

THE Outlook

*Devoted to the Exposition and Defense
of the Reformed Faith*

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***Suffering...
the School of Faith***

Suffering...the School of Faith

JANE DE GLINT

Suffering is something we like to avoid. We reach for the jar with painkillers as soon as our headache starts to intervene with the duties and pleasures of life. Many of us look away from the television screen when pictures are shown of great disasters, cruel crimes or horrible diseases. Mercy killing, more commonly known as euthanasia, is promoted as a fool-proof method to end all suffering once and for all. Civilized people strive for a world uninterrupted with pain.

SUFFERING

Still, the effects of suffering abound, also in our Western, high-tech world. As a matter of fact we seem to discover more pain all the time. Besides the many forms of physical suffering that cannot be sufficiently relieved with medical assistance, we have become more aware of the enormous impact that emotional pains and scars can have on people's functioning. We have grown too familiar with terms like childhood trauma, psychological abuse and dysfunctional relationships. It seems that each time we move one notch upward on the pleasure scale, we slide down an equal step. As our hands reach to embrace the grail of bliss, it eludes us.

No wonder. Our world lies in the firm grip of sin. Man rebelled against his good Lord and followed the insidious Prince of Darkness. The consequences were far-reaching and devastating. Satan's purpose for our world has always been complete hatred and total destruction. If it were not for the immediate intervention of the good Lord, the human

race would probably have self-destructed by now. But though our Lord in heaven prepared grace for us, this present world will remain subject to the results of sin till Judgment Day.

Consequently, we are faced with suffering. There are numerous sorts of physical disease and pain. Many people see their strength diminish and have to adjust to their ever-progressing disease. What started as an inconvenience becomes a major disability. Some of our children die before their potential received a chance to blossom, humanly speaking. Alongside these bodily ailments are the countless mental and emotional forms of distress. The ache of losing a loved one never goes away completely. We encoun-

ter disharmony between husbands and wives, parents and children, brothers and sisters, and members of the same congregation. Struggles with substance addiction or homosexuality are not foreign to God's children. Some have to deal with the results of suicide or incest. Each one of us could make this list of intense hurt longer, as many types of pain are only known to the sufferer himself. The extent of human suffering is unknown.

"There are parts of our old nature that we don't mind keeping."



CROSSBEARING

As devastating as these physical and emotional derailments can be, there is another form of suffering. The children of darkness do not experience this unique pain. Neither are all Christians living in our Western society aware of this kind of discomfort. But actually it is a fundamental part of being a child of God. This type of suffering is a direct result of our faith. Being a Christian means that we are different from the world. As a society rejects God, it becomes intolerant of His children. The result is that many Christians have to suffer persecution for the sake of their faith. It is the cross of following Christ. Jesus paid the big price for our eternal salvation; we in turn pay the small price of taking up our cross. The early Christian Church was persecuted initially by the Jews, later by the Romans. Throughout the entire history of Christ's Church many believers have been deprived of certain rights. Countless people have had to pay with their lives for the hope that kept them going. Also today many of our fellow-believers suffer maltreatment and death in northern Africa, China, the Middle East, Iraq and other parts of the world. Though we cannot fathom what these people go through, we suffer with them and make their affliction known to our heavenly Father.

SELF-DENIAL

There is another aspect of taking up the cross.

As His followers, we must crucify our old nature. This ongoing process has its own trials and frustrations.

There are parts of our old nature that we don't mind keeping. We know we should

not watch certain movies, but oh well, we can handle it. We know we should promote the *honor of our neighbor*, but then again, we pass on the

juicy details in the strictest confidentiality. Beside these tugs of the old nature, we have to deal with the inability of our new man to totally eradicate all sinful desires. Crucifying our old nature is an ongoing, painful process.

Many parts of the New Testament prepare us for this type of trial and suffering. "And Jesus said to all, 'If any man would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me. For whoever would save his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake, he will save it'" (Luke 9:23, 24). "Whoever does not bear his own cross and come after me, cannot be my disciple" (Luke 14:27).

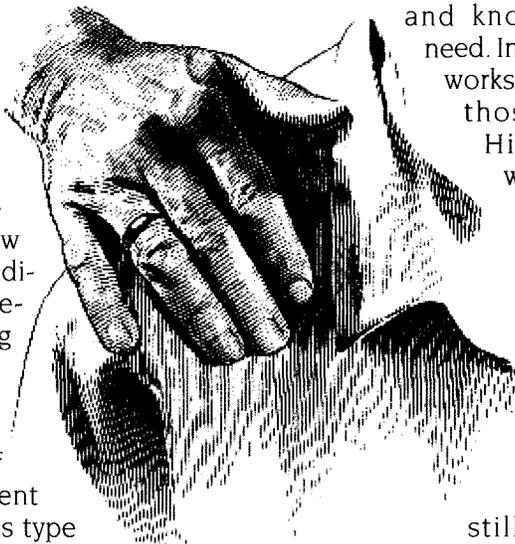
"Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal which comes upon you to prove you, as though something strange were happening to you. But rejoice insofar as you share Christ's suffering, that you may also rejoice and be glad when His glory is revealed. If you are reproached for the name of Christ, you are blessed, because the spirit of glory and of God rests upon you" (1 Peter 4:12-14).

In faith Christians learn to cope with the sufferings of this age. Though there are different types of

pain, our response is similar. Our reaction to difficulties that are a consequence of following Christ is comparable to the way we deal with the hurt of living in a fallen world. A few guidelines will help us.

GUIDELINES

In the *first* place we do well not to worry. Though anxiety can be very real and understandable, it increases our suffering unnecessarily. All affliction comes to us out of the hand of our Father. He is in control



and knows what we need. In all things God works for good with those who love Him. These

words of Romans 8:28 have reassured Christians of all times and places.

In the *second* place we can be cheerful for what still is possible.

Filled with confidence

in God's care we learn to look at the bright side. It is in this area that we hear many humbling and moving testimonies. "I am so happy

that the Lord allowed me to keep some sight in my left eye. Now I am still able to see my grandchildren!" "Isn't a wheelchair a marvelous invention? What would I do without it? If it wasn't for these wheels, I could not have visited you!" "I will never be able to have a boyfriend . . . But seeing my brothers and sisters find partners makes me so happy. I am glad that I

am still alive to experience that!" This attitude will benefit us during some forms of

persecution as well. It could be that we are deprived of certain privileges, or that we have to pay fines, but we still may have the nearness of a fellow Christian. We have to pay for the education of our children on top of all our taxes, but isn't it wonderful that we can raise them in a time of peace and that

we are able to provide them with Christian schooling?

In the *third* place, we do not have to acquiesce. With common sense we must explore what can be done to improve our health and increase our resistance. The means of modern medicine are available to us. The possibility of vitamin and mineral supplements can be explored. At times of mild persecution we can pursue political avenues to correct injustices and point out real discrimination. *Ora et labora conf denter*. In faith we will supplement our prayer with works, which include efforts to maintain law and justice in the land.

In the *fourth* place, in our adversity we have the opportunity to practice thankfulness. The Lord uses our disappointments and hurts as exercise

Beatitudes for the Aged

*Blessed are they who understand
my faltering step and palsied hand.*

*Blessed are they who seem to know
That my eyes are dim and my wits are slow.*

*Blessed are they who know today
My ears must strain to hear what they say.*

*Blessed are they who looked away
When coffee spilled on the table today.*

*Blessed are they with a cheery smile
Who stopped by to chat for a little while.*

*Blessed are they who know the ways
To bring back memories of yesterdays.*

*Blessed are they who make it known
That I'm loved, respected and not alone.*

*Blessed are they who sense I'm at a loss
To find the strength to carry my cross.*

*Blessed are they who ease the days
On my journey Home in loving ways.*

—Author unknown

*"Suffering is
essential for
salvation."*

in the school of gratitude. The lessons are very difficult sometimes. How do we give thanks when a child leaves the church or when we have to deal with the pain of divorce? In God's strength we can reach the point that we realize we have to stop asking questions. We have to learn to put our hand on our mouth in view of the Almighty's greatness (see Job 40:4). By doing that we have become ready to bring our needs before the throne of God, with thanksgiving. In return our Lord will grant us the peace that passes all understanding.

Suffering is essential for salvation. By His suffering and death our Lord Jesus Christ secured our eternal well-being. As His followers we take up our cross. Through our struggles and pain, we learn dependence on our Father and gratitude under all circumstances. Our suffering directs our view to eternity. We can learn to rejoice in our suffering, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint, because God's love has been poured out in us through the Holy Spirit, (Romans 5:3-5).

Reprinted from Reformed Perspective, March, 1998.

What is Coming Up at the Christian Reformed Synod of 1998?

JAMES ADMIRAAL

The Synod of the Christian Reformed Church is scheduled to meet for its annual session from June 13-20, 1998, at Calvin College in Grand Rapids, Michigan. Delegates from 47 classes - 94 pastors and 94 elders - in addition to denominational personnel and advisors, will meet for a maximum of one week. The one-week session was begun last year. It begins on a Saturday, and the Prayer Service for Synod is held on Sunday, and by the following Saturday Synod should have completed its business.

Judging from the *Agenda for Synod 1998* (hereafter referred to simply as the *Agenda*), one might well conclude that this year's Synod should have no difficulty completing its work within a week. It is one of the shortest *Agendas* in recent years. For example, there are no Study Committee Reports coming before this Synod, and there are only 19 overtures from classes and councils printed in the *Agenda*.

On the other hand, some of the issues contained in the overtures and in the reports of the denominational boards and agencies are weighty, controversial, and could lead to extended debate. I will touch on some of them below.

To offer a brief summary of what is coming up at Synod, I will first glean a few matters from the reports in the *Agenda*, provided by the various denominational agencies. Then I will proceed to some of the issues contained in the overtures. Brack-

eted numbers are to pages in the *Agenda*.

AGENCY MATTERS

Board of Trustees: The overall governing board of the CRC is the Board of Trustees (BOT). One the major matters it has had to deal with in the last year is the IRM Corporation problem. This problem has been well-publicized. IRM Corporation, which has invested in real estate in California, is in financial trouble and cannot at this time pay any interest

or principal to its investors. Agencies of the denomination have a total of \$11.4 million invested with this corporation. Christian Reformed Home Missions alone has \$7.9 million in IRM. No doubt this problem will elicit a lot of questions at synod, especially the concession by the BOT that these investments were made out-

side of previously-established synodical guidelines. The BOT is submitting a set of more specific guidelines to govern future denominational investments.

There are also 2 overtures coming to synod in response to the IRM problem. One asks that *all denominational agencies be required to offer the churches "a full detailed statement of investments"* [p. 212]. The other asks for an independent committee to review and study the IRM matter. The latter overture raises another, more fundamental, question: *Should church agencies be investing large sums of money donated for ministry purposes, in secular causes?*

"...some of the issues...are weighty, controversial, and could lead to extended debate. I will touch on some of them below."

Calvin Seminary: The major recommendations coming from the seminary board pertain to the appointment of two new professors. Retiring from the seminary are Professors Melvin Hugen and David Holwerda. To replace Dr. Holwerda in the area of New Testament, the seminary board recommends the appointment of Dr. Dean Deppe from Prinsburg, Minnesota. To replace Dr. Hugen in the area of Pastoral Care, the board recommends the appointment of Dr. Ronald Nydam from Denver, Colorado.

CRC Publications: Two key developments reported by this agency are the publishing of the first volume of John Calvin's *Institutes of the Christian Religion* in the Russian language, and the switch to a biweekly publication of *The Banner*.

Serving under Publications is the CRC Worship Committee. This committee was assigned by Synod 1996 to study a request to approve the New King James Version of the English Bible (NKJV) as acceptable for use in worship services. The Worship Committee enlisted several Old and New Testament scholars to do this study, and based on their evaluation, the committee advises synod not to recommend the NKJV for use in worship. The grounds for this recommendation are that the NKJV is based on an inferior Greek text of the New Testament, contains many "misleading and even ungrammatical English renderings" [p. 88], and is not used widely enough in the church world. Two appendices contain further documentation.

I am not generally in favor of using a multiplicity of versions in our churches. Nor have I personally used or studied the NKJV. It is my understanding, however, that the NKJV, is basically a modernization of the KJV, doing away with many of the latter's archaisms. If that is the case, one might think it a little inconsistent that we do allow the KJV but not the NKJV for use in worship.

Interchurch Relations Committee (IRC): The work of this committee is

always significant, not only because the unity of the church is important, but because *how the CRC relates to other denominations is also a measure of its own theological direction.*

One of the sad developments in interchurch relations is the recommended suspension of the CRC from NAPARC. NAPARC is comprised of several conservative Reformed and Presbyterian denominations in North America, including the Presbyterian Church in America (PCA) and the Orthodox Presbyterian Church (OPC). The latter two denominations have already terminated their ecclesiastical fellowship with the CRC. All the NAPARC member churches will now be voting separately whether to remove the CRC from NAPARC. All this has resulted primarily from the CRC decisions on women-in-office.

At the same time, the IRC is continuing to dialog with the Reformed Churches in the Netherlands (GKN), with whom our relations are tense. The CRC is also working to restore good relations with the Reformed Churches in South Africa (GKSA), after a time of suspension was lifted.

One recommendation from the IRC is approving the concept of "union churches" with the RCA, meaning that, under certain circumstances, a CRC congregation and RCA congregation can organize as one congregation. The committee offers guidelines for how this can be implemented and work.

OVERTURES

The *Agenda* contains 19 Overtures, although no doubt more will come to synod which could not make the deadline for inclusion in the *Agenda*. Several of those overtures are of potentially great significance for the CRC and its future.

Revise the Form of Subscription: Classis Thornapple Valley is overturing synod to appoint a study committee to revise the *Form of Subscription*. The classis then proceeds to suggest three lines along which the present *Form* needs to be revised.

One is the statement in the *Form* which claims that all the articles and doctrines set forth in the *Heidelberg Catechism*, *Belgic Confession*, and *Canons of Dort* fully agree with the Word of God. The classis takes issue with the words "fully agree," and wants them changed, claiming that the creeds are by nature human documents and therefore not infallible. This wording, says the classis, also makes some persons sign the *Form* with mental reservations and others not to sign it at all, because they don't agree with it.

A second change classis wants in the *Form of Subscription* is that it should distinguish as to who should promise to teach and defend the articles of our faith. Ministers, evangelists, and professors of theology should do so, but elders, deacons, and others - not trained theologically - shouldn't be required to make this promise.

A third change the classis proposes is in the requirement of the *Form* that those who disagree with the doctrines of the church should not publicly or even privately advocate their views until their disagreements are properly adjudicated.

It is obvious that these kinds of changes being suggested by Classis Thornapple Valley carry many implications and if implemented would have serious consequences for the church.

The way the classis has worded its overture clearly indicates it wants not just a study committee to look into these matters, but a study committee that would actually be asked to make revisions in the *Form of Subscription* along the lines the classis has outlined.

Each of the points the classis makes needs to be thoroughly discussed and questioned before a study committee is mandated to make such revisions. The "bottom line" of the classis overture is quite obviously to *weaken the strong commitment to our Reformed Creeds the Form of Subscription currently demands.*

Abortion Statement: Classis Zeeland urges synod to make a bold

statement decrying and opposing the continuing "holocaust of abortion" [p. 210]. Whereas synod has spoken on this issue before, 1998 is the 25th year since the Supreme Court's *Roe v. Wade* decision, and abortion continues. Certainly this would be an appropriate time to again proclaim the church's stand to our society.

Inactive Members: Classis Atlantic Northeast is proposing that for membership reporting, synod establish a third category of members, besides baptized members and confessing members - namely, "inactive members" [p. 214].

Who would be "inactive members"? They would be baptized or confessing members who have been declared by the consistory to have had no relationship with the congregation for one year due to no justifiable reason. These members would still be subject to discipline by the church. The reason for establishing the category of "inactive members," according to classis, is that it will encourage churches to report their membership more accurately. The underlying reason, however, appears to be financial. Churches allegedly do not report their full membership because they have to pay ministry shares on a per member basis. If "inactive members" need not be counted for ministry shares, churches would report their membership more accurately.

This overture goes in the direction of the Reformed Church of America's method of membership counting. The question is: *Will it create more problems than it attempts to solve?*

Question 80 of the Heidelberg Catechism: Classis Lake Erie wants Question and Answer 80 removed from the *Heidelberg Catechism*. This is the Q. & A. that describes the Roman Catholic mass as a "condemnable idolatry." The classis feels this terminology is offensive to Roman

Catholics who wish to join the CRC, and hinders Christian unity. Appeal is also made to changes in the Roman Catholic Church on justification by faith.

This is not the first time Q.&A. 80 has been challenged. Synod 1977 decided, however, to retain it in the *Heidelberg Catechism*. Part of the reason given then was that the teaching of the Roman Catholic Church on the mass has not changed. That reason still holds. Classis Lake Erie quotes from the *Baltimore Catechism*, a Roman Catholic document. It is plain, however, from the international *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, that the Roman Catholic Church still firmly believes that the mass is a sacrifice of Christ.

Property Division: Four Overtures are coming to synod dealing with the matter of who should get the church property when a church leaves the denomination. Synod 1997 adopted a revised *Model Articles of Incorporation*. The main change occurred in an article pertaining to property, which included a section of what should happen in cases of division in a church. In such an instance, the revised model states that the group which remains Christian Reformed - according to the exclusive determination of classis or synod - shall have exclusive right to the church's property. The overtures wish synod to revise this section so as to *recognize the final authority of the church council in property matters*. More fundamentally, these overtures are concerned about *Reformed church polity, and whether classes and synods may lord it over local church councils*.

Women-in-Office: Whereas the issue of women-in-office is not on the "front-burner" of the CRC at the present time, overtures arising from this issue continue to come up, and will also at this year's synod. One council wishes synod to review its 1995 decision opening all the offices to women, instead of waiting until the year 2000, and to undo that decision.

On the opposite spectrum is an overture which wants synod to delete its 1995 regulation that *synodical agencies* "not appoint women as ministers of the Word to any field of labor within their jurisdiction nor seek to have them installed by a local church" [p. 226].

In that same direction, an overture asks synod that when seminarians are declared candidates in the CRC by vote of synod, *voting separately on male and female candidates not be allowed*. This has been done in the years since 1995 so that delegates conscientiously opposed to women-in-office are not compelled to vote for women to be ministers.

This latter overture shows clearly what some in the CRC are intent on: force everyone to accept women-in-office. It even compares the women-in-office issue to racial discrimination. In so doing, it shows the very lack of Christian sensitivity it accuses others of demonstrating.

As the Synod of 1998 meets, it is my prayer that it will seek God's guidance through His Word and Spirit, and that in times of continued stress and conflict within the CRC, it will lead us to renew our commitment to love and serve Christ.

Rev. James Admiraal is pastor of the First Prinsburg (MN) Christian Reformed Church.



Who Are the Real Schismatics?

LAURIE VANDEN HEUVEL

When my husband and I left the Christian Reformed Church (CRC) December 31, 1997 after 36 years in the ministry there, we decided that as editors of *The Outlook* we would "forget those things that are behind" in the CRC, and "press on" in our new church home, the Presbyterian Church in America (PCA). We would, to be sure, print carefully constructed critiques of proceedings in the CRC in years to come, especially those written by and for CRC readers; but we personally would no longer become embroiled in its debates.

However, in the face of Overture 15, coming from Classis Lake Erie to CRC Synod 1998, which asks synod to consider carefully the declarations of release for ministers who have left the CRC, some things need to be said, not because my own husband's "honorable release," which was twice granted unanimously by Classis Grandville, is now being challenged by Classis Lake Erie, but because there is a more basic question which must be faced by CRC Synod 1998 and that is: Who are the *real* schismatics? Classis Lake Erie judges several ministers who have now left the CRC to be *the schismatics* who are therefore not deserving of "honorable release."

Their report goes to great lengths to show how *The Outlook* (of which my husband is Co-editor) "encouraged" secessions. As editors we deny that charge. We never *advocated* secession from the CRC. As the tide was turning strongly against CRC members who were opposed to women's ordination, we did allow occasional statements which referred to seces-

sion as the only solution if the CRC remained unresponsive to correction. Even in the most explicit article carried by *The Outlook* entitled *Take It or Leave It* (July/August, 1995, p.5), it was made clear that this was a statement made by someone else, and we as editors commented that there might be more "truth than fiction" in that statement. Was it not true that in 1996 these were the only two choices left to the opponents of women in office? They could either "take it" (pay all the bills and watch the tragedy of the GKN be reenacted in the CRC), or "leave it" (the only questions being - how and with whom?). The framers of Overture 15 call this "encouragement" for secession for which at least the Co-editor of *The Outlook* should not be recommended for "honorable release." We call it a plain and simple statement of the facts of our options. There was and never will be a satisfactory "middle ground."

The overture then tackles the South Holland Conference for its letter sent to Synod 1996, fall of 1995:

Should you not lead our churches in repentance for sin and a return to the high view of Scripture for which the CRC has historically been known - until recent years - we will be forced to convene next year to consider painful options, one of which must be a proposal to form a new or different denominational federation.

Overture 15 charges the officers with *encouragement to secession*, a ground for which they should not receive "honorable release." In our judgment, this South Holland Conference statement is a clarion *call for repentance*, and a *statement of intent* to separate if the CRC does return to its former position.

In both examples cited, a *presentation of options* and a *statement of intent*, the quotes are construed as "encouragements" to secession. This is a subjective spin which Classis Lake Erie is placing on these statements to achieve their goal: the withholding of "honorable release" status to departed ministers.

The overture brushes aside years of faithful service on the part of these departed pastors by *equating* their perceived misconduct of advocating secession, with a pastor whose years of faithful service terminates in deposition for adultery. What an insult.

But there is a more fundamental issue here which constitutes the real reason for this editorial: Who are the *real* schismatics?

As a Christian Reformed Church, we bound ourselves together for years by confessions and a Church Order which we all promised to uphold. Should any elder, pastor and professor (Calvin College and Calvin Seminary) differ from what was taught in these documents, he was dutybound to follow a specified procedure. The *Form of Subscription* signed by all of these leaders in the church requires that, should anyone of them develop doubts concerning

"...there is a more basic question which must be faced by CRC Synod 1998."

anything upheld in these documents, he must neither "directly" nor "indirectly" contradict the same by "public preaching or writing." The doubter is further required to "reveal his sentiments to one of our ecclesiastical assemblies" for adjudication *before* advocating it.

In the CRC, on the matter of women in church office, the practice of the procedure was reversed. For years pastors and especially professors wrote, taught and spoke in defense of women in office until finally, after twenty-five years, they won their case at the major assembly. Some pastors even blatantly *disobeyed* the CRC stand and ordained women in their churches. Not one of them was officially reprimanded or declared "dishonorable" for disobedience to the stand of our church.

The Synod 1995 itself acted illegally when it bypassed the required procedure for ratifying a change in the Church Order Article 3. It created instead a supplement which would declare the word "male" inoperative. Who are the *real* schismatics?

The January 23, 1984 issue of *The Banner* carried six articles promoting women in office (the matter of women deacons was coming to synod that summer). I read them and called the editor of *The Banner*. His secretary told me he would not talk to me (this was the first and only time I called him). But when I insisted I was a full quota-paying member of the CRC, he reluctantly came to the phone. I expressed my distress and surprise that there was not one word in this issue of *The Banner* which reflected the 2000-year-old stand of the Christian church in general, and the CRC stand in particular, against women in church office. His response was threefold: (1) He said that Editor John Vander Ploeg used the pages of *The Banner* to promote his agenda, so this editor could do the same. I pointed out that Editor Vander Ploeg's agenda agreed with CRC commitments and his did

not. (2) He said that *The Banner* was no longer the *official* publication of the CRC and he was therefore under no obligation to uphold the official stand of the CRC. Surprised, I asked if *The Banner* had ever informed its readers of this. He said, "No." (3) He said, "Conservatives don't know how to write." Shocked, I said nothing.

After a fruitless half hour, I finally said, "Well, I will let you go. I am going to write an article for *The Outlook* and I just called to see what, if any, plans you had to balance this issue of *The Banner* before synod meets. Now I know that you have none." "Well," he said quickly, "let's see; what can we do? How would it be if we run an article giving the "pros" and "cons" of women in office, three writers on each side of the issue, 300 words each?" I said that was hardly "equal time." But that is what happened. Three writers wrote *for* women in office, and Dr. W. Godfrey and I (only two writers) wrote *against* it, 300 words each. So, since the retirement in 1980, of Dr. Lester De Koster as editor of *The Banner*, to this day, the *official* stand of the CRC received 600 words of endorsement in its *unofficial*, funded publication, *The Banner*. Who are the *real* schismatics?

During the turbulence of the past twenty-five years, I was invited to Calvin College a number of times to debate professors before students in class. Openly the professors flaunted the position of the CRC on this issue, clearly violating their own commitments to uphold the position of the CRC. These are only two personal examples. Many more could be cited.

The *real* schismatics are those who *created discord* in the church by illegally and relentlessly promoting their cause (women in office). To this day none have been officially judged as "dishonorable" or removed from their office.

Further, the *Form of Subscription*, in addition to forbidding public expression of doubts without ecclesiasti-

cal approval, admonishes office bearers (elders, ministers, professors) to "defend" the commitments of the CRC, to "reject all errors," to "refute and contradict" them, to "exert ourselves in keeping the Church free from such errors." Who are the *real* schismatics? Certainly not the officebearers who followed the directives of the Church Order. Rather, the *real* schismatics are those who violated the Church Order *without disciplinary restraint* for twenty-five years, *raising discord* and *creating disunity* in the church. If there had been no public agitation for a position which was contrary to the stand of the CRC, there never would have been the articles in *The Outlook*, or a South Holland Conference which Overture 15 complains about. Curiously, the situation seems analagous to political takeovers in the world. First, conquer the country, then change the rules and punish the resisters.

While many in the CRC slept, the skids were being greased subversively by leaders in the church until they finally won their case. But when one side wins, another side loses. Thousands left the CRC with weary souls and aching hearts, not only because of women in office, but even more importantly because of the deep erosion of the authority of Scripture in the CRC, the "hermeneutical shift" on the part of far too many of its leaders.

But a new day is dawning. For most of those who have left, there is a freedom and joy in doing the work of the Lord with those of like mind. For the CRC there remains the task of assigning a *status* to the ministers who have left. Thankfully, God is the Judge - and He will hold each person involved in these decisions accountable for the results.

"First, conquer the country, then change the rules and punish the resisters."

To Be or Not To Be — Bound by a Form?

DARRELL TODD MAURINA

Since 1619, the Christian Reformed Church and its predecessor denominations in the Netherlands have had some of the strictest policies of any Reformed tradition for subscription to the doctrinal standards of the church.

That could change if Classis Thornapple Valley gets its way. By unanimous vote, the January 17 meeting of the suburban Grand Rapids assembly overtured Synod 1998 to appoint a study committee that would revise the statement in the *Form of Subscription* that 'all the articles and points of doctrine set forth in the *Belgic Confession*, the *Heidelberg Catechism*, and the *Canons of Dort* fully agree with the Word of God' (italics added) to reflect the fallibility of all human work." Other provisions in the overture propose that the study committee modify the *Form of Subscription* so that it distinguishes the responsibilities of elders and deacons from those of ministers, evangelists, and professors of theology in the promise to teach and defend the articles and points of doctrine" and "modify the requirement that signers of the *Form of Subscription*, if they come to have some difficulty with a doctrine or doctrines in the creeds, will not speak or write about it until they have disclosed their sentiments to the proper authorities in the church for examination."

In the CRC, all ministers, elders, deacons, evangelists, and theological professors must "declare truthfully, sincerely, and in good conscience before the Lord that we sincerely believe" the doctrinal stan-

dards of the church in "all the articles and points of doctrine... fully agree" with Scripture - the language to which Classis Thornapple Valley unanimously objected. Furthermore, the *Form of Subscription* requires that officebearers promise "to teach these doctrines diligently, to defend them faithfully, and not to contradict them, publicly or privately, directly or indirectly, in our preaching, teaching, or writing" and to pledge "not only to reject all errors that conflict with these doctrines, but also to refute them, and to do everything we can to keep the church free from them." If officebearers should "come to have any difficulty with these doc-

trines or reach views differing from them," the *Form of Subscription* requires them not to "propose, defend, preach, or teach such views, either publicly or privately, until we have first disclosed them to the council, classis, or synod, realizing that the consequence of refusal to do so is suspension from office." Further provisions specify a process whereby a church council, classis, or synod supervising an officebearer may, "on sufficient grounds of concern," vote to "require a fuller explanation of our view concerning any article in the three confessions," specify suspension from office if the officebearer refuses to provide the required explanation, and indicate a procedure for appeals.

"Changing those requirements would have severe consequences for the life of the Christian Reformed Church," said Dr. Cornel Venema, professor of Doctrinal Studies at

Mid-America Reformed Seminary in the Chicago suburb of Dyer, Indiana.

"I would propose that what they are proposing is the undoing of any meaningful confessional subscription on the part of the denomination and its ministerial servants," said Venema. "I call that a tongue-in-cheek subscribing; you say you believe in something but you reserve to yourself the right to disagree, and that is no subscription at all. Were such a proposal adopted by the synod, it would formally confirm that the CRC has ceased to be a confessional Reformed body and that those who have left the CRC for that reason have confirmed the validity of that ground."

Why Change the *Form of Subscription*?

The Classis Thornapple Valley overture originated at Princeton CRC of Kentwood. Elder Cornelius Korhorn said his church didn't send the overture because of any specific problems with Christian Reformed doctrine but rather out of concern that the *Form of Subscription* requires more than can properly be expected of officebearers.

"As we see it, the *Form* was written in the early part of the seventeenth century," said Korhorn. "The people who signed it were all professors and ministers, and if there were elders there, they were competent; whereas today most of our elders and deacons aren't competent in theology. If the preacher said something wrong they wouldn't know it."

"In my particular council not a single person has ever read the *Canons of Dort*; there's something wrong there," said Korhorn.

While particularly concerned about requiring elders and deacons to promise things for which they are not sufficiently trained, Korhorn also argued that the *Form* reflects an outdated method of doing theology.

"When this was first written, scholars were largely working by themselves; there was no mail service or telephone; they were off by themselves," said Korhorn. "Today if a theologian is wondering about a cer-

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tain question you can get on the Internet and ask questions. Theological conversation today is entirely different from what it was when the *Form* was written, which means that the way it should be handled must be modified to reflect twentieth century reality."

"If the *Form* had said they will not publicly preach or teach something that is at variance with the creeds, that would be reasonable, but it says they will neither publicly nor privately talk about it, and that is unreasonable," said Korhorn.

The most serious problem with the current language, in Korhorn's view, is the statement that the credal language fully agrees with Scripture.

"To say the creeds are fully in accord means there is nothing in the creeds that is possibly contrary to the Scripture; to us it seems that in any human document you need to leave open always the possibility that something is not in accord," said Korhorn.

"We are not saying that anything is not in accord, but only that we should not say that," emphasized Korhorn. "We are not saying there is anything wrong in the creeds; all our objection is to the *Form of Subscription*."

According to Korhorn, the overture went through a two-year process of review and six editions before its current language was adopted by Princeton CRC and later by Classis Thornapple Valley.

Retired Princeton CRC pastor, Rev. Sierd Woudstra, one of the primary authors of the overture, concurred with Korhorn's explanation of its genesis and rationale.

"I have become convinced that signing the *Form of Subscription* has become a ritual, and is basically meaningless," said Woudstra. "I love the Reformed faith, properly defined of course, but I've had difficulties with the *Form of Subscription* for decades already. I have always felt that too many elders and deacons don't know what they are signing and if they did know what they were signing, they would have problems with

it because they don't know what's in the creeds."

"One of the things I said is when I retired, nobody can require me to sign the creeds as a condition of employment," said Woudstra. "It's something you do because you have to do it and trust the Lord will forgive you for signing despite the fact that you do have some reservations."

While Korhorn said his primary concern was the overture's second point that elders and deacons may not have the necessary theological knowledge to intelligently sign the current *Form of Subscription*, Woudstra said his primary concern was the restrictions the *Form* places on theological inquiry.

"The provision in the *Form* that says you may not write or talk about things before you talk to your consistory or classis is putting the cart before the horse," said Woudstra. "The best way to find out if your concerns are valid is to write an article about it; it is by means of public discussion of an article that you see if your opinion is right or not."

Citing the way synod handled the concerns of deceased CRC missionary Dr. Harry Boer and his denial of the doctrine of reprobation - the historic Calvinist doctrine that God damns people to hell as well as elects them for salvation - Woudstra said the *Form of Subscription* created a bad theological climate in the CRC.

"I have a high regard for the creeds even though I have grave concern about the creeds, especially the doctrine of reprobation where I am fully in agreement with Dr. Harry Boer," said Woudstra. "I have often wondered if the CRC is hospitable to theological issues."

In addition to Boer, Woudstra cited two professors from the CRC's "mother church," the Gereformeerde Kerken in Nederland, as examples of world-renowned theologians who

might have difficulty working in a Christian Reformed context.

"Would a man like G.C. Berkouwer be able to effectively lecture at Calvin Seminary?" asked Woudstra. "I think not. To me it is an utter travesty of justice what was done there by Calvin Seminary to Dr. Jan Veenhof. This was an act of gross injustice, and I still want to challenge Calvin Seminary to make amends."

Berkouwer and Veenhof, both longtime professors in the GKN, came from strongly conservative backgrounds and later in life broadened their theological positions. In 1996, Calvin Seminary terminated Veenhof's visiting professorship at the seminary when it became known that he had been a member of the GKN study committee that provided theological justification for allowing monogamous homosexual unions and had written a book defending that position.

While strongly opposing the overture, Venema agreed with Woudstra that there are significant problems in the CRC with lack of knowledge of the confessions among the elders and deacons. "The solution to that problem is not to jettison the *Form of Subscription* but to do a better job of teaching, preaching and studying," said Venema. "You don't solve the problem by rejecting the confessions and subscription to the confessions."

"The one outstanding argument for the overture is it would bring the denomination's practice into conformity with present reality. They are arguing that people would be forced to be hypocrites," said Venema. "If you wish to be, like myself, part of a confessionally Reformed communion of churches, the CRC is not the place."

United Reformed News Service

"The solution to that problem is not to jettison the Form of Subscription but to do a better job of teaching, preaching and studying..."

The Purpose of the Church

JOHN MUETHER and DARYL HART

Question: *What is the task of the church?*

Answer: *And Jesus came and said to them, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you" (Matt. 28:18-20).*

Last month, we argued that the church must identify itself as *against the world*. It can bear witness to the world only if it resists worldliness, flees from idolatry, and hates the deeds of sinful men. How does its other-worldliness shape its task? Has the church any responsibility to the world? Or is part of its mission to those outside the church?

To ask these questions is to explore the purpose of the church. Though evangelicals have made *The Purpose-Driven Church* a Christian bestseller, they are confused about the purpose of the church. One need only look at a recent issue of *Christianity Today* for confirmation. In a listing "100 Things the Church is Doing Right," the magazine featured a wide range of Christian good works, from collecting underwear for the homeless to providing automobile maintenance for single women. Among these "churches" profiled, less than a quarter actually involved the institutional church, and only a handful involved the preaching of the Word. Many of these churches offered full-service, "seven-day-a-week" sets of activities for all ages and interest groups. One writer recently suggested that small churches cannot compete against

these ecclesiastical Wal-Marts and will be forced out of existence.

It should not surprise us that in this free-market landscape we find competing notions of the purpose of the church. Some have claimed that the church is primarily a tool for the transformation of its culture. In the nineteenth century, New School Presbyterian Albert Barnes articulated this view in the context of the church's relation to social reform. The church, he wrote:

owes an important duty to society and to God...; and its mission will not be accomplished by securing merely the sanctification of its own members, or even by the drawing within its fold multitudes of those who shall be saved...The burden which is laid upon it may not be primarily the conversion of the heathen or the diffusion of Bibles and tracts abroad; the work which God requires it to do, and for which specifically it has been planted there, may be to diffuse a definite moral influence in respect to an existing evil institution. On all that is wrong in social life, in the modes of intercourse, in the habits of training the young, and in the prevailing sentiments in the community that have grown out of existing institutions, God may have planted the church there to exert a definite moral influence — a work for Himself.

"It should not surprise us that in this free-market landscape we find competing notions of the purpose of the church."

Barnes offers a classic description of the church as an agent of social transformation. As this cause would be taken up by the social gospel beginning in the latter part of the nine-

teenth century, the world would set the agenda for the church. Conversion and sanctification of sinners was not enough. Instead, the primary work of the church was its exercise of social influence.

A very different view was articulated by a contemporary of Barnes, the Southern Old School Presbyterian James Henry Thornwell. In his understanding of the church's responsibility to society, Thornwell came to very different conclusions:

The church is not, as we fear too many are disposed to regard it, a moral institute of universal good, whose business it is to wage war upon every form of human ill, whether social, civil, political, moral, and to patronize every expedient which a romantic benevolence may suggest as likely to contribute to human comfort...The problems which the anomalies of our fallen state are continually forcing on philanthropy, the church has no right directly to solve. She must leave them to providence, and to human wisdom sanctified and guided by the spiritual influences which it is her glory to foster and cherish. The church is a very peculiar society...it is the kingdom of her Lord Jesus Christ...It can hear no voice but His, obey no command but His, pursue no ends but His.

Here is a clear rejection of Barnes' claims. The world does not set the agenda for the church. Only Christ, the head of the church, establishes its ministry through His word. The task of the church is to exalt its head, to teach only the doctrines He has revealed, to worship Him as He has commanded, and to order its life by what He has ordained. The church is not an agent of social transformation. The purpose of the church is not to save the world, but to save God's people from the world. These two models have vied with each other throughout the history of American Protestantism. Their differences lay at the heart of the New School-Old School division in nineteenth-century Presbyterianism and the modernist-fundamentalist controversy of the twentieth century.

Still another version of the purpose of the church comes from the

church growth movement in contemporary American evangelicalism. Begun in the 1950s, the church growth school uses social science to discern why some churches grow and others don't. Its findings have been used by church-planters to identify methods of successful church planting. From telemarketing campaigns, spacious and comfortable facilities, contemporary choruses sung to up-tempo music, and dramatic skits, to warm messages focusing on helping families cope with the pressures of modern life — all of the techniques are employed to draw largely baby-boomer worshipers into an attractive and comfortable worship atmosphere.

The more honest church planters in this camp will go so far as to see the church as a business and urge it to adopt a more entrepreneurial mindset. So the successful church will be "market driven," seeing the gospel as its product and the local community as the consumer. According to George Barna, "The more successful a church is at fulfilling people's needs, the greater its chances for growth."

For church-growth proponents, the primary purpose of the church is to attract newcomers. Typically, this is done by "target audience profiles" of a specific age range and socio-economic profile. The task of the church is to make itself attractive to that specific demographic profile. In many congregations, this thinking has prompted the introduction of contemporary worship with dance, skits, and messages that avoid "Christianese" or evangelical jargon that might bewilder or scare or bore the unchurched.

Like the New School emphasis of Albert Barnes, these churches are trying to get themselves out of their ghetto in order to influence their communities. In the words of one practitioner, they seek to "outgrow the ingrown church." Unlike the Old School sentiments of Thornwell, these churches are not limiting themselves to the Lord's specific commands. Stressing an "outward face to the world," they are more sensitive to the language of the world than to the vocabulary and grammar of the church.

As different as these three models are, what they share in common is the claim that they are about the task of fulfilling the Great Commission. The Great Commission seems to be a simple set of instructions: "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you" (Matt 28:18-20). But given these competing models of the church, it is clear that the meaning of Christ's words is not at all obvious to the church today. So the Great Commission is where we ought to begin in understanding the purpose of the church.

Whose COMMISSION IS IT?

A large multi-million dollar parachurch organization has as its mission the goal "to help give every man, woman, and child in the entire world an opportunity to find new life in Jesus Christ" by the year 2000. And it bases this goal on the Great Commission. Another parachurch organization produces the *Great Commission Handbook*, and it can be consulted on the Internet through its Worldwide Web address, "GoYe.com."

Of course, it is commendable to see Christians expressing a burden for evangelism. Yet it is important to underscore that the Great Commission is not given to individuals or to the parachurch. Jesus gave the Great Commission explicitly to His apostles. But since the promise extends beyond the apostolic age, to the end of this age, we must ask, whose commission is it after the apostolic age? The answer can be found in Matthew 16:17-19, where we find Peter's confession of Christ, which is the "Great Constitution" of the church. Edmund Clowney writes that these two texts must be understood together: "The Great Commission of Matthew 28 requires the order Christ has appointed for his church in the Constitution of Matthew 16."

Rightly understood, therefore, the Great Commission is the task of the

church. It follows that the Great Commission is directed specifically to the ministers of the Word. After all, the Commission directs us to baptize. The sacrament of baptism is given to the church, to be administered only by its officers. A prevailing notion among evangelicals today is that special office in the church is really unimportant. Frequently office is disparaged in the interest of promoting the "priesthood of believers," and a high view of the church is greeted with the charges of clericalism and elitism, which play well in populist evangelical circles. However, the priesthood of believers doesn't mean that all believers are pastors, and the general office in the church should not swallow up the special offices of minister, elder, and deacon.

As stewards of the mysteries of God, ministers in particular are set apart in the New Covenant for the ministry of Word and sacrament just as priests were in the Old Covenant. John Calvin underscored this point in his *Geneva Confession of 1537*, explaining that the church should "receive the true ministers of the Word of God as messengers and ambassadors of God," to "hearken" to these ministers as to Christ Himself, and to consider "their ministry as a commission from God necessary in the church."

The church is no human invention. It was ordained by God for the task of the Great Commission. For this reason, we can be sure from Scripture that, despite their multi-million dollar annual budgets, parachurch organizations like the ones described above will not fulfill their missions. This is because they have usurped tasks that Christ has given to His church. We dare not replace the church with a vehicle of our design, no matter how much more efficiently it may seem to operate. Christ offers His heavenly authority and protection only to His church; and only its ministers, Calvin wrote, "might confidently expect to be victorious over the whole world."

"This points us to the truth that salvation involves far more than conversion."

What IS THE CHURCH'S COMMISSION?

Another problem surrounding the Great Commission is to mistake it simply for a command to evangelize. With the dawn of the world-wide missionary efforts in the nineteenth century, evangelicals have read the Great Commission with emphases on the words, "go" and "all nations." Thus they convert the Great Commission into a proof-text for both foreign missions and door-to-door evangelism. In his popular *Outgrowing the Ingrown Church*, Jack Miller sums up the Great Commission in this way: "It is the privilege and duty of each believer to become God's zealous pacesetter in bringing the lost to Christ by every means available." But this understanding reduces the Great Commission to evangelism and further restricts evangelism to spreading of information about the gospel to the world and registering decisions for Christ. The Great Commission is not only about evangelism, nor is it mainly about evangelism.

The point here is not that the church should not evangelize. We must proclaim the gospel to the lost and desire that converts come to Christ. But that is not the only function of the church, and it is certainly not the focus of its worship.

The Great Commission itself suggests something very different. The main verb in the Greek is not "go" (which is a modifying participle), but "disciple" (which is the imperative). The text should read, "As you go, disciple, by teaching and baptizing." This points us to the truth that salvation involves far more than conversion. It is about becoming a disciple of Christ. The goal of the church is not to get the gospel message to everyone or to get more folks in the door of our churches. Rather, it should be exactly what Christ commands here: "teaching them to observe everything I have commanded you." This is the model for Christ's followers.

This is why Thornwell's understanding of the church was so profound. He went on to write:

[The church] can hear no voice but Christ's, obey no commands but His, pursue no ends but His.

Its officers are His servants bound to execute only His will; its doctrines are His teachings, which He as a prophet has given from God; its discipline His law, which He as king has ordained... The church can announce what [the Bible] teaches, enjoin what it commands, prohibit what it condemns, and enforce her testimonies by spiritual sanctions. Beyond the Bible she can never go, and apart from the Bible she can never speak.

Here Thornwell is echoing Calvin, who wrote similarly, in reflecting on the Great Commission:

Let this be a firm principle: No other word is to be held as the Word of God, and given place as such in the church, than what is contained first in the Law and the Prophets, then in the writings of the apostles; and the only authorized way of teaching in the church is by the prescription and standard of his Word.

In one sense, it might be argued that Calvin and Thornwell held a narrow perspective on the church, limiting what it could do and say. But in another sense, they understood the huge burden placed upon it, for she was to disciple all the nations, by *teaching them everything Christ had commanded*. This teaching involves the whole counsel of God, not the "four spiritual laws" or even the "five points of Calvinism."

WHAT IS DISCIPLESHIP?

What then is discipleship? A common word to describe what many people mean by discipleship is "assimilation." This is the process of getting new members more fully involved in the life of the church, whether through VBS or small groups, singing in the choir, or serving in the nursery. We prefer an older term, *Christian nurture*, to describe the process of discipleship. In this sense discipleship means being con-

formed to the whole counsel of God. It trains God's people for good works and sustains them with spiritual food for their pilgrimage in the wilderness of this world. In other words, we should measure discipleship less by how active one is in the programs of the church than by how effectively the people of God resist worldliness.

Christian nurture sees salvation not as a momentary occurrence but a continuous and arduous process, from which all Christians are prone to wander. It acknowledges that God's people are in need of salvation continually, from conversion until death. In this context, *worship is essential to the health of believers*. If we forsake the assembly of God's people, if we are not regularly sustained by Word and sacrament, we will not persevere in the faith.

Discipling, teaching, and baptizing. Together, these three elements of the Great Commission describe what the Reformers understood to be the marks of the true church: the preaching of the word ("teaching all I have commanded you"), the administration of the sacraments ("baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit") and the exercise of discipline ("make disciples"). The Great Commission, then, is a description of the true church fulfilling its mandate. The ministry of Word and sacrament disciple God's people. These are the keys of the kingdom. This is the ministry that God has promised to bless.

"...we should measure discipleship less by how active one is in the programs of the church than by how effectively the people of God resist worldliness."

DISCIPLESHIP AND WORSHIP

Contemporary confusion about the Great Commission arises from two fundamental mistakes. The *first* is an unwillingness to believe God and His promise to use the church and the things the world considers foolish to accomplish His purpose of reaching the lost. Much of the innovation in worship today reveals our lost confidence in the promises that God is bound to keep. We really don't believe that He has entrusted to the church the ministry of gathering and perfect-

ing of the saints, that He will make effectual the preaching of the Word and the administration of the sacraments to that end, and that He will supply the officers of His church with all that is necessary for them to carry out this work.

The *second* mistake comes from understanding the church and its worship merely as vehicles for evangelism. *The goal and purpose of the church is to make disciples.* Evangelism is only part of the commission Christ gave to His church. If we take the church's responsibility to disciple more seriously, we will not tailor our worship to win the approval of the world. Instead of dumbing down, we need to have our worship wise up.

Worship disciples God's people. It involves teaching all that Christ has commanded.

Thus it is the *church*, and specifically, the *church at worship* that fulfills the Great Commission. It is ministering to God by gathering a people before Him in order to offer the sacrifice of praise. It is ministering to the body of Christ by nurturing it through the ministry of Word and sacrament. And all of this happens before a watching world. It sees the church engaged in an odd ritual, speaking a strange language, worshipping the true and living God, and rejecting the gods of this world.

Unless we see worship from the perspective of the Great Commission, rightly understood, our worship will not honor God. Nor will it be effective. For finally, only worship that honors God, that conforms to what He has commanded, will be effective for convincing and converting sinners and for building them up in holiness and comfort.

In other words, worship is essential to the task of the church because it is the God-appointed means of discipling the nations.

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Re-Versalism

BRET L. MC ATEE

Reformed theology is under reconstruction, so much so that avant garde Reformed theologians should take a hint from GM and advertise their sleek product to Unchurched Harry with the pitch; "This is not your Father's theology." One of the major ways that Dad's theology has changed is with the ambitious combining of Reformed Soteriology with Universal Soteriology. Let's call it Re-versalism.

Re-versalism seeks to soften the particularism that has always been part of Reformed thinking, while avoiding the postmodern ugliness of full blown univeralism. In short Re-versalists want to avoid the "all roads lead to heaven theology," but allow for more roads

than the Reformed church has historically taught. Given their pre-suppositions, re-versalists are bright, sincere, creative, and no doubt have the best of intentions in their attempt to construct a soteriology more suitable to the kinder and gentler age we live in. Unfortunately the attempt to meld two antithetical systems results in a design that is confusing, abiblical, and satisfies only half of the equation.

Re-versalism desires to be sympathetic to the consumer who finds distasteful the truth that those who have never heard the gospel will be eternally lost. No doubt, polling data reveals that this truth leaves many people's innate sense of justice sorely grieved. Now of course it stands to reason if we want to suc-

ceed in hawking our Reformed soteriology, we had better nuance our soteriology to make sure nobody is grieved. The problem though is not classical Reformed soteriology, but rather people's innate sense of justice. Re-versalism is catering to our sinful nature. Our sinful nature always suggests that God is not fair (Romans 9:14f). It is not fair for God to decide in His providence who will hear the gospel and who will not (compare Acts 16:6). It is unfair of

God not to give everybody the gospel. It is unfair that God would save some and leave others to their own defiance of God. Of course the problem here is that Reformed doctrine has been forgotten. Re-versalism forgets that God by definition is fair

(Deut. 32:4). Re-versalism forgets that justice would be best served if all men were left eternally lost. There was no need for God to bring the gospel message to anybody, and no need for anybody to be regenerated. God didn't owe rebellious fallen man any favors. The marvel is not that people "don't get to hear" the gospel; the marvel is that anybody does. Do we dare to think that God is unjust because He is rich in mercy (Eph. 2:4f)? Do we dare believe that changing our soteriology to pacify the whims of our sinful nature allows the gospel to be the gospel? Does this change let God be God?

One proponent of Re-versalism, seeking to widen the narrow gate, states that "he does not believe that all those who have lived and died without hearing a single word of the

"Re-versalism forgets that justice would be best served if all men were left eternally lost."

Salvation-Only Through Jesus Christ

JELLE TUININGA

Over the years the Rev. Neal Punt has had his own unique (not to say confusing) view about who will be saved and who will not. More than a decade ago his writings created some controversy in the church, a controversy in which I also took part. I was hoping that Punt had come to a more Biblical position since that time, but alas, he has not. He sets forth his views again in a the January 5, 1998 issue of *The Banner*. I feel compelled to express my disagreement once more. Since the matter is not unimportant, I hope *The*

Outlook will allow me a few comments.

Confusing: Says the sub-heading to his article: "Hearing the gospel isn't the only path to God—but Jesus is the only way." Sound confusing? It is. Listen again: "Scripture clearly teaches that all who believe in Jesus Christ will be saved." But from this, says Punt, we may not draw the conclusion that "only those who believe in Jesus Christ will be saved." He calls that "a logical fallacy."

I would like to ask: If Jesus is the only way, where do we hear about

this Jesus? Isn't it in the gospel? *The Canons of Dort* (111/IV, Art. 6) calls the ministry of reconciliation "the glad tidings concerning the Messiah." So the gospel is about Jesus, and Jesus is revealed in the gospel. If Jesus is the only way, how do people come to know Him and believe in Him apart from the gospel? Doesn't it follow that people must hear the gospel to be saved? Paul says in Rom. 10: "And how can they believe in the one of whom they have not heard? And how can they hear without someone preaching to them?" Can you separate Jesus from the gospel, or vice versa? I fail to see Punt's "logic" here.

Original sin: Punt does not believe that anyone receives eternal condemnation because of his fall in Adam: "We cannot demonstrate from Scripture that God has chosen to consign anyone to everlasting damnation on the basis of their sin in Adam." Only those who hear the

Biblical message are eternally lost, but only those who, in addition to their sin in Adam, willfully and finally reject or remain indifferent toward the revelation God has given them are eternally lost."¹ Before examining this, it should be noted that the language here seems somewhat imprecise. Since nobody is saved by revelation alone, we believe the writer is suggesting *either* that those who have never heard a single word of the gospel are lost because they *rejected* the special grace that is related to general revelation, *or* they are lost because they *rejected* the common grace that is related to special revelation. Meanwhile the saved, who never heard the gospel, are saved *either* by *embracing* the special grace that was related to general revelation, *or* they are saved by *embracing* the common grace that was related to special revelation. Now if Alice in Wonderland makes sense to you I am sure this makes for a perfectly logical arrangement; but for the rest of us, alas we are mere mortals. If Re-versalists are relating spe-

cial grace to general revelation they are implying that the hypothetical saved who have never heard the gospel are saved by a special grace without the propositional revelation of Christ that comes in special revelation. If they are relating common grace to special revelation they are implying that those who are saved without hearing the gospel are saved without special grace and by revelation alone. This strikes me as strange and unorthodox.

For the sake of discussion let us grant the original supposition that those who have never heard the gospel are saved by embracing some kind of grace that is related to some kind of revelation. If that is what is suggested here, it sounds like a mutated form of the Arminian doctrine of prevenient grace. The non-mutated form of that doctrine teaches that grace which precedes potential conversion can be accepted or refused

as the individual chooses. The problem from an Arminian standpoint is that these noble pagans are saved by a lesser revelation that is related to a prevenient grace which has swallowed whole the need for the greater revelation that is related to a grace that saves. Most Evangelical Arminians would blanch at the thought that the revelation that is required for initial prevenient grace is the same as the revelation required for the more mature grace that is related to salvation. In this mutated form, prevenient grace and the lesser revelation that travels with it have been stretched out to the point of obviating the need for greater revelation and a more mature grace. This lesser grace and the attendant revelation therefore become saving in themselves.

Now, if this constitutes moldy Arminianism, it makes for rancid Calvinism. From the Reformed

"Special revelation and special grace stand in a unique relationship to one another."

gospel and then deliberately reject it are lost. But the Bible says that we are *by nature* children of wrath and "lie under the curse" (*Canons*). They are "dead in sin and in bondage thereto" (*Canons*). We read in John 3:36 that the wrath of God *remains* on those who do not believe. Note that it *was* on them by nature, and now *remains* on them. That means they are damned without the gospel. Only those who believe in Jesus Christ are "delivered from the wrath of God and from destruction" (*Canons* I, 4). We say in our *Form for Baptism* that our children "are subject to all manner of misery, yea, to condemnation itself." But then they are "sanctified in Christ." Punt should remember that in Adam we all did purposely and deliberately turn away from God. WE rejected God, and unless we turn to Him and repent,

"Punt thinks that even a pagan can 'act justly, love mercy and walk humbly with God.'"

we will perish. That's why we have no reason to believe that all children are saved. Our children, too, turned against God, and without God's gracious covenant and salvation, there is no reason to believe that they are saved.

Punt thinks that even a pagan can "act justly, love mercy and walk humbly with God." The Bible says something else (see Romans 3). L.D. 111 of the *Heidelberg Catechism* says that "we are so corrupt that we are wholly incapable of doing any good." Punt should note that even for those who "do the things required by the law" the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all the godlessness and wickedness of man. Punt has a more optimistic view of the natural man than the Bible has.

Careless use of Scripture - That's Punt's accusation of those who hold to the traditional view. But Punt himself cites all kinds of texts to try to prove his point: that Christ died for all. But generations of responsible exegetes have shown that those texts cannot be made to say what Punt wants them to say. And talk about careless use of Scripture: Punt's two textual pillars that he uses for his approach collapse entirely at closer scrutiny. They are Romans 5:18 and I Cor. 15:22. I simply cannot understand how Punt comes up with such a superficial interpretation of these texts. As dozens and dozens of responsible Reformed exegetes have shown, these texts are not concerned about *numbers* at all: they simply state the *modus operandi* of how God deals with people. All that Paul wants to say is this: There is the principle of *the one for the many*; Adam and Christ *represented others*. So all Paul is saying is: All who died,

standpoint, grace which comes to us that is related to general revelation is not sufficient for salvation, no matter how we respond to it. General revelation can convince us that there is a God, it even can convince us we are sinners of some sort but it cannot lead to the salvation that comes in special grace for there is nothing of the Savior in it. Special revelation and special grace stand in a unique relationship to one another. The Reformed standpoint declares that the revelation that is related to God's common grace does not imbue men with enough truth to lead to conversion, no matter how we respond to it. Common grace may yield to us certain talents and gifts; it often causes us to see general revelation but it can not by definition save, for there is nothing of the Lord Christ in it. The suggestion that those who never hear the gospel are saved requires us to confuse the proper positing of general revelation with common grace and special revelation with special grace.

We also must recognize that it is precisely because we are in Adam

that we will always willfully and finally reject God's revelation and the grace that accompanies it (Eph. 2:1). The unregenerate is at enmity with God and will not do anything but curse God and His special grace and special revelation. If he is unregenerate it does not matter whether he hears the gospel 932 times or none at all; he does not and will not see, and so he is lost (II Cor. 4:4). On the other hand, if we believe in election and irresistible grace we will be confident that if God starts something in any cognizant person's life by His general revelation and common grace with the intention of it flowering into salvation by the Holy Spirit's usage of special grace and special revelation, that person will eventually be confronted with and bow the knee to the Christ (Acts 8:26-39; Acts 13:48; Acts 16:13-14).

Another implied aspect of what has already been said is the impossibility of two realities living in one person. The unregenerate spend their lives constructing a reality that is falsely related to the God who is. Starting from themselves as the cen-

ter of the universe (which reveals the epitome of self-centeredness), they construct a reality at warfare with the reality of the God who is. To suggest that God saves those who have created a reality opposed to Him (egocentric vs. theocentric) is to suggest that God saves those who are currently denying and defying Him. To suggest, as the Re-versalists do, that man can somehow be religiously neutral or can somehow mix and match his egocentric reality with a theocentric reality is plainly misguided. This view completely lacks any insight into the meaning of the carnal mind being at enmity (warfare) with God. Re-versalists need to hear Van Til when he observes:

Man as sinner is an ally of Satan in that he basically hates God, whatever may appear on the surface as the fruit of non-saving grace.²

Individuals past and present simply cannot be saved until their reality (worldview) is altered. This cannot happen without special revelation, irresistible grace, regeneration and

died in Adam, all who are made alive are made alive in Christ. No more, no less. I wish Punt would show some responsible exegesis here and not make these texts say what they are not saying. I find his exegesis here completely irresponsible.

Punt says that only those who willfully reject the gospel will be lost. (Keep in mind that in a sense we all did this in Adam.) But the author of Hebrews says: How shall we escape if we *neglect* such a great salvation? Says Kuyvenhoven In *Daylight*:

Note that the Bible does not say: "If we *reject* salvation." It says: "How shall we escape if we *neglect* salvation—such a great salvation?"

The majority of those who are not saved will be lost "simply" because they have not paid attention to the gospel of the Son of God. They have not openly *rejected* God's last and loving word,

but they have shamefully *neglected* it. More people perish by disregarding the gospel than by opposing God's Word.

Punt might also take a look at I Peter 4:18.

Punt quotes Billy Graham with approval when he (Graham) says: "There is only one Way, and that Way is Jesus Christ." But he takes exception to Graham when the latter says, "There is only one path to God - through repentance and faith in the atoning death of Jesus Christ." This restriction limits the gospel, says Punt. I take my stand with Graham. He is right, and I wish Punt would come to see that. It isn't that Billy Graham limits the gospel; it is that Punt removes the limits that Scripture clearly places with regard to salvation.

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appears that we have fallen so far that what was once certain is now pitied as being anachronistic.

This kind of thinking in addition to being non-biblical (as if that isn't tragic enough), also eviscerates our compassion for the selfish, a key secondary reason for missions. We exhibit no compassion for the present selfish who have never heard the gospel when we suggest that the rebel of the past who never heard the gospel was not in reality a selfish God-hater, insisting on enthroning themselves as their own deity (Does anybody remember Romans 3:9-20?). Scripture, speaking rhetorically, asks, "How shall they believe in Him of whom they have not heard?" The clear answer is: They won't. If we really wanted to show compassion for those who hate God we would work callouses on our knees praying that God's glory would be displayed in their salvation. If we really wanted to show compassion for those who hate God we would quit trying to work off all God's "edges" and preach the unvarnished truth that God hates the workers of sin (Psalm 5:5, 11:5, Eph. 2:3); yet even when He hated us He loved us. If we really wanted to show compassion for those who hate God, we would be better stewards of our monies so that we could be better givers for God's work of missions, both local and international. If we were really compassionate as we like to consider ourselves, we would have compassion for God. Every time we rearrange things to fit our current sensibilities we reveal a harshness toward God. Every time we are content with Re-versalism coming from our pulpits we reveal a hostility towards the cross. Every time we put up with Re-versalism being expressed in our publications as a valid opinion we are in danger of blaspheming the Holy Spirit. Re-versalistic ideas are uncompassionate, mean-spirited, and God dishonoring; and those who believe and promulgate them should beware. We esteem compassion so highly that we dare not allow false compassion to be a smokescreen in the ongoing attempt to create a "deity du-jour."

justification, that is to say, the fullness of Christ crucified.

Re-versalism tends at times to play with logic. They may say things like: "Just because Scripture teaches that whoever confesses Jesus as Lord and believes in his heart that God raised Him from the dead will be saved, does not necessarily mean whoever does not fulfill these conditions will be lost." D. A Carson in his book, *The Gaggling Of God* reveals the problem with their torturing of logic:

At the level of logic...this conclusion is normally justified. Statements of the sort, "If A, then B," do not guarantee the truth of "If not A, then not B," and that is what exclusivism demands. But there is one important exception. If all the members of class A are precisely identical to all the members of B, then *if* the conditional statement "If A, then B holds," so also does the conditional statement, "If *not* A then *not* B." In other words, *if* all those who confess with their mouth

that Jesus is Lord and believe in their hearts that God has raised him constitute class A, and all those who are saved constitute class B, then if the members of the two classes are the same, it is precisely true to say that, "if you do *not* confess Jesus as Lord and do *not* believe that God has raised him from the dead you are *not* saved."³

Of course one should be gentle with one's opponents (remember Paul's gentleness with the Judaizers in Galatians 5:12), but at this point Re-versalism becomes a chic Universalism. What started out as a concern for a wider gate has, by way of necessary implication, been transformed into a deconstruction project for the elimination of gates. The simple fact is that Scripture does teach that only those who believe in Jesus Christ will be saved; and only those who do not believe in Jesus will be lost. It seems almost pedantic to cite passages like John 14:6, Acts 4:12, Romans 10:14-15, and I John 5:12; yet increasingly it ap-

Re-versalists contend that much of Reformed soteriology twists Scripture when it places too much emphasis on the imputational aspect of Adam's sin to his posterity. Some Re-versalists demand that damnation is only related to the expression of our inherent nature and not the result of Adam's sin imputed to us. This seems fuzzy because little time is spent teasing out the relationship between imputed sin and inherent sin. We would only comment that there must be some relationship between these two lest we fall into the Pelagian doctrine which teaches that we are able not to sin. This would be to deny both our federal relationship to Adam, and our sinful nature, and thus deny key foundations of the gospel.

Another technique used to confuse the matter in the minds of people is to underscore the sinfulness of God's people. The logic goes something like this: God's people sin, the unreached sin; God's people have heaven, the unreached responding to their measure of revelation therefore can have heaven. It is a kind of a sophisticated version of the, "Let him who has no sin cast the first stone" argument. Re-versalists would no doubt ask: "How dare we suggest that unreached peoples are eternally separated from God when we have so much sin in us?" The Reformed position grants that all of God's people are sinners, but also insists they are at the same time saints. This is something that can not be predicated about the lost; they are always only sinners, and this is the problem with the above logic. God's people do sin but they have an advocate with the Father. The lost, reached or unreached, past or present, have never had this blessed advocate.

Re-versalists also have latched onto the "all" and "world" passages of Scripture as proof that more will be saved than we think. It is beyond the scope of this article to examine these passages individually but the simple truth is, this reasoning

proves more than what most Re-versalists want to prove. This reasoning is unattached to the Sola Scriptura principle of reading less clear passages in light of the more clear passages and ends up proving an unvarnished Universalism not a Re-versalistic position. To insist the "all" and "world" passages are proof that more will be saved than we think is to ignore Calvin's observations that:

"To nuance any of these truths changes all of these truths and all the other ones that comprise the Gospel of Jesus Christ."

No worship has ever pleased God except that which looked to Christ.⁴ (And) surely, after the fall of the first man no knowledge of God apart from the mediator has had power unto salvation. For Christ not only speaks of his own age, but comprehends all ages when he says: "This is eternal life, to know the Father to be the one true God, and Jesus

Christ whom he has sent" [John 17:3 p.]. Thus, all the more vile is the stupidity of those persons who open heaven to all the impious and unbelieving without the grace of him whom Scripture commonly teaches to be the only door whereby we enter into salvation.⁵

In their hearts Re-versalists genuinely believe their position is a Biblical halfway house between Universalism and Classical Reformed Soteriology. Their halfway house though is like a California hotel dislodged from its mountainside perch by a raging mudslide; it is not at the bottom yet, but there is no place to go but down. We need to remember that Arminianism used to be thought of as the halfway house between Reformed Soteriology and Universalistic Soteriology. Re-versalism is the mansion sliding even further down than that position. Re-versalism sounds more like a halfway house between Universalism and Arminianism, and if that's the case, then what are allegedly Reformed people doing there?

In conclusion, if all this were about is what happened to the lost of the past who never heard the gospel

then I might be far less vehement. That is not what it is all about. This is about redefining what the gospel is. And the gospel is now exactly what it has always been. Nothing has changed! God as sovereign creator is still God. Man as dependent creature is still dependent. Dependent man still will not choose God without God changing man's nature. The changing of man's nature is still related to the Spirit's harmonious work of applying special grace and giving special revelation. Man besotted through and through with sin still must find perfection in order to approach this majestically Holy God. God's wrath is still revealed from heaven towards all unrighteousness. Man by nature is still a child of wrath. God still upholds His holiness having spent His wrath on His Christ at Calvary. God still displays His love to His people by providing His Christ at Calvary to be His people's perfection. God still displays His love to His people by sending forth His Spirit to apply the benefits of salvation. God still intends to glorify His people when He gathers them to Himself. To nuance any of these truths changes all of these truths and all the other ones that comprise the Gospel of Jesus Christ. It is precisely because the Re-versalist's rearrangement of parts of the gospel would be a going backwards into heresy that we should forswear its teaching and chide it's proponents.

Footnotes

- 1 Neal Punt. "Wondering Who Is Saved" *The Banner* (133/1 January 5, 1998): 18.
- 2 Cornelius Van Til. *An Introduction to Systematic Theology* (Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Co. 1974), pg. 134.
- 3 D. A. Carson. *The Gagging Of God: Christianity Confronts Pluralism* (Zondervan Publishing House, 1996), pp. 312-313.
- 4 John Calvin. *Institutes of the Christian Religion* 1 (Edited by John T. McNeil, Westminster Press, 1960), pp. 341-342.
- 5 Ibid.

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April 8, 1998

Dear Editors:

In your January 1998 Issue of *The Outlook*, at the top of page 9, under the heading *RESTRUCTURING ECCLESIASTICAL FELLOWSHIP*, please note the following introductory statement: "The Orthodox Presbyterian Church thinks it 'flunked' the test of dealing with the Christian Reformed Church and wants to avoid making the same set of mistakes twice. That was the message brought by the OPC Interchurch Relations Committee Chairman, the Rev. Jack Peterson...." As best I have been able to determine, including two conversations with him about this matter, this is an accurate quotation from Mr. Peterson's remarks.

As a member of the OPC General Assembly Committee on Ecumenicity and Interchurch Relations (CEIR) since June of 1993, and therefore providentially in the position to have more than minimal involvement with and knowledge of that whole process which culminated in the severing of fraternal relations with the CRCNA, I take the strongest exception to the broad assumption of that (quoted) statement for the following reasons:

1. Reflecting on the extensive debate and voting of the last several OPC General Assemblies concerning the whole matter of fraternal relations with the CRCNA (including the 1997 G.A. in which the final vote to sever fraternal relations passed by a very large majority), I believe it is abundantly clear that a growing majority of G.A. Commissioners, year after year, wanted and expected unequivocal and substantial Biblical dealing with the corporate sin(s) in the CRCNA.
2. To the best of my knowledge, no identified, authorized or statistically valid poll of the OPC membership at large has ever been taken at any time to determine if "the church" thinks it "flunked" the "test" of dealing with the CRCNA. If the chairman of the CEIR thinks the OPC "flunked" the (unspecified) "test" of dealing with the CRCNA, he is entitled to such an opinion, but that opinion ought *not* to be implied or stated as representing the thinking of the OPC at large.
3. To the best of my knowledge, no court of the OPC has made such a declaration to the effect that such a failure ("flunk") indeed took place.
4. In retrospect I do believe that we, as miserably imperfect, but blessedly redeemed sheep of the Lord Jesus Christ, and as committee members, certainly in some respects could have undertaken and accomplished our painful work in a better manner. But I also believe, *unequivocally*, that (in the aggregate), the OPC did what was righteous and Biblical in severing fraternal relations with the CRCNA by means of the measured steps we employed.
5. If "flunked" means *only* that we were instrumentally unsuccessful in stimulating the CRCNA to come to any admitted or observed corporate repentance, then I would agree that we "flunked" in that very limited and carefully defined sense *alone*. But I do *not* agree that real or presumed procedural language or other deficiencies in our inter-denominational discipline effort, therefore means that the whole process constitutes a "flunk," in the sense that Mr. Peterson's statement (as reported in your article) so generically implies.
6. That article statement, in its pejorative and broad wording, is so lacking in necessary definition(s) as to render it open to a number of ambiguous interpretations, the net effect of which, in my opinion, is to decrease, rather than increase, the kind of carefulness which honors the blessed name of Jesus Christ, the Head of His Church, and provides ecumenical communication which fosters the kind God-honoring interaction we presumably all desire.

Consequently, I very respectfully request that you print this "counter-perspective" letter in its entirety, lest the impression become widely accepted that there exists some kind of a denominationally approved assessment that our ecumenical effort directed towards the CRCNA somehow was significantly, or all wrong, or that a sizable block of OPC leaders thinks that.

Cordially, and with thanks, in Christ, be whatever consideration you grant this request.

Robert B. Needham

CDR, Chaplain Corps, USN (Retired)

Member: OPC Committee on Ecumenicity and Interchurch Relations

Pastor: New Hope Orthodox Presbyterian Church, Hanford, California

P. S. The proper name of the OPC General Assembly's Ecumenicity Committee is; The Committee on Ecumenicity and Interchurch Relations.

cc: The Rev. Jack Peterson



Concomitants of the Second Advent: The Final Judgment (II)

CORNELIS P. VENEMA

WHO AND WHAT WILL BE JUDGED?

The fact that believers need not fear the final judgment because it will vindicate their faith and service to the Lord, does not mean that the final judgment will only be of those who are unbelieving and impenitent. The Scriptures teach that *all* will be judged, the just and the unjust. No one will be spared or excluded from this judgment when the books are opened and the verdict is pronounced.

In a number of Scripture passages, reference is made to a judgment that will include all people who have ever lived. Some of these passages have been noted already in the preceding. For example, in Revelation 20:11-15 general references are made to "the dead" (vv. 12,13). Furthermore, the language used in this passage to describe the outcome of the judgment suggests that these dead include both believers and others who, because their names were not written "in the book of life" (v. 15), are thrown into the lake of fire. According to the teaching of Romans 2:5-6, in the day of the "revelation of the righteous judgment of God," *every* man will receive according to his works. The well-known description of the final judgment in Matthew 25 describes "all the nations" as being gathered before the throne of the Son of Man. These passages do not limit those who will be judged in any way. The language used confirms that no one will be exempt from being subject to judgment.

This includes all believers who, the Scriptures teach, will also be subject

to judgment. Though this judgment is not one that believers need to fear, it is a genuine judgment for them nonetheless. When in 2 Corinthians 5:10 the apostle Paul speaks of "we all" who must appear before the judgment seat of Christ, he is referring specifically and primarily to believers. Hebrews 10:30 states that "the Lord will judge His people." Writing to believers in Rome, the apostle Paul admonishes them for judging their brothers, noting that "we shall all stand before the judgment seat of God." James 3:1 speaks of a more severe judgment that will be applied to those among believers who become teachers. And in 1 Peter 4:17, believers are even warned that judgment will "begin with the household of God"!

This liability to judgment, however, does not contradict the clear biblical teaching that believers have already passed out of death into life (John 5:24). Nor does it conflict with the confidence expressed in Romans 8:1, that there is "now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus" (Rom. 8:1). It simply means that in the day of judgment a verdict and pronouncement will be made regarding all people who have ever lived, including believers.

One question that has arisen at this point has to do with whether all angels will also be subject to judgment. Some Scripture passages suggest that the disobedient or fallen angels will be liable to judgment (2 Pet. 2:4; Jude 6). These passages omit any reference to a corresponding judgment

of the obedient angels, an omission that has led some to conclude that they are exempted from the judgment. However, there is in one passage, 1 Corinthians 6:2, an intriguing reference to the judgment of angels. This passage does not specify whether these angels are obedient or disobedient. On the basis of this passage, it seems possible that all angels, obedient as well as disobedient, will be liable to the final judgment.¹ That all angels should be subject to judgment seems to be consistent with the general teaching of Scripture regarding the purpose of this judgment. In this way, the justice of God's verdicts regarding all of His creatures will be clearly revealed for all to acknowledge.

If all will be judged — believers and unbelievers, (obedient and) disobedient angels — the question that naturally arises is, *what* will be judged? This question is especially pressing with respect to believers because, if they are to be judged for sins that are already forgiven, does this not suggest a kind of *double jeopardy*? Why should the sins of believers, washed and blotted out through the blood of Christ, be brought forward at the final judgment in order to play a role in the pronouncement of God's judgment upon them?

To start with the first part of this question, the Scriptures are quite vigorous in their teaching that all will be judged for *whatever they have done*. This includes not only all thoughts, words and deeds, but also the hidden things that may otherwise be unknown. To return to a passage we have cited several times

"The Scriptures teach that all will be judged, the just and the unjust."

before, 2 Corinthians 5:10 speaks very broadly of the "deeds in the body, according to what he has done, whether good or bad." This excludes nothing. Matthew 25:35-40 specifically speaks of those things done to "the least of these my brethren," whether they be favorable or unfavorable. Revelation 20:12 speaks of the dead being judged "from the things which were written in the books, according to their deeds" (compare 1 Cor. 3:8; 1 Pet. 1:17; Rev. 22:12). God will not overlook in the day of judgment those works which were done in accord with His will (Eph. 6:8; Heb. 6:10). Nor will He overlook the "idle words" (Matt. 12:36) that have been spoken, or the deeds which are "now hidden in darkness" (1 Cor. 4:5). Just as all are judged, so all that they have done will be subject to judgment.

The more difficult form of this question relates to the propriety of a judgment of the works of believers. If believers are not liable any longer to condemnation, and if they are not fearful of the prospect of a final judgment, then it seems implausible that all of their works should be revealed on the day of judgment. Wouldn't the judgment of these works risk bringing shame and embarrassment to believers whose sins are wholly covered and forgiven for the sake of Christ? And wouldn't such shame and embarrassment be inconsistent with the believer's present confidence that his sins have been removed as far as east is from west (compare Psalm 103:12)?

In my next article, I will return to one part of the Scriptural answer to this question: the reward for good works that will be granted in connection with the final judgment. Clearly, if there is such a thing as a greater or lesser reward for works done by believers while in the body — as a passage like 1 Corinthians 3:10-15

seems to suggest — then the recognition of sinful and imperfect works, of greater and lesser obedience, will play a role in the final judgment of believers. To be sure, the final judgment will not be an occasion for undoing the confidence that believers now enjoy that there is no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. But that the works of believers will be judged is undeniable and may even serve as a legitimate motive for diligence and conscientiousness in fighting against sin in this life. Often in the Scriptures the prospect of the recognition and reward for work done for the Lord is an encouragement to faithfulness (compare Heb. 10:25; Jude 24; 2 Tim. 4:1; 1 Pet. 5:4).

Though this judgment of the works of believers should not be understood to conflict with the Scriptural teaching of salvation by grace alone through faith alone, and though it should not be taught in such a way as to rob the believer of that confidence that is born from the gospel promise of the forgiveness of sins — the undeniable teaching of Scripture is that believers will be judged according to all that they have done in the body, whether good or bad. Not only will this be an occasion for believers to rejoice in the salvation which is theirs in Christ, but it will also be an occasion for God's judgment respecting them to be confirmed as altogether righteous.

THE STANDARD OF JUDGMENT

When the final judgment takes place, one critical aspect of this judgment is the standard that will be used to confirm the justice of the verdict pronounced. This standard will be the law and Word of God *so far as these have been revealed* to those who are judged. The standard will be the same for everyone: what has been revealed or made known to

them concerning God's will. However, because there is an important difference in the extent and fulness of what has been revealed, the principle that will apply is that *greater privilege brings greater responsibility*. Those to whom much has been given, from them much will rightly be required. Whereas those to whom little has been given, from them less will be required.

The principle of greater or lesser responsibility is set forth strikingly in Matthew 11:20-22. Rebuking the cities in which He had done many of His miracles, Jesus declared severely:

Woe to you, Chorazin! Woe to you, Bethsaida! For if the miracles had occurred in Tyre and Sidon which occurred in you, they would have repented long ago in sackcloth and ashes. Nevertheless, I say to you, it shall be more tolerable for Tyre and Sidon in the day of judgment, than for you. And you, Capernaum, will not be exalted to heaven, will you? You shall descend to Hades; for if the miracles had occurred in Sodom which occurred in you, it would have remained to this day. Nevertheless I say to you that it shall be more tolerable for the land of Sodom in the day of judgment, than for you.

These words should not be taken to mean that those to whom less have been given bear little or no responsibility for their unbelief and disobedience. The principle is one of *how much more*. All bear the weight of responsibility, the full responsibility, to answer to what God has given to them. Some, however, because they have enjoyed a richer privilege and disclosure of God's words and works are weighted with a greater responsibility. This principle is one of the principal themes of the book of Hebrews. Because of the greater richness and blessing of the new covenant, disobedience and unfaithfulness in the new covenant situation becomes even more deadly than in

"...the undeniable teaching of Scripture is that believers will be judged according to all that they have done in the body, whether good or bad."

the old covenant situation (compare Heb. 2:1-3; 12:25-29).

Often times this raises the question, what about those who have not had the opportunity to hear the gospel or be taught from the Word of God? Is it fair that they should be judged according to a standard that is unknown to them?

To answer this question, I would reiterate the language used above: The standard of judgment will be the law and will of God *so far as these have been revealed*. In Romans 1:18-23 and 2:11-16, we are taught that all people, Jews and Gentiles alike, have been given some knowledge of God through the things He has made and the law whose work is written upon their hearts. No one can be excused before God on the basis of a plea of ignorance. To the extent that God has revealed Himself to all, to that extent all are responsible and without excuse before Him. Speaking to the question, is it fair that God should judge those who do not have the full light of His Word and gospel?, Carl F. H. Henry gives the following, wise answer:

"No one can be excused before God on the basis of a plea of ignorance."

God's fairness is demonstrated because he condemns sinners not in the absence of light but because of their rebellious response. His mercy is demonstrated because he provides fallen humans with a privileged call to redemption not extended to fallen angels. He continues to extend that call world-

wide even while some rebel humans spurn it as unloving and unjust and prefer to die in their sins. *All are judged by what they do with the light they have, and none is without light*² (emphasis mine).

CONCLUSION

Rather than attempt to draw together all the aspects of the final judgment considered in the preceding, I would like to close this article with an extensive citation from the *Belgic Confession*, Article 37. (To the last part of this confession — the reference to the reward awaiting the righteous for their good works — I will turn in my next article.) This article wonderfully summarizes the biblical teaching regarding the final judgment as follows:

Finally, we believe, according to the Word of God, when the time appointed by the Lord (which is unknown to all creatures) is come and the number of the elect complete, that our Lord Jesus Christ will come from heaven, corporally and visibly, as He ascended, with great glory and majesty to declare

Himself Judge of the living and the dead, burning this world with fire and flame to cleanse it. Then all men will personally appear before this great Judge, both men and women and children, that have been from the beginning of the world to the end thereof, being summoned by *the*

voice of the archangel, and by the sound of the trump of God... Then the books (that is to say, the consciences) shall be opened, and the dead judged according to what they shall have done in this world, whether it be good or evil. Nay, all men shall give account of every idle word they have spoken, which the world only counts amusement and jest; and then the secrets and hypocrisy of men shall be disclosed and laid open before all. And therefore the consideration of this judgment is justly terrible and dreadful to the wicked and ungodly, but most desirable and comfortable to the righteous and elect; because then their full deliverance shall be perfected, and there they shall receive the fruits of their labor and trouble which they have borne.

FOOTNOTES

1 The *Westminster Confession of Faith*, Chapter XXXIII, i, seems to take the position that only disobedient or reprobate angels will be judged: "In which day, not only apostate angels shall be judged, but likewise all persons that have lived upon earth shall appear before the tribunal of Christ" Cf. *Westminster Larger Catechism*, Question 90. The *Belgic Confession*, Article XXXVII, does not say anything about the judgment of angels, whether obedient or disobedient.

2 "Is It Fair?" in *Through No Fault of Their Own?: The Fate of Those Who Have Never Heard* (ed. by William V. Crockett and James G. Sigountos; Grand Rapids: Baker, 1991), p. 255.

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