

THE Outlook

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*Music in
the*

Church





Meditation

Overjoyed Gentiles Worship the Child

"When they saw the star, they rejoiced with exceedingly great joy."

Matthew 2:10

The entire Old Testament breathes out an expectancy concerning the Messiah who is to come. The anticipation of Scripture is intense for the coming of the One who is anointed by God the Holy Spirit to be the Christ: our chief Prophet, our only High Priest, and our eternal King. Indeed, the Old Testament is the grand Advent "sermon" of the Christian Church!

Believing covenant people had been told in the Old Testament Scripture what to expect on Christmas. Isaiah draws our attention to Jesse's stump: it is going to sprout a Branch that would have God's Spirit upon Him. Micah tells us to keep our eyes fixed on the small hamlet of Bethlehem because a new Shepherd-King would arise there to take care of the people of Israel.

Then it happens: the great event occurs in Bethlehem when the prophesied Word becomes the incarnate Word. But God does even more. He speaks (without words) to Gentiles, the Magi of the Orient, addressing them in a language that they could understand: a star appears to them. They know what this means. It signifies to them that a king has been born, and for many in ancient times the star represents a deified king, a living god on earth. More than this, the god-king born is not their own king. He is the king of the Jews! So what is quite remarkable is their reaction to the appearance of the star: they come to worship Him (Matt. 2:2).

In Daniel 5 there is the appearance of divine signs at the banquet of an unbelieving Oriental king. No one can interpret the signs until Daniel comes to reveal that the Babylonian kingdom, the kingdom of apostate man, has been mea-

Mark Vander Hart

sured by God and found severely wanting. It will be cut off. But this is not the end of the story. For God's plan is that all nations shall be blessed through the Messiah. The divine handwriting on the Babylonian wall caused sheer terror to the Gentiles. In Matthew 2 the divine star causes sheer joy and delight. Matthew 2:10 tells us that the wise Gentiles "rejoiced with exceedingly great joy." God leads them by the silent message of the

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star until they find the King, Jesus Christ.

They entered the house where the Christ Child is residing temporarily. Christ has done nothing yet, except to humble Himself, veil His heavenly glory, and take on the form of a servant. He has not yet spoken any sermons, He has not yet healed the sick, and He has not yet fed thousands of people. But the Eastern Gentiles, astrologers, fall down to worship Him. They do more than worship: they open their pocketbooks, shall we say, and they present Him gifts. Gold befits a King, and Jesus is a King, great David's greater Son. Frankincense is burned as a symbol of sincere prayer to God, and Jesus is God Incarnate. Myrrh, an aromatic gum, befits a Suffering Servant who came into this world to suffer and die for elect Jews and elect Gentiles. The worship which they offer Him is not done grudgingly and with dull formality. They rejoice to see the message in the heavens; they are glad to see the newborn King in the flesh.

A great sign has appeared in our history with the coming of the Messiah. Christ is born; glorify Him! But Jerusalem is troubled, Herod is determined to

thrust a sword into Him, and the religious leadership can only quote Bible verses about His birthplace. They do not believe the Bible (the Word made Scripture), they do not believe the message in the heavens (all creation makes God known, remember!), and they will not travel the five-mile distance to see Jesus Himself (the Word made flesh). But these Gentiles do!

Matthew's original audience was largely Jewish Christians, it is thought. Yet Matthew tells us that the Gentiles were the first to seek Him out, doing so with great gifts and in a spirit of great joy. Jewish sentiment ran something like this: "Whoever learns anything from a magus (Gentile astrologer) is worthy of death." Yet the grace of the Lord acts in such a way as to draw these Eastern "kings" to seek Him out and to worship Him with great joy.

Their joy was like a cup that was running over. Yet, it must be admitted, their knowledge of Jesus Christ and of the Old Testament Scripture, which spoke of His wonderful Advent, must have been quite minimal. Even more, Jesus' own earthly ministry was focused on reaching Israel's lost sheep and not the Gentiles. So it is wonderful to witness these Gentiles going the distance and not stopping until they found Him of whom the star spoke. When they saw the star, they rejoiced; when they saw the young Child, they fell down and worshiped Him.

What about us? Examine yourself in the light of this Gospel. Does our knowledge of the Lord and His wonderful Word increase in us the kind of joy that overflows, that moves us to seek Him more, that stirs our devotion in giving to His kingdom? We Gentiles who have received so much from this King, owe Him our very life. At the beginning of this Gospel we see Gentiles coming to the Lord Jesus Christ, while at the close of Matthew we hear our marching orders to go to the Gentiles to make them full-fledged disciples of this universal King. Because of that zeal to spread the Gospel, our ancestors heard the good news. Because of God's grace revealed in His Word and secured by the finished work of Jesus Christ, we today hear that same Gospel, and we are brought to saving faith and great joy. Glorify Him!

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Theme Article

Music in the Church I Accommodation or Discrimination

Laurie Vanden Heuvel

There was a time when articles on "church music" would be automatically bypassed by most laymen of the church because such a topic seemed to lie outside the area of their interest or understanding.

But times have changed. Many laymen of the church have been captive participants in worship services where a variety of unsettling, sometimes nightmarish music experiences have replaced the smooth Bible-based text and sturdy tunes which comprised their vehicles of praise in days past. Into many worship services have been introduced every thing from slick commercial arrangements of country and western tunes in jog-along rhythms, to twanging amplified guitars, to the frenzy of so-called "Christian" themes set to rock or jazz rhythms.

Suddenly many laymen find themselves groping — yes, even grasping desperately for some direction in the *rootlessness* passed off as *relevancy*. Not able to give a reasoned critique for the new modes, the laymen nevertheless express audibly what they feel intuitively, and that is, gross *incongruity* between the *message* of the Bible and the musical *methods* being used to convey it. At this point experts remind the layman of his inadequacy to judge and thus squash the argument by an appeal to the *subjectivity* of music so that what was "food for yesterday" no longer speaks to "today," and "Who can be the judge anyway of what is good?"

Is music a totally subjective art? Or are there basic elements put into its structure and operation by God which make one form more legitimate than another as a vehicle of praise to God?

Music is decidedly subjective. But all music, sacred or secular has three basic

elements to which we can appeal for concrete standards of judgment: *rhythm*, *melody* and *harmony* which developed in history in that order. These three elements do affect the emotional life of man either for good or for ill. In any given musical composition, when *melody* is dominant, it expresses itself in *song*. If *rhythm* is dominant, it automatically calls forth a *dance* response. If *harmony* is

"Is music a totally subjective art?"

dominant, the composition is *expanded melody*. This last form has been the most widely used in the traditional psalmody and hymnody of the church.

What we are seeing today is an accommodation of current folk tunes and styles to Christian themes. It is being justified on the grounds that because the Reformers adapted some folk tunes of their day to Christian themes we may do the same. But it is important to remember that in modern folk tunes, we find a mixed dominance. The rhythmic dominance is furnished by the bass, tenor and alto lines which generally progress together in half notes or whole notes, providing the regular, dance rhythm, slower and more casual than rock or jazz but a dance rhythm nonetheless. The melodic dominance is usually furnished by the soloist carrying the often *syncopated melody*, all alone. Because of this, it is never fair to compare today's "Christian" use of folk music to the use made of folk tunes by the Reformers. Although the early Reformation musicians often used secular matter in their psalm tunes, their arrangements for congregational singing reflected *solid moving parts* without a trace of dance rhythm.

Jazz and rock (be it religious or otherwise) are basically highly exaggerated forms of the modern folk rhythms with faded and dissonant melodic lines, and rhythm heavily accented, syncopated and greatly accelerated. The accompanying dance is executed with violent bodily motions and gestures and wails. An honest appraisal will have to concede that any person performing or participating in a jazz performance will, by virtue of his own intense, sensual, emotional, self-centered and personal involvement, find any serious contemplation of God or any of His works or attributes a feat of mental gymnastics which is virtually impossible. One newspaper review admitted this when it described congregational response to a religious jazz service as "enthusiastic but shallow."

Impressive predictions about the ability of folk, jazz and rock to communicate the gospel more effectively to today's world have already paled to the point where its advocates are urging a mediate program for the worship service: a little "folk," a little "rock," a little "jazz" and a little "tradition," a sort of musical "smorgasbord." Such a proposal is inadequate for two reasons. First, it seeks to *accommodate* the music of the church to tastes of its members. It presupposes that such music is there to *entertain* rather than *edify*. Musical form becomes the *object* of praise, instead of the *vehicle* of praise, subordinate to and supportive of the all-important Bible-based words.

Two principles, if scrupulously and conscientiously followed, will rescue some congregations from the web of confusion and restore order and harmony in the worship service:

1. The music of the church must fit the message of the church — its preludes and offertories as well as hymns. No artist dabs his brush in bright orange, red and green oils to paint a tree caught in a mid-winter snow storm. No organist plays "Stars and Stripes Forever" at a funeral, or the "Funeral March" at a wedding. No well-groomed gentleman will wear dinner jacket, bow tie and highly polished shoes with blue jeans. Why then set the miracle of the incarnation, the tender and compassionate love of the Father, the grandeur of His works and the mysteries of His attributes to rau-

cous dissonance and frenzied rhythms where all sensitivity to words is necessarily "drowned out" instead of "buoyed"? The incongruity of it all is obvious.

2. The congregation, choirs and soloist must select music in which the tune is *subordinate to* and *supportive* of the text, never calling attention to itself.

The music must magnify and adorn the Word. St. Augustine said in his *Confessions*:

I am inclined to approve the custom of singing in church. Nevertheless when it happens that I am more moved by the song than

the thing which is sung, I confess that I sin in a manner deserving of punishment, and then I should rather not hear the singing.

Each chorister, soloist, instrumentalist and member of the congregation holds before him a staff upon which are inscribed little noteheads and bar lines which possess the power to lift the soul heavenward or wound and mutilate it. Careful *discrimination* rather than careless accommodation is the hallmark of every Christian musician who seeks to glorify God, edify His people, and testify of Him to the world.

few were even growing and successful, but He wasn't happy with them. Why? Because they weren't being the church! Many of them had compromised their integrity, and Christ gives them a wake-up call.

What would He say to the "laughing church"? I doubt if He would find them amusing. Laughter is NOT a sign of revival. Mourning and weeping over sin is, but laughter isn't. That doesn't mean we Christians have to look like we've been weaned on a dill pickle, but it does mean that revival doesn't come on the wings of hilarity but on the wings of repentance.

What about the church that caters to unbelievers? Well, what's the church? Isn't it the gathering of God's people for the purpose of worship, praise and the ministry of spiritual gifts for the building up of the body of Christ (see Ephesians 4 for a start)?

Every Christian is given marching orders to go into all the world (not the church) and preach the Gospel. The first church in Jerusalem dropped the ball on the hand-off, and Christ had to bring a little persecution to scatter them around the world like salt on a streak. He never intended for them to stay in the holy huddle on Mondays through Saturdays, but that's what they were doing.

I present the Gospel call in my own preaching, but that's because I know there are "professing Christians" in every congregation who really don't have a personal relationship to Christ. And I also know that there are folks who come to Meadowview who don't know Jesus. They're lost but looking. I want them to know how to be found, but *the primary thrust of our worship service is for believers to worship the living Savior in spirit and truth.*

As Peter Jennings said at the end of his odyssey into "new forms of worship": "Finally, the challenge is this — as these churches try to attract sellout crowds, are they in danger of selling out the Gospel?" In too many cases, the answer is "yes." In too many churches, Madison Avenue has replaced the Scripture, and we become something Christ never intended His Church to be — a place of entertainment instead of true worship.

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Churches entertain, but are they Christian?

Gary Cox

Picture the scene with me. You're seated with a friend who has invited you to join her at a church that she says is "nothing like you've ever been to before." You're skeptical and a bit nervous, not knowing what to expect. You were raised with a rather traditional approach to God, howbeit it was also a rather dull one. Most of the time you kept wondering when this thing was going to end so you could get on with your life.

You're awakened from your momentary daydream with a blast of music, and this "church" starts to rock. Before the two hour service is over you are caught up in spontaneous and uncontrollable laughter. That's right — laughter, as if someone piped through the air conditioning vents a gaseous substance that made you split your sides. The pastor explains that it's all an evidence of the Holy Spirit's work of revival.

Now, quantum leap-like, you find yourself seated in a huge auditorium that seats 5,000 people. It's a Sunday morning, but that's about all that reminds you of your traditional church. The seat you're in is just like the ones in plush theaters, but with no hymn books in sight. There's a stage with an orchestra in front just like the plays you've been to at the Civic Center. The "service" contains no hymns, and the congregation sings just one song, the words of which are on an overhead projector.

The "pastor" sits on a stool and talks to you about your life and how Christ

fits into the picture. The time passes by in a heartbeat. The special music was great, the orchestra flawless and the "talk" was very interesting. This whole thing was anything but what you knew as a kid growing up in Mayberry.

It's all so fascinating that a few months ago, Peter Jennings of ABC News did a special report entitled, "In the Name of God" which depicted the new wave of "cutting edge" ministries marching under the banner of Jesus Christ. It's Christianity for the 21st century all right, but is it the authentic Christianity of the first century? Some have dubbed it, "Christianity Lite."

Don't get me wrong! I hate boring services as much as the next guy. I wasn't born a pastor, and while I was growing

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up, and later in the business world, I had to listen to my share of snooze sermons. But the question to all of this is NOT, "Does it sell?" but, "Is it pleasing to Christ?"

I have recently been preaching a series on the sermons that Jesus delivered to the seven churches of Asia Minor recorded in the front part of the book of Revelation. He didn't have much good to say about them, I'm afraid. Some of them looked great on the surface, and a

Reformation & Preaching

John Armstrong

WHAT IS PREACHING?

Surely one of the greatest needs of our time is the recovery of true, Biblical, effective preaching. Almost everywhere I hear remedies, but few strike me as addressing the real need. Some suggestions are imbalanced. These engender the destruction of a properly settled assurance in many of God's elect. Others are weak and foster a kind of preaching that settles for giving out information as long as it is deduced from the text of the Scripture. What we need is a new reformation in the pulpit, a new understanding of what it is God expects the preacher to accomplish by his important calling, and what it is the congregation should be earnestly seeking God for, week by week.

It is still "through the foolishness of the message preached" that God chooses to "save those who believe" (1 Cor. 1:21). The pastor who properly pays close attention to his doctrine and his life saves both himself and those who hear him (1 Tim. 4:16). For this purpose the "man of God" (a synonym for the minister in the New Testament) must also "preach the word" and "be ready in season and out of season." He must, furthermore, study both the Word and his people (2 Tim. 4:2).

But what is preaching? By strict lexical definition, one Greek word translated "preaching" means "to announce good news." This is the word from which we get our word evangelize. The other Greek word means simply "to proclaim, to announce publicly." Scholars have debated the difference between these words and even suggested that one, or both, have *the lost* as their primary focus. Modern believers often think of preaching as that which is done from behind a pulpit at a set time and on a particular day.

PREACHING AND PREACHERS

I was recently asked by the publicist at Moody Press, "What is your favorite book?" That was not easy to answer. First, with nearly ten thousand books how do you pick one? Second, I have dozens of favorites. But she wanted me to pick one so I said, "If I am forced to choose, it would be *Preaching and Preachers*, by D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones."

In this classic, ML-J says, "The most urgent need in the Christian Church today is true preaching...." Lloyd-Jones later writes, "What is it that always heralds the dawn of a Reformation or of a Revival? It is preaching. Not only a new interest in preaching but a new kind of preaching.... when the Reformation and Revival come they have always led to great and notable periods of the greatest preaching that the Church has ever known."

Lloyd-Jones goes on to show that true preaching is *declaration*. A certain amount of information must be given as well. But this note of *declaration* is central. Says Lloyd-Jones, "Any true definition of preaching must say that (the preacher) is there to deliver the message of God, a message from God to those people." He is, in Pauline language, "an ambassador." Furthermore, "Preaching should make such a difference to a

man who is listening that he is never the same again. Preaching, in other words, is a transaction between the preacher and the listener. It does something for the soul of man, for the whole of the person, the entire man; it deals with him in a vital and radical manner."

PREACHING MUST SPEAK TO THE CONSCIENCE

Until the conscience of the hearer is addressed by the Word of God preaching has not taken place. Here is a fundamental difference between preaching and other forms of speech and instruction. This is what is often missed by modern courses in homiletics.

On September 20, 1843, Rev. Bradley Minor, speaking to the Boston Baptist Association, explained this matter very succinctly and clearly when he said:

The man who addresses himself to the intellect and most of whose efforts are to enlighten men is a teacher. He who appeals to the passions is an orator. But the man who by

"Until the conscience of the hearer is addressed by the Word of God, preaching has not taken place."

manifestation of the truth commends himself to the conscience is a preacher. The religious teacher may be heard with profit and with profound respect. The pulpit orator with admiration and delight. But the preacher alone speaks with authority, and the hearers do not stop at respect and admiration—they go on to conviction and exclaim, "What shall we do?"

Solomon Stoddard, father-in-law of Jonathan Edwards, captured this same point well, when he wrote, "We are not sent into the pulpit to show our wit or eloquence, but to set the consciences of men on fire."

Tell me, you who preach—when they have heard your message, what are they anxious about? What are they urged to do, based upon true reflection and careful consideration of what you have earnestly declared? Do you put your finger upon the consciences of your hearers? Or are you afraid of their response?

THE MODERN APPROACH

If anything characterizes modern preaching it is what Jay Adams has called "its insipid obsequious approach to speaking the truth." To use the modern phrase, we will not "tell it like it is." We are reserved, overly sophisticated, and horrified by the kind of frankness that true preaching demands.

Now we must not be rude, or crude. There is no place for such. But even as I think of this warning I am reminded of a friend of mine who is just about the best preacher I have ever heard. He is often accused of being "too frank." Yet I almost never fail to profit profoundly from his preaching. Often, if I do feel "put off," it is precisely because he has hit a nerve in my own conscience. And he doesn't do it by manipulating me, but by powerfully lodging his message in my mind with a force that is compelling.

In the Book of Acts we see explicit, clear preaching. The word used to describe it is one every reader of the New Testament has noted—boldness! The word is *parresia* which means,

freedom to speak openly, a willingness to be frank, or plain speech not characterized by fear.

Preaching must affect the whole person, not simply the mind through information. Or the emotions by stirring a person. Or the will by causing people to make decisions. It must feed the mind by God's Word, stir the emotions by incarnating the truth preached, and move the will by the power of the Holy Spirit (not by direct assault) working through the questions raised by the text of the Word of God itself.

AIM AT THE HUMAN HEART FROM GOD'S HEART

Many today seem to think that preaching aimed at the heart is something that simply stirs up the emotions, as opposed to the mind. This is a non-Biblical and false distinction. We also speak of "heart knowledge" versus "head knowledge." Again this is a distinction with no Biblical warrant. What we may very well mean by this is that we must do more than think about something with our minds. We must know it, feel it and decide upon it. This is correct.

Biblically, the heart is the inner person (cf. Prov. 4:23; 1 Sam. 16:7). Preaching that truly aims at the heart seeks to understand God's heart which is revealed in Scripture, and then to speak from His heart to the inner person of the hearer. The power of such preaching is not in the style, the tone, the loudness of voice, or the pedagogy used. It is plainly in the preacher's having been gripped in his being by God's heart and then appealing to the heart (i.e., the inner person) of the hearer on the basis of God's revelation alone.

"Faith comes by hearing, and hearing comes by the Word of God" (or, as one version helpfully puts it, "by the preaching of Christ"). When Peter preached at Pentecost he had a revelation from God. We do as well. Ours comes from the written Scripture. The Bible is God's revelation. To expect another is a lack of faith and confidence in what He has powerfully given. To believe there must be more is to undermine the sufficiency of Scripture (cf. Ps. 119). To preach to the heart, preachers must study and know the heart of God. They must saturate themselves with His thoughts, His plans, His promises. Only then can they be moved by God's Word and give it to others in such a way that they will cry, "What must I do?" If all we do is rearrange the mental furniture of hearers we will never see God work through our preaching.

How sad then, when preachers give people their ideas, their opinions, their politics, their social commentary. Preachers are called upon to "feed the flock" by the good and pure milk of the Word. In the day of judgment preachers will not be judged for teaching people how to exegete the constitution and laws of the land. They will be judged if they fail to warn the flock with the "whole counsel of God." The test will be, not how large their congregation was, but how faithfully they built, i.e., "with what sort of materials they built the church" (1 Cor. 3:13).

BRETHREN, PRAY FOR ME

Can you see why Paul often asked people to pray for his preaching? To the Colossians he requests prayer that he might "proclaim it (the message of Christ) clearly, as I ought to" (4:4). To the Ephesians he speaks of spiritual warfare and concludes that the important thing is the offensive weapon God has put in the hands of the church. What is the weapon? It is the Word preached, says Paul (Eph. 6:18-20).

So what must the congregation do? Paul asks the people of God to "pray on my behalf that utterance may be given to me

in the opening of my mouth (preaching) to make known with boldness the mystery of the Gospel" (6:19). He says it twice, lest we miss the central point, when he adds, "I am an ambassador in chains (therefore pray for me) in proclaiming it (that) I might speak boldly, as I ought to speak" (6:20).

Clarity is essential. Power is a must. The preacher is called upon to speak as an ambassador of Christ—with anointed boldness straight to the conscience of his hearers. Pray that you who preach, do this with ever increasing draughts of power, and that you who listen experience the same as you sit under bold and heart-searching Gospel preaching.

We need a reformation in our pulpits and a revival in our congregations. May God grant these mercies more and more to us all.

Dr. Armstrong is editor of the journal, Reformation and Revival. This article is reprinted with permission, from Update, a bi-monthly newsletter of Reformation and Revival Ministries, Inc.

Lessons from Haggai #10

"...I will shake the heavens and the earth. I will overturn royal thrones and shatter the power of the foreign kingdoms. I will overthrow chariots and their drivers; horses and their riders will fall..."

Haggai 2:21-22



Awful, fearful things are going on in the world today. It is enough to make us tremble. We often find ourselves wondering, "What will the next catastrophe be?" Nations are at war; there is a lack of firm leadership; selfishness runs rampant everywhere. Sometimes we even wonder, "Is God there? Does He care?"

How comforting are these words of God to Haggai. He assures us that He does care, and He is sovereignly in control of every detail. It is God who

"shakes" the nations and overturns rulers. Nations rise and fall; powers shift; political leaders rule and are deposed. This has been true from the beginning of time and will continue until Jesus comes again, when God will break every power and His rule will be universally recognized. His kingdom will be firmly established and it will not be shaken - ever (Heb. 12:26-28).

Jesus told us not to be alarmed when "nation will rise against nation," for this is a sign of the end time (Matt. 24:6-8). We need not fear because, throughout the "shaking of the nations," God's kingdom will remain unmovable.

In this last message in Haggai, given to the ruler, Zerubbabel, God is telling him not to fear. Though there will be political upheaval all around, God is in control. Nations may be very powerful, but God is more powerful still. He is at work, fulfilling His purposes. He determines what nation shall be in power and which ruler shall be ruling. He makes it all happen according to His eternal decree.

We need not fear the dreadful things going on around us. If the Lord is the strength of our lives, we are secure even in the midst of destroying armies. We are guarded by the eternal purposes of God. God is still on the throne; the sovereign Lord of the universe is in control.

Elaine Monsma

Here I Am Lord, Send Me... But Not There

Nell Tjapkes

A familiar childhood prayer closes with these words, "If I should die before I wake, I pray Thee, Lord, my soul to take." Now consider this modification: "If I should die before I live, I ask, O Lord, what then?" One can only shudder with fear when contemplating the Lord's answer.

Come with me to the Scriptures to learn from Prophet Isaiah, the Apostle Paul, and Jesus the Son of God.

ISAIAH

Five things had to happen to Isaiah before he could become a faithful messenger for the Lord (Isaiah 6:1-9a):

1. He needed a vision of the awesome, overwhelming holiness that *is* the Lord, of His glory that fills the earth and of His power that shook the very framework of the temple (vss. 1-4);
2. He needed to be convicted of the dreadful sin in himself and in those around him that brought total ruin to his life (vs. 5);
3. The hot coals from the altar had to touch his mouth to effect "your guilt is taken away and your sin is atoned for" (vss. 6-7). (So must the hot coals from the altar of Calvary's cross touch our hearts and minds before we can be Christ's messengers);
4. He had to totally surrender his heart and mind to the will of the Lord: "Here am I, send me" (vs. 8);
5. He had to be chosen by the Lord to "Go and tell this people" (vs. 9). (In the New Testament, Jesus changed "this people" to "all people and nations").

PAUL

Paul defines what real living is all about with these words, "For me to live is Christ" (Philippians 1:21). He was united with Jesus Christ in a profound intellectual and emotional relationship.

His passionate love for God, his genuine love for sinners and the indwelling power of the Holy Spirit inspired him to "preach Christ and Him crucified" to sinners far from God. Isaiah said, "Woe is me. I am ruined." Paul said, "I am compelled, yea, woe is me if I preach not the gospel" (I Cor. 9:16).

JESUS CHRIST

Jesus humbled Himself in obedience to the Father's will by dying on the cross to save sinners. In His final and most excruciating hours of suffering He chose to hang between two criminals—PRISON INMATES! He even admitted one of them into His heavenly Paradise! What kind of love is *this*?

In the early sixties the problem of racism dominated this nation's attention. Although some progress was made in achieving integration, journalist M.B. Zuckerman wrote in the May 1996 issue of *U.S. News and World Report*, "The racial divide that once promised to narrow now appears to be widening." Be that as it may, from my perspective I observe a far more vicious discrimination that also embraces the church. It is unholy, deadly, and lodges deep within the heart. It completely ignores Jesus' summary of the Law: "You shall love the Lord your God... and your neighbor as yourself." I refer particularly to the prevailing, discriminatory attitude, denial not withstanding, toward prisoners. This type of bigotry is not a matter of skin color. It is a spiritual bias, an inner, deep-seated attitude rooted in pride and hypocrisy. It totally disregards the warning found in Ephesians 2:1 and 3a which says, "As for you, you were dead in your transgressions and sins. All of us lived among them at one time,...objects of [God's] wrath" (emphasis mine).

The self-righteous Pharisees had a bigoted attitude toward others. They hated and reviled Jesus because He associated with sinners and even ate with them. They took delight in exposing other

people's sins. One day they brought an immoral woman to Him for sentencing because *they* were the champions of law and justice—as if Jesus wasn't! But Jesus focused His attention on them and with one simple command, exposed their false piety. On the other hand, His *command* to the woman, "Sin no more," came wrapped in amazing grace and love.

The anti-prisoner Christians (an impossibility) throw up a smoke screen that runs something like this:

1. "They broke the law and should be punished." Who says they should not?
2. "Prison conversions are all too often temporary." Sad to say, that's true, but think again. There are countless people who sit in church every Sunday who betray their commitment to the Lord every other day of the week. So we close the church doors and stop preaching the Word? Of course not. Jesus said, "Go into all the world and preach the gospel" without adding, "except to prisoners who could be faking it." Furthermore, the results are determined by the Lord. God says, "my Word will not return to me empty but will accomplish what I desire" (Is. 55:11). Therefore, we must and will "go" with His Word in *our* mouth and His love in *our* hearts. The road is often difficult and discouraging. At times it may be lonely and even risky to one's image or physical safety. While that never stopped Jesus or the apostles, we must bear in mind that Jesus had perfect knowledge and wisdom and He often spoke audibly to His apostles. We must seek His guidance by means of the Word and prayer. We must always bear in mind that our first concern must be obedience to the will of the Father. Is the passion of our life devotion to Jesus or to the needs of men? If to Jesus, then no matter what God-ordained sufferings, trials or sorrows come our way, it will be worth it all when we hear, "Well done, thou good and faithful servant."
3. "Lock them up and throw away the key. They deserve it." Who are we, once bound by shackles of sin (or weren't we) to talk about disservice? God the Father could have said, "Serves them right. Let them burn in their hell-cells forever." In-

stead, He sent His Son to die on a cross to pay the penalty for our sins. What kind of ungrateful, insensitive wretches are we? Jesus had a word to say about these things in Matthew 18:32-35.

4. Here's the clincher. "Hatred and ill will are fueled by the exorbitant rising cost of housing and feeding an increasing number of prisoners which explodes into, "And we have to pay for this with higher taxes!" That is true and it appears to be getting worse instead of better. But one cannot help wondering how many prisoners would not have found themselves in prison if we as the Body of Christ had been more faithful in the bold proclamation of "The wages of sin is death" and "Whosoever believeth in Jesus shall be saved" (emphasis mine).

All of this is not to say that the church is doing nothing to reach the unsaved. In fact, there are fantastic programs being implemented that require thousands upon thousands of dollars and rate regular public progress reports. Surely this is in obedience to: "Go ye out into the world."

What then is the burden of my heart? To whom has the Lord directed my attention and why? The answer is found in Psalm 107:10-15:

1. "Some sat in darkness and deepest gloom, prisoners suffering in iron chains" (v. 10);

2. The reality of their rebelling against God (vs.11);

3. The necessary, God-ordained consequences (vs. 12).

What is the hope and expectation of my heart for today's prisoners?

1. That they too will cry to the Lord and be saved from their distresses (vs.13). But how can they cry to someone they don't know about and how can they know about that Someone without a messenger to tell them (Romans 10:14)?

2. That they will be brought out of the dark bondage of Satan into the glorious freedom and light of the Lord's loving rule in their lives (vs.14);

3. That a multitude of Christians will rejoice and give thanks to the Lord for His boundless love and mercy to prisoners (vs.15).

A disturbing question: Why, in the majority of churches, is there such a lack of concern for prisoners? How often, if ever, are prayers offered in the worship services particularly for criminals? How often are jail chaplains, for instance, given an opportunity to present the spiritual needs of the inmates?

Some people just aren't aware of the opportunities available and neither are all qualified to be preachers and teachers. However, organizations like Crossroad Ministries, Forgotten Man Ministries and Prison Fellowship offer many opportunities for service.

Seeing people who are created in the image of God with hard hearts and evil characters is a humbling experience because, as Martin Luther said, "There but for the grace of God go I." Getting to know people, who like us, weep, laugh, love, hate, and hurt and are often treated as less than human is part of the agony of this ministry. You see the suffering in their eyes and hear it in the words they speak, and yearn to have them come to the Savior for healing (Psalm 101). Doesn't it break your heart? It should. Don't you hear Jesus' agony as He cried, "O Jerusalem, Jerusalem" (Matt. 23:37)? Can't you just hear Him cry out, "O criminals, repent and believe; receive My love and forgiveness and find rest for your soul!"?

Addressing His Father, Jesus said, "I have brought You glory on earth by completing the work You gave Me to do." Will we be able to say the same thing when our life comes to a close?

Yes, Paul, to live is Christ. Knowing therefore the terror of the Lord, we too will seek to persuade men. Though we may sow in tears we will reap with songs of joy...carrying sheaves with us (Psalm 126:5,6).

What is your response?

"Here am I, send me ... but not there"
or

"Here am I; I'll go wherever you want me to go, dear Lord."

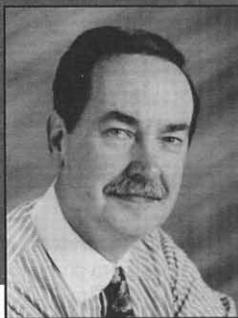
Nell Tjapkes, a member of Calvary Church in Grand Rapids, MI, is involved with Crossroad Bible Institute's Prison Ministry.

In an interview done with Dr. James Dobson by Dr. Kendall, pastor of the Westminster Chapel, London, England, Dr. Dobson gave the following answer to a question posed by Dr. Kendall:

JD: ... All right. I will take a run at that, because I do have very strong feelings about family life and things of that nature. Let me say that life entices you with all kinds of diversions and detours, especially when you're younger, and men particularly have a way of pouring themselves into business pursuits and into professional responsibilities and so on. It seems so important at the time. I have lived long enough now at fifty-eight to kind of be on the other side of a lot of that, and to take a good hard look at what we get excited about and what motivates us. I tell you, when it's all done, when you're on the other end of life - I have called it "the end of life test" - when you find yourself on your death-bed and you're looking back over your life, what do you want to see there? What is really important to be there? Will it be the plaques that hang on your wall? Or the degrees that you got in school? Or the books that you wrote? Or the money you made? Or

the positions that you held? Or the institutions that have your name on them? You know, I don't think those things are going to be very significant. What matters most in a moment like that is really very simple. When you come right down to it, it is *who you loved*, and *who loved you*, and *what you did in the service of the Lord*. Everything else is going to burn! And if that really is true, then we ought to live our lives like that. And I say to you parents that still have young children at home; every single accomplishment in life will be pale and washed out, insignificant, if you lose those kids. If you don't get the baton of the gospel in the hands of your children, then nothing else will matter in that final assessment. Moses wrote in the ninetieth psalm, "Teach us to number our days" - that notion that this life is short! And we only have a few years to do what we're going to do for the Lord, to keep in mind the ultimate priority of why we're here, and it is to win our own families to the Lord and to take as many people with us as we can - and nothing else really makes much sense to me...

Westminster Record



The Evolution of the Pope

Cal Thomas

Pope John Paul II, who courageously stood against the tyranny of Soviet communism, has succumbed in his declining years to the tyranny of evolutionary scientists who claim we are related to monkeys. However the Catholic Church spins this one, many will be led to believe that science is God and the ultimate determiner of our origins. Was there a scientist present at the beginning?

In a statement, the Pope said "fresh knowledge leads to the recognition of the theory of evolution as more than just a hypothesis." He did not say what that fresh knowledge is or why the "old" knowledge, contained in the book of Genesis, is not valid. The gist of the Pope's statement is that the human body can no longer be viewed as the unique creation of God but rather the product of a gradual evolutionary process.

Why should this remarkable shift be of any more significance than a debate among theologians about how many angels can dance on the head of a pin? For the reason that if man is not a unique creation of God, he is of no greater value and has no greater moral standing than an animal or any other living thing.

Evolutionary scientists have been anything but humble in their attempt to replace the Jewish and Christian high view of man. Their lower view claims we are material and energy shaped by pure chance in a random universe, with no Creator, no purpose, no destiny and no hope. God asks the ultimate question of Job that ought to be asked of evolutionary science: "Where were you when I laid the earth's foundation? Tell me, if you understand. Who marked off its dimensions? Surely you know! Who stretched out a measuring line across it? On what were its footings set, or who

laid its cornerstone — while the morning stars sang together and all the angels shouted for joy?"

Arrogant science sees "In the beginning" to mean the beginning of everything, as if there was nothing before the earth was formed. But those who hold to the creation model see "In the beginning" as a demarcation point between that which has always been, and that which God created in a wholly new and unique time frame that never before existed in eternity. It is the difference between chance backed by some theoretic

"Why would he want to accept the heart of a world-view that he spent his life opposing?"

cal unmoved mover, and a personal God who exists objectively (and who for our benefit has caused it to be recorded in the Bible).

Modern theology is slowly accepting an unholy alliance with evolutionists who believe in the uniformity of natural causes in a closed system. As the late philosopher Francis A. Schaeffer, noted in his book *Genesis in Space and Time*: "If we begin with an impersonal universe, there is no explanation of personality. In a very real sense the question of questions for all generations — but overwhelmingly so for modern man — is, 'Who am I?'"

An impersonal beginning (evolution and random selection), wrote Schaeffer, "explains neither the form of the universe nor the personality of man. Hence it gives no basis for understanding human relationships, building just societies or engaging in any kind of cultural effort." If God is impersonal, or does not exist, and if man is not made in His im-

age, on what basis do we appeal to a racist who wants to deny blacks equal opportunity? If man is an evolutionary accident, why pressure the Chinese over human-rights abuses?

Having surrendered to evolutionary theorists, the Pope cannot credibly defend other doctrinal issues — such as the virgin birth, the deity of Jesus, His bodily resurrection and our salvation — because the same book that says God created the world and everything in it out of nothing also testifies to these other things.

Again, Schaeffer saw the problem: "It is either not knowing or denying the createdness of things that is at the root of the blackness of modern man's difficulties. Give up creation as space-time, historic reality, and all that is left is ... uncreatedness. It is not that something does not exist, but that it just stands there, autonomous to itself, without solutions and without answers. Once one removes the createdness of all things, meaning and categories can only be some sort of leap, with or without drugs,

into an irrational world. Modern man's blackness, therefore, rests primarily upon his losing the reality of the createdness of all things (all things except the personal God who always has been)."

Columnist Joseph Sobran, a Catholic, once observed that he would rather belong to a church that is 5,000 years behind the times and sublimely indifferent to change, than to a church that is five minutes behind the times, "huffing and puffing to catch up." With his statement about evolution, the Pope has caught up to the times. In doing so, he has accepted a philosophy that stands at the core of communism. Why would he want to accept the heart of a world-view that he spent his life opposing?

Los Angeles Times Syndicate

The Jesus Seminar

Twice per year over the last decade, a group of 75 self-appointed Bible scholars have gotten together in "The Jesus Seminar" to discuss what can be known about the man called Jesus of Nazareth. Co-chaired by retired University of Montana professor Robert Funk, and DePaul University, Chicago, professor John Dominic Crossan, this group of rebel scholars has deleted almost everything the New Testament reports the Lord Jesus as having said and done.

The quest for the historical Jesus is not new. Scholars have long been disturbed by what they perceived as different pictures of Jesus' life as presented by the four evangelists. In 1835 David Friedrich Strauss turned New Testament academia on its ear with the publication of *The Life of Jesus*. He asked questions such as: Did the writers of the four gospels embellish actual facts? How did the faith and politics of the early church effect the editing process of Jesus' story? Which parts of the New Testament are fact and which pious myths?

For a hundred years, New Testament scholars who categorically denied the possibility of divine inspiration and the miraculous, worked on the New Testament until there was little left. In 1926, Rudolf Bultmann, the New Testament scholar of Marburg, Germany, pleaded for a halt to the frenzied search for the historical Jesus which left the church nothing to preach. He concluded that the Gospel accounts were so unreliable that we could know nothing of Jesus, the Jewish sage who walked the roads of Palestine almost two millennia ago. All we can do, said Bultmann, is proclaim the Jesus of faith.

Bultmann's plea notwithstanding, the quest continued. In the last decade, however, it has taken a turn in style. Whereas in the past the discussions were contained in the university lecture theaters and scholarly works (although the young men and women trained by the skeptics brought the skepticism to the pulpits and have slain their thousands), Funk, Crossan and their fellows are eager to popularize the quest. Funk sees it

as an ethical necessity to let the public in on what the Bible scholars are doing. And so the Jesus Seminar has produced *The Five Gospels* (the fifth is the *Gospel according to Thomas*).

The Five Gospels presents the Gospels according to the Jesus Seminar. The text marks what Jesus *probably* said, *may* have said, *probably* did *not* say, and *certainly* did not say. This is determined by majority vote at the semi-annual meetings of the Seminar. The group votes with great theatricality on the authenticity of each saying of the Lord by casting color-coded beads into a box or jar to indicate their vote on whether or not Jesus actually said what the New Testament writers purported Him to have said. A red bead indicates that the scholar believes Jesus actually said it; a pink bead *may* have; gray, *doubtful*; black, *not a chance*. The votes are tallied. The Seminar's labors up to 1993 appear in *The Five Gospels*. In an obvious parody of the red-letter Bibles, the supposedly authentic words of Jesus are printed in red. The rest are printed in the other colors, in descending order of credibility. 82% of the words of the Lord Jesus are judged unauthentic. The "Jesus" of the Jesus Seminar has been pared down to a poor, semiliterate man who uttered a few aphorisms like, "Turn the other cheek," "Love your enemies," and "Rejoice when reproached."

Not content, though, with only judging *sayings* of Jesus, the Seminar in an ongoing effort to offend God and Christians, has recently begun to judge the *events* spoken of in the Gospels. They have taken skepticism to new heights. The skeptics have always been around; however, the earlier skeptics did not so much deny the events reported in the New Testament as try to explain them rationally. The rationalists said that the crucifixion may have induced a deep coma from which Jesus revived. A volcanic eruption may have caused the parting of the Red Sea. The Magi of the East may have followed a comet to Bethlehem. The healings Jesus did were probably psychosomatic, brought about

by the people's faith in and devotion to Jesus.

We reject these explanations, but at least they work with the notion that the events recorded happened. The radical scholars of today hold that the Bible is a collection of myths, legends and hero-worship produced by the early believers to promote a political agenda. What is presented as facts and history in the Gospels are, in their opinion, only parables about power and authority in which the early church was complaining about oppression, poverty, real nutrition, sickness and being overworked. Crossan says that the stories in the Bible are as "true" as Aesop's Fables.

And so the scholars of the Jesus Seminar have been reading each other's papers about the events recorded in the Gospels, meeting and voting on what happened and what did not. In the Fall of 1994, they considered the Virgin Birth and 96% agreed that it is fiction. The only thing left of the Nativity description is the name of Jesus' mother (Mary). No miracles survived the decisive vote of the scholars. A year ago they voted on the Resurrection. Negative! Jesus' body was either left on the cross to rot or tossed in a shallow grave to be dug up and eaten by scavenger dogs. It is highly unlikely that Judas Iscariot for 30 pieces of silver kissed the Master and thus betrayed Him.

And so it goes, on and on. The arrogant skeptics tearing apart the Scriptures, piece by piece. It makes one pray with renewed vigor: "Destroy Thou the works of the devil, every power that raises itself against Thee, and every conspiracy against Thy holy Word!" (*Heidelberg Catechism*, Lord's Day 48). God! Strike your enemies blind, deaf and dumb!

Aesop's Fables! Wow!

SOURCES

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- 2 Nancy Gibbs, "The Message of Miracles," *Time*, Apr. 10, 1995 (145:15).
- 3 David Van Biema, "The Gospel Truth?" *Time*, Apr. 8, 1996 (147:15).
- 4 Interview with John Dominic Crossan on "The Terry Moore Show," QR 77, April 18, 1996.

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A Bridge Too Far

Just which "god" was Mr. Clinton asking to bless America?

Peter Jones

The Democratic convention's centrist sound gave people what they wanted to hear, but confirmed a dismal trend in Western civilization. Behind the dulling rhetoric about families and the defense of children, President Clinton reached a high point of tragic irony when he suggested that the killing of unborn children is a noble act of spirituality, to be decided "by a woman, her doctor, and her god."

He failed to note that abortion kills not only babies but the deep maternal instinct of mothers; that it kills our delicate trust in the healing profession; and that it severs a father's tie to his family and kills the male voice in issues of life and death.

Veiled in a mist of political newspeak, Mr. Clinton's "bridge to the future" will likely lead to a violent "village" of family collapse, infanticide, physician-assisted euthanasia, and endemic suspicion in which neither marriage, nor family, nor children, nor even the individual is safe.

In spite of claims to the contrary, this vision is a bridge to the past—the past of the revolutionary '60s: sexual liberation, feminist deconstruction, moral relativism, and anti-Christian spirituality. That point was illustrated by the triumphant return of many of the "Chicago Seven" to the city where they made history nearly 30 years ago.

There was Tom Hayden, once an explicit revolutionary, now a California state senator and delegate to the Democratic Convention. Hayden teaches pantheistic "deep ecology" at a center for the exploration of syncretized pagan/"Christian" worship and various forms of witchcraft. There was Rennie Davis, who spoke of spiritual discoveries that will push humanity into greatness within the next five years. Original cast members of *Hair* sang again of "the dawning of the Age of Aquarius."

These revolutionaries weren't on an oldies nostalgia trip; they were celebrating the current triumph of their once radical agenda which now constitutes the philosophical underbelly of mainstream politics. And they were looking forward to a pagan Age of Aquarius, which beckons from the other side of Mr. Clinton's Bridge.

With the phrase "A woman and her god," President Clinton revealed his own theology. He believes in a god who whispers to some that abortion is a slaughter of the innocents while reassur-

ing others, like ex-Surgeon General Jocelyn Elders, of its social benefits. Either the god behind these conflicting ethical systems is schizophrenic, unworthy of divine status, or more than one god is speaking.

In the '60s, radical theologians proclaimed the "death of God." Mildly amused, evangelicals claimed not to know God was even sick! But the radicals were deadly serious, seeing in this divine death announcement "the obituary of a useless single-minded and one-dimensional norm of a civilization that has been predominantly monotheistic, not only in its religion, but also in its politics."

With God dead, the revolutionaries heralded "the rebirth of the gods and goddesses" and the coming of a political system to go with it. Some of the radicals' predictions have come to pass: In the '80s and '90s, radical feminists in society and the church turned to goddess worship for spiritual empowering to transform the world. Discovering ones own god, and beyond that, that one is god, constitutes the essence of the spiritual regeneration of the '60s "Me Gen-

eration." If everyone is his or her own god, how can anything be wrong to do?

Will we follow Mr. Clinton's bridge to the global village of the 21st century? If we do, we won't find a Christian village. It will be polytheistic and animistic, just like the African villages that serve Mrs. Clinton as a cutesy model for her theories of communal child-rearing.

Will the words "God bless America" take on an ominous ring? Must we begin asking, "Which God?" and "What blessings?" The God of the Bible, with His absolute standard of right and wrong, will not be welcome in the post-mortem womb of the returning pagan goddess. The bridge is broad except for those who still hold to the Scriptural view of God.

If, by carefully chosen soundbites, Bill Clinton succeeds in selling this new religious/political vision to voters as the "right track" into the 21st century, one day in the not-too-distant future America may discover that this "bridge into the future" was a bridge too far.

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Mr. Jones is Professor of New Testament Studies at Westminster Theological Seminary in California and author of the upcoming book, *Spirit Wars: Pagan Revival in Christian America*. His first book on this subject is *The Gnostic Empire Strikes Back*.

The Prayers of "Pruned Branches"

John Blankespoor

What do we do when problems overtake us? We naturally look for help and use the means available. For example, if we are sick, we consult a doctor. But as Christians we also pray. A big question, however, is what do we pray for? The answer often is very simple. We pray for health, relief or whatever we need. However, if we don't pray for more than physical benefits, something very important is missing. The Lord also wants us to pray for *spiritual* benefits: more faith and spiritual growth.

In John 15, Jesus speaks of the vine and the branches. God is the gardener, Jesus is the vine and God's children are the branches. God prunes and trims the branches. Why? He wants the branches to bring forth more fruit. What is spiritual fruit? The answer is this: more faith, more spiritual growth, more godliness.

In Hebrews 12, the writer speaks of a father disciplining his son in order to teach him something. This is done out of love. In a similar (yet perfect) way, our heavenly Father disciplines His children. He wants to teach us something. This disciplining surely includes the physical afflictions of life. The purpose is that we will partake in more of His holiness. The Lord wants us to become more godly. The purpose here is the same as in John 15; more spiritual-mindedness and more spiritual growth.

What then may we and should we pray for when afflicted? For physical relief and health of course. But we should also pray for spiritual fruits. Healed bodies surely must bring us closer to the Lord.

Let us be very careful that we do not use the Lord only when we have need. It is so easy to do this when we pray solely for ourselves. For the Christian, the physical must always serve the spiritual.

Rev. Blankespoor is a retired minister in the Christian Reformed Church.



The Shepherd's Staff

A Column for Elders & Deacons

Pastoring Promise Keepers

John R. Sittema

IN A WORD, FRUIT...

Jesus warned us clearly in Mt. 7:15-20, to "watch out for false prophets." He wants His church to know that not everything that looks like a lamb and makes sounds like a lamb is a lamb. Sometimes, it is a wolf in lamb's wool. How does He tell us we can discern the difference between a true prophet and a false one, between a man of God and a ferocious wolf whose sole purpose is to tear the flesh of the flock of Christ? His words are clear: "By their fruit you will recognize them...Every good tree bears good fruit, but a bad tree bears bad fruit" (vss.16-17).

When I have studied Promise Keepers, primarily from the detailed reports I've sought to gather from recent attendees, I hear things that cause me some concern. Some of them I mentioned above: the altar calls which could send the message that commitment to Christ is a "walk down an aisle," the embracing of what has been described by some

"I am not afraid of Promise Keepers...."

as a charismatic worship style that could be interpreted as putting an unhealthy emphasis on emotionalism, and last but not least, what appears to some to be an uncritical ecumenicity, an ignoring of the distinctives for which our spiritual ancestors often died. I say it again, some of these things give me cause for concern.

But they do not dissuade me from encouraging participation in this ministry. Why? Because of the fruit I witness when the men return from a Promise Keepers weekend. In the first place, unlike so many other "revival movements" that have come and gone, the men who attend these Friday evening and all-day

Saturday sessions return to their homes with a real and noticeable revival of commitment to their local church, to their pastors and elders, and to their wives and children. I have been receiving phone calls of gratitude and support for my ministry from these brothers, cards assuring me of their prayers and encouragement, and even an upsurge of their participation as ministry volunteers in various committees and activities of the church. Previous revival movements did not generate such fruit in my experience. Rather, they often "ate their own children," consuming the energies of the participants in their narrow activities, leaving no time or interest in the Lord's church locally, and often generating much criticism of it.

Further, I have been pleasantly surprised by the discernment shown by the participants in Promise Keepers. The comments of one brother are instructive. He said, in essence, "I know that the 'style' of the worship was somewhat different than ours. I know that some of the messages were more inspirational and less Scripturally instructive than many of us are used to. I know that some of the music contained lyrics that were less than Biblically accurate. Yet, the majority of the messages were Biblically solid, and the overall message of the weekend was not only "acceptable" to covenant theology but seemed to be born out of it. We were called to keep covenant with our God, to walk in covenant with His people in the church, and to fulfill our covenant obligations within our homes, especially with our wives and children. I don't find that objectionable. Rather, I give thanks to God for it!"

I do too!

IDENTIFYING THE COMPETITION

One more thing needs to be said. Many (not all) of the criticisms of Promise Keepers I've heard have been generated by preachers that sound like they are threatened by the competition. (Sorry if that sounds harsh, but I believe it to be true.) Since I don't think the "competition" of Promise Keepers is the church, I don't believe the church ought to be threatened. Rather, I believe the "competition" of Promise Keepers is the liberal culture of TV on the one hand, and the immorality and violence of our city streets on the other. Promise Keepers specifically challenges men to turn from

In the last couple of years, I have, like most readers of *The Outlook*, watched with fascination the Promise Keepers movement. I have stood in amazement at an organization that gathers 50 to 60 thousand men together for 16 hours on a weekend (and does it dozens of weekends each year!) to hear hard-hitting sermons, sing songs, and renew commitments to God, wife and church. I have struggled to determine my own pastoral response to the movement (for it truly is a movement, if only because of the sheer numbers of men it has reached and because of the books it has generated that line the shelves of Christian bookstores), wondering whether I should (or even could) encourage the men of our congregation to participate in a movement that prominently features altar calls (aren't they Arminian in origin?), seemingly charismatic worship emphases (not too many Reformed churches prominently feature the raising and waving of uplifted hands in praise!), and an ecumenical spirit that encourages the unity of men from Catholic, charismatic, Reformed, and you-name-it backgrounds.

Over recent years, I've read many articles from highly respected Reformed writers highly critical of Promise Keepers. During the same span of time, I've read just as many extolling its virtues. I've found many of the former to be unfair in their criticisms, seeing ghosts behind every pillar of every Promise Keepers stadium. I've likewise found many of the latter to be naive, blindly accepting of some things that really need a discerning eye. Having said that, I write this brief article to explain to you why I endorse participation in the movement and encourage men from my congregation to attend.

the norm-less values and practices they watch on television, and to reject the violence and sexual conquest they observe in their neighborhoods, and to shape their lives instead by the historic Christian value system based on the Bible. In sounding this message, Promise Keepers is less "competition" to the sermons I preach on Sundays than it is specific "application" of them, and that to a much broader audience than I will ever be privileged to address.

In a nation where some 80% of inner city babies are born to single women, in a nation where divorce rates have skyrocketed and remained stratospheric, in a nation where most Christian churches have more women and children on their membership roles than men and where men seem to think their only "fathering" role in family is making babies, not nurturing them, Promise Keepers is a welcome North American revival movement. It has, until now, been almost exclusively a North American phenomenon because it has couched its message for the North American experience and North American men. We have ample reason to believe the message is needed, and many reasons to thank God for its warm reception.

PASTORING PROMISE KEEPERS

Need we offer no challenge to discernment? Should we encourage men to attend and hope the reasons for concern mentioned above evaporate, and that that of the potential problems materialize?

We must take positive steps to harvest the spiritual fruit Promise Keepers evidences, and to help our men discern the spirits that may well contradict a consistent and thorough Reformed and Biblical world view. The principle step I would suggest is a "debriefing session" following a Promise Keepers weekend which some of your men attend. In that debriefing session, I would solicit feedback from their experiences, discuss their understanding of the overall message of the conference and of specific messages delivered by individual speakers. The positive lessons learned should be confirmed; the questionable ones discussed openly. Finally, the participants should be challenged to explore and to find ways to put their new enthusiasm to work in daily life. Perhaps such application could take the shape of an ongo-

ing men's Bible study and prayer group, perhaps the formation of accountability partners who meet regularly to challenge and encourage one another to keep covenant with God and family, or perhaps a growing evangelistic ministry to men (usually the most difficult to reach in our society).

Being "Reformed" has always meant both testing the spirits carefully and engaging the world actively, intellectually, cutting to the heart of every issue. It has not meant sheltering our people from the world so that they never face exposure to other ideas, fearful that they might become corrupted by casual contact. I am not afraid of Promise Keepers, despite the fact that men will rub shoul-

ders with people whose theologies I may consider deficient. Rather, I welcome Reformed involvement, believing that we of the Reformation have a heritage and insights that are rich and deep to offer our society and to the broader Christian church within it. I believe Promise Keepers sounds a needed voice in North America. I believe Reformed Christians can sound a needed voice within Promise Keepers. I believe the men I know who have attended have evidenced discernment. They have also been blessed.

Dr. Sittema, editor of this department, is pastor of Bethel CRC, Dallas, TX.



What We Believe

Christ's Return and the "Rapture": Evaluating Dispensationalism (1)

Cornelis P. Venema

No evaluation of dispensational premillennialism may ignore its teaching of a *two-phased* return of Christ, the first phase of which is commonly known as the *rapture*. This feature of dispensationalism is its most popular and widely known aspect. Popularized by such bestselling books as Hal Lindsey's *The Late Great Planet Earth*, the film "The Return," and bumper stickers which note that, in the event of the rapture, the vehicle will be without driver and possibly passengers, dispensationalism has enjoyed a large following among conservative Christians, especially in North America.

The view that has predominated in dispensationalism is known as *pre-tribulation rapturism*. In the older, classical version of dispensationalism, this view held that the first phase of Christ's return, His "coming" or "parousia," would precede a seven year period of tribulation, and that the second phase of Christ's return, His "revelation" or "appearing," would introduce the millen-

nium or one thousand year reign of Christ on the earth. The first phase, Christ's "coming," is the "rapture" of 1 Thessalonians 4:15,¹ an event which is said to be Christ's coming "for" His saints in contrast to His subsequent return (the second phase) which is a coming "with" the saints who will thereupon reign on the earth with Christ for a period of one thousand years. Though this view has been somewhat modified in more recent dispensationalism, it remains far and away the most popular view among dispensationalists to this day. The views known as "mid-tribulationism" and "post-tribulationism," as the terminology suggests, differ as to the timing of the rapture, but have relatively few defenders.²

In the notes of the New Scofield Reference Bible, the rapture is an event that can occur at any moment.³ There are no events in the biblical time-table for the future that need occur before the first phase of Christ's return can take place.

Christ's return for His saints will be preceded by the resurrection of all believing saints. After the resurrection of deceased saints, all living believers will be immediately transformed. All of these saints, resurrected and transformed, will then be *caught up* (raptured) with Christ (whose return to earth will only be partial and for this purpose alone) and meet Him in the air. Thus, the church of Jesus Christ will be raptured from the earth and be taken to heaven for a period of seven years, the "marriage feast of the lamb," during which period great tribulation will befall the earth.

While the raptured church enjoys this period of the marriage feast, a number of events will occur upon the earth. A period of tribulation will begin, the latter half of which will be a period of "great tribulation." This fulfills the prophecy of Daniel 9:27. In this latter half of the period of tribulation, the anti-Christ will arise, the "beast out of the sea," who will impose great cruelties on the earth and pretend to be as God. During this period of great tribulation, the elect of the children of Israel and a great number of the Gentiles will be saved. The end of this period of great tribulation will witness a period of intensified opposition to the people of God. The kings of the earth, the armies of the beast and the false prophet, will join forces against the people of God. However, Christ will return with His saints and destroy all of His enemies at the battle of Armageddon. Thereupon, the millennial kingdom, during which Christ will rule upon the earth, will commence.⁴

CHRIST'S RETURN NOT A TWO-PHASED EVENT

Though there are many details and variations upon this view that we have not included in this summary, these should be sufficient to our purpose. The key questions which must be addressed, in respect to pre-tribulational rapturism, are really two: first, does the Bible teach that Christ's return is an event that will take place in two phases, separated by an intervening period of seven years duration?; and second, does the Bible teach that the first of these phases will be the kind of "rapture" envisioned by dispensationalism?

Though I have already treated the first question in my previous article, noting that the return of Christ is a consummating event at the end of the present age, some of the arguments offered for the idea of a two-phased return of Christ have not yet been directly answered.

In the earlier period of dispensational pre-millennialism, it was often argued that the New Testament uses the three common terms for the return of Christ, *parousia* (presence, coming), *apokalupsis* (revelation) and *epiphaneia* (appearance), to distinguish the two phases of Christ's return. The first term was said to be the

"Christ describes the rapture in a way that indicates that it will not only follow the period of tribulation but also mark the close of the age."

term for the event at Christ's initial coming, His coming "for" His saints at the rapture. The second and third terms were said to be used for the event of Christ's coming at the end of the seven year period of tribulation, His coming "with" His saints.

This claim, however, cannot stand up to scrutiny. There is clear evidence in the New Testament that these terms are used interchangeably, to refer to one event, the return of Christ at the end of the age. For example, in 1 Thessalonians 4:15, the apostle Paul uses the first term, *parousia*, to describe the rapture. But in 1 Thessalonians 3:13, he uses the same term to describe the "coming of our Lord Jesus with all His saints." According to dispensationalism, this latter event of Christ's coming "with" His saints occurs only at the "revelation" of Christ, an event supposed to take place seven years after the rapture. Similarly, in 2 Thessalonians 2:8, the apostle Paul uses the term *parousia* to refer to the event when Christ will destroy the "man of lawlessness" or anti-Christ, an event which in dispensationalism is said not to occur until the "revelation" at the end of the seven-year period of tribulation. Most unsettling to the dispensationalist argument is the fact that this passage uses two of the three terms for Christ's return in close proximity, as synonyms, when it speaks of how Christ will "bring to nought" the man of lawlessness "by the appearance of

His coming"!

Moreover, both the terms *apokalupsis* and *epiphaneia* are used in the epistles of the apostle Paul for what dispensationalists would regard as the first and second phases of Christ's return. In 1 Corinthians 1:7, the term *apokalupsis* is used to describe what would be called the "rapture," since the believers in Corinth are said to be "waiting for the revelation of our Lord Jesus Christ." However, in 2 Thessalonians 1:7,8, this term is used to describe what dispensationalists would regard as the "revelation" or "second," second coming of Christ! The same interchangeability is evident in 1 Timothy 6:14, where the term *epiphaneia* is used to describe the rapture, and in 2 Timothy 4:1, where it refers to Christ's coming as Judge of the living and the dead.⁵ There is, accordingly, no basis in the New Testament's use of these terms for Christ's return to support the idea that this return will occur in two distinct phases.

In addition to this appeal to the use of terms for Christ's return, dispensationalists also argue for a two-phased return by insisting that the church will not suffer the kind of tribulation, including the "great tribulation," that will characterize the seven year period between Christ's coming and His revelation. This insistence, however, cannot be sustained by appeal to the New Testament Scriptures.

In the "Olivet Discourse" recorded in Matthew 24, Jesus, in reply to the disciple's question regarding the destruction of the temple and the sign of His coming and the end of the age, speaks of a "great tribulation" which will occur prior to His coming. This tribulation will be so severe that it will be shortened for the sake of the elect (v. 22). The reference in this passage to the elect indicates that believers will not be raptured *before* the tribulation of those days, but will experience it themselves. Dispensationalist teaching, accordingly, maintains that the "elect" in these verses refers to the Jews and not to the church, noting that the term "church" is not used in this chapter. This is an argument from silence, however, that is considerably weakened by the fact that the gospels seldom use the term "church."⁶ The most evident reading of this passage is to take it as a reference to tribulation that befalls the people of God, the elect (whether Jew

or Gentile), before the return of Christ at the end of the age.

It is also important to observe that, in this same passage dealing with the "signs of the times," Christ describes the rapture in a way that indicates that it will not only *follow* the period of tribulation but also mark the *close* of the age. In Matthew 24:31, we read the following description of what will occur after the tribulation of those days: "And he [the Son of Man] will send forth his angels with a great trumpet and they will gather together his elect from the four winds, from one end of the sky to the other." This description is reminiscent of the language used in 1 Thessalonians 4:16-17 to describe the events which will occur at the time of the rapture (the descent of the Lord, the sound of the trumpet, the gathering of the elect). It is difficult to see why these passages should be taken as descriptions of different events, as in dispensationalism which refers the description in Matthew 24 to the second phase of Christ's return and thus to an event distinct from the rapture. It is not difficult, however, to see why dispensationalism is compelled to distinguish these passages: if the description of Matthew 24:31 were to refer to the rapture, then it would place the rapture after the period of tribulation rather than before it.

The same kind of difficulty confronts the dispensationalist as well, when it comes to the teaching of a passage like 2 Thessalonians 2 with its description of the "man of lawlessness" who will come before the day of the Lord. According to dispensationalism, the events described in this passage refer to events that will occur during the period of tribulation, especially the great tribulation, between the time of the rapture and the time of Christ's revelation. However, this would undermine the point of the apostle Paul's teaching in this passage. The point of this passage is to warn the believers in Thessalonica not to be deceived about the coming of the Lord, that it has already occurred (v. 2), by noting that the "man of lawlessness" and the "great apostasy" must occur first. This passage, which is written primarily to Gentile Christian believers (and not Jewish believers, as dispensationalists commonly teach), speaks of a number of events that will precede the coming of Christ and the day of the Lord. These events include

the period of tribulation and the anti-Christ which dispensationalism places *after* the rapture, but which in this passage will occur *before* the rapture or the coming of the Lord to grant relief to His people or church.

Though it would be possible to explore some of these passages further, it should be evident that the problem facing dispensationalism at this point is the same problem confronted in our previous discussion of the return of Christ as a consummating event at the end of the age. Unless the Bible reader brings to many of these passages a *pre-conceived doctrine of two distinct phases in the return of Christ*, there is little prospect that such a teaching would be discovered or proven from them. The biblical teaching is that Christ will return after the period of tribulation to grant His church relief and His enemies eternal destruction (2 Thess. 1). These consequences of Christ's return coincide and therefore do not require the teaching of two distinct phases in the return of Christ.⁷

THE "RAPTURE" OF 1 THESS. 4:13-18

In order to complete this consideration of pre-tribulation rapture, one of the hallmarks of dispensationalism, we have to give some attention to 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18, the one passage in Scripture which describes directly the "rapture." A careful study of this passage will show, however, that *this passage does not teach the kind of pre-tribulation rapture advocated by dispensationalism.*

The first observation to be made about this passage is that it is addressed to a particular question that was pressing among the believers in the church at Thessalonica. Among these believers, there were those who were fearful that those saints who had previously "fallen asleep" in Jesus would not take part in the joy and blessedness accompanying the coming of Christ. For this reason, the apostle Paul begins this passage by saying:

But we do not want you to be uninformed, brethren, about those who are asleep, that you may not grieve, as do the rest who have no hope. For if we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so God will bring with him those who have fallen asleep in Jesus. For this we say to you by the

Word of the Lord, that we who are alive, and remain until the coming of the Lord, shall not precede those who have fallen asleep.

These words indicate that this fear was a lively one among the believers in Thessalonica, and the apostle Paul wants to reassure them that his answer to their fear is "by the Word of the Lord" Himself. They can rest assured that their fears are unfounded.

After acknowledging this concern that the departed saints not be left out of the joy of Christ's coming, the apostle goes on to answer it more directly with an account of the coming "rapture" in which believers will be "caught up together" with Christ in the air.

For the Lord himself will descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of the archangel, and with the trumpet of God; and the dead in Christ shall rise first. Then we who are alive and remain shall be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air, and thus we shall always be with the Lord. Therefore comfort one another with these words.

According to dispensationalism, these words teach that, at the *parousia* or first coming of Christ, the "first" resurrection will occur which will be a resurrection of all (and only) believing saints. These resurrected saints, together with the glorified saints who are living at the time of the Lord's coming, will be "raptured" or "caught up with" the Lord in the air in order to return with Him to heaven *whence He came*. These raptured saints, resurrected and glorified, will then be with Christ in heaven for the seven year period of tribulation, at the end of which they will return "with Him" to reign upon the earth for the one thousand year period of the kingdom on earth (the millennium).

But is this what is taught in this passage? There are several observations that, in my judgment, suggest that this interpretation is a classic example of finding something in a text that is not there, but that has been imported into the text (only to be then extracted from it)!

First, when in verse 16 we read that the dead in Christ will rise *first*, this refers to the *precedence* of the resurrection of those saints who have fallen asleep in Jesus. These saints will be raised *before*

the living saints are caught up with them and the Lord at His coming. They will, in other words, enjoy a privilege (being raised "first") not granted to those who are alive at Christ's coming. The dispensationalist teaching that this refers to the "first" resurrection, the resurrection of believing saints only at the time of the rapture, which is to be sharply distinguished from the "second" resurrection, the resurrection of the unbelieving that will occur at the close of the millennium more than one thousand years later, is not found in the text nor is it the point of the apostle's use of the term "first."

Second, this passage speaks of all believers being caught up together "to meet the Lord in the air." Dispensationalists maintain that this refers to a meeting in the air which leads to a return of Christ and all the saints with Him to heaven whence He came. Returning to heaven, the Lord Jesus and His saints will remain there for seven years. But nothing of this is stated in the text. The text actually speaks of a being caught up together in the air "unto a meeting" between the Lord and the resurrected saints and the remaining saints who were alive at His coming.⁸ The word used in this text for "meeting" typically means a meeting between a visiting dignitary and representatives of the city or village being visited. Such a meeting would occur outside of the city or village visited, whereupon the visitor and welcoming party would return to the city.⁹ This word is used twice elsewhere in the New Testament (Acts 28:15; Matt. 25:6), and in both cases it refers to a meeting which takes place before the parties return to the place being visited. The meaning and use of this term, therefore, suggests that, in the case of the rapture, the saints who meet the Lord in the air will thereupon return with Him, not to heaven, but to the earth to which He comes at His parousia! The dispensationalist way of reading this verse is not consistent with the normal meaning and use of this term.

Third, the result of this rapture or being caught up with the Lord in the air is said to be the blessedness of being "always with the Lord." This kind of language best fits the circumstance of the final state in which believers, now resurrected and glorified, will dwell forever in the most intimate and unbroken fellowship with the Lord Jesus Christ. Being always with the Lord is not to be lim-

ited to a period of seven years in heaven or even one thousand years upon the earth. The simplest reading of this passage is to take it to be a description of the final state.

And fourth, there are several features of the description of this rapture that do not fit well with the dispensationalist position. The coming of the Lord, as it is described in these verses, is a *visible, public event, one which is signaled by the descent of Christ from heaven "with a shout, with the voice of the archangel, and with the trumpet of God."* However, in dispensationalism, the first return or coming of Christ is said to be a "secret" rapture, in which believers will be suddenly snatched away without notice. This teaching is based in part upon an appeal to an allegedly parallel description of the rapture in Matthew 24:40-41, though we have already noted that that passage does not teach a *pre-tribulational* rapture. But the kind of event described in 1 Thessalonians 4:16-18 corresponds to the descriptions of Christ's revelation from heaven at the end of the age in other passages (compare 1 Cor. 15:20-24; 2 Thess. 2:12). These passages speak of Christ's return as a public event which will bring the present period of history to a close.

CONCLUSION

The teaching of a pre-tribulational rapture, as this is understood within the framework of dispensationalism, is not founded upon the teaching of any biblical passage. Nor is it a teaching that can withstand careful scrutiny, particularly when it is measured against the general teaching of the Scriptures regarding the return of Christ at the end of the age. The Bible teaches neither that believers will be exempted from present or future tribulation at the end of the present age nor that the rapture will be the kind of event described by dispensationalism. In the one passage that speaks of the event commonly known as the rapture, there is little support for the view that enjoys such popularity among dispensationalists. This only confirms the point that I have made in previous discussions of the return of Christ: when Christ comes to judge the living and the dead, this will be a single event, closing the present period of history and marking the introduction of the final state.

FOOTNOTES

- 1 The term "rapture" comes from the Latin Vulgate translation's use of *rapiermur* (*raptus*), to render the verb, "caught up."
- 2 See Millard J. Erickson, *Contemporary Options in Eschatology* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1977), pp. 125-181, who discusses these various views of the rapture in relation to the period of tribulation among dispensationalists.
- 3 *The New Schofield Reference Bible*, ed. E. Schuyler English, et. al. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1967), pp. 1161-1162, 1293 and 1372.
- 4 *The New Schofield Reference Bible*, pp. 1162, 1359 and 1372.
- 5 Some dispensationalists also argue that there is sharp distinction to be drawn between the *parousia* and the "day of the Lord," that is, the revelation of Christ after the seven year period of tribulation. However, in 2 Thessalonians 2: 1, 2, these expressions are used to describe the same event—"Now we request you, brethren, with regard to the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, and our gathering together to Him, that you may not be quickly shaken from your composure or be disturbed either by a spirit or a message or a letter as if from us, to the effect that the day of the Lord has come." For a more complete evaluation of dispensationalism's teaching of a two-phased return of Christ, see: George E. Ladd, *The Blessed Hope* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1956); and Robert H. Gundry, *The Church and the Tribulation* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1973).
- 6 In only three places in the gospel of Matthew, Mark and Luke is the word "church" used (once in Matt. 16:18, twice in 18:17). It should also be noted that the immediate reference of these verses in Matthew 24 is the tribulation experienced at the time of the destruction of the temple in Jerusalem in 70 A.D. Although I have previously argued that the secondary and more remote reference of these verses is to a period of tribulation that will precede the return of Christ at the end of the age (of which this earlier tribulation is an antitype), the obvious reference to the destruction of Jerusalem in these verses strongly militates against the dispensationalist view.
- 7 It is instructive to observe that two references in the book of Revelation (2:22; 7:9-17) refer to "great tribulation" in reference to circumstances that are, from the point of view of the present, in the past. These passages illustrate how the dispensationalist restriction of tribulation, especially great tribulation, to the seven year period between the first and second phases of Christ's return, does not fit the biblical pattern of teaching regarding the future.
- 8 The words expressed in most translations, "to meet," actually translate two Greek words, *eis apanteesin*, literally, "unto meeting."
- 9 See E. Peterson, *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, *apanteesis*, vol. I (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1964), pp. 380-81.

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Past Times

Luther and the Power of the Gospel

W. Robert Godfrey

1996 marks the 450th anniversary of the death of Martin Luther. The pioneering reformer breathed his last on February 18, 1546. He was 62 years old.

Luther's last word was a convinced "Yes" to the question put to him by one of his pastors and spiritual counselors, "Reverend father, do you wish to die standing up for Christ and the teaching that you have preached?" Not long afterward he quietly and without pain died in the Lord.

The steadfastness of his faith and the peacefulness of his death were carefully recorded for posterity. Many in the sixteenth century believed that the demons came for heretics at their death and that their eternal suffering was presaged by agony in dying. The Roman church also sometimes claimed the death-bed conversion of those who opposed it. None of that could be said of Luther.

Luther died in the city of Eisleben only a few blocks from the house in which he had been born. He had traveled there even though his health was weak, to try to reconcile serious differences among friends. As he weakened there he felt that his life had come full circle and that it was appropriate that he should die where he was born.

Martin Luther was a remarkable worker for the Lord. He translated the entire Bible into German. He wrote poetry for hymns and composed the tunes. He advised the great and comforted the weak. He wrote great theological treatises and commented with great spiritual insight on books of the Bible. But he probably saw himself primarily as a preacher.

He preached his last sermon in Eisleben only three days before his death.¹ The text for the day was Matthew 11:25, "...Jesus said, 'I praise you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you

have hidden these things from the wise and learned, and revealed them to little children.'" This text allowed Luther to return to one of the favorite themes of his ministry, namely the surprising way in which God exercises His power among His people.

God, amazingly, wants His people to listen to His Word and He blesses His people through that Word. "Therefore Christ says, 'All things have been delivered to me,' that is, to me you must be obedient. If you have my Word, then stick to it, and pay no attention to anybody who teaches and commands you differently. I will rule, protect, and save you well."

Little children understand that they must listen to God's Word, Luther contended, but the wise and powerful do not: "This is the first point of this Gospel - that Christ and God the Father himself are opposed to the wise and understanding. For they vex him greatly; they mangle the sacrament and the church, and set themselves up in God's place and want themselves to be masters." Further, "everything that God does they must improve, so that there is no poorer, more insignificant and despised disciple on earth than God; he must be everybody's pupil, everybody wants to be his teacher and preceptor."

For Luther these wise and self-sufficient folk must have the law as a hammer preached to them so that they may be shaken from their smugness and indifference to God and His Word. The warnings of God's judgment on those who would improve on God's way of doing things must be clear. Only then can people really hear and believe the comforting words of the Gospel that Jesus "gave himself, body and life, for us."

The chief offense of the wise in their improvement on the ways of God is their

neglect of preaching and the sacraments. The power of God works through those ordinary and apparently weak instruments of the shouted word (preaching) and the visible word (sacraments). Children understand this, but the wise despise it. "...when Christ established and instituted the preaching office and the sacrament of his body and blood in order that Christians should use it to strengthen and fortify their faith, the pope cried: No, that's not the way it should be; it must be wisely handled!" So the pope gave the church more sacraments and images and monasteries and fastings and good works and pilgrimages to improve on the simplicity of the Word of God.

In a statement that is really vintage Luther, we can see his lament for the foolishness of people in their efforts to be wise:

In times past we would have run to the ends of the world if we had known of a place where we could have heard God speak. But now that we hear this every day in sermons, indeed, now that all books are full of it, we do not see this happening. You hear at home in your house, father and mother and children sing and speak of it, the preacher speaks of it in the parish church—you ought to lift up your hands and rejoice that we have been given the honor of hearing God speaking to us through his Word.

Oh, people say, what is that? After all, there is preaching every day, often many times every day, so that we soon grow weary of it. What do we get out of it? All right, go ahead, dear brother, if you don't want God to speak to you every day at home in your house and in your parish church, then be wise and look for something else; in Trier is our Lord God's coat, in Aachen are Joseph's pants and our blessed Lady's chemise; go there and squander your money, buy indulgence and the pope's secondhand junk; these are valuable things! You have to go far for these things and spend a lot of money; leave house and home standing idle!

But aren't we stupid and crazy, yes, blinded and possessed by the devil? There sits the decoy duck in Rome with his bag of tricks, luring to him-

Church & World

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self the whole world with its money and goods, and all the while anybody can go to baptism, the sacrament, and the pulpit! How highly honored and richly blessed we are to know that God speaks with us and feeds us with his Word, gives us his baptism and the keys. [absolution] But these barbarous, godless people say: What, baptism, sacrament, God's Word?—Joseph's pants, that's what does it! It is the devil in the world who makes the high personages, the emperor and the kings, oblivious to such things and causes them to allow themselves to be so grossly duped and fooled and bespattered with filth by these first-class rascals and liars, the pope and his tonsured shavelings. But we should listen to God's Word, which tells us that he is our schoolmaster, and have nothing to do with Joseph's pants or the pope's juggling tricks.

Luther, literally with his dying breath, calls the church to listen to God's Word and to find the power of God where God has put it, in the preaching and sacraments. If Luther came and preached to the American evangelical church today, his message could be exactly the same one he preached in Eisleben in 1546. So many today are looking for God and His power everywhere except in the preached and visible Word. Some fly to Toronto as a pilgrimage for holy laughter. Some embrace Rome and its old improvements on the ways of God. Others seek the powerful magic of wise sociologists at the Crystal Cathedral or Willow Creek Community Church. Still others fill stadiums to be empowered by roaring crowds or send money to some wild televangelist to get some powerful trinket in return. But the Bible and the local church's ministry are often neglected or despised.

May the legacy of Luther live among us again. May the Holy Spirit fill our hearts with a great desire for the true power of God found in the faithful preaching of the Word and the faithful administration of Christ's sacraments.

FOOTNOTE

¹ Quotations from this sermon are taken from *Luther's Works*, Vol. 51, Philadelphia (Fortress), 1959, pp. 383-392.

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GRAND RAPIDS, Mich. (November 21, 1996) URNS — Dutch theologian Dr. Jan Veenhof arrived at Calvin Seminary this fall with widespread fanfare as the seminary's second-ever "distinguished visiting professor of theology." Less than three months later, he is leaving in a quite undistinguished manner, having been terminated by the seminary board of trustees for his pro-homosexual views.

Veenhof brought highly respected credentials and an illustrious background to the position. Most recently a parish pastor in the Swiss Reformed Church at Basel where his congregation included the widow of neo-orthodox theologian Dr. Karl Barth, Veenhof had succeeded Dr. G.C. Berkouwer as professor of theology at the Free University of Amsterdam — one of the most prestigious positions in the Christian Reformed denomination's "mother church," the Gereformeerde Kerken in Nederland (GKN). While a professor in the GKN, Veenhof served several times as a fraternal delegate to the annual Christian Reformed synod in Grand Rapids, where he made the acquaintance of a number of CRC leaders. According to Calvin Seminary president Dr. James A. De Jong, that connection and Veenhof's academic credentials led to his appointment as distinguished visiting professor, assuming seminary courses previously taught by Dr. Neal Plantinga, newly-appointed dean of the chapel at Calvin College. Plantinga's new contract specified that Calvin Seminary must keep his former position open for three years in case he wishes to return to the seminary from the college.

The Veenhof family name is well-known in Dutch Reformed circles. Veenhof's father, Dr. Cornelis Veenhof, assisted Dr. Klaas Schilder in leading a 1944 conservative secession known as the *Vrijgemaakt* ("Liberation") from the Gereformeerde Kerken in Nederland. Veenhof's father broke with Schilder in 1967 and formed a new denomination over the issue of the binding authority of synods; Jan Veenhof returned to the GKN and served as a leading figure in that denomination before moving to his current pastorate in Switzerland. His position at Calvin Seminary called for him to teach during the fall of 1996 and 1997 as well as give special lectures on theological topics, but was not a permanent position and did not carry with it voting rights at faculty meetings or a share in setting the policies of the seminary.

"Veenhof, as we've pointed out in our newsletter, is an expert in the theology of Herman Bavinck, and that's an area of expertise that we wanted and needed in our program this year and next year, especially Dutch Reformed theology," said De Jong. "We've had several distinguished visiting professors and lecturers over the years; it refers to a person who has achieved a level of recognition and stature in their field and it's not just a person of ordinary credentials or experience but one who has distinguished himself for his teaching and his writing."

De Jong said Calvin Seminary's only previous "Distinguished Visiting Professor" was internationally-recognized evangelical theologian Dr. Carl F.H. Henry, father of former Calvin College professor and US Congressman Rep. Paul Henry, although a similar position was held under a different title by John Calvin scholar, Dr. Ford Lewis Battles.

While Veenhof's academic writing led to significant acclaim in the academic realm, his other writings led to trouble in the United States. Some attention focused on a book, *From 'Liberation' to Freedom*, which Veenhof co-authored with Alida Schilder, niece of *Vrijgemaakt* leader Dr. Klaas Schilder, describing their personal pilgrimages as children of very conservative parents who became broader in their theological views.

However, the biggest problem centered on some of Veenhof's less-known work, particularly a chapter entitled, "The Bible and Homosexuality" which Veenhof contributed to a larger book on homosexuality by GKN members entitled, *Who Am I That I May Not Do This?* This book appeared ten years ago in the Dutch lan-

guage and until last week Veenhof's chapter had never been translated into English.

Veenhof's contribution followed his 1981 role as one of ten members of the GKN's Commission for Church and Theology, which submitted a report on the Biblical data pertaining to homosexuality which was adopted by the GKN Synod of 1981 as a further explanation of its decision in 1979 to allow the ordination of practicing homosexuals to all offices of the church. This 1981 report and the earlier 1979 synodical decision led to a storm of criticism in the CRC and have led to sixteen years of demands by Christian Reformed conservatives that the CRC sever relationships with the Gereformeerde Kerken in Nederland.

According to De Jong, Calvin Seminary was not aware of Veenhof's role in helping write the GKN report on homosexuality and had not seen Veenhof's chapter in the book until it was called to the seminary's attention by the conservative publication *Christian Renewal*.

"It was not something we were aware of," said De Jong. "We probably should have been but we weren't."

However, the seminary began to look into the matter shortly after the Dutch-language original was provided to *Christian Renewal* by the *Vrijgemaakt* daily newspaper in the Netherlands, *Nederlands Dagblad*, and forwarded to De Jong for review. An October 15 article in another conservative Dutch daily newspaper, *Reformatisch Dagblad*, noted that "rumors" were circulating in Grand Rapids about Veenhof's views on homosexuality. On November 11, *Christian Renewal* ran a full-page review of Veenhof's article. Four days later, the executive committee of the Calvin Seminary board of trustees unanimously voted to terminate Veenhof's teaching at the end of the fall quarter.

"We did that with regret, he had done a wonderful job; the issue had never come up here, but when we became aware of the attention given to it in the Dutch press we felt we had to take this action," said De Jong. "Neither the Christian Reformed Church nor Calvin Seminary nor its faculty are in agreement that trothful homosexual relationships are Biblically legitimate."

"That's a rather fundamental point," said De Jong, noting that failure to deal with Veenhof's views would have called

into question Calvin Seminary's earlier opposition to a report on homosexuality by a study committee of the CRC's Classis Grand Rapids East, the regional ecclesiastical body to which most Calvin Seminary professors belong, that also received widespread media attention. "We made that plain to Classis Grand Rapids East a year or so ago and it is right to be consistent with that."

The unexpected termination puts Calvin Seminary into a difficult position. "We're using a combination of people from Calvin College, retired people; I'd have to get the roster out to see who we've got coming to teach," said De Jong. "It's basically the college Religion and Theology department and retirees, and some of the Ph.D. students are doing some teaching."

Veenhof, who left the United States one day before his termination on November 15, could not be reached for comment.

What Does Veenhof Believe?

In his chapter on "The Bible and Homosexuality," Veenhof articulated a closely-reasoned and nuanced position which by GKN standards would be moderately conservative. Veenhof's position stops short of advocating gay marriages, but he doesn't oppose homosexual practice in committed monogamous relationships.

Veenhof's chapter begins with a note that it is impossible to listen to the experiences of homosexuals "without also becoming in one way or another emotionally involved, and whoever is involved desires to react."

To structure that reaction, especially with regard to homosexual ministers, Veenhof begins with an extended section on Biblical authority, discussing the five Biblical texts (Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13, Romans 1:22-27, I Corinthians 6:10, and I Timothy 1:9-10) which are most commonly cited to address homosexuality. Noting that his chapter can only summarize the relevant principles of Biblical interpretation, Veenhof focused most closely on the texts in the Old Testament book of Leviticus and the Apostle Paul's New Testament letter to the Romans.

"Sometimes we ourselves are trying to get out of the Bible texts what we beforehand would like to see come out," wrote Veenhof. "Good exegesis has to guard itself against this."

Veenhof wrote that Leviticus not only prohibited homosexual relationships but also assumed that the purpose of all sexuality was the bearing of children, an assumption not shared by the surrounding cultures which would use sexuality in religious rituals of various sorts. To engage in homosexuality, which by definition cannot result in children, is to "change" God's plan for sexuality, according to both Leviticus and Romans.

"The conclusion of all this cannot be in doubt," admitted Veenhof. "Just as Leviticus, Paul also rejects homosexual practice. Thus it is described what these texts in their original context want to say."

However, the original context of the Scriptures isn't necessarily conclusive, wrote Veenhof. "Simplicity is not always the sign of truth, especially not this simplicity," wrote Veenhof. "Reality shows that this simplicity is not so convincing, not as 'simple' as it is often supposed. For in fact no one deals with these texts as it is here suggested."

According to Veenhof, a "simple" reading of Scripture would force Christians to advocate the execution of practicing homosexuals (Leviticus 20:13). Surrounding Levitical passages in chapters 17-26, generally known as the "Law of Holiness," are not observed by Christians today, including the law of Jubilee, the sabbath year of rest for farmland, prohibitions on charging interest or rent to the poor, and eating of blood. These prohibitions are not all removed by the New Testament; Veenhof noted that the Jerusalem Council of Acts 15 prohibited eating of blood because of the offense it would give to ethnic Jewish believers in Christ and also raised further questions about the argument that homosexuality is "against nature" by the prohibition in I Corinthians 11:14 on men wearing long hair on the grounds that long hair for men is also "against nature."

"If in one case we give no heed any more to Paul's conception (time bound as it is) concerning nature, then we shall have to give weighty grounds on which to do so in another case," wrote Veenhof.

In Veenhof's estimation, such "weighty grounds" do not exist with regard to homosexuality.

In a section entitled "We Know More," Veenhof argued that it was not inappropriate to say that modern Christians

know more than the Apostle Paul knew about homosexuality. This may not be said flippantly or casually, wrote Veenhof, nor may we say "that we know everything without exception better than Paul."

"It is rightly pointed out in this conference what Paul said about slavery. Paul reckoned it as obvious at the time that the slave should serve his master, but taught also by elements of the preaching of the same Paul, we think differently about it," wrote Veenhof. "In most churches they are convinced that we may also think otherwise than Paul about the place of women."

Might this be true not only of slavery and the ordination of women but also of homosexuality?

To answer that question, Veenhof argued that modern Christians should make use of Dutch theologian Dr. Herman Bavinck's distinction between "the central" and "the periphery" in the message of Scripture. "The Bible is not a scientific textbook of history, geology, or nature, nor even one of theology or ethics even though we may derive contributions to these activities from the Bible," wrote Veenhof. "According to its own nature and intention the Bible is the witness of God's love for human beings. That is what we must put first in all our use of the Bible as in our reflection on that use."

In Veenhof's estimation, the recognition that "God's love for men in Jesus Christ" is the central message of Scripture will lead to a more positive view of homosexual practice than a simple reading of the specific texts of Scripture would indicate.

"Within Reformed circles in recent years the thought has grown that this love includes the acceptance of one another as heterosexuals or homosexuals," wrote Veenhof. "It asks therefore of the heterosexual Christian that they receive homosexual fellow Christians in their being so and being different. This has to do not only with the inclination but also with the practice of it in relationships characterized by love and faithfulness."

"The letter of the law murders many homosexuals but the Spirit makes alive as seen from (standpoint) of Jesus Christ, and according to his teaching as well (Mark 2:27), man was not made for the law but the law for man," wrote Veenhof. "So homosexual love can also be a mat-

ter of gift and purity sanctified in Christ."

Scripture clearly prohibits "unbridled (off the track) sexuality which leads to amoral conduct," wrote Veenhof, but "the Bible does not speak directly about homosexual relationships in which the values of love and loyalty are upheld."

"This can contribute to the true and hearty acceptance of homosexual fellow men," wrote Veenhof. "The acceptance of homosexual officebearers is, as it were, the proof in the end of the real acceptance of homosexual church members."

"I am convinced that such acceptance also contributes to the welfare of the actual congregation," wrote Veenhof. "A minister who, as a homosexual, must, contrary to his deepest inclination, live as a celibate, will in his work discover the negative consequences. The chance is great that he will overturn himself emotionally in certain respects. Over against this a minister who is homosexual, who lives with a partner and accordingly experiences the joys and hardships of a relationship can put himself in the place of others in what happens in their partnership."

Noting that unmarried ministerial candidates in The Netherlands were sometimes suspected of being homosexual, even when they were not married for some other reason, Veenhof wrote that "much would be gained if space were created wherein congregations could really get acquainted with candidates and their partners so that contact would not break off almost as soon as it is begun."

"I have discovered repeatedly that when you become acquainted with two people who have a homosexual relationship in the way of personal contact, within the ordinary everyday things, the strangeness disappears," wrote Veenhof. "Such a chance, candidates ought to have in the churches. We all have the task to respect one another whatever our lifestyle, to give space to one another, and to encourage the once-chosen relationship in a sphere of respect and openness by love and faithfulness, and to give it beauty and lasting quality."

Responses to the Termination

Conservative leaders in the Christian Reformed denomination who are often critical of Calvin Seminary said they were pleased by Calvin's prompt re-

sponse. "We're happy that they are sticking by the synodical stand and that of course is what all the conservatives are anxious about," said Rev. Andrew Cammenga, chairman of the Interclassical Conference of CRC conservatives which met earlier this month in suburban Chicago to plan a response to liberalizing trends in the CRC, including the issue of CRC members who have called for a revision of the CRC's position that homosexual practice is contrary to Scripture.

Cammenga, however, wasn't happy that it took media attention to alert Calvin Seminary to Veenhof's views. "They didn't do a very good investigation and interview, but we're happy with the outcome of it," said Cammenga. "I'm just a little bit surprised that the investigation of this man was rather sloppy and failed to discover some rather obvious positions. One would think that for such an important position they would have done more checking."

On the other hand, gay Christian Reformed minister Rev. Jim Lucas expressed concern that the Veenhof termination would have a chilling effect on discussion of homosexuality in Christian Reformed circles.

"Basically what I would be concerned about is the message that this action might potentially send out to gay people that they're not welcome in this denomination, that the church is not willing to provide a safe place for dialogue," said Lucas. "That's not making a judgment about whether they did the right or wrong thing, it's only how I think this decision will be perceived by gays in the Christian Reformed Church and outside the Christian Reformed Church. It will be one more thing that says the Christian Reformed Church is not a safe place for gays to raise their questions, concerns, and the cries of their hearts, and about that I grieve."

Lucas, who serves as chaplain of the "As We Are" homosexual support group, is personally celibate but has consistently declined to state his position on whether gay marriages are permitted by Scripture, preferring to focus on pastoral care to hurting people rather than theological questions. "The first thing I'd like to see in the Christian Reformed Church is a genuine desire to listen to the cries of gay and lesbian members; I see very little willingness to listen," said

Lucas. "We need to care enough to simply listen for a while. If we could do that we would be miles and miles ahead of where we are now. At this point in history I feel people are so afraid of the issue they are not willing to listen."

Lucas said the CRC has been much more willing to apply its official synodical prohibition of homosexual practice than the emphasis on ministry to homosexuals which was also urged in the same synodical report. "I'm just asking

the church to do what it said it would do in 1973," said Lucas. "Everyone agrees that the church has miserably failed in its ministry according to 1973. That's to the shame and discredit of the denomination and to the terrible pain of gays and lesbians and their families."

Darrell Todd Maurina, Press Officer
United Reformed News Service
[English translation of Dutch articles courtesy Rev. Charles Krahe]

here with something this year," said Gilchrist. "We wish to follow the OPC's lead."

However, PCA delegate Rev. Larry Roff warned that postponing action at NAPARC could cause problems within the PCA. "My sense is that the intention of the assembly was that it would be dealt with here," said Roff. "It was my understanding that new business opens up any new business and not that each item of new business needs to be listed specifically on the docket."

After seeking further advice from NAPARC secretary Rev. Donald Duff, who also serves as OPC stated clerk, Whytock ruled that the PCA proposal was legally on the NAPARC agenda and would be dealt with as an item of new business.

The Christian Reformed delegation was none too pleased by the PCA's proposal to suspend them from NAPARC.

CRC General Secretary Dr. David Engelhard strongly objected to the proposal and lack of prior notice. "This is not good procedure," Engelhard told the NAPARC delegates. "Nothing was said, not one word, and then all of a sudden there was a really weighty decision. I understand the press and a whole lot of observers knew a lot more about this than we did and I feel that is offensive."

The CRC gathered support for its procedural concerns from some unusual quarters. After the CRC objected that the PCA motion was not properly before NAPARC, a procedural motion passed to declare it legally before the council — with the Orthodox Presbyterian Church being the only denomination other than the CRC to vote against consideration of the motion. Following the vote, Rev. Gordon Keddie of the Reformed Presbyterian Church in North America moved to send the PCA motion to the NAPARC interim committee for further study.

"That is scandalous, really," said Keddie. "It is not something that in my judgment is properly to be dealt with 50 minutes before adjournment."

While the NAPARC vote gives the CRC a yearlong reprieve, that doesn't mean NAPARC is likely to be supportive when the matter comes up again next fall in Atlanta. So far, at least three denominations are on record calling for discipline of the CRC. In addition to the PCA, the Orthodox Presbyterian Church

CONSERVATIVE INTERCHURCH COUNCIL WILL STUDY DISCIPLINE OF CHRISTIAN REFORMED CHURCH FOR WOMEN'S ORDINATION

PITTSBURGH (November 20, 1996) URNS — By this time next year, the Christian Reformed denomination may be faced with suspension or expulsion from the major fellowship of conservative Reformed and Presbyterian denominations in the US and Canada, an organization the CRC helped to begin 21 years ago.

Meeting in Pittsburgh on November 19 and 20, the North American Presbyterian and Reformed Council (NAPARC) voted to study suspending the Christian Reformed Church from membership because of the CRC's decision to ordain women ministers, elders and evangelists. At 292,000 members, the CRC is the organization's largest member denomination.

Similar to but much smaller than the National Council of Churches, NAPARC counts seven conservative Reformed and Presbyterian denominations as full members. Any move to suspend or terminate CRC membership will require a two-thirds vote and approval within three years by two-thirds of the national synods or general assemblies of the member denominations.

The proposal came from one of the CRC's longstanding supporters, the 271,000-member Presbyterian Church in America (PCA), whose 1995 General Assembly mandated its delegates to use "all due process afforded to them to remove the CRC membership in NAPARC" unless the CRC voted to "repent of and rescind the action of the 1995 synod" to ordain women. Since the 1996 CRC synod voted down numerous overtures asking for an end to the ordination of women, the PCA brought a motion to this year's NAPARC meeting noting "with deep regret and heartfelt concern" the CRC decision not to stop ordaining women and proposing "that NAPARC initiate the process to suspend the CRCNA from its membership."

After extended procedural questions about the legality of the motion, NAPARC voted to refer the suspension proposal to its interim committee, which will report back to the next NAPARC meeting in Atlanta in November 1997.

"Last year our General Assembly put us under mandate to deal with the situation with the Christian Reformed Church and what has been going on and I understood that there was something from the Orthodox Presbyterian Church that was coming," PCA stated clerk Dr. Paul Gilchrist told the NAPARC delegates. "The position that we have taken is we value the relationship we have with the CRC in NAPARC, and our desire is to continue in that relationship; however we are grieved and distressed by the action of the Christian Reformed synod."

A technicality delayed and almost derailed the PCA's efforts. Although the PCA notified both NAPARC and the CRC of its decision last year, the PCA didn't place a formal request for discipline on this year's NAPARC agenda, assuming that last year's notification was sufficient.

NAPARC chairman Rev. Jack Whytock, of the Associate Reformed Presbyterian Church, initially ruled that because the NAPARC agenda had already been adopted it was too late to add the proposal to discipline the CRC.

That might have been fine with Gilchrist. "We thought we had already communicated this to NAPARC last year and we thought the OPC was going to come

voted this past June to suspend fraternal relations with the CRC and to terminate relations next year if the CRC synod does not repent of allowing women's ordination. At the NAPARC meeting, the Korean American Presbyterian Church announced a previously unknown decision last June to, by unanimous vote, "suspend fraternal relations with the Christian Reformed Church in North America (CRCNA) until such time as the said church repents of their sin and rescinds their position on opening church offices to women." The Reformed Church in the United States had a history of difficulties with the CRC's ordination of women and has sent observers to groups of churches which have seceded from the CRC over the women's ordination issue. NAPARC also voted by a 4 to 3 margin not to admit the Evangelical Presbyterian Church to membership, in part because it allows the ordination of women ministers and elders.

Suspension or expulsion requires the affirmative votes of five member denominations. If either the Associate Reformed Presbyterian Church or the Reformed Presbyterian Church in North America vote to discipline the CRC, the necessary two-thirds majority will be reached. Both the ARPC and the RPCNA have ordained women deacons for many years, but both are on record opposing the ordination of women ministers or ruling elders.

"It's disappointing the way it slipped onto the agenda," said CRC general secretary Dr. David Engelhard, noting that the PCA had not responded to a letter sent by the CRC synod explaining its reasons for allowing the ordination of women. "We were thinking that our letter would initiate some discussion or conversation on their part."

"This lack of a conversation is not treating each other as full believers in Jesus Christ, just coming in there and placing this kind of resolution on the agenda," said Engelhard.

Despite the vote, Engelhard said the CRC would try to be cooperative with NAPARC. "We believe this is an organization we should be part of," said Engelhard after the vote, noting that the CRC will offer its conference call equipment to the NAPARC interim committee to facilitate discussion of the proposal, even though that discussion could lead to its removal from NAPARC.

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"Well would it be for the churches if we had more preachers like him! I hope that men like him may be read and circulated throughout the land."

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Some in the CRC were more pleased by the vote. Rev. Tom Vanden Heuvel, pastor of First CRC in Byron Center who has accepted a call to begin a new PCA church in Holland, Michigan, said the PCA action was "a great encouragement to the conservatives in the CRC."

"I totally support the PCA in this action," said Vanden Heuvel. "It does grieve me to see the stubbornness of the CRC and its recalcitrance to give heed to the admonition of its brothers and fathers in the PCA."

Vanden Heuvel, who helped to begin NAPARC's predecessor organization in 1970 and took a leading role in conservative CRC circles before joining the PCA, said he didn't think his new denomination's action would hurt his efforts to plant a PCA church in Holland — and might help. "I would say that the conservatives in the Christian Reformed Church will see that the PCA is very serious about its Reformed commitment and its desire to hold to the integrity of the Reformed confessions and will applaud it," said Vanden Heuvel.

Darrell Todd Maurina, Press Officer
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