

Dedicated to the Exposition and Defense of the Reformed Faith

The Outlook

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**THE HISTORICITY OF
ADAM AND HUMAN
SEXUALITY**

**ON DEATH AND DYING:
WHAT EXACTLY ARE
WE AFRAID OF?**

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

—Jude 3

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About the cover: *Autumn is a perfect time to focus on God's wonderful blessings and all the beauty this season brings. Find time to pray and be enriched in God's Word. "The grass withers, the flower fades, but the word of our God will stand forever." Isaiah 40:8*

The Historicity of Adam and Human Sexuality



Rev. Greg
Lubbers

The Word of God begins with profound simplicity: “In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth” (Gen. 1:1, English Standard Version). It states with the same profound simplicity, “So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them” (Gen. 1:27). Yet, humanity, even within the churches, continues to be confused with these simple truth statements of divine revelation.

Historically, this confusion was rooted in denials of the literal, historical-grammatical interpretation of the opening chapters of Genesis.

Contemporarily, this confusion is revealing itself with denials of the historicity of Adam or at least of his role as the singular head of the human race. Like a cancer, this confusion is spreading to other doctrinal and moral truths and, if left unchecked, it will have drastic consequences.

Throughout the history of the New Testament church there have been those in the church and the world who have challenged and denied the literal account and interpretation of creation as recorded in Genesis 1 and Genesis 2. Under the influence of pagan philosophy and with an erroneous allegorical hermeneutic for interpreting the Scriptures, some of the early church fathers held to a figurative interpretation of the days of creation. These men included Origen, Augustine, and Aquinas.

However, among the major Protestant Reformers there was a recommitment to a literal sense historical-grammatical hermeneutic in the interpretation of the Word of God. This hermeneutic, or method for interpreting the Bible, led Martin Luther and John Calvin, as well as the vast majority of the Dutch Reformers and Puritans, to reject a figurative or allegorical view of the creation days in favor of a literal interpretation of the days of creation.

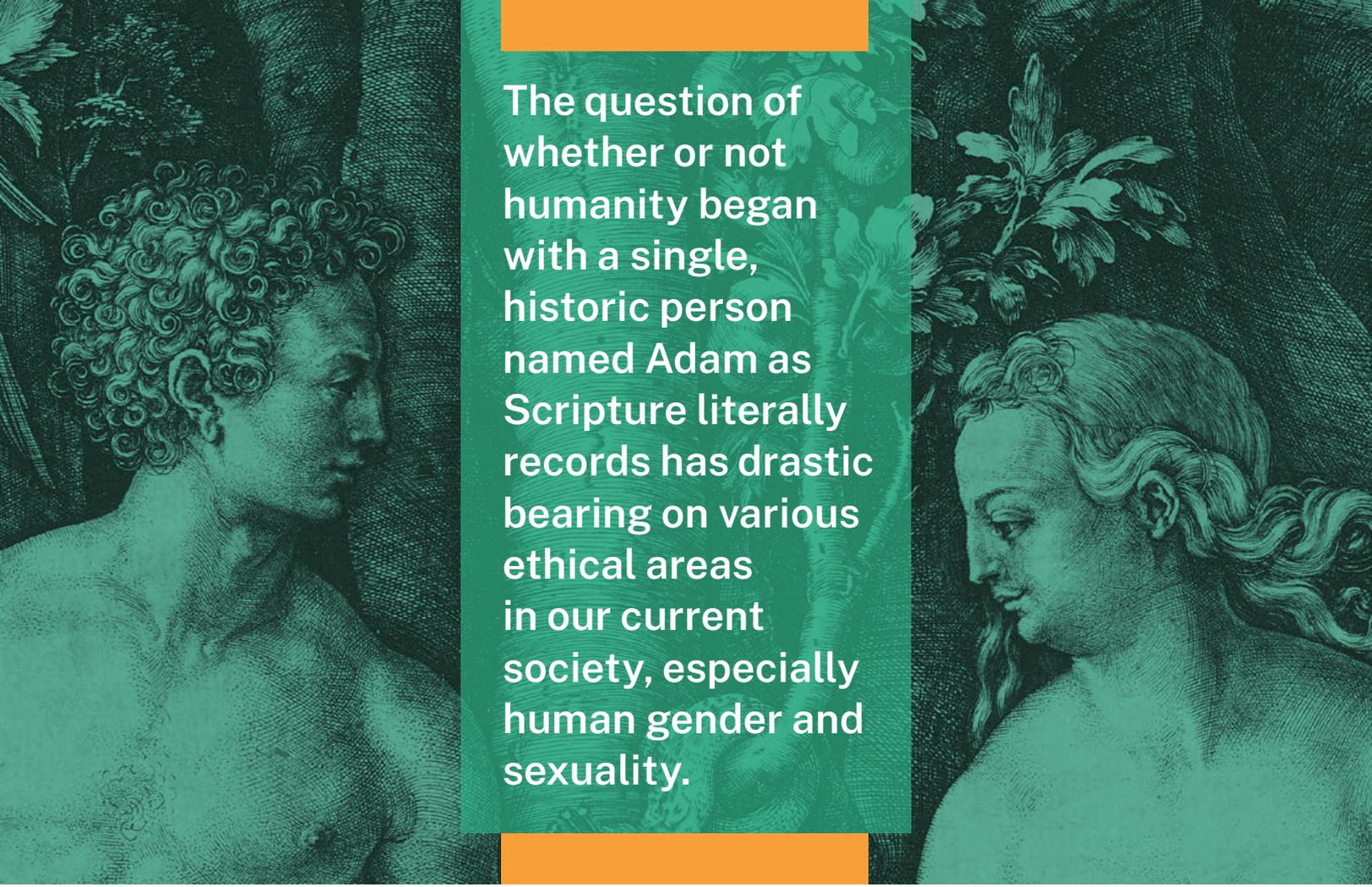
During and subsequent to the Reformation era, in the 1700s and 1800s, the Enlightenment movement gave rise to Socinianism and Deism. These movements emphasized man’s mere reason as the standard for interpreting the Bible. All of the alleged supernatural events of Scripture were denied and reinterpreted in line with man’s scientific discoveries and knowledge. In summary, natural revelation and/or scientific observation eclipsed special revelation in the Word of God, the Holy Bible. This was especially prevalent among the academia of the leading universities of Britain and Europe.

A macro-evolutionary explanation of the origin of all things was in existence before the writings of Charles Darwin. However, it was especially through Darwin’s work, in response to his exploration and exposure to “primitive savages,” that the macro-evolutionary process as the cause of the origin and development of humanity became popularized. His ideas

included theorizing about co-Adamites and a hierarchy of “races.” These ideas were used to justify horrific practices of inhuman treatment of some races, including the justification of the institution of slavery. Many persons conveniently omit or forget the full title of Darwin’s infamous book, *On the Origin of Species by Means of Natural Selection, or the Preservation of Favored Races in the Struggle of Life*. The recent edition of this work advertised on Amazon is simply entitled *On the Origin of Species*.

In the second half of the nineteenth century, such macro-evolutionary explanations of the origin of the human race were adopted by German theological liberals and infiltrated European universities and seminaries. These theologians explained away the literal historical-grammatical interpretation of the days of creation by referencing a combination of Near Eastern cosmology and mythology along with an alleged ancient worldview of the author of Genesis. In their view, the author of Genesis was a simple-minded child of his times. Based upon these factors, Genesis 1 and Genesis 2 were read as an “ancient poetic literary device,” and the literal days were denied.

Such views immigrated from the universities and seminaries of Europe to the universities and seminaries of North America. Even such stalwart orthodox theologians such as Charles Hodge and B. B. Warfield opened their minds to the theories of macro-evolution as an



The question of whether or not humanity began with a single, historic person named Adam as Scripture literally records has drastic bearing on various ethical areas in our current society, especially human gender and sexuality.

explanation for the origin of the human race.

Throughout the early 1900s, Calvin Theological Seminary and the Christian Reformed Church stood fast against these theories under the leadership of professors such as Geerhardus Vos, William Heyns, and Louis Berkhof. However, in the 1950s, under pressure from the science department of Calvin College and the writings of Howard Van Til, some Christian Reformed pastors and theologians began speaking and tolerating views of a “literary framework” understanding of Genesis and a “progressive creation.”

Today, this tolerance has spread to include teachers and organizations within the Christian community who aggressively deny the origin of the human race to be a historical

Adam. These efforts include the organization BioLogos, headed by a former Calvin College professor, and *Jesus Loves You and Evolution Is True: Why Youth Ministry Needs Science*, a book by a religion professor at Northwestern College. It also includes Reasons to Believe, an old-earth advocating “ministry” with a 3.1-million-dollar annual budget.

Many Christian colleges, universities and seminaries are now adamant in their denial of a literal interpretation of the days of creation. They do not ignore or deny the Bible outright, but rather they propose a different way of interpretation. In their view, Genesis 1 and Genesis 2 are to be viewed as a Near Eastern, culturally conditioned, literary framework through which God revealed some

general truths concerning the origin of all things. This then allows for a belief in a macro-evolutionary theory of the origin of the human race, which they believe matches the scientific evidence and data concerning the age of the universe.

Now a further step is being taken by some Christian professors and teachers. This step is advocating that the origin of the human race likely included one or more pre-Adam hominids from which Adam and Eve were perhaps selected as representatives in relationship to God. Adam is not viewed as the head of the human race in the sense of being the first human being, created by an immediate act of God by the formation of his body and the impartation of his soul.

The views of evolution have evolved. And ideas have

consequences. But why pick up this debate again? What is at stake? This matter of truth and interpretation is important in relationship to biblical reliability, doctrinal fidelity, and ethical morality. While attention could and should be given to the first two areas, great concern is also raised in relationship to the realm of ethical morality.

The question of whether or not humanity began with a single, historic person named Adam as Scripture literally records has drastic bearing on various ethical areas in our current society, especially human gender and sexuality. The past decade has seen an alarming evolution of perversions within human sexuality, including the advancement and acceptance of homosexuality and gender fluidity. How does this relate to one's view of Genesis 1–3?

The biblical and historical understanding of the Christian church, and of human society, of the binary genders of humanity is based upon the clear statement of Genesis 1:27, "So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; *male and female he created them*" (emphasis added). Recognizing the reality of

the consequences of sin in defects resulting in rare cases of sexual ambiguity, it is true and should be clear that there are two genders or sexes, male and female. These two genders comprise the race of humanity and are designed and created to be complementary to one another. That is why Genesis 2:18 states, "Then the LORD God said, 'It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper fit for him.'" That helper was a woman.

Furthermore, the biblical and historical understanding of the interrelation between these two genders is that sexual expressions of intimacy are morally good and pleasing to the Creator only when exercised between two persons of opposite gender who are united together in the creation ordinance of the sacred institution of marriage.

However, once the moorings of literal historic-grammatical interpretation are loosed for a figurative interpretation of the opening chapters of Genesis, the ship of human ingenuity is set free for all sorts of deviations in regard to human sexuality. An evolutionary model for the explanation of the origin of

humanity practically erodes the inerrancy, sufficiency, and clarity of the Bible. It also denies the veracity of the account of creation, the fall, and redemption. Culture and the Christian church are reaping the fruits today of a shift in methods of interpretation in regards to Genesis 1–3 that became popular yesterday.

The Christian church certainly needs to continue to proclaim the truth of the Word of God also in regard to human gender and sexuality. However, to do so consistently, it needs to proclaim the truth of the Word of God interpreted in a literal historical-grammatical sense upholding simple and yet profound truths: "In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth" (Gen. 1:1) and, "So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them" (Gen. 1:27).

Rev. Greg Lubbers

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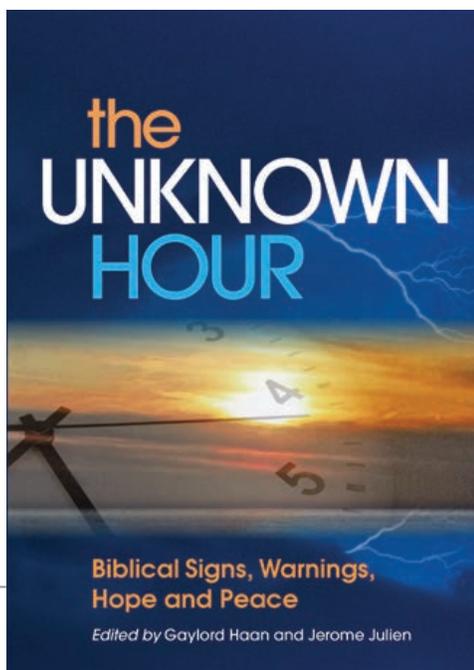
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Michael R. Kearney, *Outlook* Contributor writes:

Addressing contemporary themes such as materialism, immorality, and fear, *The Unknown Hour* points readers to the course of redemptive history and the Lord's unfailing promises to his Church. It imparts sobriety and strength in tumultuous times. Firmly rooted in the eternal relevance of the Scriptures, this study is both timely and timeless. Its end times message issues a call to comfort, not to consternation.

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On Death and Dying: What Exactly Are We Afraid Of?



Mrs. Vanessa
Le

“Are you afraid of the coronavirus?”

My four-year-old asked his Sunday school teacher that question on March 8, 2020. Since then, I daresay that there has not been one person on our planet who is unaffected by the pandemic. As I watched events unfold, questions echoed in my mind. There were a variety of reactions and levels of social distancing. I believe that a large part of Christian charity is not allowing our different reactions and opinions to divide us as Christians. However, I do want to address the heart attitudes of all involved. As Christians, are we afraid of death?

Hard Pressed?

In a well-known passage on death and dying, the apostle Paul says, “For to me, to live is Christ, and to die is gain. . . . For I am hard-pressed between the two, having a desire to depart and be with Christ, which is far better. Nevertheless to remain in the flesh is more needful for you” (Phil. 1:21–24, New King James Version). In the attitudes surrounding the coronavirus, I have not seen much of what I would call “hard-pressed.” I am not talking about wanting to throw your life away or having a death wish. I am talking about a living communion with God, with Christ, through the Holy Spirit, such that death seems like what it is—our entrance into glory. Are you feeling hard-pressed between a desire to live and a desire to depart and be with Christ? Are you living out Philippians 1:21–24?

Is It Really Better?

Is it really better to depart and be with Christ? I think every Christian would agree with that. But what is our attitude? Deep down, do we believe it? Or do we allow the pleasure and glory of this life to sneak in? Do we say, “I’m pretty happy here. I’m needed here. I can accomplish



more for God's glory if I live longer"? Paul said that too: "to remain in the flesh is more needful for you." But he did not end there. He was hard-pressed. He said that he longed to go and be with Christ. I admit that for me it is easy to always say, "Later." Later, I will be more ready for death. When my children are out of the house . . . when I've finished that ministry project I always wanted to do . . . when I've had a chance to live more life.

Desire to Depart

As a Christian, we should be desirous of departing to be with Christ. The examples of other Christians can serve to admonish us. Elizabeth Prentiss (1818–1878) was the author of the hymn "More Love, to Thee, O Christ" and the well-known book *Stepping Heavenward*. After her death, her husband, George, wrote of her: "She viewed it [death] as an invitation from the King of Glory to come and be with Him. During the more than three-and-thirty years of our married life I doubt if there was ever a time when the summons would have found her unwilling to go; rarely, if ever, a time when she would not have welcomed it with great joy."¹ In Elizabeth's time, death was a constant companion throughout life. Unlike many of my generation who have never seen death up close, Christians living in the nineteenth century almost inevitably experienced the death of a close, young, and often healthy family member. Infant mortality was high; Elizabeth Prentiss lost two of her children before they turned four years old. I think that this experience helped them to have a different view of death than what I have. For me, I have the expectation—no, the assumption—that I will live a long

and relatively healthy life. It's almost as though I am entitled. Entitled to live into my eighties or nineties. Entitled to a life of ease and little personal suffering. Entitled to the lives of each of my family members. Forgetting that it is God who gives life. That I don't have a right to life, that each and every day is God's gift to me. But most of all, forgetting that this life is not really what my life is all about. "If in this life only we have hope in Christ, we are all of all men the most pitiable" (1 Cor. 15:19)

What, then, should be my attitude about death? Should I be afraid of death? Afraid of the coronavirus? Afraid of driving my car lest I get into an accident? Death is an enemy, so some fear is natural. However, death is a defeated enemy. I do not need to fear. "Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil; for You are with me" (Ps. 23:4). Death is the great leveler of all. Death is something that no human relationship can survive. Even if we were to die at the same time as our spouse and children, we would still walk through that valley alone. And yet—not alone. "You are with me." Jesus Christ is the only person who can go with us through death and guide us safely to glory. Our relationship with him is the most important aspect of our lives.

How Do We Prepare?

How should we prepare for death? My cousin is currently preparing for marriage. She is so excited to have a wedding day set and is counting down the days, preparing all the details. But what is her attitude toward her soon-to-be husband? "I'll be with him soon, so no need to talk to him much now." Or, "I have all these pressing wedding details to

hammer out. He'll just have to wait until I'm less busy." Obviously that is not her attitude. Her attitude is, "I'm going to spend the rest of my life with this wonderful man, and I'm going to spend every possible minute with him in the meantime!"

Too Busy?

I wonder if our attitude toward our Savior is that of a soon-to-be bride. Do I say, "I want to spend every possible minute with my Savior right now"? When I have a spare minute, when I'm in the car waiting, when I'm cooking dinner, when I'm relaxing after the kids are in bed—is turning to Jesus my default mode? I don't know about you, but for me it is much easier to turn to technology. A huge disadvantage of technology is how easily it sucks our time and attention. "I don't have time" is a common excuse for a lack of any of a number of spiritual disciplines. Reading the Bible? "I'm too busy." Praying? "There's never a down moment in my life." Listening to an extra sermon here or there? "Who has an hour of time when their brain can concentrate?" If any of these thoughts are familiar to you, I'd like to challenge you: Check your screen time. Are you too busy for Facebook? How about that game of Solitaire on your phone? Do you have a chunk of two hours to watch that latest movie? Moving beyond that, what about your leisure time? We live in a society where work does not consume our every waking moment, where we do not have to work all the time in order to live. When you're walking or biking or exercising, driving your kids from one activity to another, are you leaving time for the most important relationship in your life?

If my desire for Christ right now is buried beneath a to-do list and a playlist, then how can I expect to desire to depart and be with Christ? Has my spirituality essentially become a pie-in-the-sky heaven by-and-by while I enjoy myself on earth?

If you're not sure of how to long for heaven, try getting a partner for Bible reading and spiritual growth. I have done this for the past five years, with great benefits to both of us. Together, we decided on a plan of what to read and how much each day. We then text each other on a regular basis about what we're reading. It has been a huge help in the area of accountability and growth in grace, as well as furthering our friendship in many unforeseen ways.

You've Already Died!

In the process of writing this article, I had that sinking feeling of "I can't do it. I have failed. I have not desired Christ more than the things of this world. How can I ever expect to long to be with Christ when I am attracted to this world?" The answer lies in union with Christ. Through our union with Christ, we've already died. As Paul says in Colossians 3:3: "For you died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God." How can the apostle say that? If you're reading this, you obviously haven't physically died. Yet we have died through our union with Christ. He died on the cross and has been raised to heaven. Somehow, mysteriously, Paul speaks of us having already died. If my life is hidden with Christ in God, then it is

easier, somehow, to not get distracted with the false pleasure and glory of this world. My real life awaits! How can I not long for it with all my heart?

Union with Christ also assures us of our resurrection life. "For if we have been united together in the likeness of His death, certainly we also shall be in the likeness of His resurrection, knowing this, that our old man was crucified with Him, that the body of sin might be done away with, that we should no longer be slaves of sin" (Rom. 6:5-6). Jesus died on the cross—and I died with him. My life is no longer my own. I've already died, already conquered, already triumphed over death. Now I know with *certainty* that I will live again, I will rise, I will join my Savior in glory. As Jesus my Savior delights in God the Father and the Holy Spirit, so I can and do delight in God. As his death conquered sin, so I, too, can be freed from sin. I am free to set aside the hindrances, the fear, the false pleasures of this world. "When Christ who is our life, appears, then you also will appear with Him in glory" (Col. 3:4). I am not afraid. I am hard-pressed. I delight in the Savior who has died for me, set me free, and risen for me. He will bring me to glory in his perfect time. And I can't wait.

1. George Prentiss, *More Love to Thee: The Life and Letters of Elizabeth Prentiss* (394), as quoted in Sharon James, *Elizabeth Prentiss: More Love to Thee* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth Trust: 2006), 178.

GOOD QUESTION

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WHAT'S SO SPECIAL ABOUT THE APOSTLES' CREED?

For many Christians, the Creed is a regular part of congregational worship. You might think, too regular. Why should modern Christians frequently confess an ancient summary of the faith?

Unity. Considering the terribly fractured state of the church today we should jump at the opportunity to affirm in worship a summary of the faith used from before the Middle Ages to this day by people from every imaginable language, tradition, and location on the globe.

Clarity. We live in uncertain times. We are humbled by how much we simply do not know. But we can know with certainty what is taught in the articles of our "undoubted Christian faith" (Heidelberg Catechism Q/A 22). Repetition drives these basic Bible truths deep into our hearts and minds so that they infiltrate our daily living.

Devotion. Repetition is only valuable if what is repeated is meaningful. We don't complain about the oft-repeated line "I love you." If the words are true and if we truly mean them they don't need to be reinvented to stay fresh. View the Apostles' Creed as a time-tested affirmation of your genuine love for the Triune God.



Mrs. Vanessa Le

is a wife and mom to four children age five and under. She enjoys reading, playing the piano, studying theology, and generally being Mommy. She is a member of Orlando Reformed Presbyterian Church in Orlando, FL.



Eight Reflections on Racism and Riots

I'm neither black nor white. I'm brown, or Asian American. And I'm a Christian; therefore, I will address racism and rioting from a biblical point of view. Here are my thoughts on these issues.

1. There's only one race on earth, and that is Adam's race. Regardless of your skin color, your origin can be traced back to Adam (Gen. 1–2). We should therefore view ourselves as belonging to the same Adamic race. Having the same blood, we should love, and not hate, each other.

2. Since we have the same race, you can't say that your race is better than other races. In fact, it doesn't make sense to think that your race is superior to other races, since there's only one race. Thus, to be a racist is inconsistent with the Bible. I think we see racism at its worst in the genocide of approximately six million Jews during Hitler's time. Hitler thought that the Jews were an inferior group of people, "fit for enslavement, or even extermination."

3. Whether you're black, brown, red, white, or yellow, your life matters to God because he created you in his image (Gen. 1:26–27). My life matters not because I'm brown but because I bear God's image. Black lives matter not because of their color but because they are made in God's image.

4. Since every life is created in God's image, all lives (black, brown, red, white, and yellow) are equal. We should therefore treat every life with equal importance. George Floyd's life was as important as the lives of those Nigerian Christians brutally murdered by jihadist Fulani herdsmen and Boko Haram.

According to genocidewatch.com, "350 Nigerian Christians were massacred in the first two months of 2020 . . . Nigeria has become a killing field of defenseless Christians. Reliable sources show that between 11,500 and 12,000 Christians have been massacred since June 2015 when the Buhari Government of Nigeria came to power. Jihadist Fulani Herdsmen accounted for 7,400 murders of Christians. Boko Haram committed 4000 killings of Christians."

Imagine: since 2015 about twelve thousand black lives were murdered in Nigeria! Right now there are demonstrations around the world, including England, Germany, and Canada, against the murder of George Floyd. Yet I can't help but wonder why we also don't hear an outcry regarding the mass killing of black lives in Nigeria? Is it because Nigerian lives are not as important as the lives of those living in the United States? I'm not minimizing the horrible murder of Floyd, nor am I saying that police brutality should not be peacefully protested. However, if we believe that all lives matter, we should treat every single life with equal worth. We should not pick and choose what life we want to value.

5. Since God's image is sacred and since every life is made in God's image, every life is not only important and equal but also sacred. The murder of George Floyd was evil because it violated the sacredness of his life (Gen. 9:6). And the sacredness of one's life doesn't depend on who violates it. Floyd's life was sacred not because it was violated by a white police officer. Even if he was murdered by a black police officer, his life was still sacred.

Sadly, if a black life was killed by another black person, or if a white life was killed by a black person, we don't see the same degree of protest, as if black lives matter only when they are killed by a white person. When was the last time you heard a strong demonstration because a black man was killed by a black police officer? Every life matters because every life is sacred;



and thus, I plead with the Black Lives Matter movement that they also protest against the murder of unborn innocent babies in the wombs of every black woman. The lives of these aborted unborn babies were as sacred as George Floyd's life.

According to Grand Rapids Right to Life, "Abortion is not just a woman's issue. It's a human rights issue. . . . Abortion is the number one killer of black lives in the United States. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, abortion kills more black people than HIV, homicide, diabetes, accident, cancer, and heart disease . . . combined."

6. God has gifted us in the United States with the First Amendment, which guarantees "the freedom of speech" and "the right of the people peaceably to assemble." Constitutionally, you have all the right to protest against the injustice done to George Floyd. But according to the First Amendment, you must do so "peaceably." Therefore, you have no right to loot, hurt police officers and set their vehicles on fire, or vandalize and ruin buildings. This is not your right! After all, what does looting have to do with the murder of Floyd? Do you think it will help solve the issue? The injustice done to Floyd does not license you to do lawlessness. My heart was grieved with what happened to Floyd, but my heart was equally grieved with the riots caused by lawless protesters.

God says, "Repay no one evil for evil, but give thought to do what is honorable in the sight of all. If possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all. . . . Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good" (Rom. 12:17–21, English Standard Version).

7. Racism is still very much alive in our country. We can either ignore this problem and pretend it doesn't exist, or face and address it. Fellow Christians, we should deal with the issue of racism with the same force that we give to the issues of abortion and same-sex marriage. To my fellow pastors, we should also be preaching against the sin of racism.

8. The only remedy for racism is the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ. Racism says, "I'm ethnically superior to you." The gospel says, "We equally matter before God because both of us are created in his image." Racism violates the sanctity of life. The gospel treats every life as sacred. Racism begets hatred and violence. The gospel begets love and peace. Racism divides. The gospel brings reconciliation not only between you and God but also between you and your enemies. Racism harms and kills. The gospel heals and gives everlasting life through faith in Jesus Christ (John 3:16). Racism resents. The gospel forgives.

"Let all bitterness and wrath and anger and clamor and slander be put away from you, along with all malice. Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you" (Eph. 4:31–32).

What we therefore desperately need today in our country is the gospel. And here's the beauty of the gospel—in Christ we become all one. "There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus" (Gal. 3:28).

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Meeting with God: The Word Read and Preached in Worship



Mr. Michael R. Kearney

Our Worship, Chapters 14, 24–29

Worship is a holy conversation between God and his people. The previous installment of this series on Abraham Kuyper's book *Our Worship* considered several elements of worship in which the congregation speaks to God: through prayers, songs, and offerings. Meanwhile, God speaks to the congregation primarily through the reading of Scripture, preaching, and the administration of the sacraments. Here we will consider Kuyper's commentary on the first two elements of God's speech in worship, before concluding in the next and final article with a discussion of the sacraments.

Reading Scripture to Hear God Speak

Kuyper calls us to reexamine our liturgical assumptions for the practice of reading the Bible in worship. In the history of the Reformed liturgy, Kuyper traces three reasons why the church might include reading in worship: to build the congregation's familiarity with Scripture, to fill time before the formal opening of worship, or to provide a larger context for the sermon about to be preached (159–62). Kuyper considers the first rationale no longer relevant in an age of much greater biblical literacy than the medieval church possessed.¹ He condemns the second rationale because the Scriptures ought never to be used as background noise or filler material. And he expresses reservations about the third rationale because not every passage of Scripture provides the kind of context that would assist the congregation in understanding the sermon.

But there is a more fundamental purpose for Scripture reading in worship, and that is to hear God

speaking directly to the congregation (162). There is a great deal of biblical warrant for the practice of reading the Word of God publicly (Neh. 8:1–8; Col. 4:16; 1 Thess. 5:27; Rev. 1:3).² As Kuyper suggests, the pronouncement of the Scriptures in the assembly of believers involves a dynamic that transcends the personal devotional experience of reading the Bible at home. When the Scriptures are read aloud in worship, God speaks to his gathered people, directly and audibly. If this is the case, Scripture reading is a liturgical activity that commands our utmost attention and diligence.

The passages to be read at each service should be chosen carefully for their spiritual weight and applicability. Kuyper flirts briefly with the idea of a coordinated schedule of weekly readings for the churches, like the lectionary. Ultimately he dismisses this practice, fearing that it assigns an unduly mystical significance to the Scriptures (163).

Reading the Scriptures in worship also helps to counter an exclusive focus on the minister as the leader of the assembly and the sermon as the only

important part of the service (103–6). For this reason, Kuyper encourages churches to assign the task of Scripture reading to an elder rather than to the minister. Such an elder must possess gifts of understanding and oral delivery, and he should prepare the passage to be read ahead of time so as not to be surprised by the emphasis of the sentences or the pronunciation of foreign names (164). The reading should always be conducted by a member of the consistory, lest it communicate the idea that Scripture reading is inferior to the other activities of worship (165).³

Preaching to Proclaim the Gospel

Kuyper's discussion of Scripture reading, a frequently overlooked part of worship, prepares us to consider the far more familiar activity of preaching without losing the idea of liturgical awareness. For the preacher who recognizes his liturgical responsibility, "his text will not be the hook on which he hangs some interesting ideas, but he has to give the congregation something from God and in his name" (189). The notion of the assembly of believers transforms the activity of preaching from a mere lecture in an auditorium to a segment of a divinely initiated conversation in which both God and the congregation possess essential roles.

Kuyper stresses that preaching is not merely instruction, and the minister is not merely what some denominations call a "teaching elder" (190–92).⁴

In its fullest sense, preaching is proclamation. In every sermon there resides one fundamental message which presses the congregation beyond an interesting collection of facts to hear the clear call of the Spirit on their lives individually and together (193). The goal of preaching is to move the congregation—not to arouse mere sentimentality, but to accomplish “the stirring of our whole person” (194). Preaching must move the congregation further down the path of holiness and devotion to God in every aspect of their lives. For this motion to occur, the preacher must remember two things: his obligation to bear one particular instruction from God to his congregation each week, and his own need to be stirred by what he preaches (195).

As we have seen in earlier installments, the minister bears a complex role in the service. To be sure, he is a brother among brothers, and his relationship to his congregation should always remain intimate and friendly (200). But when he preaches, the minister also steps into a role that mirrors the position of God toward the assembly (196). His task is not to fulfill the congregation’s stylistic preferences but to maintain a simple, direct, and personable tone that strikes the spiritual imagination of the hearers (197). The preacher should not direct his sermon primarily to unbelievers or hypocrites who may lurk within the ranks of the visible church, but he should speak to the congregation as an assembly of presumed believers. At the same time, this gospel proclamation to the assembled saints will also “unmask the hypocrite and either move him to repentance or put the fear of God in him” (199).

Preaching as a Liturgical Act

It would be easy to classify Kuyper’s treatment of preaching as a foray

into hermeneutics or homiletics—the arts of preparing and expositing a passage. But Kuyper never loses sight of his primary goal, which is to explore the liturgical dimensions of the activity of preaching. As a result, his discussion is relevant not just for preachers but also for those who sit under the ministry of the Word each week. Understanding the liturgical dimensions of preaching is a prerequisite for maximizing the benefits of hearing it.

Because preaching is liturgical, it is inadequate to describe the gatherings of the church merely as “preaching services” while minimizing or neglecting the other essential activities of worship (166). In fact, Kuyper identifies four sections in the historic Reformed liturgy: the service of confession and absolution, the service of the Word, the service of prayer, and the service of the sacraments (171). The liturgical nature of preaching mandates that the church establish markers in space and time to set the sermon apart as a distinct entity within the order of worship.

One such marker is Kuyper’s recommendation that “the minister ought not to enter the pulpit until it is time for the sermon” (170). The pulpit is an architectural feature of the sanctuary—often quite prominent in Reformed churches—designed specifically for preaching, and ministers should not generate liturgical confusion by using it for other purposes. By extension, Kuyper also implies that the pulpit should not be used by other participants in the worship service for activities such as leading singing or making announcements.

Another recommendation is to pay attention to the specific liturgical function of the prayer before the sermon (172). This ought to be a

particular and brief prayer for the Spirit to illuminate the Scriptures and to speak through the sermon the minister is about to deliver. The prayer should not grow to encroach upon the general prayer for the needs of Christendom or to repeat the themes of the prayer of confession. A proper pre-sermon prayer simply invokes God’s blessing on the preaching, and as an additional benefit it awakens the congregation’s interest in the message it is about to hear (173).

The Preacher’s Liturgical Responsibility

Although Kuyper’s most detailed recommendations in this section bear primarily upon ministers, all church members stand to benefit from examining the purpose and process of preparing to preach. Perhaps Kuyper possessed firsthand experience as an overscrutinized *dominie*, for he repeatedly stresses the need for ministers to maintain the freedom to develop their own preaching styles and hone their particular talents (167). The preacher’s task is not to emulate the most famous orators of the Christian church, but rather to exercise the humble talent of preaching, “as an earnest and loving response to God, by constant and faithful effort week after week to penetrate the meaning of Scripture as deeply as he can” (168). This involves the dual activity of careful preparation and patient waiting upon the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

The liturgically aware preacher will give careful thought to the process by which he chooses each week’s sermon text. Kuyper outlines three possible methods: relying on the prompting of the Spirit week by week, preaching through a prearranged liturgical calendar of texts, or preaching through entire books or sections of the Bible in order (178–81). He favors leaving

the choice of the sermon text to the discretion of the individual minister.⁵ But here, too, the minister bears a liturgical responsibility.

Preaching involves both short-term and long-term goals (181–85). In the short term, the preacher must craft an effective sermon on a particular topic each week. In the long term, the minister must pursue a plan for building up the spiritual knowledge and maturity of his congregation over the course of months and years. When a pastorate becomes unfruitful, Kuyper suggests that the pastor may be continuing to meet his short-term goals of preparing individual sermons while leaving the congregation's long-term needs for

growth and nourishment unfilled. An effective long-term ministry will involve “a steady enrichment of spiritual life through increased faith and grace resulting from Christ’s work” (184). The liturgically aware preacher should “preach for change” (185).

The minister who understands weekly worship as the gradual formation of Christian attitudes and behavior among the assembly of believers will not be surprised or frustrated if this change takes years or even decades.

Moreover, the congregants who possess this formative understanding of weekly worship will come to the service of the Word each Lord’s Day ready to be edified and built up. In the reading and preaching of Scripture, the congregation is “built in such a

way that the walls of salvation and spiritual life rise higher in their midst” (201). A holy and transformative event takes place in the ministry of the Word each week. This is why the minister ends the sermon with the solemn pronouncement of the “Amen,” invoking the blessing of God on what has been heard (205). The structure and pattern of this weekly liturgy of reading and preaching bring about a gradual but enduring transformation of the church into the image and likeness of Christ.

Questions for Reflection and Discussion

1. What are some benefits of reading the Bible out loud as opposed to silently?



2. What details of your church's order of worship indicate that the ministry of the Word is about to begin?
3. What are some remarkable sermons you have heard over the course of your Christian walk? What made them so memorable?
4. How can we prepare for preaching each week with our own spiritual transformation in mind?

1. Today we might consider whether biblical literacy has now declined to a point where this function of public Scripture reading might once again be useful. See Barna Group, "The Bible in America: Six-Year Trends," June 15, 2016, <https://www.barna.com/research/the-bible-in-america-6-year-trends/>.
2. Scholars of communication point out that almost all reading, even reading by oneself, was done out loud until at least the fourth or fifth century AD. See Alberto Manguel, *A History of Reading*, 2nd ed. (New York: Penguin, 2014).
3. The editor of *Our Worship* infers that Kuyper would have placed the weekly Scripture reading after the recitation of the Apostles' Creed and accompanying psalm and prior to the prayer before the sermon (xl).
4. Of course, all preaching contains an element of explanation and instruction, and instruction is the main purpose of catechetical preaching (190).
5. Note that this discussion applies primarily to the morning worship service in the Dutch Reformed liturgy. The afternoon or evening sermon has traditionally been devoted to an exposition of a section of the Heidelberg Catechism, a practice still recommended in the Church Order of the United Reformed Churches in North America (Article 40).

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Bible Studies on Jonah

From Death to Life

(Jon. 1:17; 2:10)

Rev. William Boekestein



Most of life's conflicts have an outer front and an inner front. The outer front is the storm that people can see, the circumstances that rattle us. The inner front is the hidden storm, the violent movements of the soul. Jonah certainly faced an external conflict. At his own request the sailors, whom he first hoped would help him escape his divine commission, had thrown him into an angry sea. At the end of the first chapter Jonah is literally drowning.

But Jonah's soul was also agitated. "In the struggle of faith," says John Calvin, "there are internal conflicts."¹ Jonah sensed, perhaps for the first time, that he was officially not in control of his life. He finally seemed to take seriously the battle for his soul. This conflict is a turning point in Jonah's life. Don't expect perfection. Jonah's behavior in Nineveh is massively disappointing. In the second half of the book it is evident that his heart is still painfully out of tune from God's. Jonah has only "a small beginning of [the] obedience" God requires of us.² But, after this crisis, Jonah was ready to go to Nineveh. He was willing to listen to God. He had quit running. Even reluctant obedience is an improvement over brazen rebellion. Like Jacob, Jonah wrestled with God and his life was changed.

By understanding Jonah's crisis we can learn to grow through life's storms. The part of the narrative neatly bookended by references to the great fish presents five phases to Jonah's internal struggle of faith.

Jonah Despaired of His Life

Scripture both states and poetically describes the context of Jonah's prayer as a drowning scene. When the sailors grabbed Jonah to throw him overboard everyone on the ship believed they were carrying out an execution. Jonah wasn't being dramatic: the floods truly surrounded him and the waves went over his head (Jon. 2:3). The deep closed around him. The sea was suffocating him (v. 5). Jonah "called out to the Lord" (v. 2, English Standard Version) as a man who was being buried alive under water.

The background is a deep blue gradient with stylized, wavy bands of lighter blue representing ocean waves. At the top, there are dark blue, scalloped shapes representing clouds. In the center, a large, dark blue whale is swimming. Inside the whale's body, there is a circular cutout showing a silhouette of a person kneeling in prayer. Several small, white fish are scattered throughout the water.

So confident was Jonah of his imminent death that he could say, “Out of the belly of Sheol I cried” (v. 2). Sheol is the realm of the dead. Jonah’s language makes clear that he believed he was leaving this earth: “I went down to the land whose bars closed upon me forever” (v. 6). The pit from which God brought back Jonah’s life “signifies the grave or realm of the dead . . . He was not simply spared from serious risk. He was actually snatched up from the grave, as it were.”³

Jonah’s crisis was a death sentence. In God’s hands it was also a much needed gift. Charles Spurgeon wrote, “Most of the grand truths of God have to be learned by trouble; they must be burned unto us with the hot iron of affliction, otherwise we will not truly receive them . . . We discover many secrets in the caverns of the ocean,

which though we had soared to heaven, we never could have known.”⁴ How can this thought encourage you in your trouble? How is God revealing your weakness to manifest his strength? What pressure is he putting on you to make you cry out to him? Thank God that he puts upon all of his children something like a sentence of death “to make us rely not on ourselves but on God who raises the dead” (2 Cor. 1:9).

God Forced Jonah to Reflect

All at once Jonah could breathe. Not well, probably. But well enough. Eventually it became clear to Jonah: “The LORD appointed a great fish to swallow up Jonah. And Jonah was in the belly of the fish three days and three nights” (Jon. 1:17). As relieved as he was to be alive, Jonah had entered a time of solitary confinement. God could easily have rescued Jonah less dramatically. He could have placed his chastened prophet back on deck, in the company of a captive audience of crew members, with a stiff breeze blowing the ship back to Joppa. Instead, he was alone in a dark, damp, smelly cell.

What did Jonah do in the fish?

The answer might elude those of us whose minds have been poisoned to fear solitary times of reflection. “Jonah is in the fish thinking, learning,” and probably more psychologically alert than he has ever been.⁵ Jonah’s predicament in the fish invites us to answer this question: “What do you do when you can’t do anything?” When you are left alone because your social plans fell through? When you are threatened by the potentially paralyzing fear that all your best options have been eliminated? When your conscience is so troubled that everything you do feels wrong? Jonah had been busy doing. Now he had to be. He had to face the stern morning of consequences, alone, in the reflection room God had provided.

What if Jonah had a smartphone while he was in the belly of the fish?

To put it differently, are we even capable of experiencing the kind of thoughtful, undistracted moments that are essential for growth? We are increasingly being warned that our minds are becoming “wrecked by constant distraction . . . unfamiliar

with concentration.”⁶ Psychologically, we fear boredom. So we do what we can to avoid it. But if we are terrified of being bored we will rarely engage in the kind of deep thinking necessary for rich self-knowledge.

Jonah had no choice: God locked him inside the monastery of a great fish, alone in a dark, tight place with just his thoughts. He found that being bored can be life changing. We do have a choice. We need to resist the urge to fritter away with digital distractions potentially life-changing solitary moments. We need to find ways to engage in the historic disciplines of silence, meditation, solitude, and self-examination.

Jonah Faced God’s Anger over His Sin

When Jonah declared to the sailors God’s will—“hurl me into the sea . . . it is because of me that this great tempest has come upon you”—he was accepting God’s death penalty against rebels. Let’s be blunt. Jonah wasn’t merely drowning. God was waterboarding his prophet for his disobedience. Jonah acutely perceived that “he was utterly cast away by God.”⁷ The runaway prophet had accomplished more than he bargained for. He had wanted to flee from God (1:3). Now, as he sank beneath the water reality set in: “I am driven away from your sight” (Jon. 2:4). When Jonah’s soul fainted within him (v. 7) his lungs weren’t merely losing oxygen; his heart was losing hope. His soul fainted within him. Calvin reads the phrase like this: Jonah’s soul recoiled upon him. His anxiety stirred up into an incoherent mess without any hope of rescue.⁸ His “soul collapsed and fell in upon itself.”⁹

Jonah was slowly dying, as he felt it, under God’s angry hand. “He was almost sunk down to hell.”¹⁰ Jonah wants us to know that he was as good

as dead, and not just physically. As he plumbed the depths of the sea he entered a sort of spiritual hell; “he was coming to see something of his own wretched condition and his spiritual bankruptcy.”¹¹ He became terrified to lose God’s smiling face. Only a miracle could save him from drowning. It would take a similar miracle to save him from eternally self-destructing.

Have you had this experience? Forget about the specifics. The details and severity of your story don’t have to mesh with Jonah’s. But like both Timothy and Paul you must come to know yourself as a hell-deserving sinner. If you’ve always assumed that you deserve God’s kindness it may be a sign that you are trusting in your sense of deserving and not in Christ.

Jonah “Remembered the Lord”

For the first time in this book we hear someone cry out not to a god, or even to the true God, but to “my God” (2:6). Jonah “came to himself” (Luke 15:17). By faith he realized that how things were was not how they had to be. He was a guilty sinner. He had messed up his life. But even from that far country, in that tight place, Jonah saw God as the rewarder of those who diligently seek him (Heb. 11:6). He would again look toward God’s temple (Jon. 2:4). Faith allowed him to hope. “He believed. He did not perceive.” He looked through his circumstances to God’s promises. Faith is not oblivious to despair. How could he escape feeling despair, squeezed as he was into the belly of the fish? But by faith “you outlive—you live down—your despair.”¹² God moved Jonah to declare that “salvation belongs to the LORD” (v. 9).

Have you? Faith is a hopeful surrender to the God of power and grace.

God Gave Jonah New Life

“The LORD spoke to the fish, and it vomited Jonah out upon dry land” (2:10). A man who had, by all appearances, drowned to death was alive again. As in creation God spoke and life sprang from non-life. Jonah foreshadows the experience of every converted sinner.

He also foreshadows the experience of the Savior of every converted sinner. Is there a closer thematic scriptural parallel than the Gospel writers’ descriptions of the cross and the resurrection? The creed teaches us to confess: Jesus “descended into hell.” But the theme of Christ’s descent was played out a millennium earlier. Jonah went down to Joppa (1:3), down into the ship (1:3), and down to the bottom of the sea (2:6). Jonah descended into “the belly of hell” (2:2, King James Version). This terrible phrase summarizes Jesus’ whole state of humiliation; down, down, down, into hell he went. He suffered “unspeakable anguish, pain, and terror of soul, on the cross but also earlier.”¹³ In his descent into hell Christ was truly “under the power of death.”¹⁴ In his soul Jesus tasted the pain of hell.¹⁵ In his death Jesus felt “in himself the anger and severe judgment of God, even as if he had been in the extreme torments of hell, and, therefore, cried with a loud voice, ‘My God, My God, why hast Thou forsaken Me?’ (Ps. 22:1; Matt. 27:46).”¹⁶ One sixteenth-century Reformed confession says that in his descent Christ underwent “with the multitude in the nether regions, the horror of eternal death as if hand in hand with them.”¹⁷

But Christ wasn’t held down by death. Instead “He battled with the power of hell, to break and destroy it.”¹⁸ Because Christ suffered as the innocent one, hell had no proper hold on him; he had to be released! Calvin reminds us that the Father was never angry with Jesus. “For how

could he have been indignant against his Son whom he loved so much, and in whom he was so well pleased?”¹⁹ Christ felt God’s anger because of how truly he took our sins upon him. But even on the cross the Father was pleased with his Son. From eternity past the Holy Trinity covenanted to redeem the elect through the humility and exaltation of the Son. As Jesus sunk into hell God’s rescue plan was accomplished (John 19:28). Christ could truly say “It is finished.” God’s justice has been satisfied. Sin’s curse has been cancelled. The believer’s righteousness has been perfected. Could the Father be any prouder? Because of Christ’s innocence he would endure the cross and take up again the glory of the Godhead. Christ emerged from the grave the victor over sin and Satan!

When Jonah stepped out of the fish he symbolized new life coming out of death. Imagine the sun breaking through the clouds of an unnaturally terrible storm. More important, God’s face is shining. The optimistic reader will even anticipate that things are not quite as hopeless for Nineveh as the first verse of this book suggested. Life can come from death. God is the author of resurrection stories. Those who believe in him are delivered from spiritual death (John 11:25–26) and anticipate the resurrection of the body. Jonah helps us anticipate that day when God will say the word and the domains of death will give up their dead (Rev. 20:13).

What can you do with this? You can love the Lord because of his deep love for you. You can start walking with God according to his will. You can begin to pay the vow that you made when you entrusted your life to God’s care. You can prepare for God to ask hard things from you. You can know that God never asks anything from you apart from the risen and reigning Christ who energizes your life.

1. John Calvin, *Commentaries on the Twelve Minor Prophets*, vol. 3 (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1989), 79.

2. Heidelberg Catechism Q/A 114.

3. Douglas Stuart, *Hosea–Jonah*, Word Biblical Commentary 31, ed. Bruce M. Metzger, David A. Hubbard, and Glen W. Barker (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1988), 477.

4. Charles Spurgeon, *Spurgeon’s Sermons*, vol. 3: *Salvation of the Lord* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House 1987), 194.

5. Stuart, *Hosea–Jonah*, 473.

6. Cal Newport, *Deep Work: Rules for Focused Success in a Distracted World* (New York: Grand Central Publishing, 2016), 159.

7. Calvin, *Commentaries*, 79.

8. Calvin, *Commentaries*, 84.

9. Hugh Martin, *The Prophet Jonah: His Character and Mission to Nineveh* (London: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1958), 196.

10. Calvin, *Commentaries*, 85.

11. Sinclair Ferguson, *Man Overboard: The Story of Jonah* (Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 2015), 35.

12. Martin, *Prophet Jonah*, 190–91.

13. Heidelberg Catechism, Q/A 44.

14. Westminster Larger Catechism, Q/A 50.

15. *Emden Examination of Faith, The Reformed Confessions of the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries in English Translation*, ed. James T. Dennison Jr., vol. 2 (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 2010), 47–48.

16. *Confession of Congregation of Geneva, Reformed Confessions*, 2:98.

17. *Waldensian Confession of Mérindol (1543), The Reformed Confessions of the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries in English Translation*, ed. James T. Dennison Jr., vol. 1 (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 2008), 453.

18. *Calvin’s Catechism (1545), Reformed Confessions*, 1:478.

19. *Calvin’s Catechism (1537), Reformed Confessions*, 1:370.

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You have not come to what may be touched, a blazing fire and darkness and gloom and a tempest . . . But you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem” (Heb. 12:18, 22)

In the previous article I mentioned that we had been reading through the book of Hebrews for our morning devotions. Hebrew is a fascinating book for me because it shows the contrasts and the continuity between the Old and the New Testaments. We don't know who wrote this book, but we know that the primary focus of it is on Jesus Christ. It presents powerful arguments in defense of Jesus Christ as being superior to all the persons and practices of the Old Testament. As we were reading, we came to this passage from Hebrews 12:18–19. In a couple of sentences it presents a sharp contrast. The author is writing to Jewish Christians who had been scattered in the dispersion and were now widely scattered in the Roman Empire. The author, whoever that might be, is trying to connect for them in their minds the relationship between their Jewish history and their new life in Christ.

In the passage he sets forth that contrast in unmistakable terms: “You have not come to what may be touched, a blazing fire and darkness and gloom and a tempest . . . But you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem” (Heb. 12:18, 22, English Standard Version). Frequently, when you encounter the word “but” you can expect a radical shift in direction or emphasis. That is what the writer of Hebrews is doing at this point. He is presenting two different scenes which are radically different in character. What is he talking about? How are we to understand this?

The answer requires us to go back to Exodus 19. This chapter serves as a prelude to God's giving the Law on

Mount Sinai. In our worship services, it would serve as a fitting introduction to the reading of the Law.

The Context

When we go back to the beginning of Exodus 19, we notice that “it is in the third month” since the Israelites left Egypt. They have been wandering in the wilderness. They have crossed the Red Sea on dry ground. They have witnessed the total destruction of Pharaoh's army, all drowned in the Red Sea. God has deliberately brought them to the foot of Mount Sinai, the highest mountain in the Sinai Peninsula. God tells Moses to have his people camp before the mountain because he has some important instructions for them. He is going to give

What God is doing through these ten plagues is demonstrating the fact that he is a

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God who will not tolerate any substitutes.



them the laws by which they are to live. He will present the Ten Commandments on two tables of stone, but he is going to give them much more. As you read through the rest of Exodus, you realize that God's Law is comprehensive. It is going to take days to deliver it all. God calls Moses to come up on the mountain, but he tells Moses to give specific instructions to his people.

- Make certain that you wash your clothes. Also, understand that everyone needs to take a bath. You are standing before Almighty God.
- Make certain that no one touches the mountain. If you touch it, you will die.
- Make certain that none of your sheep or goats or cattle or camels touch it either. If they do, they will die.
- Stand back and listen carefully!

The Characterization

As you reflect on this passage, you notice something rather strange. God comes to his people in different forms, in different characters.

When he wanted to get them out of Egypt, he presented himself as a perfect young lamb that had to be slain. As they escape, being pursued by Pharaoh, he presents himself as a pillar of cloud by day and as a pillar of fire by night. When we get to Mount Sinai, he presents himself as a thunderstorm and violent earthquake. He makes smoke cover the mountain and then makes it shake and rattle. That characterization prompts us to go back even further. We need to look at the plagues.

The Plagues

We need to go back into the earlier chapters of Exodus to gather information about the ten plagues that God used against the Egyptians. The first plague is reported to us in Exodus 7:17–24. Notice that

by a simple act of God the entire Nile River turns to blood. You can easily gloss over that and notice that Pharaoh hardened his heart once again and was not impressed. But reflect on the Nile for a minute. It is the largest river in the world and drains more land than does the Mississippi. It is more than forty-five hundred miles long, rising in South Sudan. That entire river turns to blood. All the fish in it die and float along the banks. You cannot drink the water. You cannot use it for irrigation. The power of God is truly awesome. It ought to send fear into your hearts and mine.

But the magnitude of that river and God's power over it is only one facet that we need to look at. The Nile River is also worshipped as a god by the Egyptians. The Egyptians are notorious for the number of idols that they worship. Various Egyptologists have counted more than two thousand separate gods that they worship. The Nile River had two primary gods associated with it: Hapi, the god of the Nile, and Osiris, who was worshipped as the life stream of the Nile.

If you study the ten plagues that God sent against Egypt, you will discover that each one of the ten plagues is focused on one or more of the Egyptian deities. They are notorious for their multifaceted idolatry. God is not only demonstrating his awesome power. He is also claiming victory over the various gods that they worship. He is destroying their gods!

What God is doing through these ten plagues is demonstrating the fact that he is a jealous God who will not tolerate any substitutes. When he gives the Law on the top of Mount Sinai, he declares that in unmistakable language: "You shall not make for yourself a carved image, or any likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth

beneath, or that is in the water under the earth. You shall not bow down to them or serve them, for I the LORD your God am a jealous God" (Ex. 20:4–5). God is referring to all those idols and carved images that he destroyed with those ten plagues.

While Moses is up on the mountain getting the rest of the Law from God, his foolish people violate those first two commandments. They persuade Aaron to build a golden calf, which they worship as the god who rescued them from slavery in Egypt. How incredibly stupid could they be? Don't they realize how utterly wicked that was? Did they not remember the promises they had just made?

God sees, and he sends Moses down to do something. Moses is so upset that he throws down and breaks the two tables of the Law that God himself had written. Then God himself comes down and threatens to wipe out the entire Jewish people. He threatens to kill them all. He did that once before at the time of Noah. Moses argues with him and persuades God to relent, asking what the Egyptians and surrounding nations would think if God carried out his threat. At the same time, God informs Moses and all his people that he is a jealous God. In fact, he says, my "name is Jealous" (Ex. 34:14). That is one way that God characterizes himself.

The Passover

When we go back to the tenth plague, we find that God characterizes himself in a very different way. He is not only a jealous God who can destroy all the idols of Egypt. He is also a lamb. God is using that tenth plague to teach his people about himself. He presents the picture of a year-old, perfect lamb who has to die. That lamb will be the one who releases them not only from slavery in Egypt but also from the slavery of sin. Without going into

great detail, that lamb will save them from Pharaoh but also will be the executioner who kills the firstborn child and firstborn animal in every Egyptian home. Hundreds of thousands of Egyptians will die that same night if they are not covered by the blood of the lamb. Jesus Christ, that Lamb, is a double-edged sword. He saves his people, and he destroys his enemies.

The March

As the Israelites leave Egypt, God presents himself in a third distinct manner. He now appears as a pillar of cloud, separating his people from the pursuing Egyptian army. During the day, he is a pillar of cloud so thick that no one can get through it or see through it. At night, that pillar turns to fire. God is the great protector of his people. He will keep them safe. Pharaoh's army can follow their tracks, but they cannot see them or reach them.

The Mountain

Now, after marching through the wilderness for more than two months, God brings them to Mount Sinai, the highest mountain in the Sinai Peninsula. God tells them to wait while he calls Moses to come up to the mountain with him. The mountain is covered with smoke because the Lord had come down on the mountain as fire. God presents himself as fire, as thunder, as lightning, and as an earthquake, all accompanied by loud trumpet blasts. God also issues two distinct commands, both of which would strike fear into the hearts of his people. The first is, be sure to wash

your clothes. You and your bodies are dirty. You may not come into my presence until you wash. The second is, Do not touch this mountain. If you or any animal touches it, that person or that animal must die. Don't go over near that offender. Instead, be sure to use your bow and arrow because no hand shall touch him. He must be stoned or shot (Ex. 19:13).

The message is clear: God is holy. You are unholy. You are dirty. You need to be washed. Let us reflect quickly at our baptismal fonts. Notice that there is water in them—clear, clean water. Why? Do we want our children to drink it? No! We need to remember that all of us, including our children, our grandchildren, and even our great-grandchildren, are born dirty. We all are sinful by birth. We all have original sin and are totally depraved. We need to be washed. Fear the God of the mountain. Do not come even close!

The Contrast

Let's go now to the book of Revelation. When we read through Revelation 7:9–17, we note a tremendous contrast. We are no longer kept away from the mountain, but we and countless others, from every tribe, from every nation, are all in God's immediate presence. We are surrounding the throne, not trembling in fear but rejoicing and singing praises. Nobody is dirty. Everyone is wearing white robes, spotlessly clean. There is no fear. There is no sadness. No one has to be shot or stoned for invading the presence of the Almighty. Joy and peace predominate. Happiness

prevails. God welcomes his people into his presence.

The Cause

What has happened? Why the obvious difference? Why is it that all these people are in the immediate presence of God? Did God change his character? Did God decide that his image was unpopular? Did his advisors persuade him to create a new operational program? Did he hire a new advertising agency? The answer is an emphatic no. God still hates sin. He is still completely, unmistakably holy. He cannot tolerate evil, wicked, sinful people in his presence. No one who is evil may be in his presence.

What is the answer then? How do we explain this fantastic contrast that the writer of Hebrews calls to our attention? The answer is simple. Two words will explain it: the cross. God chose all those who are elect so that they might worship and enjoy him forever and forever. How can that be? The Almighty's plan is amazing: He would send his own Son, who is also holy and blameless, have him become a human being, so that he might take all of our sins upon himself and pay the awful price so that you and I do not have to die. He would voluntarily go to the cross and experience the worst wrath imaginable and take our place. He must die so that you and I can live. That is truly amazing grace. God hates sin so much that he will kill his own Son in the most painful, despicable manner possible. He will hang him on a cross.

But that leaves us all with questions: Are you covered by the blood of the Lamb? Did he die for you? Are you in Christ? If not, you better be afraid. You better quake with fear.

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In heaven we shall see, love and praise. Our vision will never fail, our love will never end, and our praise will never fall silent.

—Augustine



Have you ever wanted someone dead? Scripture tells us of a man who not only wanted someone dead but did everything he could to see that it happened. This man was Haman.

Many of you are familiar with the story of Esther, the queen who risked her own life to save her people. Many of you also know that Haman was the man responsible for trying to exterminate Esther's people: the Jews. He attempted it because one man, Mordecai, cousin to Esther, didn't bow to him (Esth. 3:1-6).

Jezebel. The name alone makes you think of an evil, conniving woman. The wife of Ahab, she led all of Israel into worship of the false god Baal. She manipulated, lied, and sometimes murdered to get what she wanted (1 Kings 21). When Elijah, the prophet, killed her prophets, she swore to kill him (1 Kings 19:1-2).

Do you see the commonalities between these two? They both did whatever it took to achieve and maintain power. Both were ready, out of hearts filled with murderous anger, to destroy anyone who threatened that power.

Americans are told to be like Haman; American women, like Jezebel.

No one says, "Now, girls, try to act a little less like Esther and a little more like Jezebel." But media, books, parents, tell women time and again not to let anything (or anyone) stand in the way of our dreams. And we ought to make these dreams big. We laud female CEOs, top chefs, presidents. We label these women as empowered.



There is nothing wrong with big dreams or lofty aspirations. Nor is this a piece on the merits or maladies of the women's empowerment movement. After all, men also have their fair share of pressure to aim for CEO, top entrepreneur, and so on. Suffice it to say, these messages have cultivated in women's hearts a deep need to achieve and maintain power at any cost. We effectively make power, a good gift given by a good God (2 Tim. 1:7; Luke 10:19), our ultimate aim—our idol.

In my three previous articles, I discussed how our response to failure reveals our idols. If comfort is our idol, we look to things like food, sex, or television to soothe us when we fail. If we crave approval we seek out people to pet our ego when we fail. If control consoles us, we hypermanage certain realms of our life when we've failed in others. But how do we respond to failure when power is our idol of choice? Do we go around head hunting?

Imagine this scenario: you are in line for a promotion at work. You have logged



long hours and stayed close to the right people in order to position yourself for the promotion. Then your co-worker gets the position. You failed. What is your response? If you seethe with anger, planning ways to get that co-worker fired, you probably have an inordinate (or unhealthy) desire for power.

Or, consider another scenario. Your children have always been obedient and respectful—you see to it. They respect your opinions and have done everything you suggested, whether it be where they attend college or what to wear to a job interview. Then, one of your children suddenly opposes you at every turn. That child drops out of school, dates the one person you told him or her to avoid, and hardly answers your calls. Now what? Do you find yourself ranting to your husband, or are you secretly promising to make your child's life miserable? Watch out! You may be bowing down to power.

Here I will pause to note, as I did in my previous posts, power is not evil. Power, comfort, control, and all are all gifts given by God. God even explicitly says that he gives all Christians his own power, that we may do whatever he asks of us (Col. 1:11; 2 Cor. 12:9; Isa. 40:29–31; Eph. 3:20–21). He gives kings power to punish wicked (Rom. 13:4), and church leaders power to discipline the wayward (Matt. 18:15–18). Power is not the problem. The problem is when we want the power God gives us more than we want God himself.

The problem is (like control, comfort, or approval) when we set our heart on power, we can never have enough, and it will always disappoint us. How many people after receiving one promotion are contented to stay in that position? Or what amount of obedience will make a power-hungry mom happy? Consider too, the illusive nature of power. One minute we are company CEO, the next we find ourselves packing up the office after a string of layoffs. One minute our children are like dutiful minions, the next our neighbor calls distraught over what our child did to theirs. When power is our end goal and our source of hope, it will destroy us.

Consider again the stories of Haman and Jezebel. Haman had persuaded the king to issue an irrevocable law to destroy the Jews. But upon arriving home from an exclusive meal with the king and queen, he complains, “Yet all this is worth nothing to me as long as I see Mordecai the Jew sitting at the king’s gate” (Esth. 5:13, English Standard Version). Thereupon, he built a gallows on which to hang Mordecai. Haman was hanged on these very gallows (Esth. 7:9–10). Likewise, Jezebel, after harassing and killing anyone who stood between her and her power, dies suddenly

and violently. Not minutes after her death, dogs ate all but her skull, feet, and the palms of her hands (2 Kings 9:30–37). Though both of these characters had a significant amount of power, neither was content; and both died suddenly and brutally.

I am not implying that if we struggle with power idolatry God will release us to the wild dogs. Nor do I believe that God destroyed Haman and Jezebel solely because they lusted after power. Their corruption was more comprehensive. However, I think we can conclude that God does not take idolatry—including idolatry to power—lightly (see Gen. 11; Acts 12:21–23; Luke 10:18).

Bowing down to power is an affront to God's supremacy. It is an attempt to oust God from his throne. Power worshipers are essentially saying they want the place of God in someone's (or everyone's) life. They want to dictate the rules and call the shots. They may only want it in a small sphere—complete power over husband, co-workers, children—but the desire is no less strong. Whether the sphere is large or small, this sin deserves a death like Haman's or Jezebel's.

What are we to do?

To find our answer, we need to look a story of another person who lusted after power: Nebuchadnezzar. Nebuchadnezzar was the ruler of Babylon, perhaps the most mighty empire of its time (Dan. 4:22). He it was who erected a giant statue and ordered all to bow before it. When three men, like Mordecai, refused to bow, he, in a furious rage, ordered the men burned alive. When God rescued them (as he had Mordecai), Nebuchadnezzar praised God (Dan. 3:1–4:3). However, he, not God, was still sitting on the throne of his heart. So one day, when Nebuchadnezzar was admiring his empire as something he'd built himself (though he knew it was given him from God), God made him like a wild beast (Dan. 4:28–33). But, unlike the stories of Haman and Jezebel, we don't leave Nebuchadnezzar in this state of insanity:

At the end of the days I, Nebuchadnezzar, lifted my eyes to heaven, and my reason returned to me, and I blessed the Most High, and praised and honored him who lives forever, for his dominion is an everlasting dominion,

and his kingdom endures from generation to generation;

all the inhabitants of the earth are accounted as nothing,

and he does according to his will among the host of heaven

and among the inhabitants of the earth;

and none can stay his hand

or say to him “What have you done?” (Dan. 4:34–35)

In effect, Nebuchadnezzar acknowledged that, while God may have given him a measure of power, it is God who has

ultimate power, not him. He is doing the reverse of Romans 1:21. He is honoring God as God and giving him thanks.

When we worship power in place of God, we are like Nebuchadnezzar. Like him, we act as though any sway we hold over others is a result of our own skill and ingenuity. Like Nebuchadnezzar, God calls us to repent of our false pride and acknowledge that he is Lord, not us. He is the one who gave us whatever little power we do have. He is also the one who can take it away (Job 1:21). When we see power as a gift pointing to the giver, it frees us. Power is no longer the thing that controls us; it is a tool we can use to glorify God and serve others. God may take the gift away, but he remains. And is it not much better to have the giver than the gift?

All of our idols—comfort, approval, control, and power—ask us to look to them, a created thing, for salvation and hope. They promise joy and security but destroy those very things. We cannot will our way out of idolatry. Nor if we had ten lives could we do penance enough to cover our idol worship. The only solution to our idolatry is the cross of Christ.

Christ lived a life free from idol worship (Luke 4:1–13). He was bloodied, battered, and hung on a tree—dying the death of Haman—to take the punishment our idolatry deserves. Only when

we see ourselves as beastly as Nebuchadnezzar (and every bit as prideful), and in our despair cry out to Jesus, acknowledging him as Lord, will he replace our idolatrous hearts with new hearts. Then, though these new hearts are still prone to wonder and still adept at creating new idols, the Holy Spirit begins his refining work on us; breaking down our idols one by one. And we need to cry out to him daily, asking him to continue destroying our idols and continue making us look more like him. For we will never be satisfied until we find our everything in God.

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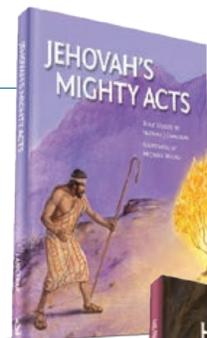


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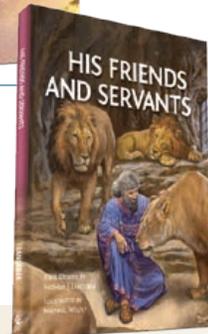
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Themes in James: Pure and Undeclared Religion and the Peril of Partiality



Mr. Gerry Wisz

To review briefly, James means by that pregnant phrase “the perfect law of liberty” the law of the Spirit and of life as opposed to the law of sin and death. The law of the Spirit and of life is the law, the only law, that grants liberty. To the extent that this kind of perfect law is known (impossible to know it perfectly here) is the extent to which the knower is at liberty. James also notes that the knower of this kind of law is a doer, and not a mere hearer, of the Word.

This also extends into a society. If a society sees the value of such a perfect law, then it will want to see that law—or at least its effects—inform all of the ways and practices of life, understanding that this is what ensures liberty, not only for a single person but for a people. The law of sin and death deceptively calls the perfect law of liberty slavery, even though it’s freeing, and even though it’s the law of sin and death that binds people into slavery.

James is interested in seeing his audience embrace the law of the Spirit and of life, to live according to its promptings and instruction so that they can leave off the habits of still living by the law of sin and death—as he mentions, anger, impatience, an unbridled tongue (which James says is a mark of self-deception). Later in James, we see warnings against, and spiritual antidotes for, partiality, love of money, and worldliness.

James wants his readers to be doers, and not mere hearers, of the Word. That means putting one’s faith into action instead of

assenting to the doctrines of the faith without living by them. That doesn’t mean he expects his readers to be sinless. He later writes, “We all stumble in many ways” (Jas. 3:2, English Standard Version), and that means James includes himself. But it does mean that we can’t rest self-satisfied in not making progress in the Christian life, nor can we remain impervious to biblical correction. That’s a dangerous place to be, indeed.

Pure and Undeclared

What does James mean by being a doer and not just a hearer of the Word? He gives us an example. “Religion that is pure and undeclared before God the Father,” he writes, “is this: to visit orphans and widows in their affliction, and to keep oneself unstained from the world” (Jas. 1:27). Do you see his redirection? Instead of giving ground to his readers’ anger, impatience, and unbridled tongues—their all-about-me orientation—he redirects them from themselves and from the world system with its lusts and demands.

And he directs them toward, first, those whose suffering is far more acute than their own, and second, toward heavenly mindedness, which will keep them from continuing to get their white robes stained by the world. After all, isn’t it the world system, with its lusts and demands, as it remains the place where they park their hearts, that stokes their anger, impatience, and carping?

A doer of the Word, according to James, involves first an other-orientation, especially in regard to those who are afflicted—those who

have no say. And second, it involves a spiritual mindfulness of staying away from sin so that one lives a life that’s pleasing to God. This works across all kinds of people of different backgrounds, cultures, callings, and life situations. That means ministry to others, especially though not only the dispossessed, and self-ministry at pursuing obedience to God. That, James writes, is religion that’s pure and undeclared. When we operate from these as a radiating center, the anger subsides, the impatience is calmed and dissipates, the unbridled tongue is no longer wagging in its hot flames.

What we call entitlements or some call the welfare state didn’t exist in James’s day. Neither did women managers or CEOs. A woman who lost a husband to an accident, violence, or sickness was essentially bereft, as were her children. This is why in Old Testament Israel, God had made a provision for widows and their children, instructing that a kinsman of the deceased husband take the widow as a wife. James is not repeating this command, but he is telling his audience to be mindful of the bereft in their midst, certainly in the Christian community.

Different Yet the Same

Today, the widow and orphans may have their day-to-day needs met, perhaps just, but they also need encouragement that comes from the gospel. Do you know anybody like that with whom you can visit? Meanwhile, if we’re looking for something to do for ourselves, besides making money, James recommends an ongoing life project: keeping ourselves

unstained from the world, even while we're fully operational in it, and even if that brings us back to trials, which will, after all, make us steadfast.

Partiality. That's James's next topic, and he shows how it has no place in the kingdom of God. There are the rich and the poor. If the rich come into your fellowship, do you treat them with special favor while ignoring the poor? Then, James writes, you have broken the whole law of God. What does he mean by this? The Hebrew mind—and these are Hebrew Christians James is writing to—followed an ethically complex system of ways and means when it came to the law of God: The Ten Commandments provided the Hebrews, and us, with the baseline for our relationship with both God and our fellow man.

But James reminds his audience not of the ins and outs of case laws, but of the Golden Rule, the second greatest of the two greatest commandments, which together summarize the law: the second greatest commandment is to love our neighbor as we love ourselves. One could also say that the sin of partiality is, as a subset, covered under the sixth commandment, "Thou shalt not kill," insofar as that commandment teaches us not to do any harm to our neighbor either by commission or omission.

But the second greatest commandment, the Golden Rule, that is, "the whole law," is what James invokes. And what it teaches is that the way we would want to be treated by others—reasonably, respectfully, justly, and mercifully—is how we should treat others. This is what makes a church a peaceable place, and by extension, it's what makes a social order healthy and habitable.

**RELIGION
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— & —
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JAMES 1:27

James's Law Keeping

If the Hebrew Christians James is writing to do not commit murder or adultery, they may think they're okay. But James is telling them that the Christian faith has to do with motives and the heart, not just refraining from obviously wicked sins. We know what the Lord Jesus says about murder and adultery from a motivational

perspective, and not just from an actual taking of a life or being unfaithful to a spouse. The welling up of hate or the lustful look, he says, arise from the same dark, subterranean pool of the flesh or the natural man that actual murder or adultery do, indicating that we're not led by the Spirit in these cases or at all in these areas.

And the same is true for partiality. Consistently ignoring someone or treating someone with disdain because they're not potentially useful to you, while treating someone else with great fanfare or favor because potentially they can butter your bread or in some other way add value to your interests, is sinful behavior. It's in disobedience to the second greatest commandment. And it's not just first-century Hebrew Christians that fall into this. We do as well.

James's audience would have been familiar with this admonition, although as it affected justice in the courts rather than in the church. Proverbs, for example, is laced with warnings not to ignore justice for the poor and disenfranchised, just because of that person's poverty, that is, because he or she is easy to dismiss. The Word of God doesn't say to show special favor to the poor, but to do justly. Likewise, there should be no special favor for the rich just because they are rich, or, what we're hearing more of today, to show special disfavor to those who have more than others just because they have more than others—but, again, to do justly. Justice in the Bible is not about income inequality; it's about equality under the law, which has its basis in equality under the second greatest commandment—love of

neighbor that governs the second table of the Ten Commandments.

Visiting our disabled son at his group home in a New Jersey shore community one Sunday, my wife and I took Mark to a nearby church where we were among the few people who didn't wear blue jeans. This particular teaching about partiality came up in the sermon. The pastor reminded the congregation that it works the other way around, too: because someone is dressed well, has a new car (we don't), has a professional job, and speaks grammatical English doesn't mean he or she's to be disdained and judged.

Lifestyle choices have consequences, certainly, but poverty doesn't automatically and thus always assume a lack of diligence and irresponsible way of living, any more than wealth always assumes greed and lack of concern for others. Theologian Sinclair Ferguson has said that wealth or poverty is neither blessing nor curse unless God make it so.

It's the kingdom of God, notably but not only the organized church, where we see a true, viable, and robust pluralism—people of various backgrounds, races, economic standing, and cultural assumptions who have all these now newly interpreted along the lines of the gospel, or hopefully so. That's the tie that binds, where otherwise there wouldn't be any tie at all. Pluralism can be healthy only within a homogenous belief system; otherwise, we're no different from the world, which James tells us has no place in the church.

Mr. Gerry Wisz

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Ministries Working for a Common Witness

Mr. Dave Vander Meer



Most of us probably know someone who is involved in a local Christian parachurch ministry. These ministries are in just about every North American community. People might volunteer at a pregnancy resource center, food pantry, rescue mission, or another ministry that provides some type of service. Many of us support independent, Reformed parachurch ministries like seminaries (Mid-America, Westminster) or Christian publishers (Reformed Fellowship), or attend conferences of a ministry (Ligonier), and many others. But if we use the word *parachurch*, people may give one a funny look, a feeling that the ministry is not legitimate.

Denominations will often have committees and agencies working within their structures. This is the case for both the Orthodox Presbyterian Church (OPC) and the Presbyterian Church in America (PCA). The Christian Reformed Church (CRC) that many of us had been a part of had agencies and committees that worked across the denomination and internationally. Some of the old names would have been the Young Calvinist Federation (YCF) or the Christian Reformed World Relief Committee (CRWRC). Another example is *The Banner*, the CRC denominational magazine. *The Outlook* (Reformed Fellowship) is not a denominational magazine.

When the United Reformed Church (URC) was formed, local consistories were going to have a much larger role in the broader church. Some of this was due to the concern that agencies and committees in the past didn't seem to have much accountability directly to the churches. When the URC started, there were no agencies and few committees; some committees even had direct consistorial involvement. Local churches would oversee missionaries. There were questions about how URC churches would interact with local parachurch ministries. Each church had to make its own decisions and would answer those questions independently of each other. But questions about how we were going to work together, instead of having agencies work on our behalf, still needed to be answered.

It is interesting that in the Lord's providence two fledgling ministries were starting and grew up with the URC. One is Reformed Youth Services, which has consistory oversight and a board, in the United States; the other, Word & Deed Ministries, with board oversight, is in Canada. The URC did not have a youth agency or a world relief and development ministry. Each ministry has a different type of oversight, but these ministries filled a void as the URC was beginning as a federation.

Organizational meetings forming Reformed Youth Services started just before the URC began. These meetings were attended by a group of men from the Chicago and Grand Rapids areas who were from churches that were Independent Reformed, Christian Reformed, and Reformed Church

in America (RCA). They had one thing in common: to promote the Reformed faith to our youth. The Kyrie convention that was overseen by Seventh Reformed Church of Grand Rapids had laid the foundation for the idea. A board was established; a director committed to the goal of promoting the Reformed faith was found in Ed DeGraaf. Around thirteen different churches climbed on board right away to start this new endeavor. Cornerstone URC of Hudsonville has been the overseeing consistory since the beginning. Over time, more churches became members of RYS. Most of the churches were United Reformed, the majority from the United States. RYS has kept a multid denominational membership.

The synod of the URC in 1999 was overtured (#2) by Classis Michigan “to encourage our churches to join the ongoing ministry of Reformed Youth Services to the youth of our denomination.”¹ While there was a fair amount of praise for RYS from the floor of synod, the overture was defeated. One of the comments made during the discussion was something to the effect of, “Are we going to endorse every organization that comes our way?” The message was, we don’t want to do that; it would take too much time and effort. Each church would decide what it was going to do. After the vote, a pastor came up to me and said that the way youth ministry is approached in their region is different from the RYS approach. I realized that day that RYS may be viewed by some as a parachurch ministry. Maybe it is because a board is involved and the point is missed that a consistory has final oversight. Synod could not endorse the work of a URC consistory that was doing something for the benefit of the federation churches and beyond. Second, is anyone going to ask for synodical endorsement because if a URC

church cannot get one, who can? Third, it is going to be hard for the URC to be united and work together on a large scale.

Word & Deed Ministries was started in 1994 and was modeled after a ministry in the Netherlands. Its mission is to help meet the spiritual and physical needs of people in the developing world in accordance with biblical principles for the glory of God. It began with a few board members from the Free Reformed Church, but soon others were asked to join. Representation from United Reformed churches were some of the first to join, as did many URCs in Canada. A few years later, Word & Deed expanded into the United States and again had early representation from URC churches. Now the majority of board members in the United States are from URC churches, including Rev. Dieleman from Trinity URC, Visalia. URC churches partnering with Word & Deed in the United States had a slower start than in Canada, but that is slowly changing as more churches become aware of and understand the ministry.

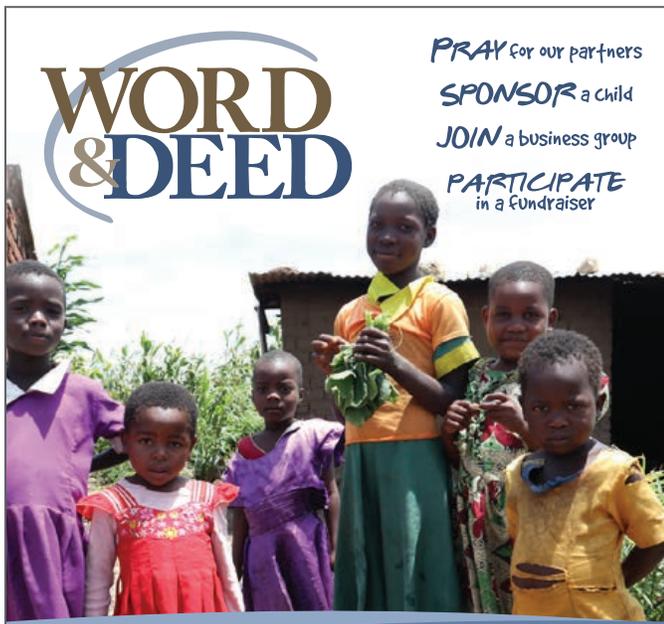
Word & Deed is viewed by many as a parachurch ministry. The question is, “Is this bad?” Is it bad that churches from smaller Reformed and Presbyterian churches, denominations, federations, or independent churches band together to make a greater impact than they could do individually? We have people from multiple churches working together for the same goal. Last year I was talking with a URC pastor about ecumenical relations with sister denominations and churches and what we could be done together. He surprised me with one of his comments. He said, “We don’t have to start anything new; we already do it through Word & Deed.”

The question often asked of parachurch ministries is, who is doing the spiritual work? How is the local church involved? Each Word & Deed project is tied to local churches. Often these pastors are involved with the projects at some level. Word & Deed has been helping and has had a relationship with churches in many countries, and it is through these partnerships that the work is being done. In India, we work with the Evangelical Reformed Church (ERC) through its ministry, Mission of Peace-Making (MPM). Rev. Anup Hiwale is the project director; his oversight previously had been through a URC church from Classis Central. Some years back it shifted to Word & Deed because of our specialization and experience. In Costa Rica, the project director of Education Plus (our partner) is Juan Carlos Ramirez, an elder in the church that Rev. Bill Green pastors. Lord Willing, Josh Vogel and his family from Covenant Christian Church (URC), Wyoming, Ontario, will be working alongside the indigenous leaders at the Word & Deed partnered projects in Quininde, Ecuador. Word & Deed works directly with the Reformed & Presbyterian Church of Northeast India, in Malawi, the Central African Presbyterian Church; and the Sudanese Reformed Church. (Some of these churches the URC is just starting to have ecumenical relations with, but Word & Deed has been working with them in different capacities and some for many years.) We are helping these local churches do their diaconal and missional ministry in their churches and community. Many of the churches above received emergency food relief assistance from Word & Deed during the COVID-19 crisis so they could provide food to their hungry church members but also to the hungry in their communities. One example is the ERC/MPM, which received

support to feed more than four hundred families for three months.

Is Word & Deed parachurch? The answer depends on one's perspective. The North American answer is yes, but to the people who are served through food relief programs, theological training, or children's projects through these local indigenous churches the answer is no. Word & Deed has no ownership of any building, and our name is not placed above the door of our partners. The ministry is local. We want it that way. One of the advantages of this is that in places where there is persecution, sometimes the law allows local indigenous Christians to function while prohibiting outside Christian ministries. Maybe in some way Word & Deed is a hybrid of a parachurch ministry.

Why do parachurch ministries start? From what I have seen, having been involved with several, they begin organically. By that I mean a group of people sees a need that is not



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being filled and work together to fill the need. How did Mid-America or Westminster seminaries start? There was a need for the proper training of men for the gospel ministry. Right to Life was started with the legalization of abortion. Christian pregnancy resource centers open as an alternative to abortion clinics, and so on. The saving of children by Christians goes back to the early church. Christians should always be trying to minister to people, especially in times of desperate need. Faithful churches can help them in their crises, point them to Christ, and nurture their faith.

Why is there a stigma that comes with the word *parachurch*? One of the main reasons is parachurch ministries can go far from their original intended purpose by losing the Christian aspect of what they were doing. Chasing after government funding can cause this to happen. When the government becomes a part of the budget, organizations open themselves to being told how to operate or what to say or not say. Another reason is as time goes on, new people, who don't have the same vision or convictions, join the ministry and might want to be more inclusive of different religions or lifestyles. Sometimes the name changes, dropping the word *Christian*, or the ministry changes to do something in the name of Christ without uttering the name of Christ. The original purpose of meeting a need but with a Christ-

centered message is lost. But this problem is not a unique parachurch problem. It can happen to churches and Christian schools as well.

Another reason why parachurch ministry can be stigmatized is that these ministries are viewed as competition to churches. Sometimes they do this to themselves by straying into areas that are specifically meant for the church. Parachurch ministries should not be holding worship services. Another reason is funding. If an agency (as in the CRC) does work and is paid through some sort of quota or ministry shares by the church, it is viewed as part of the work of the church. If there is no internal denominational agency, that same work can be viewed as less important and not part of the ministry of the church. It is no longer what we are doing together. It's not "ours," and this can lead to different ministries being pitted against each other. This can happen with seminaries, mission works, and so on. Our loyalties should be first to our local congregation, but that doesn't mean we cannot work together as URC churches or alongside other like-minded Reformed and Presbyterian churches. It is through working together for the furtherance of the kingdom of God, as stewards of his good gifts, that we can have a greater impact with a common, united witness.

What is the problem if we don't do something together? Nobody is compelled to work together. But it can show an attitude of the age we live in, one of independence and disconnectedness. The amount of work that can be done is diminished by a lack of cooperation, but also the spirit in which we work together is hampered. By not having agencies in the URC (something I am not necessarily arguing for) we have no obligation to work together. The common agency was "ours"; it was something to unite around as bigger than a single congregation. We don't have that now. Was this an unintended consequence of the RYS decision of synod 1999, that we became too independent, and now we are hampered from working together on a large scale? We have to start thinking together. We have a common faith and profession. We are called to be united.

The first half of Ephesians 4 refers to unity in the body of Christ. Ephesians 4:11–13a (English Standard Version) says, "And he gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the shepherds and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God." According to William Hendriksen, "The important lesson taught here is that . . . the entire church should be engaged in spiritual labor. . . . And during the week, too, every member should equip himself to be engaged in a definite 'ministry,' whether that be

imparting comfort to the sick, teaching, neighborhood evangelization, tract distribution, or whatever be the task for which one is especially equipped. . . . It is exactly unity that is promoted when all become busily engaged . . . each member eagerly renders service for which the Lord has equipped him."² Each of us has our place, our gifts to be used for the kingdom. Different Reformed parachurch ministries have their place in kingdom work. Hendriksen finishes his commentary on these verses by using the example of the S.W.I.M (Summer Workshop in Missions) program of the CRC, in which high school students would spend a few weeks away from home, receive some training in missions, and then witness and work in different communities. "They bring the message, teach, and organize various social and religious activities. They are not afraid to live for a while in a slum district in a close and beneficial contact with the community."³ It is a combination of Word and deed which changes the young person. Hendriksen says that the young person comes back and has more interest in Christ and his church. The program is a blessing to students and churches. Hendriksen then ends with this: "Thus, unity has been promoted, a unity of faith in Christ and of knowledge—not just intellectual but heart-knowledge—of the Lord and Savior, who, because of his majesty and greatness, is here called "the Son of God."⁴

It is easy to be critical, but then one must present a solution. The URC may no longer have agencies like we had in the CRC. Many of the Reformed ministries that some of our churches support have risen up to be viewed as "our" agencies. Each ministry has to be judged by its purpose, merits, and theology. May we unite around the many ministries that can bring us closer together locally, nationally, and internationally. Let us recognize that ministries have functioned for the benefit of Christ's church at home and around the world. Reformed parachurch ministries also have been part of our history and work hand in hand with other liked-minded churches for a common witness of Jesus Christ.

1. Acts of Synod 1999, article 37, 18, https://www.urchna.org/sysfiles/site_uploads/pubs/SL_pub3417_1.pdf.

2. William Hendriksen, *Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians and Philemon*, New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1995), *Ephesians*, 198, 199.

3. Hendriksen, *Ephesians*, 199.

4. Hendriksen, *Ephesians*, 199.

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Churches from the Old Country



Mrs.
Annemarieke
Ryskamp

This article is about the Dutch Reformed Protestants who emigrated to North America and took their faith and churches with them. They came in three waves: the first was during the 1840s after the Secession of 1834; the second was during the 1890s, after a second break with the Dutch state church took place; and the third was after the second world war, until about 1955. As these Dutch Protestants emigrated, they started new churches, joined others, or brought their churches to the new country. May this article be a teaser to read the books in the Sources section below, as this article contains only a few highlights of this fascinating part of history.

Secession, Persecution, and Emigration

Since the beginning of the eighteenth century, rationalism had been spreading all over Europe. Rationalism trusted in human reason rather than in God. Many doctrines from the Bible were rejected, and faith was severely undermined. The Reformed Church in the Netherlands became the state church in 1795. King Willem I became the head of the church in 1816 and signed a new church order. From this point on the state church was called the *Nederlandse Hervormde Kerk*, and it underwent several detrimental developments. Among the many changes, the most important concerned the doctrinal standard. It did not have to conform to God's Word anymore, which created room for liberal and unbiblical teachings, especially about the essentials like election, atonement and total depravity.

After 1810, more and more orthodox Christians published tracts and protested the change. This situation came to a head in 1834, when Hendrik de Cock was removed from his ministry in Ulrum, Groningen. De Cock received support from several other ministers, including Hendrik P. Scholte (1805–1866) and Albertus van Raalte (1811–1876). The protesters were either removed from office or never admitted to the state church, and so a new group of churches, called the Christian Separated Churches, came into existence. In 1869, they took the name Christian Reformed Churches (*Christelijke Gereformeerde Kerken*). Confusingly, the Dutch words *Hervormd* (as in the name of the state church, *Hervormde Kerk*) and *Gereformeerd* both translate to “Reformed” in English.

The state did its best to fight the existence of these new churches. Because of a Napoleonic law, gatherings of more than twenty people were prohibited, and Sunday services were forcefully disrupted, even when they were held outdoors. Ministers had to lodge soldiers in their homes and were often roughly treated. They had to pay fines, and some were even were imprisoned. Popular opinion was against them, so the congregants had to deal with mob violence and harassment.

The economic circumstances in the Netherlands of the 1840s were depressing, with economic stagnation, poor harvests, and high national debt. High taxes, the failure of 80 percent of the potato harvest in 1845, and harvest failures in subsequent years caused many more

people to become poor and extra susceptible to cholera and other contagious diseases. Politics seemed paralyzed, the elites stayed firmly in control, and there was no prospect of climbing the economic ladder.

In that time it became a popular idea to emigrate to America, where there would be plenty of land, freedom of religion, and no elites to rule people. The leaders of the Secession formed societies of interested people, and each leader left with his own group around 1846. Van Raalte settled in West Michigan; Scholte started the town of Pella in Iowa; Cornelius van der Meulen came with a group from the province of Zeeland and settled in the Holland, Michigan, area. A group from Friesland came under the leadership of Martin Ypma. An Overijssel group was led by Seine Bolks. Immigrants from Groningen founded a village east of the Holland settlement, while a group from the German border region of Bentheim christened their village Graafschap. The Dutch also settled many other places, but this article will highlight only the most influential leaders, namely Van Raalte and Scholte.

Hendrik P. Scholte

Scholte left the Netherlands later than did Van Raalte, because of the illness of his wife. His group also traveled more luxuriously on a steam ship. Scholte's wife was used to living in a cultured environment and was not eager to go to America. She was extremely disappointed when she had to live a pioneer's life in a small log cabin in Pella, so her husband built her a nice home as soon as he could.

Scholte had arranged with Van Raalte that they would meet in St. Louis and from there find land in the Mississippi delta. But Van Raalte changed the plan, and Scholte was not willing to agree to it. He considered the forests in West Michigan unsuitable for agriculture and the swampy area unhealthy. Instead, he went to St. Louis and traveled from there until he found an area with fertile land (in Iowa), which he bought. This would give him trouble later when he was selling it to the settlers.

Scholte himself was not keen on the church order, not even being one of the secessionists. He started his own church, the Christian Church of Pella, as soon as he arrived in Pella. He wanted to order his church like the apostolic church in the New Testament. This church order had ten articles based on the principles of life depicted in 1 Peter 2:9 (English Standard Version): “But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light.” The church was blessed, and for a long time Scholte remained a powerful personality in Pella. In 1854, he worked with local Baptists to found Central University. He fulfilled many necessary administrative roles and worked hard to promote the spiritual and material well-being of the people.

But opposition also came. Many people were not happy that Scholte stressed the importance of learning English and using it exclusively and as soon as possible. The perception was that he wished to Americanize everything. When Scholte continued to transact land sales in a way that many believed was not in the best interest of the citizens, his church suspended his right to preach, which resulted in his resignation. With a

small group of followers he started another little church. Meanwhile, the original congregation invited Van Raalte to come help them join the Reformed Church in America (RCA).

On August 25, 1868, Scholte died of a heart attack. His widow soon married a man who could give her a life of more exposure to cultural events.

Albertus C. Van Raalte

Van Raalte and his group came to the United States in the fall of 1846. The voyage by a three-masted ship took fifty-five days. These emigres were welcomed by Rev. Isaac N. Wyckoff of the church of Albany, New York. The support of people like Wyckoff was instrumental in Van Raalte later wanting to join the RCA.

As agreed upon, Van Raalte and his group went on their way to St. Louis, but they couldn't go further than Detroit because of the winter. From there Van Raalte investigated West Michigan, which was densely forested but seemed to him still a good place to settle. The land was cheap, which was an advantage for the poor settlers, and wood would be useful for building and heating. The books listed at the end of this article elaborate how terrible those first years of this group were. They faced nearly impossible conditions. The Dutch didn't know how to fell a tree and build shelter out of wood. Sickness also ran rampant.

Van Raalte worked alongside the people and at times shared their desperation. The harsh circumstances deepened their faith, and their faith sustained them. Despite all the sadness, they experienced spiritual joy. From the start they organized their church according to the ways of the secessionists. The first of these pioneer congregations was in the Holland colony, the second in Vriesland, the third in Zeeland, and the fourth in Overisel. By 1848, there were enough congregations to form Classis Holland. The aim was

to form a denomination that was free from government interference and patterned after the mother church. Unfortunately, this group also brought along from the old country many of their doctrinal disputes.

In 1848, Classis Holland received an invitation from the RCA to send a delegate to the General Synod of the RCA. The invitation could not be accepted due to the terrible circumstances, so Wyckoff came to visit the Dutch settlement to assure them of the friendly interest of his denomination. His offer of assistance was welcome, and the settlers were ready to listen to his proposal for closer ties with the RCA. Wyckoff sensed the colonists' fear of being subjected to human (state or denominational) authority again and assured them that they were free to leave the denomination any time. On June 5, 1850, Classis Holland was accepted into the RCA.

Van Raalte probably knew about the differences between the seceders and their American brothers and sisters but chose to overlook them out of his desire for peace and his gratitude toward them. But early on there were already signs of concern.

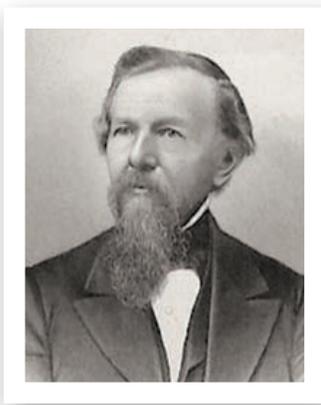
The Christian Reformed Church

Among the settlers who came later was a weaver named Gysbert de Haan, who spent a couple years in the east before coming to West Michigan. He arrived after the years of the worst hardships. He was also more aware of things that were going on in the RCA churches and was unhappy about Classis Holland having joined that denomination. Groups of other unhappy people formed, especially in Grand Rapids.

Rev. Koene Van den Bosch arrived in the middle of the disputes. He was willing to take action, as the disputes were never ending, and finally four



Hendrik P. Scholte



Albertus C. Van Raalte



Hendrik de Cock



Dr. Abraham Kuyper

Mrs. Maria Scholte



The Van Raalte home in Holland, MI
(Courtesy of Hekman Digital Archive, Calvin College)



Dutch immigrant children and an example of a Dutch Midwest Homestead

congregations submitted letters of secession from the RCA on April 8, 1857. Their main complaints were

- The RCA's use of eight hundred hymns, instead of Psalms only
- Open communion
- Not enough catechetical preaching as required by the church order
- Membership in the Freemasons among those within the RCA

For six years Rev. Van den Bosch

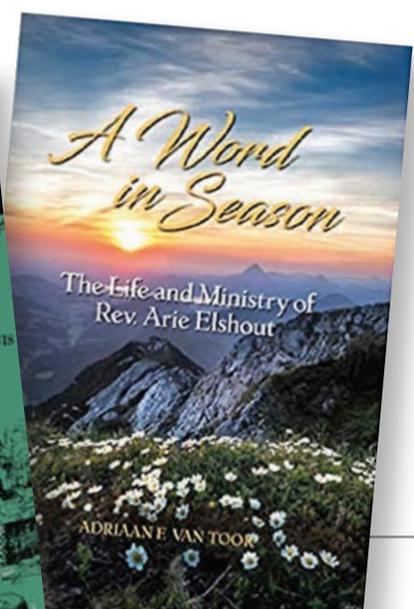
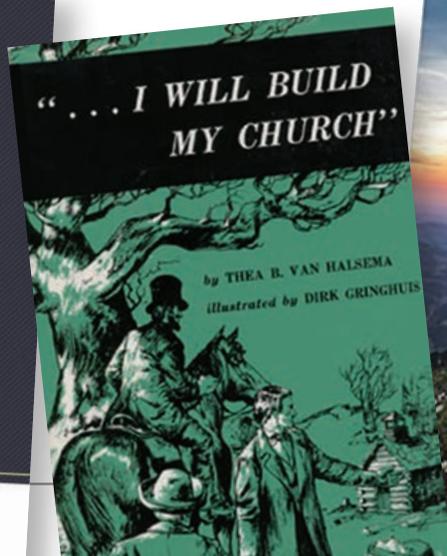
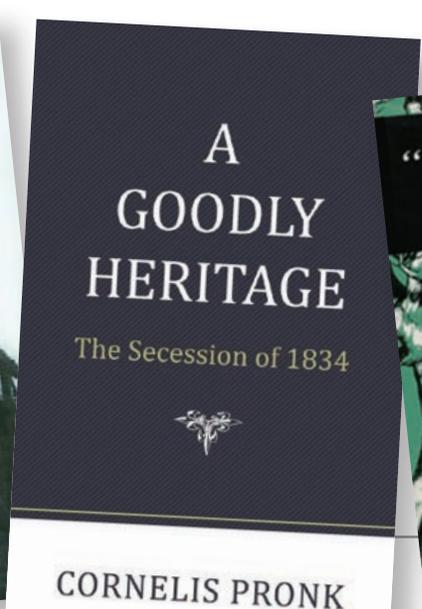
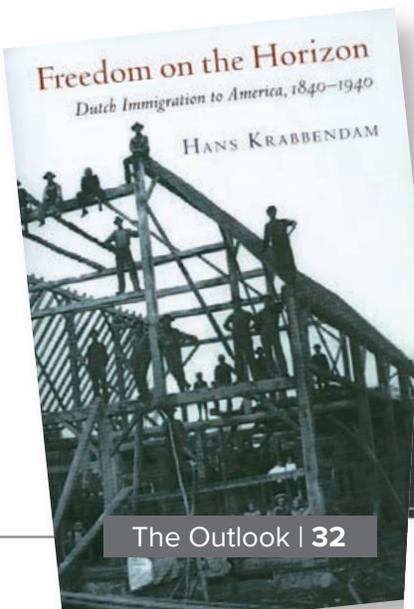
was the only minister of these four churches. They called their new church True Holland Reformed Church, a name that was changed to (Holland) Christian Reformed Church twenty years later, when the mother church in the Netherlands recognized its true daughter in America.

These congregants started their own school in a parsonage in Graafschap. Rev. D. J. Van der Werp was the only teacher for twelve years, until his death in 1876. Calvin Seminary, now

Calvin University, had its official *dies natalis* (birthdate) on March 15, 1876, in a building at Williams Street in Grand Rapids, Michigan. The only professor at first was Rev. Geert Boer.

The Second Wave

In the old country there were congregations that didn't leave the state church in the Secession, but they wanted to change it from within. The man who led this reform movement was Dr. Abraham Kuyper. He not only was a pastor and



theologian, but also he was prime minister of the Netherlands (1901–1905) and started the Free University in Amsterdam.

Kuyper became the leader of the Doleantie movement, a name that refers to the sadness many felt when their efforts to reform the Dutch Reformed Church did not succeed. Eventually the Doleantie churches and the Secession churches agreed on a merger, which took place on June 17, 1892.

From the start there were objections from the Christelijke Gereformeerde Kerken (Christian Reformed Church). Many of Kuyper's followers left the Netherlands and came to the United States. They joined the Christian Reformed Church, which resulted in great growth for the church.

The Third Wave

The third wave of Dutch immigrants came to North America after the Second World War. Years of war and German occupation had brought a poor economy with too little work. Also, the housing shortage was severe. Many people were interested in moving to a more promising country. The United States passed laws decreasing the number of immigrants each year, but the eleven provinces of the Dominion of Canada had much open land left for settlers. Many of the families that emigrated were from the church of the 1834 seceders. Upon arrival they were much helped and supported by their brothers by blood and faith, both in Canada and in the United States.

In America, the giant melting pot, the Dutch mixed slowly. For many years they hoped they would not need to mix at all. That is why several church groups would continue to call their ministers from the old country. On June 9, 1967, Rev. Arie Elshout sailed to America with his wife and children. They were heading for a small congregation of Dutch immigrants in Artesia, a suburb of

Los Angeles. His son, Rev. Bartel Elshout, was kind enough to write the following paragraphs about it.

The Netherlands Reformed Congregations of North America, as well as the Free Reformed churches of North America, consisted (and still do) almost exclusively of Dutch immigrants and their descendants. The immigrants of the churches in the United States came primarily at the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth century, whereas most of the immigrants in the Canadian churches came immediately following World War II (1945–1955).

Consequently, during the first seventy-five years of the twentieth century there continued to be strong ties with the Netherlands. Both federations continue to maintain full correspondence relationships with sister denominations in the Netherlands. Until today, this means that the NRC and FRC can and do extend calls to ministers serving in these sister denominations. Especially the older generations in these federations wish to retain and preserve the ethnic context of their churches. During the earlier part of the twentieth century, these churches were Dutch islands in the midst of North American culture. It was therefore perfectly natural for them to extend a call to ministers in the Netherlands, and to be accepting of their (initial) limited proficiency in the English language. It was quite common that they would also conduct Dutch worship services. However, that practice has almost completely subsided.

A Final Word

In closing I'd like to quote the final

paragraph of Rev. Cornelius Pronk's book:

The question is not whether we have a well-worked-out covenant view but whether we have embraced Christ by grace alone through faith alone. Only in this way will we reach the purpose of the covenant of redemption and of the covenant of grace, which is to glorify our triune God—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—and to enjoy Him forever.

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Only with Their Consent:

A Reflection on Article 7 of the URCNA Church Order



Dr. Cornelis P. Venema

Those who are already ordained ministers within the federation may be called to another congregation in a manner consistent with the above rules, without the examination or the laying on of hands. Any minister receiving a call shall consult with his current council regarding that call. He may accept the call only with their consent. (Church Order of the URCNA, Article 7)

Although the evidence is anecdotal, councils and consistories in the URCNA have frequently expressed to me their concerns with the calling process in the federation. Often the concerns expressed focus on the language in Article 7 of the church order, which has the heading, “Calling a Minister Within the Federation.” According to Article 7, an ordained minister in the federation is required, upon receiving a call, to “consult with his current council regarding that call” and “may accept the call only with their consent.”

The provisions of Article 7 prompt a number of questions. What does the requirement for the council’s “consent” to a minister’s acceptance of a call entail? Does this requirement give the council an unbridled authority to refuse their minister the right to accept a lawful call from another church? May either the council or the minister legitimately appeal to the stipulations of this article to prevent other churches from even considering a minister for a call? Could this article be used in a way that violates the spirit of Article 65 of the church order, which declares that “no church shall in any way lord it over other churches, and no office-bearers shall lord it over other office-bearers”? If the council’s authority to refuse a minister’s acceptance of a call is unbounded, would that allow the council’s office bearers to lord it over

the minister who wishes, upon the basis of his careful discernment of God’s will, to accept a call he has received? Likewise, if the language of “consent” in this article is not properly circumscribed, could a church lord it over other churches by frustrating their efforts to consider for, and extend a call to, their minister? There are two ways in which this might occur. On the one hand, councils might use the language of “consent” in Article 7 to pre-empt their minister from being considered for a call by another church in the federation. And on the other hand, councils might lord it over other churches by refusing inappropriately to allow their minister to go and help them in their need as a vacant congregation. In this way, the council would be able to nullify the prayer expressed in a congregation’s letter of call, namely,

that “the King of His church so impress our call upon your heart and give you light that you may arrive at a *decision that pleases Him and, if possible mutually gratifies us*” (emphasis mine).

These are only some of the questions that arise upon considering the language of “consent” in Article 7. As is often true in matters of church polity or government, it would be relatively easy to imagine a variety of cases that illustrate the need to understand as clearly as possible what this article requires councils and ministers to do when a minister is being considered for a call or obliged to give an answer to the call he has received. For this reason, it is critically important that the stipulations of this article be understood in the light of its historical origin and subsequent application in the history of the Reformed churches. Before offering my summary observations about Article 7, therefore, I want to trace briefly this history in order to ascertain how the language of “consent” has been understood among Reformed churches who share this provision in their church orders.

The Origin of Article 7: The Church Order of Dort

The presence of Article 7 in the URCNA Church Order is historically



linked to the form of government that was adopted by the Synod of Dort (1618–1619). Like many other denominations whose historical roots lie in the Netherlands, the URCNA's church order is a modified version of the Dort Church Order, which was adopted for use in the Reformed churches in the Netherlands. Article 10 of the Dort Church Order reads as follows:

A Minister, once lawfully called, may not leave the congregation which unconditionally received him, to accept a call elsewhere, without the consent of the Consistory and the Deacons, (and those who previously held the office of elder and deacon, together with the magistrate), nor without the knowledge of the Classis; likewise no other church shall be permitted

to receive him until he has presented a legal certificate of dismissal from the church and the Classis where he served.¹

According to Van Dellen and Monsma, two respected commentators on the polity of the Reformed churches, Article 10 of the Dort Church Order was written to address the problem of “itinerant, self-appointed preachers” who “would leave their Church when they grew tired of it and when they saw fit, without consent of the Consistory or Classis.”² Accordingly, the aim of the article was to regulate the practice of ministers in taking a call to serve another church, requiring that they do so only after consulting with and receiving the consent of the consistory and diaconate (council). Because this was the original intent of the article, it is not surprising that in the early

period of the Reformed churches in the Netherlands, the language of “consent” was understood to serve as a constraint upon the practice of many ministers who acted unilaterally in moving from one church to another. During the subsequent history of the Reformed churches in the Netherlands, however, it was recognized that this constraint could easily be abused by councils in an unduly authoritarian manner. Councils could appeal to this article to prevent ministers from accepting a call, even though there were no weighty reasons to do so.³ In recognition of this potential abuse of Article 10, its stipulations were increasingly interpreted to require open and respectful communication between a minister and a council in the event of the minister receiving a call. Rather than viewing the article as primarily a constraint upon the unilateral actions of ministers, the churches viewed it as provision for an orderly, open, and responsible

process for the way ministers and councils dealt with the calling of ministers within their communion.

The Polity and Practice of the CRCNA

Though Article 7 in the URCNA Church Order finds its historical roots in the Dort Church Order, the more immediate background and occasion for its inclusion lies in the polity and practice of the CRCNA. A proper understanding of the article requires, accordingly, some reflection on the interpretation and application of similar articles in the church orders of the CRC, especially the 1934 Church Order and the revised 1965 Church Order. These church orders provided an obvious point of departure for the committee that prepared the earliest version of the URCNA's form of government.

Article 10 of the 1934 Church Order of the CRCNA is very similar to the original article of the Dort Church Order.

A Minister, once lawfully called, may not leave the congregation with which he is connected, to accept a call elsewhere, without the consent of the Consistory, together with the Deacons, and knowledge on the part of the Classis; likewise no other Church may receive him until he has presented a proper certificate of dismissal from the Church and the Classis where he served.

The only significant difference between this article and the original version of Dort is the deletion of any reference to the role of the civil magistrate, a deletion that is also reflected in Article 7 of the URCNA Church Order. The article includes the stipulation that the classis be informed of the council's consent, a stipulation that was not retained in Article 7 of the URC's Church Order. The deletion of this provision in the URC's Church Order may

reflect its more "consistorial" or "congregational" tenor.⁴

In their commentary on the 1934 Church Order, Article 10, Van Dellen and Monsma offer several helpful comments on its provisions. In the first place, the article makes clear that a minister's decision to take a call and leave his present charge is not a unilateral one. Though the minister is not obliged to ask his council for permission to be considered for and receive a call, he must not accept the call without consulting with his council. If a minister receives a call and, upon prayerful consideration and discernment of God's will, decides that he should accept it, he is obliged to confer respectfully with his council before doing so. Only after receiving the council's consent may a minister accept a call. The council's deliberation, however, should be governed only by appropriate motives and in the awareness that a decision not to consent must be based upon the most weighty grounds. As they put it, "In their considerations the Elders and deacons may not be governed by personal favor or antipathy, but only by the facts at hand. The glory of God through the coming of His Kingdom should control them also in this case."⁵ The point Van Dellen and Monsma especially emphasize is that the council may not abuse its authority in refusing consent, when their reasons for doing so are not born out of a desire to exercise inappropriate control over the minister or to retain his services out of a selfish motive (we like our minister and therefore will not permit him to leave). In the event of an irreconcilable difference between the council and minister on the question of consent, they rightly note that the case should be presented to the classis for disposition.⁶

When the CRC revised its church order in 1965, two changes were

introduced into the article (now Article 14.a). First, the revised article now stipulates that the "consistory" must give its consent to the minister's acceptance of a call, the deacons being excluded for the first time. And second, the stipulation that the consistory's consent be approved by classis is removed. In their revised commentary on the CRC's 1965 Church Order, Van Dellen and Monsma reiterate their comments on the 1934 Church Order, Article 10. Interestingly, even though the new article removes any mention of the approval of classis, Van Dellen and Monsma repeat their earlier observation that, in the event of a disagreement between consistory and minister, the matter should be referred to the classis for resolution. The assumption behind this observation is that a consistory may have refused consent for reasons that are insufficiently weighty and demeaning to the office of the minister whose service in the denomination is not to be unduly restricted by an over-reaching consistory.

Since further changes to the CRC's church order in more recent decades are not relevant to an interpretation of Article 7 in the URCNA Church Order, I will not comment further on how the matter is presently stated or interpreted in the practice of the CRC. However, in his commentary on a more recent version of the CRC's Church Order in 2010, Henry De Moor, professor of church polity at Calvin Theological Seminary, offers a helpful summary of the traditional understanding of the question of consent.

The traditional calling process in the CRCNA is that a minister entertains a call from another congregation, spends time in information gathering, and in fervent prayer, and then decides at the end of three weeks of deliberation whether to stay or

move on. . . . The council that currently has supervision must be involved in the deliberative process. And the question is not how well the pastor is liked or appreciated, but whether local circumstances are such that the minister is free or not free to move on. Perhaps the pastor's presence continues to be essential to the ministry in which the community is engaged. Even after the pastor has made a decision to leave, the council may withhold its consent, though it must certainly have very weighty reasons for doing so. Pastors are not "free agents" who inform the new calling church of their decision even before the current council has been consulted or informed.⁷

In my estimation, De Moor's summary of the article articulates well what we have seen in the course of this short overview of the historical origin and interpretation of the issue of consent.

The URCNA and Article 7

Though it would be instructive to consider how the issue of "consent" is addressed in the church orders of sister denominations to the URC (especially, the Canadian Reformed Churches), I will conclude this overview with a comment on the one instance where Article 7 was officially deliberated upon by an assembly of the URC.⁸

Shortly after the formation of the URC, an overture from Classis West was brought to Synod St. Catharines in 1997. The overture (#6) asked the synod to change the original wording of Article 7 as it was adopted at the first synod of the URC in 1996. The original wording of Article 7 ("He [the minister] shall consider a call only with consent of his current council") left the impression that a minister needed the consent of his

council even to consider a call from another church. Hence, the overture specifically asked that this sentence be replaced with the following: "Any minister receiving a call shall consult with his current council regarding that call. He may accept the call only with their consent."⁹ Among the grounds for the proposed change, the overture noted that the original wording "would be unjust both for the minister and for the church which is extending the call." In the estimation of Classis West, the original language of Article 7 could be used to prevent ministers from being called by a church or then considering the call extended before the council gave its consent.

Remarkably, Synod St. Catharines acceded to the proposed change from Classis West, even though its advisory committee recommended that the original wording be left unchanged. In their advice to the synod, the advisory committee had argued that "permission for a minister to even consider a call from another consistory is necessary at the beginning of the process, since the freedom to accept such a call requires the freedom first to consider it."¹⁰ By acceding to the overture and rejecting the advice of its advisory committee, Synod St. Catharines sought to prevent a misuse of Article 7. In the judgment of synod, Article 7 requires the consent of a minister's council after a minister has received a call from another congregation and is inclined to accept it. Article 7 does not limit the freedom of churches to consider a minister for a call or to extend a call. Nor does it limit the freedom of a minister to consider a call and seek to discern whether he should accept it. The consent of a minister's council is to be sought after a call is extended and the minister desires to accept it. By its decision, Synod St. Catharines resisted the use of Article 7 to pre-empt the calling process by an

inappropriate appeal to the language of consent in Article 7.

Concluding Observations

In the light of my review of the origin, history, and interpretation of the language of "consent" in Article 7 of the URCNA, I would like to offer several concluding observations.

First, Article 7 does not require or even encourage a minister to ask his council for consent to be considered for a call by another congregation of the federation. Likewise, Article 7 does not forbid a council from considering a minister for a call until he has received his council's permission to do so. The assumption of Article 7 is that all ministers of the federation are liable to be considered for a call from another congregation, and that all congregations have the freedom to extend a call to them. It is inappropriate, therefore, for a minister to appeal to the language of "consent" in Article 7 to avoid the inconvenience and discomfort that may attend the calling process, particularly when a call is extended. It is also inappropriate for a council to appeal to the language of "consent" in Article 7 to prevent their minister from being considered for a call to another church. The consent required in Article 7 is to be sought only after a call has been extended to a minister and the minister-elect is inclined to accept the call.

Second, Article 7 reminds ministers that they are not free agents or itinerant, self-appointed pastors who can come and go as they please. According to Article 7, when ministers receive, consider, and find themselves inclined to receive a call, they should inform their council, explain their inclination, and seek the council's approval or consent. Such approval or consent does not require the council to be pleased with a minister's decision to accept

a call. Indeed, they may well find the prospect rather displeasing! Rather, it requires that the council “acquiesce” to the pastor’s decision and grant him the freedom to do what he believes is the Lord’s will. Though ministers are free to receive and consider a call, they are not free to accept a call without the council’s consent.

Third, Article 7 does not stand alone in the church order and may not be interpreted without regard to the important principle set forth in Article 65, which forbids office bearers from lording it over other office bearers and churches lording it over other churches. In the case of a minister who has received a call that he is inclined to accept, Article 65 reminds councils that their consent may not be withheld in a way that lords it over the minister’s conscience and treats him as though he were exclusively their servant. To do so would also risk the council’s lording it over another church’s freedom to extend a call to their minister. The office of the minister is demeaned, and the principle enunciated in Article 65 is violated, when the council fails to honor a minister’s freedom and right to receive and accept a call from another church. The churches of the federation are also treated disrespectfully when the council acts as though their minister is their private servant, and not a minister whose gifts may be used fruitfully in another charge.

And fourth, Article 7 does acknowledge that a council has the right to refuse consent to their minister’s acceptance of a call. But the historic practice of the Reformed churches makes clear that this may occur only in an exceptional case where there are weighty reasons for this refusal. The council may refuse to consent only when it believes

that there is a pressing need for their minister’s continued service. Though Article 7 does not mention the need for classical involvement in the event of an irreconcilable difference between the council and minister, the historic practice of the Reformed churches suggests that a minister retains the right of appeal to the next broader assembly, classis, for adjudication. I do not know of any instance where such an appeal has been made in the URCNA. But, were it to occur, it would be a good test of the URCNA’s adherence to a standard practice in the history of the Reformed churches.

1. *Paradigms in Polity: Classic Readings in Reformed and Presbyterian Church Government*, ed. David W. Hall and Joseph H. Hall (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), 178.
2. *The Church Order Commentary, Being a Brief Explanation of the Church Order of the Christian Reformed Church* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1941), 49. It should be noted that this commentary was Van Dellen and Monsma’s exposition of the 1934 edition of the CRCNA’s Church Order and is not to be confused with the better-known sequel, *The Revised Church Order Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1967), which was an exposition of the revised CRCNA Church Order of 1965.
3. For a description of the way Article 10 was interpreted in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, see K. de Gier, *Explanation of the Church Order of Dordt in Questions and Answers* (Grand Rapids: Netherlands Reformed Book and Publication Committee, 2000), 22. De Gier argues that a subtle shift occurred from the earlier to the later period, when the problem of ministerial malpractice was not as pressing as the problem of council’s placing a “burden . . . upon the conscience of a pious servant [minister].”
4. It is instructive to observe that the URCNA Church Order does not have a number of provisions and supplements that regulated the calling process in the CRCNA. These

provisions and supplements included, for example, the requirement that a vacant church have a church counselor to advise and ensure that the church order and its supplements be honored; that a minister be ordinarily given at least three weeks to consider a call; that a minister may not be called a second time within a year by the same church without classical approval; that a church be reimbursed by the calling church for a portion of his earlier moving expenses if its minister takes a call to another church within a specified period of time.

5. *The Church Order Commentary* (1941), 50.

6. “If ever the Elders and Deacons feel that they should not give consent, and when a frank and mutual discussion fails to change the mind of a Minister as well as that of the Elders and Deacons, then the case goes to Classis for disposal” (*The Church Order Commentary* [1941], 50).

7. *Christian Reformed Church Order Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Faith Alive, 2010), 53.

8. The comparable article in the Church Order of the Canadian Reformed Churches is Article 9, which reads: “A minister, once lawfully called, shall not leave the Church to which he is bound to take up the ministry elsewhere without the consent of the consistory with the deacons and the approval of classis. On the other hand, no Church shall receive him unless he has presented a proper certificate of release from the Church and the classis where he served, or of the Church only, if he remains with the same classis.” The comparable article of the “Proposed Joint Church Order” for the union of the URCNA and the CaRCs is Article 6, which reads: “A minister within the federation shall be called in a lawful manner by the consistory with the deacons. Any minister receiving a call shall consult with his current consistory with the deacons regarding that call. He may accept the call only with their consent.” The PJCO follows the pattern of Article 7 by removing any reference to the approval of classis.

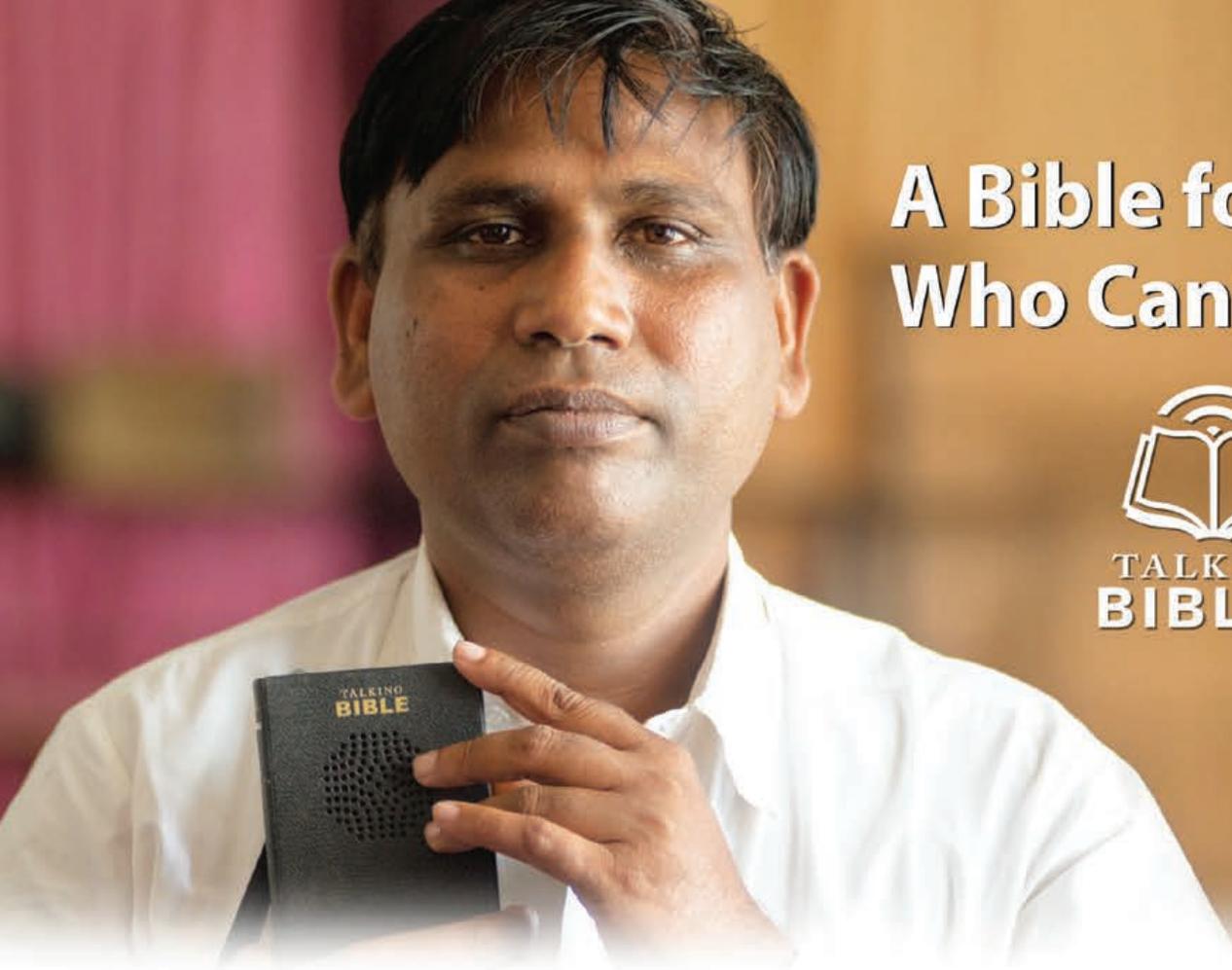
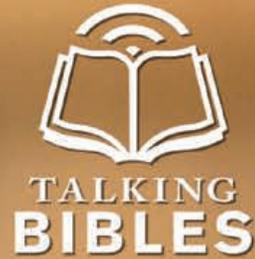
9. *Acts of Synod 1996, 1997, 1999* (United Reformed Churches in North America), 92.

10. *Acts of Synod 1996, 1997, 1999*, 49.

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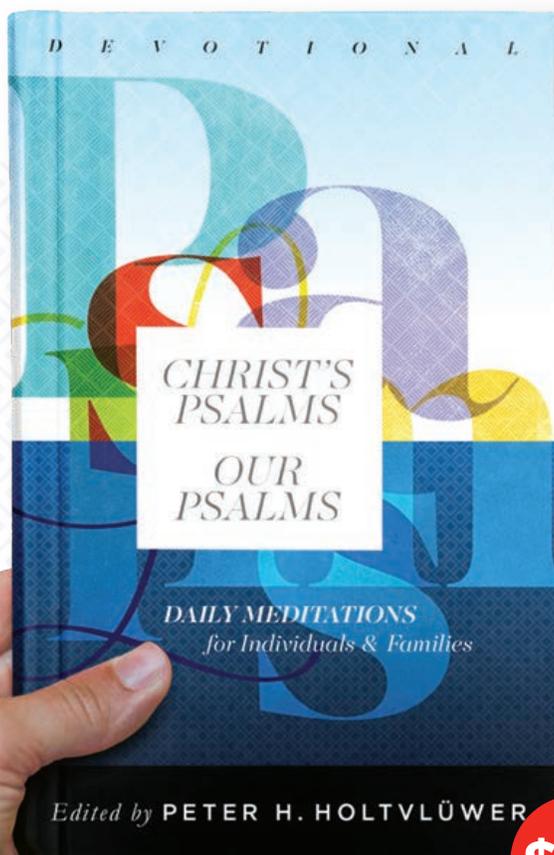
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