, the Devil and his hosts “to the utmost of their power as murderers [watch] to ruin the Church and every member thereof . . . daily expecting their horrible torments” (Belgic Confession, Art. 12).

While the Devil rages, we must not lose hope. Christ came to destroy the Devil’s works. “He who sins is of the Devil, for the Devil has sinned from the beginning. For this purpose the Son of God was manifested, that He might destroy the works of the Devil” (1 John 3:8; cf. Heb. 2:14). Throughout Jesus’ earthly ministry he exercised power over the Devil and his demons (Matt. 4:1–11; Luke 8:31; Acts 10:38). As Jesus died on the cross, it seemed like the Devil had won. In reality, by his own death Christ had conquered that great enemy death, which entered the world through the Devil’s work. He had crushed the Devil’s head (Gen. 3:15).

Christmas is a time for us to remember and participate in Christ’s Devil-destroying work. Let us not engage in that which Christ came to destroy. Because Christ has conquered, his disciples *can* resist the Devil (Eph. 6:11, James 4:7). Let us also not have a defeatist attitude as Christians. Christ is our Devil-slayer. And in him we have power over the Devil as well (Acts 13:9–12).

Christ Came to Give Eternal Life

We all have earthly bodies that are corrupted by sin and naturally destined to decay and judgment. All the money in the world could not buy a remedy for our corruption. We need a cure from heaven. Christ, in his incarnation, provided that cure. “I am the living bread which came down from heaven. If anyone eats of

this bread, he will live forever; and the bread that I shall give is My flesh, which I shall give for the life of the world” (John 6:51). Christ was sent into the world as the cure for sinful flesh. His flesh is heavenly, untainted by corruption. Christ gives his own flesh as a ransom for the life we forfeited by sin. His life must go for ours so that ours may be spared. Jesus teaches us here to eat his flesh. In fact, Christ presents himself here as the real food. Matthew Henry said that “everything else we eat is as shadows compared to Christ.” Christmas isn’t just a time to think or talk about Jesus. We must eat him.

How do we “eat” Christ? First, develop an appetite for Christ by committing your heart to him, believing that only he will be sweet and fulfilling. Second, ruminate on him. Like a wine taster, savor him; don’t allow his doctrine to pass by too quickly. Apply every “bite” of his person and work to your life. Third, delight in him. Enjoy him. The best food is both nourishing and tasty. Finally, feed on him regularly. Make him your favorite food.

When you eat something (ideally) you trust that it will be good for you. You commit that food to your body, and it becomes part of you. Something similar happens when we “eat” Christ by faith. In order for the Bread of Life to be consumed to our benefit, it had to be broken. Christ was broken on the cross so that we can share in his life. Christ came to give eternal life.

Christ Came to Be Worshiped

“Now after Jesus was born in Bethlehem . . . wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, saying, ‘Where is He who has been born King of the Jews? For we have seen His star in the East and have come to worship Him’” (Matt. 2:1–2). “And when they had come into the house, they saw the young Child . . . and fell down and worshiped him” (Matt. 2:11). What a privilege these wise men had! They saw Christ in the flesh. They

worshiped him face to face. They gave gifts to their Savior. Christ came to be worshiped. But just because Christ is not physically among us now does not diminish this purpose for his coming. After all, when Jesus was parted from his disciples and carried up into heaven, “They worshiped him!” (Luke 24:52). How do we worship Christ?

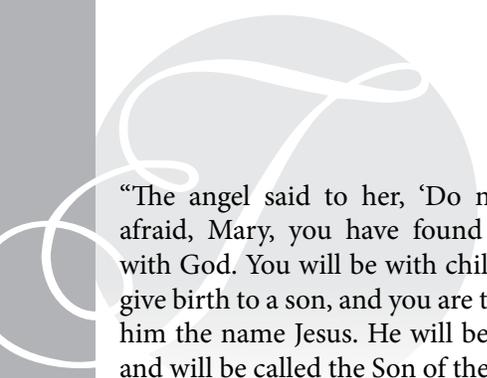
Seek Him, as the Wise Men Did

Our pilgrimage is no longer to a humble stable but to heaven where Christ is. Christ was born to live and preach and die and rise to heaven to draw us up to him. God drew the wise men to him by means of a star. God draws us to him by his Word and Spirit. Christ is our bright and morning star (Rev. 22:16; 2 Peter 1:19). “Seek the Lord while He may be found” (Isa. 55:6). As the wise men sought Christ, they were filled with joy (Matt 2:10). Christmas teaches us that it is a joyful thing to seek Jesus. The Christian journey is riddled with trials and difficulties, but the brilliance of the One whom we seek gives us joy for sorrows. “And the ransomed of the LORD shall return, and come to Zion with singing, with everlasting joy on their heads. They shall obtain joy and gladness, and sorrow and sighing shall flee away” (Isa. 35:10).

Give Him Gifts as the Wise Men Did

In every season of the year the Psalmist’s question should be ours: “What shall I render to the LORD for all his benefits to me?” (Ps. 116:12). The answer isn’t gold, frankincense, and myrrh but a blameless and holy walk (1 Thess. 3:9–4:2). The truly wise person still offers Christ a humble spirit and, in faith, bows before his God.

Rev. William Boekestein is pastor of Covenant Reformed Church in Carbondale, PA (URCNA).



“The angel said to her, ‘Do not be afraid, Mary, you have found favor with God. You will be with child and give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever; his kingdom will never end.’”—Luke 1:30–33

There I was, looking around absentmindedly and humming along with the background music when suddenly it dawned on me what I was humming: “O come, O come, Emmanuel.” Notice what I said? I was absentmindedly humming along with “O come, O come, Emmanuel”—absentmindedly humming the greatest news event in the history of the human race.

I couldn’t help but wonder how often we catch ourselves doing that. The trouble is that everybody is doing it. People who do not even know that the Emmanuel has come are humming “O come, O come Emmanuel.” We have entered into the season where everybody apparently knows something about Jesus, but they are thoroughly confused as to who He is. And so in celebration of the birth of Jesus they decorate their yards with lights, spend oodles of money on gifts, drink too much alcohol, and go to parties almost every night of the week, all the while complaining about how busy they are and how they cannot wait for the season to be over.

To compensate for their lack of

knowledge about who Jesus really is, they perpetuate happy little fables and legends about Jesus. That’s really not new. That has been going on for centuries. Already back in the fourth century, a priest by the name of Arius taught that Jesus was the first thing that God created and, although he had a very high view of Jesus, he made Jesus less what our creeds confess: “very God of very God.”

For many others, Jesus is considered to be a great religious teacher who was killed because He challenged the religious leaders of the day. Unfortunately, churches are full of people who really do not know who Jesus is. And equally unfortunate is that there are many theology professors who do not know who Jesus is and, because of that, they are casting doubt on God and on Jesus.

Great

To find out just how great this Jesus is, all we have to do is read the Book that was written about Him. In Luke 1, we find a young teenager named Mary who is engaged to be married. One day, while she is busy making plans for her wedding, someone not on the guest list appears before her. It is Gabriel, the angel of God.

He greets Mary with the words, “Greetings, you who are highly favored! The Lord is with you.”

The angel goes on to explain that Mary will conceive and bear a child. When Mary questions how this is going to take place, the angel explains that even as Mary’s relative, Elizabeth,

is going to have a child in her old age, so also Mary will have a child at her young age. The angel provides Mary with the unique details of God’s plan that involve a unique birth and a unique child. And He will be great. After all, nothing is impossible with God.

So if there is any confusion these days as to who Jesus is, it certainly cannot be traced back to what the Bible says about Him. After all, the record is clear. The confusion arises when we reject that which Luke so very clearly records for us.

First of all, Luke clearly records that Jesus followed the usual pattern of child development from prenatal growth to birth. There was nothing strange about that. The same process occurs in every mother’s womb. Jesus grew from a fertilized egg to an embryo to a fetus to a little baby. Every expectant mother is going through the same thing Mary went through. The babies in their wombs are developing and growing the same way Jesus developed and grew in Mary’s womb. Jesus was a human being in the fullest sense. He didn’t merely take on the characteristics of a human being; he took on Himself our human nature with all the usual physical, emotional, and mental characteristics that we have.

When Jesus was born, I am certain that Mary counted his fingers and his toes, looked at his fingernails, and noticed His hair and the color of His eyes. Jesus received the fullness of human personhood from her. At

Christmastime we celebrate the birth of a real human being.

Greater Still

But there is more. Mary was from the line of David. She was also from the priestly line of Aaron. These two facts about Mary become very important as we consider who Jesus is. Since Mary is from the line of David, her son would also be from the line of David. David was one of the most illustrious and marvelous characters in all of Jewish history. He was the person God had used to establish the nation of Israel. By the time his rule ended, he had laid the foundation for many years of peace to follow him.

This great Old Testament hero had great poetic and artistic ability; he had undaunted courage and determination. As a warrior king he is the great figure in the Old Testament that symbolizes all that can happen when a sinful person puts himself in the service of God.

David was from the tribe of Judah, and his family called Bethlehem their home. As a boy, he tended sheep on the very same hills where the shepherds were watching their sheep when the angels made the announcement that a Savior had been born. David was the great lion of the tribe of Judah who had established the rule of God in a world that was filled with chaos. He was a man after God's own heart.

After David died, there lived among the Jewish people the expectation that someone would come and reestablish the great work that David had accomplished. Jeremiah foretold of this very thing in his prophecy: "The days are coming," declares the LORD, "when I will fulfill the gracious promise I made to the house of Israel and to the house of Judah. In those days and at that time I will make a righteous Branch sprout from David's line; he will do what is just and right

in the land. In those days Judah will be saved and Jerusalem will live in safety. This is the name by which it will be called: The LORD Our Righteousness" (Jer. 33:14–16).

This was the hope of every expectant mother in Israel: that her baby would be the long-awaited Messiah, the one who would sit on David's throne, the one who would establish Jerusalem as a world power. When the angel told Mary she was going to become the mother of Jesus, she understood. She heard those words in terms of the great prophecies and all the promises and expectations expressed throughout the Old Testament.

All of Israel was looking for the Messiah who would be great, who would be David's offspring, who would be born in Bethlehem, and who would reestablish the mighty rule of the great king. The great prophet Isaiah had also prophesied about a great king who would be like David: "For unto us a child is born, to us a son is given, and the government will be on his shoulders. And he will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace" (Isa. 9:6).

The angel Gabriel tells Mary her son would be the fulfillment of all the Old Testament prophecies. "The Lord God will give Him the throne of His father David." As Jesus conducted His ministry, the issue of being David's son, the promised one, came up time and time again. As He preached, the message He brought was the message of the kingdom: "From that time on Jesus began to preach, 'Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near'" (Matthew 4:17). Those who heard Jesus preach knew full well that He was referring to the kingdom of David.

Just before His crucifixion, as Jesus approached Jerusalem—the city of

David—the people of the city came running out to greet Him as the One who was in fact going to restore the kingdom. They shouted, "Hosanna! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord! Blessed is the coming kingdom of our father David! Hosanna in the highest!" (Mark 11:9–10).

After the resurrection of Jesus, the disciples ask Him, "Lord, are you at this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel?" (Acts 1:6). They fully expected that Jesus was going to take His place on the throne in Jerusalem and rule the world.

Repeatedly the Bible announces that the Jesus is the great promised son of David. In Revelation 22:16, Jesus declares, "I, Jesus, have sent my angel to give you this testimony for the churches. I am the Root and the Offspring of David, and the bright Morning Star."

Greatest Ever

The Biblical message is not complete, however, if we just notice that the baby born in Bethlehem centuries ago is a descendant of King David. After all, the Bible never talks about Jesus taking the throne in Jerusalem. Israel never did become a world power. Instead we read about how this Jesus died a most horrible and painful death.

If we look at the life of David, we see him as a great man who was also a sinful man. David would acknowledge that himself. That would be true of any person who followed David to the throne. The Old Testament is full of kings who followed David to the throne who were corrupt and wicked. They were sinful.

If Jesus came to be the long-promised son of David but was just an ordinary

person like you and me, there would be very little reason to believe in Him or to worship to Him. But the Bible makes clear that Jesus is also the Son of the Living God.

Isaiah had foretold that His name would be *Mighty God*. The angel told Mary, “He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High” (Luke 1:32). This is the great message of the Bible. God’s only begotten Son became David’s Son. Certainly, His birth followed all the usual patterns of child development from prenatal growth to birth. But His conception was supernatural. The angel describes the coming child as distinct from all others born of a woman. While Jesus is a real and true human being, He was conceived by the Holy Spirit. From the moment of conception He is holy in and of Himself. Whereas the great John the Baptist was declared by Gabriel to be filled with the Holy Spirit even from birth, Jesus is holy even before His birth.

Because of His supernatural origin, Jesus was not born with the original sin that clings to the rest of us. David may rightly confess, “In sin did my mother conceive me” (Ps. 51:5), but it was not so with David’s Son born of Mary. He was like us in all things—except sin. Jesus came into the world much as Adam, the first Man, came into the world—uncontaminated by sin.

That is what we celebrate. We praise God for giving us this new man, Jesus Christ, who is like us in every way and is at the very same time the Son of God. He becomes the second Adam. Jesus Christ, the second person of the Trinity, moved from the fullness of His divinity into the limitations of our humanity. Paul says He “made himself

nothing, taking the very nature of a servant” (Phil. 2:7).

It goes even further than that. I mentioned that not only was Jesus born from the line of David, but He also comes from the line of Aaron. Aaron was the priest of Israel when the people were set free from bondage in Egypt. As the priest, Aaron would make the necessary sacrifices on behalf of the people.

This Son of God, son of David, and son of Aaron also made a sacrifice. He made the necessary sacrifice for us when took upon Himself our sin and guilt. God became incarnate for that very purpose—to take upon Himself the debt we owe to God. When He was born of the virgin Mary, the Son of God began to walk down the road that led to Calvary where He gave up the sacrifice—His own life on a cross—to pay for human sin.

We have to remember that sin is our greatest problem. If our sin cannot be removed from us then we are all doomed. But God, in His great love, sent His one and only Son into this world to remove our sin from us so that we could be reconciled to Him.

Many people do not like to think about that as they celebrate the Christmas holiday. They don’t like to see themselves as sinners in need of a Savior. They don’t like to think about the huge debt they owe to God because of their sin and how God paid that debt through the death His Son. And so they celebrate the birth Jesus as a great man, or a great teacher who has taken His place among the great teachers and leaders of the world. They admire Him for His wisdom, His moral purity and obedience to God. But they refuse to recognize His sacrifice to God as our great High Priest. Because of that we absentmindedly hum along with the carols we hear in the background.

As we do so, we miss His essential greatness as the only begotten of the Father the Son of the Most High God.

This great Jesus, Son of God, son of David, and son of Aaron, established His kingdom by going to the cross for you, where He died to pay for your sin. He established His kingdom by rising up from the grave in victory. Now He demands your allegiance to Him. He is the great King! His kingdom shall have no end, just as the prophets of old foretold.

Conclusion

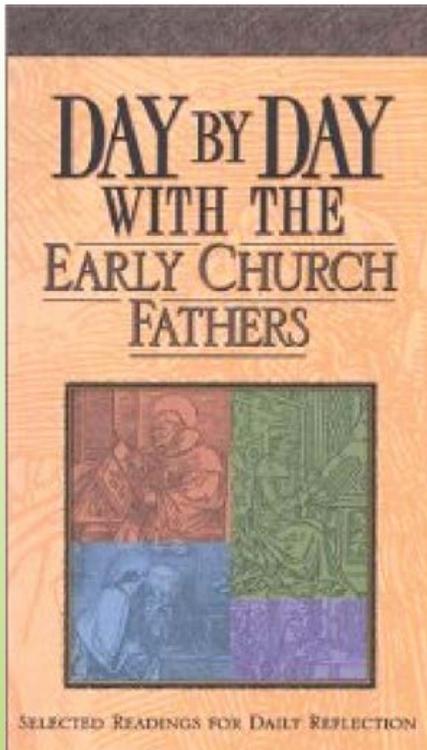
In this issue we have seen the angel Gabriel announce the birth of two great men: John and Jesus. Who is the greater? John’s mother was barren; the mother of Jesus had never been with a man at all. John became the prophet calling in the wilderness for people to repent of their sins. Jesus had the authority to say to them, “Your sins are forgiven you.” John would be great before the Lord; Jesus would be great without any qualifications. He was declared to be the Son of the Most High God. He is Lord!

Have you learned to acknowledge the all-surpassing greatness of Him who came in the fullness of time to save His people from their sins? God calls you to place your hope, your trust, and your faith in Jesus Christ. God calls you to trust in Jesus Christ for your salvation and to dedicate your life to serving Him. He has fully paid the price for your salvation through His death. Whatever plans you have for celebrating the Christmas season, make sure those plans do not exclude Jesus Christ, our Emmanuel.

Rev. Wybren Oord

is the co-pastor of Trinity United Reformed Church in Lethbridge, AB, and the editor of *The Outlook*.

Daily Devotions for

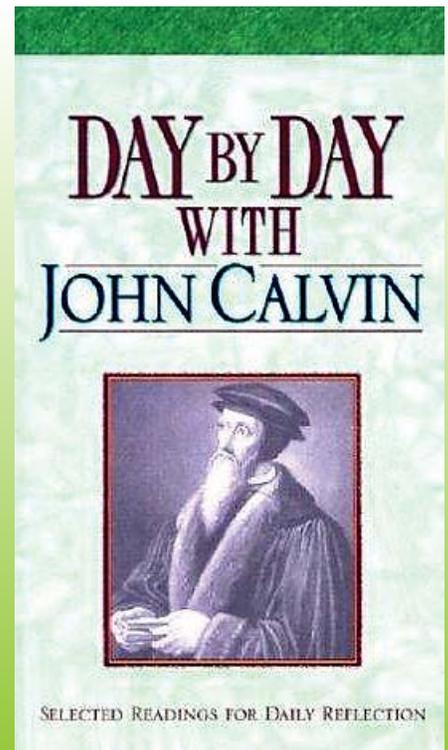


Others, such as Gregory Nazianzen and Gregory of Nyssa, are hardly known at all. Yet each one of the thirty-nine men featured in this volume played an important role in the early church.

Each day *Day by Day with the Early Church Fathers* offers a few paragraphs from a church leader who lived during the opening centuries of the New Testament church. These were men who faced great trials and were often persecuted (even martyred) for their beliefs. A brief biography of each contributor tells of some of the difficulties these men of faith faced as they rose to prominence in the church and defended the church against ungodly and false teachers of their time.

Their great zeal and love for the triune God and the humility in which they sought to serve Him shine through on each page. Even a small glimpse of each writer should give a clear understanding as to why the Reformers wanted to break away from the traditions of the Romans Catholic Church and return to the teachings of the early church.

The authors have provided outstanding samples of the writings of each church father and updated the language. At the same time, they have preserved the original meaning of the author in each meditation. As you use this volume as your daily devotion, may you be introduced to some of the early writers in the church and enticed to read more of their works.



Day by Day with John Calvin: Selected Readings for Daily Reflection

Compiled and edited by Mack Fackler, Philip Christman, Donald Dumbacher, and Paul Stob

Hardcover, 384 pages

ISBN 13: 978-1-5656365-3-8

Hendrickson Publishers

Recommended by Dave Vander Meer

Day by Day with the Early Church Fathers: Selected Readings for Daily Reflection

Compiled and edited by Christopher D. Hudson, J. Alan Sharrer, and Lindsay Vanker

Hendrickson Publishers

ISBN 13: 978-1-5656339-6-4

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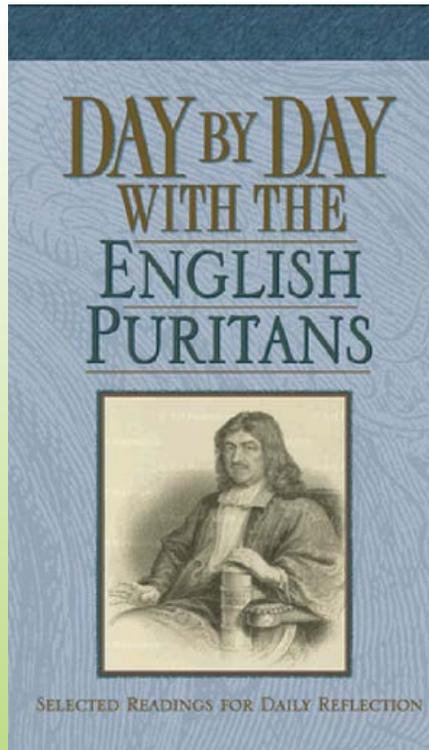
Recommended by Rev. W. Oord

Not everybody wants to sit down and read the thirty-eight volumes of *The Early Church Fathers*. Some of the early church fathers like Athanasius and Augustine are well known.

Day by Day With John Calvin is a daily devotional that gives you some of John Calvin's insights on certain Bible texts. Each passage brings a different passage and a new writing on that text by John Calvin. While these writings are short—one page in length—they are both practical and powerful. It is amazing how much Calvin could say in a short amount of space. It is a wonderful combination of doctrine and applications.

Four of the 365 titles in the devotional are titled as follows: Perfectly Saved, Learning in Humility, Faith Undefeated, and Pardon in Prayer. There is a special section on the Ten Commandments. The book also includes an index of Scripture passages in the back that could be helpful when studying Scripture to get a quick explanation from Calvin's teaching on that text.

In this devotional we are reminded of the great heritage of our faith that should not be forgotten. If you have not read much of Calvin's works, or it has been a long time since you have read any of his writings, then this book would afford you a good place in which to get acquainted or reacquainted with John Calvin. You will be encouraged in this devotional to dig deeper into the thoughts and teachings of this man who so greatly influenced Protestant Christianity.



Day by Day with the English Puritans

Compiled and edited by Randall J. Pederson

Hardcover, 422 pages

Hendrickson Publishers

ISBN-13: 978-1565638341

Reviewed by Rev. W. Oord

You have, no doubt, read *Pilgrim's Progress* by John Bunyan. Every minister should read Richard Baxter's *The Reformed Pastor*. Everyone should be required to read John Owen's *The Death of Death in the Death of Christ*. These brilliant men, along with many others, were known as the Puritans. They had a wealth of knowledge and insight into the truths of the Holy Scriptures.

To catch just a glimpse of their brilliance, I encourage you to begin each day with *Day by Day with the English Puritans* as your morning devotional book. To spend some time each morning with the Puritans—even if it is but a few minutes—would be a wonderful way to begin each day. Each day you would be introduced to a gem of thought to carry with you the rest of the day.

J. I. Packer writes that, like all good devotionals, the selected readings found in this volume will “enlarge your sense of God's presence, goodness, and closeness to you.”

Summary Report of the Meeting of the URCNA Classis Eastern USA October 16–17, 2012

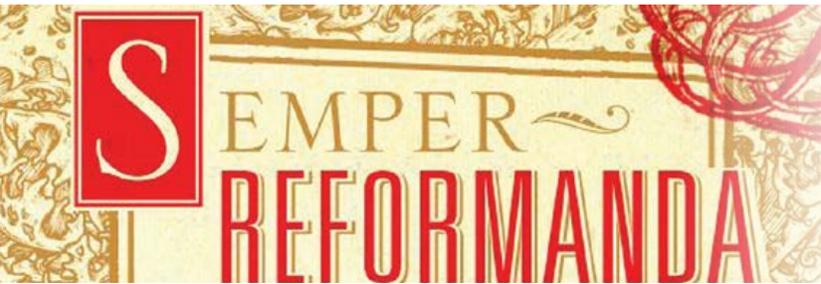
Rev. Andrew
Eenigenburg

Delegates to the thirtieth meeting of Classis Eastern USA assembled in Wayne, NJ on Tuesday, October 16, 2012, to begin their deliberations with our third annual *Semper Reformanda* Conference. Under the theme, “What Does a Healthy Ministry Look Like?” delegates began with a panel discussion on maintaining sexual integrity both in ministry and in the church body. After lunch, provided by Preakness Valley URC, Dr. David Murray of Puritan Reformed Seminary put an excellent Scottish accent to work as he led four separate teaching sessions. His balanced and

how the body of churches in the East could take active steps to glorify Christ by planting confessionally Reformed churches in the populous cities of the East Coast region.

Immediately following the conference, Rev. Paul Murphy, chairman for the meeting, called the delegates to order for the official work of the day. The meeting began with the candidacy examination for Mr. Sam Perez, recent graduate of Westminster Seminary in Philadelphia. Mr. Perez gave a strong performance in each examination category, and delegates

finances. The delegates approved two overtures addressing these concerns. One overture updated, clarified, and strengthened the Classical Rules of Procedure to provide for better communication, coordination, and early preparation in the shared work of the churches. The second overture established a better system of oversight, budgeting, and duties of the classical treasurer. The most notable addition to the treasurer’s position established a system of classical askings that intends to provide a more stable approach to funding classical priorities.



practical teaching covered such topics as faithful sermon preparation in a busy ministry, caring for our bodies, positive leadership skills, and counsel to the depressed. His heartfelt and experienced teaching led to thoughtful discussion and reflection throughout the two-day meeting.

Getting an early start the next morning, delegates completed the *Semper Reformanda* conference activities with a discussion on the challenges of Home Missions led by Rev. William Boekestein. He offered an evaluation of the practical changes that could help classis work with greater unity, coordination, and strength. Delegates went on to discuss

gave unanimous concurring advice so that the consistory of Messiah’s Reformed Fellowship could declare Mr. Perez a candidate for ministry in the URCNA. Furthermore, his ordination examination requirement was waived among the churches of Classis Eastern US.

The thirtieth meeting of Classis Eastern US also showed breakthroughs in coordination both in classical procedures and



Another critical aspect of the work involved reports from a number of classical committees and functionaries. These reports detailed work accomplished as well as identified future priorities. Classical church visitors reported on their work among the churches and noted their participation in the ordination of Rev. Stephen Wetmore at the Trinity Reformed Church in Cape Coral, FL, as a particularly joyful occasion.

The church planting committee remains active in identifying both the right men and harvest fields for the work of church planting. They were thankful for the summer work of Mr. Zachary Wyse, an intern who focused on evangelism and church planting

under the direction of Dr. Brian Lee. The delegates approved a specific recommendation to provide funding to establish a church plant in Jersey City, NJ, in 2013, led by Mr. Perez. Lord willing, there will be additional openings as classis seeks to meet the goal to plant five new churches. The classis continues to seek the Lord's will concerning the appointment of a classical church-planting coordinator as well as a synodical missions coordinator.

Along the way, Rev. Jay Fluck of the RCUS addressed the classis as a fraternal delegate. He encouraged the men to remain diligent and faithful. Our Fraternal Relations Committee continues to reach out to other Reformed denominations, and continues to seek a joint classis/presbytery meeting with the Orthodox Presbyterian Church in 2013. In terms of fraternal relations, the classis also moved to invite Rev. William Den Hollander as a representative of the Canadian Reformed Churches to address the classis and lead an extended discussion at the spring classis meeting.

Delegates exercised the advantage of belonging to a body of churches by gaining biblical counsel and insight from one another concerning various pastoral concerns in the churches. Through shared biblical discussion and exhortation, the churches achieve mutual wisdom and encouragement for carrying out the commands of Christ. After careful consideration, the classis gave concurring advice to the decision of Pompton Plains Reformed Bible Church to declare Rev. Dale Van Dyke eligible for call to the churches by way of URCNA church order article 11. Finally, after two very full days of education and deliberation, Rev. Murphy closed the meeting with thankful prayer.

Rev. Andrew Eenigenburg,
Stated Clerk, Classis Eastern USA



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