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DEDICATED TO THE EXPOSITION AND DEFENSE OF THE REFORMED FAITH

JESUS

LORD OF LORDS, KING OF KINGS

Joy to the World!

Lowell Mason, 18

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Mr. Cornelius VanKempen

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When Christ was born in Bethlehem, an angel of God gave the message of His birth to the shepherds who were in the field near the town. What do we hear in the song that the angels sang? They are glorifying God in the highest. They are doing what they and we were created to do. “And all the angels stood round about the throne, and about the elders and the four beasts, and fell before the throne on their faces, and worshipped God, saying, Amen: Blessing, and glory, and wisdom, and thanksgiving, and honour, and power, and might, be unto our God for ever and ever. Amen” (Rev. 7:11–12).

The great wonder of the birth of the Son of God into the world as the Son of Man, as the Savior, could not be kept secret but must be published around the world. The Creator of all became a servant to all. “Ye call me Master and Lord: and ye say well; for so I am. If I then, your Lord and Master, have washed your feet; ye also ought to wash one another’s feet. For I have given you an example, that ye should do as I have done to you. Verily, verily, I say unto you. The servant is not greater than his lord; neither he that is sent greater than he that sent him” (John 13:13–16). Jesus Christ the God-Man was Lord of lords and King of kings. He became a servant to gather His people from the ends of the earth to glorify Him.

But the song did not end in the fields of Bethlehem. It was told to all who would listen. This song had not been heard on earth before, but now “the Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us, (and we beheld his glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father,) full of grace and truth” (John 1:14). God sent witnesses of this great wonder, which had been looked for since our fall in Paradise, for the fulfillment of the promise of the Seed. “And I will put enmity between thee and the woman, and between thy seed and her seed; it shall bruise thy head, and thou shalt bruise his heel” (Gen. 3:15). The angels returned into heaven, and God sent His messengers to proclaim the good news. John the Baptist was a witness that the Light of the world had come as the Lamb of God (John 11–36). This “Emmanuel, which being interpreted is, God with us” (Matt. 1:23) came as the suffering Savior for His people.



THE ANGELS’ SONG EXPANDED

And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God, and saying, Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will toward men. And it came to pass, as the angels were gone away from them into heaven, the shepherds said one to another, let us now go even unto Bethlehem, and see this thing which is come to pass, which the Lord hath made known unto us.

—Luke 2:13–15, KJV

“For even the Son of man came not to be ministered unto, but to minister, and to give his life a ransom for many” (Mark 10:45).

The angels’ song was silenced as they beheld the scene on earth. The Lord of glory was crucified, but listen to Him there. “Father, forgive them for they know not what they do.” “My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?” “I thirst.” “Father, into thy hands I commend my spirit.” “It is finished.” The thief on the cross could join the throng above forever singing the angels’ song. The veil of the temple was torn in two from top to bottom. The earth quaked, and the darkness was turned into light. Heaven broke forth into rejoicing through His death. Satan and death were defeated forever. His people are given ears to hear the joyful sound. Because He died, they would live eternally to glorify Him. “And I heard a loud voice saying in heaven, Now is come salvation, and strength, and the kingdom of our God, and the power of his Christ: for the accuser of our brethren is cast down, which accused them before our God day and night. And they overcame him by the blood of the Lamb, and by the word of their testimony; and they loved not their lives unto the death” (Rev. 12:10–11).

Jehovah’s kindly face gives happiness and grace

To all that are pure hearted; to them is life imparted.

Rejoice in God, ye just. He raised you from the dust;

Give thanks, ye people all. His holy Name recall,

Repose in Him your trust. (Psalter 423:7)

By God's servants the message goes out even today. The way of salvation is opened through the cross of Jesus Christ. "In that day there shall be a fountain opened to the house of David and to the inhabitants of Jerusalem for sin and for uncleanness" (Zech. 13:1). Many times in this world His people's mouths are closed, unable to sing, but when their Savior King draws near they cannot but sing His praises. They look for Him to take away their sorrow, and receive the desire of their heart to be with Him forever:

And I looked, and, lo, a Lamb stood on the mount Sion, and with him an hundred forty and four thousand, having his Father's name written in their foreheads. And I heard a voice from heaven, as the voice of many waters, and as the voice of a great thunder: and I heard the voice of harpers harping with their harps: And they sung as it were a new song before the throne, and before the four beasts, and the elders: and no man could learn that song but the hundred and forty and four thousand, which were redeemed from the earth. (Rev. 14:1-3)

This is the never-ending song of joy and praise, glorifying the triune God who reigns forever and ever. The song that the angels sang so many years ago will continually increase because of our faithful Savior, Jesus Christ, who died, arose, ascended into heaven, and will come again to bring His people home to be with Him eternally. What song are you singing?

Jesus! The vision of Thy face hath
overpow'ring charms!

Scarce shall I feel death's cold embrace,
If Christ be in my arms.

When flesh shall fail, and heart-strings break,
sweet will the minutes roll!

A mortal paleness on my cheek,
but glory in my soul.

(The Song of Simeon 5-6)



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MAN BREAKS COVENANT

Rev. Peter H. Holtvliwer

Meditation Text: Genesis 3:1-7

Suggested Reading: Psalm 1

There's a battle going on in these opening verses of Genesis 3, and it's not going well. On the one side is Satan voicing seductive thoughts through a serpent and on the other side is the woman who, though accompanied by her husband, is responding alone. Adam offers no help and Eve asks for none, and together they are losing ground to the devil's attacks. On the surface of things it looks like a conversation about a forbidden fruit but underneath it all is a war for the allegiance of man's heart. Will mankind, headed by Adam, keep the covenant God had made with them in the garden or will they turn away and give themselves to another master? Will man choose the way of life or the way of death?

Lethal Strike

After the first interchange between the devil and the woman, Eve is left in a vulnerable position. She has not only allowed the serpent to suggest evil things about God without objecting, but also she herself has cast the Lord's instructions in a much more severe light than they were given: "but God said, 'You shall not eat of the fruit of the tree that is in the midst of the garden, neither shall you touch it, lest you die'" (Gen. 3:2, English Standard Version). She has opened herself up to believing that God could be something other than He is, and in that moment the devil advances with a bold strike: "You will not surely die" (v. 4). Faster than a rattlesnake Satan strikes at the heart of the woman with lethal force. Satan has moved from raising a question about God's integrity to now emphatically contradicting God's word in a brazen lie. He even takes the words of God's original command and turns them upside down—you absolutely won't die!



Do you see how deception lies at the core of who the devil is? Later the Lord Jesus points back to this event and warns us about Satan's nature: "He was a murderer from the beginning, and does not stand in the truth, because there is no truth in him. When he lies, he speaks out of his own character, for he is a liar and the father of lies" (John 8:44). We should be on the lookout for deceit in its many forms, from very soft and sly to very bold and in your face, and be prepared to withstand it by putting on the armor of God, starting with the belt of truth (Eph. 6:14). Deception can be outed and withstood only by knowing and clinging to the truth of God's Word, turning neither to the left nor to the right.

Power of the Lie

Satan follows up his bald-faced lie with an alluring reason: "For God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil" (v. 5). Isn't Satan so ingeniously wicked? Now that Eve, as well as Adam, who is passively taking all of this in, are disposed to thinking less of God than they should, Satan capitalizes on their wavering faith and casts

an even darker shadow over God. He paints a picture of the Lord as a stingy God who is selfishly holding something back from His creatures: the knowledge of good and evil. Satan openly calls God a liar and makes Him out to be a mean-spirited despot who uses ignorance to keep people in submission to Himself while enjoying certain things that He withholds from humans. Then, after casting aspersions on God's motives, Satan holds out to man the enthralling possibility of being like God—oh, what a deviously devastating temptation!

And isn't that still the main attraction for mankind and the primary lie believed by many all over the world today? Man loves the idea that he can be like God, equal to Him in knowledge and even in power. There are examples of this throughout Scripture. Later in Genesis we see mankind rallying together to build the tower of Babel as a monument to their own name, not the Lord's (11:1–9). Generations later, Pharaoh king of Egypt claims sovereignty over God's people Israel by denying that the Lord is God (Exod. 5:2). Some hundreds of years after that, Nebuchadnezzar exalts himself

as god by taking all credit for his kingdom and his power (Dan. 4:30). The Roman emperors thought they were gods, as did King Herod (Acts 12:21–23). And is it not the case today that man thinks he is in control of his own destiny? Doesn't man think he can solve all the world's problems through science, medicine, and technology? Disney and so much of the media teach that every person has power within himself so that all you need to do is believe in yourself and you can do anything. By tapping the power within, you can solve your problems at work, at home, and in society. Much of mankind still believes the devil's lie that they can be like God or worse: be their own god.

Two Choices

Now we can see more clearly that Adam and Eve's sin here is not a light matter. Some might wonder how such a simple mistake like picking a forbidden fruit could be so offensive to God and lead to such brutal consequences in this world. But this was not a simple mistake. Eve didn't randomly take the wrong fruit from the wrong tree one day—it's not even really about the fruit, is it? It's all about trusting God and His word.

Eve gave careful consideration to her actions. We read, “So when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was to be desired to make one wise, she took of its fruit and ate” (v. 6). In the course of this conversation she showed that she knew exactly what the Lord had commanded, as well as all that the devil had promised. The choice before her was her covenant God and His word over against the devil and his word. And the devil’s lies are so convincing, aren’t they? Look how good that fruit is! Look how lovely that tree is! His lies appeal to our physical bodies, to our sense of beauty, and even to our intellectual appetite—the fruit was desirable for gaining wisdom, don’t forget. How many times haven’t we stood at a fork in the road and the one path looks so good to follow, so easy, so nice, so pleasant and harmless, while the other so small, narrow, rocky, and difficult? The devil is not an idiot. He knows exactly how to appeal to our basic instincts, but in all these choices let us be fully aware, just as Eve was: it’s a choice between God and His promise versus Satan and his promise—whom would she believe? Whom would she follow? Whom will you believe? Whom will you follow?

Those are really the only two choices in life, aren’t they? Psalm 1 teaches us this quite plainly. We can either in faith embrace the Lord and His promise of salvation and live the righteous life into eternity or reject Him and walk the pathway of wickedness into everlasting punishment. Sometimes we fool ourselves into thinking that life can be neutral. We imagine that we can live life more or less for ourselves and that doing so is not necessarily against God. But that too is the devil’s deception. The Bible teaches that in the end either you trust and obey God or you trust and obey Satan—there is no other alternative.

Sin is rebellion against the Lord and carries with it a terrible toll.

Terrible Toll

Sin always has devastating consequences. No one breaks God’s commandments and doesn’t pay a price, sooner or later. We find that toll coming out in verse 7: “Then the eyes of both of them were opened, and they realized they were naked.” From Genesis 2 we know they were already naked, but the difference now is that they became aware of it and instantly felt ashamed of their nakedness. So powerful and pervasive was this sense that they scrambled to sew fig leaves together and cover themselves so they could at least bear to look at each other. Something had come between the man and the woman, and they were filled with shame.

And that something is a broken relationship. Mankind had just broken the covenant God had so graciously made with them in paradise, and the symptom of that brokenness is shame. Soon they will hide from the Lord when He comes, but already now the guilt of their sin pressed upon their hearts. Their own consciences accused them of rebellion against God and brought them low in their guilty shame, so low that also the relationship between the two of them was deeply affected. They hide themselves from one another under the fig leaves.

Have you ever noticed that? When your relationship with God is broken, then your relationship with people, even with your spouse, begins to break down too. Soon the gap between husband and wife will be widened as the blame game begins (3:12–13).

It’s a dreadful cost—the misery and shame of sin. What a relief to know of that other Adam who took on our sin and shame, nailing them to the cross. Adam and Eve’s sin was not

isolated to the two of them, for Adam is the head of the entire human race, and when he fell, we fell in him (Rom. 5:12). Every human descends from these our first parents and shares in their corruption (Job 14:4). What we read in Genesis 3:1–7 is the account of our own rebellion against God, a rebellion which pitched us and all of God’s good creation into death and decay. And so we confess with Scripture, “All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned—every one—to his own way” (Isa. 53:6). But we also confess faith in the Savior Jesus, who “was despised and rejected by men; a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief; and as one from whom men hide their faces he was despised, and we esteemed him not. Surely he has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows” (53:3–4). Your shame and mine was placed upon His shoulders as the Lord “laid on him the iniquity of us all” (53:6) so that in the end “everyone who believes in him will not be put to shame” (Rom. 10:11).

A little while ago we asked: What happened to the beauty of God’s good creation? The simple, sober truth is that we ruined it by breaking covenant with God. But God in His grace has restored His relationship with us in Jesus Christ. Faith in Jesus is all you need to enter into this renewed covenant of love with God in which His peace fills your heart and your heart wants only to serve Him in grateful devotion. And isn’t that the heart and the start of renewed beauty?



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Dreading Death

Mrs. Elisabeth Bloechl

The Fear of Loss

Living in Uganda, I was made painfully aware of possible threats to the life and health of my children. Some of the deadliest snakes loved the nearby river. Accidentally imbibing tap water or eating out could mean bacterial infections. Driving continually reminded me of my finitude. I prayed daily, sometimes hourly that God would keep my kids alive and well. I thought moving back to safe and sanitary America would change that. It didn't.


Though I worry less about if my children will have to take yet another round of antibiotics or get hit by a motorbike. I still worry about them. What if they contract cancer? What if they get into a car crash? What if they buy into cultural lies and it destroys them?

What if I lose my kids?

How many of us fear losing something, the death of something? Our spouse, mental abilities, close friendships. Previous losses, hearing about those of others, and our awareness of the brokenness of this world leave us wondering if our turn is next. And we dread it.

Why do we look toward loss with fear and horror? Isn't death a natural part of life? Aren't we all just part of a natural cycle of birth and death? On the contrary. Death is utterly unnatural. As Sinclair Ferguson writes, "It's disruptive of the created order. It's an enemy of the life that God created human beings to enjoy. And because of that, it's quite natural for us to hate death because it leads to disintegration."¹ Death is a rending of that which was meant never to be torn asunder; that includes all manner of death, from the passing of a parent to miscarriage to mental decay to destruction of relationships. Death means loss, and death is inescapable.

The chapters after Adam and Eve's fall are a record of this reality of death (see Gen. 4–5) and mankind's consequent sorrow. We see this sorrowing over death throughout the Bible, from Abraham grieving over the death of Sarah (Gen. 23:1–2), to Saul lamenting the loss of his kingdom (1 Sam. 15:24–34), to Jesus weeping at Lazarus' tomb (John 11:33–35). The Bible does not shy away from the reality and horror of death—be it the death of a person or the death of a thing; trust, friendship, unity. Nor does it leave us in the



Sarah died in Kirjath Arba (that is, Hebron) in the land of Canaan, and Abraham came to mourn for Sarah and to weep for her.

— Genesis 23:1–2

hopelessness death brings. Rather, it offers both the reason and the solution.

Back to the Beginning

Adam and Eve had but wiped the juice of the forbidden fruit off their greedy lips when the searing reality of loss shot through them. “They knew that they were naked. And they sewed fig leaves together and made themselves loincloths” (Gen. 3:7b, English Standard Version). They now knew themselves as corrupt, depraved, and disordered.² Their sin sliced through their relationship, creating a rift: they were ashamed to disclose themselves fully to the other, choosing rather to futilely cover their sin and shame with their own creations. Worse than these was the loss of their relationship with God—they hid themselves from Him with whom they once joyfully communed (Gen. 3:8). How does God respond to their losses, their death?

God enters into this place of sorrow and agony. He does not wait for them to come to Him. He confronts them. Coming in judgment, yet not ultimate judgment. God comes in the cool of the day, rather than terror of night. He comes walking, not on horseback or on the thunderclouds. He softly calls to Adam before appearing before them in terrifying glory. God comes calling Adam and Eve to humility and repentance.³

Adam and Eve, rather than repent, shift blame. God has none of their excuses but makes it clear that their loss, their pain, their impending death is not because of His sin but theirs, and they must eat its bitter fruit (Gen. 3:16–19, 24). In the same way, when we are confronted with death and loss, God testifies to His innocence and our sin, though we often put God on the dock as did Adam and Eve: “it was the woman you gave me,” “It was the drunk driver you allowed on the road,” “It was the disposition you gave him.”

True, it is not always our personal sin that caused the car accident that took our brother, or the apostasy of our child. However, all such deaths are a result of the fall, which is a result of our sin. For in Adam’s fall, we fall all.⁴ Adam’s sin—our sin—brought the world under a curse (Rom. 8:22). In this world cursed, we have earthquakes, miscarriages, brain damage. Because of our sin, we die—as God promised we would (Gen. 2:17). “That’s why Paul says in a magisterial statement in Romans 5:12 that sin came into the world through one man, and death through sin. That’s why we all die: sin—Adam’s sin, others’ sin, our sin, my sin.”⁵

The picture is bleak. Death and loss are the promised consequences of our sin. Since the fall we have all been choked by the bitter taste of our autonomy, and we will continue to experience the horrifying consequences of it. But the Bible does not end with the fall.

The Solution

Before God utters one curse or declares one dreadful consequence to Adam and Eve, He speaks to the serpent: “I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and her offspring; he shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise his heel” (Gen. 3:15). Yes, Adam and Eve will suffer, sweat, and die; but from the womb of the woman who sated her lustful belly and the loins of the man whose lips were stained with poison passion will come a Son. This Son will destroy Satan and death. This Son will break the choking bonds of death by breaking sin’s hold over us (1 Cor. 15:54–56).

The means by which He will accomplish this Herculean defeat are foreshadowed just a few verses later. Before God drives Adam and Eve out of the garden, He clothes them. This time, not with fig leaves of their own contriving—fig leaves that serve only

to solidify their inability to cover their sin (Isa. 64:6). This time, blood is shed, a life is taken. “And the LORD God made for Adam and for his wife garments of skins and clothed them” (Gen. 3:21). This shedding of blood was a necessary requirement of the law—the broken law. “Indeed, under the law almost everything is purified with blood, and without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness of sins” (Heb. 9:22).

But the slain animal does more than symbolize the satisfaction of justice. That animal slain points forward to Jesus’ washing away the sins of untold multitudes and whose righteousness covers these sinners turned saints (John 1:29; 2 Cor. 5:21). The animal slain depicts how Jesus took on the consequences of our sin—the loss, pain, death—the very wrath of God. The animal slain illustrates how He lived in our broken world as an ordinary man who felt the sting of rejection, the pain of the whip, the heartrending sorrow of death (Isa. 53). What the animal slain fails to show is that not only did Christ take on the curse of sin but also He conquered it by bursting out of the tomb, never to die again.

What does this mean for us? Our personal salvation and sanctification are clearly accomplished through Christ, but what difference does Jesus’ sacrificial life, death, and resurrection make to the deaths we face?

First, death no longer has the last word. Its power was broken by Christ’s broken body. For those who have died in Christ, eternal life awaits (John 3:16). We will again see our loved ones who have died in the Lord. But there is also hope for this life. By Christ’s blood poured, there is hope for broken relationships—He is able to redeem and restore the bleakest situation. As Christ forgave His enemies, so a husband can forgive his once unfaithful wife

because the Holy Spirit is applying Christ's work to him. Christ's blood transforms abusive addicts into loving fathers—bringing life out of death.

Second, because Christ knows from firsthand experience the pain of death and loss, He is able to sympathize with us. Like us, He grieves the horror of death (John 11:1–37). He weeps in the face of separation (Matt. 26:36–46). So when we are experiencing the same trials, He walks with us through them. Not as one defeated, but as one who has passed through them and seen the other side. Yet, not as one superior and removed, but compassionate and tender (Heb. 4:14–16).

Third, Christ's death and resurrection herald a glorious future. On the cross, at the empty tomb, Christ began the process of restoration. One day, He will return and restore all things to Himself. He will destroy sin, the devil, and death once and for all (Rev. 20:10). He will release the earth from the curse of sin (Acts 3:20–21). Those clothed in Christ's righteousness pass through death as through a gateway to everlasting life where Christ will shine as the sun, and, at the last trump, our bodies will join our souls in glory (see WSC Q/A 37–38). For just as God did not abandon Christ to the grave, neither will He allow our physical bodies to lie forever in the grave (Ps. 16:10).

So to us who fear death and loss, may we look away from our fears to our risen Lord who has conquered death, creating from it life. Instead of walking in dread, may we walk in confidence that when we face death and loss, Christ will walk with us through it and make from it something beautiful. May we entrust our loved ones to the only one able to give them all they need in this life and the next. May we live life joyfully and hopefully with our eyes on heaven and its eternal glories. May we sing the words of an old hymn:⁶

*Who trusts in God, a strong abode
in heav'n and earth possesses;
who looks in love to Christ above,
no fear his heart oppresses.
In you alone, dear Lord, we own
sweet hope and consolation:
our shield from foes, our balm for woes,
our great and sure salvation.
Though Satan's wrath beset our path,
and worldly scorn assail us,
while you are near we will not fear,
your strength shall never fail us:
your rod and staff shall keep us safe,
and guide our steps forever;
nor shades of death, nor hell beneath,
our souls from you shall sever.
In all the strife of mortal life
our feet shall stand securely;
temptation's hour shall lose its pow'r,
for you shall guard us surely.
O God, renew, with heav'nly dew,
our body, soul, and spirit,
until we stand at your right hand,
through Jesus' saving merit.*

1. Sinclair Ferguson, "Death," <https://www.ligonier.org/podcasts/things-unseen-with-sinclair-ferguson/death>.

2. Matthew Henry, *Commentary on the Whole Bible*, vol. 1 (New York: Revell, n.d.), 25–26.

3. *Ibid.*, 26.

4. WSC Q16. Did all mankind fall in Adam's first transgression? **A.** The covenant being made with Adam, not only for himself, but for his posterity; all mankind, descending from him by ordinary generation, sinned in him, and fell with him in his first transgression.

5. Ferguson, "Death."

6. Joachim Magderburg, "Who Trusts in God, a Strong Abode."



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Ezekiel's Call to a Prophetic Priesthood Part 1 (2)

Ezekiel 2–3, 33



Dr. R. Andrew Compton



In the first article in this series, we took a close look at the baffling yet awe-inspiring opening chapter of the book of Ezekiel. There we saw that God's glory/*kavod* was a reminder of His deliverance of His people in the exodus and His ongoing presence with them in exile.

In this second article, we consider Ezekiel's call. Not only does his call reiterate the word-centeredness of God's servants throughout history, but also it underscores the fundamental shape of the book. Indeed, it underscores the fundamental shape of the biblical storyline. But before we study Ezekiel's call in chapters 2–3 and its reiteration in chapter 33, we take a look at how the story arc of Ezekiel relates to the story arc of history. Ezekiel 20:1-44 packs into one chapter the literary shape of the entire prophetic book.

From Judgment to Restoration

Ezekiel 20 begins with a seemingly throwaway phrase in verse 1: "It came to pass in the seventh year, in the fifth month, on the tenth day of the month."¹ But this formulaic dating is a feature we encounter numerous times in the book. It gives us a glimpse of the progress of God's revelation to Ezekiel during different periods of his ministry but also shows two key theological details: (1) Ezekiel's prophetic priesthood lasted twenty years, the length of an ordinary priestly career (see Num. 4:3, 23, 30), and (2) Ezekiel is concerned with actual, datable history. O. Palmer Robertson reminds us that "the prophets are not abstract philosophers dealing with nebulous ideas about God. They are men involved in the flow of time and history, demonstrating the purposeful involvement of their God in the course of human events."² In our day of vague spirituality and neo-pagan

revival, this insistence on the historicity of God's mighty acts is especially counter-intuitive . . . and especially important.³

Concern for history is evident in the contents of the chapter. Four stages of Israel's history are recounted, just as in Psalm 106. In verses 5–32, we encounter Israel in Egypt, in the wilderness, in a second generation in the wilderness, and in the land of promise. And yet in each of these settings, though God had redeemed His people, they rejected Him. This is striking when we consider that the elders who have gathered to inquire of Ezekiel (or more accurately, to interrogate him) were a part of that final stage: Israel in the land of promise. (Prior to their exile, of course.) Their own wanton idolatries are spelled out in graphic detail, and the Lord chastens them: “So shall I be inquired of by you, O house of Israel? As I live,” says the Lord GOD, “I will not be inquired of by you” (v. 31).

This should be the end of the story, shouldn't it? God has extended so much patience and grace. He has tolerated so much rebellion and folly. Surely Ezekiel 20:1–32 will be the last chapter in God's dealing with His people, won't it? Answer: No!

Verses 33–44 show not just another turn toward Israel in grace and mercy, but a decisive, final turn. God will take the nation out of exile through a new exodus into a new wilderness. Verses 37–38 say, “I will make you pass under the rod, and I will bring you into the bond of the covenant; I will purge the rebels from among you, and those who transgress against Me; I will bring them out of the country where they dwell, but they shall not enter the land of Israel. Then you will know that I am the LORD.”

There is something climactic about this restoration: “For on My holy

mountain, on the mountain height of Israel,” says the Lord GOD, “there all the house of Israel, all of them in the land, shall serve Me; there I will accept them” (20:40a). Even though there are some elements of this that find partial fulfillment in the return from exile after 539 BC, Ezekiel 40:2 shows that this mountaintop service ultimately finds fulfillment in the eschatological, new-creation hope of believers. We will consider the new temple and land of Ezekiel 40–48 in a future article, but for now it suffices to see that the cycles of God's disciplinary actions in Israel's history are preparing His people for a decisive act of restoration that will break the cycle for good. Israel's history is one of judgment leading to restoration, and we will see that Ezekiel's prophetic-priestly call narratives in chapters 2–3 and chapter 33 shape the book of Ezekiel along the exact same lines.

This is valuable to remember if reading the judgment-heavy chapters 1–32 begins to weigh heavily on your emotions: the restoration-heavy chapters 33–48 are coming soon.

Ezekiel's Call: PCS'd to a Rebellious House

I asked an Air Force friend, “What would your reaction be to someone who said to you, ‘I PCS'd to Altus Air Force Base.’” His response: “It's in the middle of nowhere, Oklahoma. You don't go to Altus for a wonderful cultural experience!”

When a member of the armed forces receives orders to a new Permanent Change of Station (PCS), they call it being PCS'd. When my father was young, he PCS'd to Pearl Harbor, Hawaii, for submarine duty. He enjoyed his stay thoroughly. But others get PCS'd to less desirable locations. Like Altus Air Force Base. They go to do their duty, but they don't plan to chalk it up as one of their more memorable assignments.

In Ezekiel 2:1–7 we read that Ezekiel was PCS'd to a rebellious house. Having just fallen on his face in 1:28b at the overwhelming encounter with the glory/*kavod* of the Lord, Ezekiel is placed on his feet by the Spirit and given a laundry list of terms that describe his audience: “Even a glance through the few verses of chapter 2 in English throws up seven occurrences of the word-group ‘rebel, rebellious.’”⁴ You would think that exile might have softened the nation: “Uh oh. We messed up big-time. We need to get right with our Maker!” But instead, as Christopher J. H. Wright continues: “Even in exile the hardened obduracy of Israel continues unabated.”⁵

In 2:3, the Lord introduces an ironic word play. Israel is called “nations” (Hebrew *goyim*) of rebels. Most often in the Old Testament, Israel is called God's people (Hebrew *'am*); the word *nations* is reserved for the pagans surrounding Israel. Even today the Yiddish language (a German dialect of Hebrew) employs the word *goy* in many pejorative expressions. And yet here it is Israel that is called *goyim*. The irony increases in 3:5–7 where Ezekiel is told that if he had gone to preach to foreign nations, they would actually listen to him. The *goyim* would act more like a God-fearing people (*'am*)! Israel, by contrast, will be more stubborn and hardened even than the pagans.

An encounter with the Lord's glory/*kavod*, followed by such an ominous assignment, would rattle anyone. Yet God does not send Ezekiel off alone to fend for himself. No, in 2:6, He urges Ezekiel: “And you, son of man, do not be afraid of them nor be afraid of their words, though briars and thorns *are* with you and you dwell among scorpions; do not be afraid of their words or dismayed by their looks, though they are a rebellious house.” Though

their loathing would ordinarily be unbearable, the Lord gives Ezekiel special resilience: “Behold, I have made your face strong [*chazaq*] against their faces, and your forehead strong [*chazaq*] against their foreheads. Like adamant stone, harder [*chazaq*] than flint, I have made your forehead; do not be afraid of them, nor be dismayed at their looks, though they *are* a rebellious house” (3:8–9).

Ezekiel would have found some humor in this. After all, his name literally means “God strengthens/hardens.” In Hebrew this consists of the verb *yechezeq* (“he strengthens/hardens”) plus the noun/subject of the verb *El* (“God”), pronounced as *yechezqeyel*. When God calls someone to a task, He gives them what they stand in need of to accomplish His purposes, to bring glory to Him by following His call. This is especially important for us to remember today in our own varied callings. Many feel that they must succeed at all costs or their efforts will be for nothing. But God is most honored when His children seek His glory in all things, not just when they come out on top. In fact, many people who come out on top do so precisely because they are not sufficiently concerned for God’s glory.

Ezekiel isn’t guaranteed to bring them to repentance, but that is not what is most important. Ezekiel 2:3 says what matters most is that they will know a prophet has been among them. Ezekiel is called to be faithful to his call and deliver the message. The result: they will have no excuse. And yet even in this, God equips His servant with a most valuable tool for his work: God’s very word.

Eat this book!

Nestled in the middle of this speech about a rebellious house is one of the more striking images of internalizing

God’s word found in Scripture. Ezekiel sees a hand, and in it is the scroll of a book. This word for scroll (Hebrew *megillah*) occurs in only four places in the Old Testament: Psalm 40:7, Jeremiah 36:1–32, Zechariah 5:1–4, and here in Ezekiel 2:9–3:3. Looking at these briefly will help to fill out the picture.

In each of these passages, the scrolls describe the revealed will of God, His inscripturated word. In Psalm 40:7, this seems to refer to the book of God’s will for the king in Deuteronomy 17:18–20, a book that Christ fulfills in His kingly but especially His priestly offices (see Heb. 10:5–9). But in the others, we see specifically God’s words of judgment.

In Jeremiah 36 the scroll of the book contains God’s words “against Israel, against Judah, and against all the nations” (Jer. 36:2). The chapter tells the story of the scribe Baruch reading the scroll much to the chagrin of King Jehoiakim, who destroyed the scroll and tried to imprison Jeremiah and Baruch. Yet God’s word would not be silenced. Not only did the Lord hide His servants but also ensured that Jeremiah and Baruch were able to rewrite all the words Jehoiakim sought to destroy (Jer. 36:26, 28, 32). God’s punishment of sin cannot be avoided!

Zechariah 5:1–4 pictures the divine and infallible nature of God’s words of judgment. In Zechariah, the scroll flies across the earth. But it does not just contain God’s words of curse; it is called “the curse.” Its utterance was efficacious: “This is the curse that goes out over the face of the whole earth: ‘Every thief shall be expelled,’ according to this side of the scroll; and, ‘Every perjurer shall be expelled,’ according to that side of it. ‘I will send out the curse,’ says the LORD of hosts; ‘It shall enter the house of the thief and the house of the one who swears falsely by My

name. It shall remain in the midst of his house and consume it, with its timber and stones” (Zech. 5:3–4).

This kind of judgmental certainty should be echoing in our ears as we read of Ezekiel’s scroll, inscribed on the inside and outside “with words of lamentations and mourning and woe” (2:10). But as Ezekiel symbolically fills himself with a message that he knows will bring negative responses from his countrymen, he receives a surprise: “So I ate, and it was in my mouth like honey in sweetness” (3:3b).

Many have sought to explain this sweet taste by associating it with the word of God in Psalm 19:10 where His law, testimony, statutes, and commandments are “sweeter also than honey and the honeycomb” (cf. Ps. 119:103). Yet the contents of the scroll are not those healing aspects of God’s word from Psalm 19 but the curse words like that of Jeremiah 36 and Zechariah 5.

When the apostle John is likewise put through a visionary scroll-eating commissioning ritual in Revelation 10:8–11, eating a book that also contains a word of judgment,⁶ he too tastes sweetness in his mouth, and yet verse 10 says that immediately his stomach became bitter. Did Ezekiel have a different response than John? The answer is no. When we look ahead to Ezekiel 3:14, we find that the prophet’s experience was not so different from that of the apostle: “The Spirit lifted me up and took me away, and I went in bitterness in the heat of my spirit, the hand of the LORD being strong upon me” (English Standard Version). What do we then make of this sweetness-to-bitterness progression?

Bittersweet or Sweetly Bitter?

It is true that God’s word gives life. Ezekiel 37:1–14 will illustrate this as prophesying to a valley of dry bones in the Spirit (saying “O dry bones,

hear the word of the LORD!” [v. 4]) transforms the dusty skeletons into a living, breathing, resurrected host. Psalm 19:7–11 does indeed show that even God’s law—when fulfilled in Christ and therefore no longer able to separate believers from the Lord—is a word of delight, a guide to the life of wholeness and thanksgiving. The sheep hear the Shepherd’s voice and follow Him, knowing that His words lead to eternal life (John 10:3, 4, 16, 27–28; cf. John 6:68).

Even God’s words of judgment and vengeance reflect His holy, dependable, just, and restoring character. Those who have faced injustice, affliction, and abuse need not despair. God will ultimately right every wrong (Rom. 12:19; Heb. 10:30). And yet that does not mean that God’s judgment is no big deal; that pondering his eternal separation from fellow image bearers causes no emotional difficulty even for believers.

The Puritan scholar William Greenhill, who was a member of the Westminster Assembly, wrote: “Here was a [sc]roll full of ‘lamentation, mourning, and woe;’ and yet when the Lord commends it to Ezekiel, he finds sweetness in it: *not that he was not sensible and affected with the miseries coming upon him, for he was not . . . without natural affection*; but seeing the righteousness of God in his judgments towards them, he could not but be affected with a spiritual joy, and find sweetness therein, his will being reveled, and that which a gracious heart rests in.”⁷

Put another way by Christopher Wright, Ezekiel “observes the paradox that although the content of the word he was to eat and then to speak was long and bitter (2:10), the act of obedience itself was *as sweet as honey* (3:3). . . . The task of declaring such a message would bring Ezekiel utter grief and devastation (cf. 24:15–27). Yet in

that task, because it was the only way of obedience to the will of God who longed for the salvation of his people, there was an inner sweetness that only faithfulness to God’s will can bring.”⁸

Resting in God’s Word

Our next article will conclude this study of Ezekiel’s call. Understanding the details of this call will pay dividends as we move forward through select, representative chapters of this book. But as we conclude, we do well to remember how important this word-centeredness is, not only for Ezekiel’s unique, Old Testament office of prophet, but for all of us.

God has given us His word. That word is true. It is sufficient. It is powerful. It makes sense of our world. It changes hearts. The Lord tells Ezekiel immediately after having him ingest the scroll: “Son of man, go to the house of Israel and speak with My words to them” (Ezek. 3:4). The rest of the book will not only contain the repeated phrases “And the word of the LORD came to me, saying . . .” and “Thus says the LORD,” but also it will allude to and quote numerous parts of earlier Old Testament Scripture. (Leviticus and Deuteronomy play especially important roles in Ezekiel’s preaching.)⁹

Ezekiel’s audience had taken to following popular “proverbs” (e.g., Ezek. 12:22, 23; 16:44; 18:2–3) and listening to popular counselors who made pronouncements with no divine warrant (e.g., Ezek. 11:2–3). They treated Ezekiel’s ministry as an entertaining form of fearmongering (e.g., Ezek. 20:49), much like entertainment news media today. Our own day is driven by soundbites, slogans, entertainers, politicians, and so-called experts who wax eloquent about what should be, yet also with no divine, biblical warrant.

What is God’s answer? “Speak my words to them.” This does not mean clubbing people with the Bible. It does not mean feeling no heartache at those who reject God’s word. It does not mean neglecting to listen patiently to people’s struggles, questions, and objections so as to know how best to apply Scripture to their lives. But it always means prioritizing God’s revelation over anything else, no matter how popular or natural that anything else feels.

Ultimately Ezekiel will give way to a better prophet, a better priest, a better—indeed, the consummate—Son of Man, our Lord Jesus Christ. A word-centered approach will ultimately be a Christ-centered approach since the Scriptures testify to Him (cf. Luke 24:27; John 1:45; 1 Pet. 1:10–12). Our ongoing study of Ezekiel will drive us naturally to Jesus, the ultimate glory/*kavod* of God. He not only proclaimed a message of judgment but also bore that judgment on the cross for the sake of His own.

1 All Scripture citations are from the New King James Version unless otherwise noted.

2 O. Palmer Robertson, *The Christ of the Prophets*, abridged ed. (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2008), 40.

3 See Peter Jones, *Spirit Wars: Pagan Revival in Christian America* (Wine Press Publishing/Main Entry Editions, 1997); idem, *The Other Worldview: Exposing Christianity’s Greatest Threat* (Bellingham, WA: Kirkdale Press, 2015).

4 Christopher J. H. Wright, *The Message of Ezekiel* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2001), 54.

5 Ibid.

6 G. K. Beale, *The Book of Revelation: A Commentary on the Greek Text* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 527, 530–32, 550–53.

7 William Greenhill, *Ezekiel* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, 1994), 98, emphasis added.

8 Wright, *Message of Ezekiel* 1, 59.

9 See Gary Edward Schnittjer, *Old Testament Use of Old Testament: A Book-by-Book Guide* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Academic, 2021), 312–57.

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Concluding Considerations: Jodocus van Lodenstein on Being Reformed



Dr. Michael R. **Kearney**

When 2024 began, I started a series of articles about the Dutch minister Jodocus van Lodenstein and his untranslated work *Beschouwinge van Zion* (*Considering Zion*). What first led me to Van Lodenstein was my interest in discovering the origin of the phrase *semper reformanda*, “always being reformed.” I did not locate a precise citation, but it became clear in Van Lodenstein’s opening chapters that ongoing Spirit-led reform and renewal were his continual prayer and plea. Now, nearing the end of 2024, I think it wise to conclude with a few general comments. This

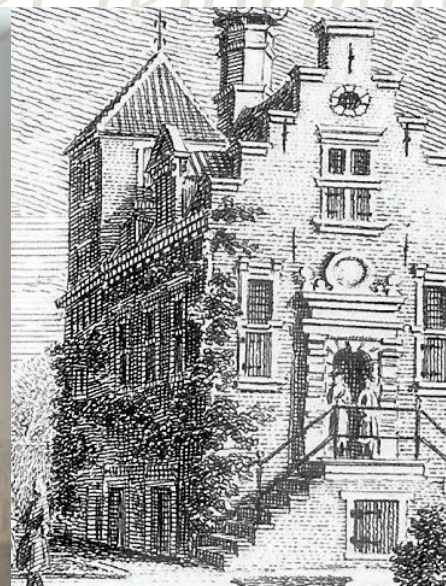
short series leaves us with some challenging thoughts from Van Lodenstein on what it means to be Reformed.

I was not born into a Reformed family. My father was an ex-Roman Catholic, and my mother had been raised Lutheran. My father’s own study of the Scriptures led him through a variety of churches in search of biblical doctrine and worship. He eventually encountered Reformed doctrine through Family Radio and the teaching of Harold Camping (which is why I appreciated Rev. Chris Gordon’s nuanced article on Camping in the June 1 issue of *Christian Renewal*). Only later

did we end up joining a Reformed church. I share that because “what it means to be Reformed” was a deep question confronting my family and upbringing, representing an ongoing process of learning and transformation rather than a single “ah ha” moment.

In fact, I doubt there can ever be a single definition of “being Reformed.” I now live in a region dotted with Reformed churches of many denominations—all of which claim to subscribe to the Three Forms of Unity. Yet even among such churches, differences in teaching and worship can be dramatic. One of the

Ecclesia reformatata semper reformanda



oldest congregations in the United States, the Marble Collegiate Church of 1628 in New York City¹, is still affiliated with the Reformed Church in America. Donald Trump's second marriage took place in that church, and he claimed to attend it during his first presidential campaign. That claim prompted the church—an avowedly liberal congregation—to let CNN know that Trump was not an active member.² Even in American political discourse, the question of what it means to be Reformed continues to matter. And it matters for each one of us too, if we continue to profess that the Reformed tradition is the most biblically consistent expression of the Christian faith. I believe Van Lodenstein deserves a place alongside more renowned Reformers like Martin Luther and John Calvin for framing a vision of Reformed Christianity that warns us not to confuse dependence on God with allegiance to human traditions.

Repentance, Renewal, and Revival

I tend to think of the mission of the Reformation in three broad terms: repentance, renewal, and revival. Luther beautifully articulated the need for repentance in the opening words of the Ninety-Five Theses: “When our Lord and Master Jesus Christ said, ‘Repent’ (Matthew 4:17), he willed the entire life of believers to be one of repentance.” Luther applied this notion of repentance, or spiritual turning, to individual believers, but he also contended that the Christian church itself must be characterized by a constant movement of turning away from sinful, worldly living and toward Christ, the Savior of those who believe. Luther rediscovered the free promise of the gospel conveyed in the Scriptures, which brought unspeakable comfort and peace to his own troubled soul and the souls of millions of others who had

...He argued against views of the Reformation as a once-for-all historical event that had gotten the church back on track; instead, he emphasized the need for spiritual revival, leading to ongoing reform and renewal throughout believers' whole lives.

been kept from this truth through the worldly abuses of the Roman Catholic Church.

That evangelical focus on repentance is further fleshed out by an emphasis on the renewal of persons, institutions, and societies—a legacy often associated with John Calvin. Calvin's systematic vision for Reformed theology and practice in Geneva offered inspiration for many other Protestants across Europe. This systematic vision sprang from Calvin's understanding of union with Christ as the central teaching of the Scriptures. For Calvin, the most important spiritual reality was a believer's personal union with Jesus Christ; membership in a physical church became the natural manifestation of spiritual membership in the body of Christ. Reformation, then, involved a renewal of family, church, and society according to biblical principles.

Yet the story did not end with Luther, Calvin, or their contemporaries, and Van Lodenstein warned Reformed churches in his own day of the danger of slipping back into the same kind of worldliness that had undone the Roman Catholic Church. He argued against views of the Reformation as a once-for-all historical event that had gotten the church back on track; instead, he emphasized the need for spiritual revival, leading to ongoing reform and renewal throughout believers' whole lives.

When asked what it means to be Reformed, we can easily answer in regard to key teachings, such as

the five solas, covenant theology, the priesthood of all believers, or the need for personal union with Christ. While each of these doctrines is essential to a Reformed understanding of the gospel, I believe that repentance, renewal, and revival represent three commitments that focus on how these doctrines must be lived out.

Importantly, these three themes reinforce one another while also keeping one another in check. Think of churches you may know that focus almost exclusively on personal repentance, or on societal renewal, or on Spirit-led revival. Each theme without the other two will likely nurture an imbalanced approach to teaching and worship. Together, repentance, renewal, and revival chart a path that upholds *semper reformanda* as a guiding principle for our lives, families, and churches.

Semper Reformanda as a Principle

It is fascinating to consider how Christian denominations label themselves. Some names are based on geographical origin—Roman Catholic, Eastern Orthodox, Anglican, and so on. Other denominations associate themselves with the name of a particular person—Lutheran or Mennonite, for instance. Some denominations identify themselves in terms of organizational structure—Presbyterian, Congregational, and the like. Still others claim a particular doctrinal tenet—such as Baptist or Seventh-Day Adventist churches.

The Reformation was a public acknowledgment of a historical mistake: the mistake of confusing the visible body of Christ's church on earth with His incorruptible body in heaven. The Reformers offered frequent reminders that true churches and false churches coexist on this earth. The marks of a true church consist in its adherence to the Bible, its biblical observance of worship, and its involvement in discipling its members in holiness.

Have you ever considered where Reformed churches fall in this naming scheme? We are not named for a person, although we might call ourselves Calvinists. Nor are we named for a single characteristic doctrine or a unique structure of church government. Rather, our name denotes a *principle* of reformation.³ The principle of reformation requires that all our lives, individually and collectively, operate under the biblical calls for repentance, renewal, and revival.

This means that our faith can never be defined by the ideas of a specific person, the ethnic heritage of a particular place, or the worship practices of a certain time. Singing Genevan psalm tunes or quoting Calvin in a sermon does not make a church or its members Reformed. Nor can we claim that the Protestant movement marked a pure time in history in which the Christian church “got it right.” Indeed, to believe this would be to reject the very principle that the Reformers sought so earnestly to recover. That principle is the reminder that our faith is merely an empty-handed response to the sovereign work of God revealed in the Bible—a frequent reminder of Van Lodenstein’s writing.

We must always guard against an idolatrous embrace of manmade notions of what “Reformed” means. Any of these descriptors will fail us if we forget that the very point of the Protestant Reformation

was to point away from human influence and power and toward total dependence on the Lord Jesus Christ and His revelation in the Scriptures. Indeed, the whole Reformation movement can be summed up as a profound recognition of sin and its consequences for communities of faith. The principle of reformation, understood as repentance, renewal, and revival, is the essential characteristic that should keep our churches humbly reliant upon their God and Savior, and that principle should drive us to search the Scriptures constantly to have our beliefs and practices either confirmed or corrected.

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Van Lodenstein’s writings are a unique treasure of our theological heritage. I suspect that they have had a greater influence in denominations like the Netherlands Reformed congregations and the Heritage Reformed congregations than they ever had on the Christian Reformed Church or the United

Reformed Churches in North America. Certainly, Van Lodenstein’s extreme language can sometimes be misconstrued. Nevertheless, this doleful prophet of the Further Reformation offers much-needed warning and encouragement for all Reformed believers today.

Van Lodenstein stressed the need for a robust theology of the Holy Spirit. Just as the church was inaugurated by the Holy Spirit at Pentecost (Acts 2), so the church of all times and places is ever dependent upon the Spirit’s indwelling in the hearts and minds of believers to illuminate them, to comfort them, and to guide them into all truth (John 16). Van Lodenstein loved the church. Painfully, he recognized that the Reformed tradition formed in the previous century could not maintain its purity by itself. Indeed, in some ways it faced new dangers that the medieval Roman Catholic Church had not faced. But Van Lodenstein’s passionate plea for a church marked by *semper reformanda* also conveyed trust in the promises of Jesus that He will build and maintain His church through the Spirit’s guidance.

1. The Marble Collegiate Church has a dual affiliation with the United Church of Christ, according to <https://www.marblechurch.org/history>.

2. Eugene Scott, “Church Says Donald Trump Is Not an ‘Active Member,’” CNN, August 28, 2015, <https://www.cnn.com/2015/08/28/politics/donald-trump-church-member/index.html?sr=twtsr0828trumpchurch>.

3. Dutch theologians in the nineteenth century used the word *beginsel*, a “founding principle,” to discuss the identity of Reformed churches. See Daniel J. Ragusa, “Trinitarian Harmony: The Foundations of a Philosophy of Revelation in Early Nineteenth-Century Dutch Reformed Theology,” PhD dissertation, Westminster Theological Seminary, Philadelphia, PA, 2023.

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DEMENTIA

This article is a call for compassion both for dementia sufferers and for their loved ones. This is not in any way medical advice, but some of my own and others' experiences that may help raise our Christian love and understanding in dealing with a health problem that most of us will encounter sometime in our lives.

Dementia

Dementia is a term used to describe a group of symptoms affecting memory, thinking, and social abilities (see mayoclinic.org). It happens in the brain and is caused by damage to or loss of nerve cells and their connections in the brain. The symptoms depend on the area of the brain that's damaged, so dementia can affect people differently.

Causes can be diseases like Alzheimer's, Huntington's, Parkinson's, or Creutzfeldt-Jakob's, or trauma to the brain from certain sports injuries, accidents, or a brain tumor. But there are also many dementia-like conditions that can be reversed: for example, if they are caused by an infection or

immune disorder, endocrine problems, low levels of certain nutrients (e.g., vitamins D, B-6, B-12, folate), diabetes, depression, side effects of medications, or even a urinary tract infection. It's also possible that the underlying cause is a sin, like drunkenness. It is therefore important to be alert to what the cause could be, especially in case it is treatable.

Dementia and Faith

Our bodies are physically broken by the Fall, and that includes both our vascular system and our brains. The Christian view of the brain is that it is the interface between the non-physical soul or mind and the

physical creation. When the brain falters, communication with the outside world, including loved ones, becomes extremely difficult. This is frustrating both for the patient and the loved ones.

“Interface” is computer terminology because in the world computers are the manmade version of the brain. But the brain was meant by God to be the interface with Him in faith and with the people around us, so we could love them (as Jesus commanded) and proclaim the gospel to them.

When a dementia patient seemingly cannot remember anything anymore, the tendency exists to stop visiting, because they forget your visit right away and conversation becomes tiresome too. There are several reasons why this is wrong in the sight of God. First, God is not dependent on our frailty and broken interface. Jesus knows who this cherished child of God is and will be again in the restoration of the kingdom. In a research project (see Faithinlaterlife.org, by author Alex Drew) people with dementia were asked about their faith, and they all professed to feel closer to God. Trust and hope were interwoven in the words of each of the research participants. One patient even showed signs of conversion although he had never been a believer before. Even in the later stages of life, just like the thief on the cross, we can come to accept God’s gift of grace. God’s grace trumps cognitive capacity, and nothing can separate us from His love.

This tells us that we, the loved ones, the caretakers, and we as the church community, have the responsibility to remind and minister, to sing and pray with dementia patients, and be their memory for them. We need to bring them to church to enjoy the service, and we should certainly never neglect them just because

they are suffering from one of the consequences of the Fall.

Also, during the dark times we need to realize that another theme in Scripture is that even in great darkness and suffering, there is joy, hope, and growth (Rom. 5:3–5). In suffering our trust in God is strengthened. Romans 8:28 states that for those who love God all things work together for good, and dementia is one of those things. This is true for us just as much when caring for the patient. It should encourage us to keep praying and caring, even if it requires lots of patience, emphatic imagination, and creative love.

For both the sufferer and the loved one there is God’s comfort and hope: therefore “let those who suffer according to God’s will entrust their souls to a faithful Creator while doing good” (1 Peter 4:19, English Standard Version).

Alzheimer’s?

Because Alzheimer’s disease is the most infamous of the possible causes and therefore also over-diagnosed by doctors, there can be a fear of suffering from it at the first loss of short-term memory. This is a sad situation, because it may turn into a self-fulfilling prophecy for elderly people who think they are suffering from Alzheimer’s while all they are suffering from is old age, a senior moment, or one of those treatable issues.

The Alzheimer’s Association website (alz.org) gives “10 Early Signs and Symptoms of Alzheimer’s and Dementia,” and this website also gives symptoms that are only age-related. Like everything in our bodies, the brain starts to lose its youthful vigor with age. And the way we age is profoundly personal. The main difference between Alzheimer’s symptoms and what is age-related is whether it is disrupting our

daily lives. Forgetting something, not knowing what day it is, being irritated when a routine is disrupted, poor judgment on occasion, sometimes having trouble finding a word, or misplacing things are all age-related and not a concern if they happen on occasion and a person can later retrace steps, or realize where it went wrong.

My older loved ones often worried they were getting Alzheimer’s when they just weren’t as keen as they used to be. My answer was always, if you don’t know where your keys are, you are forgetful; if you don’t know what a key is for, you may have Alzheimer’s. They always laughed and were relieved—for the moment.

Another help would be to help train a failing memory. “Use it or lose it” becomes a greater truth the older we get. Apart from helpful ideas like making lists or putting out a calendar, it’s a good idea to work on crosswords, sudoku, or puzzles or being taken out for new experiences.

Dementia?

I would like to make the point that under certain circumstances dementia may look a lot worse than it really is. For example, an elderly lady who is in a care facility has nothing left to live for, has no new experiences, and therefore starts to live in her past where she was still busy and useful to others. When asked how she’s doing, she will answer: busy! And that may seem odd, until you relate to her and can empathize and see why she’s answering that way.

Another example is when the patient can’t talk very well anymore. They may only be able to say a different word than what they want to, and it takes some knowledge of this person to realize what they mean by this word. Consider the words not random, but with a different meaning. This also relates to a

bilingual person, because their second language may disappear and they will have only some of the first language left because it is hardwired in their brain.

Both empathy and respect are extremely important when dealing with patients whose brains don't work well anymore, and the diagnosis of dementia shouldn't be given rashly.

Advanced Dementia

When dementia gets advanced, the burden becomes heavy on both the patient and the loved ones.

Already when our brains get older, we become less able to suppress the less likable sides of our character. I heard this called "filter gone." If this is combined with the frustration of being less able to think and communicate, it is understandable that one may become grumpy, bad-tempered, or depressed. To understand this dynamic makes it easier to deal with it and to forgive.

On the website ContentedDementiaTrust.org I found a method called the SPECAL (not a typo) method that gives advice on how to talk with dementia patients. They give "Three Golden Rules" for talking with dementia patients: "We owe it to the person with dementia to avoid leaving them with anxieties that they cannot,

only moments later, explain. So we must search for the information and language that is most acceptable to them. Once we have found the best answer to their most frequent question, this form of words should be used consistently by everyone coming into contact with the person. This may not be commonsense, but it increases confidence all around." My point is that there is helpful and loving advice out there on how to deal with dementia patients.

The burden for the loved ones is that the patient will forget that you visited frequently, and the patient may even forget who you are. It's like losing your loved one even before he or she dies. But God is aware of everything, and it's important for yourself later to know that you didn't give up on them. You may also never know how your love shown to them will still impact them. They can't express it anymore, but they can still feel it.

There are different levels or areas in our memory. One that's separate from the rest is the memory for music, both for hearing music and for making music. I know a very old lady who has severe dementia, but she can still play the hymns that she always played on the piano, and she's happy when she does it (you may have to remind her). Some people can suddenly still dance to their favorite music, and others are happy to listen. Some will remember the

words of the hymns they treasured, even when they can't speak anymore. Music is a blessing from God, and it reaches straight into our soul. If you don't know what to do during a visit, try music: we all carry it on our phones.

What a grace that God does allow many to remember key and central things related to our faith, like old hymns, old pastors, favorite Scriptures, and our confession of Jesus. God does what some cannot. He remembers His covenant forever, the word that He commanded for a thousand generations (Ps. 105:8). When the bodies and brains of God's saints wither away, they are not forgotten by Him.

And all of us surrounding them aren't either. There is information out there that can help us deal with these special saints, and we should never forget that a loving God is watching over us too, ready to comfort and help us if we just ask (Ps. 139).

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Hope Staal, *General Manager*

FROM

MAINTENANCE

TO

MISSIONAL

A Plea for Reformation (3)



Rev. Paul T. **Murphy**

Conversion growth in Presbyterian and Reformed churches is virtually nonexistent. In the opinion of this writer that should, can, and must change. Hence, this call for reformation in the mission of the church.

In the last issue we saw a biblical theological perspective on God as a missionary God. So, how does a church move from being a maintenance church to one that is on mission with God? It must begin with the leaders. Those who rule in the church are to be examples to the flock, and that includes evangelism and outreach.

I would encourage you to begin reading something together as leaders in the church, books that articulate and elaborate a biblical theology of mission. *The Mission of God* by Christopher Wright is quite a big work, but it's very rich, beneficial, heartwarming reading. A little less lengthy work would be Michael Goheen's *The Light of the World*. On a more popular level is Kevin DeYoung's *The Mission of the Church* or *Tell the Truth* by Will Metzger. At the risk of self-promotion, I would recommend my own *A Humble*

*Effort to Promote Local Evangelism.*¹

Perhaps this reading could be done in a monthly time of council education or a separate time of study and prayer.

Some of those older among us may recall that in the credentials form of the Christian Reformed Church there was a question, "Are the elders engaged in the work of evangelism?"² Significantly it's not on the Form in the United Reformed Churches. In Classis Eastern U.S. we have added that question to the credentials form. We voted on that, and we said the

elders should answer that question because the elders are the leaders of the church, and they should be setting an example when it comes to evangelism. That is only one of many good things in our former church home as far as missions were concerned. We have lost something in the secession. Rev. Harry Bout is a retired missionary on the URCNA Missions Committee. He recently showed me a Church Order from the Christian Reformed Church in the early twentieth century. It had six Church Order articles on evangelism in the local church. The URCNA has lost a biblical emphasis which we would do well to recover.

Allow me to address the office of pastor specifically. I do so because the church will more often than not reflect the pastor of the church. I suggest that for there to be an evangelistic church there must be an evangelistic pastor. Why? Because the Bible says so. A pastor is to "do

the work of an evangelist.”³ Now, in our churches the minister’s life and doctrine are overseen by the elders. The minister is, as one of his responsibilities, to do the work of an evangelist. That means that elders, who are responsible for the ministers, should ensure that a pastor is fulfilling his calling. If a minister were neglecting any of the responsibilities of his calling surely the elders would address that in consistory meeting. If a pastor is neglecting the work of evangelism, then he stands in need of correction.

Out of all the responsibilities expected of a minister, how much time is given him to do the work of an evangelist? How much time is your church willing to give him to do the work of an evangelist? Would you be willing to give him 20 percent of his pastoral responsibilities to do evangelism?⁴ A fellow minister, when

meeting with a church that had called him, asked that in his letter of call he be given 20 percent of his time devoted to evangelism. The church agreed. Shouldn’t every church?

The main reasons why this is not common, at least in the opinion of this writer, is because the pastor is already overworked with multiple pastoral duties. It is also because we do not see evangelism, and leadership in that area, as a main concern in the ministry of the church. Could this be a main problem with why we do not see conversion growth in Reformed and Presbyterian churches?

I recently posed this question at a lunch meeting of fellow URCNA pastors. One response was, “You better not say that too loud or the elders will chop your head off.” The other responses? Silence.

We will not move beyond being maintenance churches if we maintain

the status quo. The Reformed church is always reforming. Let us act.

1. Available in PDF format by sending a request to ptmurphy@merfnyc.org. A friend has developed a study guide for this booklet. Many evangelism committees in North America have found this a beneficial work.
2. The credentials are what each church submits to the meeting of classis. There are other questions about preaching, sacraments, and discipline to ensure that each congregation is manifesting the marks of the church. It begs the question if evangelism/missions/outreach should be a mark of the church. After all, it is our *raison d’etre*.
3. 2 Timothy 4:5.
4. Perhaps 10 percent in a large congregation.

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Lord's Day 21: God's Spirit Is Working in the Church

Rev. William Boekestein



54Q. What do you believe concerning “the holy catholic church”?

A. I believe that the Son of God through his Spirit and Word, out of the entire human race, from the beginning of the world to its end, gathers, protects, and preserves for himself a community chosen for eternal life and united in true faith. And of this community I am and always will be a living member.

55Q. What do you understand by “the communion of saints”?

A. First, that believers one and all, as members of Christ the Lord, have communion with him and share in all his treasures and gifts. Second, that each member should consider it a duty to use these gifts readily and joyfully for the service and enrichment of the other members.

56 Q. What do you believe concerning “the forgiveness of sins”?

A. I believe that God, because of Christ’s satisfaction, will no longer remember any of my sins or my sinful nature which I need to struggle against all my life. Rather, by his grace God grants me the righteousness of Christ that I may never come into judgment.

“I believe in the Holy Spirit.” Just six words. It seems like the Apostles’ Creed has much less to say about the Holy Spirit than it does about the Father and the Son. But what if we understood everything that follows to be a consequence of the Spirit’s ministry? Remember, the creed is divided into three parts, one for each divine person. The Spirit, our Sanctifier, transforms us by applying to us every benefit designed for us by the Father and earned for us by the Son.

Only by the Spirit’s work do God’s children enter a holy fraternity (54),

enjoy supernatural fellowship (55), and experience the forgiveness of sins (56).

The Spirit Makes Believers Members of God’s Church

Each of the creed’s three words—“holy catholic church”—are important.

God’s people are the church, the gathering of believers whom the Father has given to the Son through the Spirit from the world (John 6:37). The church is God’s new creation, Christ’s

bride whom He pursues, defends, and protects.

The church is catholic, or universal. Because God “shows no partiality” (Acts 10:34), Christ gathers a people from the entire human race from the beginning to the end of the world (Rev. 5:9). But even the truly catholic church has boundaries—the word also means “orthodox.” We must accept as brothers all those—but only those—whom Christ has “united in true faith.”

The church is holy. “He chose us in him before the foundation of the world that we should be holy and blameless before him” (Eph. 1:4, English Standard Version; cf. 1 Peter 2:9). Every child of God is a saint (Eph. 1:1), literally “a holy one” who practices true holiness without which no one will see the Lord (Heb. 12:14).

A right view of the church helps us avoid two contrasting errors. We must not neglect the church. The baptisms in Acts tell us that those who came to trust in Jesus were also initiated into life with a new family, Jesus’ church (1 Cor. 12:13). “No one ought to withdraw from it, content to be by himself, regardless of his status or condition.”¹ But neither may we put confidence in our church membership. Without true faith in Jesus, church membership becomes an empty shell. The church is a community chosen for eternal life that we receive by trusting Jesus.

But how does it function like a body?

The Spirit Gives Believers Beautiful Communion

To understand Christian community we must affirm two truths. First, fellowship is a gift from God (Eph. 2:13). “Christian brotherhood is not an ideal but a divine reality.”² It is not first about what we do; it is a reflection of who we are: a body of individuals unified by a common history, character, policy, interest, and activity. Second-century theologian Justin Martyr wrote that believers in the church form “a single soul.”³

Second, fellowship is also a duty of every believer. J. I. Packer writes, “Most churches today have passengers rather than practitioners.”⁴ But an uninvolved church member is a contradiction in terms. We must use our gifts “readily and cheerfully” for others. You won’t serve exactly like anyone else in your church. And that is

just what God wants! “We have many members in one body, but all the members do not have the same function” (Rom. 12:4). God graciously gifts some to teach, others to serve, encourage, give with greater liberality, show mercy, or practice unusual cheerfulness (6–8). And the discovery and use of spiritual gifts doesn’t need to be complicated. We simply need to “look to the interests of others” (Phil. 2:4), using our gifts “for the service and enrichment of the other members.” The ways we can do that are as varied and numerous as the cells and organs in a healthy body (1 Cor. 12:14–26). The mantra of surveillance states regarding problems is, “See something? Say something.” In the church it should be, “See something? Do something.”

Sadly the body isn’t yet fully healthy. But its members are forgiven.

The Spirit Frees Believers from the Guilt and Penalty of Sin

Christianity makes sense only if you understand sin. “Sin” literally means to miss the target of God’s law. We sin by coming short of God’s standards, doing what God forbids, or failing to do what God requires. Genuine Christians know the shame of having “sinned and fallen short of the glory of God” (Rom. 3:23). Sin always has repercussions. It threatens our joy, stunts our growth, separates us from loved ones, and injures our victims. Sin also has eternal consequences. If not dealt with, sin will separate us from God. The “wages of sin is death” (Rom. 6:23).

But “the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Rom. 6:23). Sin can be forgiven! Christ came to call sinners to repentance and to embody the gospel promise of restored life with God. By pure grace God charges the sins of believers to the account of His dear Son. He will no longer remember our sins (Mic. 7:19). Instead, he gives to us Christ’s righteousness. God “made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him

we might become the righteousness of God” (2 Cor. 5:21).

When God forgives, He takes away all the guilt and shame that sin creates. He begins to counteract the alienation and other consequences caused by sin. In this life you’ll never be perfect; neither will your fellow church members. So believers must imitate God’s forgiveness of us, being “kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another” (Eph. 4:32). And we must truly struggle our whole lives against our sins and our sinful nature, choosing life by putting to death the deeds of the body, with the Spirit’s help (Rom. 8:13).

What does my new life as a believer look like? Church tells us who we are. Fellowship links us with fellow pilgrims. Forgiveness comforts us in our fallenness. To say it differently, “the ‘holy catholic church’ is ‘the communion of the saints’ only because there is ‘the forgiveness of sins.’”⁵ By His Spirit Christ is building a church by turning sinners into saints who are able to enjoy true communion as a foretaste of our future heavenly life together.

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1. Belgic Confession, 28.
2. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together* (New York: HarperCollins, 1954), 26.
3. Fred Klooster, *Our Only Comfort*, 2:689.
4. J. I. Packer, *A Quest for Godliness: The Puritan Vision of the Christian Life* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 1990), 221.
5. Klooster, *Our Only Comfort*, 2:711.

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Lord's Day 22: What Does Your Future Look Like?

Rev. William **Boekestein**



57Q. How does “the resurrection of the body” comfort you? A. Not only will my soul be taken immediately after this life to Christ its head, but also my very flesh, raised by the power of Christ, will be reunited with my soul, and made like Christ’s glorious body.

58Q. How does the article concerning “life everlasting” comfort you? A. Even as I already now experience in my heart the beginning of eternal joy, so after this life I will have perfect blessedness such as no eye has seen, no ear has heard, no heart has ever imagined: a blessedness in which to praise God eternally.[]

Christian living straddles two realities: Christ is making all things new (Rev. 21:5), but no one has fully experienced that newness.

For the gospel to be good news—the best news—it must be doing something powerful now that will be perfected in the coming age. As John put it, “Beloved, we are God’s children now, and what we will be has not yet appeared” (1 John 3:2, English Standard Version). Real hope in the present must materialize in the future.

The last two phrases of the Apostles’ Creed bolster our souls with biblical truths that will completely transform us, and are starting to already.

I Believe in the Resurrection of the Body

The beauty of the resurrection is divided into two phases—what happens to believers first at death, and second at the general resurrection.

Our Souls Will Be Raised

At death believers’ souls will immediately pass into glory and begin what theologians call the “intermediate state.” For the believer there is no “being dead” (Mark 12:26–27). When believers die, their bodies—still united to Christ—rest in the ground until the resurrection. But believers cannot stay dead. “To be absent from the body is to be present with the Lord” (2 Cor. 5:6, 8).

For Christians death is phase one of the glorious transformation of lives wracked by the fall’s aftereffects. Now God has forgiven our sins. Then we will lose all familiarity with sin. Past sin will no longer burden us and future sin will be impossible. Death more fully unites believers with “the spirits of just men made perfect” (Heb. 12:23). Our death is truly “only a dying to sins and an entering into eternal life” (Q&A 42).

But even that state will be incomplete (Rev. 6:10). Contrary to classic Greek philosophy, salvation isn’t the rescue of the soul from the body. I grew up singing, “Thank you, Lord, for saving my soul. Thank you, Lord, for making me whole.” But the song is only half right. I am made whole not

by God saving my soul but by God remaking and re-joining my soul and body. That's the second phase of His resurrection promise.

Our Bodies Will Be Reunited with Our Souls

As Christ “rose again from the dead” so will the bodies of all the faithful be raised to glory. In fact, everyone will arise from death. Jesus declared that one day “all who are in the tombs will hear his voice and come out” to be judged and receive their eternal lot (John 5:28–29; cf. Acts 24:15). “Those who sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, some to everlasting life, and some to shame and everlasting contempt” (Dan. 12:2; cf. 1 Thess. 4:14).

At the resurrection Christ will make believers' bodies like His glorious body. Our heavenly bodies will be comparable with our present ones but incredibly improved. “What is sown is perishable; what is raised is imperishable. It is sown in dishonor; it is raised in glory. It is sown in weakness; it is raised in power” (1 Cor. 15:42–43). Our heavenly bodies will forever transcend the possibility of malfunction, decay, shame, or weakness.

But even the bodily resurrection is only a beginning of glory. The creed's last phrase explains what follows.

I Believe in Life Everlasting

Believers have the beginning of eternal joy now. God loves us, even if sin sometimes blindfolds us from sensing it. We have peace of conscience; our souls can be well—but aren't always—even in ugly circumstances. We have pleasure in the Holy Spirit—we don't always feel jolly, but we have joy because of God's goodness. We progress in holiness—slowly and haltingly, perhaps. But we know something of the blessedness of godly living.

But our joy is incomplete. Psalms of lament give words to the trembling hearts of believers of all generations. “Many are the afflictions of the

righteous” (Ps. 34:19). We groan to put on immortality (2 Cor. 5:21). “If in this life only we have hope in Christ, we are of all men the most pitiable” (1 Cor. 15:19).

After this life, unmixed joy will begin. The catechism doesn't elaborate on the “blessedness” that believers will receive in heaven. But the main idea of both proof texts has to do with knowing God (John 17:3; 1 Cor. 2:9). Then we will know God more fully even as He has always been fully known us (1 Cor. 13:12). This means that we will better and more happily know the extent of our pardon. In the Day of Judgment “Christ will openly [acknowledge] and [acquit]” the saints.¹ When God reveals every thought, word, and deed of every person who has ever lived, it will be abundantly clear: None of us have come close to meeting God's standard of sinless perfection. None of us are nearly as holy as God is holy. Still, God will say to His children, “Well done, good and faithful servant . . . enter into the joy of your master . . . Come, you who are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world” (Matt. 25:23, 34). Our works do follow us into eternity (Rev. 14:13). How we live now truly matters. But the reward for believers' works will be “far above the merit of all their services and sufferings.”²

We will also more fully enjoy God and praise Him continually. Some people are turned off by the idea of praising God eternally—they imagine haloed saints pensively strumming harps. But C. S. Lewis flagged such reasoning as childish. Those who despise heaven because they “do not want ‘to spend eternity playing harps’” should be told that “if they cannot understand books written for grown-ups, they should not talk about them.”³ The pleasure of heaven is joyful adoration of God as He fully satisfies our longings. “In your presence is fullness of joy; at your right hand are

What is sown is perishable; what is raised is imperishable. It is sown in dishonor; it is raised in glory. It is sown in weakness; it is raised in power.

–1 Cor. 15:42–43

pleasures forevermore” (Ps. 16:11; cf. 1 Thess. 4:17). Imagine the best heaven you can and you will have massively undershot. And yet, such imagination, informed by Scripture, comforts us along the way now.

Throughout the trials of the Christian life, God graciously gives us small tokens of heaven. But some desires can be fulfilled only in the age to come—even our current unmet desires prove this. Lewis famously said that “[i]f I find in myself a desire which no experience in this world can satisfy, the most probable explanation is that I was made for another world.”⁴ You were made for another world. In Christ you are being transformed for another world. Soon believers will begin a joyful eternity in God's presence. Let that truth comfort you (1 Thess. 4:18) and quicken you to other-worldly living now.

This article is part of a series, “Our Life's Comfort,” which was first published at corechristianity.com on June 2, 2022, <https://corechristianity.com/resources/articles/what-does-your-future-look-like-lords-day-22>

1. Westminster Shorter Catechism 38.

2. Matthew Henry, *Matthew Henry's Commentary on the Whole Bible*, vol. 6 (Old Tappan, NJ: Revell, n.d.), 1166b.

3. C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (New York: Macmillan, 1960), 121.

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Church Order

Article 25: Delegates & Matters of Broader Assemblies
Article 26: Classis



Rev. Greg Lubbers

URCNA

*Let all things be done decently and in order.
—1 Cor. 14:40, NKJV*

ARTICLE 25: Delegates and Matters of Broader Assemblies

Those delegated to the broader assemblies shall be seated only with properly signed credentials, and each delegate shall have only one vote. In the broader assemblies only those matters that could not be settled in the narrower assemblies, or that pertain to the churches of the broader assembly in common, shall be considered. All such matters shall originate with a Consistory and be considered by classis before being considered by synod. No broader assembly shall have the power to depose an office-bearer or otherwise exercise church discipline, since these powers belong to the Consistory. (Article 25)

(Continued on next page)

ARTICLE 26: Classis

A classis shall consist of neighboring churches whose Consistories delegate two of their members with proper credentials to meet at a time and place determined at the previous classis meeting, within the next twelve months. If three Consistories in the classis deem it necessary that a classis meet earlier than the regular time determined, the Consistory charged with convening the meeting shall determine when and where the meeting is to occur. The

churches shall take turns providing a chairman and acting as the convening church.

Furthermore, the classis shall inquire of each Consistory whether Consistory and deacons' meetings are held, the Word of God is faithfully preached, the sacraments are faithfully administered, church discipline is exercised, the poor are cared for, and God-centered schooling is promoted; and whether the Consistory needs the advice and help of the classis for the proper government of the church.

Each classis shall inform the other classes regarding matters of mutual concern by forwarding its minutes to them in a timely manner. (Article 26)

(Continued on next page)

(Continuation of article 25)

The Delegates to the Broader Assemblies

Within the URCNA, each local consistory delegates (i.e., sends a person authorized to represent others) two of its members to the broader assemblies of classis and synod. Members of broader assemblies are sent by their respective consistories to deliberate and vote on the matters that are lawfully before the broader assembly. To ensure such persons have been properly delegated by their respective consistories, the Reformed churches have a long-standing practice of presenting credentials that officially indicate their delegation. Other office bearers are often present at the broader assemblies and are usually granted the privilege of the floor, but these persons do not have a right to vote since they have not been delegated by a local consistory.

The delegates are authorized by their respective consistories “to take part in all the deliberations and transactions of the classis [or synod] meeting regarding all matters legally coming before the meeting and transacted in agreement with the Word of God, as interpreted by the Three Forms of Unity, and applied in the Church Order.” On all such matters, each delegate has the right to vote, but parity grants each delegate only one vote. While not codified in the current Church Order, older versions required delegates to abstain from voting on matters that dealt with them personally. This is still a wise practice. A delegate can also voluntarily abstain from voting. This is also a wise practice if the delegate is completely unclear and unsure of his conviction on a matter.

In light of the above, it is wise for consistories to delegate two of its members who have a gifted ability

to engage in careful, and at times lengthy, deliberations with a thorough knowledge of the Scriptures, the confessions, and church polity rather than settle for whichever member is willing and able to attend a broader assembly. Those persons who are delegated should be conscious of the fact that they engage in the work of the church and represent not merely themselves but also the consistories that have delegated them.

The Matters for the Broader Assemblies

Reformed church polity is ever wary of broader assemblies overreaching their respective jurisdiction. For historical reasons leading up to its formation, the URCNA is especially emphatic in its limitation on what matters lawfully belong to the broader assemblies. The Church Order clearly states that matters for the broader assemblies must

(Continued on next page)

(Continuation of article 26)

The Constituency of Classis

Within Dutch Reformed church polity, the narrowest of the broader assemblies is that of classis. The word “classis” has its origin in the Latin language and has a basic meaning of a division or class of citizens. As used today, the word can represent a group of federatively united churches within a common geographical area as well as a meeting of delegated office bearers from those churches. In its most basic essence, “A Classis is a gathering of Churches meeting for mutual counsel and support and for united action concerning certain matters common to the interest of all the Churches.”¹

On the basis of federative unity in doctrine and practice, consistories within a particular classis delegate two of its consistory members to attend classis meetings. These

delegates represent their respective consistories and churches at such meetings. In an attempt to avoid hierarchy and maintain parity, the Church Order of the United Reformed Churches in North America stipulates that the churches within a classis “shall take turns providing a chairman and acting as the convening church” on a rotational basis.

The Occasion for Classis

The essential practice described within this article of the Church Order dates back to the sixteenth century. At that time until up into the early twentieth century, it was common for meetings of classis to take place every two or three months. The current ordinary practice is for meetings of classis to be convened twice annually, although the Church Order mandates only an annual meeting. Classis itself determines the

time and place of its next meeting.

However, at times it may be necessary for classis to meet more frequently and/or before its next scheduled meeting. Such events could include a consistory needing immediate advice from classis in a pressing discipline matter. The Church Order provides for the convening of classis in such a situation but also avoids classis having to meet just because of the desire of one consistory. For a classis to be convened earlier than the next scheduled meeting, three consistories within classis must concur to calling such a meeting.

The Supervision of Classis

Reformed church polity consistently seeks to maintain a balance in church government between the danger of hierarchical tyranny and the benefit of mutual accountability. One of the ways in which mutual accountability

(Continued on next page)

(Continuation of article 25)

originate with a consistory and then move their way from the narrower assemblies to the broader assemblies.

The agendas of broader assemblies must include only ecclesiastical matters that “could not be settled in the narrow assemblies” or matters “that pertain to the churches in common.” Examples of the former would include consistories seeking advice and persons presenting appeals, provided they proceed in an orderly way as outlined elsewhere in the Church Order. Examples of the latter would include actions that impact all of the churches within the federation collectively such as changes to the Church Order or the

work of various committees and functionaries of the federation.

The Power of the Broader Assemblies

Broader assemblies do not have their own inherent authority but rather have a delegated authority derived from the consistory’s delegating their respective persons. In connection with this principle, broader assemblies have a limited power to handle only matters which the churches assign to the broader assemblies through the stipulations of the Church Order.

The power of the broader assemblies is never one of exercising church

discipline. That power belongs only to the consistory, although the consistory must seek the advice of the classis in exercising that power, and persons may appeal to the broader assemblies if they are convinced a consistory has abused that power. In the life of a federation or denomination of churches, it is always necessary to insist that “no Classis or Synod may therefore assume to do that which rightfully belongs to the domain of the local Church, and which can be acted upon by its consistory.”¹

1. Idzerd Van Dellen and Martin Monsma, *The Church Order Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1941), 209.

(Continuation of article 26)

is exercised is the customary questions asked of each consistory’s delegates at a classis. While some denominations have edited them slightly, these questions have a long history of use.

The credential form used indicates these questions are to be discussed within the individual consistories and then reported to classis by the delegated brothers. The questions

all center upon the proper, biblical government of the local church and provide consistories an opportunity to request the advice and help of the broader assembly if need arises.

While it is now common for these questions to be asked near the end of classis, older Church Orders stated that they should be asked at the beginning of the meeting. There is wisdom in such a practice to avoid these questions becoming mere

matters of routine when delegates are tired and ready to head for home.

1. Idzerd Van Dellen and Martin Monsma, *The Church Order Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1941), 278.

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MINISTRY PARTNERSHIPS: REWARDING FELLOWSHIP IN THE GOSPEL

We thank God for the many ways we can mutually support and encourage Reformed believers around the world. Here are some ways church partnerships in particular have been beneficial in the past year:

As part of our mission to build up the church, we:

- generate Reformed Bible studies & office bearer training materials
- send evangelistic outreach to believers in prison via *The Outlook*
- offer discounted bulk subscriptions to *The Outlook*
- sponsor conferences & webinars on relevant topics
- distribute solidly confessional materials and catechetical resources

Supporting churches have encouraged us by:

- taking offerings in support of Reformed Fellowship
- donating toward prisoner subscriptions to *The Outlook*
- purchasing group subscriptions to *The Outlook*
- hosting webinars, conferences, or other events
- distributing Reformed Fellowship’s newsletter

Ten Commandments for Pastors and Church Members



Dr. Joel R. **Beeke**

Ten Commandments for Pastors

Give priority to your personal communion with God. Put your own soul first: your maintaining communion with God is a prerequisite for being an effective pastor to your people. “Take heed therefore unto yourselves, and to the flock, over the which the Holy Ghost hath made you overseers” (Acts 20:28, King James Version).

Give priority to prayer and holiness. Undertake no sermon, no pastoral work, no task of the ministry without seeking God’s face in Jesus Christ. Follow John Bunyan’s advice: “You can do more than pray after you have prayed, but you cannot do more than pray until you have prayed.” Personal holiness is not only a necessary pursuit but also a joyful one and is usually inseparable from divine success in the ministry.

Be bible all your life. Be like Bunyan, of whom Spurgeon said that if you pricked any vein, the blood that would flow out would be bible. Read the

Word, study the Word, believe the Word, pray over the Word, love the Word, live the Word, memorize the Word, meditate on the Word, sing the Word, and practice the Word.

Remember that preaching is the primary task of the ministry, and that to do it rightly, you need the Holy Spirit two times for every sermon: once in the study and then again on the pulpit.

Be profoundly thankful and humbled for the honor of being an ambassador of Jesus Christ. Remain convinced all your life that you have a crucial vocation, for you are dealing with never-dying souls for a never-ending eternity.

Preach Christ to the full. Be determined to know no man after the flesh—including yourself—and to glory in nothing except Jesus Christ and Him crucified, exalted, and coming again. Be a self-forgetter and a Christ-preacher. You can never preach Him enough. Devote the best energy of your life into preaching Him biblically, doctrinally, experientially,

and practically. Resolve, like Thomas Boston, to leave the savor of Christ behind in all that you do and wherever you go.

Love. Love the triune God; love your wife and children; love people; love your work.

Maintain a radical sense of dependency on the anointing of the Holy Spirit in all that you think, say, and do. Lean upon the Spirit at all times.

Ask God to give you a few, very close pastoral friends with whom you can hold each other accountable. Love your brethren in the ministry, and do not compete with them.

Live every day with an eternal perspective that fuels evangelistic urgency for the lost and pastoral love for the saints’ maturation. Keep eternity in view in all that you do, so that on the great day you may give a good account of your ministry and may hear your Master say, “Well done, thou good and faithful servant . . . enter thou in the joy of thy lord” (Matt. 25:21).

Ten Commandments to Church Members

Don't idolize your pastor. Don't expect him to be able to do what only God can do. Don't make a savior of him.

Don't criticize your pastor, unless he departs from the truth, and then do it with tears. And please don't expect perfection. He is a mere man—a weak, sinful man at that, just like you. His office is divine, but his person is human. He sets before you treasure in an earthen vessel. If you don't remember that, you will cry hosanna today but will crucify him tomorrow.

Don't avoid your pastor. Go to him, tell him your needs, open your soul, but don't waste his precious time. It is your duty and privilege to go to him with your questions and spiritual troubles—and that will be to his encouragement and joy.

Do pray for your pastor. Pray for his soul, that he may be kept humble and holy. Pray for his body, that he may be kept strong and spared for many years. Pray that he may be a burning and shining light. Pray for his ministry, that it may be abundantly blessed. Pray for his wife, his family, his sermon preparation, his delivery,

his counseling. Pray your minister full and he will preach you full.

Do be a good listener to and doer of the sermons your pastor preaches. Listen to and obey your pastor. As long as he preaches the Scriptures, receive it as the very word of God. Remember, he is Christ's gift to you.

Do be interested in your pastor. Don't let all your conversation with him be focused only on you. Be kind to him. Show interest in him, his life, and the life of his family; he is human too.

Remember to appreciate your pastor's strengths and minimize his weaknesses, always reminding yourself that your next pastor may not have your present pastor's strengths. Don't compare pastors with each other, but learn to appreciate each pastor whom God sends you for the peculiar gifts that God has given to that pastor.

Look above and beyond your pastor. Look to Him whom your pastor sets before you.

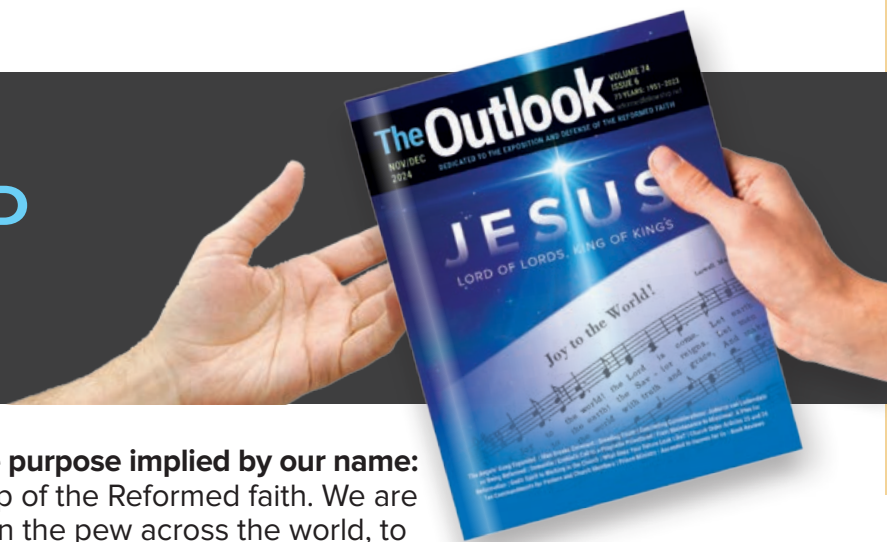
Do be coworkers with your pastor and the consistory. Be self-forgetters, Christ-exalters, and co-laborers. Covet humility, wisdom, peace, unity—and put on charity.

Keep an eternal perspective under your pastor's ministry. Ask God that your pastor may give a good account of your soul on Judgment Day. Remember you don't have to give an account of your pastor's blemishes and strengths on the Day of days, but you do have to give an account of what you have done with the word that he will bring you. If you are as yet unsaved, look on his ministry as one more major opportunity God is giving you to receive with meekness His engrafted word. Through his ministry, the Lord is saying that He has more people from your church to be gathered into His eternal harvest—and why should it not be you? Oh, that you would know the day of your visitation under your pastor's ministry!

Dr. Joel R. Beeke

is the chancellor and professor of homiletics and systematic theology at Puritan Reformed Theological Seminary. He has served as a pastor since 1978 and currently ministers at the Heritage Reformed Congregation of Grand Rapids, MI. He is a prolific author and frequent conference speaker.

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Prison Ministry

Thanksgiving Greetings from a Reader of *The Outlook* in Prison

Thanksgiving comes around once a year and for non-Christians they gather around their tables with family and friends. This maybe the only time they give thanks. As a Christian man, being in prison for 20 years I have many things to be thankful for. Now that's a statement! How can I be in prison and still have things to be thankful for? It is because of God's saving grace.

I am thankful for Christ being the Head of my life. I am thankful for Divine Hope Reformed Bible Seminary for sending professors who are teaching me to become a better Christian and person. I am thankful for their sound Biblical teaching. I am thankful for them because I have learned how to forgive others and myself. I am thankful because the professors have enriched my life and equipped me with the knowledge I need to learn about the Bible. These teachings have educated me to explain better the practical meanings of the Bible to my family and those who don't know Christ.

Finally, I am thankful to all of the board members of Divine Hope and all those who pray and give offerings to support Divine Hope; so that men like me can change our life's and be a shining light for the Kingdom of God.

Happy Thanksgiving,

Craig Prendota
Danville Corr.Ctr.
Danville, Illinois

We are thankful

for the growth of prison ministry in this past year. We praise and thank God for the privilege it is to see His gospel going into these dark places, and to hear the faithful witness of brothers and sisters behind bars. In addition to sending *The Outlook*, we have increasing requests for other materials also. Most recently, a MINTS chaplain has requested 20 copies of "The Price of Possession", our catechism books on the Heidelberg Catechism, for a prisoners' Bible study.

Will you help us reach our funding goal for this year, and will you give generously to support this program in the coming year? Reaching those in prison with the gospel and Reformed truth is a great blessing, and we hope you will partake of that joy with us.

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Meditation: **Ascended to Heaven for Us**



Rev. George **van Popta**

Christ's exaltation began where His humiliation ended: in the grave. Christ arose from His tomb, and then, after forty days, ascended into heaven. He entered heaven as the incarnate man Jesus. He did not leave His earthly body behind, but took His full humanity with him. Entering heaven, He was seated at the right hand of God. That means that some of the dust of the earth is now on the throne of heaven.

His session on the throne is beyond wonderful for us, for three reasons:

He is our Advocate before the heavenly Father. We have a friend in high places. He speaks up for us and pleads our cause.

In Him we have our flesh in heaven. Your flesh, my flesh—in heaven already! His existence in heaven is a sure pledge that we one day will be there too.

From heaven He sends us His Holy Spirit to work in our hearts. The Holy Spirit makes us seek the things that are above, and not the stuff down here.

Have you read *Pilgrim's Progress*? John Bunyan writes about the man with a rake in his hand who can only look down at the earth, where he's raking about the dirt and twigs. Don't be like that earthbound man.

Rather, look up to heaven, to where Jesus Christ is, and from where He is coming again, for us. Alleluia!

Rev. George van Popta

is minister-emeritus of *Jubilee* Canadian Reformed Church of Ottawa. He and his wife, Dora, live in Hamilton, ON.



The Lord Ascended from the Earth

... he ascended into heaven, and sits at the right hand of God the Father almighty...

1. The Lord as - cend - ed from the earth in - to the heaven a - bove,
2. Yet Christ is with us till the end, as he has prom - ised us.
3. Our Lord's as - cen - sion prof - its us, and makes our lives se - cure.
4. Christ Je - sus our great King and Priest is now at God's right hand

from where he does his priest - ly work for us, whom he does love.
He is both true man and true God, and him we___wor-ship thus.
Christ pleads our cause at God's right hand. God's grace for___ us is sure.
from where he bless - es all the church, and gov - erns___ eve - ry land.

He will re - main there till the end when he will come a - gain
As man he is no long - er here, but in his de - i - ty
We have our flesh in heaven a - bove where we will one day be.
He, by his Spir - it, pours out gifts on us, a - bun - dant - ly,

to judge the liv - ing and the dead from God the Fa - ther's throne.
he's nev - er ab - sent from his church, and so he'll al - ways be.
His Spir - it dwells with - in our hearts that we like Christ may be.
and by his pow - er shel - ters us a - gainst all en - e - mies.

Text: Heidelberg Catechism, QA 46-51 (Apostles' Creed Article 6); vers. George van Popta, 2019
Tune: Clement W. Poole, 1875

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We welcome submissions in the following categories:

- **Feature articles** discussing a particular aspect or application of Reformed teaching (1,500–2,000 words)
- **Reviews** of Reformed books and educational materials (500–750 words)
- **Commentary** containing brief devotional, historical, or practical insights (250–350 words)

Submissions must be consistent with the historic Reformed faith as outlined in the Three Forms of Unity (Belgic Confession, Heidelberg Catechism, and Canons of Dort) and the Westminster Confession and Catechisms. Submissions will be reviewed by the editor and members of the board of Reformed Fellowship.

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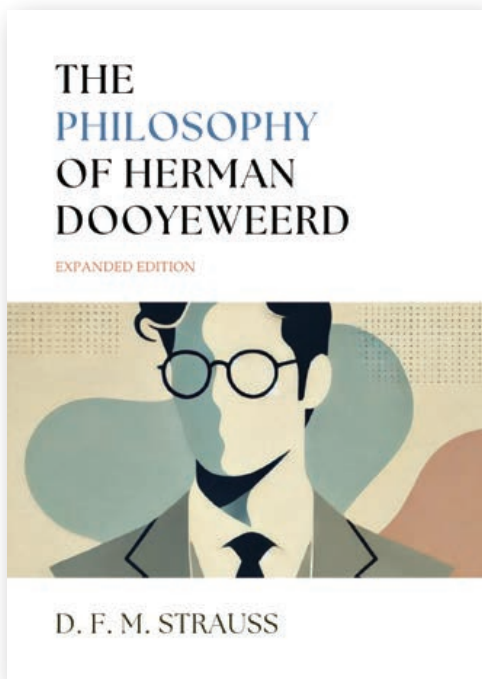
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Book Reviews

The Philosophy of Herman Dooyeweerd, Expanded Edition Finding My Vocation: A Guide for Young People Seeking a Calling



The Philosophy of Herman Dooyeweerd: Expanded Edition

by D. F. M. Strauss

Release Date: October 2024. Paideia Press. 516 Pages. Paperback. \$23.00 (varies by vendor). Dimensions: 1.0" x 6.0" x 9.0"

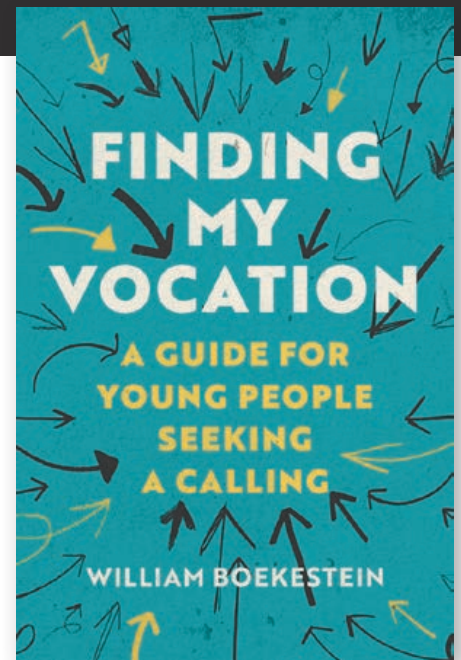
Herman Dooyeweerd (1894–1977) is widely regarded as a towering figure in twentieth-century Reformed Christian thought. His *Philosophy of the Law-Idea*, also referred to as the *Philosophy of the Cosmonomic Idea*, offers a sophisticated reorientation of philosophical inquiry rooted in the sovereignty of God's law-order over all creation. In *The Philosophy of Herman Dooyeweerd*, D. F. M. Strauss, a leading scholar in Reformational thought, provides an expanded and comprehensive introduction

to this seminal thinker, exploring his philosophical system and its implications for man's life and thought.

The genius of Dooyeweerd's thought lies in his ability to challenge the reductionisms that dominate modern and postmodern thought. Unlike systems that reduce reality to material, rational, or subjective terms, Dooyeweerd's philosophy emphasizes the distinctiveness and coherence of different aspects of reality, each governed by its own laws under God's sovereign design. For Dooyeweerd, human activity, whether in science, politics, art, or ethics, must be understood within this framework of modal laws, which are integrally related yet irreducible to one another. This philosophical framework stands as a corrective to the fragmented, dualistic modes of thought that have characterized much of Western thought.

Strauss's expanded edition meticulously presents these central ideas in Dooyeweerd's thought, allowing both new and seasoned readers to grasp the breadth of his philosophical vision. Central to this vision is the antithesis Dooyeweerd draws between Christian and non-Christian thought—a radical division that stems from one's ultimate commitment either to God's revelation or to autonomous human reason. Strauss captures the depth of this antithesis, showing how

(Continued on next page)



Finding My Vocation: A Guide for Young People Seeking a Calling by William Boekestein

Release date: September 6, 2024
Reformed Free Publishing Association
168 pages. Paperback. \$16.95 (varies by vendor). Dimensions: 5.5 x 0.39 x 8.5 inches

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Parents are privileged to walk a road of discipleship with their children.

As they become young people, they enter a moment of life filled with big questions. Parents typically focus on being able to answer questions regarding their relationships with the Lord and others, especially when it comes to relationships with the opposite sex. But when they ask questions regarding work, calling, or vocation, we aren't always ready to lead young people through the

(Continued on next page)

(Continuation of Dooyeweerd Review)

Dooyeweerd's Christian philosophy provides a robust alternative to fallen systems of thought.

When one becomes familiar with Dooyeweerd, it becomes clear that he is no ordinary, run-of-the-mill Christian intellectual. The testimony of several scholars, both Christian and non-Christian, affirms the exceptional nature of Dooyeweerd's contributions. Notably, Professor G. E. Langemeijer, former Attorney General of the Dutch Appeal Court, recognized Dooyeweerd as "the most original philosopher Holland has produced, even Spinoza not excepted." This high praise, especially from a non-Christian scholar, underscores the originality and profound insight of Dooyeweerd's thought. Similarly, Professor Giorgio Delvecchio, a prominent neo-Kantian philosopher, described Dooyeweerd as "the most profound, innovative, and penetrating philosopher since Kant." These acknowledgments from leading figures outside the Reformed tradition highlight the wide-reaching impact of Dooyeweerd's philosophy.

What makes Dooyeweerd's philosophy so striking is its comprehensive vision of reality, deeply rooted in a Christian worldview. He sought to demonstrate that the entire cosmos is subject to God's laws, and that true knowledge—whether in the sciences, humanities, or the arts—must begin with a commitment to the Word of God. This conviction, which permeates Dooyeweerd's entire system, sets him apart from other philosophers who have operated within a fallen framework. Dr. P. B. Cliteur, a humanist and president of the Humanist League in the Netherlands, admitted that Dooyeweerd was "undoubtedly the most formidable Dutch philosopher of the 20th century," going so far as to confess that "examples [of such insight] simply don't exist" within his own humanist tradition.

Strauss's publication, *The Philosophy of Herman Dooyeweerd*, invites readers to ponder the deeper questions of worldview that Dooyeweerd so masterfully addressed. The book stands as a testament to Dooyeweerd's intellectual rigor and his unwavering commitment to grounding all human thought in the Creator's sovereign law-order.

For those already familiar with Dooyeweerd's work, this expanded edition serves as an invaluable resource for further exploration of his philosophy. Strauss's scholarship is thorough and clear, offering both historical context and detailed analysis of Dooyeweerd's key concepts. For newcomers to Dooyeweerd, this book provides a challenging and reasonably accessible introduction to one of the most original and profound philosophers in the Reformed tradition.

In conclusion, *The Philosophy of Herman Dooyeweerd* is essential reading for anyone interested in Reformed Christian philosophy, and Strauss's expanded edition further solidifies Dooyeweerd's place as a singular thinker whose insights continue to challenge and inspire scholars across various disciplines. This book not only preserves the legacy of Dooyeweerd's thought but also invites readers to engage with the foundational question of what it means to live and think in radical submission to the Word of God.

Book review by

Rev. Steven R. Martins

is President and Founder at the Cántaro Institute.



(Continuation of Vocation Review)

questions they're asking. What should I be when I grow up? What should I do with my life? What kind of job should I pursue? Is it ok to pursue wealth and be successful? How do I use my gifts to love and serve the Lord? We know they're called to faithfulness and to serve the Lord in their vocations to that end, but what additional wisdom should we share? *Finding My Vocation* provides young people with an approachable and focused look at matters of work, vocation, and calling. In the invitation to ponder, prepare for, and practice vocation, Rev. Boekestein makes plain a way of discipleship that is faithful to the Word and our Confessions, but also one filled with much practical wisdom. However, do not dismiss this book as one only for young people. I was encouraged, convicted, and challenged unto the task of diligent remembrance regarding whom I serve and how I am to serve Him, no matter the job or task. I also found that the testimonies at the end of each chapter and the appendices would have been extremely helpful in answering questions that my children have posed in the past. Parents be encouraged to take up this reading with your young people, knowing that many profitable discussions will come from it and His church will be better off for them!

Book review by

Rev. Matthew Nuiver

is currently serving as Minister of Word and Sacraments at Faith United Reformed Church in West Olive, MI.



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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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- Fees for preparing artwork for ads (in addition to advertising costs above) are \$140 for full-page, \$115 for half-page, \$90 for quarter-page. These fees are waived if advertising art is print-ready. Please submit manuscript in an email or as an MS-Word.doc attachment. If you have pictures or images, please include as JPG files.
- Preferred final file format for print-ready ads: High Quality Print PDF.
- Ad sizes specifications:
 8.75 x 11.25, trim 8.5 x 11"
 Full page non-bleed: 7.25 x 9.75"
 Half page horizontal bleed: 8.625 x 5.25"
 Half page horizontal non-bleed: 7.25 x 4.5"
 Quarter page (non-bleed) 3.5 x 4.5"
- This Advertising Policy supersedes all prior policies, resolutions, or other statements.

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The Solar Talking Bible

- Easy to use
- Powerful speaker
- Solar powered



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Kamilah and the Talking Bible: A Transformation of Faith

Kamilah was known for her temper and quickness to quarrel. Her classmates expected her outbursts, and teachers had nearly given up on her. One day, a classmate invited her to the Scripture Club, saying, "Come! Jesus needs you." Curious, Kamilah followed.

Mr. James, the club's teacher, was surprised but welcomed her. She listened intently as they read and discussed the Bible. Intrigued, she kept attending, though hesitant to embrace the faith.

Months later, Mr. James introduced a Talking Bible. Its stories captivated Kamilah, touching her heart and transforming her. She became patient, loving, and forgiving—qualities she had never shown before. When asked about her change, Kamilah openly professed her faith in Jesus. She inspired her classmates, bringing many to the club, all eager to learn about the Jesus who had changed her life. The Talking Bible became a cherished tool, continuing to touch and transform the lives of many children, just as it had done for Kamilah.

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Reformed Fellowship, Inc.

1988 140th Avenue
Dorr, MI 49323
(616) 532-8510

WEBINAR

Thursday, November 14, 6:00 p.m. EST
**The Historical and Contemporary
Relevance of the Belgic Confession**

Dr. Chad Van Dixhoorn interviewed by Dr. Daniel Ragusa

7:00 p.m. Reformed Fellowship Membership meeting, observers welcome

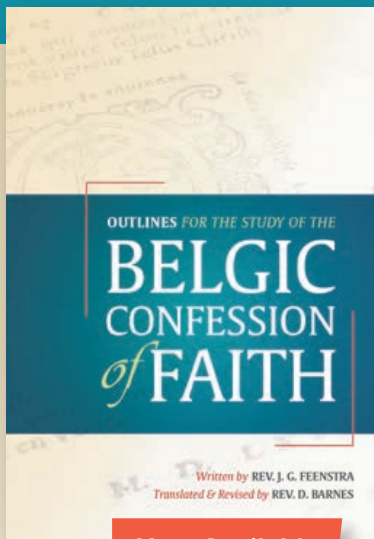
7:30 p.m. Panel Discussion with Rev. Doug Barnes, translator of *upcoming release*, J. G. Feenstra's:

Outlines for the Study of the Belgic Confession of Faith

Written by
Rev. J.G. Feenstra

Translated & Revised by
Rev. D. Barnes

The excellence of Jelte Gerrit Feenstra's work on the Belgic Confession was the major inspiration for Rev. Doug Barnes to learn Dutch. We are delighted to share the fruit of his labors, a resource invaluable to the study of this beloved confession, via this beautifully presented first-time-in print English translation.



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Members and guests are cordially invited to **PLEASE JOIN US** either via Zoom or in person at: Bethany URC, 5401 Byron Center Ave SW, Wyoming MI. Email office@reformedfellowship.net for a Zoom link.

WEBINAR

SAVE THE DATE

Thursday, January 16, 7:00 p.m. EST
**Money Talks:
What is yours saying?**

Bryce Bartruff, PhD, formerly an elder at Tenth Presbyterian Church of Philadelphia, now resides in Arizona and has taught on personal finance for over 20 years. He travels throughout the country conducting his five-hour seminar called Fiscal Fitness to individuals in all economic levels, and is the author of *new release*:

A Cheerful Giver Principles of Generosity in the Christian Life

Bryce D. Bartruff, Ph.D.

Bryce D. Bartruff, Ph.D

This clear, concise resource helps us understand our relationship with God and "our" money. How does God want us to use the resources He has entrusted to us - if not for eternal purposes?

Dawn G. Doorn,
Vice President for Advancement,
Westminster Seminary California

This is a book that every Christian should read and every church should have.

Jonathan Landry Cruse,
author, pastor, Community
Presbyterian Church, Kalamazoo, MI

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