

The Outlook

Dedicated to the Exposition and Defense of the Reformed Faith



• The Ministry: from Jesus With Love • What is Reformed Worship (I) • The Fourth Plague: A People of the Kingdom

• Bible Studies on Jacob • Looking Above: Prayer and Trumpets • New Testament Evidence Regarding Paedocommunion (V)

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May 2007—Volume 57 No. 5

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"And the three companies blew the trumpets...and held THE TORCHES in their left hands, and THE TRUMPETS in their right hands. . .and they cried, 'The sword of Jehovah and of Gideon.'"

(Judges 7:20).

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The Ministry

From Jesus with Love

Christ ascended, He gave gifts to men. Ephesians 4:8

What gift did God give to the Church at Pentecost? Jesus by the Holy Spirit gave pastors and teachers to the Church for the good of the Church after He ascended into heaven (Ephesians 4:7-11).

Of course, the gifts that Christ gave the Church are far greater than simply the ministry or any other group of gifts. Yet, Paul singles out the ministry in Ephesians 4 as the gift of Jesus Christ to the Church by which He governs, feeds, and leads the Church He purchased with His own blood (Acts 20:28).

In many versions of the Bible, it says, “He Himself gave some *to be* apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, and some pastors and teachers.” The words “to be” are added to make the passage make sense in our language. There is nothing wrong with doing that. We have to do that, or our translation would be gobbledygook. However, in this case, the passage makes perfect sense even if we remove it. So, instead of Christ giving “some to be apostles...” we have Christ gave “some apostles...” This indicates that Paul’s emphasis here is not that some men receive gifts for the ministry but rather that *the Church receives the gift of the ministry.*

So why did Jesus Christ give the ministry to the Church? The rest of the passage (Ephesians 4:7-16) answers that question. There is both a positive and negative purpose;

namely, to build up some in sound doctrine and to refute those who oppose it.

The Positive Purpose – To Teach Sound Doctrine

The Apostle explains this positive purpose in two ways. He says that pastors are given “for equipping the saints for the work of ministry” and “for the edifying or building up of the body of Christ.” Both have reference to the positive teaching of theology or the system of doctrine revealed in the Bible that leads to salvation and godliness.

The goal of the pastor, then, is to teach the way of truth that will build up the saints unto salvation and edify them for the work of the ministry. The pastor is the leader in ministry, but he is not the only “minister” in a broad sense. All of the saints are called to serve God through honest labor, evangelism, and worship.

The goal of this teaching is twofold. It is to lead us to “the unity of the knowledge of the Son of God” and to “a perfect man,” or to maturity. The ministry is God’s way of building the Church up in a unified system of doctrine and causing them to grow up into solid and mature Christians.

The Negative Purpose – To Refute False Doctrine

The negative purpose is not stated directly here. The text says that

part of becoming a mature Christian is “no longer being children tossed to and fro and carried about with every wind of doctrine, by the trickery of men, in the cunning craftiness of deceitful plotting” (v. 14, cf. Titus 1:9). Because there are many false teachers in the world, the pastor must not only point out the right way that people should go, but he must also point out the wrong ways that they should not go.

It is of the utmost importance to recognize that without the maturity that comes from long study and hearing of the Word of God, we can easily be misled because of the cunning with which false doctrine is presented. Very few false prophets stand up and say, “Before I begin my message, I want to let you know that I am a false prophet.” In fact, I have yet to hear any of them say that.

For example, a Jehovah’s Witness may come to your door, and you may respond, “But you don’t believe Jesus is the Son of God.” The JW will confidently respond, “Yes, we do.” The problem here is that he means something different by “son,” something different by “of,” and something different by “God.” In the same way, too often people have accepted claims of “I believe in justification by faith alone” because some will use the phrase, even though they mean something different by “by,” by “faith,” and by “alone.” It is the job of pastors to make this clear to people so that they will not be tossed to and fro with every wind of doctrine or led down the path of destruction.

To think that someone can be a Christian apart from the visible Church is presumption and extremely dangerous.

Challenge to Pastors

Since this is the case, this ought to challenge us as pastors. It is not enough to say that we were once gifted with the gifts, but we must actively be edifying, equipping, and refuting. We must also go to the refreshing streams of the Word of God (and not just in preparing for a sermon or study!) in order to have something with which to equip and edify the saints.

Secondly, we must remember that we are not the only gifts to the Church. As Paul says on this very point in 1 Corinthians 14:32, "The spirits of the prophets are subject to the prophets." We must use our gifts and be ready to benefit and rejoice in the gifts of other ministers in our presbytery or classis and beyond.

We must also remember that we are not the only generation that God has gifted to the Church. We must go back to the Church Fathers because, as William Perkins wrote, "Satan raises old heresies from the dead in order to retard the restoration of the Church which has begun in our own time" (*The Art of Prophecy*, p. 24).

Challenge to all Church Members

If it is true that a pastor cannot be fully equipped for his task without recourse to the gifts of other ministers, then it is certainly also true for the rest of the Church. If we cut ourselves off from the Church, then

we cut ourselves off from Christ's means for Christian maturation.

It is amazing to see how many people think they are Christians even though they are not a part of the visible Church. They think they are fine, but their growth is stunted and they are being tossed all over the place by every wind of doctrine or lulled to sleep by the false comforts of the world.

Many people object to such a strong view of the Church because the Church is in such a sad condition. There are many ministers who have little or no education and indeed are worse than useless. I can certainly sympathize with this and also mourn at the sad state of the Church today.

However, going out on our own is not the answer. To think that someone can be a Christian apart from the visible Church is presumption and extremely dangerous. The answer to the problem of the proliferation of false and empty teachings in the Church is simply to seek out the true Church all the more diligently. Consider this analogy. If your local grocery store was only selling Twinkies, would you go there just because it was close to your house? Would you stop feeding your family because the grocery store near you did not have good food? No, you would keep searching until you found a place where you could get nourishing food for your family, however much effort it might take.

Conclusion

If we believe that Christ is the Savior, then we must also seek the means He has chosen to administer that salvation. That place is the true Church. Not everything that calls itself a Church is a Church, and so we must seek out the true one.

But praise God that we have found the true Church. Even though it is but a small remnant, we need to thank God that we still have the truth of the Gospel in our Reformed Churches. It is the gift of Christ. This ought to make us thankful but also make us fear because of how often we have abused this gift and taken it for granted. What a miracle of God's grace that His Church still continues among us!

Since the Church is the gift of Christ we must also remember that it is ever dependent on His mercy and grace. Our response should be to get on our knees and pray for its continuation among us, humble ourselves for our sins, and pray that God would continue to give us His gifts to raise it to a better condition in the earth.

On the other side, let us also remember this: We are not dealing with a Savior who only begrudgingly gives to His people. We are dealing with a generous Savior who will not fail to give His Holy Spirit to all who ask of Him (Luke. 11:13).

Rev. J. Wesley White is the pastor of the New Covenant Presbyterian Church in Spearfish, South Dakota.

What is Reformed Worship? (I)

It is Biblical

“Why is the worship in a *Reformed* church so different from the worship at almost every other church I have ever gone to?” I cannot tell you how many times visitors ask this question. I have found that what first strikes people about a Reformed church is not our doctrine, but our worship. It has an unfamiliar, even cold feeling at first for many.

We owe it to all serious inquirers to explain not only what we do in worship, but why. Intelligible worship is a biblical requirement. Children asked their parents when they celebrated the feast of the Passover some 3500 years ago: “What do you mean by this service?” (Exodus 12:26) While worshipping the Triune God is profoundly transcendent and mysterious, it must be understandable. This is also what the Apostle Paul taught in his first letter to the Corinthians, when he said that preaching in foreign languages, commonly called “tongues,” must be translated for the edification of those assembled.

This article begins a series intended to introduce you to the basics of Reformed worship so that you will understand and be equipped to explain why we as Reformed churches do what we do in worship. We will do this by looking at eight characteristics of Reformed worship: it is biblical, historical, covenantal, evangelical, liturgical, reverential, joyful, and eschatological.

A Congregation of the Word

As Reformed churches, we do what we do in worship because of the Holy Scriptures. Of course every “Bible believing” church today says, “Our church’s worship is biblical!” After all, who wants unbiblical worship? As Reformed Christians, we are zealous to glorify our jealous God in a way He has commanded. This is why we say our worship is biblical. Yet, what does this mean? What does this look like?

First, Scripture describes the Church as a community of faith. The Holy Spirit creates and shapes faith by the Word (Rom. 10:17). In his Pastoral Epistles, Paul writes of the Church as ever learning and ever teaching the following: the words of the faith (1 Tim. 4:6), sound doctrine (1 Tim. 1:10; Titus 1:9, 2:1), sound teaching (2 Tim. 4:3), the sound words (1 Tim. 6:3; 2 Tim 1:13), the good doctrine (1 Tim. 4:6), the good deposit (2 Tim. 1:14), the mystery of the faith (1 Tim. 3:9), and the trustworthy word (Titus 1:9).

In order to learn these “words of the faith” and have the word of Christ dwell in us richly (Col. 3:16), we gather as a community as Israel did in the wilderness after coming out of Egypt. The story of the book of Exodus shows the Old Testament church gathered at the foot of Mount Sinai in worship. We, as the New Covenant people of God, assemble in worship and ascend “Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem” (Hebrews 12:22).

For this reason, a mark of Reformed worship is its saturation with Scripture. The services of Strasbourg, Geneva, Heidelberg, and the *Book of Common Prayer* in England abounded with Scripture texts and scriptural allusions. In an age of biblical illiteracy, we need a Scripture-filled worship, with scriptural language in every aspect, from responses and songs, to prayers and the reading of Scripture itself. As one has said, “We will not have Jesus Christ at the center of our church services if we do not have His Word at the center.” Also, Robert Godfrey asks, “If we are not interested in the Word of God, can we really be interested in God?” Thus, in our worship services we must read, preach, pray, sing, and see in the sacraments the Word.

Furthermore, we need Word-based worship because the Scriptures teach the inseparable link between the Word and Spirit of God. The Bible knows of no false dichotomy between a church focused on the Word and another on the Spirit, each to the exclusion of the other. Instead, what we learn from Scripture that where the Word is, the Spirit is also (Ps. 33:6, Isa. 34:16, 59:21, 61:1, John 3:34, 6:63, James 1:18, 1 Peter 1:23).

A Worship by-the-Word

Secondly, our worship is biblical because of the way in which we determine what we do in worship. This is not determined by “what works” in getting vast numbers of people through the door, or what is enjoyable, or even what we may or may not like. Instead, the Bible regulates our worship. This is why the *Church Order of the URCNA*

After all, God is God, which means how He is worshipped is His right to demand.

states that the elders of the churches are to oversee public worship, which “shall be conducted according to the principles taught in God’s Word” (Art. 38).

Reformed worship is biblical because we believe God Himself gives us the particular things we are to do in public worship (the “elements” of worship). We call this the “regulative principle of worship,” or, RPW for short. This means that God regulates how we are to worship Him in His Word. God is jealous for His Name to be revered and hallowed (Ex. 20:7, 34:13-14; Deut. 4:24; Matt. 6:9 cf. Westminster Larger Catechism, Q&A 110), and when we are jealous for His glory by worshipping Him how He deserves and desires we “serve God acceptably with reverence and godly fear” (Hebrews 12:28). After all, God is God, which means how He is worshipped is His right to demand.

The Second Commandment

Where do we find this principle taught in God’s Word? There are many places in Scripture, but we will focus in on a few examples. In the first Commandment the one true God who has redeemed us to be a worshipping people, a “kingdom of priests” (Ex. 19:6; 1 Pet. 2:9), commands us to worship him alone: “You shall have no other gods before Me.” In the second Commandment this one true God tells us the way we are to worship Him negatively by saying how we are

not to worship Him: “You shall not make for yourself a carved image” (cf. Deut. 4:15-19). Positively, this teaches that we are to worship God only according to His word.

We see this in the very words of the second Commandment where the “steadfast love” of the LORD is towards those who “love Me and keep My commandments” (Exodus 20:6). Intricately linked with the prohibition of images of the LORD is the language of doing what the LORD says in His word.

The book of Leviticus, as well, expresses this positive aspect as it mentions repeatedly that worship is “according to the rule” (e.g., Lev. 9:16 cf. Lev. 10:1; Deut. 12:29-32). Thus, all worship not “according to Scripture,” is what the Paul calls “will worship” (Col 2:23; ASV).

At the end of the Ten Commandments, this matter is stated in an unforgettable way: “If you make me an altar of stone, you shall not build it of hewn stones, for if you wield your tool on it you profane it” (Ex. 20:25). If the ancient Israelite would think that he could improve upon the worship commanded of God by carving a more beautiful altar, he was to know that even one mark added by the hand of man to that commanded by God was a complete contamination as far as God was concerned. When men try to improve the worship of God, they ruin that worship, rather than improve it.

This Commandment is impressed upon the people of God with the injunction that the LORD is a “jealous” God. This is the language of marriage. The LORD has forsaken all others for His bride, Israel, and He loves and desires her only. When it comes to worship, then, He expects and desires Israel to respond with the same zeal for Him that He has for her.

Cain and Abel

Worshipping God “according to the rule” is also the essence of the story of Cain and Abel in Genesis 4. Cain was a farmer, a “worker of the ground,” while his brother Abel was in the livestock business, “a keeper of sheep” (Gen. 4:2). Cain offered to God an offering “of the fruit of the ground;” Abel offered “the firstborn of his flock and of their fat portions” (Gen. 4:3-4). God accepted Abel’s offering but did not accept Cain’s (cf. Gen. 4:4-5). They both offered an offering of worship. They both seemed “sincere” – the one principle according to many today that must guide worship.

Yet, the reason God accepted Abel’s offering, and not Cain’s, was that Abel offered *what God commanded*, that is, the best of what he had. The best, and the best alone, is what is fitting for worship. On the contrary, Cain offered what he thought worked or what he thought was best. Abel offered “the firstborn” of his flocks and its “fat portions.” These are the terms used later in the law when God gave spoke of offering “the best of the firstfruits of your ground” (Ex. 34:26) as well as the firstborn of animals (Ex. 34:19; Lev. 27:26).

Yet, we must also keep in mind that performing the right rite is meaning-

less apart from faith. As Hebrews 11:4 teaches us, it was by faith that Abel offered a more acceptable sacrifice and through that that God testified to him that he was righteous. By faith, Abel understood that just as the LORD God spared Adam and Eve by sacrificing the animals in their place and covering them with their skins (Gen. 3:21), so too he could only be acceptable through the offering of another that would take his place and make satisfaction for his sins.

Nadab & Abihu

In the familiar, yet fearful, story of Nadab and Abihu in Leviticus 10 we recall that they offered “unauthorized fire before the LORD” (v. 1). In the preceding verses, we read that Aaron, Nadab and Abihu’s father, had offered the first sacrifices in the liturgical life of Israel. In Aaron’s case “fire came out from before the LORD and consumed *the burnt offering...*” (Lev. 9:24), yet in Nadab and Abihu’s case “fire came out from before the LORD and consumed *them*” (Lev. 10:2).

Both Aaron and his sons were priests and offered sacrifices, yet the reason for the LORD’s differing responses was that Aaron offered a sacrifice “as the LORD commanded...according to the rule” (Lev. 9:10, 16), while Nadab and Abihu “offered unauthorized fire,” that is, worship that was not commanded, and therefore forbidden.

The story of Nadab and Abihu is about worshipping the LORD according to His Word, not according to one’s own desire, however, sincere. To offer worship not prescribed was to profane the LORD

and take away from his glory. This is why the LORD, through Moses, said to Aaron, after Nadab and Abihu were consumed, “Among those who are near me I will be sanctified, and before all the people I will be glorified” (Lev. 10:3).

Because of the holiness and glory of God, Jehovah prescribed not only that Israel was to worship Him but also how they were to do so. Thus, the place of worship, the tabernacle, was to be made “according to the pattern that was shown you” (Heb. 8:5 cf. Ex. 25:9, 40, 26:30, 27:8; Num. 8:4; Acts 7:44) and the acts of worship, the sacrifices, were to be offered “according to the rule” (Lev. 5:10, 9:16).

The New Testament

“But this is all Old Testament teaching,” you might be thinking. Yet Jesus said, “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them...teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you” (Matthew 28:19-20). Is the solemn requirement that the Church teach all things that Christ has commanded not at the same time a solemn prohibition against teaching anything that He has not commanded? If, in the worship of God, we observe all that Christ has commanded, ought we not also to scrupulously avoid anything and everything that He has not commanded?

Jesus said that the Pharisees worshipped God “in vain” (Mark 7:7). Why did God reject their worship?

Because, Jesus said, “You leave the commandment of God” preferring “the tradition of men” (Mark 7:7-8). They worshipped God in vain because they worshipped God as they wished, rather than as He required. In the same way, the apostle Paul warned the Colossians: “Let no one disqualify you, insisting on asceticism and worship of angels, going on in detail about visions, puffed up without reason by his sensuous mind” (Col. 2:18). This was worship offered because they wished to offer it, rather than because God commanded it: “These have indeed an appearance of wisdom in promoting self-made religion and asceticism and severity to the body, but they are of no value in stopping the indulgence of the flesh” (Col. 2:23).

No doubt Jesus was rude by our standards when He said to the woman at the well, “You worship what you do not know; we worship what we know, for salvation is from the Jews” (John 4:22). Yet, He was only being truthful. “God is spirit,” He said, “and those who worship Him must worship in spirit and truth” (John 4:24).

True worship was impossible for the Samaritans as long as they worshipped God as they wished. They needed to worship God as He commanded in order to find acceptance with Him. “For the Father is seeking such people to worship Him,” said Jesus, who would be “the true worshipers [who would]

When men try to improve the worship of God, they ruin that worship, rather than improve it.

The Scriptures alone are sufficient to teach us the who, what, when, where, and why of worship.

worship the Father in spirit and truth (4:23). When we persist in worshipping God as we will, rather than as God wills, we are not “true worshippers.”

In Romans 1:21-25 the Apostle Paul condemns every false kind of worship invented by men. He also reveals the source of such false worship. Men become “vain in their imagination,” he says. They invent what they vainly imagine to be “good ways” to worship. They worship as they will, not as God commands. But when they do this, they really “worship and serve the creature more than the Creator,” says Paul, and for this reason “they are without excuse.” They are without excuse because there is no excuse for departing from the rule, which says “we must not worship God in any other way than He has commanded in His Word.”

The Sufficiency of the Scriptures

The third reason why we speak of Reformed worship as being biblical is that as Reformed Protestants we believe that the Scriptures alone are sufficient to teach us the who, what, when, where, and why of worship. The Scriptures alone are our infallible guide for teaching, for theology and doctrine, and for living, practice, and life. Since this Word is sufficient for our salvation and Christian life, then it surely is all we need in order to worship Him as He desires and deserves. The only

way we know how to worship Him is by His self-revelation in His Word, which is sufficient to teach us this (2 Timothy 3:16-17). Since the distance between God and us is infinite, we cannot know what would be pleasing in God’s sight in worship apart from His revelation of Himself.

The Reformed confessions expressed this doctrine of Scriptures’ sufficiency and its application to worship, saying,

The whole counsel of God concerning all things necessary for His own glory, man’s salvation, faith and life, is either expressly set down in Scripture, or by good and necessary consequence may be deduced from Scripture.

(Westminster Confession of Faith I.6)

God alone is Lord of the conscience, and hath left it free from the doctrines and commandments of men, which are, in anything, contrary to his Word; or beside it, if matters of faith, or worship.

(Westminster Confession of Faith XX.2)

...the acceptable way of worshipping the true God is instituted by Himself, and so limited by His own revealed will, that He may not be worshipped according to the

imaginings and devices of men, or the suggestions of Satan, under any visible representation, or any other way not prescribed in the Holy Scripture.

(Westminster Confession of Faith XI.1)

...[the] Holy Scriptures fully contain the will of God, and that whatsoever man ought to believe unto salvation is sufficiently taught therein ...the whole manner of worship which God requires of us is written in them at large. *(Belgic Confession, art. 7)*

...they [rulers of the Church] ought studiously to take care that they do not depart from those things which Christ, our only Master, has instituted. And therefore we reject all human inventions, and all laws which man would introduce into the worship of God, thereby to bind and compel the conscience in any manner whatever. *(Belgic Confession, art. 32)*

What does God require in the second Commandment?

That we in no way make any image of God, nor worship Him in any other way than He has commanded us in His Word. *(Heidelberg Catechism, Q&A 96)*

The Elements of Worship

Finally, our worship is biblical because of *what* we place in the liturgy. The “elements” of worship are the things the Scriptures command us to do in public worship. For

example, Acts 2:42 gives an outline description of the worship of the earliest of Christian congregations. There we read that the early Christians were devoted to “the fellowship,” which is that mutual bond of love that exists among members of the Church, as expressed in the giving of alms. As the fellowship of Christians, they were also devoted to the apostles’ teaching (the Word), to the breaking of bread (the Lord’s Supper, as the Greek text says “*the bread*”), and to the prayers. The general categories of acceptable worship are Word, Sacrament, Prayer, and Offering. These categories were used by John Calvin in his *Preface to the Psalter* as well as our *Heidelberg Catechism*, Q&A 103.

The category of the Word includes many elements. In historic Reformed practice worship begins with Scripture, whether the baptismal words of Jesus, *a la* Strasbourg (Matt. 28:19), or the *votum*, “Our help is in the name of the LORD who made heaven and earth,” as in Geneva (Ps. 124:8). In our day, most Reformed churches begin with the very Word of God calling His people to worship in a Scriptural call to worship (e.g., Ps. 95). The minister, then, speaks God’s greeting (e.g., 1 Tim. 1:2; Rev. 1:4-5). We then read the Law of God (Ex. 20; Deut. 5) along with Jesus’ summary of the Law (Matt. 22). After confession, those churches that follow the historic, Reformed, pattern have some form of “Declaration of Pardon” (based on Matt. 18:18; John 20:23), in which another Scripture text (e.g., 1 John 1:9), promising the good news to the hearers is read and applied. We sing the words of Scripture in the Psalms,

biblical Canticles, and biblically-based hymns, confess the Word as summarized by the *Apostles’* or *Nicene Creeds*, hear the Scriptures read and proclaimed (e.g., 1 Tim. 4:13), hear the biblical words of the institution of the Lord’s Supper, and receive the biblical words of benediction (Num. 6:24-26; 2 Cor. 13:14). Our worship, then, is a biblical worship because of what actually makes up the “stuff” of our worship “according to the rule.”

Under the category of the sacraments there is the administration of the two New Covenant sacraments, baptism and the Lord’s Supper, which were given according to Christ’s commands (e.g., Matt. 28:18-20; Luke 22:17-20; 1 Cor. 11:23-26), “according to the rule.”

Following John Calvin’s division, under the category of prayer are two major types of prayer: prayers spoken and prayers sung. The spoken prayers are the many Scriptural types of prayers such as prayers of intercession (e.g., 1 Tim. 2:1), confession (e.g., Ps. 51), illumination (e.g., Ps. 119), and adoration (e.g., 2 Chron. 6:12-42; Ps. 8). The sung prayers occur when the congregation offers up prayer in the form of singing Psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs (Eph. 5:19; Col. 3:16).

The Psalms, especially, have been the inspired hymnbook of the covenant people of God for 3000 years. During the Protestant Reformation, one of the most radical and earth-shattering reforms was the translation and versification of the Psalms for the laity to sing. Our forefathers insisted upon this reform, for as St. Paul teaches, through the singing of psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs we

edify each other (Eph. 5:19; Col. 3:16).

Finally, the offering of “Christian alms” (*Heidelberg Catechism*, Q&A 103; Phil. 4:10-20), that is, the collection for those in need, is an element of worship according to Acts 2:42. It may also be seen under the category of prayer, since an offering is paying a vow of thanks to the Lord (e.g., Ps. 116:18; 1 Cor. 16:2).

Reformed churches do what they do in worship because of the Bible. After all, the Bible itself speaks of *Christian* worship as being “according to the rule” because of the holiness of God in the same way as it did of Israel’s worship in Leviticus 9-10:

Therefore let us be grateful for receiving a kingdom which cannot be shaken, and thus let us offer to God acceptable worship, with reverence and awe, for our God is a consuming fire. (Heb. 12:28-29)

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The Fourth Plague: A People of the Kingdom

In this article we will consider the Fourth Plague, and the distinction that Jehovah makes between the Hebrews and the Egyptians. The application of this theme is profound for both the church and for individual Christians.

Let us compare the instructions that Moses received regarding the fourth plague with the instructions that Moses received regarding the first plague: “And Jehovah said to Moses, ‘Get up in the morning and stand before Pharaoh as he is going to the water, and you shall speak to him: “Thus says Jehovah, ‘Send out My people that they might serve Me.’”’” Compare this with the instructions that Moses received regarding the first plague. “Go to Pharaoh in the morning. Behold, he will be going to the water. And you will stand upon the bank of the Nile to meet him. Then you shall speak to him, ‘The Lord, the God of the Hebrews, has sent me to say to you: Let my people go, so that they may serve Me in the wilderness.’”

The instructions follow the same pattern. In both accounts, Moses is commanded to meet Pharaoh in the morning, at the bank of the Nile. During this encounter Moses is instructed to confront Pharaoh with the demand to release God’s people so they might serve Him in the wilderness. In regard to the first and the fourth plagues the warning is the same and the time of the warning is the same. The instructional formula

is the same. The similarities between the first and the fourth plague indicate that a new series of plagues is beginning with the fourth plague. With the beginning of this plague a new wave of judgment will roll over Egypt unless Pharaoh humbles himself.

With the fourth plague there are also important differences. The magicians are no longer present. They have been defeated with their inability to imitate the third plague. As a result they have withdrawn from the scene of the conflict. In spite of the acknowledgment by the magicians that the plagues are the result of the gods, Pharaoh continues to struggle against Jehovah. We should view Pharaoh’s refusal to acknowledge defeat as evidence of his hard heart and his arrogance.

The directive to stand before Pharaoh is in the imperative. Literally it means, “take your stand before Pharaoh.” The verb tense is causative, which means that this meeting is not casual, instead, it is a confrontational meeting. The confrontation takes place on the banks of the Nile, “behold Pharaoh is going to the water.”

It seems as if Pharaoh returns to the banks of the Nile as a part of his regular routine. We need to ask the question, why would Pharaoh appear before the Nile as a part of his regular morning practice? It is very possible that this was an

act of piety. The Nile was considered the source of all life in Egypt. The Egyptians personified the Nile as a god, the god Hapi.

If Pharaoh’s appearance before the Nile was religious in any way then it reflects the hardness of his heart. Even after his god had been humiliated and defeated, the king of Egypt returns to his defeated god. This illustrates the thinking of men and women that are dead in sin. At the very core of their soul they remain committed to that which is false, even if it makes no sense. In Pharaoh we have a picture of man’s hostility toward the one true living God, even when it makes no sense.

The announcement of the fourth plague includes a play on words: “If you do not send out my people, behold, I will send out swarms of insects on you.” The extent of the plague is accentuated by the fact that not only will the Egyptian houses be filled with flies, but all the ground will be filled with insects. It will be as if all of Egypt is covered in a dense cloud of biting insects. There will be no open space that is unaffected. We are told that the land will be ruined by the insects.

“But on that day I will set apart the land of Goshen on which my people are standing. No insect will be there, in order that you might know that I am Jehovah in the midst of the land.” The setting apart of the land of Goshen is an example of election. God elects the nation of Israel as His own; they are objects of His mercy. God protects the Hebrews from the fourth plague. This is the first

time that we are told that the land of Goshen did not suffer from one of the plagues.

The purpose for the division is plainly stated and restated. “But on that day I will deal differently with the land of Goshen, where my people live; no swarms of flies will be there, so that you will know that I, the LORD, am in this land. I will make a distinction between my people and your people” (8:22, 23).

Authority From God

The distinction between the Hebrews and the Egyptians is described in verse 23 as a distinction between My people and your people. The distinction between My people and your people does not mean that Jehovah is not in authority over the Egyptians; in fact, the opposite is true. We are told explicitly in the text that the purpose for this distinction is to demonstrate that Jehovah is present in the land of Egypt and that He has authority over the land. Jehovah is present and He is clearly sovereign over the land. and He is sovereign over the people of Egypt, in fact, He is sovereign over Pharaoh. God allows Pharaoh to rule the land, He allows Pharaoh to exercise authority over the people of Egypt, but he does so as one who enjoys a delegated authority. In no way does Jehovah forfeit His own authority. By delegating the rule of Egypt to Pharaoh. There is no authority that functions independently of God’s sovereignty. Every human authority is a delegated authority.

This same distinction remains true today’ God allows men to rule

over the kingdoms of the earth. Many of these men deny the very God that allows them to rule, yet God never forfeits His own authority or His sovereignty; God continues to rule over His enemies. This is what David is describing in Psalm 110 when he says, “The Lord will extend your mighty scepter from Zion; you will rule in the midst of your enemies.”

As God caused David to rule in the midst of his enemies, likewise the Messiah rules in the midst of His enemies. During this present evil age, Christ continues to rule in the midst of His enemies, but in the age to come His enemies will experience the unveiled wrath of God. The fact that God allows His enemies to continue in this age should not be viewed as a sign of weakness or an indication that God is not in control. Even in this present evil age God is in control, but a time is coming when we will see and experience the perfected rule of Christ as His enemies are dethroned and judged. On this day Jesus will divide between the sheep and the goats. This distinction will be just as public as the distinction between the land of Egypt and the land of Goshen.

Psalm 110 describes the rule of Christ in this age, but it also describes the end of this age as a day of wrath for God’s enemies. “The Lord is at your right hand; he will crush kings on the day of

his wrath. He will judge the nations, heaping up the dead and crushing the rulers of the whole earth.” Therefore in this age God allows hostile rules to continue, but He rules in their midst. They enjoy a delegated authority, but a day is coming when this will no longer be true.

The Kingdom of God

Since this is true, how should we think about the kingdom of God in this age? The kingdom of God in this age is a spiritual kingdom and it is dispersed throughout the nations. It is a mistake to identify the kingdom of God, in this age, with a specific nation. This is why Jesus prays the way He does in John 17:14-16

“I have revealed you to those whom you gave me out of the world. I am not praying for the world, but for those you have given me, for they are yours. I have given them your word and the world has hated them, for they are not of the world any more than I am of the world. My prayer is not that you take them out of the world but that you protect them from the evil one. They are not of the world, even as I am not of it.”

If you belong to Christ then you are not of the world any more than Christ is of the world. There

There is no authority that functions independently of God’s sovereignty.

remains a distinction between those that belong to the world and those that belong to Christ, just as there was a distinction in Exodus between the Hebrews and the Egyptians. This distinction is maintained by the internal working of the Holy Spirit.

Since Jesus says is not praying for the world, but for those that the Father has called out of the world, how should we think about the world? Should the mission of the church include the transformation of the world or should the mission of the church focus upon the nurture and preservation of those that have been called out of the world?

In the Bible the world always remains the world. We live in the world, but we do so with the knowledge that we do not belong to the world. We belong to Christ. There is no way to live in the world and yet not be of the world apart from the knowledge that you belong to Christ. This is the emphasis of the first answer of our Catechism. This is the basis of what it means to be godly. Being godly means living with a sense of God's presence, a sense that you belong to Christ, and a sense of what you have received from Christ.

The apostle Peter in his first epistle addresses this book to God's elect, strangers in the world, scattered throughout. Peter thinks of us as strangers, aliens, and pilgrims living in a place where we do not quite belong because we belong to another land. Likewise, in the book of Hebrews we read "by faith Abraham made his home in the

promised land like a stranger in a foreign country; he lived in tents, as did Isaac and Jacob, who were heirs with him of the same promise. For he was looking forward to the city with foundations, whose architect and builder is God."

James the brother of Jesus addresses his letter "To the twelve tribes scattered among the nations." James applies the Old Testament language of the twelve tribes to the church, but he makes the point that the twelve tribes are no longer associated with one nation. The twelve tribes--the church--are scattered among the nations. The kingdom in this age is a spiritual kingdom, yet it is distinct from the world. The people of God are no longer gathered together under the banner of one nation; instead the people of God are scattered among the nations, they are scattered in the world, yet God's people live with the knowledge that they belong to Christ.

Every believer should live with the conviction that although the earthly governments may not acknowledge Christ as King; this does not change the fact that Christ continues to rule in the midst of His enemies. Knowing that Christ rules over every established power and authority, even those that deny His existence, should be a source of great comfort.

As Christians it is vital that we live our lives with an understanding that there is a distinction between the world and the people of God. This distinction is critical to the spiritual health and well-being of the Church and of every individual that claims to be a Chris-

tian. Apart from this distinction the church will never maintain its unique identity and its spiritual mission. In conclusion when a church loses this distinction it forfeits the gospel.

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Bible Studies on Jacob

Lesson 17: By Faith Jacob Blessed Joseph's Sons

Read Genesis 48

Introduction

Jacob and all his family have now moved into Goshen, the best part of Egypt. God clearly allowed this move during the days when Joseph was a powerful leader in Egypt, and the Pharaoh was kindly disposed toward Joseph's family. In the next several centuries the family of Jacob will grow into a mighty people, the nation of Israel, under the blessing of God (Gen. 47:27). But there would be no one "tribe of Joseph," but rather, from one man Joseph there would come two separate tribes as Jacob adopts Joseph's sons as equal to all of his other sons. At least questions come immediately to mind: 1) why does Jacob do this, and 2) why is so much Biblical text given over to recall this? What message is God giving to His people in Jacob's words and actions?

Jacob's speech to Joseph (48:1-7)

The chapter opens with an illness scene which is really a deathbed scene. We have been at a supposed "deathbed" before, namely, when Isaac earlier thinks that death is near (Gen. 27:1ff). When Isaac believed that he was at death's doorstep, he wanted to pronounce his fatherly blessing as the patriarchal head of the family on his favorite son, Esau.

Joseph and his two oldest sons make their way over to his Jacob's residence. This gives Jacob an

opportunity to put his remaining energy into a speech and a blessing ceremony, both of which are significant for the future of God's people. The things that Jacob says here will have impact down through the centuries as the nation of Israel develops and lives in the Promised Land of Canaan. Joseph and his sons must hear these words in order to understand what Jacob is about to do. But, even more importantly, we who read the story today might be able to trace how the hand of God leads His people in history and how He guides all things according to His great plan.

The first thing that Jacob recalls takes us back to his dream at Luz (renamed Bethel). When Jacob was fleeing from his brother, God appeared to him in a dream. Jacob calls God here, "God Almighty," i.e., "El Shaddai." Most likely this particular name for God identifies Him as a God who is strong and powerful (like the mountains), the God who can do whatever He wills to do, the God who is able to make everything in creation bend to His will and submit to His power. This was the divine name with which God identified Himself to Abraham in Genesis 17:1. In that context God spoke to Abraham about the great promise of descendants (seed) and land. Those things are the same items of interest in Genesis 28 at Luz (Bethel) in Jacob's dream! And that gracious promise is not yet fully realized in Genesis 48. Yet Jacob wants Joseph to

know about God's revelation in a dream. After all, Joseph is not the only dreamer in redemptive-history! God spoke to many Old Testament saints by means of a dream or vision (cf. Hebr. 1:1).

God's blessing would create a "community of peoples" from Jacob, and his descendants would receive the Promised Land as an "everlasting possession" (verse 4). That is the "old, old story" that God has put before the heart and mind of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and now Joseph and his sons. The essential message had never changed, but it got richer and fuller as time went on, even as the community of faith was growing in number and getting closer to the Promised Land. That story would reach one stage of fulfillment when the people of Israel come into the land of Canaan, but it would reach a higher level when Christ secures our entry into the new creation by His own work of salvation.

Jacob has given his son and grandsons a short history lesson. Once again we are impressed with how crucial history is in the Bible and in our faith. The center of this history lesson is God's great faithfulness: He did not give up on Jacob. Such mercy in a relationship is carried out through the work of the Holy Spirit. Our own sanctification and perseverance in the faith is based upon God's preservation. What a story to tell the next generations! What a legacy to leave behind as you realize that you are not going to stay in this world forever!

It is in that context that Jacob declares his intention to adopt Joseph's sons as his very own. Joseph took

“Manasseh and Ephraim” (mentioned in verse 1 in the order of their birth) along with him. But as Jacob speaks, he says that he adopts “Ephraim and Manasseh” (the new order of importance) to be sons on an equal par with the other sons of Jacob. Thus, the favorite son (Joseph) of the favorite wife (Rachel) gets divided, so to speak, in order to become two tribes! Jacob recalls the sad loss of Rachel when she had died in Canaan and was then buried near Bethlehem. But looking ahead, he elevates these two sons of Joseph to patriarchal status. Obviously, Jacob had given this some thought ahead of time.

Joseph’s sons presented to Israel (48:8-14)

Verse 10 probably explains why Jacob asks the question in verse 8, “Who are these?” His eyesight is poor. And the thoughtful reader remembers Genesis 27, when Isaac thinks he is about to die. So there are some parallels here. But there are also differences: Jacob deceived Isaac earlier in order to obtain the fatherly blessing. Isaac unknowingly pronounces the blessing on the younger son, although he thinks it is the older son, Esau. But in Genesis 48, although Jacob’s eyesight has dimmed greatly, yet he knows what he is doing when he blesses the younger son. By asking “Who are these?”, Jacob may be following good legal procedure to be certain that the proper parties are both present and identified. It is similar to when Isaac asks if it is indeed Esau who is present with him (see Gen. 27:18,24,32).

In his answer, Joseph identifies the boys standing with him as gifts from God. So it is! Joseph had married

a daughter of an Egyptian priest. Joseph and his wife Asenath had at least two boys: Manasseh (from “to forget”?) and Ephraim (“twice fruitful”), as recorded in Genesis 41:50-52. Children are God’s gifts in order to carry on the faith once for all delivered to the saints and to carry on the divine project of filling this world with people who serve the true God aright.

To have these two young boys before him, must have given Jacob deep joy and satisfaction. He has been moved from once thinking that Joseph was dead, to now being able to bless Joseph’s sons. Who would have thought this possible?

Joseph had presented his sons according to the normal procedure so that the younger son would be on Jacob’s left side while the older boy (Manasseh) would be on Jacob’s right side, the side of the favored one. Joseph thinks, “My older son Manasseh gets the main blessing.”

Jacob blesses Joseph (48:15-16)

In blessing Joseph, Jacob has in mind both of his sons, as he says in verse 16. In reading this blessing we should listen carefully to the beautiful parallelism that is expressed about God. Jacob recalls that his grandfather Abraham and his father Isaac walked before God, that God has been his shepherd all his life, and that the Angel has delivered him from all harm.

God is “my Shepherd.” It is a beautiful image, familiar to us from the well-known Psalm 23. The ancient shepherd was the one in authority over the flock of sheep, called upon to feed, to lead, and to defend the sheep in his care. Jacob confesses

that this is what God has done for him throughout his entire life. Jacob was cared for in times of danger and want, but also in times of prosperity. By using the word “Angel” in parallel with God, Jacob is pointing out that God’s very Angel, His own presence was by him all his life. But when does Genesis explicitly mention an Angel with Jacob? Genesis 32 recorded the night-long wrestling match, but it mentions first a “man” and then “God.” Only Hosea 12:3-4 uses the word “Angel” to describe Jacob’s wrestling opponent. Furthermore, Jacob says that this Angel delivered (or, redeemed) him from all harm.

Jacob’s use of the word “Angel” in verse 16 is one of those places in the Old Testament that point out that the Lord Jesus Christ has been present throughout the story of redemption, directing people and events in such a way that God’s elect have been protected—fed, led, and defended. God’s people have God’s Son with them even now (cf. Matt. 28:20), in the power of the Holy Spirit, so that we are kept in the love and care of our God all the days of our lives. Jacob could look back and confess that God had been a Good Shepherd to him. That same God is now going to bless Joseph’s two sons so that they would be fruitful in this world.

Ephraim moved ahead of Manasseh (48:17-20)

Joseph initially is disturbed to see his father cross his arms so that the right hand blesses Ephraim, the younger, while the left hand blesses the older son, Manasseh. Joseph even tries to correct his father. But Israel knows exactly what he is doing. “I know, my son, I know.”

Hebrews 11 says that Jacob did this “by faith.” Both tribes would be great, powerful tribes, but Ephraim would be the heart of northern Israel, “a group of nations,” while Manasseh would be a “great people.”

Israel assures Joseph of the future (48:21-22)

The two pillar promises in God’s covenant promises in Genesis have been seed (descendants) and land. The blessings pronounced have assured us of Joseph becoming two great tribes. But Joseph and his sons are still in the land of Egypt. Israel reassures Joseph that God will fulfill His own promise, made in Genesis 15 and often repeated: God will be with His children to bring them back to Canaan, the Promised Land. Even Joseph, who spends most of his life in Egypt, will have an inheritance in Canaan. Israel mentions a ridge of land (verse 22), although it is unclear what this refers to in the text earlier. Perhaps the events of Genesis 34:25-29 are in the background here, but that is not agreed upon by all scholars.

Conclusion

Jacob has exercised his right as the great patriarch to alter the direction of his family’s development. But he did this “by faith.” We have witnessed a growth and maturity in his faith. By grace through faith Jacob embraced the promise of God for the future, and his blessing of double portion to Joseph is one way he can express it to Joseph, to Joseph’s sons, and to us in the community of faith today. Because every promise of God is “yes” and “amen” in Christ, we can live and also die by faith in His promises.

Lesson 17: Points to ponder and discuss

1. Jacob tells his story briefly to Joseph and his sons. He draws attention to God’s promises by faith. Why was it important to repeat this story (again!) to his son and grandsons? What is the reason that the Bible gives for us to repeat such testimony about God’s deeds to our children? See Deuteronomy 6:4-9, 20ff and Psalm 78:1-8.
2. In Genesis 48:11 Israel tells Joseph about the amazing turn of events that God has brought about in his life. Why did God put Israel through such things? What are similar things in your life where God has worked out some (great) changes, things that you never thought possible, humanly speaking?
3. God keeps us readers always a little off balance by doing unexpected things with unlikely people. God would do the very same thing in His Son, the Lord Jesus Christ. Show how this is true in the Person and work of Jesus Christ (e.g., where He was born, how He lived, what He possessed, etc.).
4. Read through Psalm 23 again. Trace Jacob’s life in terms of what Psalm 23 describes (times of plenty, dangers, enemies, etc.). In other words, how did the LORD actually shepherd Jacob?
5. The northern tribes were carried away, portion by portion, by the cruel Assyrians, until the fall of the city of Samaria in 722/721 BC. Read Jeremiah 31:15-20. Over a century later the prophet Jeremiah would remind us of the LORD’s heartfelt compassion for Ephraim. What did God want for Ephraim? What do we learn about our God in these statements about Ephraim?
6. “Seed and land:” the pillar promises of the Old Testament covenants. But we are now in the new covenant era. How does that now apply to the promises God gives His church today?

Bible Studies on Jacob

Lesson 18: Jacob Tells His Sons About the Future

Read Genesis 47:29-31 and Genesis 49

Introduction: his “last will and testament” (49:1)

Jacob has spoken with Joseph and his sons about God’s blessing upon them. Now he blesses all his sons. Genesis 49 contains the longest poetic portion of this book (verses 2-27). This is often called “the blessing of Jacob” to his sons. Blessings in Scripture are also pregnant with the future. Jacob tells his sons to gather around so that he might tell them “what will happen” to them. The patriarch becomes a prophet, foreseeing the future by inspiration. But it is more than just the future. He also is judging his sons, that is, he evaluates their lives and speaks of where that will take matters in the future with respect to the tribes that will descend from them. As you read through Jacob’s statements about his sons, it might be helpful to be looking at a map (in the back of most Bibles) of how the tribes were settled in Canaan.

My first three sons (49:2-7)

Leah bore four sons to Jacob initially: Reuben, Simeon, Levi, and Judah. Jacob speaks about them first, of course. Normally, the first-born son was supposed to walk off with the double portion of blessing. That is what Reuben should have received, but he sinned against his father by becoming intimate with Bilhah, Rachel’s maidservant (see

Gen. 35:22). This was a sin against the 5th and 7th commandments. Such earlier sin now leads to this result. Sin had discredited him, and now he is disinherited as the first-born. From later history, we never read of any king emerging from the tribe of Reuben. No prophet and no priest arise within the ranks of this tribe. On the contrary, in Numbers 16 we read about the revolt of Korah, Dathan, and Abiram—the last two men from the tribe of Reuben. They called into question the leadership of Moses, and the Lord punished them with death and destruction. “Turbulent as the waters, you will not excel,” says Jacob about his firstborn son. And that is what happened. Reuben received his tribal land in the region east of the Dead Sea.

Jacob speaks of Simeon and Levi together. These two brothers banded together at the time of Dinah’s violation by Shechem in Genesis 34. They hatched the plot that led to the massacre of the people of Shechem, something that had put Jacob in a very precarious position with the people of that region. Jacob recalls this about them, speaking about their “weapons of violence... they killed men in their anger.” In fact Jacob curses their fierce anger and their cruel fury. Not much blessing here! His words are words of judgment. In the parallel lines in verse 7 Jacob says that these brothers (i.e., the tribes) will be “dispersed” in Israel.

And so it was... but in strangely different ways! It is a young man from Simeon (Num. 25:14) who boldly sins by bringing a Midianite young woman into his tent when God punished Israel during the Baal-Peor incident. Simeon is not even mentioned in Moses’ blessing in Deuteronomy 33. Simeon receives land in the Promised Land, but it is in the dry southern portion of Canaan, and it is within the territory boundaries of the larger tribe of Judah. In other words, the dispersion of Simeon has them basically absorbed into another tribe.

Levi is also dispersed in Israel, but in a good way. It is the tribe of Levi that rallies to Moses’ side at the sinful incident of the golden calf (see Exodus 32). Because of that loyalty to the LORD and His cause, God “ordains” this tribe to be the priestly tribe that serves at the holy sanctuary of the LORD. Those Levites who do not serve at the sanctuary itself would be permitted to live throughout Israel in its towns and villages (see Num. 35:2,7; Joshua 14:4; 21:41). It is a Levite, Phinehas, who takes a spear and boldly goes to impale the sinful Simeonite young man in the Baal-Peor incident mentioned above (see Num. 25:1ff), and God blesses that zeal. So both Simeon and Levi are “dispersed” as Jacob says, but in strangely different ways.

Judah: a lion, a scepter, and a donkey (49:8-12)

Jacob’s first three sons have “taken themselves out of the running,” so to speak, by their sins of fornication and great violence. So now the patriarch sees into the future about Judah. Clearly he notes that this

will be the royal tribe. Joseph may have authority over his brothers for the moment as they bow to him as ruler in Egypt. But the time will come when Judah's brothers will bow down to him. Jacob calls him a "lion's cub" (the lion as "king" of the beasts). He mentions a scepter and ruler's staff as staying with Judah "until he comes to whom it belongs" (pointing ahead to David and great David's greater Son, Jesus Christ). Rich imagery of a donkey tied to a vine fill out a picture of royalty and prosperity. Judah would occupy the southern hill country as a great and powerful tribe.

Zebulun and Issachar: in good land (49:13-15)

These two tribes occupied parts of the Galilee in the northern part of the Promised Land. Zebulun, technically not on the Mediterranean Sea, was close to the sea. Both tribes received land that was fertile. Plus, the men of Issachar became known for their spiritual insight, for they knew the times

Dan: a serpent (49:16-18)

The name "Dan" comes from a word that speaks of justice or judging. "Dan will provide justice for his people," says Jacob. From Dan would come the great judge Samson (Judges 13-16), but this tribe would also, in part, desert its tribal inheritance in order to migrate to northern Israel where it would cruelly attack a peaceful city and rename it... Dan! Danites would also engage in false worship, yielding to the wickedness of the great Serpent, Satan. "I look for Your deliverance, O LORD!" It is interesting to note that in the tribal roll call of Revelation 7:4-8, the tribe of Dan is not even mentioned.

Gad, Asher, and Naphtali (49:19-21)

Gad received his tribal land to the east of the Jordan River, sandwiched between Reuben to the south and half of Manasseh to the north. But this area would be vulnerable to attack by the Moabites from the south and by the Ammonites to the east.

Asher and Naphtali received their tribal land in the north, in the Galilee region as well as along the coast of the Mediterranean Sea. The land was fertile and rich, but that made it a desirable fruit to pluck on the part of foreign enemies. These tribes would not be able to drive out the Canaanites later on, and these tribes would be some of the first to be carried away by the Assyrians.

Joseph the vine and Benjamin the wolf (49:22-27)

Jacob comes to the "Rachel tribes" last. Certainly the longest comments are reserved for Joseph (sons Ephraim and Manasseh). Genesis 48 revealed that Jacob moved Joseph's two sons to the level of tribal patriarchs. These two tribes would become powerful and influential as Ephraim ("fruitful") would settle in the central hill country of the Promised Land, and Manasseh would live on both sides of the Jordan River. Joshua would come from Ephraim, and this central tribe would be the last part of northern Israel that would go into exile to Assyria (722 BC).

At least two main points stand out in the blessing to Joseph. First, a complete picture of blessing is drawn in the words of Jacob. Do you hear these words: "fruitful vine... strong arms... blessings of

the heavens... of the deep... of breast and womb"? Jacob had wondered in Genesis 37 concerning Joseph's dreams about the family having to bow down to Joseph. But now he acknowledges that the young son Joseph had become a "prince among his brothers" (verse 26). Second, Jacob gives God all the credit for this great blessing. It is all because of the "hand of the Mighty One... because of the Shepherd, the Rock of Israel..." In other words, "Praise God from whom all blessings flow!" So true for Joseph, but it remains absolutely true for all Christians today as well. "All things are yours," says the New Testament, and "you are Christ's, and Christ is God's."

The youngest son Benjamin (a "ravenous wolf") produced a tribe that became known for its excellent warriors. Ehud from Benjamin was a left-handed judge who killed the Moabite tyrant Eglon and led Israel to victory. Saul, Israel's first king, would come from Gibeah of Benjamin. But also during the time of the judges, civil war would nearly annihilate the tribe of Benjamin, a tragic story told in Judges 19-21. But from this tribe would later come another Saul in the book of Acts, a proud Pharisee who would be stopped by Jesus Christ and then transformed into the great Christian missionary of the New Testament, Paul.

Jacob gives instructions for his burial (49:29-32)

Jacob ends his days in the peace of knowing that Joseph was alive and that his large clan was living in peace and prosperity in the land of Goshen. Yet Jacob does not want his body to be buried in the Egyptian

Lesson 18: Points to ponder and discuss

1. We do not know the day and hour when a loved one will leave this life. We do not dwell morbidly on this fact. Still, since this is the case that we do not know about their departure (should the Lord tarry), have you considered what *must* be said and done to those you know and love before that time comes? What do you *need* to say and do, especially with your loved ones, before the Lord calls you out of this life?
2. Jacob blesses these sons. Think back on the kinds of men they have shown themselves to be (the massacre at Shechem, selling their own brother Joseph, deceiving their father, etc.). Were they deserving of their father's blessing? How is Jacob both just and merciful in these final dealings with his sons? Does this parallel in some ways how the Lord God deals with us?
3. Read Luke 2:36-38. When Jesus was born, an old prophetess named Anna (Hannah), a descendant of the tribe of Asher, was present in the Temple. She went about speaking of the "redemption of Jerusalem" that had been born. As a tribe, Asher was taken away into captivity. Yet in Luke 2 there is a remnant present, saved by grace. How does this show the amazing grace of God, even centuries after the exile?
4. The tribe of Benjamin produced Saul, the first king, who persecuted David and tried to kill him. Later, another man of Benjamin, the Pharisee Saul, persecuted the Son of David, Jesus Christ. Read Acts 9:1-19, the conversion of Saul (later called Paul). How are those stories similar, and how are they different? Note how God rejected King Saul in the end, but He selected Paul to be His great apostle.
5. Jacob insists on having his body buried in Canaan, the Promised Land. Does it matter today where our bodies are to be buried? What and where is the "promised land" for us? What is the future for Christians, personally and corporately, in the age to come?
6. "To whom much is given, much is required." When Jacob purchased the birthright from Esau, what covenantal responsibilities now became his? Could he have had any idea how God would lead his life from that point on? Could we have expected from Jacob the kind of speeches that he gives in Genesis 48 and 49, back in Genesis 25 and 27, earlier in his life? Grace elects and also sanctifies.

sand or in a royal pyramid or any other Egyptian final resting place. Egypt is not "home," no matter how "nice" it may be. In faith, he knows that the Promised Land is the place where "my people" are, he tells us (verse 29). He knows the address of his burial cave in Canaan. Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Rebekah, as well as first wife Leah ("my people") are there. That, and nowhere else, is where Jacob insists on being buried. This is something that Jacob earlier had made Joseph solemnly swear, according to Genesis 47:29-31. Once this was promised, Jacob could worship "by faith... leaning on the top of his staff" (Hebr. 11:21b). His heart was not in Egypt; he looked ahead to what God had promised him.

Jacob is "gathered to his people" (49:33)

The Bible tells us about Jacob's birth. He emerged from the womb with his small infant hand grasping his brother's heel. And now the Bible also tells us of his departure from this life: he "drew up his feet up into the bed, breathed his last and was gathered to his people." What a simple and beautiful description of the end of the life of this patriarch! The NIV Bible uses this as the heading above verse 29: "The Death of Jacob"—which is true—but the word "death" (both the verb and the noun) are not used in Genesis 49 to describe Jacob's departure. "Death" and "die" are used in chapters 48 and 50 but not here in this chapter. The last words from Jacob to his sons focus on his burial in the plot that had been purchased from the Hittites many years before.

When Jacob dies, Egypt mourns for

him. But he is buried in the Promised Land, in the hope of his glorious resurrection. Still, in dying Jacob truly goes “to be with his people,” for our God is the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. He is the God of the living, not of the dead. More than that, our Triune God is the God who elects His own, before we have done anything good or evil in this world, and then He works steadily, for however long it may take, to wrestle us sinners down, to test and tame us, to put us “through many danger, toils, and snares,” so that we might live by faith, and that we might die in His grace, always admitting that we are aliens and strangers in this earth (see Hebr. 11:13-16).

May we see in the life of Jacob how God’s amazing grace elects and then protects, guides and guards His own to the close of their lives. “Surely goodness and love will follow me all the days of my life, and I will dwell in the house of the LORD forever” (Ps. 23:6).

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Looking Above

A Series on the Revelation of Jesus Christ

Revelation 8:1-6

Prayer and Trumpets

Have you ever considered your prayers from the perspective of heaven? Revelation 8:1-6 compels you to do so. These verses push you to consider your prayers from the perspective of heaven. As you do so, you will learn that prayer is something far more effective than you ever thought it to be.

The context is set in the opening verses. “When He opened the seventh seal, there was silence in heaven for about half an hour” (8:1). That half hour of silence we have identified as that time period between when God last spoke in His Son and when He will again speak in His Son. In other words, that half hour of silence is the time period between Christ’s first coming and His second coming—between His incarnation and His return to judge the living and the dead.

Silence in Heaven

That half hour of silence, then, is the time period in which you live! Where do you live after all, but between the first coming of Christ and His second coming? Where do you live, but between the incarnation of Christ and His return to judge the living and the dead? You live in that time period characterized by silence! You live in heaven’s half hour of silence! You are in it. This is your story. This is your history. Your life is being described here in the text. You are not mere spectators sitting in the stands

watching the events unfold before your eyes. You are participants in the arena! You are part of the action! Revelation 8:1 is describing your history!

Do you find that disturbing? You should! For the time period in which you live is characterized by silence! You live in a time when heaven and God are seemingly silent! You live in a time when it seems that God is not there! You cry out to heaven, and heaven, it seems, is silent! You cry out to God, and God, it seems, is silent! It seems that God is not there! That is disturbing!

But then let me remind you of what we said in the last article: we cannot read Revelation 8:1 and leave matters there. We cannot read Revelation 8:1 and conclude with the apparent silence of God. We must move on to Revelation 8:2: “And I saw the seven angels who stand before God, and to them were given seven trumpets.”

Again, remember what we have observed. The trumpet blasts do not *follow* the half hour of silence. These things are not to be understood chronologically, as though the half hour of silence must come to a conclusion, and only then can the trumpets sound. No! The half hour of silence encompasses the entire time period between Christ’s first coming and His return. In other

words, the half hour of silence encompasses the whole of chapters 8-11. But then remember what we find in those chapters: trumpets! The trumpets accompany the silence. The trumpets break the silence. The trumpets blast in the silence, even bringing the silence to its end.

While it may seem that God is inactive, the trumpet blasts assure you that God is anything but inactive! While it may seem that God is silent, the trumpet blasts assure you that God is anything but silent! God is very much at work, and particularly through the preaching of His Word.

This, then, is the context set before us in Revelation 8:1-2. John sees in the silence seven angels standing before God and to them were given seven trumpets. We would fully expect that the next thing John would see would be those angels raising the trumpets to their mouths in order to sound forth. Instead, John sees something else. He sees the prayers of the saints ascending before the throne of God (:3-5).

Incense at the Altar

“Then another angel, having a golden censer, came and stood at the altar. He was given much incense, that he should offer it with the prayers of all the saints upon the golden altar which was before the throne” (8:3). John sees “another angel.” This angel has a golden censer in his hand. He stands at the altar. He is given much incense that he should offer it with the prayers of all the saints upon the golden altar which was before the throne.

What are we to make of all this? The background is found in the Old Testament, and specifically in the altar of incense, that item of furniture in the tabernacle that stood just before the curtain of the Holy of Holies. We read about it in Exodus 30:6-8, “And you shall put it before the veil that is before the ark of the Testimony, before the mercy seat that is over the Testimony, where I will meet with you. Aaron shall burn on it sweet incense every morning; when he tends the lamps, he shall burn incense on it. And when Aaron lights the lamps at twilight, he shall burn incense on it, a perpetual incense before the Lord throughout your generations.” The High Priest was to keep incense burning before the presence of the Lord continually—perpetually—as a sweet aroma before the Lord.

It is interesting to note that in Psalm 141:1-2, David likens his prayers to the incense that arises from the altar of incense: “Lord, I cry out to You; make haste to me! Give ear to my voice when I cry out to You. Let my prayer be set before You as incense, the lifting up of my hands as the evening sacrifice.”

In Revelation 8:1-6, that identification is complete. The prayers of the saints are mixed with incense from the altar. In other words, the prayers of the saints ascend before God like incense! Even as the incense, burnt continually on the altar of incense, ascended into the presence of God as a sweet and pleasing aroma before Him, so the prayers of the saints continually ascend into the presence of God as a sweet and pleasing aroma before Him! Your prayers ascend before the throne of God. Your prayers come before

Him, and they are pleasing to Him! He delights in the prayers of the saints! “And the smoke of the incense, with the prayers of the saints, ascended before God from the angel’s hand” (8:4).

Results of Prayer

But now consider the result of your prayers, verse 5: “Then the angel took the censer, filled it with fire from the altar, and threw it to the earth. And there were noises, thunderings, lightnings, and an earthquake.”

To what do the “noises, thunderings, lightnings, and an earthquake” refer? They refer to judgment! Your prayers are linked to judgment. Your prayers ascend into heaven before the throne of God, and God, in answer to your prayers, sends forth judgments from His throne upon the earth! God answers the prayers of His saints by sending forth judgments upon the earth. You pray and the result is judgment!

As disturbing as that may be, there is still more! Not only do your prayers *result* in God’s judgments upon the earth, but your prayers actually *set in motion* God’s judgments upon the earth! Consider the censer, held in the angel’s hand, in verses 3-5. In verses 3-4, that censer is filled with incense and the prayers of all the saints. But that incense and those prayers do not remain in the censer; they ascend before the throne of God, leaving the censer empty, as it were. But then look at what happens: the censer is filled with fire from the altar, and the angel throws it to the earth! The prayers of the saints ascend, leaving the censer empty; the censer is then

filled with fire and cast to the earth. Could the imagery be any clearer?! The prayers of the saints set in motion the judgments of God upon the earth!

Consider what that means: you bow down upon your knees by your bed at night to pray, and God's judgments are poured out upon the earth! You bow your head in prayer early in the morning, and God's judgments are poured out upon the earth! You offer up your prayers at the dinner table, and God's judgments are poured out upon the earth! Think of it! Something that appears so weak and insignificant has been ordained by God, and is used by God, to pour out His judgments upon the earth, and thereby advance His kingdom even to the day of consummation.

Verse 5 drives home the point: "And there were noises, thunderings, lightnings, and an earthquake." That phrase is consistently used in Revelation in the context of judgment, and that judgment progresses throughout the book. Pay close attention to how the phrase develops as you move through the book!

The first time we encounter the phrase is in 4:5, "And from the throne proceeded lightnings, thunderings, and voices." Here you have only the introduction of judgment— it is announced in heaven.

The second time we encounter the phrase is in 8:5, "And there were noises, thunderings, lightnings, and an earthquake." Now the judgments of God begin to be poured out upon the

earth. You notice the addition of the word, "earthquake." There is progress in God's judgments upon the earth. In 4:5, those judgments were announced in heaven. In 8:5, those judgments begin to be poured out upon the earth.

The third time we encounter the phrase is in 11:19, "Then the temple of God was opened in heaven, and the ark of His covenant was seen in His temple. And there were lightnings, noises, thunderings, an earthquake, and great hail." You notice the addition of "great hail." There is progress in God's judgments upon the earth. In 8:5, those judgments upon the earth began. In 11:19, those judgments upon the earth have become much greater. In fact, here the twenty four elders worship God for His judgments upon the earth: "We give thanks, O Lord God Almighty, The One who is and who was and who is to come, because You have taken Your great power and reigned. The nations were angry, and Your wrath has come, and the time of the dead, that they should be judged, and that You should reward Your servants the prophets and the saints, and those who fear Your name, small and great, and should destroy those who destroy the earth" (11:17-18).

The fourth and final time we encounter the phrase is in 16:17-21, "Then the seventh angel poured out his bowl into the air, and a loud voice came out of the temple of heaven, from the throne, saying, 'It is done!' And there were noises and thunderings and

lightnings; and there was a great earthquake, such a mighty and great earthquake as had not occurred since men were on the earth. Now the great city was divided into three parts, and the cities of the nations fell. And great Babylon was remembered before God, to give her the cup of the wine of the fierceness of His wrath. Then every island fled away, and the mountains were not found. And great hail from heaven fell upon men, each hailstone about the weight of a talent. Men blasphemed God because of the plague of the hail, since that plague was exceedingly great." Here you have a great description of the final judgment and wrath of God Almighty!

There is progress in judgment. The more the saints of God pray, the more the judgments of God are poured out upon the earth and the more His kingdom advances, even to the day of consummation! The prayers of the saints set in motion the judgments of God upon the earth!

In that sense, there is power in prayer! If the prayer of one righteous man is powerful and effective—the prayers of Elijah shut up the heavens for 3 ½ years!— then consider the power and the effectiveness of the prayers of all the saints collectively! There is power in prayer! God has ordained that it would be so. The prayers of the saints set in motion the judgments of God upon the earth! That is the point of verses 3-5.

Prayer and Preaching

But then let me draw your attention to one final thought, verse 6, "So the seven angels who had the seven trumpets prepared themselves to sound."

We shall see in coming articles, the Lord willing, that the trumpets are

David likens his prayers to the incense that arises from the altar of incense.

intimately connected with the preaching of the Word. The preaching of the Word is pictured to us in Revelation 8-11 in terms of trumpet blasts to underscore the role of the preaching of the Word. What does the preaching of the Word do? It warns! It warns sinners! It summons them to repentance and faith! It calls them to repent and believe the gospel! The preaching of the Word of God goes forth like a trumpet blast warning unbelievers to repent and believe! The preaching of the Word of God goes forth like a trumpet blast, as a harbinger of the last trumpet! Yes, there comes a Day when the last trumpet shall sound.

Notice, then, the connection between the prayers of the saints and the sounding of the trumpets. It is only *after* the prayers of the saints have ascended that we read of the trumpet blasts going forth. "So the seven angels who had the seven trumpets prepared themselves to sound." The trumpets sound only in connection with the prayers of the saints. We are given the impression that if the saints do not pray, the trumpets will not sound!

The prayers of the saints set in motion the sounding of the trumpets, and those trumpets represent the preaching of the Word! The prayers of the saints, then, set in motion the preaching of the Word! We are given the distinct impression, here in Revelation 8:5-6, that if the saints do not pray, the Word will not be preached! Why do

The more the saints of God pray, the more the judgments of God are poured out upon the earth and the more His kingdom advances, even to the day of consummation!

you think Paul pleaded with the Romans, "Now I beg you, brethren, through the Lord Jesus Christ, and through the love of the Spirit, that you strive together with me in prayers to God for me..." (Romans 15:30)? Paul understood full well that in the preaching of the Word he was dealing with that which is an aroma of life unto life for those who are being saved, even as it is an aroma of death unto death for those who are perishing. Paul understood that as he preached God's Word, it saved some, even as it condemned others. Paul understood that in the preaching of the Word, he was dealing with matters of eternity. Paul understood how desperately he needed the prayers of the saints.

Any minister who understands what is happening in the preaching of the Word understands full well how desperately he needs the prayers of the saints. I am reminded of the story of a seminary professor who taught the first year preaching class. For the first day of class he gave the students directions to meet him at a certain location at a certain time. When the time came the students made their way to the destination; it was a cemetery. The professor was standing there in the middle of the cemetery and he called

the students to gather round him; they did so with rather puzzling looks. The professor chose one of the students and told him to start preaching to the graves. Reluctantly, the student did so. But nothing happened. The professor urged him to preach louder. The student did so. Still nothing happened. The professor urged him to preach with more urgency. The student did so. Still nothing happened. The professor urged him to preach with all the energy he could muster. The student did so. Still nothing happened. Finally, exasperated, the student turned to the professor and said: "What's the point?!" The professor replied, "even as you don't have the power within yourself to raise the dead here in this cemetery, so you don't have the power within yourself to raise the spiritually dead in church. That's the work of God! Don't ever forget that!"

Do you see why the prayers of the saints are needed for the preaching of the Word?! I dare say that the ministry of the Word depends more upon the prayers of the saints than it does upon the hours spent in the study! That is not to minimize the responsibility of the minister in the study; it is to emphasize the responsibility of the saints in prayer! I dare say, furthermore, that the reason many churches fail to thrive is because the people spend more time in *criticizing* the preaching of the Word than they do *in prayer* for the preaching of the Word. Which do

We are given the distinct impression that if the saints do not pray, the Word will not be preached!

you spend your time doing? Praying for the preaching of the Word or criticizing the preaching of the Word? Would you pass judgment on the preaching of the Word? Then perhaps it is more than time for you to pray!

There is no greater thing you can do for your minister than to pray for him, and to pray for the preaching of the Word. No amount of time in the study can replace the prayers of the saints. It is said that C. H. Spurgeon, the prince of preachers, had an entire prayer room constructed beneath the pulpit, where members of the congregation would continue in prayer for the preaching of the Word, even as that Word was being preached. Spurgeon understood the weight of the preaching of the Word, as did those who prayed.

Revelation 8:1-6 compels you to consider prayer from the perspective of heaven. It compels you to see prayer as that which sets in motion the judgments of God upon the earth. It compels you to see prayer as that which sets in motion the preaching of the Word, which is nothing less than the power of God unto salvation.

Prayer is something far more effective than most of us ever thought it to be. The only question that remains, then, is this: *do you pray?*!

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The New Testament Evidence Regarding Paedocommunion (Part Six)

In a previous article, I began my treatment of 1 Corinthians 11:17-34, a passage that is undoubtedly the most important piece of biblical evidence that has implications for the question of paedocommunion. In that article, I observed that the passage consists of four distinguishable sections: verses 17-22, which identify the problem in Corinth that characterized the church's celebrations of the sacrament of the Lord's Supper; verses 23-26, which contain the apostle Paul's summary of the institution of the Lord's Supper; verses 27-32, which provide instructions on the way recipients of the sacrament ought to receive the body and blood of the Lord, lest they participate in an "unworthy" manner; and verses 33-34, which return to the original problem that Paul is addressing in the Corinthian church and offer instruction on how the Corinthians should wait for each other when they come together to eat, lest they continue to experience the Lord's judgment upon them. We considered the first two of these sections in our previous article. We now turn our attention to the last two sections, the first of which is most directly pertinent to the question of a proper participation in Christ by means of the sacrament.

How Participants Should Receive the Lord's Supper (vv. 27-32)

In this section of Paul's discourse

on the Lord's Supper, a noticeable shift takes place. No longer is the apostle simply focused upon the particular abuses that characterized the celebration of the Lord's Supper by some members of the Corinthian church. Though these abuses remain the occasion for his treatment of a proper celebration of the Lord's Supper, it is evident that the apostle now wishes to speak more generally of the manner in which all recipients of the sacrament are to receive the body and blood of Christ. Having recalled the words of institution for the sacrament, Paul sets forth some of the guidelines that must govern the believer's reception of the sacrament. In this section of the passage, the apostle offers instructions regarding how the Lord's Supper is to be celebrated in a worthy manner. In the historic interpretation of the passage, these instructions have typically been taken to require the presence of an active faith-discernment on the part of those who come to the Table of the Lord. This section of 1 Corinthians 11:17-34, accordingly, is of special importance to our evaluation of the paedocommunion position.

The shift that occurs in this section of 1 Corinthians 11:17-34 is evident from the change in language that Paul uses. Whereas the earlier section, which described the problem in the church in Corinth, uses primarily the second person plural "you" (vv.

17-20, 22), this section shifts to the third person singular. Rather than directly addressing the Corinthian believers who were abusing the Lord's Supper, Paul now uses the language of "whoever" (v. 27), "a person" (v. 28), and "anyone" (v. 29, a third person participle). Consistent with this usage of the third person, the apostle also uses third person verb forms and the third person reflexive pronoun "himself" (v. 29). The change in this section to the use of such third person forms has a significant bearing upon how the instructions of this section are to be understood. Though the apostle began his treatment of the Lord's Supper in 1 Corinthians 11 with a description of the inappropriate behavior of some members of the Corinthian church, he now moves to a series of *general* instructions that apply to *all* members of the covenant community.

The significance of this change in language is aptly stated by John Calvin in his commentary on the passage. According to Calvin, these instructions, though written in the context of a particular problem in the Corinthian church, provide instruction for the reception of the Lord's Supper on the part of anyone who receives the body and blood of Christ.

Some people make it apply [i.e. the passage] only to the Corinthians, and to the corruption which had got such a hold in their midst. But my own view is that Paul, as he usually does, moves from that particular suggestion to general teaching, or from one example to a whole class. The Corinthians had

one particular fault. Paul takes advantage of this to speak of every kind of fault to be found in the administration or receiving of the Supper.

The point of Calvin's comments is that the instructions of verses 27-29 are applicable, not only in the particular circumstance that occasioned his remarks on the celebration of the Lord's Supper, but also to *any* celebration of the Lord's Supper on the part of *any* believer. They are not restricted to those whose celebration of the Lord's Supper may reflect the kind of abusive practice that was evident in the Corinthian church. Whenever the Lord's Supper is administered, believers are warned against an "unworthy" reception of the elements.

The opening sentence of this section makes clear how important these instructions are for a proper reception of the sacrament: "Whoever, therefore, eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty of profaning the body and blood of the Lord." By using the connective, "therefore," Paul emphasizes the close connection between his prior comments about the Lord's Supper and the instructions that he is now going to offer. The language of this transitional verse underscores the seriousness of an unworthy reception of the body and blood of Christ. Such an unworthy reception is tantamount to a profaning, or treating as unholy, the holy sacrament that the Lord instituted for the benefit of his people. When Paul speaks of an "unworthy" eating of the bread or drinking of the cup, he means to refer to the manner in which the sacrament is received. He does not

mean to refer to the "worthiness" of the recipient of the sacramental elements, but to the way in which believers partake of the sacrament.

After this introductory emphasis upon the seriousness of a proper participation in the sacrament, the apostle stipulates two distinct requirements for the reception of the sacrament: first, the participant must "examine himself" prior to eating the bread and drinking the cup (v. 28); and second, the participant must "discern the body" when he eats and drinks (v. 29).

The verb Paul uses to describe the first requirement for a proper reception of the sacrament has the general meaning of "to test something to determine its genuineness." Each person who eats the bread and drinks the cup must do so only after he has "examined himself." Though Paul gives no specific information regarding what such a testing or examining of oneself means, the verb he uses is found in a number of New Testament passages, including other Pauline epistles (see Rom. 1:28; 2:18; 12:2; 14:22; 1 Cor. 3:13; 16:3; 2 Cor. 8:8, 22; 13:5; Gal. 6:4; Eph. 5:10; Phil. 1:10; 1 Thess. 2:3; 1 Tim. 3:10). The closest parallel to this passage is 2 Corinthians 13:5, where the apostle summons all believers to "examine yourselves, to see whether you are in the faith. Test yourselves. Or do you not realize this about yourselves, that Jesus Christ is in you?— unless indeed you fail to meet the test!" Another parallel passage, which also uses this verb with a reflexive pronoun, Galatians 6:4, speaks of the need for each believer to "test his own work." The common sense of these pas-

sages is that the believer is obligated to examine his faith and conduct to determine whether it corresponds to what is expected of a person who belongs to Christ.

Though the idea of “self-examination” in verse 28 has often been freighted with the excess baggage of an protracted, introspective process of spiritual inventory-taking, the term only requires a responsible testing on the part of the believer to see whether his faith is genuine. When the believer tests himself, he must simply determine whether his faith and practice correspond to his status and profession as a member of the church of Jesus Christ. In the historic understanding of the Reformed churches, such self-examination looks simply for the fruits that belong to a normal Christian profession. For example, the Heidelberg Catechism, which reflects the consensus view of the Reformed churches, insists that only those believers whose faith exhibits the three elements that belong to a Christian profession should be admitted to the Lord’s Supper. Genuine faith in Jesus Christ always entails a recognition of the believer’s sin and misery, a believing trust in Jesus Christ as Savior, and a resolve to live in grateful obedience. This insistence seems to be a reasonable application of the principle that believers should examine or test the genuineness of their faith in Christ before coming to the Table of the Lord.

The second stipulation in these verses—that the recipient of the sacrament participate in a way that includes “discerning the body”—also requires explanation. What does the apostle mean when he

speaks of “discerning the body” in order not to partake of the Lord’s Supper in a way that would bring judgment upon the participant (verse 29)?

In order to answer this question, it is necessary at the outset to observe that there is a slight difference in the textual evidence for verse 29. Most modern translations, which are based upon older manuscript evidence, do not have the words “of the Lord” after “discerning the body.” Older translations, like the King James Version, which are based upon the Byzantine or Majority text, include these words. Though the difference between these two textual traditions is relatively minor, it is possible to argue that the shorter text lends support to a particular reading of the passage that is favored by some advocates of paedocommunion. For example, some advocates of paedocommunion conclude that the shorter reading supports the idea that Paul is emphasizing only a kind of ecclesiological discernment. Rather than referring to the believer’s recognition of the “body of the Lord,” which was given as a sacrifice for sin upon the cross, Paul is referring to a recognition of the identity of the church community. The discernment in question is not Christological but ecclesiological.

According to this paedocommunionist interpretation, a

proper recognition of who belongs to the body of the church fits more appropriately with the context. Since Paul is responding to the failure on the part of the Corinthians to recognize how all members of the body (rich and poor alike) enjoy full communion with Christ, the shorter reading of the text is most appropriate. When Paul stresses the need to receive the sacrament after a proper discernment of the body of Christ, he is calling the Corinthians to repent from the sinful divisions that marked their celebration of the Lord’s Supper. In comparison to this reading, the longer reading of the text suggests that the “body” to be discerned is the actual body of Christ that was given as an atonement for sin and that is signified in the sacramental elements.

In my judgment, it is likely that the shorter reading of the text of verse 29 is correct. However, I do not believe that the shorter reading supports the claim of some paedocommunionists that the discernment Paul has in mind is primarily ecclesiological. In the immediate context of verse 29, Paul refers on two occasions to the body of Christ, first in reference to the institution of the Lord’s Supper (v. 24), and then in reference to the sacramental eating and drinking of the body and blood of Christ (v. 27). Both of these references to the “body” are references to the body “of Christ,” which is signified and communicated by means of the sacramental elements of bread and wine.

The language of this transitional verse underscores the seriousness of an unworthy reception of the body and blood of Christ.

In the historic understanding of the Reformed churches, such self-examination looks simply for the fruits that belong to a normal Christian profession.

Since the sacrament is a means of communion with Christ, it requires believing discernment of the body of Christ that was given as a sacrifice on behalf of his people. Because the sacrament is a means of remembering and proclaiming Christ's sacrificial death until he comes, those who receive Christ in the sacrament must do so in the way of an active recognition of his body. Minimally, the recipient of the sacrament is obliged to "evaluate" or "recognize" that the bread and wine represent the body and blood of Christ that were given for the forgiveness of his people's sins. The verb that the apostle uses has the simple meaning of engaging in an act of "discrimination" or "recognition" of Christ's body that is so wondrously signified and communicated to believers as they receive the sacramental meal of the Lord's Supper. The paedocommunionist argument that this discernment refers only to an ecclesiological identification of those who belong to the covenant community does not do justice to the immediate context of this verse.

After stipulating these requirements for participation in the sacrament, the remaining verses of this section of 1 Corinthians 11 (vv. 30-32) return to the particular circumstances of the Corinthian church. Once more the language is in the second person plural ("you"). Because of the sinful practice in the Corinthian church, Paul tells the Corinthians

that they are suffering the judgment of God ("That is why many of you are weak and ill, and some have died"). The failure on the part of some of the Corinthian believers to judge themselves correctly, has resulted in their being subjected to the Lord's judgment. This judgment is not an irrevocable condemnation, but an instance of God's severe mercy that they should heed in order not to fall under the condemnation of the world.

**Exhortation for the Future
(vv. 33-34)**

The concluding section of Paul's discourse on the Lord's Supper in 1 Corinthians 11:17-34 is directed especially to the Corinthian church. Just as in the preceding verses (30-32), the apostle returns to the sinful practice of some of the Corinthian believers and offers a word of admonition to them. Since this section of the discourse is not as directly pertinent to our interest in the question of paedocommunion, we will only briefly comment on its teaching.

In these verses, the apostle Paul notes that the antidote for the sinful divisions of the Corinthian church's celebration of the Lord's Supper requires two things: first, when the Corinthian believers come together to eat, they must "wait for one another"; and second, those who are hungry should "eat at home" rather than in the context of the church's

gathering for the celebration of the sacrament. Since the Table of the Lord represents the communion that believers together enjoy with Christ, the Corinthians should eat or drink together. The Corinthians must not eat and drink without first waiting for each other, lest the communion they enjoy with the Lord be violated by their divisive spirit. If the Corinthians persist in their divisive pattern of behavior, they will only continue to suffer the judgment of the Lord. In order to avoid the Lord's judgment upon them for their sinful abuse of the Table of the Lord, the Corinthians are summoned to a pattern of conduct that does not belie the significance of the sacrament as a means of fellowship with Christ.

Conclusion

Though 1 Corinthians 11:17-34 does not stand alone within the context of the biblical evidence for the proper administration and reception of the Lord's Supper, it is a passage that speaks to this subject more directly than any other. No other passage provides as direct a witness to the manner in which recipients of the body and blood of Christ are to be admitted to the Lord's Table. Even though this passage does not speak expressly to the question of the admission of children of believers to the Table of the Lord, its implications for this question are apparent. In order to clarify these implications, I will conclude my treatment of the passage with several observations.

First, it is clear that the apostle Paul's consideration of the Lord's Supper in this passage is prompted by a particular circumstance in the

Corinthian church. The passage begins by identifying a divisive spirit that characterized the celebration of the sacrament among the Corinthian believers. The occasion for Paul's appeal to the words of institution of the sacrament, and his instructions regarding a "worthy" reception of the sacramental elements, was the divisions that marked the behavior of some of the Corinthians when they celebrated the sacrament. These divisions belied the union and communion with Christ that is so wondrously symbolized in the Lord's Supper. For this reason, the apostle soberly warns the Corinthian believers that such behavior has and will cause the Lord's judgment to fall upon them.

Advocates of paedocommunion properly emphasize this occasion for Paul's discourse on the Lord's Supper. However, the argument of some paedocommunionists that this occasion limits the application of Paul's instructions only to believers who are guilty of a like spirit of divisiveness is unduly restrictive. No competent interpreter of the passage denies the particular occasion that prompts Paul's instructions. The question remains whether Paul takes this occasion to provide more general instructions regarding the celebration of the sacrament by all believers whenever the sacrament is administered.

Second, an important feature of this passage is the transition that Paul makes from a description of the particular problem in Corinth to general instructions regarding a proper reception of the sacrament. Though advocates of paedocommunion often insist that

Paul's appeal to the institution of the Lord's Supper (vv. 23-26) and his teaching regarding a worthy reception of the sacramental elements (vv. 27-29) only address the particular problem in Corinth, the language Paul uses suggests otherwise. It seems clear that Paul wants to use the occasion of the Corinthian abuse of the Lord's Supper to stipulate general guidelines for the way *any* believer should receive the sacrament. This means that Paul is not simply calling some Corinthian believers to repent of their particular sin of divisiveness in celebrating the sacrament (and perhaps others today who are guilty of a similar offense). Paul is calling them to repent, to be sure. But he is also giving instructions that apply to any believer on the occasion of any administration of the Lord's Supper. The instructions of this passage have, accordingly, general application to the church's celebration of the sacrament of the Lord's Supper. The passage provides a rich description of the manner in which the new covenant sacrament of the Lord's Supper is to be administered.

Third, in the most important section of this passage, the apostle stipulates that anyone who receives the body and blood of Christ in the sacrament must do so after he has "examined himself" and only in the way of a proper "discerning" of the body of Christ. In our exposition of

these stipulations, we noted that they place no extraordinary burden upon those who come to the Table of the Lord. They do not oblige recipients of the sacrament to engage in a protracted process of introspection to determine whether they are genuine believers. Some advocates of paedocommunion represent this kind of extraordinary, protracted process of self-examination as the historic view of the Reformed churches. Though this may seem to lend support to the paedocommunion case, it amounts to a kind of "straw man" argument. The normative understanding of these requirements in the Reformed churches is that the believer is expected to test the genuineness of his Christian profession before partaking of the sacrament. Such self-examination amounts to no more than a testing of his faith by the biblical standard of what belongs to a true Christian profession. Furthermore, the "discerning" of the body of Christ is not some kind of highly intellectualized exercise that exceeds the competence of many believers. It amounts to a simple recognition of the body of Christ that is signified in the sacramental elements of bread and wine.

Since true faith always entails a basic knowledge of what the Scriptures teach about Christ's sacrifice upon the cross for the sins of his people, it is not surprising

The verb that the apostle uses has the simple meaning of engaging in an act of "discrimination" or "recognition" of Christ's body.

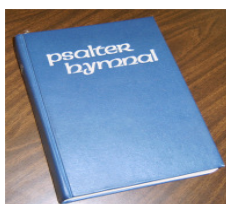
that those who remember and proclaim Christ's death in the sacrament do so in the way of a faith-recognition of the body of Christ. These requirements for the reception of Christ in the sacrament are the basis for the historic insistence of the Reformed churches that those who are admitted to the Table of the Lord be professing believers. The children of believing parents are instructed in the Word of the gospel in order to prepare them to profess the kind of faith that is able to receive Christ sacramentally. The reception of Christ in the sacraments is not a witless, unintelligent act on the part of those who participate. Only those who have examined themselves in the faith, and who have rightly discerned the body of Christ (and the implications of the one body for the unity among believers), should come, remembering and believing Christ's sacrifice upon the cross. These requirements are precisely the ones that have led the Reformed churches to insist upon a profession of faith as the occasion for a covenant member's reception at the Table of the Lord. Such a profession of faith principally confirms that the covenant member can eat and drink the body and blood of Christ with "the mouth of faith."

For these reasons, I remain convinced that a proper reading of 1 Corinthians 11:17-34 provides sufficient warrant for upholding the historic view and practice of the Reformed churches. This passage

No other passage provides as direct a witness to the manner in which recipients of the body and blood of Christ are to be admitted to the Lord's Table.

constitutes a clear and compelling piece of evidence against the position of those who advocate the admission of all covenant children to the Table of the Lord, and who reject the need for a proper, public confirmation of their faith.

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



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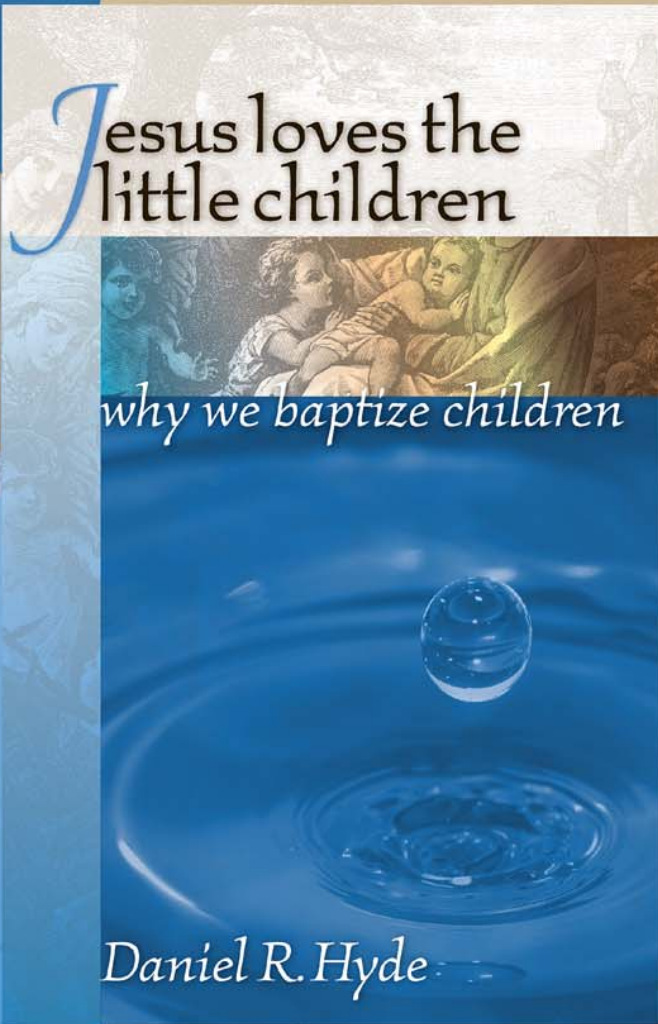
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Work for MINTS Has Begun

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The course is important because the cults are proselytizing around the world, and many church leaders, including pastors, in third world countries do not understand the doctrine of the Trinity. Though a couple American-born cults which have worldwide influence will be featured in the course, students will be encouraged to study cults originating in their own country and to analyze them in the light of the Scriptures. This could prove to be very useful because the missions which planted churches frequently did not complete the Great Commission, which includes teaching whatever Christ has commanded and taught. The result is that the “gospel” which is often preached is a distortion of the Gospel of God’s grace in Christ which the Scriptures present. The goal of MINTS is that the Lord will bless this work to teach pastors and church leaders the apostolic faith, to stimulate reform in His church overseas, and to protect the church from the confusion which the cults have produced.

Fund-Raising Efforts Continue

In the Fall of 2006, Rev. Vander Pol began informing the churches of the invitation he accepted to work with MINTS. He also visited several URCNA Classes in the US. A few churches responded by indicating their intention to give specified amounts for the work in 2007. Others responded by giving generous offerings or by promising to take offerings. Faithful individuals are giving regularly. So far \$13,000 has been received from churches and individuals, and approximately \$7,000 more has been budgeted by churches to be given this year. When the work is fully funded, it will require nearly \$100,000 to cover all expenses. Since it is unwise at this stage to spend funds that have not been received, Rev. Vander Pol’s time spent working for

MINTS is determined by the amount of funds that have been received.

Rev. Vander Pol works the rest of the week for Trinity Reformed Church (URC) in Cape Coral, Florida, where he has been the pastor for almost ten years. The Council has been very supportive and accommodating to his need to raise funds. Between now and the Fall of 2007, he intends to stay in contact with the churches, to ask if offerings can be received, and to urge more churches to place his work for MINTS on their budgets in 2008.

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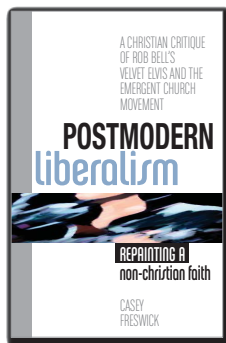
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