

July/Aug 2014

Dedicated to the Exposition and Defense of the Reformed Faith

# The Outlook

VOL 64 ISSUE 4

[www.reformedfellowship.net](http://www.reformedfellowship.net)

**SYNOD VISALIA 2014**

**SUNDAY WORSHIP  
OBSERVANCE**

**NEW BIBLE STUDY ON  
MARK BEGINS**

**SPECIAL SECTION FOR  
MINISTERS AND  
SEMINARY GRADUATES**

**BAVINCK THE  
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(ISSN 8750-5754) (USPS 633-980)

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

—Jude 3

**Journal of Reformed Fellowship, Inc.**

Send all copy to:

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

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**Subscription Policy**

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

Zip Code should be included. Periodicals postage paid at Grandville, MI.

**POSTMASTER:**

Send address changes to *The Outlook*, 3500 Danube Dr. SW, Grandville, MI 49418-8387

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Grandville, MI 49418-8387  
(877) 532-8510 Phone Toll-free in US and Canada

**Business Mailing Address**

3500 Danube Dr. SW  
Grandville, MI 49418-8387  
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**About the cover:** *The Omena Presbyterian Church, in Omena Michigan. Established 1858. Photographed by Jeff Steenholdt on a northern high blue sunny day.*

# Synodical Prayer Service: Ministry in Terrible Times (2 Timothy 3)

Rev. Adrian  
Dieleman

## Introduction

“But mark this,” writes Paul. “There will be terrible times in the last days” (2 Tim. 3:1). On the face of it, you would say this does not apply to us because our modern technological world has nothing in common with the ancient world. They walked and rode camels; we drive cars and fly airplanes. The average person knew nothing of what happened elsewhere; we get news from around the world 24/7. Back then they kept records on clay tablets; we also use tablets, but ours run on batteries and connect to the Internet. Ancient doctors used natural remedies; we have CAT scans and open heart surgery and transplants.

People say times have changed. But, when it comes right down to it, how different is today from the time of the apostles? Aren't we living in difficult or terrible times right now? The housing market still has not recovered from a few years ago. The job market is still way down. The national debt has soared to unbelievable levels. Businesses are failing. Government regulation is increasing. Our schools are failing to educate our children. We have a severe water crisis here in California which means also the severe danger of fire in many locales.

But this is not what the apostle has in mind. The apostle talks of terrible times, difficult times, awful times for the church; more specifically, he sees difficult times coming for the churches that he by God's grace established: the churches of Rome,

Corinth, Galatia, Ephesus, Philippi, Colosse, Thessalonica.

Applied to today Paul talks to us about doing ministry while surrounded and assailed by great evil and wickedness.

We are gathered together this week to talk about the ministry we are doing as elders and pastors of the URCNA. We are gathered together tonight to pray about this ministry. But as we meet and as we pray we need to be reminded of the things mentioned by Paul in our Scripture reading—things that pertain to ministry some two thousand years ago; things that pertain to ministry today.

## Terrible Times

“But mark this,” writes Paul. “There will be terrible times in the last days” (2 Tim. 3:1). Paul sees terrible times in the “last days.” The “last days,” as most of you realize, is a technical phrase for the whole time between Christ's first and second comings. So we should not be surprised that Paul's description of the troubles sounds eerily familiar to those of us who are in church office today. Paul is reminding us that every day is difficult in a fallen world. Because of sin, things are not the way they are

supposed to be. This has been the norm since Adam and Eve were exiled from the Garden of Eden, and it will continue to be so until the return of Christ. Our time, in other words, is exactly like Paul's time.

Want proof of this? Listen to Paul's partial description of what makes the last days so terrible. And ask yourselves, aren't we like this too? “People,” he says, “will be lovers of themselves, lovers of money” (2 Tim. 3:2). That certainly sounds like today. “Boastful, proud, abusive” (2 Tim. 3:2). Our televisions are filled with news of athletes, movie stars, and government officials who act this way; sad to say, we see this behavior in neighbors, and church members too. “Disobedient to their



parents, ungrateful, unholy” (2 Tim. 3:2). Wow, Paul, are you sure you are talking about the first century and not the twenty-first century? “Without love, unforgiving, slanderous” (2 Tim. 3:3). I see this all the time; it seems to make little difference whether you are in or out of the church. “Without self-control, brutal, not lovers of the good, treacherous, rash, conceited” (2 Tim. 3:3–4). Nothing out of date here. “Lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God” (2 Tim. 3:4). That certainly sounds like today.

Paul continues by describing religion without godliness. He writes, “Having a form of godliness but denying its power” (2 Tim. 3:5). Do you recognize this in your church—people going through the motions and meaning none of it?

“Always learning but never able to acknowledge the truth” (2 Tim. 3:7). Doesn’t this sound like those who hop from church to church at the drop of a hat?

Paul ends his description of “terrible times” by talking about opposition to the truth and persecution of those who live a godly life in Christ Jesus (2 Tim. 3:8–13). Don’t we see more and more of this?

Paul’s list is not exhaustive. It represents some of the ways unrepentant sin displays itself in the lives of people.

Now, did you notice how Paul starts? The first thing he specifies is that people will be “lovers of themselves.” He could have mentioned anything else in his list, but he starts with a preoccupation with the self. He is telling us that the terrible, difficult, awful times for the church all arise from a selfish, me-first mentality. Excessive self-love, he says, feeds vices. When love is misdirected toward the self instead of the Lord, the only result can be sin. Which reminds us that our calling is to lead people

away from love for self and into love for the Lord.

Do you know what is the saddest part of the “terrible times” described by Paul? Paul is describing life in the church. IN THE CHURCH. Yes, much of this also applies to the world. Yes, much of this applies to the great state of California with its same-sex marriages and medical marijuana and every liberal and nutty cause you can think of. But Paul is also describing life in the churches he was privileged to plant. And, as I have already pointed out, it certainly sounds like life in our churches today.

Look at some of the ways Paul’s description of terrible times comes to expression in our churches. In our churches, just like in the world, members lie and cheat and steal and commit adultery and hold grudges and fight with family members. In our churches, just like in the world, marriages are falling apart. In our churches, just like in the world, people are viewing pornography. In our churches, just like in the world, children need to be protected from abusive parents. In our churches, just like in the world, members become addicted to drugs and alcohol. In our churches, just like in the world, imperfect kids are being raised by imperfect parents. In our churches, just like in the world, some sins are deemed more respectable than other sins. We must never make the mistake of underestimating the great power of sin.

“There will be terrible times in the last days” (2 Tim. 3:1). We are living in those times. We are ministering in those times. As the Synod of the URCNA we are meeting in those times. So, keep in mind that we are dealing with sinners and their sin.

### **Ministry in Terrible Times**

Now, what kind of ministry is called for in “terrible times”? That’s the question I want us to answer this

evening. What are we to do as a Synod? More importantly, what are we to do as United Reformed churches?

There are those, like the Barna Group, who say that “terrible times” require special ministry. We need to do special ministry or we will lose our children and grandchildren. We need to modernize ourselves or we will become irrelevant. We need to get with the twenty-first-century way of doing things or we are part of a dying breed. I am sure everyone here has heard those arguments. Maybe you have even heard them from members of your own churches.

What is the result of this kind of thinking? In the 1980s many pastors were given the opportunity to go for free with their wives to the Crystal Cathedral to learn how to do church through the power of positive thinking; things aren’t looking so positive now, are they? In the 1990s many pastors were sent for free to Willow Creek Community Church in the greater Chicago area and told to be seeker friendly; even Bill Hybels, the founding pastor, now admits this was a mistake. More recently, pastors have been sent to Saddleback Church to learn from Rick Warren how to be purpose-driven. If there is anything these fads teach us is that they are just fads that come and go like the tide. They come and go because they are human driven and not Bible driven.

So, what is the Bible’s way of ministering in terrible times? Listen to what the apostle says: “continue in what you have learned and have become convinced of” (2 Tim. 3:14). The key word here is “continue.” The key thing to ministry in difficult, terrible, awful times is to continue. Continue in what you have been doing. Continue doing what you have always been doing. No need to change course, to jump ship, to try something new. Continue.

Continue what? Continue in the “holy Scriptures, which are able to

Continue in the Scriptures. We are to be Word-centered, not program centered. We are to be Word-centered, not building centered. We are to be Word-centered, not seeker centered.

make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus” (2 Tim. 3:15).

I can hear the cries and the screams (I hope not from anyone here): “But that is so old-fashioned. That is so yesteryear. That is the way our grandparents did church. That is the way the Reformers and apostles did church. Our times are special and different. New methods and new ways are needed. The old ways are inadequate.” Really? Do you think that is what Bob Schuller is saying right now?

I notice that many of us here are Baby Boomers. If there is one trait that defines Baby Boomers it is this: Baby Boomers drink up change and innovation. So they want to be different, they strive to be distinct, and they constantly cry for change.

In contrast to this desire for constant change and innovation is the Bible’s call to continue: “continue in what you have learned and have become convinced of” (2 Tim. 3:14). Continue as you minister in terrible times. Continue as you minister to sinners.

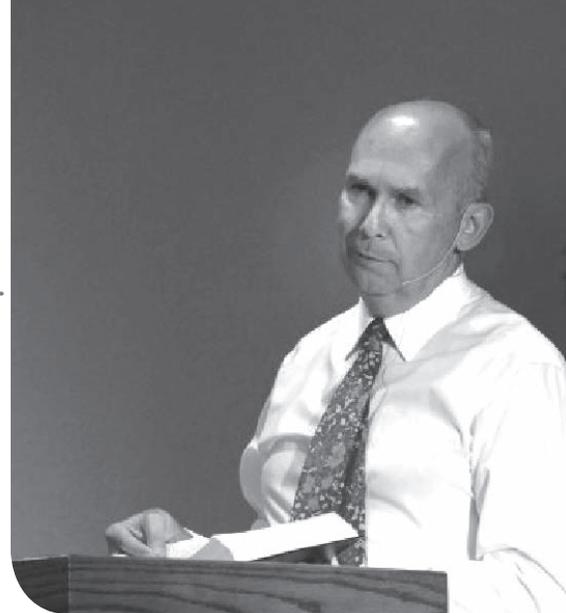
In these terrible times, as we do the Lord’s work in the URCNA, we need to continue. “Continue,” says Paul, in the “holy Scriptures, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus” (2 Tim. 3:15).

Many churches have lost that. We were attending a clergy group meeting. One of the men wanted to know how we who are Reformed decide what to preach on. In his church, he explained, there are so many special Sundays that the preacher gets to pick only a handful of topics or passages to preach on per year. His church observes the

Christian calendar, of course. But on top of that they also celebrate Earth Day, Mother’s Day, Father’s Day, Justice Day, Memorial Day, Fourth of July, and the list goes on and on. In contrast to this, we continue to proclaim the Bible’s message of sin, salvation, and service. In contrast to this, we continue to proclaim the Bible’s message of repentance and faith. Because we know Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting, and training in righteousness (2 Tim. 3:16).

A funny story. Trinity URC of Visalia has a church plant in Big Springs, California, near the Oregon border. A number of years ago the Big Springs church was without a pastor and was thinking of closing its doors. Rev. Bernie Van Ee agreed to look them over. On the Sunday he came to preach the church building was packed. He decided to take the call. Much to his surprise the attendance was down to half after he started his ministry. What happened? Turns out one of the members owns a gas station. He offered a free fill-up to everyone who attended when Bernie was looking the church over. But what did Bernie do? He did exactly what Paul tells us to do: he continued. He preached the gospel message. He preached and he taught and now, by the grace of God, there is a group of brothers and sisters who are committed to continuing as church.

“Continue,” says Paul, in the “holy Scriptures, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus” (2 Tim. 3:15). Specifically, what does this call for? Paul breaks this down for us



throughout his letters: “Until I come, devote yourself to the public reading of Scripture, to preaching and to teaching” (1 Tim. 4:13).

It is the same theme again: continue. Continue in the Scriptures. We are to be Word-centered, not program centered. We are to be Word-centered, not building centered. We are to be Word-centered, not seeker centered. Our ministry, our work as elders and pastors, our work as churches, our work as Synod, is to be centered on the Word. Because this is what is needed in these terrible times.

## Conclusion

We live and work and minister in terrible times. What are we to do? We are to continue in the holy Scriptures, which make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. Continue because human nature has not changed. Continue because the gospel has not changed. Continue because the means of grace have not changed. Continue. Amen.

### Rev. Adrian Dieleman

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The psalmist exclaims in Psalm 84:1: “How lovely is your tabernacle, O Lord of hosts.” The word *tabernacle* means dwelling place. The tabernacle was the place that God chose to come down and meet with his people in the wilderness. The God of heaven and earth descended to meet with his people so that they might call upon his name and worship him in the beauty of his holiness.

Notice the passion of the psalmist. He is describing his love of coming to worship. Deep within his being he longs—yes, even faints—to think about the worship of God. We often think of Old Testament worship as full of requirements, laws, and sacrifices, so that there must have been no joy in coming to worship. But here the psalmist is rebuking the idea that the worship of God was some sort of chore or some hard demand God put upon his people. That is not what it was at all. His description shows that he found coming to the Lord’s house the opposite—it’s lovely. How lovely is your tabernacle! It as if he says, “The worship of the Lord thrills my soul; it is my greatest passion to be where God dwells. The worship of you, O Lord, is the most satisfying thing I have ever done with my life.”

This isn’t the only place such a description is given. Psalm 27:4 states,

One thing have I desired of the Lord,

That will I seek:

That I may dwell in the house of the Lord

All the days of my life,

To behold the beauty of the Lord,

And to inquire in his temple.

The worship of the Lord for these saints was intended to be the ultimate blessing.

Why is worship so important? The psalmist is not putting emphasis on places of stone or wood or the physical structure of the tabernacle. He is speaking about the spiritual blessings that flow from God’s presence as he chose to come down and tabernacle among them. There is an understanding presented to us in this psalm that when God’s people gathered corporately for worship on the Sabbath, there was something happening that you couldn’t get anywhere else. You will notice in Psalm 84:2 that his heart and his flesh are crying out for the living God. God himself had chosen to come and dwell among his people in that place, and the people embraced such a presence with cries.

For the Old Testament saints, it wasn’t a question of how often they *had* to come to worship. Forcing worship would be the most unnatural thing to do in light of what they understood was happening. The Lord always wanted his people to call the Sabbath a delight. Whenever it became a duty of forced servitude, people ended up drawing near with their mouths while their hearts were far from him. They

went through the forms, devoid of sincerity of heart, and they missed the intention of the Sabbath.

For the Old Testament saints, the whole Sabbath was a day of rest and gladness. They gathered morning and evening for corporate worship. We see this in the only designated psalm



for the Sabbath, Psalm 92. As the worshipers would come to the Lord's house on the Sabbath, they would sing,

It is a good thing to give thanks  
unto the Lord,

And to sing praises to Your  
name, O Most High:

To declare Your lovingkindness  
in the morning,

And Your faithfulness every  
night.

This is remarkable! This is the only  
psalm with a superscription expressly

designating this as a psalm for the Sabbath, and it expressly presents a pattern of God's people gathering for worship morning and evening.

It's sad in our day that there is so much ignorance surrounding not only what worship is, but also why it is needed. Today, people love to quote Jesus, who said that we no longer worship on this mountain or on that mountain but in spirit and in truth, and they have taken this as license to say that they no longer need the church because we have the Spirit. This may have a sound of wisdom, but it has led to something tragic.

There is a reason God had to give a commandment in the New Testament to let no one neglect the assembling of himself together as is the manner of some. The Scriptures always warned that there would be a problem with people saying they don't need to come to church. We live in those times. And I suggest that people are spiritually pining away because of this disregard.

It is a great tragedy that people today treat the worship of the Lord as a burden to their already busy lives. Can you imagine what the Lord is hearing from someone who asks: "Do I really have to worship the Lord?" I respond: Has the Lord burdened us? Is it too much to come one day out of our week for a few hours to sing to him, enjoy him, acknowledge his goodness, and receive his grace to us in our struggle as sinners? In this light, the excuses of those who say that they don't need to come and worship the Lord have nothing to do with being pushed or pulled; it has everything to do with what Jesus meant when he said that men love the darkness more than the light. Coming to the light is welcomed only by those who are assured that the Lord has been gracious in making his face to shine upon them. That is the most thrilling experience a sinner can enjoy on this earth.

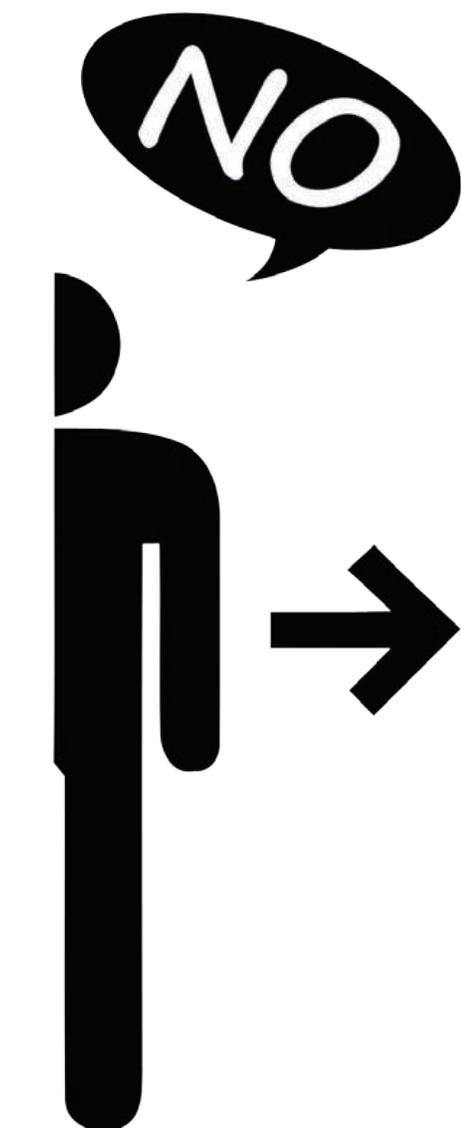
When the child of God knows the smiling countenance of the Lord, worship is the most splendid blessing of his life. Here a power is given that cannot be found anywhere else. Christ calls us to him that he might give us the food and drink of eternal life. Christ stoops down and washes our feet. This is where gospel is announced: that Christ died for our sins, that he rose for our justification, and that he is coming again to take us to be with him. There is a power in worship that cannot be experienced elsewhere.

James Boice once said,

There is something to be experienced of God in church that is not quite so easily experienced elsewhere. Otherwise, Why have churches? If it's only instruction we need, get it by a tape or book. If it's only fellowship, have a home gathering. There is something to be said for the sheer physical singing of the hymns, the sitting in pews, the actual looking to the pulpit and gazing on the Bible as it is expounded, tasting the sacrament in the very atmosphere of the place set apart for the worship of God that is spiritually beneficial.

Here we are set upon a rock. Here God looks upon the face of his anointed and blesses us. Come to the waters and be refreshed. Come, put your foot into the hands of the Savior, and he will cleanse you from all your sins. Come, let us worship the Lord!

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Escondido, California.



***Fewer and fewer*** churches have an evening service these days. And in those that do, attendance is almost always better in the morning. Why is that?

That's obviously a huge question with lots of answers. Some have dropped the evening service for pragmatic reasons. People don't come anyway, so why put all the work into it? Others have struck it for strategic reasons. For example, many have replaced the worship service with small group gatherings, youth group, and other church-related programs. And still others, if they are honest, have stopped coming for lethargic reasons. Sunday naps are just so blissful! The game is going down to the wire! Or I can worship God outside in his created sanctuary just as well (if not better) than in a dark and musty church building.

And then there are those who don't attend evening worship because they've never had evening worship. It's completely foreign. Sundays have always included going to church in the morning and then doing whatever else for the rest of the day.

In this article I hope to confront you with three good, biblical reasons why missing corporate worship on a regular basis will inevitably lead to spiritual decline in your life and in the life of the church. Many books

and articles have been written on why we should attend the means of grace (preaching and sacraments) with the people of God, but perhaps far less have ever wrestled with the other side of the coin: What exactly am I missing out on when I miss worship?

## Spiritual Food

I have recently done some reflection on the unarguable rise in biblical illiteracy among church-going Christians. I'll spare you the statistics, but know that the numbers don't lie. Christians don't know their Bibles like they used to. This is to our shame, especially in light of the incredible technological tools and resources at our disposal compared to previous generations.

But given the decline of evening worship services across the church landscape, perhaps we shouldn't be surprised by our lack of Bible knowledge. Simply put, we get less preaching and teaching than we used to.

For example, let's say that you used to be a part of a church which met morning and evening but recently decided to drop the evening service so that families could spend more time together (which, ironically, is impossible when churches replace evening worship with family night at church: men over here, women over there, kids in this corner, youth in that building). The average person,

taking into consideration vacation, sicknesses, and special services, probably attended no fewer than a hundred services per year under the two-service model. However, by dropping the evening service or choosing not to attend it, that same average person will sit under no more than fifty sermons per calendar year. I'm not a math whiz, but I think that's half!

Yet objections go like this: "Ok, yes, it's true that we listen to fewer sermons. But we've replaced those sermons with Bible studies and fellowship groups—so what's the big deal?"

The big deal is that preaching is God's ordained means of grace. It's not my idea. I'm not saying this just because it's my calling to preach. Preaching is God's idea. Yes, certainly God uses Bible studies and small groups and personal devotions. We should be in the Word daily! But the overwhelming model in the New Testament for spiritual conversion and growth is preaching and sacraments.

Paul writes, "How then will they call on him in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in him of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone preaching? ...So faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ"

(Rom. 10:14, 17). God ordinarily uses the foolishness of the message preached to create faith in people's hearts.

But he also uses the Word preached to strengthen our faith and build us into maturity. Paul writes to the church in Thessalonica, "And we also thank God constantly for this, that when you received the word of God, which you heard from us, you accepted it not as the word of men but as what it really is, the word of God, which is at work in you believers" (1 Thess. 2:13). When God's Word is faithfully and clearly preached, people change, by the Spirit of God.

In my weekly e-mail to my church family, I include a section labeled "Lord's Day Meals," where I list the Scripture texts and sermon titles for the coming Sunday. I call those sermons "meals" intentionally. God is pleased to feed us when we sit under the preaching of his Word.

Choosing to neglect the evening service is like choosing to skip breakfast or eating only carbohydrates and never protein or vegetables. Over time, such a lifestyle will begin to reveal itself in our spiritual health.

### Spiritual Fellowship

A second reason not to miss the evening service is related to the fellowship that comes from joining with the family of God.

As God tells us in Hebrews, "And let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near" (10:24-25).

Of course our brothers and sisters who attend only morning worship services will say that they *aren't* neglecting to gather together. True enough. But isn't more of a good thing better than less? In churches

that have evening services, a message is being communicated when members regularly miss, and it's this: *I don't need your fellowship, and you don't need mine.*

But church membership is more than signing a piece of paper and being on a roll. To be a member of a local church means that you covenant with this particular, actual church family, with all its foibles and strengths.

To join a church is not to be a consumer. It comes with a high responsibility. It means that you promise to look out for your fellow members. You commit to pray for them and listen to them. You encourage them when they're down. You rejoice when they rejoice. But how can you do this if you're with them only half the time? How can we know one another's needs if we make the deliberate choice to stay home half the services per year?

— Sunday —



# LORD'S DAY MEALS



Morning

- Feeding of the 5000  
Mark 6:30-44
1. What Power!
  2. What Care!

Evening

- Feeding the Sheep  
John 21:17
1. Do You Love Me?
  2. Rejoicing in God's Love

From chef

Main dish

Beverages

Others who are convinced of the evening service's importance choose to "date" other churches for the second service. But we must ask: Why not go to your actual church? Unless you are seriously considering leaving your existing church for weighty reasons, you should make it a point to attend the church to which you formally belong.

On a practical level, I often tell people that fellowship is easier and often deeper after the evening service than the morning. At least in my context, the mornings can be kind of full. Soon after the morning service ends it's on to Sunday school and catechism. And once those are finished, it's often time to head home and get the dish out of the oven.

Of course hospitality ought to play an integral role in the life and fellowship of the church, which often happens on Sundays. But from my experience, there's just something extra special about the fellowship on Sunday evenings. People are more awake than they are in the morning, less distracted, and usually more open to sharing their lives with each other.

### **Spiritual Foretaste**

As the hymn puts it so well, Sunday is the "day of all the week the best, / emblem of eternal rest." I'm persuaded that if we really knew the blessing that Sundays and corporate worship are meant to be, we wouldn't choose to forsake the evening service.

After all, we call Sunday the Lord's Day for a reason; we don't call it just the Lord's morning or evening. It saddens me that we've turned a good

and gracious gift upside down and think in terms of what we can't do on Sundays instead of what we get to do.

I don't mean to sound overly pious, and I wasn't always there myself. Sometimes I'm still not. But by God's grace, he's shown me from his Word and experience that when we learn to see and enjoy the Day for what it's meant to be, we wouldn't trade morning and evening worship for anything!

Pay close attention to what God says in Isaiah 58:13-14:

*If you turn back your foot from the Sabbath,  
from doing your pleasure on my holy day,  
and call the Sabbath a delight  
and the holy day of the Lord honorable;  
if you honor it, not going your own ways,  
or seeking your own pleasure,  
or talking idly;  
then you shall take delight in the Lord,  
and I will make you ride on the heights of the earth;  
I will feed you with the heritage of Jacob your father,  
for the mouth of the Lord has spoken.*

In other words, we do not have to choose between the Lord's Day on the one hand and pleasure on the other. No, it's only when we forsake ourselves and our earthly passing pleasures that God promises to give us true, lasting joy in him.

Let me ask you: If you don't have the desire to worship God whenever he calls you to worship now, then what makes you think you'll want to spend eternity doing it?

### **Conclusion**

Forbid it, Lord, that those who routinely attend morning and evening worship be puffed up with pride and look down from our holier-than-thou perch. Morning and evening worship, week after week, month after month, year after year, is a gift, not a measuring stick.

May the Lord of the Sabbath, who was raised on the first day of the week, in whom is found true and eternal rest, be pleased to teach us the superior pleasures of being in his presence to worship him, to receive his Word, and to stir our fellow pilgrims to love and good deeds while we wait for heaven.

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# Bible Study on Mark

## Lesson 1: Introduction to Mark's Gospel

### Mark 1:1

Rev. William Boekstein

A few years ago I was about to preach for the first time in a certain church. As I began to arrange my papers and books I noticed a sign on the top of the pulpit. It was a quotation from John 12:21 in which it is recorded that certain Greeks approached Philip and said to him, "Sir, we wish to see Jesus." I have since learned that many churches have placed these words on their pulpit as a reminder to the minister that one non-negotiable purpose of preaching is to show the

glories of Christ to the congregation. I remember getting a little nervous as I thought about that sign, wondering if Christ was clearly set forth in my sermon. I'll never forget this event.

It is, of course, possible to lose sight of Christ in one's theology. But to do so is to forfeit the foundation of our faith. We become like Peter, who knew his theology but took his eyes off Jesus and began to sink in the sea. It is critically important for us to keep our eyes fixed on Jesus. One of the best ways to do so is to spend some

time in the Gospels.

This first study introduces Mark's Gospel using his own preface: "the gospel of Jesus Christ." Mark tells us in his first verse that he has not written an epistle or a book of poetry but a Gospel. In so saying, Mark gives us a clue to help us understand his contribution to Holy Scripture.

### Introducing the Gospels

What is a Gospel, and why is this question critical in our study of this



second book of the New Testament?

### *The Gospels Are Narratives*

“Broadly speaking, biblical truth comes in two basic literary forms, narrative and discourse. Narratives are stories” of historical events.<sup>1</sup> Gospels are distinct from poetry, or epistles, or prophecy, in that their teachings are couched in story.

The fact that the Gospels are narratives suggests several implications for how we study them. First, we need to keep the story form as much as possible. To take a tiny portion of a story and expound it at great length is to risk destroying the power of the story.<sup>2</sup> Second, it is usually best to study one Gospel at a time. In other words, there is a place for judicious comparison with parallel Gospel accounts, but we should remember that “it is precisely their distinctives that are the reason for having four gospels in the first place.”<sup>3</sup> So, for example, this study will not consider Jesus’ birth narrative because Mark says nothing about it.

Third, we need to try to enter into the story as much as possible. A good story draws us in. And Mark, more than the other Gospel writers, includes the kind of details that help us imagine that we are in the story. Mark presents his message not as a dry lawyer’s brief but as a fast-paced historical account of the ministry of the Savior of the world.

### *The Gospels Are Prophetic Fulfillment*

The Gospels are direct historical fulfillment of the Old Testament. Mark’s second verse draws forward the testimony of the prophets: “As it is written in the prophets . . .” The Gospels essentially answer the question, “What has become of the message of the prophets?” Remember that the Old Testament had been completed around four hundred years before the first Gospels were written. During the intervening time there had

been little to no prophetic movement. People were waiting and wondering, “Where is this promised Seed?” For this reason, Matthew begins with a genealogy. In his defense to Agrippa, Paul says that the only charge against him is that he has been saying “no other things than those which the prophets and Moses said would come—that the Christ would suffer, that He would be the first to rise from the dead and would proclaim light to the Jewish people and to the Gentiles” (Acts 26:22-23). Mark would have agreed with Paul.

### *Gospels Are Good News*

Unlike other narratives, biblical narratives have a very specific purpose, namely, to describe the redemptive acts of God. “Gospel” comes from the Old English “godspell,” or “good news.” Gospels are theological biographies which announce the greatest story ever told (cf. Luke 1:1-4; Acts 1:1-3): Christ has come in the flesh to “deliver a ruined world, and to restore men from death to life.”<sup>4</sup> As we study this Gospel we need to keep asking the question, “How does Jesus’ life teach us good news?”

### **Profiting from the Gospels**

You probably wouldn’t be reading this study if you didn’t believe that it will be profitable to your spiritual life. One of simplest plans to profit from Mark’s Gospel is to expect to see Jesus in his role as mediator. Christ came to fulfill the badly-deteriorated Old Testament offices of prophet, priest, and king (Jer. 8:1-3). As prophet he teaches us God’s will; as king he rules over history and judges the thoughts words, and deeds of men; and as priest he lays down his life to save his brethren. As we see Jesus in his threefold splendor, we respond as his loyal subjects.

### *We Witness God’s Redemptive Work in Christ*

When studying the Gospels we must ask, “Where is God in this

story?” The Gospels help to give us a theological world and life view. The Gospels are different from modern histories in that their authors write from a transcendent viewpoint; they write from the perspective of God. They help explain the supernatural purposes lying behind the natural events.<sup>5</sup> This is how we need to see life. In order to be shaped by the theological history of the gospel we must not read the Gospels simply as moral lessons. The events in the Gospels are significant because they actually happened.

Biblical history is essentially the history of Christ. This is blatant in the Gospels. Other characters come in and out of the story, but the story never ceases to be about Jesus (even if none of them say everything about Christ).<sup>6</sup>

### *We Observe the Life That God Blesses or Judges<sup>7</sup>*

When we read the Gospels we catch a glimpse of God interacting with men; in some cases blessing, in some cases cursing. We learn from these interactions what type of life God honors and which he rejects. We learn about this life in the Epistles through doctrine; in the Gospels through illustration.<sup>8</sup> Someone has said, “History is moral philosophy teaching by example.”

We see the characters in narrative as mirrors. Sometimes we see an image that resembles us (for better or for worse). Sometimes we see an image that doesn’t resemble us (again, for better or for worse). For example, we see Judas filled with remorse for his sins but not exhibiting true repentance (Matt. 27:3). We see Pilate give in to crowd’s pressure and refuse to do what he knew was right. We watch Peter confess Christ and then falter (Mark 8:29; 14:66-72). The characters in the Gospels are literally living before the face of God in Christ. This fact cracks

open a special window into our own lives as we seek to live before the face of God. We must learn to ask, “Where am I in this story?”

### *We Submit to the Great Teacher*

The epistle to the Hebrews begins by saying that God, previously spoke by the prophets but “has in these last days spoken to us by His son, whom he has appointed heir of all things” (Heb. 1:1). God speaks to us through his Son. When Jesus was transfigured on the mountain God’s voice boomed from heaven saying, “This is my beloved Son, hear him!” (Mark 9:7). Jesus speaks through the entire Bible. But God insists that there is something unique about the prophetic earthly ministry of Christ recorded in the Gospels. In the words of Christ, the will of God takes on flesh and blood and communicates to us in a powerful way. If we did not have the Gospels we might miss God’s tender invitations, his angry warnings, his solemn commands.

### **Introducing Mark’s Gospel**

The more we know about this book the better we will be able to enter into it.

#### *The Author*<sup>9</sup>

Although we will talk about a human author of this book, the preeminent author is God the Holy Spirit. The Bible teaches that God moved holy men to record his very words (2 Peter 1:21). The book which we are undertaking to study is, properly speaking, God’s Gospel, not Mark’s.<sup>10</sup>

As the human author of the second Gospel, John Mark was not an apostle but a close associate of the apostle Peter, who calls him his son (1 Peter 5:13). He likely grew up right in the center of the exciting start of Christianity (Mark 14:51-52) because his mother, Mary, occupied a position of prominence and influence among the early Christians (Acts 12:12). He was present for part of the first missionary journey of Paul

and Barnabas, who was his cousin (Acts 12:25; 13:13). Mark evidently proved himself faithful thereafter, for when Paul is imprisoned in Rome he commends Mark to the Colossians (Col. 4:10). In fact, shortly before Paul died he requested Mark’s presence (2 Tim. 4:11). By this time, Mark had probably written his Gospel.

When Mark first met Jesus he was likely a young man who seems to have grown up in a pious home. Some people take this to be a boring thing. The life of Mark was anything but boring. Nor was it unproductive. He seems to have failed greatly on Paul’s first journey. Yet he did not sulk in defeat but rather continued to labor for the Lord.

#### *Prominent Themes in Mark*

As we begin our study it will be helpful to catch a glimpse of some of the themes we should expect to encounter along the way.

First, Mark focuses more on the works than the words of Christ (in comparison with the other Gospels).<sup>11</sup> Understanding this is helpful in two ways. First, it teaches us that we are to be not only talkers but also doers. The Gospel of Mark is a grand illustration of James’s point that faith is made perfect by works (James 2:22). Second, it reminds us that Christ was a doer. We are not saved because Christ talked about the kingdom of God (as important as this is) but because he ushered in the kingdom of God by his deeds. He fought against Satan. He performed miracles. He walked this earth faithfully to fulfill the law’s demands for us. As one commentator has said, Mark presents the ministry of Christ “as one of strenuous activity. Task follows task, with almost breathless rapidity.”<sup>12</sup> It is not insignificant that Mark frequently prefaces Christ’s action with the word *immediately*.<sup>13</sup> It is true that in his doing he sets a pattern for us, but he also comforts us with the promise that “it is done.” Christ is the ultimate

doer. He labored for us so that we could rest in him. At the same time, Mark records ten occasions on which Jesus withdrew from the crowds to be alone with his disciples or with God.<sup>14</sup>

Second, Mark emphasizes Christ’s passion. Mark devotes a greater proportion of his Gospel to the events surrounding Christ’s death than Matthew, Luke, or John. He uses ten chapters to describe the first thirty-three years of Jesus’ life, and five chapters to portray the week of his death. This dual emphasis is a beautiful picture of our redemption which is accomplished by both the active and passive obedience of Christ. We might say that Mark divides his Gospel into two scenes, although with significant thematic overlap. In the first scene Christ identifies with sinners. He demonstrates his power over evil through his miracles; he declares that he has power to forgive sins. He fulfills the will of God. This scene focuses on his active obedience. In the second scene he gives his life as a ransom. He is forsaken by both his friends and his Father. His blood falls to the sin-cursed ground. He paid the price for our disobedience. In his death, Christ’s passive obedience shines like the stars on a dark night.

Third, Mark stresses the suffering nature of discipleship (8:34; 10:21). Throughout the Gospel, Mark makes it clear that to follow Jesus necessarily means to tread the way that he trod. Mark’s Gospel stresses that suffering always precedes glory; it did for Christ and it will for the Christian. We need to grasp this especially in light of the impact the health, wealth, and prosperity gospel has made on the church.

Fourth, Mark prioritizes Jesus’ preaching of the kingdom; he uses the word *kingdom* at least twenty-one times. Louis Berkhof succinctly defines the kingdom as “the rule of God established and acknowledged in the hearts of sinners.”<sup>15</sup> This is what

Christ is doing in Mark's Gospel. This definition of the kingdom helps us avoid two dangerous errors. First, we deny that the kingdom of God can be brought to bear by "human endeavors, such as education, [laws] or social reforms."<sup>16</sup> When Christ and the disciples go out preaching the kingdom, they call men to repent and believe in Christ (1:15). Unless one's heart is changed, one cannot be an agent of change in the world. Second, we learn the fallacy which suggests that true religion is strictly a private matter which is impotent to engage the world. When God changes our hearts, we become citizens of his kingdom who are obliged to use kingdom principles to make war against the gates of hell (Matt. 16:18).

The great irony is that Christ doesn't establish this kingdom through typical means of force but through suffering service. Charles Erdman has suggested that the key verse of Mark's Gospel is Mark 10:45, "The Son of man did not come to be served, but

to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many." This is what we will see in the Gospel of Mark: The King of kings establishing a kingdom through service and sacrifice. It is this very thing that makes him the King of kings.

1. Dan Doriani, *Getting the Message: A Plan for Interpreting and Applying the Bible* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 1996), 61.

2. In preaching through a Gospel periscope it is best to follow the story line of the text. This seems to suggest that there should be manifest progress in a narrative sermon and sermon series. See Sidney Greidanus, *The Modern Preacher and the Ancient Text* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988), 307.

3. Compare John Broadus, *Preparation and Delivery of Sermons* (New York: Hodder and Stoughton, 1898), 330, and Greidanus, *Modern Preacher and the Ancient Text*, 297.

4. From John Calvin's definition of Gospel in *Harmony of the Gospels*, vol. 1 (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1989), xxxvi.

5. See Dan McCartney and Charles Clayton, *Let the Reader Understand: A Guide to Interpreting and Applying the Bible* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2002), 224.

6. Compare John 21:30-31; 21:25, and William Klein, Craig Blomberg, and

Robert Hubbard, *Introduction to Biblical Interpretation* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2004), 400.

7. See Doriani, *Getting the Message*, 73-75.

8. Gordon Fee and Douglas Stuart, *How to Read the Bible for All It's Worth: A Guide to Understanding the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1993), 83.

9. This section borrows from the clearly written introduction to Mark's Gospel found in Charles Erdman, *The Gospel of Mark* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1945), 7-14.

10. Nonetheless, Jesus was comfortable with referring to the human author of Bible books (e.g., Luke 24:27).

11. Notably, Mark records very few of Jesus' parables (four) but a host of miracles (nineteen).

12. Erdman, *Gospel of Mark*, 11.

13. This word in the Greek is found forty-two times in Mark, which is more times than it is used in all the other books in the New Testament combined.

14. Erdman, *Gospel of Mark*, 12.

15. Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1976), 408.

16. Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, 408.

## Points to Ponder and Discuss

1. What is a Gospel?
2. How is a Gospel both similar to and different from a biography?
3. Who is the author of the second Gospel? Explain.
4. What are some themes that are evident in the book of Mark?
5. Why might Mark's Gospel slow down near the end of Jesus' earthly ministry?
6. How is Jesus' constant activity in Mark a comfort for believers?
7. What are three questions that can help us profit from our study of the Gospels?
8. What are some practical implications of grasping Mark's theme of "victory through suffering"?
9. Reflect on the definition of "kingdom" offered in this study.

# Bible Study on Mark

## Lesson 1: Preparation for Ministry

### Mark 1:1-13

Rev. William  
Boekestein

Someone has said, “Preparation is half the battle.” How often do plans fail for lack of preparedness? How often are we like the young man I once observed speaking with the manager of a gas station about getting a job? He was wearing his pajamas; his hair was a mess. He looked like he had just rolled out of bed. He was obviously not prepared for this interview and probably didn’t get the job.

At the beginning of his Gospel, Mark teaches us the importance of preparation. His Gospel is a record of the most important plan ever enacted, the ministry of Jesus Christ. As we consider Jesus’ preparation for his ministry, our faith in his finished work can be greatly strengthened.

Mark 1:2-13 gives a distilled account of three stages of Christ’s incarnational ministry. In the first stage the people are being prepared by John the Baptist. In the second two stages the focus shifts to Christ’s preparation. At the end of this brief account we rightly have high hopes for the ministry that is to follow.

#### Christ’s Herald (1:2-8)

Christ came to preach the good news of the kingdom of God, as the King of that kingdom. But every king has a herald, someone who goes before the king and announces his coming. Christ’s herald was John.

Who was John the Baptist? If you would have asked *him* that question he would have said, “I’m a nobody.” He didn’t want people to know who he was because he came to point people to Christ. In honor of John’s request not to focus on himself we’ll be brief. John was born under miraculous circumstances to Zacharias and Elizabeth. He lived in obscurity for most of his life. One day he came out of the wilderness, preached Christ with all his might for a short time, and then was beheaded by Herod (Matt.



14:3, 10). He was a man who gave his life to Christ. Rather than focus on who John was we focus on three ways in which he served as a herald.

#### *John Came Fulfilling Prophecy*

John testified to Christ by being the one the Old Testament said would come to prepare his way. Appropriately, Mark uses the Old Testament to introduce Jesus' harbinger (vv. 2, 3). Mark first quotes from Malachi 3:1. In its broader context Malachi 3 foretells that the Messiah would come to judge the temple. Before this judgment God would send his messenger to prepare the way. By quoting from the last of the Old Testament prophets Mark skillfully links John the Baptist to the long line of messengers whom God sent to his people (Heb. 1:1).

Mark then quotes from Isaiah 40:3. Isaiah 40 begins Isaiah's message of comfort. Before the Messiah would come to deliver his people they would hear "the voice of one crying in the wilderness: 'Prepare the way of the Lord; make His paths straight.'" Isaiah said that a messenger would cry out in the wilderness; Mark 1:4 says that John came baptizing and crying out in the wilderness.

Mark introduces John the Baptist with these two passages to show the dual purpose of Christ's coming: to judge the illegitimate sons of the kingdom and to deliver his true sons from bondage to sin. John serves as Christ's herald by fulfilling the Old Testament prophecies which predicted that Christ would have a forerunner.

John's role as forerunner is also shown by his style (1:6). Mark's reference to John's clothes of camel's hair and leather belt seem strange until we understand their purpose. John is here compared with Elijah, who was a hairy man who wore a leather belt (2 Kings 1:8). The last two verses of the Old Testament (Mal. 4:5-6) say that Elijah would return before Messiah

would. Mark here suggests what Christ would blatantly state: Elijah has come (cf. Mark 9:13)!

#### *John Came Preaching a Baptism of Repentance*

John's message of repentance is a perfect hinge between the law-dominated Old Testament and the gospel-saturated New Testament.<sup>1</sup>

So important was John's message that it is highlighted by a visible symbol of baptism. The Bible says a lot about the meaning of baptism. Baptism is a sign of covenant membership and of identification with the people of God. But here baptism focuses on personal sinfulness. John heralds Christ's coming through baptism by emphasizing the reason for his coming: to remit sins. Baptism symbolizes our need for cleansing. For believers it is a seal of the forgiveness of sins and a call to new obedience. If you have been baptized, then you are identified as someone who has a problem with sin. You have also been identified as one who can look confidently to Christ for forgiveness of sins.

#### *John Came Magnifying Christ*

John magnifies Christ through two sayings (vv. 6-8). First, John speaks of his own unworthiness compared with Christ. "Christ is so great that I am not worthy to touch his shoes!" Not his feet, but his shoes! As evidence of his union with Christ, John thought great things of Christ and spoke great things of him. John's faith was anything but private!

Second, John says that although he baptized with water, Christ will baptize with the Spirit (v. 8). John makes the point that there is a difference between him as the outward administrator of baptism and Christ as the "author of spiritual baptism."<sup>2</sup> Mark is insisting, early in his record, that the Messiah is no mere man. After all, who can command the Spirit of God but God himself?

### **Christ's Baptism (1:9-11)**

John's baptism prefaces the baptism of Christ, which provides an opportunity to reflect on the name "Christ."

#### *The Name "Christ"*

In the baptism of Jesus his title of Messiah (from the Hebrew for "anointed one"; the Greek form is "Christ"), though not used, is graphically illustrated. To understand this important concept we need to look to the Old Testament. The kings of Israel were anointed with oil and thereby singled out for the office to which they had been called. Likewise, when King Jesus is introduced by his herald, he too is anointed, not with oil but with the Holy Spirit in his baptism. Christ was anointed to be a mediator, or one who bring resolution to two parties in conflict. Christ's baptism is his ordination service.<sup>3</sup> The mediatorial nature of Christ's ministry is clearly seen from the way Christ identifies with both man and God in his baptism.

#### *Christ's Identification with Man*

Mark tells us that Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee for his baptism. This seemingly small detail is quite important. When the disciple Nathanael heard that Jesus was from Nazareth he said to Philip, "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?" (John 1:46). Jesus' geographical extraction showcases his humility.

Jesus identifies with his people not only by hailing from an insignificant city but also by undergoing the rite of baptism. Jesus underwent John's baptism of repentance which was for the remission of sins. Did Jesus need to have sins forgiven? No. But, as Paul writes, "He made Him who knew no sin to be sin for us, that we might become the righteousness of God in Him" (2 Cor. 5:21).

## Identification with God

Jesus' baptism account is one of the great Trinitarian texts of the Bible. In Jesus' baptism the three distinct persons of the Godhead are shown to be intimately united. The Father speaks to the Son in words of affirming love. The Spirit, in the form of a dove, publicly sets him apart indicating that this is no ordinary man. As the Anointed One he has been distinguished from all other people (cf. Is. 61:1) and equipped for a monumental task. How meaningful were those powerful words which pulsed through Christ's mind: "You are my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased." Christ was about to begin a public ministry that would bring upon him shame, hostility, powerful temptation to sin, death, and even hell. God urges obedience by reminding his Son of their intimate and blessed relationship. Jesus was baptized in the Father's love to prepare him for a second baptism of the Father's wrath on Calvary (Luke 12:50).

If Christ's baptism was encouraging to him, it is to believers as well. Christians always have the Spirit, but God uniquely prepares us for difficult tasks. Sometimes we are filled with fear to step out of ourselves for God. We need to remember that where God calls he also empowers. We also need to remember God's pattern as we urge others to greater faithfulness. How often do we sound like the Scranton, Pennsylvania, radio personality who introduces his show every day by shouting: "You *better* listen!"? God is setting a pattern of communication. He was not content to assume that his Son knew of his love. He knew that something powerful happens when we verbally affirm the love we have for others.

These words of the Father are also important words for how we view Christ. If the Father was not pleased with his Son, then we could not be

saved. We are staking our lives on the sacrifice of Christ's own life which he offered to the Father. If that life was not well pleasing to the Father, then we have no forgiveness. But we can have the confidence of knowing that Christ's sacrifice was accepted by God because he was his beloved Son. In fact, God says these same words to believing Christians. If you have repented of your sins and trusted in Christ as mediator, then the Father says to you today, "You are my beloved, adopted son or daughter, in whom I am well pleased." It is true that everything we do is stained with sin. But, as Paul affirms, "I am crucified with Christ; it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me; and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved *me* and gave Himself for *me*" (Gal. 2:20).

### Christ's Temptation (1:12-13)

Following his baptism, Jesus is three times tempted by Satan in a dry and solitary setting surrounded by wild beasts. The name "Satan" means "adversary." This is an appropriate introduction to the clash that Jesus was initiating between himself and the devil. In just a few short years this adversary would be defeated even though he will not be fully incapacitated until the last day.

We can understand only a little of how Jesus was tempted because we are so prone to give in to temptation and therefore rarely ever experience its full power. In football, quarterbacks can't afford to experience the full hit of the linemen so they often just slide down when they are about to be hit. This is what you and I often do. The husband who is tempted to get angry at his wife fights the urge for a moment and then gives in. The man who is tempted to look at pornographic images on the computer might go a few days or weeks without looking but then gives in. A woman is tempted to share that shocking bit of gossip but before the temptation even gets strong, she gives

in. We have never experienced the intensity of temptation which Christ experienced because we give in so quickly. "In your struggle against sin, you have not yet resisted to the point of shedding your blood" (Heb. 12:4, NIV). But Christ did!

Here is the comfort in Christ's temptation: *he did not give in*. As Christians we struggle sometimes with doubt. We look at our sins and are grieved and wonder how we could possibly be saved. We wonder at how easily we give in to temptation. We are terrified by our failures. It is in times like this that we must take comfort in the temptation of Christ, *because he passed the test!* Your salvation does not depend on your performance but on Christ's. And here we have a grand demonstration that Christ will never fail us.

Jesus' temptation was heightened by his physical weakness. Matthew and Luke tell us that had nothing to eat during that time. Probably the longest that some of us have gone without food is less than one day. Think about how easily Esau gave up his birthright because he hadn't eaten for a few hours or maybe for a few days. But here Christ hadn't eaten for forty days and holds fast to his birthright which becomes our blessing by faith in him. Christ is here contrasted with God's disobedient son, Israel, who wandered in the wilderness forty years (Num. 14:34). He is shown to be the true ark of salvation which was battered about a turbulent sea for forty days and nights (Gen. 7:12).

At the conclusion of this God-ordained time of testing, God the Father ministered to by his son through angels. The end of obedience is blessing.

In the first lesson we suggested three ways to engage Mark's Gospel in terms of application: What is Christ teaching? What kind of life does God bless or judge? What do we

learn of God's redemptive work in Christ? The following chapters won't always outline these questions quite so explicitly, but to underscore the methodology, let's consider each in turn.

### *What Is Christ Teaching?*

In this passage Christ doesn't say anything; he utters no promises or commands. But God, in publicizing Christ's authority, *is* teaching us the importance of this question. Authority is a huge issue in teaching; just a few verses later, Mark tells us how the people marveled over Jesus' authoritative teaching. If you don't have authority and credentials, then what you say carries little weight. Why is it that when a black-and-white car—with its lights flashing—races up behind your car, you pull over? You instantly recognize that the police officer in your rearview mirror has authority. In his baptism God broadcasts the absolute authority of his Son; in his temptation Christ proves his authority. Understandably, newly commissioned military officers fresh out of college struggle

to command the same respect as seasoned and tested soldiers. In the wilderness Christ is tested and demonstrates his right to our respect and obedience.

### *What Kind of Life Does God Bless or Curse?*

God blesses the life of total commitment. How else could you describe the life of John the Baptist (Matt. 11:11)? But we also learn that God blesses the life of repentance. You will never outgrow sin in this life. But, by God's grace, you can develop a lifelong habit of "repentance leading to salvation" (2 Cor. 7:10).

### *What Do We Learn About Christ's Redemptive Work?*

God is fulfilling the promise made in the Old Testament that he would defeat Satan, and he's doing that through his beloved Son. In the garden of Eden the first Adam scurries away before the victorious devil (Gen. 3:8); in the wilderness of Judea, the devil limps away before the victorious second Adam (Luke 4:13).

Preparation is half the battle. After this preparation we have a pretty good sense of how the battle between Christ and Satan is going to go. This Gospel *is* good news! And keep in mind . . . this is only the beginning!

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1. Calvin sees the beginning of John's preaching as "the abrogation of the law and the beginning of the gospel, strictly speaking" (*Harmony of the Gospels*, 1:174).

2. Calvin, *Harmony of the Gospels*, 1:197. Calvin also maintains, in this connection, that Christian baptism today is the same as that which John administered.

3. Erdman, *Gospel of Mark*, 24.

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## Points to Ponder and Discuss

1. What do you learn about Christ by reading Mark's opening Old Testament quotations in their original contexts?
2. How does John the Baptist glorify Christ?
3. How can we imitate John in glorifying Christ?
4. To what degree is your life characterized by confession of sins?
5. Why does the Father pronounce his love to Jesus at his baptism?
6. Is there anything about the Father's declaration that we can bring into our various relationships?
7. How does Christ's baptism convince us of his sympathy with and toward sinners?
8. Reflect on the fact that it was the Spirit who drove Jesus into the wilderness to test him (Mark 1:12).
9. Why is Christ's temptation significant for the believer?

# The Trouble with Ministers (1)

Rev. Wybren H. Oord



## Special Section for Ministers and Seminary Graduates

Many young men recently graduated from seminary and are awaiting a call. How many of them, do you suppose, want to be removed from their ministry by means of discipline or because they cannot get along with their elders and congregations? I dare say that the answer would be: none of them.

Of course not. Nobody goes into the ministry with the idea that one day he will be forcibly removed from that office. And yet it happens. It happens a lot—more often than we care to admit.

This series of articles is being written not to point fingers or to open up old wounds. It is written for young men who are looking forward to the ministry. It is written to caution those entering ministry by pointing out some of the easiest mistakes into which we ministers can fall. Believe me, brothers, ministry is the most gratifying, exciting, and rewarding calling a person can receive. But there are also dangers. The devil does not leave you alone simply because you wear a clerical collar. In fact, he

After seven years you have married or buried someone in almost every family in your congregation. In other words, you have been involved in some major emotional aspect of every member's life. You have rejoiced with them when they rejoiced, and you have wept with them when they wept.

attacks you all the harder because if he can get you to fall, your entire congregation will be affected.

In my almost thirty years of ministry I have observed several ministers being removed from office. Three of them were very good friends; several were classmates. As a church visitor, I have been involved with the removal of six ministers from their congregations in the last dozen years. I have gotten to know some elders from other churches better than my own. I have seen them angry. I have seen them cry. Most of all, I have seen that they have a love for the church of Jesus Christ. Removing a minister from office is a gut-wrenching task. It is not a task anyone enjoys.

## Two Options

There are two options for removing a minister from office in the URCNA. I am sure that in whatever denomination or federation you become a minister, they have something similar to these two options

The first is Article 11 in our Church Order. It deals with the dissolving of the pastoral relationship between the pastor and the congregation for non-disciplinary reasons. Non-disciplinary reasons. That is an incredibly difficult

call to make! Unfortunately, I see this article as the one that is used when the congregation wants a new minister. They just get tired of each other and it's time to move on.

I know there is more to it than that, but I have never been known to beat around the bush. As one church visitor put it, there's a whole lot of little issues that add up to one big problem. What a sad thing! What a pathetic thing. As far as I know, no minister in the URC who has been released from his congregation by means of Article 11 has ever received a call to another URC church. It is the kiss of death for the minister.

Article 61 is used when there is a disciplinary problem. In this case, the minister should not be in the ministry because of gross sins committed. According to Article 62, this includes "false doctrine and heresy, public schism, public blasphemy, simony, faithless desertion of office or intrusion upon that of another, perjury, adultery, fornication, theft, acts of violence, brawling, filthy lucre." In other words, he has abused his office and used it as a means either to carry out his false teachings or to fulfill his wicked desire.

I have dealt with both of these articles as a church visitor, and, believe me, both are devastating to the minister,

his family, and to the congregation. It tears apart families and churches.

## Equally Bad Options

So, how do you avoid them? How do you make your ministry one in which these two articles will never take place? Move every four years? That's one solution, I suppose. That way you are never anywhere long enough to get into trouble.

I read a magazine article years ago that gave a report on the effectiveness of ministers. It stated that ministers are most effective in their congregations after they have been there for seven years. That only makes sense. After seven years you have married or buried someone in almost every family in your congregation. In other words, you have been involved in some major emotional aspect of every member's life. You have rejoiced with them when they rejoiced, and you have wept with them when they wept. And, I would add, after seven years you finally know how they are all related to one another.

So, we are most effective after seven years. The same article also said the average stay of a minister is four and a half years. What that means is that we are never effective.

You could do that. You could move every five to six years. Some ministers do. Granted, if that were your policy, you would have to write only five or six hundred sermons, but it sets you up for failure. After all, you won't get too involved with the people where God has currently called you if you are already planning on moving on.

I know one minister who starts looking for another church after being somewhere for four years. He doesn't know this, but his elders and his congregation are well aware of his policy. They even start talking to other ministers long before he has a call. Somehow, that doesn't seem like a good solution. Not to mention that it is awkward for the other ministers with whom the elders start dialoguing.

The problem with doing this is that it creates an escape mechanism within the church and within the minister. We have developed a concept within the church that if you have a problem, you move on. As a result, the problem is never dealt with by the minister or by the church. Instead, if the problem is within the congregation, the next minister has to deal with it; or if the problem is in the minister, the next church has to deal with it. Either way, the issue never gets resolved.

I remember one small church where a problem developed that led to four families, all related, leaving the church. It greatly affected the church with everyone taking sides: the families were wrong; the elders were wrong; and, of course, it was all the minister's fault.<sup>1</sup>

It was a difficult time, to say the least. Right in the middle of it all the minister received a call to another church. Of course he was going to accept the call! What better way to get out from under a problem than to run away from it? I still remember



it as clearly as if it were yesterday. I received a call from an elder telling me that the minister had declined the call.

He stayed there for another two years.

During those two years a young person was diagnosed with cancer; four parishioners were involved in a very serious car accident; he counseled a couple who were considering divorce and by God's grace stayed together. A lot of ministry took place, and through that ministry healing was brought to the congregation.

When the minister received a call to another church, he told me that he didn't feel as if he was running away from a problem. By God's grace he had helped bring closure to the problem and was now free to serve God elsewhere. He tells me that to this day, when an elder or former elder from that church stops in to visit him, he always brings up that incident and says, "Thank you for seeing us through it and not taking off in the middle of it."

### Conclusion

We all have met ministers who have gone through difficult times and come out better for it. But, no doubt,

we have also met former ministers who could not escape the temptations the devil set before them. I tend to learn better from the latter, negative examples more than anything else. I like to think that over the years I have observed a few things. I have come back from visits as a church visitor and asked my elders, "Do I do that?"

Decades ago when I began the ministry, my best friend was a very conservative minister. Not being all that conservative myself at the time, he became my inspiration. He isn't in the ministry anymore. In fact, he spent some time in jail. My greatest inspiration became my greatest warning. Sin can happen to anyone, including ministers. Sometimes, especially ministers.

The title of this series of articles, "The Trouble with Ministers," is to point out how to avoid some of the pitfalls that ministers can fall into very easily. I write this hesitantly because I am not an expert.<sup>2</sup> The next article will deal with problems that lead to an Article 61—leaving the ministry because of disciplinary reasons. Being deposed from ministry. Something nobody wants, and yet something we set ourselves up for all too often.

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1. Anytime there is a problem in the church, it is always the minister's fault. I wish I were smart enough to think up half the things I have been accused of. One elder once put it very nicely: "Lightning always strikes at the top."

2. I'm not an expert at avoiding trouble. Getting into trouble has never been a problem.

### Rev. Wybren Oord

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It is a few hours after church on Sunday. The phone rings. An excited voice on the other line announces: “You’ve been selected to win a million dollars. All you have to do is think about this morning’s sermon and tell me the theme, the main points and a few personal applications, and the million dollars is yours.” Would you get the money?

If this scenario is unlikely, there is a similar scenario that is not only likely but certain. Each of us will experience holiness, hope, and heaven, or disobedience, despair, and death, based on what we have done with the preaching of the gospel (Mark 4:1–20). Preachers will be held accountable for boring or unfaithful preaching (James 3:1). But listeners are responsible to use what they have been given through the preached Word. Many of us might be hearing the Word with eagerness. Others of us might fill a pew from week to week

but gain little from what we hear. Can such “hearing” really profit?

True hearing certainly requires God’s recreating work. The Westminster Shorter Catechism reminds us that “the *Spirit of God* makes the reading, but especially the preaching of the Word, an effective means of convincing and converting sinners, and building them up in holiness and comfort, through faith, to salvation” (Q&A 89). Apart from God’s blessing people hear the words of the sermon but not the God of the sermon. They hear about Christ but do not receive Christ.

But Christ also says, “He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches” (Rev. 3:22). One ordinary means by which Christ works the benefits of redemption is the preached Word (WSC, Q&A 88). And proper hearing takes personal discipline. Kent Hughes urges us to “break holy sweat” in hearing God.

There are three ingredients necessary to profit from preaching.

## **Preparing for the Preaching**

Good listening doesn’t just happen. It is developed through thoughtful preparation.

### *Preparing Throughout the Week*

Good sermon listeners tend to be those who maintain regular family worship. To put it negatively, we should not expect to love worship and preaching on Sunday if we are not developing a spiritual appetite through personal and family worship Monday through Saturday.

Midweek preparation also means thinking ahead about the next Lord’s Day. The Puritans called Sunday “the market day of the soul.” As grocery day approaches you think about the list of items you need. As we anticipate meeting with God we should meditate on our needs and anticipate God’s provision.



By daily preparation we will learn the heart of the psalmist who wrote, "My soul longs, yes, even faints for the courts of the Lord" (Ps. 84:2).

### *Preparing on Saturday Evening*

How often are our Saturday evenings true preparations for worship? To transition from the busyness of the week to the gospel-restfulness of the Lord's Day we should have special times of family worship Saturday evening. Puritan George Swinnock wrote, "If you would leave your heart with God on Saturday night, you should find it with him on the Lord's Day morning."

Saturday evening preparation is not only spiritual. Since good listening requires a rested body and mind we should be sure to get plenty of sleep Saturday evening (without oversleeping and having to rush to church). Recently I listened to arguably the greatest sermon ever preached on American soil, Jonathan Edwards's "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God." The problem was, I listened to it when I was settling in to bed for the night. The next morning I remembered almost nothing of what I heard. Preaching doesn't work by osmosis!

As guardians of the home, parents should require their children to be well rested for church. Parents can't make a child sleep, but they can enforce a reasonable "lights out" time.

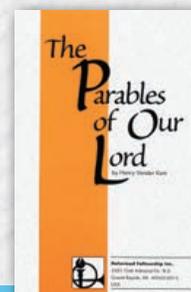
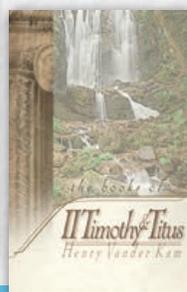
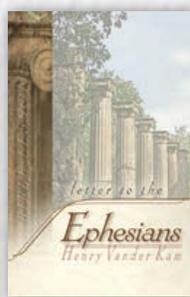
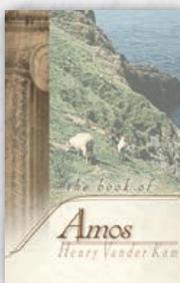
### *Preparing Sunday Morning*

As we get ready for church Sunday morning we should be careful to show others our best grace. If we would be on our best behavior Sunday morning our worship would be greatly improved. Men who holler at their families to "hurry up!" are not preparing anyone for worship.

We should also consider sitting as close to the front as possible. Why do most events fill up from the front to

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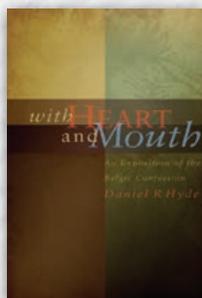
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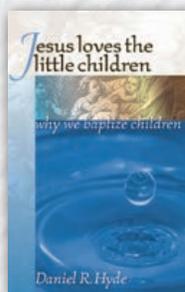


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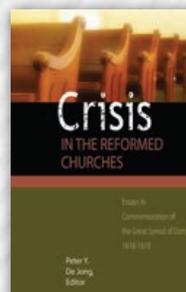
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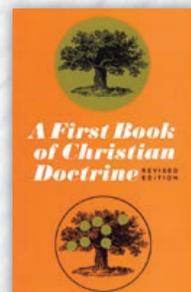
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the back? We can all confirm from experience: The closer you are, the more involved you are. Perhaps some of us are more likely to win the lottery than to change where we sit at church. But most of us would do better to move forward.

### *Preparing with Prayer*

Sermon preparation should be joined with prayer. Pray for God's wisdom when you open your Bible. Before the worship service pray for the minister and his preaching. If you feel yourself growing tired, either spiritually or physically, pray for strength.

### **Receiving the Preaching**

Even good preparation does not guarantee good listening. Rather, "we must attend to the Word with diligence" (WSC, Q&A 90).

### *Come to the Service Expectantly*

Do not come to church to have your ears tickled or to fulfill someone else's expectations. Come to hear God's Word explained and applied. Expect the sermon to make God's Word plain, to answer real-life questions, to assist in application, and to lead Spirit-illuminated listeners to God through Christ. "As newborn babes, desire the sincere milk of the word" (1 Peter 2:2) and thereby receive it with faith and love.

### *Take Responsibility for Your Spiritual Health*

Our lives might radically change if we took more responsibility for what we hear in church. The next time you leave church saying, "I didn't get much out of the sermon," ask yourself, "Was I not a diligent hearer?"

This is what God suggests in Hebrews 5. The Hebrews, by this time, ought to have been teachers, but they could still only handle the most basic teaching. "By reason of use" you must have your "senses exercised to discern both good and evil" (v. 14).

### *Interact with the Text*

One of the saddest sounds in church is that of Bibles closing as the sermon starts. Reading the text and keeping the Bible open during the sermon help many people to better converse with God.

Many people also find it helpful to take notes during the sermon. Unfortunately, we tend to take notes in church the same way we were trained to take notes in school. In school, students have to record large tracts of text in order to pass the quiz or test. But this might not be the best way to take sermon notes. Don't try to record every thought, and use shorthand where possible. Try to get the main points, and possibly, the subpoints, *simply as a way of organizing your notes*. But within the skeleton outline you should fill in thoughts that God knows you need to remember and apply. Your notes will look different than your neighbors'. You might also do well to quickly write down distracting thoughts (e.g., a shopping list item, or a person you forgot to call). Writing down our distractions frees our mind to forget and refocus.

### **Applying the Preaching**

An old minister once said, "The sermon isn't done until it's done." He meant that the purpose of the sermon isn't realized until the hearers do it.

Paul says that the unrighteous perish because they did "not receive the love of the truth, that they might be saved" (2 Thess. 2:10). They did not

put the Word of God into practice. Unbelievers hear the gospel, but they do not do what it says and so it does not profit them (Heb. 4:2).

We all want to think that we are doers of the Word and not hearers only. But what do we do with the word that is preached every week? We need to work to apply every word we hear specifically. The doer of the Word, says James, "continues in it" (1:25). He keeps the sermon going after the Sunday service.

### *Ask the Right Questions*

As we process the sermon we should ask, "What was the main point of the sermon? What is one thing I learned about God? What are a few things God is calling me to do as a result of this sermon? How can this sermon make me more like Jesus?" The psalmist hid God's Word in his heart not to become smarter or wittier but holier (Ps. 119:11).

### *Discuss the Sermon*

It's amazing what happens when we talk about Scripture. If you only hear something and never think or talk about it again, you will probably forget it. Talking about the sermon helps us to lay it up in our hearts.

God's Word is living and active. The Spirit will apply it in the lives of his children. But we have a responsibility to benefit from His Word. Let us never deceive ourselves by simply hearing the words of the Bible. Instead, let us diligently listen to God and do what he says so that his Word may become effective to salvation.

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Humor, idealism, and sanctified imagination are three rhetorical tools that most preachers make use of at one time or another. We will explore why they should be avoided.

Humor in the pulpit rarely serves the intended purpose of illustrating the text of Scripture. Invariably, the only thing that it accomplishes is to cause those who listen to remember the personality of the speaker. Separating humor from the personality of the speaker, so that the congregation

remembers Scripture rather than the preacher, is a great and possibly even insurmountable task.

Generally speaking, humor and exhortation form two competing and contrasting languages that cannot be mixed successfully. Exhortation carries the weight of authority. Humor has the potential to undermine the authority of the speaker by removing the sense of sacredness from the worship service. The simple fact is that people will not receive exhortation from a comedian. We should not expect those in the pew to make the

mental and emotional shifts required from preacher to comedian, and then back to preacher.

Humor, if it is to be used at all in the sermon, should be used strategically and sparingly. And only in order to illumine a passage of Scripture that could not be more readily understood through more somber and reflective methods of explanation.

Because God is adequately understood through those modes of worship which are synonymous with his character, the sermon as an



integral means of worship is most effective when it portrays God as he really is, holy and worthy of awe. And while the God of the Bible may very well have a robust sense of humor, the average church member does not relate to him on this basis. Why? Because God's humor is obscure, while his awe, majesty, and wonder are plain. The most that humor in a sermon can accomplish is to explain how man relates to himself and others—not how God relates to man, or man relates to God.

Most preachers possess an idealistic temperament. This means that they are neither analytical in a positive sense nor cynical in negative sense.

I found it quite remarkable recently when I heard two pastors, one Baptist and the other Presbyterian, preach exactly the same thing. What both said was that if the people in their congregations loved one another as Christ commanded his followers to love each other, the unbelieving world would then be forced to accept the claims of the gospel. Both pastors said that the unsaved would literally be breaking down the doors to get in.

Such idealistic rhetoric does more harm than good, for it is contrary to both Scripture and reason. Should such fallacious statements be indulgently ignored by those in the pew, or should they be given a more critical review? An indulgent response is generally not beneficial either to the pastor or the listener, or to the life of the congregation as a whole. The danger with an indulgent response is that of the congregation dismissing something that sounds nonsensical and then not listening as closely the next time, when the pastor does say something that is worth listening to.

It is fair to raise the question as to whether or not idealism is an occupational hazard for ministers of the gospel. Or is it simply the case that there is a perceived rather

than a real optimism inherent in the teachings of Christ? In other words, do certain ministers believe that they are somehow being false to the gospel if they do not project through their words and actions an attitude of optimism toward the future? After all, Christ's kingdom will one day be victorious. But does this fact necessarily warrant a stubborn idealism about what happens on this earth until the time of Christ's return?

In US culture, optimism is more prevalent than pessimism. Why is this the case? For the simple reason that optimism is easier than pessimism. In a culture where tolerance and equality are worshipped as idols, it is much easier to fit in than to stand out. Such optimism is a legacy of the can-do philosophy of freedom and opportunity which is supposedly available to every citizen and foreigner in the United States. A civic doctrine such as this has little patience with any frame of mind which might be construed as promoting doubt or negativity. In the land of opportunity, failure is not an option.

When a pastor uncritically soaks up the beliefs and values of the surrounding culture and then baptizes them in the name of Christianity, the church is ill served. Transforming civic values such as optimism and idealism into Christian virtues by adopting a pious vocabulary is a snare which preachers can all too easily fall into. The only thing that is required is for common civic terminology to be morphed into terms recognizable as Christian piety.

If a pastor prays from the pulpit that it is the fervent wish of the congregation that every person in the city becomes a Christian, those sitting in the pews would do well to ask themselves some hard questions. Such as, is this in fact God's will? When in the history of the church has this ever occurred? The point is that logic and exhortation should complement each other, and not be in opposition.

The preacher who makes such declarations does harm on three levels. The first is to himself as an individual. The second is to the members of his congregation. And the third is to the reputation of Christianity as a whole.

The preacher who consistently uses idealism either as a conscious rhetorical tool or merely as an unnoticed expression of his own personality will lose credibility in the eyes of at least some of those in his church. Beyond this, the reputation of his congregation will also suffer. Those who visit, and then leave dissatisfied, usually will not hesitate to vocalize their concerns to others. And while such concerns are generally expressed in house, that is, among Christians, the reputation of Christianity in the broader community will also be damaged. Unbelievers who have a bias against the gospel will seize upon any opportunity to justify their unbelief. Preaching which is not connected to reality offers one such opening.

Gradualism and continuity are two aspects of change which are seldom given their due by the leader who is impatient for change. People need the opportunity to see how the new coherently connects to the old, before they will endorse change. They also need to be given adequate time to assimilate new ideas within the context of their present existence, so that bridges of transference can be clearly thought out and initiated. Church members ask the question, although not always on a conscious level, "How can I make this new idea, which is being proposed by the leaders of the church, work in my own life, and the life of my family, without causing too much disruption?"

The challenge being that the dreams which idealism promotes are not to be judged according to any outcomes achieved, but instead by the power of the incipient vision which is created within hearts and minds. Idealism is never a conclusion but merely one beginning after another. The inability

of the idealist/optimist to recognize potential drawbacks inherent in projected plans and initiatives can be a significant problem. Because the visionary is so often caught up in the realm of dreams rather than reality, the stubborn nature of tradition and the status quo are seldom given adequate consideration. The status quo may be wrong to varying degrees, but it is what the lives of a majority are heavily invested in. New plans and proposals inevitably fail when a pastor attempts to initiate change too quickly and dramatically for his congregation to appreciate and follow.

Perhaps the most difficult of the three pitfalls to recognize is that of sanctified imagination. But it is helpful if we can think of the sanctified imagination of the preacher as being the verbal counterpart of superstition.

How does this work? Superstition is an attempt to bridge the gap between the natural and supernatural worlds by the use of non-rational means. Inherent within superstition is the unspoken assertion that what is most valuable in the supernatural realm lies beyond empirical verification. It is precisely at this juncture that the paths of faith and superstition diverge, each to follow its own course. Faith recognizes the mysteries inherent in revelation, yet nevertheless embraces reason as being a useful guide to that part of the Christian faith which can be empirically verified and tested. Superstition regards such a process as possessing little value.

The preacher who indulges in bouts of sanctified imagination unwittingly fulfills the same role as superstition, albeit using a non-physical, non-corporeal method. Thus, the impulse toward superstition, using the benign venue of preaching, achieves the same deleterious consequences.

While superstition typically relies upon non-verbal and non-rational forms of expression, sanctified imagination provides a convenient

means by which the Protestant minister can safely (in his own mind at least) add to the biblical text. These verbal flourishes, while less obvious than the use of images and icons, should be avoided at all costs. The reason being that superstition in all its forms has the effect of blunting and softening the revelation of God's Word. It is this very non-threatening and non-confrontational aspect which makes it so pleasing to the carnal nature of mankind. Those who listen to such flourishes and filling in of the gaps on the part of the preacher are invited subconsciously to let their imaginations wander beyond the boundaries of thought that are logically related to the text which is being explained. The result being that emotion clouds reason, and the power of God's Word is veiled.

When a preacher uses the words "sanctified imagination" in a sermon, or when he says things such as "can you imagine" or "imagine if you will," he is inviting the congregation to enter a realm which is much more controlled by the listeners than by Scripture.

While Scripture provides a mental hedge or fence in which to contain the thoughts of the listeners, imagination effectively removes this hedge, allowing their thoughts to travel freely beyond boundaries which are logically related to the biblical text. On a subconscious level, this allows emotion, rather than reason, to govern the response of the listeners to God's Word. The danger of such an emotional response is that the hearers, being unrestrained by the text, will invariably apply those categories of thought which are most pleasing to themselves.

For example, in a sermon dealing with the woman at the well (John 4:6-26), the listener may be invited by the pastor to imagine what might be going through the woman's mind as she speaks with the Lord. And yet in this story, what are viewed by the pastor as

being gaps in the biblical narrative are in reality not holes which need to be filled but instead silences which are meant to limit speculation. Sanctified imagination invariably becomes carnal imagination, as the both the speaker and the hearer of Scripture seek to control God's revelation for the benefit of their own self-righteous complacency. The result is that we are no longer as concerned with extending the message of God's truth and mercy to moral outcasts such as the woman at the well, as we are in subtly congratulating ourselves that we are not in her benighted condition.

This assertion—that a preacher's use of his own imagination to fill in the gaps where Scripture is uncomfortably silent amounts to a form of superstition—will be difficult for some to accept. That Scripture tells us everything we need to know to live the Christian life successfully should not be news to anyone. That the Word of God does not tell us everything that we would like to know is also obvious.

Throughout the history of the church, this void of information between what is required and what is desired has come to be filled in various ways by different churches according to their traditions and interpretations of Scripture. The use of images, icons, and ritualized prayer is one common method, and the answer least acceptable to Protestant churches. However, we should not be lulled into a sense of complacency regarding the desire of the flesh to seek after substitutions and addendums to Scripture that are less confrontational than God's own Word.

**Dr. Paul Flodquist**

is a member of the Covenant of Grace OPC in Oxnard, California. He has also taught Systematic Theology at a local Bible College.

Esteemed Brothers in the Church of Christ:

It truly is an honor and privilege that I may once again be present in your midst and address you as General Synod of the URCNA. The fact that I can address you in your broadest assembly with *all* your churches represented by its delegates makes this moment very special. Since GS Nyack 2012 I have been in the rather unique position of visiting seven of your eight Classes. Included in these visits were some sixteen opportunities to conduct worship services in URC congregations, and besides those to preach as well in other churches among your Classes upon special invitation. Aside from these preaching engagements I could address your Classes and congregations to introduce the federation of CanRC and its history and heritage. In short, if ever it has been appropriate to apply the figure of “ambassadors” to the servants of Christ as they make their appeal on Christ’s behalf [2 Cor. 5:20], I certainly felt like I came in that function! My appeal, however, on behalf of Christ, was not so much as saying, “Be reconciled to God,” but to encourage you with the other words of the apostle, “Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through

the bond of peace!” Indeed, your invitations, your receptions, and your interests and inquiries, together with my humble attempts in fulfilling my mandate, did add up to the apostle’s appeal to manifest the maintenance of the unity of the Spirit and to promote the will to ecumenicity through the bond of peace!

Brothers, I consider myself exceedingly blessed by the experiences enjoyed during these visits and occasions. Just as we are exulting here at GS Visalia 2014, so I rejoiced in each and every of the other opportunities, in the truth of the words of Psalm 133, “Behold, how pleasant and how good, that we, one Lord confessing, together dwell in brotherhood, our unity expressing!” [PH #279] When the CERCUC report to your synod mentions that “growing love, mutual knowledge and trust, as well as increased cooperation in such things as education, evangelism, youth activities, conferences, joint services, and pulpit exchanges have marked the past number of years,” among the churches in closer geographical proximity, that is, then I may add that also these my personal encounters contributed to a similar

growth in love, mutual knowledge, and trust! Your committee report is so true when it observes that “it is significant that the closer and more frequent the interaction has been, the greater is the interest and openness toward progressing onward in this endeavor.”

At times the question was put to me whether I was still as convinced and motivated that the process toward organizational unity should be pursued, having experienced and discovered that “significant ambivalence remains concerning the whole process among the US Classes of the URC.” [As your CERCUC report refers to my findings.] Let me assure you with all the sincerity of my heart and integrity of my faith, that my exposure to these US churches and Classes and my interaction with the brotherhood in the URCNA have become an even greater incentive for this pursuit than I have had since the beginning of my involvement in 1992. In fact, the miracle of the growing unity among the churches in Canada to the point of its present integration and immersion and cooperation at every level of church life, congregational communion, and

the pursuit of kingdom service in a growing number of areas of life, this miracle must be a strong motivation to continue our pursuit to the point at which we may see the miracle of the twenty-first century come true in the union of the URCNA and CanRC to the greater glory of God our Savior and as testimony to the world!

Why this should be? Well, brothers, we all know that the church gathering work of Christ is a dynamic process. When you, in 1995–1996 set out to establish the federation of United Reformed Churches in North America, you pursued a union by faith, in love, with courage, and in mutual trust (as your CERCU report testifies), because you knew that this was in accordance with the Word of God. You did so because the entire Scripture reveals this dynamic process toward union in Old and New Testament: in the service of God at Shiloh, in one tabernacle, one temple, for the one people of God (which was composed of twelve so very different tribes), a unity of God's people which our Savior articulated when speaking about one flock and one Shepherd, revealing to us in the New Testament gathering of His church that He breaks down dividing walls to unite Jews and Gentiles, uniting them into one holy nation, working toward the one multitude! God is one; He unites under the headship of Jesus Christ, and He restores unity as well!

Then the Scriptures reveal to us that this work is visible: the multitude in Revelation 7 came about through Christ, as He walked among the seven churches in Asia Minor, holding their stars in His one hand, being the one foundation under their local churches, which expressed their unity by being a hand and foot to each other, in the congregations and among their federation! Indeed, it is this dynamic work of God that we can see throughout the history of the church, as we confess in the oneness and catholicity of the church! Hence, we are urged to look at God's work and not at the people and their feelings, reservations, or their ambivalence, but we must see our faith working through love, scripturally, confessionally, historically, and organizationally! The church is pillar and foundation of the truth; it's this truth which unites believers, congregations, and federations! We have seen the miracle of this unity develop and grow in Canada, as it continues to manifest itself; in the same spirit of unity in the truth we may see this dynamic character of the church become evident in the union that we continue to pursue as brothers and sisters of common confession and heritage!

Esteemed brothers, just as GS Escondido 2001 was pivotal in promoting a growing momentum by its forward-looking decisions and appointments, you have gathered in one of the churches in California again with the opportunity to maintain and increase the momentum through decisions and CERCU's recommendations which pursue

this unity in the truth (including our common understanding of the richness of the doctrine of the covenant)! The most recent GS of the CanRC, in Carman 2013, has reiterated and confirmed its sincere desire that we proceed in the way in which the Lord of the church has blessed us so exceedingly. It endorsed your CERCU's plan for the preparation of union in the coming years till your and our next GS, in 2016 the Lord willing. We, as Coordinators of the Committee for Church Unity, the Rev. Clarence VanderVelde and I (your ambassador of the CanRC), will be ready and eager to do everything we can to cooperate and to facilitate whatever plans and discussions need to pave the way for your consideration and decision of our desired union. Personally I would like to assure you that as gladly as I have accepted the invitations and made the visits to your churches and Classes to introduce our churches, so eagerly I would be available to further your acquaintance and remove whatever ambivalence remains!

Dear brothers in the Lord, receive the greetings of the CanRC in the communion of the Spirit of peace and in the pursuit of scriptural ecumenicity and the ecclesiastical unity of our two Reformed federations of churches of the Lord Jesus Christ!

**Rev. Willem den Hollander**  
is a fraternal delegate of the  
Canadian Reformed Churches  
(CanCR) to the URCNA.

**SYNOD  
VISALIA  
2014**



## A Review of the URCNA Synod 2014, Visalia, CA

Rev. Wybren H. Oord

Trinity United Reformed Church of Visalia, California, served as the convening consistory and host church for the United Reformed Churches in North America's ninth meeting of the Synod. The pleasant surroundings of this central valley of California provided a warm atmosphere for Synod in both the climate and the mood of the delegates. The beautiful facilities of Trinity URC gave the delegates ample room for committee meetings, deliberations, and fellowship. Trinity's two pastors, Rev. Adrian Dieleman and Rev. Robert Godfrey, went out of their way to make delegates feel welcome. The staff and volunteers were exceptional in their willingness to help and serve.

The week began with a prayer service on Monday evening. Rev. Adrian Dieleman offered a message of encouragement to the brothers from 2 Timothy 3:14 entitled "Ministry in Terrible Times."<sup>2</sup> Various delegates also offered up prayers on behalf of the upcoming meeting.

*Dr. Cornelis Venema, president of Mid-America Reformed Seminary in Dyer, IN, contributes to a colloquium on covenant theology between United Reformed and Canadian Reformed seminary professors during URCNA Synod 2014. From left to right: Dr. Ted Van Raalte, Dr. Jason Van Vliet, Rev. John Bouwers, Dr. Venema, Dr. W. Robert Godfrey.*



*Officers of Synod: Rev. Bradd Nymeyer was elected as chairman, Rev. John Bouwers as vice chairman, Rev. Doug Barnes as first clerk, and Rev. Greg Lubbers as second clerk.*

On Tuesday morning Rev. Bradd Nymeyer was elected as chairman, Rev. John Bouwers as vice chairman, Rev. Doug Barnes as first clerk, and Rev. Greg Lubbers as second clerk. Shortly after the election of officers, the delegates met in their various committees.

### The Proposed Songbook

Each day of Synod began with devotions and the robust singing of songs from the proposed Psalter. Singing from the proposed Psalter also took place each time Synod was led in a time of devotions. This singing, no doubt, led to the Psalm portion of the new hymnal being adopted by the delegates without dissent. After being led in devotions and singing, the chairman suggested that if Synod had fifteen minutes of “free time” it could be filled with a time of singing. Unfortunately, those fifteen minutes never materialized.<sup>3</sup>

The new songbook should be completed by May 1, 2015, with possible publication in 2016.

### Fraternal Delegates

Throughout the first full day of Synod, delegates were greeted by fraternal

delegates who reminded us that the church of Jesus Christ is much bigger than just our federation. During the deliberation of Synod, greetings were received from

Canadian Reformed Churches—  
Rev. Willem den Hollander<sup>4</sup>

Orthodox Presbyterian  
Church—Dr. Alan Strange

Heritage Reformed Churches—  
Rev. Bartel Elshout

Reformed Church in the United  
States—Rev. Jonathon Merica

Free Reformed Church—Elder  
Edmund LeMahieu

Reformed Presbyterian Church  
of North America—Rev. Bruce  
Backensto

Hearing fraternal delegates address Synod is normally a delight. Several of them picked up on Rev. Dieleman’s opening message on the struggle the church of Jesus Christ as it wages war against the evil forces around us. They called upon our federation to work with them in the battle assuring us that the victory has already been won by our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. We were often reminded that there is

more that unites us than separates us as federations and denominations.

In addition to hearing fraternal delegates, a letter of greeting was read from the Reformed Church of Quebec. Delegates also voted without dissent to enter into ecumenical contact with the United Reformed Churches of Congo.

### Overtures<sup>5</sup>

*Overture 1* (35–36): The editorial change replacing “council” to “consistory” on the Classical Credentials was approved.

*Overture 2* (37–41): Synod did not accede to adopting a particular translation of the Belgic Confession in light of the ongoing work of the Liturgical Forms and Confessions Committee. Synod did encourage the churches to review the various creeds, confessions, prayers, and forms in preparation for Synod 2016.

*Overtures 3 and 4* (43–46): Synod appointed a study committee to review various ways by which members leave a local congregation. Under consideration are transfer, withdrawal, resignation, desertion, and so on.



Rev. Ralph Pontier of Neerlandia, Alberta, speaks on the floor of synod.



*Overture 5 (47–48):* It was decided that a Missions Coordinator hired by the URCNA should be an ordained minister.<sup>6</sup>

*Overture 6 (49):* Synod instructed the Liturgical Forms Committee to include the doxology at the end of the Lord's Prayer<sup>7</sup> in every instance where the prayer is included in the liturgical forms.

*Overture 7 (51–58):* Synod approved the Form for the Baptism of Infants proposed by Classis Ontario-East and referred it to the Liturgical Committee for further refinement.

*Overture 8 and 9 (59–62):* The delegates at Synod did not approve limiting the number of forms to one per liturgical event. Nor did the delegates find it necessary to remove Baptism Form 2 (in the Blue Psalter).

### **The Canadian Reformed Church**

Wednesday evening offered a wonderful interactive theological discussion between professors Dr. Robert Godfrey and Dr. Cornel Venema, representing the URCNA, and Dr. Jason Van Vliet and Dr. Ted Van Raalte, from the CanRC.

The professors acknowledged the historical and contemporary nuances within continental Reformed churches of Dutch heritage in relationship to the doctrine of the covenant. As the professors interacted, emphasis was placed upon the common ground and mutual understanding shared by each federation. Most of the delegates to Synod have become convinced that there are very few, if any, theological differences between our two federations.

Even so, Synod voted to table indefinitely, and therefore without prejudice, the move to Phase 3A with the CanRC. This vote was based not on theological differences but on different practices within our respective federations. The word “anecdotal” became the word of the day as various delegates told of events they experienced in their dealings with local CanRC consistories, congregations, and members. Although a few anecdotal incidents may be pushed aside, a large number of them does constitute a pattern that needs to be addressed.

Both federations have to acknowledge that there are huge differences

between the URCNA and the CanRC in practice. Over the last decade our Synod appointed three synodical committees to work with the CanRC: the Theological Education Committee; the Songbook Committee; and the Church Order Committee.<sup>8</sup> The Theological Education Committee was dismissed after no agreement could be reached. The Songbook Committee was instructed to work with the CanRC in their formulation of a new song book. Apparently there were enough differences to make this committee jump ship and work with the Orthodox Presbyterian Church instead. The Church Order Committee sold the farm and proposed that the CanRC church order be adopted when the new federation is formed. While delegates learned the word “anecdotal,” the committees found the word “compromise” a difficult one.

In spite of the difficulties our synodical committees experienced as they worked toward unity with CanRC committees, the Committee for Ecumenical Relations and Church Unity (CERCU) seems determined to move forward to complete unity. In light of disagreements with synodical

*Synod photography by John Van Dyk*



decisions of the past that led to the eventual formation of the URCNA, it may well be that many of our congregations are more afraid our own synodical committee than they are afraid of the CanRC.

Several delegates from the states found the report written by CERCU to be condescending toward them as it accused them of not having “the opportunity to discover this truth firsthand”<sup>9</sup> concerning the CanRC. Many consistories within the states have made an effort to work with CanRC consistories. They have had CanRC ministers fill their pulpits; they have been in discussions with their members. Rev. W. den Hollander has spoken at several US Classes meetings and has been a wonderful, positive spokesman for the CanRC. What seems to be forgotten is that a decade ago, when Phase 3A was first introduced, it was a delegate from the United States who made a motion from the floor to move immediately to Phase 3A.<sup>10</sup> If one reads the guidelines for Phase 3A, it is easy to see that our federation is already in this stage.

A lot of time has been spent on pointing out the similarities our two federations have in common. Most

ministers who have done premarital counseling do not spend a lot of time discussing the similarities of the couple. Before a couple are brought into union with one another, they are encouraged to talk about their differences and come to a mutual understanding. If we are proceed toward full unity with the CanRC, we must begin to discuss our differences.

How will our federation respond to

1. Regional Synods
2. Attestations
3. The Book of Praise
4. Borders<sup>11</sup>
5. Delegated Authority
6. Federation Seminary
7. The Proposed Church Order

How will their federation respond to

1. Weekly Communion
2. Women Voting
3. Variety in the Order of Worship
4. Children’s Sermons
5. Special Music During the Service
6. A Variety of Seminaries
7. A Variety of Song Books<sup>12</sup>

Before the CERCU Committee “informs Synod that it recommends we proceed to phase 3A,” many of these differences need to be discussed. As congregations from both federations continue to interact with one another and discuss these differences, we will grow closer together and our union will be all the stronger.

I have been familiar with the CanRC for well over thirty years. Although my experience was limited for a time to the churches in Blue Bell and Grand Rapids, they were almost always pleasant. Over the last four years, I have had the pleasure of getting to know two CanRC churches north of the border and currently serve as afternoon pulpit supply for a vacant CanRC church. My experiences have been very positive.

### **The Proposed Joint Church Order (PJCO)**

One of the biggest concerns expressed in discussions over coffee and mealtimes was the proposed church order. The new church order that has been proposed implements various changes that are unfamiliar to many URCNA congregations.



Of major concern is the hierarchical nature the new church order appears to introduce. Taken away from the elders and put into the hands of broader assemblies are everything from who grants a license to exhort to who decides what can be sung during the worship service.

A federation that has only eight Classes will be introduced to Regional Synods. Instead of delegates from each church attending broader assemblies, those attending them will be appointed by the narrower assembly. Instead of two hundred delegates at the General Synod, the number would be greatly reduced as Regional Synods appoint only a few delegates.

There may be some very positive aspects to this method. General Synod could be more deliberative in nature. A quick review of our own Synod would show that even though we have two hundred delegates, only 10 percent of the delegates do 90 percent of the talking.

However, if Regional Synods appoint the delegates to General Synod, a

particular Classis may not have a delegate at General Synod. One of the CanRC observers noted over breakfast that while their General Synod is more deliberative, the URCNA Synod seems more like a reunion. He also commented that the frequent devotions made our Synod more worship-filled.

If the new church order is adopted, a member in good standing at one church would need an attestation in order to partake of the Lord's Supper at another church within the federation. An individual's testimony of his total dependence upon the sacrifice of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of sins would no longer be a valid declaration for admittance to the Holy Supper. Instead, one would need visible proof in the form of a letter signed by the clerk of the individual's home church to authenticate his love for the Lord. In addition, approval of Classis must be received before admitting anyone to Lord's Supper who is not a member of an ecumenical church.

Synod instructed the PJCO Committee to await further work on

the proposed church order until after the federation votes to enter into Phase 3A with the CanRC. This decision gives consistories opportunity to study the PJCO and write overtures to change any articles with which they may disagree.

In a rather ironic side note, it is my understanding that Synod Burlington of the CanRC was able to receive letters from consistories that had concerns about the PJCO whereas the hierarchical- fearing URCNA consistories must send letters to Classis for approval before Synod receives them.

### **Mission Work**

The missionary labors of the church of Jesus Christ were also dealt with by the synodical delegates. The Missions Committee produced a manual on church planting entitled "How to Plant a Reformed Church." Recognizing the wealth of material contained therein, Synod received this manual for distribution to the churches.



*Pastors Mike Brown, William Boekestein and Harry Bout talk about missions.*



In addition to a manual, Synod interviewed Rev. Richard Bout for the position of a Missions Coordinator. After the interview and deliberation, Synod, by significant majority, elected Rev. Bout to be the first Missions Coordinator of the United Reformed Churches of North America.

### Other Matters

Time was taken to note of the deaths of three ministers who have served the churches honorably within the federation. Since the last meeting of Synod, it has pleased the Lord to call home Rev. Rein Leestma, Rev. Arthur Verburg, and Rev. Al Korvemaker. The churches were encouraged to remember their widows and families in prayer.

Synod also gave careful attention to completing their work in connection to providing honorably for the ministers of the federation while they are both actively serving in their office and when they reach retirement or become disabled.

Other items taken care of on the final day of deliberations included

receiving reports from the federation's treasurers and boards of directors, electing various functionaries for the federation, and setting a budget for the next two years.

In one of Synod's final actions, Bethany United Reformed Church, Wyoming, Michigan, was appointed to be the convening consistory for Synod 2016, DV. With humble gratitude to the Lord God and words of encouragement from the chairman, and for the first time in the history of the URCNA, Synod adjourned on Thursday evening.

Overall, the meeting was delightfully directed by the chairman, who kept the delegates moving forward without rushing the discussions. The surroundings were wonderfully warm<sup>13</sup> and welcoming. The overall mood of the delegates was very uplifting and positive. Having been dismissed a day early, many delegates who had departure flights scheduled for Saturday took advantage of the free Friday by visiting the Pacific Ocean, Yosemite National Park, or Sequoia National Park.

May the Lord of the church use our efforts for his glory.

1. With special thanks to Rev. Gregg Lubbers for his daily press releases.
2. This address can be found in this issue on page 28.
3. While the delegates regretted not having the fifteen minutes to sing from the proposed songbook, not one of them complained that Synod finished its work a day earlier than expected.
4. Rev. Den Hollander's address to Synod is on page 28 and 29 in this issue.
5. Page numbers in parentheses refer to the agenda.
6. The hiring of a Missions Coordinator was taken up later in the meeting.
7. "For yours is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, forever."
8. A subcommittee of CERCUC.
9. Page 77 of the agenda. The claim was made that only one third of the URC has discovered that the CanRC are our dear brothers and sisters in the faith. Not only does it cast a disparaging tone toward the US churches, but also it assumes all the Canadian congregations are in agreement with the merger.
10. Although this motion received support from another US delegate, it was ruled out of order.
11. Several CanRC consistories remain convinced that a person is not permitted to drive past one true church in order to attend another true church. This policy may work when CanRC and URC churches are some distance apart; churches in proximity to one another would have to do some member shifting.
12. In addition to the Psalter Hymnal, a vast variety of supplemental song books appear in many URCNA pews.
13. Something especially enjoyed by Northern Canadian delegates who received reports of snow and frost warnings back home.



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

# Bavinck the Dogmatician: The Person of Christ and the Centrality of the Incarnation (4)

Dr. Cornelis P. Venema

## Incarnation and the History of Revelation

Third, the centrality of the incarnation is clearly affirmed in the history of revelation. From the first pronouncement of the promise of the covenant of grace in Genesis 3:15, the so-called first gospel or *protoevangelium*, and throughout the revelation that God gave his people Israel, the history of revelation focuses upon the coming of the promised Savior.

Within the wisdom and purpose of God, the history of revelation culminates in the coming of Christ in the “fullness of time” (Eph. 1:10; Gal. 4:4). Even the language, “fullness of times,” reminds us that God the Father was preparing to send his Son throughout the entire course of the history of redemption after the fall into sin. “By all sorts of means and ways, the ground-work for the incarnation first had to be laid in the preceding history. Just as the incarnation presupposes the generation [of the Son] and the creation [of humans in the image of God], so now there is added still another presupposition and preparation: revelation” (RD 3:280). In the prologue to the Gospel of John, we are told that the eternal Word of God, who was with God in the beginning and through whom all things were created, is the light who enlightens all peoples. After the fall into sin, God revealed himself in various ways and times through the prophets of the Old Testament economy.

Though this manifold revelation was especially given to his covenant people, Israel, to whom God came in the form of theophany, prophecy, and



miracle, it was intended to prepare the way for his coming to all peoples, Jews and Gentiles alike. As Bavinck describes it, “[i]n that manner the Son prepared the whole world, including Jews as well as Gentiles, for his coming in the flesh. The world and humanity, land and people, cradle and stable, Bethlehem and Nazareth, parents and relatives, nature and environment, society and civilization these are all components in the fullness of the times in which God sent his Son into the flesh” (RD 3:280). The entire history of revelation, indeed the history of the world under God’s superintendence, was a history of God’s communication of himself as the sovereign Redeemer. And thus, when Christ entered the world through his incarnation in the fullness of time, all the promises and preparations for his coming were brought to their appointed end. From the beginning, God purposed to make his dwelling with his people, and this purpose was realized when he “tabernacled” with us when the Word became flesh (John 1:14). The coming of Christ in his incarnation was no afterthought in the history of

revelation, but rather ties together in the form of fulfillment all that God had spoken throughout this history.

The history of revelation is, therefore, a history of preparation for the coming of Christ who was “born of a woman, born under the law” (Gal. 4:4). The “election and favoring of Mary as mother of Jesus” represents the culmination of God’s purpose to dwell with us in the person of the incarnate Son. Even though in the history of the church, Mary’s role as the instrument through whom the incarnation was achieved has been exaggerated, the Protestant church also acknowledges her blessedness as the chosen vehicle for the incarnation. In this role, Mary serves God’s purposes of grace, and her place within redemptive history is properly recognized. And yet, the role of Mary in the incarnation is not that of one who was “immaculately conceived” or “immediately assumed” into heaven, as though she were a kind of “co-mediatrix” who contributes something of her own to the person and work of the incarnate Son of God. The Roman Catholic Church’s dogmas of Mary’s immaculate conception and bodily assumption into heaven represent the logical development of its theological emphasis upon the “idolization of the human” (RD 3:282).

In Roman Catholic dogma, Mary, together with the church’s hierarchy and the “merits” of the saints, cooperates with and merits God’s favor and grace. But this strikes at the heart of the gospel as a story of God’s sheer grace and unmerited favor. Mary’s role in the incarnation does not consist in her good works or merit before God, but in her trust in the favor and promise of God to her. Nonetheless,

Bavinck recognizes that the Protestant churches may properly hold her in “high esteem” without ascribing any independent value to her co-operation with God’s grace. After all, “Christ himself desired her to be his mother, who conceived him by the Holy Spirit, who carried him beneath her heart, who nursed him at her breast, who instructed him in the Scriptures, in whom, in a word, the preparation of the incarnation was completed” (RD 3:282).

### **Incarnation and the Testimony of Scripture**

And fourth, the centrality of the incarnation is confirmed by the compelling testimony to the deity of Jesus Christ in Scripture. Though it is important to recognize that the entirety of the history of revelation prepares the way for the incarnation of the Son of God in the fullness of time, the great event of the incarnation is absolutely unique and unparalleled. There are no parallels to the incarnation, which involved nothing less than the condescension of the eternal Son of God, who assumed the fullness of our human nature through his birth of the virgin Mary.

In his treatment of the testimony of Scripture to the deity of Jesus Christ, Bavinck observes that there have been many attempts in the past and the present to deny the compelling truth of Christ’s deity. Over against these attempts, he notes that the church in its confessions has always held to the certainty and truth of the incarnation: “The faith with which the church appeared in the world was a simple one, but of one thing it was sure: in Christ, God himself had come to it and taken it into his fellowship. That was certain; that was something it would not let itself be deprived of and that it defended against a wide range of attacks and formulated plainly and clearly in its confession. In the doctrine of the deity of Christ, it maintained the character of the Christian religion,

the reality of its fellowship with God” (RD 3:284).

Unlike the founders and teachers of other world religions, the Christian doctrine of Christ’s person does not simply view him as a great teacher or a formative influence. Christ is nothing less than the “content” of the Christian faith. The confession of Christ’s deity is not restricted to his “office,” as though he is the one who performs the task that God assigned to him. Christ fulfills his task as the true Son of God, as the apostle Paul makes clear when he speaks of “God reconciling the world to himself” in the person of his Son. Nor is the confession of Christ’s deity merely a matter of expressing his religious “significance” or “value” to Christian believers. Christ has value and unsurpassed significance to believers because he is God become man in order to accomplish the redemption of his people. When it comes to the deity of Jesus Christ, it is all or nothing. Either he is the eternal Son of God, the only Redeemer and Mediator who answers to our need as sinners, or he is merely a human being who cannot reveal God to us or perform the work needed to procure our redemption.

The testimony of the Scriptures to Christ’s deity is so pervasive that it can scarcely be denied. And yet, because we are so familiar with the rich scriptural proofs for the deity of Jesus Christ, these proofs no longer impress us with their clarity and force. If Christ’s own self-testimony, as it is represented to us in the New Testament Gospels, is untrue, then the only conclusion we could read is that he was guilty of “insane fanaticism or horrendous blasphemy” (RD 3:283). To illustrate the pervasiveness and clarity of the Bible’s testimony to Christ’s deity, Bavinck offers the following compelling summary:

Scripture attributes to Christ not in a few instances but repeatedly personal preexistence (John 1:1; 8:58; 17:5; Rom. 8:3; 2 Cor. 8:9;

Gal. 4:4; Phil. 2:6), divine sonship in a supernatural sense (Matt. 3:17; 11:27; 28:19; John 1:14; 5:18; Rom. 8:32), the creation and sustaining of all things (John 1:3; 1 Cor. 8:6; Eph. 3:9; Col. 1:16–17; Heb. 1:3; Rev. 3:14), the acquisition for all and everyone of all weal and salvation (Matt. 1:21; 18:11; John 1:4, 16; 14:6; Acts 4:12; 1 Cor. 1:30), kingship in the church (Matt. 3:2; 5:11; 10:32, 37; John 18:37; 1 Cor. 11:3; Eph. 1:22; Col. 1:18), dominion over all things (Matt. 11:27; 28:18; John 3:35; 17:2; Acts 2:33; 1 Cor. 15:27; Eph. 1:20–22; Phil. 2:9; Col. 2:10; Heb. 2:8), and judgment upon the living and dead (John 5:27; Acts 10:42; 17:31; Rom. 14:10; 2 Cor. 5:10); it calls him directly and unambiguously by the name “God” (John 1:1; 20:28; Rom. 9:5; 2 Thess. 1:12; Titus 2:13; 2 Pet. 1:1; Heb. 1:8–9). (RD 3:283)

Even a cursory reading of all these passages will be enough to show that all the threads of scriptural revelation, when woven together to form a rich tapestry of God’s redemptive work, serve to point everywhere and always to the great and central truth of God’s being “with us” by means of the incarnation of the Son of God.

Failure to acknowledge the clear testimony to the deity of Jesus Christ, the incarnate Son of God, does not merely imperil the gospel. It represents the loss of the gospel entirely. Such a denial of the deity of Christ and the centrality of the incarnation strikes at the heart of the good news of God’s coming to us in the fullness of time in order to restore us to life-communion with himself.

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We generally think of the division of the human race into the two antithetical camps of belief and unbelief. This is the outcome of the divine initiative in grace. God sent forth his only begotten Son into the world with a saving intention (John 3:17). This reality necessarily elicits a response, faith or unbelief. The person who puts faith in Christ escapes all condemnation, while the one who refuses to trust in Jesus comes under the judgment of God (John 3:18). Faith, or a lack thereof, is decisive for eternity.

## Hope Within Us

The New Testament contemplates this antithesis from another perspective as well. On the one hand, people without faith “have no hope” (1 Thess. 4:13). Believers in Christ, on the other hand, have what Peter calls “the hope that is in you” (1 Peter 3:15). In the first century, hope sustained the Christian, while many lived without the confident anticipation of a better day to come.

This sober reality of the ancient world continues into the present. The existentialist philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre affirmed that man is a “useless passion,” underscoring his position that our lives in this world are pointless because death brings an end to our existence. We as Christians conversely are firmly convinced that the future will bring a better day. We are the men and women of faith in the Lord, but we are also people with hope as we look to the future (Rom. 8:25).

Paul regarded hope as having central importance. He included it among the three cardinal virtues, standing with the elite qualities of faith and love (1 Cor. 13:13; 1 Thess. 1:3). While faith in Christ and love for the saints were matters for which Paul gave thanks to God, he nevertheless expressed his desire that new converts to the Lord would advance beyond their faith and love to the point where they would “know what is the hope of his calling” (Eph. 1:18). The call of God brings hope into our lives, and Paul wanted the saints of God to know what the Christian hope is.

## The Blessed Hope

Our hope focuses upon the return of Christ, “the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior, Christ Jesus.” The coming of the Lord is what Paul identifies as “the blessed hope” (Titus 2:13). It is the hope that brings happiness and joy to the believer. It is therefore a major characteristic in the life of the person who has “turned to God.” We are those who not only “serve the living and true God” but also “wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead, that is Jesus” (1 Thess. 1:9-10).

We wait with eagerness for the day of triumph, the day in which the “Lord himself will descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of the archangel and with the trumpet of God” (1 Thess. 4:16).

## Future Salvation

Why do we contemplate Jesus’ coming with happiness and delight? It is because we have put on “the hope of salvation” (1 Thess. 5:8). We recognize that with respect to the Day

of the Lord, “God has not destined us for wrath, but for obtaining salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ” (1 Thess. 5:9).

Our salvation is grounded in eternity, for God “chose us in him before the foundation of the world that we would be holy and blameless before him” (Eph. 1:4). From another point of view, we were saved at the cross: “In him we have redemption through his blood” (Eph. 1:7). From still another standpoint, salvation comes to us “after listening to the message of salvation.” “Having also believed,” we were “sealed in him with the Holy Spirit of promise” (Eph. 1:13). From a final perspective, our salvation will come to us in the future. God has “destined us” for “obtaining salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ” (1 Thess. 5:9).

## Component Parts

What exactly will this entail? We are destined to escape the wrath of God that will be unveiled in the Day of Judgment (Rom. 2:5-6; 1 Thess. 5:9), but there is more to it than that. It also means that we will experience complete conformity to Christ the Son of God (Rom. 8:29). “We know that when he appears, we will be like him, because we will see him just as he is” (1 John 3:2). Our conformity will be in soul and in body, both moral and physical, even intellectual and emotional. Conformity will bring perfection to every aspect of our humanity. Thus “we eagerly wait for a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ, who will transform the body of our humble state into conformity with the body of his glory” (Phil. 3:20-21).

## Looking Forward

The hope given to us in the gospel of grace means that we ought to have a forward orientation in our lives. Let us be like Paul, who directed his thoughts to the future. It was his intention, as he contemplated the day of eschatological judgment, to “be found in him”—to be found by God in a state of union with Jesus Christ. In such a condition, he would be the man “not having a righteousness” of his own “derived from the Law, but that which is through faith in Christ, the righteousness which comes from God on the basis of faith” (Phil. 3:9).

The possession of the righteousness of God would mean that Paul would indeed “attain to the resurrection of the dead” (Phil. 3:11). As one who received “the abundance of grace and of the gift of righteousness,” he would “reign in life through the one, Jesus Christ” (Rom. 5:17). He would be part of the great messianic assembly, the people of God who would “always be with the Lord” (1 Thess. 4:17), the congregation that “will live together with him,” enjoying the sweetness of his love and fellowship (1 Thess. 5:10).



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It is no wonder that Paul compared himself with a runner in a foot race who would not look back, “forgetting what lies behind and reaching forward to what lies ahead” (Phil. 3:13). Paul lived as a man with a goal. His energies were ever directed to the obtaining of a prize like no other. In Scripture, we still hear him speak: “I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ” (Phil. 3:14).

## Personal Application

How then do you and I spend our days? Do we look past “this present evil age” (Gal. 1:4) to that which is to come? Are we able to say with Peter and the believers of the first century that “we are looking for new heavens and a new earth, in which righteousness dwells” (2 Peter 3:13)?

The example of Paul stands before us: “I press on so that I may lay hold of that for which also I was laid hold of by Christ Jesus” (Phil. 3:12). Are we willing to embrace the same perspective, placing the longing of our hearts upon the hope of salvation? The apostle invites us to so: “Let us therefore, as many as are mature, have this attitude” (Phil. 3:15).



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