



THE Outlook

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74 YEARS: 1951-2025

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DEDICATED TO THE EXPOSITION AND DEFENSE OF THE REFORMED FAITH | 74 YEARS: 1951-2025

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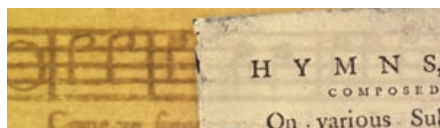
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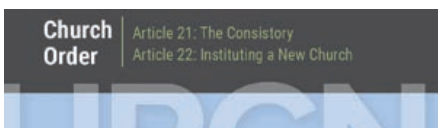
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Every Christian Is an Evangelist



At the end of the year businesses need to check their inventory to see what is available for the new year. This is a busy time of the year as business goes on as normal, but they also need to be ready without delay to fill the orders that they hope will be coming in. Do they need to increase the supply house, and how much space is needed? There is so much to do and so little time to get it all done. We go to work, preparing and readying things, and putting our plans into motion. It seems all is set, and looking ahead things seem rosy, expecting a banner year for us. We are pleased as much profit is to be had. All we have done and prepared for are things that need to be done. God has blessed us with so many blessings. We thank Him for them.

We have thought of everything, and nothing has been forgotten. But, have we? Have we thought about our life? What happens if sickness strikes? But we put that aside: I'm healthy. I don't get sick. I'm still quite young, and there's nothing to worry about. God says, "Thou fool" (Luke 12:20). We receive many blessings every day. They all come from God. It is good to thank Him for them, but what is forgotten? The Blesser! He gives us all of our temporal blessings, but do not forget that the main and greatest blessing is Himself. We cannot even take our next breath without His blessing. All of our natural blessings amount to nothing without Him. "I am the vine, ye are the branches: He that abideth

in me, and I in him, the same bringeth forth much fruit: for without me ye can do nothing" (John 15:5).



Mr. Cornelius VanKempen

known as Case, has been married to Susan for fifty-eight blessed years. They attend and are members of Heritage Reformed Congregation in Grand Rapids, MI.



TAKING INVENTORY

And he [Jesus] spake a parable unto them, saying, The ground of a certain rich man brought forth plentifully: and he thought within himself, saying, What shall I do, because I have no room where to bestow my fruits? And he said, This will I do: I will pull down my barns, and build greater; and there will I bestow all my fruits and my goods. And I will say to my soul, Soul, thou hast much goods laid up for many years; take thine ease, eat, drink, and be merry. But God said unto him, Thou fool, this night thy soul shall be required of thee: then whose shall those things be, which thou hast provided? So is he that layeth up treasure for himself, and is not rich toward God. (Luke 12:16-21)

Jesus Christ is the treasure we need as we enter the new year. No storage is needed for this treasure in our temporary home (the world).

Christ has everything needed for time and for eternity.

The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want.

He maketh me to lie down in green pastures: he leadeth me beside the still waters.

He restoreth my soul: he leadeth me in the paths of righteousness for his name's sake.

Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil: for thou art with me; thy rod and thy staff they comfort me.

Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies: thou anointest my head with oil; my cup runneth over.

Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life: and I will dwell in the house of the Lord for ever. (Ps. 23)

Inventories on earth need to be taken often, and there is no assurance that our plans will come to pass, but with God in Jesus Christ our needs are forever sure.

Unless the Lord the house shall build, the weary builders toil in vain;

Unless the Lord the city shield, the guards a useless watch maintain.

In vain you rise ere morning break, and late your nightly vigils keep,

And of the bread of toil partake; God gives to His beloved sleep.

Psalter 359:1-2 (Psalm 127)

Why We Wait: Part 1



Mrs. Elisabeth **Bloechl**

The Reality of Waiting

The first weeks of excitement and anticipation were suddenly swallowed up with the words, “There is no heartbeat.” As the days and months after her loss slog slowly by, Jane begins to wonder if her first pregnancy will be her last. Will the Lord again open her womb? The longer she waits and prays and hopes, the more hopeless and desperate she feels.

Bob has been battling cancer for months. His days, once crammed with activity and work, are now filled with crippling pain, unshakeable fatigue, and waiting. Waiting for scan reports, waiting for a resolution, waiting for some answer.

Susan’s husband lost his job five months ago. Despite diligently applying for various jobs, he finds

that nothing is presenting itself. Their savings are slowly diminishing, as are their hopes of buying a home and settling down before winter. Susan wonders how much longer she can wait.

Waiting is difficult. Living in modern-day America exacerbates the difficulty. We live in a time of soundbites, fast-paced movies, fast food. We have learned to expect immediacy. We want our dinner done in less than thirty minutes, grumble when waiting at a red light, get anxious if our blood test results don’t come in before bedtime. We are an impatient lot, ill equipped to wait well.

But waiting is part of being human. God, who is outside of time, made us time-bound creatures and breathed time restrictions into the very fibers of creation. We see it clearly in the creation account. Over and over, we

read the refrain: “There was evening and morning.” Nor are these time restraints portrayed as evil or a result of the fall. Rather, time, like food and friends, is good. So too is the fruit of living in a time-bound world as time-bound creatures: waiting. “Every thought that we produce, every word that we speak, every conscious moment exists in time. That means that waiting is a crucial part of being created in time.”¹

God has a good purpose for our waiting. We will explore what God does in and through our waiting. Is He silent, or does He speak? What does waiting reveal about us? God? Our faith? In order to answer these questions we will look at examples of waiting in the story of Abraham, the Israelite exile, and the larger narrative of waiting for the consummation. First, we will

focus on God—what He does in our waiting and what He reveals about Himself through our waiting; second (in the next article) we will shift our focus to how God uses seasons of waiting to change us.

What God Does in Our Waiting

Among the most well-known biblical stories of waiting is that of Abraham waiting for the fulfillment of God's promises of land and offspring. God called Abraham out of his country, away from what he knew, promising that He would make of him a great nation and a blessing to all the nations of the earth (Gen. 12:1–2). That was when he was seventy-five years old and childless (Gen. 12:4). For the next twenty-five years Abraham would wander through unknown lands, wage wars, acquire wealth, and wait for the fulfillment of God's promise. What was God doing while Abraham waited?

Four times, God explicitly restates and solidifies the promise He made to Abraham in Genesis 12. He did this through making a covenant, illustrating His promise with visible signs, and adding detail to His previous promise (see Gen 13:14–18; 14:18–20; 15; 17; 18:1–21.) At other times He implicitly assures Abraham of His promise. For example, He twice protects Sarah's womb (Gen. 12:10–20; 20). Finally, after twenty-five years of God's assuring Abraham of His faithfulness to fulfill His promise, Abraham receives the promised child.

However, though Isaac's birth fulfilled part of God's promise to Abraham, it was not the fulfillment of His covenant promise to bless all the nations through Abraham. The birth of Isaac was yet another sign God gave Abraham pointing to a greater promise—the promise of a Savior and an eternal kingdom. "Abraham and Sarah foreshadowed their descendants, who had to wait until 'the fullness of time'

(Gal. 4:4) when God would bring about the Son who is so much greater than Isaac. It is this Son who would truly laugh in the face of death by triumphing over it in the resurrection—God's climactic miracle."² Because God was not silent during Abraham's season of waiting, He proved Himself trustworthy and able to fulfill that greater promise. He used the season of waiting to reveal Himself to Abraham—and all who read the account today. So too, with the Israelites' time of extensive waiting during their exile in Babylon.

In this case, even before the Israelites were taken captive, God was speaking to them, preparing them for a season of waiting.

Through prophets, God warned the Israelites time and again that because of their rebellion they would be taken captive and would remain in that captivity for seventy years (Isa. 6:8–13; Jer. 25:11–12; 37:11–17; 38:14–18; Ezek. 4–5). Nor did His word fail. Rather, not only did the Israelites go into exile to Babylon, but also events unfolded exactly as God has said they would—down to the king's losing his eyes and the destruction of the temple (Jer. 39:1–10; 52:12–23).

For seventy years, the Israelites lived as subjects, first of Babylon and then of Persia. During this long season of waiting to return home, God continued to speak to them through prophets, reminding them of their sin, comforting them, expressing His sorrow over their circumstances, predicting the fall of their enemies (see Isa. 30:18; 40:1–5; Jer. 50–51; Lamentations; Hos. 2). He assures them of His commitment to His covenant and their restoration (Ezek. 16:59–63; 20:33–34; 37). And these prophets often communicate God's message in visible and shocking ways (Hos. 1:2–11; 3; Ezek. 37). God also spoke to the Israelites in implicit

ways: for example, saving Shadrak, Meshak, and Abednego from the deadly fires; preserving Daniel from the jaws of the lions (Dan. 3:8–30; 6), events which testified to God's presence and promise-keeping—He will preserve a remnant (Isa. 35). So too, as He had with Abraham, He used the season of waiting to direct His people to the Savior to come who would build an eternal temple and kingdom (Isa. 42:1–4; 50:4–11; 53; Ezek. 40:1–44:3). So, when the Israelites were finally permitted to return to rebuild their temple, they were able to testify to the goodness of God's character revealed through their waiting. They were able to continue waiting with confident hope for the Savior.

But what about us today? What about those of us who are waiting, not for the Savior's birth, but His glorious return and the consummation? Does God still speak to us in our season of waiting as He did to Abraham and the Israelites? Most assuredly, though today, He does so not through prophets, many and varied signs, or personal revelations. Today, God speaks to us during our times of waiting in three ways: His word, the sacraments, and providence.

The Bible in its entirety is a testimony to God's faithfulness to keep His promises to us; most significantly, those concerning Christ. Each story, poem, law, or lament points us to Christ. And in Christ, we find God's promises fulfilled and assurance that those yet unfulfilled will be (Luke 24:27; 1 Cor. 1:20). Not to mention the details of other promises God gave and kept which testify to His trustworthiness, for example, His promise to give Hezekiah an extra twenty years of life (Isa. 38:1–8), His promise to preserve Lot though the fire of heaven rained down upon his home (Gen. 18:32; 19:29), or His promise to rebuild the temple after three days

(John 2:18–22). To this immense testimony of the word, God adds the testimony of the sacraments.

The sacraments are God’s visible, tangible signs to us that Christ—who has accomplished our salvation—will not fail to accomplish the consummation of all things. Every time we take the Lord’s Supper we are reminded of Christ’s body truly broken and blood truly spilt (Matt. 26:26–29). We are reminded that, even now, that same broken body symbolized by the elements is in heaven, eagerly anticipating and preparing for the day He receives His bride (John 14:3; Eph. 5:25–27). It is a foretaste of the promised feast of the lamb (Matt. 26:9, Rev. 19: 6–9). And as we are spiritually nourished by this foretaste, so we are assured that Christ—who laid down His life for His bride—will surely come to take her home (see WSC Q/A 168). Much the same message is communicated in baptism.

Baptism, far from an act of man, is a visible sign of God’s promises. Each baptism is a reminder that just

as surely as the waters are sprinkled on the head of the baptized, so surely Christ’s blood sprinkled on all who believe will cleanse us of all sin. It is a call to young and old alike to lay hold of the promises of salvation, being assured that He who promised is faithful—even as we can see that faithfulness displayed in the ordinary works of providence.

When we look back over the course of our life, we can see God’s faithfulness and care from before our first breath. Who gave you breath? Who sustained your life until now? Who gently drew you to Himself despite your many protestations? Who gently and persistently sanctifies you—promising to continue until His job is complete? Who works all things, all events, trials, and circumstances to your good? Our lives are a story testifying to God’s faithfulness. So why would He who was faithful from our birth not likewise be faithful through the difficult times of waiting?

Though God speaks to us through these simple yet powerful means

in any and all seasons of life, it is often through difficult times of waiting that God uses these means to reveal more of Himself than we had otherwise known, just as the promises and signs God gave to Abraham and the exiled Israelites revealed God’s character in sharper relief during their protracted seasons of waiting. But God does more through waiting than reveal Himself and testify to His faithfulness. He transforms us. It is to this aspect of waiting we will turn in our next article.

1. Scott Redd, “What Does It Mean to Wait on the Lord?,” *Tabletalk*, April 2024, <https://tabletalkmagazine.com/article/2024/04/what-does-it-mean-to-wait-on-the-lord/>.

2. Eric Watkins, “Waiting on God,” May 25, 2014, <https://www.ligonier.org/learn/devotionals/waiting-on-god/>.

Mrs. Elisabeth Bloechl

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GOOD QUESTION 101

HOW CAN I OVERCOME DOUBT?

Tell God your doubts. Biblical psalms, roughly 60% of which are laments, teach us to bring our complaints and questions to God, trusting that he can bear our burdens and will be tender with the doubting (John 20:27).

Doubt your doubts. Doubts are often nothing but untrustworthy feelings. We should insist that our doubts bear a burden of proof.

And we should realize that our doubts have answers even if we don’t yet know them.

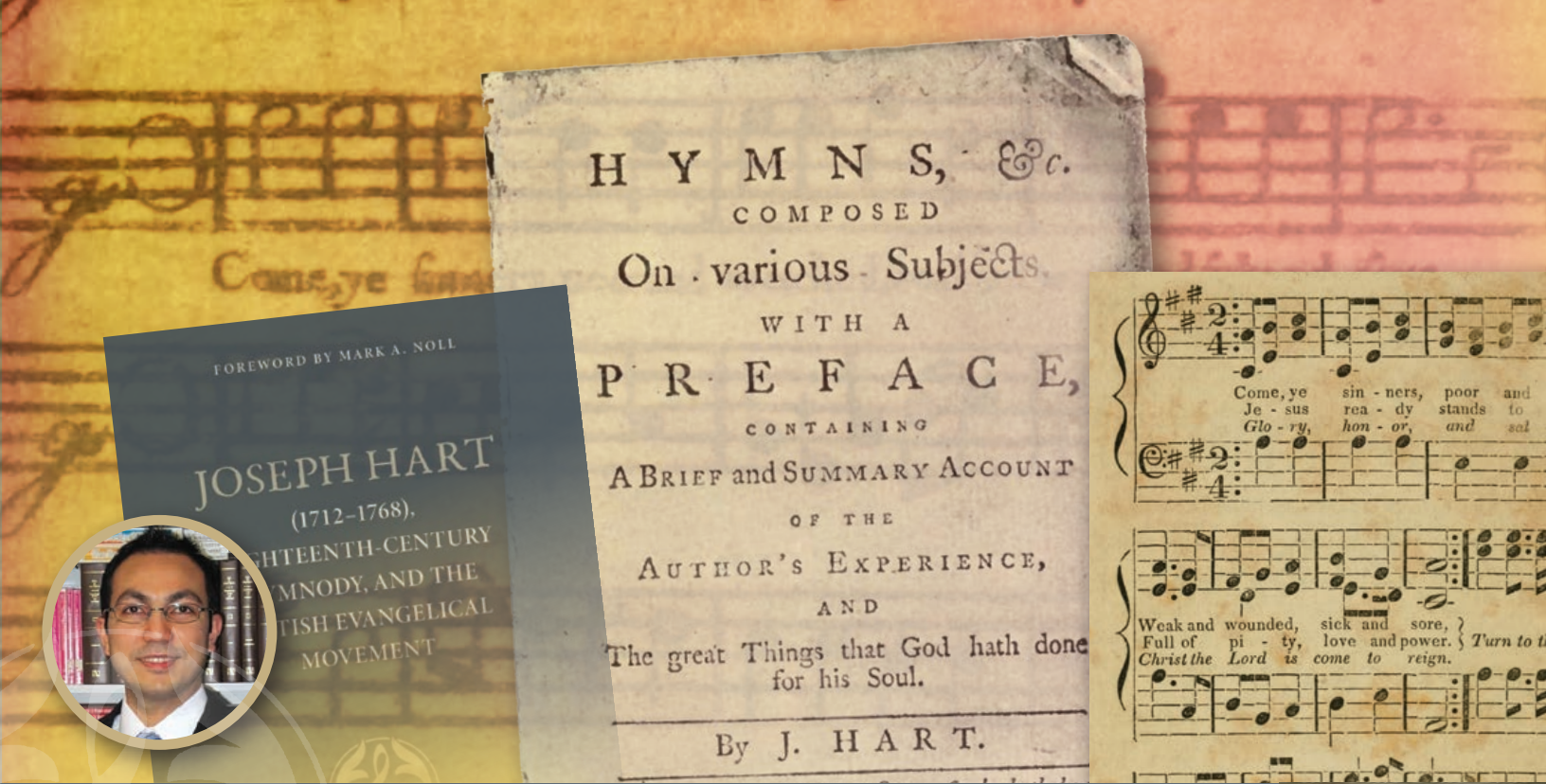
Be humble. Arrogant faith is as precarious as a sandcastle on the seashore, easily dashed by waves of doubt. Humble faith is powerfully convinced of

God’s mercy and quick to lean on Jesus in the midst of doubt.

Face doubts in community. Doubters belong “bound to a community” that “upholds us each time we threaten to stumble and fall. The cloud of witnesses that surrounds us cheers us on in the struggle” to think and act like Jesus (Herman Bavinck).

Feed on God by His word. “A man can’t always be defending the truth; there must be a time to feed on it” (C.S. Lewis). “Contemplation of Christ and his glory ... is the only relief” for doubts (John Owen).





Joseph Hart: Hymnwriter of the Heart of Conversion



Dr. Michael R. **Kearney**

Review of Brian G. Najapfour, *Joseph Hart (1712–1768), Eighteenth-Century Hymnody, and the British Evangelical Movement*

Does your reading pile grow and grow like mine? Every month there is another devotional or magazine in our church mailbox; every week new books by outstanding authors on important topics appear; every day blog posts, newsletters, and podcasts proliferate without number. There are too few hours in the day to keep up. (Perhaps, you are thinking to yourself, those long-winded writers in *The Outlook* are part of the problem!)

Of course, this problem is really a tremendous privilege: we live in a time of abundant educational opportunities, with no good reason not to avail ourselves of the excellent

Reformed study materials that are continually appearing. Yet time is still precious. For that reason, when I have both things to read and things to write on my to-do list, you can understand why I might try to combine those tasks.

I appreciate short book reviews in *The Outlook* and other Reformed magazines, but I also admire the long labor of people like Rev. Shane Lems and Dr. Andrew Compton, who have been thoughtfully reviewing a variety of books on their blog *The Reformed Reader* for more than fifteen years.¹ So when I received a review copy of Dr. Brian G. Najapfour's *Joseph Hart (1712–1768), Eighteenth-Century Hymnody, and the British Evangelical Movement*, I sensed it deserved something more than a mere blurb. I hope you'll think so too.

Najapfour, who has written for *The Outlook* and served on the board of Reformed Fellowship, wrote his doctoral dissertation on Hart for the Theological University of Apeldoorn. You may have never heard of Hart, but you may recognize his most famous hymn, “Come, Ye Sinners, Poor and Wretched,” which appears in more than fourteen hundred songbooks.² Najapfour presses past the origin of this beloved text to offer a holistic examination of Hart's life, ministry, and religious context. Mark Noll, the premier historian of evangelical Christianity, authored the foreword, confirming the scholarly significance of Najapfour's project.

Well and good, you may think, but why should those of us who are not premier historians of evangelical Christianity care about an eighteenth-

century hymnwriter? I think the book addresses at least three timeless questions that each Reformed believer should consider.

Why We Must Each Be Converted

It may seem odd to talk about the conversion of someone who was raised in the church and assented to Calvinist teaching throughout his life. Hart's outward behavior seems to have demonstrated little that would conflict with a Christian walk. On the inside, however, his adolescence was full of what he later called "Vanities and Vices."³ As Najapfour recounts, Hart's attempts to reconcile Calvinist doctrine with his sinful habits led him into a period of legalism followed by a period of antinomianism. In other words, Hart first sought his salvation in earnest moral living, and when he finally realized that he needed the saving work of Christ, he retreated to the other extreme, considering good works totally unnecessary.

Through both of these seasons of error, Hart retained some notion of Reformed doctrines of salvation. In fact, Najapfour connects Hart's antinomianism with hyper-Calvinism: he viewed any kind of human effort towards our sanctification as an insult to the already finished work of Christ. Thus, Hart could idly submit to the ravages of sin in his own life, claiming that it was simply not God's will to free him yet from those sins.

Najapfour's careful overview of Hart's life reminds Reformed believers to guard continually against the deceit of sin in our lives too. The unpleasant truth is that legalism and antinomianism can coexist with a "sound" understanding of Reformed theology; they are not heresies of their own so much as wrong applications of the gospel we confess. Legalism and antinomianism are less like one-time potholes on the road to conversion and more like long

ditches of which we must continually beware in the narrow walk of following Christ.⁴ Either we falsely assume that we can stay on the path by our own efforts, or we let our feet wander into all kinds of evil because Jesus has already paid our debt—and both errors will most often end up causing us to crumple on the ground, exhausted by our inability to keep the law and wondering if we are even saved to begin with.

Around forty years of age, Hart embarked on a serious effort to reform his sinful behavior but fell into despondency because he had never received a special revelation of his salvation. On Pentecost Sunday, 1757, Hart heard a sermon that finally granted him assurance of salvation directly from the promises of Scripture—what he described as his "reconversion."⁵ Although he continued to wrestle with assurance, this marked an enduring turning point for Hart. After 1757, the hymns and writings Hart composed contained plentiful references to the cross and blood of Jesus, combining gratitude for Christ's finished work with a zealous desire to put sin to death.

Conversion stories are a frequent theme of evangelical Christianity, but Hart's example shows us that the central story must always be Jesus and His finished work on the cross, not the ups and downs of an individual life. As Hart himself observed, "there is no chalking out the Paths of one Child of God by those of another; no laying down regular Plans of Christian Conversion, Christian Experience, Christian Usefulness, or Christian Conversation."⁶ Each one of us, whether raised in the church or not, must be converted from sin to a life of thankful, holy living for God—and each of those journeys, like each particular believer, remains unique.

What We Sing and Why

In his lifetime, Hart was esteemed alongside preachers like George

Whitefield and hymnwriters like John Newton, John and Charles Wesley, and Isaac Watts. Najapfour writes, "If Watts's hymns helped ignite the flames of the evangelical revival . . . Hart's hymns continued to fuel the revival."⁷ Hymnwriting flourished in the British evangelical movement, in contrast to a more traditional Calvinistic focus on psalm singing. While no one objected to singing psalms per se, hymnwriters like Isaac Watts often argued that the English metrical translations of the psalms were too literal and lacked the Christocentric focus needed for New Testament worship.

Najapfour is fairly neutral in presenting the debate between psalmody and hymnody. His point is mostly to note that hymnwriting was a distinctive practice of the evangelical movement and that Hart had recognition as a talented poet in his own day. But that debate is important to consider because it shapes the way each one of our churches conducts its worship today. There are still Reformed churches that sing only psalms, some that sing a mixture of psalms and hymns, and others that sing mostly hymns or contemporary music with only an occasional psalm. There are solid Reformed arguments for and against each one of those positions, and many of those arguments stem from the conversations going on in the eighteenth century during Hart's lifetime. Even if Reformed believers still cannot agree on what the Bible says we should sing, we can agree that those songs profoundly shape what we believe and how we express our faith, and they should be unequivocally based on the Bible in content and tone.

What We Believe

On a broader level, Najapfour's study of Hart's hymns points toward a faith that is not reducible to rationalism. Hart wrote at a time in

which philosophers like John Locke were casting doubt on any aspect of Christian faith that did not accord with reason. Locke's critique of anything irrational also extended to forms of language like poetry and metaphor—and hymns would certainly fall into such a category.

Rationalism is still alive and well today, and many people reject Christianity because it includes things that escape the grasp of logic: the mystery of the Trinity, the resurrection of Jesus, or the experience of faith itself. So when we sing hymns, we not only bear witness through the content of what we sing. In addition, the form of what we sing testifies that our faith is greater than what the human mind can analyze and comprehend. The heartfelt song of a redeemed sinner is something irrational and contemptible to the unbelieving world. Najapfour notes that the Holy Spirit is a particularly important theme in Hart's hymns.

The Spirit leads the church into all truth, bringing to mind the comforting words of Jesus our Savior.

In sum, Najapfour's study of the life and works of Joseph Hart is valuable not just for students of eighteenth-century Protestantism but for anyone who sings in church, anyone who wonders how to present the gospel to others, and anyone who wrestles with doubt and sin in the Christian walk. Hyper-Calvinism and the loss of the doctrines of grace are still twin dangers today. In the life and hymns of Joseph Hart, we see a narrow walk that points to the simple gospel as the answer to both legalism and antinomianism. As Joel Beeke writes in the afterword, Hart presented a gospel that "embraced election and evangelism as non-identical twins born of the same divine love."⁸ In the words of Hart's most famous hymn, our whole lives ought to be spent telling others—and reminding our own feeble hearts—that "Jesus ready

stands to save you,/Full of pity, love, and pow'r."

1. See <https://reformedreader.wordpress.com/>.
2. Hymnary.org, "Come, Ye Sinners, Poor and Needy," https://hymnary.org/text/come_ye_sinners_poor_and_needy_weak_and.
3. Quoted in Brian G. Najapfour, *Joseph Hart (1712–1768), Eighteenth-Century Hymnody, and the British Evangelical Movement* (Jordan Station, ON: Paideia Press, 2024), 13.
4. This is consistent with Sinclair B. Ferguson's account in *The Whole Christ: Legalism, Antinomianism, and Gospel Assurance Why the Marrow Controversy Still Matters* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2016).
5. Quoted in Najapfour, *Hart*, 36.
6. Quoted in Najapfour, 176.
7. Najapfour, 62.
8. Joel Beeke, afterword to Najapfour, *Hart*, 184.

Dr. Michael R. Kearney

is a board member of Reformed Fellowship.

WEBINAR

SAVE THE DATE

Thursday, January 16, 7:00 p.m. EST

Money Talks:
What is yours saying?

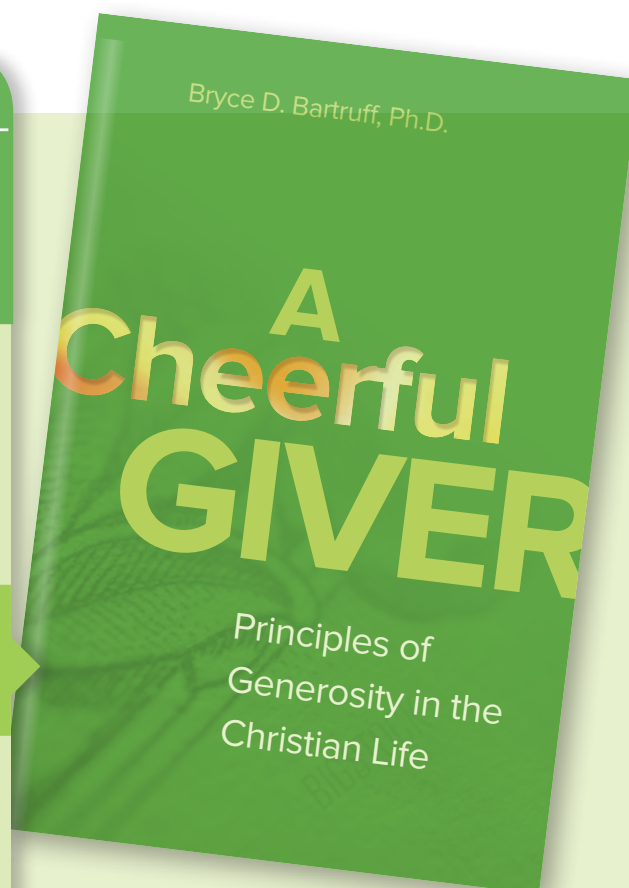
Bryce Bartruff, PhD, formerly an elder at Tenth Presbyterian Church of Philadelphia, now resides in Arizona and has taught on personal finance for over 20 years. He travels throughout the country conducting his five-hour seminar called Fiscal Fitness to individuals in all economic levels, and is the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

A Cheerful Giver

Principles of Generosity in the Christian Life



Email us at office@reformedfellowship.net for a webinar link





A Faithful Biblical Ministry among the Pilgrim Fathers

Dr. Mark Larson

Two remarkable men arose in Nottinghamshire during the reign of Queen Elizabeth I. William Brewster was born between 1560 and 1566 in Scrooby. John Robinson came into the world in 1575 in Sturton-le-Steeple, not too many miles down the road from Scrooby. Both men studied at the University of Cambridge, Brewster at Peterhouse College and Robinson at Corpus Christi College.

Both men embraced the Reformed faith and came to the conviction that they could no longer be a part of the Church of England. Robinson affirmed that it had been put into place “without the preaching of the gospel” and consisted “of men and women for the most part ignorant, faithless, impenitent, disobedient.”¹ The true church, they contended, consisted of individuals who “hold forth faith in Christ Jesus, holiness in the fear

of God, and submission to every ordinance and appointment of God.”² They therefore became Separatists, rejecting the territorial church model and advocating the doctrine of the gathered church in which it may be truly said of a local congregation that it is a body of believers “beloved of God, called to be saints” (Rom. 1:7, King James Version).

Brewster served as a postmaster and lived at Scrooby Manor, an estate owned by the Archbishop of York. He provided fresh horses for government messengers traveling on the Great Northern Road between London and Edinburgh. He was well paid, earning probably ten times more than the average farm hand. Robinson joined the Separatist congregation that met in the manor house sometime around 1606 and 1607. The group included their first pastor, Richard Clifton, and the

young man who would later become the governor of Plymouth Colony, William Bradford.

The authorities began to harass the Scrooby congregation for conducting private worship, which was illegal at the time. The decision was then made to emigrate to the Netherlands, a place where they could worship according to their biblical convictions. After spending a year in Amsterdam, Brewster and Robinson, along with about one hundred Separatists, moved to Leiden in 1609. The congregation then chose Robinson to be their pastor and Brewster to be their elder. Part of the Leiden congregation, including Brewster, sailed on the *Mayflower* in 1620 across the Atlantic and established the Plymouth Colony. Robinson remained with the majority of the congregation in Leiden intending to join his flock in the New World at some point in the future. That, however, did not happen. Robinson died in 1625 and was laid to rest in Pieterskerk in Leiden.

Pictured above: “The Embarkation of the Pilgrims” shows a group of English travelers about to cross the Atlantic in 1620. The figures at the center of the composition are William Brewster, holding the Bible; Governor Carver, kneeling; and pastor John Robinson, praying in a black outfit. Painting by Robert Walter Weir (1803–1889)

As we contemplate these two men of God at a distance of four hundred years, what can we learn from them as we endeavor to serve the Lord in the twenty-first century? I would like to call attention to the fundamental issue of their embrace of a proper foundation for ministry, namely Holy Scripture, the infallible and inerrant Word of God.

A Biblical and Reformed Foundation

Jesus concluded the Sermon on the Mount declaring, “Whosoever heareth these sayings of mine, and doeth them, I will liken him unto a wise man, who built his house upon a rock” (Matt. 7:24). Robinson and Brewster took this statement to heart. Their lives and ministries were based upon the foundation of the Bible. It was nothing less, they believed, than “the holy scriptures, which are able to make thee wise unto salvation through faith which is in Christ Jesus” (2 Tim. 3:15). The central task of the ministry for them had been given as an apostolic charge: “Preach the word” (2 Tim. 4:2). They followed this exhortation and therefore did much good for the souls committed to their care, for “the gospel of Christ” is indeed “the power of God unto salvation to everyone that believeth” (Rom. 1:16).

When the Pilgrims parted from their pastor for the great trans-Atlantic voyage, John Robinson exhorted them, “I must herewithal exhort you to take heed what you receive as *truth*; examine it, consider it, compare it with the other Scriptures of truth, before you do receive it.”³ This was the *sola scriptura* position of the Protestant Reformation, and Robinson desired that his people be like the noble Bereans: “They received the word with all readiness of mind, and searched the scriptures daily, whether these things were so” (Acts 17:11).

The biblical foundation of their theology led Robinson to teach

Reformed doctrine in Scrooby and in Leiden with Brewster sounding the same note in Plymouth. It was Robinson who would champion the Canons of Dort. He even debated the learned Arminian theologian Simon Episcopius at the University of Leiden. William Bradford summarized what happened: “When the day came the Lord did so help him to defend the truth and foil this adversary.”⁴ Brewster was no less Reformed in his teaching. His library included volumes by such luminaries as John Calvin, Theodore Beza, Peter Martyr Vermigli, Richard Greenham, and Richard Sibbes.

Loved and Honored by the People of God

Godly men and women of their time recognized the blessing of God given to them in the pastor and elder of the one congregation that met in two places, Leiden and Plymouth. There was the realization of their enormous loss in the death of their pastor, John Robinson, in 1625: “When he *died*, not only the University, and Ministers of the city, accompanied him to his grave, with all their accustomed *solemnities*, but some of the chief among them with sorrowful resentments and expressions affirmed, “That all the Churches of our Lord Jesus Christ had sustained a great loss by the death of this worthy man.”⁵

Robinson, though, did not minister on his own. The Lord gave him Brewster, a dear friend and co-laborer in the gospel, “a beloved brother and faithful minister in the Lord” (Eph. 6:21). The two Separatists worked side by side in the sacred ministry: “John Robinson” had “for his *help* in the *government* of the Church, a most wise, grave, good man, Mr. William Brewster, the ruling elder.”⁶ Brewster served the “poor persecuted church” of pilgrim believers “above 36 years in England, Holland,” and the “wilderness” of New England. He did for “the Lord

and them faithful service in his place and calling.”⁷

Let us remember that faithful pastors and elders come from God. Christ gives “pastors and teachers, for the perfecting of the saints for the work of the ministry for the edifying of the body of Christ” (Eph. 4:11–12). Let us be thankful for the gifted men who care for our souls in the present day remembering the apostle’s exhortation: “And we beseech you, brethren, to know them who labor among you, and are over you in the Lord, and admonish you, and to esteem them very highly in love for their work’s sake” (1 Thess. 5:12–13).

Robinson and Brewster likewise summon us by their example to be steadfast in our love and service to the Lord, building our ministry upon the preaching and teaching of sacred Scripture. May we thereby receive the reward of our labors, the divine commendation, “Well done, good and faithful servant” (Matt. 25:21, 23).

1 John Robinson, *The Works of John Robinson*, ed. Robert Ashton (London: John Snow, 1851), 2:96–97.

2 Edward Winslow, *Hypocrisie Unmasked* (1646), 98–99.

3 Cotton Mather, *The Great Works of Christ in America*, vol. 1 (Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth, 1979), 64.

4 Quoted in Walter H. Burgess, *John Robinson, Pastor of the Pilgrim Fathers: A Study of His Life and Times* (London: Williams and Norgate, 1920), 57.

5 Mather, *The Great Works of Christ in America*, 1:47.

6 *Ibid.*

7 A statement from William Bradford, quoted in Francis J. Bremer, *One Small Candle: The Plymouth Puritans and the Beginning of English New England* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020), 168.

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HOW TO Dress FOR CHURCH



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Every churchgoer needs to decide what to wear to the church worship services and once there will have an opinion about what others are wearing. The New Testament doesn't give specific instructions, unlike the Old Testament, but several remarks are made, and it is useful to consider some underlying principles that can guide us in our decisions and opinions.

Holy Attire

In the Old Testament are several references to “holy attire” needed for worship (see 1 Chron. 16:29; Ps. 96:9). In Psalm 96:9 the New King James Version says, “worship the LORD in the beauty of holiness.” The Hebrew word for “beauty of holiness” is *hadarah*, which also means to worship in holy attire. Our dress isn't something we claim for ourselves and our own enjoyment. It is a symbol of the grace of God meant to be enjoyed as a gift He redeemed. We should dress to honor Christ and not lift up ourselves.

The words “holy attire” should not be confused with vestments, which are liturgical garments used in Christian churches for specific occasions. Vestments could be called sacred attire, as opposed to the holy attire mentioned above.

Culture

Because we have freedom in Christ, we have the freedom (in love) to decide on our own holy attire. The culture in which we are living is important in deciding for us what to wear on certain occasions. Note, for example, the shift in our culture since the 1950s for women to wear slacks instead of only skirts. A good example of not going along with the culture are the Amish.

Colossians 2:20–23 has the response to the culture, which is nowadays synonymous to the world: “Therefore, if you died with Christ from the basic principles of the world, why, as though living in the world, do you subject yourselves to regulations . . . according to the commandments and doctrines of men?” The culture determines customs, but that is not the same as the culture determining what is appropriate. We should let God decide what is appropriate.

Biblical View on Clothing

In God's eyes to be covered with clothes is important. Adam and Eve were naked before they sinned, but as soon as they did sin, they realized they were naked and

felt ashamed about it. God doesn't want to see a sinful person naked, so He Himself made tunics of skin and clothed them (Gen. 3:21). We find the same concern in the Law (e.g., Exod. 20:26; 28:42–43), and a good example is Ham receiving a curse for seeing his father Noah naked and only telling his brothers about it (Gen. 9:22–25).

The deeper meaning of God's disapproval of nakedness is clearly seen in Revelation 3:18, where Jesus tells the lukewarm church: "I counsel you to buy from Me . . . white garments, that you may be clothed, that the shame of your nakedness may not be revealed." All through the Bible clothes are first and foremost meant to cover our shame, so that also figuratively means that we should "put on" righteousness and "put off" everything that we offend God with.

God looks at the heart and not at the outward appearance (see, e.g., 1 Sam. 16:7). He is concerned about what we wear in that respect:

Adorn yourself with a gentle and quiet spirit (1 Peter 3:3–4)

Adorn yourself with good works (1 Tim. 2:10)

Take off your love of the world (1 John 2:14–15)

Clothe yourself with love:
"Therefore, as the elect of God, holy and beloved, put on tender mercies, kindness, humility, meekness, longsuffering. . . . But above all these things put on love, which is the bond of perfection" (Col. 3:12–14)

With the comparisons of clothes with righteousness and shame so prevalent in the Bible, we don't want to embarrass ourselves in God's eyes in the worship service by being too skimpily dressed and showing off our nakedness.

If our heart's attitude is more important than our outward

appearance, this is why we also should adjust our way of dressing to what is considered normal in a church that we start attending regularly. As Paul explains in 1 Corinthians 10:23–33, it is best to give no offense for the sake of the other person's conscience. Do not seek your own profit, but the profit of many, that they may be saved (v. 33). So, for example, if the women all wear head coverings (because of 1 Corinthians 11:10), you should too, even if you don't think it's important.

Another issue is discussed in James 2:2–4, namely, that we shouldn't give more honor to the well-dressed than to the poorly dressed person. If you do this, you are showing "partiality among yourselves, and become judges with evil thoughts." This deals with genuinely rich and poor people and cannot be used as a reason by a rich child of God to dress poorly. However, wearing fine clothes will not earn us favor with God, and therefore it shouldn't earn us favor with our brothers and sisters either.

Some Practical Considerations

Our heart's attitude and those of our children may not always be right. For those occasions I can think of a few practical ideas.

Remember to dress for the occasion.

You have clothes for work, sleep, or other times. And when you go to a worship service, you dress for this important occasion, because this is how important we are to God (1 Peter 2:9–10): "But you are a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, His own special people, that you may proclaim the praises of Him who called you out of darkness into His marvelous light; who once were not a people are now the people of God, who had not obtained mercy but now have obtained mercy." It's an understatement to say that this is a good reason to dress up for the occasion that's meant to thank God for this privilege and to give Him the

honor due to Him.

Cover up nakedness. We probably should be covered from our neck to our knees. In Greece they hand out wraps and shawls for tourists who want to enter their churches but are not covered appropriately.

For teenage girls it's also important that the father explains the other reason why they should not have much bare skin while sitting in church. Even if the front is covered, you don't know how your bare back will distract the person sitting behind you. It might be an idea to address the topic of dressing for church in the church's girls' groups.

For boys it's important to see how their father dresses and especially knowing why he dresses that way.

Dress your birth gender. God created us male and female (Gen. 5:2), and we are different from each other. It's in our DNA in every cell of our bodies. We can't fool God by our outward appearance and instead should acknowledge His creation wisdom.

For people who live by themselves, but really everybody, it is useful to ask God in the morning what you should wear to church. Even if you don't think that God answers, it's a good attitude adjustment, and it's my experience that God does answer questions like that.

In church, refrain from judgment of others until you know their whole story. If you feel judgmental, please repent and go talk to this person to find out more.

Finally

Galatians 3:26–27 says it best: "For you are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus. For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ."

Be always clothed with Jesus!

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.
—Genesis 3:15

Diagnosis AND Cure

Meditation Text: Genesis 3:8–15
Suggested Reading: Job 42:1–6; John
15:18–25



Rev. Peter H. Holtvlüwer

“Just how bad is it, Doc? Tell me the truth.” Many people ask that question of their physician when they feel that something may be seriously wrong with them. As humans we know something is wrong with us. The evidence is everywhere: rampant crime and incessant wars; marriages and families broken apart; soaring rates of anxiety, depression, and suicide; and victimization of the powerless. Inside of our own souls we know something is wrong, for we frequently lack contentment, feel shame we can’t name, and experience an emotional distance from others. We can never seem to live a consistently happy life. Our hearts want to cry out, “Just how bad is it, Doc?” And, “Is there a cure?”

Diagnosis

In the text before us our great Physician provides both a diagnosis and a remedy. In the previous passage we saw that mankind made a decision to rebel against God and instantly felt shame and the vulnerability of their nakedness (Gen. 3:7). And in verse 8 we see more of our first parents’ reaction: “And they heard the sound of the LORD God walking in the garden in the cool of the day, and the man and his wife hid themselves from the presence of the LORD God among the trees of the garden.” Man, who was made in the image of God and appointed king over all creation for God’s glory, now runs away and hides from God. And why? Adam explains, “I heard the sound of you in the garden, and I was

afraid, because I was naked, and I hid myself” (v. 10). It’s a horrendous development. Man—who had been the object of God’s love and who had loved God in return—now has nothing but dread of God in his heart.

Don’t we humans still today have this instinct to run away from God? We are born with a tendency to ignore our Creator’s wishes and live life our own way. And even as Christians, when we fall into a pattern of sin, what happens to our prayers? We don’t feel much like talking to God and so we let our prayers slide. Our corrupt heart isolates itself from the only one who can help us, and so our guilt, shame, and fear mount up higher and higher.

As much as Adam and Eve can’t stand to be in God’s presence, they also show hatred for each other—did you notice the blame shifting going on? When the Lord starts asking questions then Adam aggressively points away from himself: “The woman . . . , she gave me fruit of the tree, and I ate” (v. 12). Sound familiar? Denying our own sin and finding fault with others has become part of our DNA.

But Adam’s depravity goes deeper, for he blames more than just his wife: “The woman whom you gave to be with me.” Do you see the audacity of sin? Adam brazenly dares to blame God for his own wickedness! And the woman is no better, for she will shortly do the same thing in blaming the snake, but do either of them fall on their knees and take the blame? This is a picture of us: sharing our parents’ fallen nature, we know exactly how to pass the buck and justify ourselves.

Sometimes we fool ourselves into thinking that admitting our sin is the same as repentance, but the two are not the same. Adam and Eve both admitted their sin but found the fault in someone else. There

The diagnosis is in: the human situation is dark and dreary because there is no good left in man. Man doesn’t even want to go to God for help but runs away in fear. And yet the Lord comes after us anyway.

was no change in their hearts, no turn in the direction of their lives. How different was the response of Job. Job had fewer privileges than Adam and Eve in Paradise. He also suffered tremendously though he had not been unfaithful to God, and yet when the Lord called him to account for questioning God’s ways, Job humbled himself: “I have uttered what I did not understand, things too wonderful for me . . . therefore I despise myself, and repent in dust and ashes” (Job 42:3, 6). This is what God is looking for, but do any of us offer this to Him willingly and freely of our own accord?

The diagnosis is in: the human situation is dark and dreary because there is no good left in man. Man doesn’t even want to go to God for help but runs away in fear. And yet the Lord comes after us anyway.

Unexpected Grace

It’s a totally unexpected move. The Lord had threatened death as punishment for sin (Gen. 2:17), so that’s all Adam and Eve could expect. It would have been perfectly righteous of God to send fire down from heaven to destroy man and burn up the earth. Isn’t that why Adam and Eve were so afraid? They knew their guilt and their punishment. They also knew that God does not lie, so destruction must await them.

But we don’t read about fire. Or God’s consuming wrath. To our surprise we read that the Lord comes walking into the garden just like He always did. And when Adam and Eve

run and hide then the Lord does not lash out in anger, but “the LORD God called to the man and said to him, ‘Where are you?’” God’s first word is not one of judgment but of grace: “Adam, my son, where are you?”

Isn’t that amazing? Man had insulted the Lord, turned his back on Him, and thrown himself into the clutches of Satan and death, but still God comes looking for man in order to rescue him. It’s mercy totally undeserved and favor that defies any logic. Though we hate God by nature, yet He comes to you and me and calls after us.

That grace comes out more clearly in verse 15 where the Lord curses not Adam but the serpent. While the Lord does not excuse man for his sin (as we’ll see in the next passage), yet He immediately acts to deal with the origin of sin itself by cursing the devil. Satan is man’s number one enemy, and man must be made to see this. That is what the Lord is doing through His series of questions. Remember that at this moment Adam and Eve were still in league with Satan. Having rejected God’s command and accepted Satan’s lie, they had made a covenant with the devil. The only way for man to be brought back into favor with God was for that devilish covenant to be broken up and Satan destroyed—and the man and his wife needed to understand that in no uncertain terms. They could not stay friends with the devil. No one can serve two masters—it’s either the Lord or Satan (see Matt. 6:24).

The Gift of Enmity

And that's why the enmity God speaks of is such a gift of grace. At first this sounds strange, for enmity is strife. It is to be at loggerheads with someone else, to have a certain hostility between you—how can that be a blessing? Yet this enmity comes directly from the Lord. In fact, it's part of His curse upon Satan: "And I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and her offspring" (v. 15). The Lord inserts enmity in order to break up this diabolical allegiance. Satan had caused enmity to sprout between man and God by bringing man into alliance with himself, but immediately God turns the tables and puts enmity between His people and the devil—is that not an undeserved blessing and total grace? God separates His own from the camp of the enemy who in reality only wishes to destroy us.

Do we sometimes forget or ignore this gift? It can become tiring to always feel different from the world, to always be set apart a little bit, to always be regarded as outside the mainstream. When we start resenting this apartness, then we edge over a little closer to the offspring of the serpent, to unbelievers. We start blending in with the world. We participate in its forms of entertainment; we adopt its way of thinking and speaking; we become close friends with unbelievers and maybe even start getting romantically involved. We need to stop and ask ourselves: Am I maintaining this God-given separation or am I sliding back over to the devil's side?

Of course, the Lord does not intend for us to be absolutely separate from non-Christians in every way, for we need to love our neighbors (including our enemies) and speak

to them about God's grace in Jesus. Some of them will yet prove to be among God's elect. We must certainly let our light shine before men (Matt. 5:16), but that light will not be able to shine if we become like them. If we start thinking and speaking and living like the world then soon we will be as spiritually dark as they are. It is just as James writes: "Do you not know that friendship with the world is enmity with God? Therefore whoever wishes to be a friend of the world makes himself an enemy of God" (James 4:4). Evangelism and romance don't mix. Partnering with unbelievers in marriage or business makes a mockery of that enmity. Let's instead be mindful and thankful for God's gift of enmity knowing that it is keeping us from falling back into league with Satan and opens the way for his defeat.

That ultimate defeat, however, will come through a long battle over the ages of this world. The Lord goes on to tell the serpent "he [the offspring of the woman] shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise his heel" (v. 15b). This is a description of the continual enmity or the spiritual warfare between the line of the woman (i.e., God's people) and the followers of the serpent (Satan's people). What this means is that being a Christian is not a bed of roses—we can expect to be snakebit from time to time. We can expect suffering and pain. When we show ourselves to be followers of the Lord Jesus Christ, we should be prepared for backlash from the unbelieving world.

Satan Crushed

The Lord Jesus Himself experienced this. He is the promised offspring of the woman, and though He came to save His people from their sins, yet many hated Him—all those who were offspring of the devil. Jesus did them no wrong, but they couldn't

stand Him. The serpent himself came and nipped at His heels in the desert of temptation. Satan then struck awfully close through the hand of hostile crowds that wanted to put Him to death. Finally the devil sank his fangs into Jesus through the betrayal of Judas, which led to Jesus' execution on the cross. And as our covenant mediator was hated and oppressed by Satan and his followers, so He warned us to expect the same: "If they persecuted me, they will also persecute you" (John 15:20). The enmity is there as a blessing, but sometimes we experience the bitterness of a snake bite.

And yet it is only temporary. The snake's bite is never fatal, for even though Satan latched his fangs onto the Lord Jesus Christ, yet at that very moment, unbeknownst to the devil, the Lord was crushing Satan's head. Satan did his best to ruin the Christ but because the last Adam never believed the lie of the serpent and never entered into covenant with him, the death He died could never be permanent. He had no sin to be punished for, and so Jesus rose from the grave to disarm Satan completely, overcome the power of sin, remove the sting of death, and seal the victory for God's people once and for all. Sin's antidote and its healing effects can already be felt today by believing in Jesus. And complete healing is assured on the day when Christ returns to throw that ancient serpent into the lake of fire and take His healthy and restored people to live with Himself forever.

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Church Order

Article 27: Church Visitors
Article 28: Synod



Rev. Greg Lubbers

URCNA

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

ARTICLE 27: Church Visitors

Each Consistory of the classis shall invite two experienced office-bearers appointed by classis, either two ministers or a minister and an elder, to visit the council once every two years, who shall give account of their visit to the classis. These visitors shall inquire whether the office-bearers faithfully perform their duties, adhere to sound doctrine, observe in all things the adopted order, and properly promote as much as lies in them, by word and deed, the edification of the congregation including the youth, to the end that these visitors may fraternally admonish those office-bearers who have in anything been negligent, and may by their advice and assistance help direct all things unto the peace, edification and greatest profit of the churches.

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ARTICLE 28: Synod

The churches shall meet as a synod at least once every three years. Each Consistory shall delegate two of its members to this meeting. Each synod shall determine a time and place for the subsequent synod and shall authorize a Consistory to convene that synod. If a majority of the classes deem it necessary that a synod meet earlier than the regular time determined, the Consistory charged with convening the meeting shall determine when and where the meeting is to occur. (Article 28)

The Nature of Synod

The Christian church has a long history of meeting “as a synod.” This history was and is especially vital to the ecclesiastical life of Reformed churches including those of a Dutch heritage. The word “synod” is derived from the Greek language and means “assembly.” “Synod” is used to indicate the broadest assembly of the churches that make up a federation or denomination of churches.

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The Purpose of Church Visitors

The churches of the Reformation were initially confronted with a twofold concern. One of the concerns was that of ecclesiastical hierarchy. Another one of the concerns was that of ecclesiastical ignorance. Both of these concerns are of perpetual duration among churches. In an attempt to address these concerns, Reformed churches within the Netherlands established the practice already in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries of appointing church visitors at meetings of classis.

The purpose of this practice was to avoid the hierarchy of an Episcopalian church polity while at the same time providing a means for mutual supervision among the office bearers of the churches. When

executed correctly, this long-standing practice of church visitors as codified in the Church Order promotes unity and edification among the churches.

The Appointment of Church Visitors

At the assembly of classis, the churches that have federated together on the bond of unity in faith and practice appoint at least two office bearers, preferably more than just two, to serve the function of church visitors. While consistories delegate two of their members to attend classis, classis does not delegate church visitors to visit the councils of the churches since classis does not have that nature of authority over a consistory. Rather, classis appoints men to the function of church visitors to whom the individual consistories agree to extend invitations “to visit the council once every two years.” Since the church

visitors are appointed by classis, they also report on their work to classis.

Given the nature of the work of the church visitors, the Church Order stipulates that the men appointed to this function should be “experienced” and should be “either two ministers or a minister and an elder.” Older forms of the Church Order in the line of Dort further stipulated that these men should be the “oldest, most experienced and competent.” Since, as a general rule, wisdom is acquired with age and experience, this stipulation should not be ignored.

Church visitors must be office bearers who have mature knowledge and wisdom in matters of doctrine and polity along with a godly spirit since they may have to “fraternally admonish those office-bearers who have in anything been negligent, and may by their advice and assistance

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Meetings of synod are of a delegated nature. Practices vary among Reformed denominations of which assembly delegates members to synod and how many persons are delegated. Many Reformed denominations have the classes delegate a rather limited number of persons ranging from four to six ministers and elders from each classis. From its inception, the URCNA has adopted the practice of having each local consistory delegate two of its consistory members, either ministers or elders, to synod.

Synodical meetings are not voting conventions in which the members communicate the votes of the consistories that sent them. Rather, ecclesiastical assemblies, including synods, are deliberative assemblies in which various matters are discussed upon biblical, confessional, and polity grounds with input given and received from any member who

wishes to speak. Upon participating in and hearing of these deliberations, the synodical delegates then make decisions regarding the various matters placed before them seeking what is best for the churches as a whole. Given these realities, consistories should delegate the men best suited for this nature of work understanding that the deliberations and days of synod are often arduous.

The Occasion for Synod

Historically, the Church Order of Dort made a distinction between “Particular Synods” and “General Synods” with the former being all the churches in one particular area such as a province and meeting more frequently and the latter being all the churches in a country or countries and meeting less frequently. Many, but not all, Reformed federations and denominations today “meet as a synod,” no longer maintaining the practice of having particular synods

and general synods.

While several Reformed denominations meet as a synod on a set annual basis, the URCNA decided that “churches shall meet as a synod at least once every three years.” Recent practice has been to meet every two years. It would appear that the move from meeting as a synod every year to meeting as a synod “at least once every three years” was an intentional attempt to emphasize the primacy of the local government of the churches within the consistory, and to a degree the classes, rather than the broadest assembly, the synod.

The Church Order recognizes that exceptional situations may arise within the churches that warrant an earlier meeting of synod.

Therefore the provision is given that “[i]f a majority of the classes deem it necessary that a synod meet earlier than the regular time

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help direct all things unto the peace, edification and greatest profit of the churches.” Such a seasoned, mature, godly spirit will also restrain the church visitor from creeping into a hierarchical posture in his work.

The Tasks of the Church Visitors:

The primary task of the church visitors is to inquire among the council of a local church regarding that church’s office bearers’ faithful fulfillment of their respective duties. In essence, they are to ask if the minister of the Word and sacraments, the elders, and the deacons are doing what they are supposed to be doing.

In relation to this overarching task, the church visitors are to inquire about the office bearers’ commitment to biblical doctrine, practice of Reformed church polity as codified within the Church Order, and encouragement of “the edification of the congregation” with

a special focus upon the youth of the congregation.

To fulfill these tasks, the church visitors meet, upon invitation from the local consistory, with the council of a local church. Under the leadership of the chairman of the consistory, the church visitors ask various questions of the minister of the Word and sacraments, elders, and deacons. While sample lists of questions exist and are helpful, this interaction should not become merely mechanical or routine. Rather, the questions should serve to foster guided discussion prompting reflection, encouragement, and, if necessary, admonishment. In addition, occasions may arise in which church councils have questions for “advice and assistance” from the church visitors for how best to carry out their respective callings. While church visitors have no formal authority over a consistory or a council, their mature and experienced insight is often most valuable and appreciated.

Older traditions and practices included a formal announcement to the congregation that the church visitors were coming. This was to provide any member of the congregation who had a disagreement with the consistory an occasion to meet with the church visitors and the consistory. At times, it was also a practice that the church visitors would make a thorough inspection of the minutes of the consistory, diaconate, and council meetings and then sign them indicating their approval of their orderliness. Without outright condemning such practices, the Church Order is silent upon such practices indicating that they are not mandated. We must remember the church visitors are not church supervisors.

The Church Order identifies a beautiful aim of these tasks of the church visitors, an aim every member of the church should share: “[to] direct all things unto the peace, edification and greatest profit of the churches.”

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determined, the Consistory charged with convening the meeting shall determine when and where the meeting is to occur.”

Since synod is not a continuous assembly and ceases to exist upon adjournment, before it adjourns each synod is responsible to “determine a time and place for the subsequent synod and shall authorize a Consistory to convene that synod.”

The Work of Synod

The material for the work of synod is determined by the stipulation in Article 25 of the Church Order, “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.” Matters that “could not be settled in the narrower assemblies” would include lawful and orderly appeals as addressed in Articles 29 and 31 of the Church Order. Matters “that pertain to the churches of the broader assembly in common” would come by way of overtures or committee reports and would include addressing the Church Order, federational funds, or the work of synodical committees and functionaries. Broader assemblies, as well as committees and functionaries, must continually and conscientiously exercise self-restraint and avoid addressing matters that are not properly within their jurisdictions.

Since the synod is not a continuing assembly, some of its work is carried out through committees of various

types. Since these committees are committees of synod, they report on their work to the next meeting of synod. These committees must also focus exclusively upon the mandate given to them by synod.

While Reformed church polity ardently avoids extensive parliamentary rules, for the practical working of the meetings of synod, the URCNA has a publicly accessible document entitled “Regulations for Synodical Procedure.” Most Reformed and Presbyterian federations and denominations have such a document.

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Lord's Day 23: Why Faith Matters

Rev. William **Boekestein**



59Q. But how does it help you now that you believe all this?

A. That I am righteous in Christ before God and an heir to life everlasting.

60Q. How are you righteous before God?

A. Only by true faith in Jesus Christ. Even though my conscience accuses me of having grievously sinned against all God's commandments, of never having kept any of them, and of still being inclined toward all evil, nevertheless, without any merit of my own, out of sheer grace, God grants and credits to me the perfect satisfaction, righteousness, and holiness of Christ, as if I had never sinned nor been a sinner, and as if I had been as perfectly obedient as Christ was obedient for me—if only I accept this gift with a believing heart.

61Q. Why do you say that through faith alone you are righteous?

A. Not because I please God by the worthiness of my faith, for only Christ's satisfaction, righteousness, and holiness are my righteousness before God, and I can receive this righteousness and make it mine in no other way than by faith alone.

Atheist Richard Dawkins sees the biblical stories of the virgin birth and Jesus' resurrection as examples of "religious propaganda." In his mind, articles of faith are part of a political strategy to command the allegiance of "unsophisticates and children."¹ But Dawkins's theory works only if the virgin birth and Jesus' resurrection never happened. Propaganda is inherently biased or misleading; often it's completely false. Only if the Bible is a lie does believing it make you a victim of religious manipulation.

But what if Scripture's message is true? What if God "exists and . . . rewards those who seek him" (Heb. 11:6, English Standard Version)? If the triune God is the creator, deliverer, and sanctifier, wouldn't it be important to believe what He says about Himself?

What Good Is Faith?

Here's how the catechism puts the question after almost forty questions and answers about the Apostles' Creed, the church's ancient summary of Bible doctrine: "But how does it help you now to believe

all this?" Short answer: Believing God's truth completely changes us. Right doctrine—like the virgin birth and Jesus' resurrection—sincerely believed, is how we recover the life-giving knowledge of God that was lost in the fall. By believing God, "I am righteous in Christ before God and an heir to life everlasting." Hear in that answer a familiar theme: Faith changes both my present and future life.

Presently believers are righteous before God. Of course, this benefit is unimpressive if you miss the crisis that faith addresses. Some friends

and I once asked dozens of strangers, “How are you made righteous before God?” People couldn’t understand the question. Social engineers have relentlessly shushed humanity’s nagging sense that all is not well between us and God; we might have a problem with Him, not the other way around. In truth, our sin makes us unrighteous before God (Isa. 59:2). And our guilty consciences won’t let us forget. We have broken all of God’s commandments (James 2:10). And even our most heroic moments are marred with self-interest. More than that, despite our best deeds we still have an inclination toward all evil (Rom. 7:23).

Only true faith changes our relationship to God. Despite my sin, by faith in Christ, God treats me “as if I had never sinned,” as if I were as righteous as Christ Himself. Salvation is a legal exchange—Jesus takes the blame for our sin; we get the credit of His righteousness. “For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God” (2 Cor. 5:21). Our righteousness is from God, received by faith (Phil. 3:9), resulting in peace with our maker (Rom. 5:1).

Concerning our future, believers are also heirs of eternal life. Heirs are legally guaranteed a share of the grantor’s estate. By believing in the Son, Christians already have everlasting life (John 3:36). But believers also expect, at the time appointed by the Father (Gal. 4:2), to receive an unimaginable inheritance (1 Cor. 2:9).

Since faith is the difference between life and death, it’s vital to understand how it works.

How Does Faith Work?

Sometimes people view faith as if it were a commodity with which we barter with God. We give Him our faith—He gives us eternal life. But

if salvation worked like that, faith would have to be quantifiable. How much faith would be needed to purchase salvation? And how good would it have to be? And what if our faith wavered? Would our standing before God become jeopardized, the way a retirement fund devalues with stock market slumps?

Faith isn’t a commodity. It isn’t like an inherently valuable work that deserves a paycheck (Rom. 4:4). “And to the one who does not work but believes in him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is counted as righteousness” (Rom. 4:5). Faith is the opposite of a commodity! It’s an emptying of self and a desperate reception of Christ’s righteousness.

In fact, it’s not faith that saves; Christ saves us through faith. We don’t trust in faith but in the triune God. When our faith wavers, we need not fear that we will get less of Jesus. I’ve seen California redwoods whose insides have been gutted by forest fires but are alive because they are rooted to the life-giving earth. Even a frayed wire conducts electricity so long as it connects to the power source. Sometimes your faith is nearly gutted, terribly frayed. Doubts and distractions make you wonder how God could still love you. Remember, you do not “please God by the worthiness of [your] faith, for only Christ’s satisfaction, righteousness, and holiness are [your] righteousness before God.” Like a mouth that chews life-nourishing food, faith is merely an instrument by which we receive Christ. Faith is how we participate in the real events of His spotless birth and death-defeating resurrection. Faith is how we boast in the Lord (1 Cor. 1:31).

What is the takeaway? “Receive [Christ’s] righteousness and make it [your] own . . . by faith alone.” “Accept this gift with a believing heart.” We don’t create faith—it’s a gift of God (Eph. 2:8). But we must

practice faith. And not just once, but constantly. If you are spiritually exhausted, wondering how faithful you have to be before God will accept you, Jesus invites you to step off the treadmill of works and trust that Jesus has done all the work the Father could ever be satisfied with. The world wants us believe that we are enough. But we know better. We aren’t enough. Neither are the people around us. But Christ is. His righteousness is “more than sufficient to atone for the sins of the whole world.”² By faith Christ becomes for us “wisdom from God, righteousness, and sanctification” (1 Cor. 1:30).

Some songs sing to you even when you don’t ask them to. But there is a good song to have stuck in your head, the song of God’s steadfast love toward believing sinners (Ps. 42:8). God is pleased with believers because of Jesus. God is stricter than we are in judging sin and more gracious than we are in forgiving sin. The best possible news is that to those who believe, God “counts no iniquity” (Ps. 32:2) but instead declares them righteous (Ps. 32:11) only by true faith in Jesus.

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1. Richard Dawkins, “Snake Oil and Holy Water, *Forbes* ASAP, October 4, 1999, https://www.forbes.com/asap/1999/1004/235_print.html.

2. Canons of Dort, 2.3.

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Lord's Day 24: Why Good Works Aren't Enough

Rev. William **Boekestein**



- 62Q. Why can't our good works be our righteousness before God, or at least a part of our righteousness?
A. Because the righteousness which can pass God's judgment must be entirely perfect and must in every way measure up to the divine law. But even our best works in this life are all imperfect and stained with sin.
- 63Q. How can our good works be said to merit nothing when God promises to reward them in this life and the next?
A. This reward is not merited; it is a gift of grace.
- 64Q. But doesn't this teaching make people indifferent and wicked?
A. No. It is impossible for those grafted into Christ by true faith not to produce fruits of gratitude.

Many of us struggle with gifts. We like receiving things, but only if we've earned them. We don't want to feel indebted. A sense of deserving stokes our pride; unmerited kindness humbles us.

This problem becomes more serious in connection with the greatest gift we can receive. The Bible teaches that sinners are justified—or judged righteous by God—on the basis of Jesus' righteousness which believers receive by faith. We're justified by faith alone, not by works (Eph. 2:8–9). And that pill swallows hard. We want to somehow contribute to our salvation. And some theologians claim that the teaching of gracious salvation by faith alone makes people

spiritually careless—people won't care about works if they believe they are justified graciously.

But Scripture teaches that good works are necessary for salvation and insufficient for our justification. To understand that we must heed two vital warnings.

Don't Trust in Your Good Works

It's easy to do. Because earning is the system most familiar to us, we can hardly believe that God doesn't respect our merit. Since childhood you have sensed that people's attitude toward you is shaped by your behavior. You got accepted into

college based on your performance. Raises and bonuses at work depend on your output. It's so easy to import a mindset of work-and-reward into the arena of religion. The older brother in Jesus' parable believed his father owed him a blessing for his faithfulness (Luke 15). We might feel the same way. But salvation doesn't work that way. Why?

Our Good Works Fail to Meet God's Perfect Standard

God says, "Be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect" (Matt. 5:48, English Standard Version). We know that's impossible. But we're also good at moving goalposts. If we feel optimistic about our natural

standing before God it's because we think too little of Him and too much of ourselves. But we are worse—and God is better—than we can imagine. Our deceptive hearts outrageously over-appraise our goodness (Jer. 17:9). Our best works are stained with the sins of virtue signaling, dishonesty, and ingratitude. We obey selectively. And our works can become a security blanket, taking the place of Christ's works. We aren't nearly as righteous as we suppose. And "God is bigger than we think—holier, more excellent, than we realize."1 Holy angels use most of their wings to cover themselves from God's face because He is holy, holy, holy (Isa. 6:2, 3).

God Rewards Our Good Works Purely by Grace

The catechism hypothetically suggests that good works might be meritorious because God promises to reward them. If good works fetch rewards, they must possess some purchasing power before God, the argument goes. But God's rewards are always gracious, never earned. Before Abraham's faith was accounted as righteousness, God introduced Himself as Abraham's "exceedingly great reward" (Gen. 15:1–6). No matter how richly God rewards us, for even our best efforts, we should say, "We are unworthy servants; we have only done what was our duty" (Luke 17:10). Paul expected Jesus to award him with a crown of righteousness even though he considered himself the foremost sinner (2 Tim. 4:8; 1 Tim. 1:15). Paul wasn't banking on his good works but on the appearing of Jesus in glory for him.

Still, God's gracious reward should stir us to practice good works in the brief time allotted us (Rev. 22:12). Our works on earth have value in heaven (Matt. 5:11–12; Col. 3:24); they follow us into the next life (Rev. 14:13). So the wise person stores up treasure in heaven (Matt. 6:19–21).

Good works are vital. But we can receive Christ's righteousness and all His benefits "in no other way than by faith alone" (Q&A 61). This truth should comfort us when we fall short of His glory. We are what we are by God's grace, not our works (1 Cor. 15:10).

Don't Dismiss the Power of a New Life

The Roman Catholic Church insists that good works are part of how we're righteous before God. And good works must be meritorious, it's alleged, in order to incentivize godliness. People will do good only if they think their salvation depends on it. This seems logical. And people truly do abuse the teaching of grace as an excuse for ungodly living. People do treat grace as a cheap thing.

But a mentality of cheap grace is discordant with the biblical doctrine of justification by grace alone. Justification is part of a total overhaul of sinners who come under the care of God's gracious Spirit. He gives us true faith (Eph. 2:8) before we have done a single good work. But He doesn't stop there. In sanctification, God commands His children to work out their salvation as God works in them to will and to do His good pleasure (Phil. 2:12–13). He has prepared good works for us to walk in (Eph. 2:10). "It is impossible for those grafted into Christ by true faith not to produce fruits of gratitude." God grants spiritual life by grafting us into Christ, in whom is life. A justified sinner becomes "like a tree planted by streams of water that yields its fruit in due season, and its leaf does not wither" (Ps. 1:3). "Every good tree bears good fruit!" (Matt. 7:7).

Making justification depend on good works is also contrary to how God motivates our faithfulness. True acts of love are spurred neither by fear of rejection for underperformance nor by a selfish desire for personal gain

but by the heart-warming power of God's gracious acceptance of needy sinners. "Fear has to do with punishment, and whoever fears has not been perfected in love. We love because he first loved us" (1 John 4:18–19). The law cannot be obeyed but by a robust love for God and our neighbor. And only the gift of faith activates within us desires that are compatible with true love. Requiring works for justification is a recipe for mercenary obedience. The true gospel treats believers as sons; any other "gospel" makes us hirelings.

When good works are treated as currency they will never be enough. Good works are a response of gratitude to the indescribable gift of God's righteous Son. So the reward is as freely given as the grace which produces good works. Jesus came into the world to save sinners like you and me. God promises that if you believe in the Lord Jesus Christ, you will be saved. Add good works to that formula of justification, and you blow it up. Surely God reminds justified believers "to be obedient, to be ready for every good work" (Titus 3:1). And by God's grace, believers are beginning to cheerfully answer that call.

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1. Kevin DeYoung, *The Good News We Almost Forgot: Rediscovering the Gospel in a Sixteenth-Century Catechism* (Chicago: Moody, 2010), 120.

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FROM

MAINTENANCE

TO

MISSIONAL

A Plea for Reformation (4)



Rev. Paul T. **Murphy**

In my previous article of this series, I stressed the importance of pastors and elders being examples to the flock (1 Peter 5:3) in the area of evangelism. In this article, I want to emphasize another passage of Scripture dealing with the person in the pew. Ephesians 4:12 (English Standard Version) states that the shepherd/teacher has the responsibility “to equip the saints for the work of ministry.” William Hendriksen comments on this verse: “The immediate purpose . . . is the ministry to be rendered by the entire flock . . . The important lesson taught here is that not only apostles, prophets, evangelists, and those who are called pastors and teachers, but the entire church should be engaged in spiritual labor.”

I believe the main reason why conversion growth in Reformedville is so poor is that we primarily do missions by proxy, that is, we pay and pray for others to do it. That is what we have been taught to do, and we do it very well. In that sense it is to be commended. We were trained, and we responded faithfully. But that teaching is unbalanced. It omits the responsibility of lay persons to evangelize their neighbors. We must regain what R. B. Kuiper calls

the forgotten office of believer. He writes, “One of the most significant accomplishments of the Protestant Reformation was that it restored the office of believer to the honor which it deserves.” How true it is that the Reformed church must always be reforming! We must reform once again in our day and recover the evangelistic manpower of every professing member of the church.

The biblical references to the

evangelistic responsibility of all is seen not only in Ephesians 4:12 but also in 1 Peter 2:9: “But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light.” The reference is to Exodus when Israel is redeemed from slavery, and that principle is now applied to the church. The purpose of the redemption is that they may proclaim God’s excellencies.

See also Matthew 5:14, 16, where the church is called to be salt and light. See Acts 1:8, where the ascending Jesus says, “But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth.” John Stott says of this verse, “We can no more restrict the command to witness than we can restrict the promise of the Spirit.” The point? Every Christian receives the Holy

Spirit to enable and empower them to witness. In Acts 8, persecution had come upon the church; all were scattered except the apostles (v. 1). “Now those who were scattered went about preaching the word” (v. 4). The word used here for preaching is *euangellizo* (evangelized). Colossians 4:5–6 says, “Walk in wisdom toward outsiders, making the best use of the time. Let your speech always be gracious, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how you ought to answer each person.” Note once more the emphasis on verbal testimony from every Christian.

In addition to the scriptural evidence is historical verification. Kenneth Scott Latourette, a Yale historian, writes in *A History of the Expansion of Christianity*, “The chief agents in the expansion of Christianity appear not to have been those who made it a profession, but men and women who carried on their livelihood in some purely secular manner and spoke of their faith to those they met in this natural fashion.”

Carl Henry, recognized as the grandfather of American evangelicalism, says something similar: “A one-to-one approach, initiated by every believer, still holds the best promise of evangelizing the earth.”

Rev. Peter DeJong, my predecessor at Dutton Church in Michigan and a veteran home and foreign missionary, told me, “One of the biggest handicaps to our local evangelism programs is often the indifference of our members to their missionary calling . . . One of the biggest factors in the success of winning people has often been the interest of a Christian neighbor who tried to reach them rather than the efforts of a busy minister.”

Seventy-five percent of people who make a profession of faith and join a church do so through family and friends. We need to mobilize the

members of our church to be more evangelistic.

The most compelling reason for regaining the office of believer and enlisting believers in evangelism is found in the Heidelberg Catechism. It captures beautifully the responsibilities of each Christian in evangelism. In Q 31, the catechism is explaining the Apostles’ Creed and specifically why Jesus is called Christ, meaning anointed. He is so named because He has been anointed with the Holy Spirit to be prophet, priest, and king. Then, in its inimitable fashion the catechism makes a personal, pastoral, and practical application: “Why are you called Christian?” (Q 32). It answers, “because I share in His anointing to be prophet, priest, and king.” Every Christian has a prophetic responsibility. A silent, never-witnessing Christian is an oxymoron, a contradiction in terms, a sub-Christian.

In Q 86 we read, “Why must we still do good works?” and the answer is, “so that by our godly living our neighbors may be won to Christ.” Notice the beautiful balance of the catechism’s description of the Christian life: word and deed, lips and life, say and do, talk and walk. We cannot be content to “witness by my life” because people will not know why you live the way you do unless you tell them. “I live like this because Jesus loved me and gave Himself for me, and I want to love Him and live for Him.”

This is magnificently displayed in 1 Peter 3:15, where we read we are always to be ready to give verbal testimony. Notice that this is addressed not to pastors, missionaries, or those especially gifted for evangelism, but to every ordinary person in the pew. The critical question is why Peter insists that everyone be ready to give an answer. It is because he expects you

to be asked, and why does he expect you to be asked? It is because of the godly lifestyle evident in your daily life (1 Peter 2:1, 12, 14, 15, 20, 21; 3:2, 6, 8–11, 13, 16, 17; 4:19). Word and deed must always go together.

If our churches are to make the move from maintenance to missional, then we must exhort, engage, equip, and enlist all our members to be evangelists. This is not incidental or tangential to the life and existence of our churches. Two quotes make the case. Alexander Duff, a nineteenth-century minister, stated, “Hence it follows, that when a church ceases to be evangelistic, it ceases to be evangelical; and when it ceases to be evangelical, it must cease to exist as a true Church of God, however primitive or apostolic it may be in its outward form and constitution.” The second is from Kuiper: “In Palestine are two large lakes, the Sea of Galilee in the north and the Dead Sea in the south. Water flows from the mountainous region of Hermon and Lebanon into the sea of Galilee and out of it through the river Jordan into the Dead Sea. The sea of Galilee is a freshwater lake and has much life in it. The Dead Sea is said to be so dead that no living creature can possibly survive in its briny waters. Why this difference? The answer is that the sea of Galilee gives as well as takes, while the Dead Sea only takes . . . The church that only takes and never gives is sick unto death.”

Therefore, churches in Reformedville find ourselves in an existential crisis. Will we reform or . . . ?

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THE DEATH OF CHRIST AND THE RIGHTEOUSNESS OF FAITH

Signed, Sealed, and Administered (Part 1)



Rev. Casey D. **Freswick**



Introduction

Recently I had the opportunity to speak with an informed and articulate person who believed the sacrament of baptism should be administered only to adults. He opposed infant baptism. He made a typical declaration of this position when he pointed out, from his perspective and understanding, the significant difference between believers' baptism and circumcision. At this point I affirmed the New Testament practice of adult baptism: hear the promise, believe, repent, and be baptized. I then affirmed the Old Testament practice of believers' circumcision: hear the promise, believe, repent, and be circumcised. At this declaration he was confounded, for he had never heard about believers' circumcision.

First, it is important to note that circumcision is the past sign and

seal of the death of Christ and the righteousness of faith and that baptism is the present sign and seal of the cross of Christ and the righteousness of faith. Circumcision was administered only before Christ. Baptism is administered only after the death of Christ. Today our Lord seals the promises of the gospel of grace upon our hearts by our proper understanding and practice of baptism. In the past He sealed that promise to Old Testament believers by circumcision. So, in the history of redemption we can talk about circumcision as being the past sign and baptism being the present sign. Circumcision was administered in the past age. Baptism is administered in the present age. In this article I will demonstrate how Romans 4:11 and its context clearly declare these statements to be true. Yet, circumcision and

baptism are theologically the two signs and seals of the cross of Christ and the righteousness of faith. So, sometimes in this article I may refer to circumcision as a present sign and seal.

We will examine the close relationship between the Old Testament sign and seal of circumcision and the New Testament sign and seal of baptism. First, we will see that the reality of the death of Christ is signed and sealed by circumcision and baptism. Second, we will examine how the righteousness of faith, which is the effectual result of the work of Christ on the cross, is signed and sealed by circumcision and baptism. Third (in the next issue of *The Outlook*), we will observe the common twofold administration of the signs and seals of circumcision and baptism.

The Death of Christ Signed and Sealed

Romans 4 is an extensive New Testament commentary on the meaning and administration of the Old Testament sacrament of circumcision. The nature of sacraments is revealed in Romans 4:11 (New King James Version): “And [Abraham] received the sign of circumcision, a seal of the righteousness of the faith.” The words “sign” and “seal” in this text give us our basic language of the sacraments. The words “sacrament” and “holy” have the same fundamental meaning. Both refer to something set apart. The church uses this language in places like the Heidelberg Catechism (Q&A 66):

What are the sacraments?

Sacraments are visible, holy signs and seals. They were instituted by God so that by our use of them he might make us understand more clearly the promise of the gospel, and seal that promise. And this is God’s gospel promise: he grants us forgiveness of sins and eternal life by grace because of Christ’s one sacrifice accomplished on the cross.

A sign is a marker that points to a reality beyond itself. A seal is an official mark that guarantees the genuineness of the sign. A marriage license is a sign of the marriage covenant. The official seal imprinted on this license is a testimony to others that the sign of the marriage covenant is genuine, thus proving the existence of the marriage covenant itself. The marriage license is proof that the couple is married, that they made covenant vows and entered the marriage state. The marriage license is a sign and seal given by the state that a particular man and woman are married. (We will not deal with the state’s perversion of marriage in this article.) Circumcision and

baptism are the signs and seals of the realities of the cross of Christ and the righteousness of faith.

With this basic understanding of the nature of the sacraments themselves we turn to our examination of the fact that the cross of Christ is signed and sealed by circumcision and baptism. This raises important questions. When was Christ circumcised? When was Christ baptized? When we hear these questions, we might immediately say, “Jesus was circumcised when he was eight days old.” Luke 2:21 states, “And when eight days were completed for the circumcision of the Child, His name was called JESUS, the name given by the angel before He was conceived in the womb.” Many would turn to Mark 1:9: “It came to pass in those days that Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan.” We conclude Jesus was baptized when he was thirty years old. The later example involves a number of erroneous assumptions. But the first example is a clear confusion between the sign and reality. Ultimately, we will see that Jesus was circumcised and baptized at the same time. These redemptive realities took place at the same time because His circumcision and His baptism were His death on the cross.

The Bible clearly teaches that the death of Jesus on the cross is signed and sealed with circumcision and baptism. Colossians 2:11–14 says,

In Him you were also circumcised with the circumcision made without hands, by putting off the body of the sins of the flesh, by the circumcision of Christ, buried with Him in baptism, in which you also were raised with Him through faith in the working of God, who raised Him from the dead. And you, being dead in your trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh,

He has made alive together with Him, having forgiven you all trespasses, wiped out the handwriting of requirements that was against us, which was contrary to us. And He has taken it out of the way, having nailed it to the cross.

Is the circumcision of Christ referring to the sign He received at eight days old? No, it is referring to Christ on the cross! Here the Word declares that the circumcision of Christ is the death of Christ. In Mark 10:38 we read, “But Jesus said to them, ‘You do not know what you ask. Are you able to drink the cup that I drink, and be baptized with the baptism that I am baptized with?’” Here and in Colossians 2:12 Scripture clearly declares that Jesus’ death is His baptism. In these texts the words “baptism” and “circumcision” do not refer to the outward signs but the reality. Water baptism is and blood circumcision was the physical sign of the reality of Christ’s death. The circumcision of Jesus was the cross. The baptism of Jesus was the cross. Physical circumcision was and water baptism is only the sign. The redemptive reality of these signs and seals was the once and never to be repeated death of Jesus.

The Righteousness of Faith Signed and Sealed

Christ’s death is what makes our righteousness possible. We are made righteous, justified, only because of the substitutionary death of Christ. Justification and righteousness are translated from the same Greek word. “God justifies us” is the same thing as saying, “God declares us righteous.” Circumcision was a sign of the reality of Christ’s death, God justifying us and our resulting state of righteousness. Baptism is the sign of the reality of Christ’s death, God justifying us and our resulting state of righteousness. The source,

the death of Christ, and resulting state, our righteousness, are both signed and sealed in baptism. Thus, circumcision and baptism are the signs and seals of both the cause, the death of Christ, and the result, the righteousness of faith. There is no righteousness of faith without the death of Christ, His baptism and circumcision. There would be no reality of the signs in any individual if the reality of the signs was not first and foremost found in the death of Jesus Christ and His righteousness.

In Romans 4:11–12 God’s gift of circumcision to Abraham is explained:

And he received the sign of circumcision, a seal of the righteousness of the faith which he had while still uncircumcised, that he might be the father of all those who believe, though they are uncircumcised, that righteousness might be imputed to them also, and the father of circumcision to those who not only are of the circumcision, but who also walk in the steps of the faith which our father Abraham had while still uncircumcised.

Technically, these verses begin with the administration (“he received”) and then address the meaning and return to more about the administration of circumcision. Clearly, one fundamental meaning of the outward sign of circumcision is seen in the phrase “the sign of circumcision, a seal of the righteousness of faith.” First, let’s look at the redemptive reality of “the righteousness of faith” signed and sealed by both circumcision and baptism and then at the administration of both circumcision and baptism.

The righteousness of faith is the state or condition of our standing before God: righteous. This state is the result of our justification.

Justification is the one-time past act by God that results in our ongoing state of righteousness. This historic truth was known by Abraham and all true believers of the Old Testament. Scripture, summarizing Abraham’s salvation, teaches, “And he believed in the LORD; and he counted it to him for righteousness” (Gen. 15:6, King James Version). Here, at the beginning of the Old Testament, we see a clear reference to the righteousness of faith. The concluding verses of Romans 4 highlight this truth about Abraham: “He did not waver at the promise of God through unbelief, but was strengthened in faith, giving glory to God, and being fully convinced that what He had promised He was also able to perform. And therefore ‘it was accounted to him for righteousness’” (Rom. 4:20–22).

Accounted righteousness is the righteousness of faith. Accounted righteousness has two parts, the absence of sin and perfect obedience to the law. For true believers, both of these gifts come from Christ. Righteousness is accounted to us because of justification’s two parts, known as double imputation: the imputation of our sin to Christ resulting in our forgiveness, and the imputation of the good works of Christ to us resulting in our perfect state before God. Both are true for the righteousness of faith for individual believers.

First, let us look at the imputation of our sin to Christ. The context of Romans 4:11 emphasizes the forgiveness of sins as an essential part of righteousness. Paul quotes David to prove this reality: “just as David also describes the blessedness of the man to whom God imputes righteousness apart from works: ‘Blessed are those whose lawless deeds are forgiven, And whose sins are covered; Blessed is the man to whom the LORD shall not impute sin’” (Rom. 4:6–8). This part of the

righteousness of believers is the fact that their sins have been borne on the cross by Christ and are forgiven.

Forgiven sin is one of the required conditions necessary for a blessing-filled relationship with God. God is holy, perfect, righteous, and totally good. Where there is sin and unrighteousness, there is a God-cursed relationship. All humanity is unrighteous. We have all sinned and fallen short of the glory of God (Rom. 3:23). Our fundamental unrighteous cursed condition must be changed for us to be the blessed people of God. Our sin must be removed. Circumcision was the one personal outward sign of the reality of this sin removal. Baptism is the other.

Scripture teaches that baptism has this essential connection to forgiveness. In Acts 2:38 we read, “Repent, and let every one of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins; and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.” Acts 22:16 ties together faith, baptism, and forgiveness: “And now why are you waiting? Arise and be baptized, and wash away your sins, calling on the name of the Lord.” We are righteous before God because God declares that we are sinless because our sin was imputed, given to Christ, taken by Jesus, and removed by His sacrifice on the cross. Our sin is washed away.

But righteousness is not merely the absence of sin; it is the presence of perfect obedience to God’s law.

If a teacher gives a test and you get every question wrong, to get a perfect grade on the test the past wrong answers cannot be counted against you. But just because the wrong answers are removed does not mean you have a perfect grade. You need the right answers as well. Christ on the cross removes all the wrong. But what if every time I attempt to take the test I fail? How can I ever pass

the test? Neither you nor I can ever pass the test and attain righteousness though obedience to the law. But Christ passed the test without any failure. He is the sinless one.

The book of Romans, and Romans 4 specifically, contrast the righteousness of the law and the righteousness of faith. The righteousness of the law is perfect obedience to the law and every command specifically given to a person. Jesus Christ perfectly fulfilled the law and specific commands given to Him. True righteousness is doing everything that God demands of us to do. The context of Romans 4:11 stresses forgiveness, but the use of the word “righteousness” in the phrase “righteousness of faith” emphasizes the imputation of Christ’s perfect obedience to us. We are clothed in the righteousness of Christ: “I will greatly rejoice in the LORD, My soul shall be joyful in my God; For He has clothed me with the garments of salvation, He has covered me with the robe of righteousness” (Isa. 61:10).

The righteousness of faith in Romans is the righteousness that is contrasted to a righteousness attained by perfect obedience. This is the second part of righteousness: the imputation of the perfect obedience of Jesus to His people. The righteousness of faith is our sin imputed to Christ plus His perfect obedience imputed to us. This is the state of being righteous before God. Romans 4:5–8 ties these themes together: “But to him who does not work but believes on Him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is accounted for righteousness, just as David also describes the blessedness of the man to whom God imputes righteousness apart from works: ‘Blessed are those whose lawless deeds are forgiven, And whose sins are covered; Blessed is the man to whom the LORD shall not impute sin.’” “To him who does not work”

and “righteousness apart from work” both assume there is a righteousness of works. Jesus is the only one who lived without sin and attained the righteousness of works, the only one who was perfectly obedient. Righteousness imputed apart from works is the righteousness of faith.

Righteousness is accounted; it is granted and credited to us. It has been described as a foreign righteousness. It is a righteousness with an essential connection to the person and work of Jesus Christ. This righteousness of faith can be defined with the words of the Heidelberg Catechism, Q&A 66: “without any merit of my own, out of sheer grace, God grants and credits to me the perfect satisfaction, righteousness, and holiness of Christ, as if I had never sinned nor been a sinner, and as if I had been as perfectly obedient as Christ was obedient for me.—if only I accept this gift with a believing heart.” As we have seen, this reality of God’s redemptive work in our lives was signed and sealed in the Old Testament by circumcision and is now signed and sealed by baptism.

Romans 4:11 declares that circumcision is a sign and seal of righteousness. But it adds the words “of faith.” The phrase “righteousness of faith” appears three times in the book of Romans (Rom. 4:11; 9:30; 10:6). Romans 10 gives us a great explanation of the role of faith in the “righteousness of faith”:

For Christ is the end of the law for righteousness to everyone who believes. Moses writes about the righteousness which is of the law, “The man who does those things shall live by them.” But the righteousness of faith speaks in this way, “Do not say in your heart, ‘Who will ascend into heaven?’” (that is, to bring Christ down from above) or, “‘Who will descend into the abyss?’” (that is, to bring

Christ up from the dead). But what does it say? “‘The word is near you, in your mouth and in your heart’” (that is, the word of faith which we preach): that if you confess with your mouth the Lord Jesus and believe in your heart that God has raised Him from the dead, you will be saved. For with the heart one believes unto righteousness, and with the mouth confession is made unto salvation. For the Scripture says, “Whoever believes on Him will not be put to shame.” For there is no distinction between Jew and Greek, for the same Lord over all is rich to all who call upon Him. For “whoever calls on the name of the LORD shall be saved.” (Rom. 10:4–13)

Here we have a great commentary on the “righteousness of faith” (Rom. 10: 6). It is all about Christ (v. 4), is contrasted to a righteousness of the law (v. 5), speaks by faith (v. 6), has the word in the heart (vv. 7–8), confesses the Lord Jesus, believes that God raised Him from the dead (v. 9), has faith unto righteousness, confesses unto salvation (v. 10), is not put to shame (v. 11), makes no distinction between Jew and Gentile (v. 12), and calls on the name of the Lord unto salvation (v. 13). There is no reason to think that there are two different definitions of the righteousness of faith in Romans. What a glorious grace-filled promise given to Abraham and all who follow the faith of Abraham. Abraham received the outward sign of circumcision as the sign and seal of the righteousness of faith. Does this mean that Abraham is saved because of his faith? Not at all; it means that Abraham comes to know the reality of his personal right standing before God by personal faith. He believed and spoke of the promise of righteousness ultimately given in the work of God the Son, our Lord Jesus

Christ, a reality signed and sealed by outward circumcision.

Baptism is the sign and seal of the righteousness of faith for New Testament believers. This is testified to in the historic form for baptism used in Reformed churches: “And when we are baptized into the Name of the Son, the Son seals to us that He washes us in His blood from all our sins, incorporating us into the fellowship of His death and resurrection, so that we are freed from our sins and accounted righteous before God.” This description of the sign testifies to both the cross of Christ and reality of “accounted righteous before God.”

The biblical justification for such

a confession rests in the general interchangeable use of baptism and circumcision in the New Testament. “In Him you were also circumcised with the circumcision made without hands, by putting off the body of the sins of the flesh, by the circumcision of Christ, buried with Him in baptism, in which you also were raised with Him through faith in the working of God, who raised Him from the dead” (Col. 2:11–12). But this text also highlights, and baptism emphasizes, our union with Christ. We are baptized into Christ, united to Christ. When we are united to Christ God is our God and we are saved, forgiven, clothed in righteousness, filled

with the Holy Spirit, and we are the recipients of all the benefits of Christ. The righteousness of faith is ours. Baptism itself signs and seals this redemptive reality. We know these truths by faith.

In the next issue, we will consider circumcision and baptism administered.

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

Ezekiel 2–3, 33



Dr. R. Andrew Compton



In the previous article, we began our look at Ezekiel's call to a prophetic priesthood. We saw how standing in the presence of God's glory-*kavod* qualified him for a prophetic commission, much as it did with Isaiah many years before (Isa. 6; cf. Jer. 1). And in response, Ezekiel fell on his face—a most appropriate response to such an encounter. But while God's verbal commission and visionary scroll-eating were sufficient to send Ezekiel on his way to minister His word to a rebellious house, God brought His prophetic priest through several more rites before the formal beginning of his word ministry (Ezek. 5:5).

The final words Ezekiel heard in this first encounter with the Lord indicated that his ministry was not destined to be easy: "And go, get to the captives, to the children of your people, and speak to them and tell them, 'Thus says the Lord GOD, whether they hear, or whether they refuse' (3:11).¹ God says that the message needs to be declared whether the exiles

wish to hear or not. Indeed, the act of declaring the message—even if it results in anger and rejection—is what God deems successful.

Seven Days of (Priestly) Silence

In 3:12, God intervenes as He did in 2:1, now lifting Ezekiel up and physically leading him away, with Ezekiel all the while experiencing the noise of the earth trembling. This is, however, no earthquake; it is the sound of the angelic creatures from Ezekiel 1. Though it is called a "sound," it contains a discernable message: "Blessed be the glory of the LORD from His place!" (Note that this Hebrew word can be translated as either "sound" or "voice.") Why is it called the sound of an earthquake?

Having lived most of my life in southern California, I have experienced many earthquakes. Never have I been able to discern words in the rumbling. But I think the discernable words

here are examples of the hi-def we talked about in chapter 1. The rumbling testifies to the sheer power and volume of the angelic blessing. Like a tinted lowrider with bumping subwoofers that rattle your windows at a stoplight, the musical praise of the cherubim rattles the creation itself.

We saw previously that Ezekiel responded much as the apostle John following his own scroll-eating vision: the scroll turned John's stomach bitter; Ezekiel's "spirit" became embittered. The embittered Ezekiel is brought back to the refugee camp where the exiles were dwelling and sat overwhelmed (or "astonished"—the Hebrew verb *shamam*) for seven days. On the one hand, this invokes Job's experience, where he sat for seven days and seven nights before his outburst, cursing the day of his birth (Job 2:13–3:26). Job 21:5 even associates this same Hebrew verb with covering one's mouth.

On the other hand, these seven days of waiting following divinely commanded eating evoke the ordination of a priest many years before. In Leviticus 8:31–36, Aaron and his sons eat a meal and then sit at the entrance to the tent of meeting for seven days (cf. Exod. 29:35). This is especially striking when considering that Ezekiel may have thought his priestly vocation, for which he had been preparing his entire life as a member of Buzi's priestly family, had been lost. Yet here, having experienced God's glory-*kavod* presence, a presence nearly always experienced by priests in the holy of holies, Ezekiel sits for the length of a priestly ordination ceremony. As we will see in coming chapters, Ezekiel's priestly call seems very much active, even as it also encompasses a prophetic commission.

This is not without precedent. After all, Jeremiah was a prophet who was also from a priestly family, albeit from Anathoth, not Jerusalem. Moses, the unique prophet of the Lord, was

from the tribe of Levi and engaged in what we might call a proto-priestly ministry, anticipating the day when his brother Aaron would formally be ordained as a priest. This ordination would bring a formality to the priesthood that had not yet been experienced. (Remember that there were priests already at Mount Sinai [e.g., Exod. 19:22, 24], though we are not told how they came into to this role.)

Ezekiel on Prophetic Guard Duty

In Ezekiel 3:16–21, Ezekiel receives another layer to his commission: he is called to be a watchman.

In the Old Testament, a watchman is a military figure (e.g., 1 Sam. 14:16; 2 Sam. 13:34; 18:24–27; 2 Kings 9:17–20). He is akin to a guard standing duty and calling out a warning to those who approach or to those who might be under threat from an approaching foe. This imagery has long been associated with the prophetic task, although some have also observed priestly associations.² God Himself is said to keep watch (see Prov. 15:3), using the same Hebrew word found here. But God also commissions watchmen in His image.

In Isaiah 52:8, we see watchmen announcing the return of the Lord to Zion: "Your watchmen shall lift up their voices, with their voices they shall sing together; for they shall see eye to eye when the LORD brings back Zion." Yet the work of a watchman is not always appreciated by the people. In Jeremiah 6:17, they refuse to listen to the words of the watchman: "Also, I set watchmen over you, saying, 'Listen to the sound of the trumpet!' But they said, 'We will not listen.'" And in Hosea 9:8 the people hold the prophets and leaders in such derision that they even try to trip up the watchman that he might fail in his work: "Ephraim was a watchman with my God, a prophet; yet the snare of a bird catcher is in all his ways, and there is only hostility in the house of his God" (New American Standard

Bible [NASB]). And so Ezekiel joins a long line of watchmen whose service is not overly appreciated, to put it mildly.

As part of this watchman commission, God gives Ezekiel four different scenarios. Though they are not presented in this order, they depict a spectrum from the absolute worst-case scenario to the best-case scenario.

In 3:18, God opens with a bad scenario. Here the watchman is told to warn the wicked of their impending doom but refuses. As a result, though the wicked person dies for his own iniquity, the watchman is not thereby off the hook. Indeed, God says "his blood I will require at your hand." Though this need not refer to eternal damnation, 2 Samuel 4:11–12 does indicate that the watchman will face the same fate as the unwarned wicked person: death.

Next, 3:19 depicts a better scenario than verse 18, though it is still not ideal. Here we read of a faithful watchman who does in fact warn the wicked. In spite of the warning, the wicked person refuses to listen. The result? The wicked will die for his iniquity, just like he did in the first scenario, but the watchman will have delivered his own soul. He is not required to convert the wicked; thus it is not his fault that the wicked rejects the warning.

The third scenario, in 3:20, represents the worst possible situation. Here a "righteous" person turns from his "righteous" ways (scare quotes intentional), is not warned by the watchman, and perishes in his unbelief. Just as in the first scenario, the watchman is liable for his failure to warn the apostate.

Before we go on, we need to untangle some especially tricky elements of this scenario. Though this individual is called a "righteous person," this does not mean he is righteous in a proper and salvific sense (see

Heidelberg Catechism, LD 23). Those who receive the perfect righteousness of Christ by faith alone (whether as Old Testament saints looking forward to the reconciling work of the Messiah or as New Testament saints looking backward at the Christ's finished work) receive all the benefits of salvation, including the blessing of the perseverance (or preservation) of the saints.³ Though believers continue to struggle with sin and sometimes even fall into great sin (Canons of Dort 5.4), they will never ultimately fall away (Canons of Dort 5.6). After all, as Paul writes, "He who has begun a good work in you will complete it until the day of Jesus Christ."

But why is this person, who ultimately falls away, explicitly labeled "righteous"? Ezekiel, who loves irony (see 28:3), describes a seeming righteousness, a merely external behavioral uprightness. John Calvin states that "the righteousness is here called so, which has only the outward appearance and not the root: for when once the spirit of regeneration begins to flourish, as I have said, it remains perpetually."⁴ Though he is Israelite by descent and has participated in the external life of theocratic Israel/Judah—even going into exile as part of the collective solidarity of God's people—they are not of the elect core of God's people.⁵ They are those of whom John writes in 1 John 2:19: "They went out from us, but they were not of us; for if they had been of us, they would have continued with us; but they went out that they might be made manifest, that none of them were of us."⁶

As we come back to the details of this third scenario in verse 20, we see that the fall of this externally righteous man is no accident; it is part of God's plan to expose the goats lurking amidst the sheep. God Himself will "put a stumbling block before him." What makes this a worst-case scenario is not that a wicked person perishes for his own wickedness, but that he is an imposter. Righteous

behavior is intended to showcase God's working in a person's life. Yet here it is pseudo-righteous behavior, a parody of God's renewing work which ultimately mocks it. For those who feel that good works apart from saving faith might help even a little, Ezekiel is told that "his righteousness which he has done shall not be remembered" (3:20). Whatever societal good may have accompanied his deeds, they count for nothing for the state of his eternal soul. And in the end, the watchman receives the same warning as he did in 3:18: he will be held accountable for this person's death because he failed to warn him.

The fourth scenario is the ideal one. In 3:21 God describes every minister's hope: a believer hears the warning and heeds the warning. Though the adjective "righteous" was used ironically in verse 20, here it retains its proper meaning. Verse 21 brings the scenarios to an ideal place of resolution. Ezekiel is shown a win-win situation where the person being warned lives and the watchman lives, the latter delivering himself from culpability.

Ezekiel's commission is sobering, especially when one considers how much overlap there is between the watchman's commission and the commission of pastors and elders today. Calvin argued that this passage is as relevant now as it was in Ezekiel's day: "What Ezekiel heard belongs to all teachers of the Church, namely, that they are Divinely appointed and placed as on watchtowers, that they may keep watch for the common safety of all. It was the duty of those who have been appointed from the beginning ministers of the heavenly doctrine to be watchmen."⁷

Pastors and elders are to look out for the safety and well-being of everyone in the covenant community. The pastoral epistles admonish shepherds to warn and rebuke (e.g., 1 Tim. 5:20; 2 Tim. 4:2; Titus 1:9, 13; 2:15).

And James 3:1 cautions people from hastily becoming teachers in Christ's church since those who do so will be judged with greater strictness. Ezekiel's commission serves as a warning to church officers and an appeal to congregants to pray for their officers and heed their godly rebuke, knowing that they warn on behalf of Christ Himself with the goal of preserving their souls.

A Mute Watchman?

The final section of Ezekiel's call account is a bit puzzling. After having just heard that a watchman must warn, Ezekiel undergoes a ritual act wherein he is unable to warn. How does that work? We read in 3:25–26: "And you, O son of man, surely they will put ropes on you and bind you with them, so that you cannot go out among them. I will make your tongue cling to the roof of your mouth, so that you shall be mute and not be one to rebuke them, for they are a rebellious house."

This is also the first of Ezekiel's sign-acts, so we will retread these verses in our next article with an eye to that. But as we read this there are two things we need to note.

First, this muteness is not complete silence. Iain Duguid explains: "His dumbness is not total; he is still able to warn of the danger to come, as he has been commissioned to do so in 3:17–21. But his speech is totally restricted to the reproduction of God's words of judgment—the words of lament, warning, and woe inscribed on the scroll he has swallowed."⁸

The scroll containing words of lamentation, mourning, and woe (2:10) is not the same message as the rebuke forbidden in 3:26. In fact, some scholars view this as a reference to a legal figure, like a lawyer or a mediator. The phrase "one to rebuke" is more woodenly translated as "a man of rebuke," suggesting that the time for gracious

appeals and legal pleas is over; all that remains is the message of curse for apostasy (cf. Prov. 24:25; Job 9:33; 13:15; these passages seem to use the same verb in a mediatorial way). Verse 27 makes clear that there will be times when God opens Ezekiel's mouth so he can say "Thus says the Lord GOD," something he does in fact do 120 times in the book from this point forward.

Second, the juxtaposition of the watchman commission with a message about Ezekiel's tongue being stopped (i.e., his muteness) is a marker of the macrostructure of the entire prophetic book. The pattern in 3:16–27 (watchman commission → tongue stopped) is repeated with modification in 33:1–22 (watchman commission → tongue loosed). This relates to the contents and message of the book as a whole.

Already in 24:25–27 Ezekiel was told of the signs that would accompany the end of his muteness (i.e., renewal of his ability to rebuke): the fall of Jerusalem.

And you, son of man—will it not be in the day when I take from them their stronghold, their joy and their glory, the desire of their eyes, and that on which they set their minds, their sons and their daughters: that on that day one who escapes will come to you to let **you** hear it with your ears? On that day your mouth will be opened to him who has escaped; you shall speak and no longer be mute. Thus you will be a sign to them, and they shall know that I am the LORD.

In 33:21–22, that day finally comes. A messenger arrives announcing that Jerusalem has fallen, and verse 22 states, "and He [i.e., the LORD] opened my mouth" (NASB).⁹ In verse 21, however, something odd happens with the date listing, signaling that Ezekiel rearranged his

oracles. Notice how the dates are stamped in the following passages:

30:20: year 11, month 1, day 7

31:1: year 11, month 3, day 1

32:1: year 12, month 12, day 1

32:17: year 12, [month 12], day 15

33:21: year 12, month 10, day 5

40:1: year 25, [month 1], day 10

In 32:17, the words "month 12" are not stated explicitly in Hebrew, though most scholars view this as the same month as the prior reference. (The English Standard Version makes this explicit in its translation.) What this means is that in 33:21, we find an oracle that Ezekiel received prior the oracles he received in 32:1–16 and 32:17–33:20. Why would he rearrange these?

If Ezekiel had kept his oracles in chronological order, 33:21–39:29 would have come before the two oracles he received in year 12, month 10. That would mean that 33:1–20, a second, greatly expanded watchman commission, would be found fifty-two verses after the fall of Jerusalem and the loosing of Ezekiel's tongue. But now, the watchman commission (33:1–20) leads directly into the loosing of Ezekiel's tongue (33:21–22), creating almost a mirror image of what we found in 3:16–27.

Ezekiel 3–32 shows Ezekiel's work as a watchman who cannot intercede as a legal man of rebuke but can only declare the curse Judah has gained by its apostasy. It is no coincidence that the majority of his messages in these chapters are oracles of judgment. He is a watchman against covenant presumption. Those who claim Abraham as their father (Ezek. 33:24–29) but reject Abraham's faith and life will find only God's wrath.

Ezekiel 33–48 shows Ezekiel's work as a watchman who is once again able to intercede as a legal man of rebuke. And here too, it is no coincidence that the majority of his messages in these chapters are oracles of salvation

and eschatological deliverance/hope. He is a watchman against covenant despair. Those who feel that the exile proves that God has abandoned His chosen people will find that He is refining them, purging their evil from their midst, and making His bride radiant (see Eph. 5:25–27). Keep this big picture in mind as you read through the book.

In our next article, we will look at Ezekiel's sign-acts and see the ongoing formation and first words of God's prophetic priest.

1 Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture citations are from the New King James Version (NKJV).

2 Marvin A. Sweeney, *Reading the Hebrew Bible After the Shoah: Engaging Holocaust Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2008), 133–34. Sweeney's work is often insightful, though not otherwise orthodox.

3 For a careful theological articulation of the doctrine of perseverance and the numerous Scriptures that support it, see the Fifth Main Point of Doctrine of the Canons of Dort.

4 John Calvin, *Commentaries on the First Twenty Chapters of the Book of the Prophet Ezekiel*, trans. Thomas Myers (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 2003), 1:159.

5 Cf. R. Scott Clark, *Baptism, Election, and the Covenant of Grace* (Dorr, MI: Reformed Fellowship, Inc., 2007), 14–18.

6 Cf. Belgic Confession, art. 29, which speaks of the hypocrites whose physical presence in the church does not mean they are properly and salvifically part of it.

7 Calvin, *Ezekiel*, 1:148. Cf. Joe Mock, "Insights from Calvin on Pastoral Leadership," *The Reformed Theological Review* 81, no. 2 (2022): 149–52.

8 Iain M. Duguid, *Ezekiel*, NIV Application Commentary (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1999), 80.

9 Note that the NASB best captures the grammatical narrative form of the verb which underscores that it is the Lord, not the messenger, who did the opening (although the NKJV does capitalize "He" to make the subject clear).

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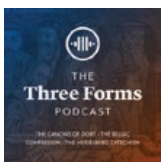


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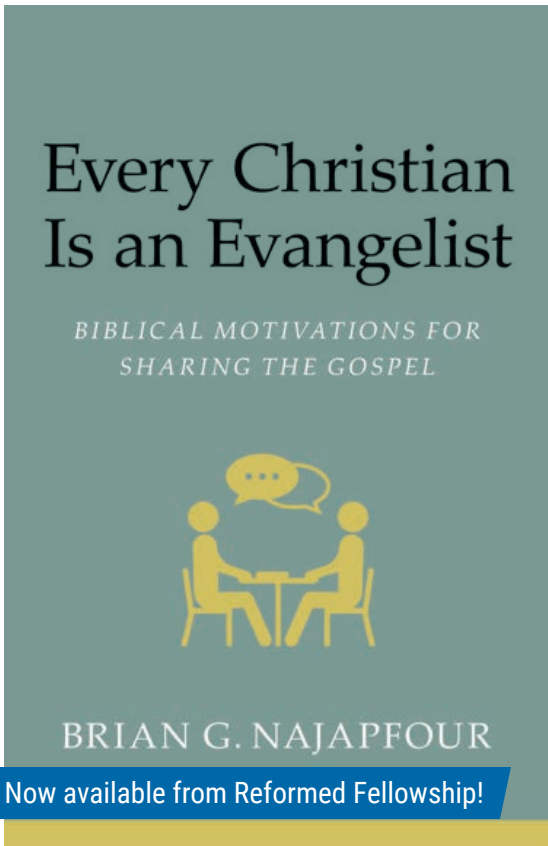
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Book Review

Every Christian Is an Evangelist: Biblical Motivations for Sharing the Gospel



Mrs. Annemarieke **Ryskamp**



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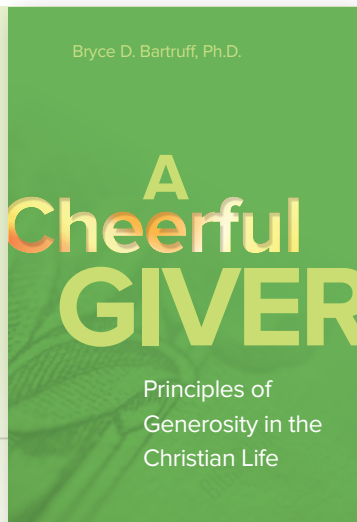
The two most convicting chapters are "Five Reasons Why All Christians Must Evangelize" and "Five Excuses Some Christians Use for Not Evangelizing." When you read this book you will probably feel convicted, as most of us fall short of evangelizing, but that is part of our identity in Christ (18). Feeling your conscience pricking is a good reason to not look away from this book.

Moses (when he gets his calling from the burning bush) is the best example of all the excuses that can be made to not tell other people about God's plans for us. Moses keeps coming up with new reasons until even God Himself gets impatient. Surely we don't want to be like Moses in this respect. But note that Moses still had to do this job and God was helping and supporting him in every possible way.

Pastor Brian Najapfour is loving in his approach. There is no judgment in his words; quite the opposite: he shows understanding and has many good suggestions for a great number of possible personal circumstances. There are also discussion questions for each of the four chapters which would be useful to discuss in a group in order to hold each other accountable. It's also useful to keep a copy at hand for times when you feel yourself lacking.

When you realize that there are all those people who mistakenly assume they'll go to heaven because "they deserve it" or because they never read the Bible and don't know they need a savior, and if you realize what terrible consequences that will have for them, you will feel compelled to tell them about the gospel. This book will be a great help for how to go about it.

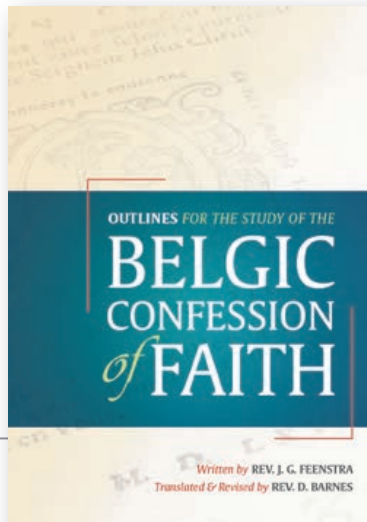
Review of *Every Christian Is an Evangelist: Biblical Motivations for Sharing the Gospel*, Brian G. Najapfour; foreword by Joel R. Beeke. Jordan Station, ON: Paideia Press, 2024. 92 pages. Paperback. \$6.00.



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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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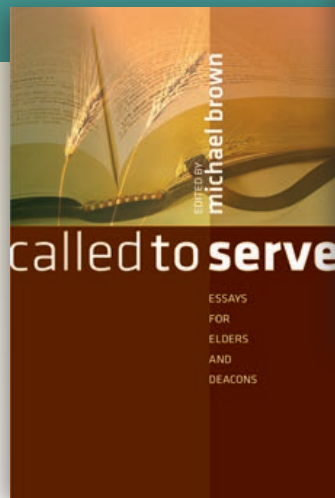
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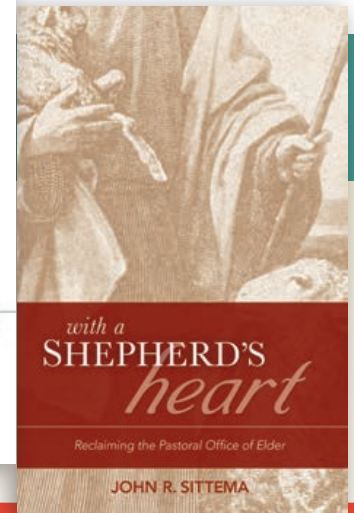


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