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"Exhorting you to contend earnestly for the faith which was once for all delivered to the saints."
—Jude 3

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About the cover: Minus zero wind gusts in January 2014 swirl the snow around Covenant United Reformed Church, located in Kalamazoo, Michigan. Photography by Jeff Steenholdt.

“Now there was a man in Jerusalem called Simeon, who was righteous and devout. He was waiting for the consolation of Israel.”

– Luke 2:25

W

What are you expecting for this new year, 2014? Where will you find your comfort this year? “Comfort” is what the word *consolation* in our text means. Simeon was waiting for the consolation of Israel—the comfort—that God had promised to Israel. And the Holy Spirit had told him that one day he would see it.

Some of you may be approaching this new year with a sigh of relief. You have felt a lack of comfort in your life and you think, “*At last, 2013 is over. Maybe 2014 will be different.*”

The Christmas season brought some joy and happiness. In millions of homes, praises were sung, and in thousands of churches around the world, the season of celebration took place. There was rejoicing throughout the world because a little baby was born in a manger. For a moment it was as if the angelic song that the shepherds heard was reechoed in every heart. The great message “Fear not!” brought some comfort to our hearts.

But that is done now, isn't it? We are in a new year. Many people already have almost entirely forgotten the first note the angels sang—“Glory to God in the highest!” We are ready to move on. It is a new year: 2014!

CONSO

Perhaps we have forgotten that the whole purpose for Christ coming into this sin-filled world was for the glory of God. Christ's birth in Bethlehem had been promised centuries earlier in Genesis 3 after Adam and Eve ate of the forbidden tree. Christ came to frustrate the work of Satan and to bring back a fallen people to their Maker and Lord.

Although Israel received the promise that the Redeemer was coming, many people had forgotten about it. Perhaps they had not forgotten—they just filed it away somewhere in the back of their heads. It was time to move on. And so they went on, eating, drinking, and being merry as in the days of Noah before the flood.

The Messiah's coming into the world had become a matter of traditional belief but not of vital faith and hope. There was no comfort in it. If their hearts were stirred up at all, it was because of God's work in the past. Remember those ten plagues and how Moses delivered us up out of Egypt? Remember the great King David? Remember the wisdom of King Solomon? Remember the glory of the first temple? They remembered

the history but not the promise—not what God was going to do in the future. They observed all the religious forms, but they failed to interest themselves in the promise of the coming Messiah.

Even when some strangers stirred up all of Jerusalem by asking, "Where is he that is born King of the Jews?" no one in the entire city had enough interest to go with the wise men to Bethlehem to see what had happened—a child who was born a king.

The Consolation of Israel

Simeon seemed to be the exception to the rule. Whereas the shepherds symbolized the average person on the street, Simeon represented the testimony of a wise elder who has walked with God. The Bible tells us that Simeon was a devout man living in the city at a time when it was far from holy.

He was looking forward to the consolation of Israel. While the multitudes were comforting themselves with what God had done in the past, Simeon lifted his eyes to the heavens awaiting the fulfillment of the promise—not what God had done, but what God was yet to do. The

Holy Spirit had revealed to Simeon that he would not die before he had seen the Lord's Christ. Once Simeon had received the promise, he waited for its fulfillment.

Simeon demonstrates what it means to be a believer. Faith is being sure of what we hope for (Heb. 11:1). That means waiting in faith—not for what God has already done, but for what God has promised he will do.

How often Simeon must have walked to the temple waiting for what God had promised to do. Would the consolation of Israel be a great warrior king like David or a great prophet like Isaiah? Perhaps he would be like Moses, calling down horrible plagues upon the Roman government that was currently oppressing them as the Egyptians had done centuries earlier.

Then one day it happened. As good Jewish parents, Mary and Joseph brought their firstborn son to the temple when He was forty days old to dedicate Him to the Lord. As they came into the outer court to make the necessary sacrifices, they were met by an old man. Much to their amazement, the old man asked to

Salvation

hold the baby. Even more amazing are the words that he spoke:

Sovereign Lord, as you have promised, you now dismiss your servant in peace.

For my eyes have seen your salvation, which you have prepared in the sight of all people,

a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to your people Israel.

—Luke 2:29–32

Understand what an incredible moment this is—the Old Testament saint holding in his hands the New Testament, the Word become flesh. Simeon was seeing with his own eyes what God's people had waited centuries to see. He was holding in his arms the salvation of God: not a great king, prophet, or priest, but a little baby.

Here was this young peasant girl and her husband making the most meager sacrifice. They were so poor that all they could afford to sacrifice was a pair of doves, but in her hands was the greatest sacrifice of all—the sacrifice that would give light to the Gentiles and glory to the people of Israel.

Simeon did not have any doubt that this was the promise of God fulfilled. He looked at the tiny baby with the eyes of faith and realized afresh the wonder, sovereignty, and faithfulness of God. He had seen God's salvation. He held it in his arms.

The Consolation of All People

In many ways this moment when Simeon held the baby Jesus in his arms was unique and unrepeatable. Jesus will never be a baby again. None of us will ever be able to actually hold the holy infant in our arms the way Simeon did. While that may be true, however, so is this: neither Simeon nor anyone else can be saved by simply holding the baby Jesus in his or her arms. Jesus still had to live the perfect life, die the atoning sacrifice, and rise to eternal glory. There is no salvation without the cross or the empty tomb.

And so in another sense this moment in Simeon's life is not at all unique. Many people throughout history can identify with Simeon's words. After many years of living by faith, they continually praise God for the promises he has made and kept. They have found God to be faithful. Their

hope is in the promises of what is yet to be: the new heaven and earth. They are able to say with Simeon, "Now dismiss your servant in peace."

In many churches on New Year's Eve the minister reads a list of those who have gone into glory. What a comfort when we are able to say that they were ready! They had the comfort of knowing Jesus Christ as their Savior. They knew the promises of God had been fulfilled for them through Jesus Christ.

What will 2014 bring for you? Are you able to say the words of Simeon? Can you say, "Lord, I'm ready at any time. My eyes have seen your salvation"? You do not have to hold the little baby Jesus in your arms to say that. You have to hold the risen Jesus in your heart.

Anyone who has seen Jesus with the eyes of faith is prepared to die. Trusting in the living, dying, risen, and ascended Lord will bring you the same comfort and peace that Simeon had in Luke 2. When, in faith, you trust that God has accomplished everything for your salvation, you can also trust that God has prepared a

place for you where there is no sorrow or pain and every tear is wiped away.

Simeon said, “For my eyes have seen your salvation, which you have prepared in the sight of all people.” The Consolation of Israel is not just for Israel. The baby that Simeon held in his arms was not just for Simeon to see. The salvation that the sovereign Lord promised in the Old Testament was not just for Israel. It is for Jews and Gentiles alike.

Certainly Luke 2 contains an incredibly Jewish story. All the people we read about are Jewish: Simeon, Anna, Mary, Joseph, and, of course, Jesus. Even so, in this passage Simeon takes the gospel with all its promises and comfort and makes it global. Simeon makes clear that Jesus is the Savior of Gentiles as well. People of all cultures, countries, and customs must come to Jesus as their Savior.

You must come to Jesus Christ as your Savior. You are to be reconciled to God through the Christ. No matter who you are, you are called upon to embrace Jesus by faith in the saving grace of God provided through his Son; faith that receives the promise of God’s salvation even though you may not completely understand it; faith that receives Jesus as the only begotten Son of God.

We begin 2014 by acknowledging an event that happened in the past: the death of God’s Son on the cross of Calvary. Through His death God has provided the way for sinful people to be reconciled to himself.

Yes, the consolation of all the ages has come. In him you will find the comfort for which your heart yearns.

The Final Consolation

But you cannot stay there.

We are much like the Israelites in Simeon’s day. We have gathered around Bethlehem’s manger with our children. We have even used the occasion of Christ’s birth to talk about his death. It is well that we do so. We must be reminded again and again of the sacrifice that Jesus made on our behalf. We can never be grateful enough for what our Savior has done for us.

Even so, we should not be like the Israelites were before the birth of Jesus, looking only to the past but indifferent about the future. The author of Hebrews tells us that faith is being sure of what we hope for. That means waiting in faith—not for what God has already done, but for what God has promised to do.

We are drawing ever nearer to the final consolation of God’s divine purposes. Christ is going to come again. He will inaugurate the new heaven and earth in which all the effects of sin and death will have vanished.

We cannot be satisfied with things as they are. We cannot just walk away from 2013 and once again become engrossed in the material things of the present as if that were our only concern. There are many who do. Like Israel, they have a wonderful historic faith. They know the Bible and believe it to be true, but they do not have the consolation of Israel; they cannot find true comfort in God’s Son. They have no assurance in their hearts.

Certainly we must believe the past events in our salvation’s history. We must also focus on the promises that God has given to us—not just the promises of the past already fulfilled in Jesus Christ but the promises of

the future as well, also fulfilled in Jesus Christ. We are to focus on the certainty of this future glory that awaits all who have a true faith in Jesus Christ as their Savior. The glorious Holy City, the New Jerusalem, has been guaranteed to us by Christ’s initial coming into this world. He will come again.

Like Simeon, we await the consolation of Israel. He was satisfied with the first coming of Christ. Having seen the infant Jesus, he could say, “Now dismiss your servant in peace, for my eyes have seen your salvation.”

We too have been to the manger. That alone should not satisfy our hearts. Neither should Calvary. Neither should Pentecost. There is a greater day a-coming—greater than any the world has ever known—greater than Christmas, greater than Cavalry, and greater than Pentecost. It is the day when our faith shall become sight.

Sin and death will be unknown. There will be no sorrow, no sickness, no pain or suffering. Every tear will be wiped away. God himself will dwell with us! That is what we are waiting for. It is for this consolation we long and pray.

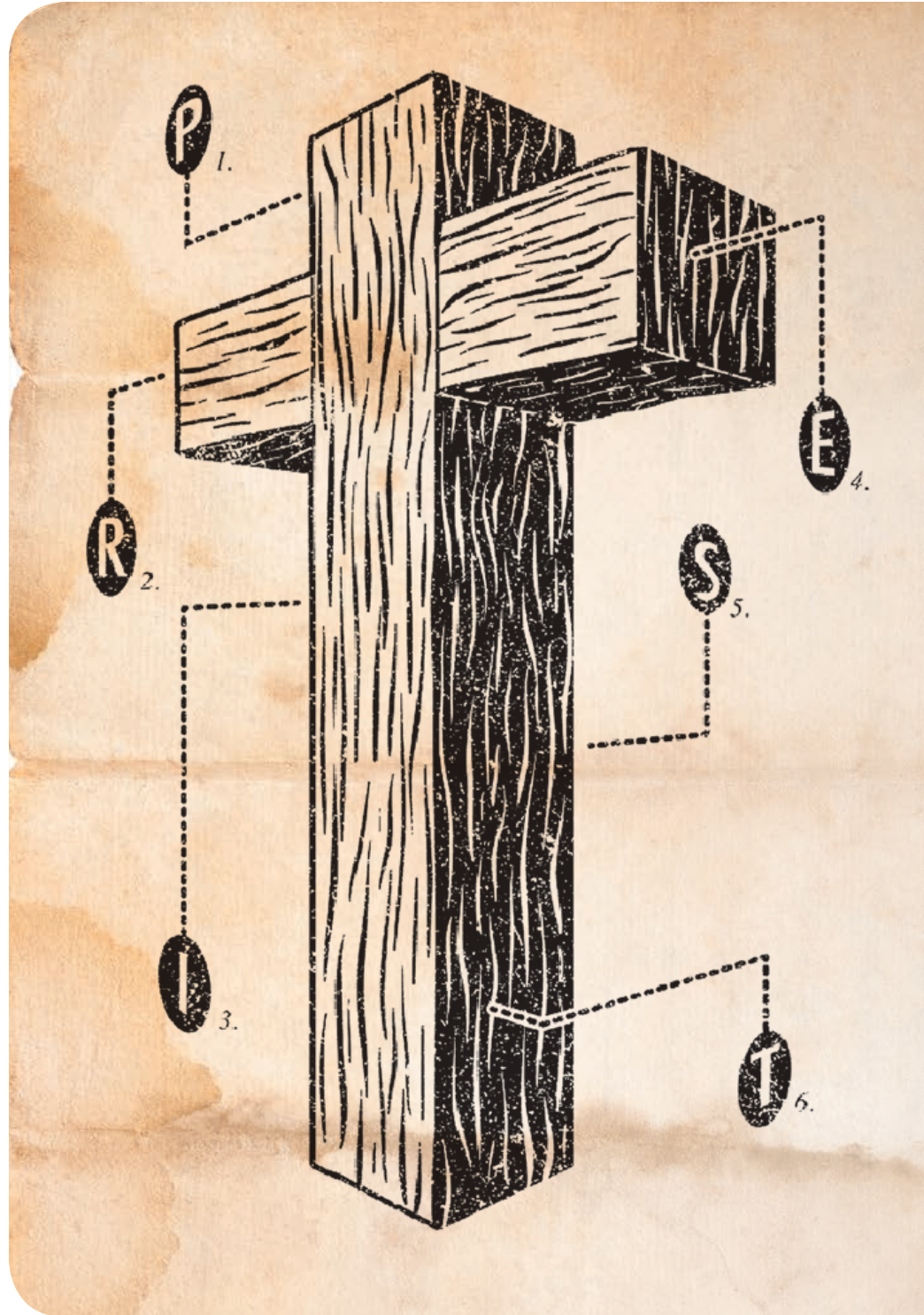
The Holy Spirit promises to each one who believes in Jesus Christ that we shall see that glorious day. We look forward to Christ’s second coming. And we can never be fully satisfied until that day has come.

Even so, Lord Jesus, come quickly.

Rev. Wybren Oord

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In 1941 Winston Churchill stood before an eager audience at an all-boys school in war-torn England and spoke these famous words, “Never give in. Never give in. Never, never, never, never—in nothing, great or small, large or petty—never give in.” Churchill’s words echo the message of the writer to the Hebrews. While Churchill rested his comments on the “honor and good sense” of his audience, the writer to the Hebrews urges confidence in the high priestly work of Jesus Christ.



The recipients of Hebrews were in danger of abandoning Christ through unbelief. Pressured by persecution, assaulted by sin, and challenged by everyday life, these believers were on the brink of quitting in the heat of battle. With such dangers clearly in view, the author chooses one primary theme on which to focus: the priesthood of Christ. The word *priest* occurs more than seventy times in the New Testament. More than one-third of these occurrences are in Hebrews.

Christ's priesthood demands a believer's attention on a continual basis. When we fear that God is still angry toward us, we need to remember that Christ has *propitiated* the wrath of God. When we doubt that God could ever look on us with favor, we need to recall that Christ stood as our *replacement*. The love the Father shows to him he now shows to us. When we take for granted that Christ suffered for us, we need to reflect on his *innocence*. He always does the will of God for us with precise obedience.

The priesthood of Christ is eminently practical, but if we can't remember what his priesthood means we will not use it as we must. In *Remember Jesus Christ*, Charles Erdman writes that "the association of ideas is the controlling law of memory." If we could associate six key ideas of Christ's priesthood with the letters P-R-I-E-S-T, perhaps we would more readily recall his work and be better steeled to "never give in."

Propitiating High Priest

In very simple terms, *propitiation* means to regain favor. The word, which is used in several key New Testament verses (Rom. 3:25; Heb. 2:17; 1 John 2:2; 4:10), is related to an Old Testament word that describes the cover of the ark of the covenant in the Holy of Holies, which was sprinkled

with the blood of the sacrifice on the annual day of atonement. This rite signified that the life of the people, the loss of which they had merited by their sins, was offered to God in the blood as the life of the victim, and that God by this ceremony was appeased and their sins covered" (*Strong's Concordance*).

The Belgic Confession of Faith says that "Christ presented himself . . . before the Father, to appease His wrath" (art. 21). By experiencing the terrible punishment our sins had merited, Christ saved his people from the otherwise certain judgment of God's wrath (Rom. 5:8-9; 1 Thess. 1:10). The reason that Christ staggered in the garden of Gethsemane as he considered the cup that the Father had called him to drink was because he knew that the judgment for all the sins of all God's children swirled in that cup. And he drank it all! Christ was forsaken of God (Ps. 22:1; Matt. 27:46) that we might be accepted of God and never more be forsaken.

The concept of propitiation is closely related to that of substitution.

Replacing High Priest

The Bible says that Christ "presented himself *in our behalf* before the Father, to appease His wrath by His full satisfaction, offering Himself on the tree of the cross, and pouring out His precious blood to purge away our sins" (Belgic Confession, art. 21).

Isaiah 53 (cf. 1 Peter 2:24) is a remarkable testimony to Christ's work as substitute. *He* has borne *our* griefs and carried *our* sorrows (v. 4). *He* was wounded for *our* transgressions, and *he* was bruised for *our* iniquities. The chastisement for *our* peace was upon *him*, and by *his* stripes *we* are healed (v. 5). The Lord laid on *Him* the iniquity of *us* all (v. 6). For the transgressions of *God's* people *he* was stricken (v. 8). *He* shall bear *their*

iniquities (v. 11). *He* bore the sins of *many* and made intercession for the *transgressors* (v. 12).

Reflecting on Christ's death, Philip Bliss wrote:

Bearing sin and scoffing rude,
In my place condemned He stood,
Sealed *my* pardon with *His* blood.
Hallelujah! what a Savior!

The impact of the principle of substitution, or replacing, is amplified when we consider Jesus' innocence.

Innocent High Priest

The Gospels deliberately highlight Jesus' innocence, particularly in the hours preceding his death. The Sanhedrin struggled to find enough false witnesses to agree on a charge (Matt. 26:60). When the crowd demanded Jesus' crucifixion, Pilate asked, "Why, what evil has He done?" (Matt. 27:23). In the span of nine verses, John three times records Pilate saying, "I find no fault in him" (John 18:38-19:6). "While [Pilate] was sitting on the judgment seat, his wife sent to him, saying, "Have nothing to do with that just Man" (Matt. 27:19). The centurion who helped put Jesus to death confirmed Christ's innocence when he said, "Truly this Man was the Son of God!" (Mark 15:39). The earth itself testified to Jesus' innocence when it split open in revolt at his unjust death (Matt. 27:51).

The propitiatory and substitutionary nature of the atonement would mean nothing if Christ wasn't perfectly innocent. "For Christ also suffered once for sins, the just for the unjust, that He might bring us to God, being put to death in the flesh but made alive by the Spirit" (1 Peter 3:18).

David illustrates Christ's innocent substitution when he said, "Though I have stolen nothing, I still must

restore it” (Ps. 69:4). The punishment Christ received felt heavier since there was no guilt in him.

An Exceptional High Priest

One of the main arguments in the book of Hebrews, especially in chapters 5–7, is that Jesus is superior to the ordinary priests who served in the tabernacle and later in the temple. The Bible says that there are two orders, or kinds, of priests. By far the most common were the Levitical and Aaronic. But there is another order of priest. Christ is a high priest after the order of Melchizedek (Ps. 110:4; cf. Gen. 14:18–24). Descended as he is from the tribe of Judah, from the kingly line of David, Christ is the exception to the priestly rule.

The Melchizedekian priesthood is superior to the priesthood of Levi (Heb. 7:10). Christ alone is our eternal, sinless, oath-bound priest who actually sat down at God’s right hand, having “by Himself purged our sins” (Heb. 1:3). The futility of the labors of the Aaronic priesthood does not apply to Christ. Since it is impossible for God to lie, by his oath we are assured that the foundations of salvation are eternal and immovable.

A Suffering High Priest

Christ’s entire life, in body and soul, was a life of suffering. As he approached the cross, the weight of his suffering increased. In the garden, “being in agony, He prayed more earnestly. Then His sweat became like great drops of blood falling down to the ground” (Luke 22:44). The descriptions of Christ’s physical suffering on the cross are palpable. “My strength is dried up like a potsherd, and My tongue clings to My jaws; You have brought Me to the dust of death” (Ps. 22:15).

Christ’s spiritual suffering is intangible and defies comprehension. On the

cross he humbled himself unto the very deepest reproach and anguish of hell. Because of his suffering, no matter what befalls us we can never say, “Christ cannot understand” (Heb. 2:17–18). Christ became our sympathetic high priest through suffering (Heb. 5:8).

A Total High Priest

Christ’s priestly work completely answers our problem of sin. For this reason Paul would know nothing save Jesus Christ and him crucified (1 Cor. 2:2). It is not necessary to seek any other means of being reconciled to God than his only sacrifice. Knowledge of Christ crucified far surpasses everything else (Phil. 3:8). In Christ’s wounds we find all manner of consolation for the present and the future. Christ’s death has perfected forever those who are sanctified.

Use this acronym to remember Christ’s work as priest. As a propitiating priest, Christ has done away with God’s wrath toward believing sinners. As a replacing priest, Christ has stood condemned in our place, sealing our pardon with his blood. As an innocent priest, Christ has answered for us God’s demand for perfection. As an exceptional priest, there is no other like him; there is no one else to whom we must look for healing. As a suffering priest, Christ suffered the pain and anguish of hell so that we don’t have to. As a total priest, when Christ said, “It is finished,” he meant it (John 19:30). He secured total salvation for us.

Christ’s priesthood teaches us that we have no other way of dealing with our moral failure and the penalty thereby incurred than to come to God and say, “Nothing in my hand I bring, simply to thy cross I cling.”

Propitiating

Replacing

Innocent

Exceptional

Suffering

Total

High Priest

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The Eschatological Value of Christ's Heavenly Priesthood in the Theology of Geerhardus Vos

Timothy R.
Scheuers

Several important motifs in the book of Hebrews set it apart from the rest of the New Testament. Most prominent among them is the epistle's unique emphasis on Jesus Christ's priestly office as a fulfillment of the old covenant priesthood and the accompaniments of its religious order. In general, the writer of Hebrews offers resources of spiritual encouragement to a group of suffering Christians called to endure with courage their own banishment from Jewish religious institutions, including the synagogue and temple (Heb. 13:13). His inspired word of exhortation comes to lift their "drooping hands" and strengthen their "weak knees" (Heb. 12:12).

Distinguished biblical theologian Geerhardus Vos considers those texts that expound Jesus Christ's heavenly priesthood to be particularly valuable for all Christians' perseverance in this present age and thus crucial to the epistle overall. Such passages not only orient readers' approach to the book of Hebrews but they also offer a profoundly insightful, and thus not merely academic vision for seeing the eschatological benefits of Christ's eternal priesthood. Vos regards a proper understanding of the eschatological significance of Christ's high priestly office essential for the development of a vibrant Christianity: its "whole character ought to be prospective; everything in it ought to be determined by the thought of the future . . . the inheritance of the final kingdom of God."¹



At the start of his treatment of Christ's priesthood in Hebrews, Vos distinguishes between the coordinated offices of Christ as "Revealer" and as "Priest." The opening verses of Hebrews reveal the importance of these closely linked roles. In verses 2–3 we read, God "has spoken to us by his Son," and, "after making purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high." Likewise, in 3:1, the Savior bears this dual title—the "apostle and high priest of our confession." Since the single article *and* binds these two capacities closely together, they are vitally connected for the benefit of the Christian believer and the endurance of his confession. In order that we might be partakers of the heavenly calling of God in Christ, we must cast our gaze upon our eternal high priest.² We will do that in this article by tracing the nature and benefits of Christ's priestly office, granting particular attention to the eschatological blessings afforded believers on account of Christ's ongoing heavenly session as a priest at God's right hand. In addition to the broad text of Hebrews, Geerhardus Vos's essays, sermons, and lengthier works on this subject will inform the overall flow of this article and the content of its conclusions.

The Nature and Benefits of Christ's Heavenly Priesthood

Throughout Scripture, exhortations to new obedience often follow divine promises. In a similar manner, the significance of Christ's heavenly priesthood relates to believers in the form of promise and exhortation. The assurances of God's Word evoke genuine thanksgiving, which should result in grateful diligence to God's righteous call. Hebrews 4:14 illustrates

this common scriptural pattern: "Since then we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus, the Son of God, let us hold fast our confession." Likewise, in verses 15 and 16 of the same chapter, we read, "For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin. Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need."

The exhortation to hold fast and maintain an enduring public confession of Christ raises important questions: How is this to take place in the believer's life? What provisions are there for Christians to take an abiding stand for truth in the midst of this present evil age?

The inspired writer to the Hebrews saw the reality of Christ's priestly office not only as a profound basis for the call to "stand firm" but also as the eschatological reality by which believers are strengthened for faithful endurance in this present age of tribulation. The enduring basis upon which Christians must and can "hold fast" is that "we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus, the Son of God" (4:14). Richard Gaffin reflects, "The secret of holding fast our confession is not something finally that we do, but what Christ has done and continues to do."³ With this beautiful promise in mind, we turn our attention to the writings of Geerhardus Vos, who has helpfully examined the unique characteristics of Jesus Christ's priestly office that make it so vital not only to the content of our confession but also to

the enduring nature of our Christian profession.

In the first place, Vos draws our attention to what makes *Jesus Christ's priestly office so unique*. The greatness and perfection of Christ's priesthood is necessarily tied to and shaped by his eternal existence as the Son of God. Jesus belongs to a different class of priest, quite distinct from the earthly Levitical priesthood that served its purpose for an appointed term and then became obsolete (8:13). Jesus Christ is a priest forever after the order of Melchizedek (5:6), not based on a legal requirement or hereditary descent, "but by the power of an indestructible life" (7:16). Vos writes:

When Melchizedek appears in Scripture as a priest who derives nothing from ancestors or predecessors in office, but everything from his own royal personality, it is only because he has been by inspiration made alike in this respect unto the Son of God that he might prefigure the Son of God. Christ draws the qualification for his priesthood from his divine nature as well as from his human nature because it can be said of him that he is without beginning of days and end of life; therefore he remains a priest forever. He has his priesthood unchangeable because the power of an endless life is in him. He transcends and abrogates by his ministry the Levitical priesthood because in his, the undying person, he has forever assumed all its functions and prerogatives in an infinitely higher sense. Through the eternal Spirit, he offered up himself without blemish unto God and therefore he

has perfected forever by one sacrifice all them that are sanctified.⁴

Interestingly, Vos notes that the unique temporal appearance of the priestly order of Melchizedek was due only to the eternal nature of Jesus Christ, the Son of God, whose priesthood, historically speaking, was patterned after it. He writes, “Now, if the greatness and eternity of the person of the Son of God determined the greatness and eternity-appearance of the figure of Melchizedek, and in consequence also determined the character of Melchizedek’s priesthood, and if further the priesthood of Christ was, historically speaking, copied after the order of Melchizedek, then *it follows that it is ultimately nothing else but the divine eternal nature of the Son of God by which his priesthood is shaped and from which it derives its unique character.*” Jesus Christ’s eternal sonship renders his priesthood distinct from every other type of priesthood.⁵

Vos’s observation of the unique nature of Christ’s priesthood directs our attention to the central theme of Hebrews—the comprehensive superiority of Jesus as the Son of God. The author of Hebrews states that he is superior to angels in virtue of his more excellent name (1:4). Christ’s honor and glory also surpass that of Moses, for he is the faithful steward over God’s house “as a son” (3:3–6). Centrally, the epistle to the Hebrews identifies Jesus Christ as the high priest whose service far transcends the qualities of the Mosaic priesthood. In virtue of his divine qualifications for priestly ministry, Christ introduces new hope through which believers can draw near to God. “Sworn in” to priestly office by a divine oath, Jesus is “the guarantor of a better covenant” since the old covenant made nothing and no one perfect (7:19–22).

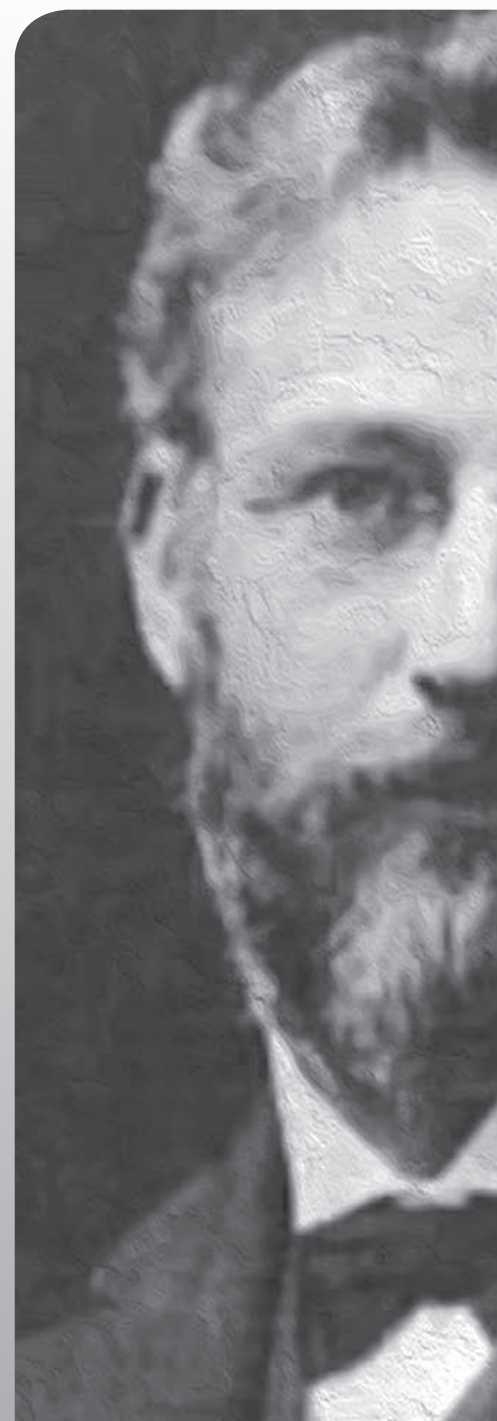
The qualitative superiority of Christ’s priesthood provides better new covenant benefits that come to believers by way of guarantee. The former priests of the old covenant were prevented from continuing their priestly mediation because of their sin and consequent death. Christ, on the other hand, continues forever and “holds his priesthood permanently” after offering up himself for sinners “once for all” (7:23–24, 27). Because of his interminable intercession before God, he is “able to save to the uttermost those who draw near to God through him” (7:25). Jesus Christ, the eternal Son, who God appointed to make perfect forever those who respond in faith and obedience, surpasses the weakness of the human priesthood under the old covenant. “For by a single offering he has perfected for all time those who are being sanctified” (10:14).

In sum, the epistle to the Hebrews identifies Jesus Christ as the eternal Son of God who manifests his supremacy through his divine appointment as a better priest to a better priesthood that brings about better effects than that of the old covenant. Within the structure of the old covenant, the law made nothing and no one perfect (7:19). However, Christ’s sacrifice as the eternal high priest is sufficient to sanctify many “through the offering” of his body “once for all” (10:10).

Vos identifies a second key characteristic of Christ’s superior priestly office. The priesthood of the Son of God is necessarily better because he is a heavenly priest. Vos believes it is foundational to our apprehension of the blessings of Christ’s priesthood that he has “passed through the heavens” on our behalf (4:14). In fact, throughout the epistle to the Hebrews, the inspired author describes Jesus as belonging to the heavenly world, “in which

everything bears the character of the unchangeable, the abiding.”⁶ Whereas the ministry of the high priest under the conditions of the old covenant properly belonged in location to the Holy of Holies, where the temporary priesthood alone could be officiated, so much more “the ministry of Christ belongs to heaven, where he alone can be a priest.”⁷

A principal benefit of Christ’s office is the superior locale where his priestly service transpires. Vos notes the clear



spatial contrast between heaven and earth that exists within the epistle to the Hebrews in order to emphasize the ontological superiority of what takes place in heaven compared to the inferiority of earth. The point of the inspired epistle writer is that we have Jesus Christ, the high priest of a better covenant, who “is seated at the right hand of the throne of the Majesty in heaven, a minister in the holy places, in the true tent that the Lord set up, not man” (8:1–2, emphasis added). He labors for believers now and forever

in the better heavenly tabernacle made by God himself, the “true tent.”

As much as the heavenly venue of Christ’s priestly work is superior, Vos would also have us see that God established a relationship of derivation between the earthly tabernacle and the heavenly tent. The earthly tabernacle derived its existence, pattern, and purpose from the heavenly tabernacle. In this way the earthly tent, though but a shadow, was necessarily a type of the heavenly reality. In fact, Christ’s priesthood is so tied to its heavenly location that “he would not be a priest at all” if he were still on earth (8:4). Vos comments:

His eternity and priesthood are seen most closely united in this—that for the main part the discharge of his priestly functions takes place according to our epistle in heaven where he ministers in his glorified state. The two are so inseparable that the author simply says: “If he were on earth, he would not be a priest at all.” But being in heaven, he is the one priest, and his priestly state partakes of the unchangeability which is the supreme law of that world. He is a priest upon his throne (to use an Old Testament phrase) and his throne, as we have seen, is everlasting since it stands at the right hand of the throne of God himself. Even when the priestly work in the specific sense of the application of his redemption shall have ceased, when it no longer will be necessary for him to make intercession or plead his merit for us because all sin and all consequences of sin shall have been removed—even then he will remain the everlasting High-Priest of humanity offering up to God the united adoration and praise of the redeemed race of which he is the Head.

Thus, it was necessary for the copies of the heavenly reality to be purified by the heavenly sacrifices themselves.

Christ has not entered into mere types of the heavenly place for priestly labor, but into heaven itself. The heavenly is the true, original, abiding, and permanent place of atonement, while the earthly is an impermanent copy constructed by men. When Christ went “behind the curtain,” he entered into the heavenly sanctuary, just as the earthly priest once a year went into the Holy of Holies, which was a copy of God’s heavenly throne room (6:19). By implication, Christ’s ministry was not complete on earth. He had to ascend to the heavenly tent. Hence, his ascension was not a detour from his priestly labor. Rather, he is working—and he must work—from heaven, because entering the true and eternal Holy of Holies is the specific cosmic goal for all of Christ’s atoning work. He must continue to make intercession for us before God’s throne in heaven if we are to receive his saving benefits. Therefore, the book of Hebrews shifts our attention to a world in which heaven is not distant or inactive. Rather, it is where the most important action takes place. It is surely at the center of our religious existence. Indeed, says Vos, heaven is the primary locale of our atonement.

Our conception of Christ’s high priestly work often culminates at the cross. Vos agrees, of course, that the atonement for sin procured at the cross of Calvary is of central importance to Christ’s priesthood. At the same time, he cautions relegating the priestly work of Christ to his atoning work on earth. The author to the Hebrews places the emphasis of Jesus Christ as our priest in a heavenly context. Even with all the emphasis upon Christ’s earthly sacrifice for sin, the writer of Hebrews teaches that the death of Jesus Christ has something preliminary about it. Christ’s death,



with all that it accomplishes, is still preparatory for what he is doing presently as our high priest in heaven. Vos comments that Christ, who is the supremely “heavenly person,” performed his act of atonement “in the milieu of heaven” since he was himself “a piece of heaven come down to earth.”⁸ Christ’s historic sacrifice for sin, while profoundly and necessarily temporal in nature, pertains principally to the age to come because of his heavenly priesthood. “Through the eternal Spirit he offered himself up to God, and therefore the acts of his priesthood, though spatially taking place on earth, really belonged to the sphere of the *aionion*. Its ideal reference was not to any earthly order of priesthood but in the ministry of heaven, for which it proved the necessary basis.”⁹ Moreover, if it is true that Christ offered his temporal sacrifice in regard to the sphere of heaven in order to appease the wrath of a holy judge, so too the intermingling of heaven and earth takes place for the Christian, who is made a partaker of the benefits of Christ’s death, resurrection, and ascension into heavenly glory. This intermingling takes place even now since “the Christian already anticipates his heavenly state here on earth.”¹⁰ Vos sees such anticipation of and interaction with the coming *aionion* on the part of the believer to be a “redemptive acquisition” stemming from the priestly work of Christ in heaven.¹¹

Vos further identifies how Christ’s intercession at the right hand of God offers heavenly benefits of an eschatological nature for Christians living in the present age. Christ continually presents himself as our advocate before the Father in heaven, pleading our case upon the basis of his imputed righteousness. Because

Christ offered himself in the heavenly sanctuary as the righteousness God requires of us, we can be assured that even in the midst of this present evil age we can “with confidence draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need” (4:16). Believers can also pray to God the Father with Christ as their intercessor, knowing that in Christ they are taken up into heaven to invoke God’s name and seek his mercy and grace.

Indeed, says Vos, such is the essence of the office of a priest. “A priest is one who brings near to God. His function differs from that of a prophet in that the prophet moves from God toward man, whereas the priest moves from man toward God. This idea is found in [Hebrews 5:1], where the author gives a quasi-definition of a priest: ‘For every high priest, being taken from among men, is appointed for men in things pertaining to God, that he may offer both gifts and sacrifices for sins.’ Thus a priest is one who brings men near to God, who leads them into the presence of God.”¹²

Vos more fully considers the true significance of being ushered into God’s

presence because of Christ’s priestly work. The task of any priest must be first to approach God in virtue of his unique authority in order to act as a representative for his people: “The priest brings men to God representatively, through himself.”¹³ The question arises, then, whether believers come near to God merely in and through the representation of another, enjoying no real connection with God themselves. Is there a sort of “imputed” fellowship with God through the mediator-priest, without the believer’s essential enjoyment of it? Vos responds by saying, “In the priest, the nearness to God is not merely counted as having taken

place for the believers, as a mere imputation. Rather, *so close is the connection between the priest and the believers that a contact with God on his part at once involves also a contact with God for them.* The contact with God is passed on to them as an electric current through a wire.”¹⁴ Indeed, a believer’s intimate union with Christ by faith secures direct, permanent, and life-giving fellowship with God, who is in heaven.

Finally, an essential characteristic of a priest’s work, and that of Christ most specifically, is that “a priest does not content himself with establishing contact only at one point; he draws the believers after himself, so that they come where he is.”¹⁵ Christ draws his children into full and complete fellowship with God so that the age to come, at least in principle, has already arrived for the Christian.¹⁶ Vos explains:

Although in one sense the inheritance of this world lies yet in the future, yet in another sense it has already begun to be in principle realized and become ours in actual possession. The two spheres of the earthly and the heavenly life do not lie one above the other without touching at any point; heaven with its gifts and powers and joys descends into our earthly experience like the headlands of a great and marvelous continent projecting into the ocean.¹⁷

The author of the epistle to the Hebrews states that Christians actually have arrived at “Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem” (12:22). To regard this language as purely metaphorical is to pass over the true meaning of the author, Vos says. “Christians are really in vital connection with the heavenly world. It projects into their lives as a headland

In virtue of their union with Christ, the heavenly priest, believers have a foretaste and already enjoy something of the newness of the coming age. They experience truly, though not completely, “the eternal side of the promises of God.”

projects out into the ocean.”¹⁸ As a priest, Christ works instrumentally to procure actual fellowship between God and his saints. Believers truly enter into “the sanctuary of perfect communion with God” through their heavenly representative, Jesus Christ. Moreover, as the intercessor of the saints, Christ obtains and savors the fruit of his priestly labor on behalf of his people. In virtue of our union with him by faith, then, we have a foretaste of eschatological glory in and through Christ, the high priest. “He dwells with God as the first heir of the blessedness to which his ministry has opened the way.”¹⁹

Through his appearing, Christ is “the great representative figure of the coming aeon.” As a result, “the new age has begun to enter into the actual experience of the believer. He has been translated into a state which, while falling short of the consummated life of eternity, yet may be truly characterized as *semi-eschatological*.”²⁰ Christ’s close identification with his people secures these eschatological blessings for them. Since Christ, through his voluntary sacrifice unto death, has become the head heir and already active participant of the eschatological state, Vos concludes, “He leads us in the attainment unto glory.”²¹ In virtue of their union with Christ, the heavenly priest, believers have a foretaste and already enjoy

something of the newness of the coming age. They experience truly, though not completely, “the eternal side of the promises of God.”²² The book of Hebrews on the whole, then, seeks to demonstrate the necessarily better nature of Christ’s heavenly priesthood in order for believers to draw close to God “through a fresh and living way.”²³

1. Geerhardus Vos, “A Sermon on Hebrews 12:1–3,” *Kerux* 1, no. 1 (May 1986): 4–15.
2. Geerhardus Vos, *The Teaching of the Epistle to the Hebrews* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1956), 91.
3. Richard B. Gaffin Jr., “Christ, Our High Priest in Heaven,” *Kerux* 1, no. 3 (December 1986): 17–27.
4. Geerhardus Vos, “A Sermon on Hebrews 13:8,” *Kerux* 4, no. 2 (September 1989): 2–11.
5. Geerhardus Vos, “The Priesthood of Christ in Hebrews,” in *Redemptive History and Biblical Interpretation: The Shorter Writings of Geerhardus Vos*, ed. Richard B. Gaffin Jr. (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 1980), 153 (emphasis added).
6. Geerhardus Vos, “The Eternal Christ,” in *Grace and Glory: Sermons Preached in the Chapel of Princeton Theological Seminary*, by Geerhardus Vos (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1994), 204.
7. Vos, “Priesthood of Christ in Hebrews,” 160.
8. Vos, *Teaching of the Epistle to the Hebrews*, 114.
9. Geerhardus Vos, “Hebrews, The Epistle of the Diatheke,” in *Redemptive History and Biblical Interpretation: The Shorter Writings of Geerhardus Vos*, ed. Richard B. Gaffin Jr. (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 1980), 220.
10. Vos, *Teaching of the Epistle to the Hebrews*, 114.
11. Vos, *Teaching of the Epistle to the Hebrews*, 114.
12. Vos, *Teaching of the Epistle to the Hebrews*, 94.
13. Vos, *Teaching of the Epistle to the Hebrews*, 95.
14. Vos, *Teaching of the Epistle to the Hebrews*, 95 (emphasis added).
15. Vos, *Teaching of the Epistle to the Hebrews*, 95.
16. Vos, *Teaching of the Epistle to the Hebrews*, 52.
17. Vos, “Sermon on Hebrews 12:1–3,” 4–15.
18. Vos, *Teaching of the Epistle to the Hebrews*, 51.
19. Vos, “Priesthood of Christ in Hebrews,” 137–38.
20. Geerhardus Vos, “The Eschatological Aspect of the Pauline Conception of the Spirit,” in *Redemptive History and Biblical Interpretation: The Shorter Writings of Geerhardus Vos*, ed. Richard B. Gaffin Jr. (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 1980), 92.
21. Vos, “Hebrews, the Epistle of the Diatheke,” 214.
22. Vos, *Teaching of the Epistle to the Hebrews*, 21.
23. Vos, “Priesthood of Christ in Hebrews,” 141.

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Bible Studies on Romans

Lesson 30: The Love of God

Romans 13:8 -14

Rev. Wybren
Oord



The world has no respect for a church member who tries to squeeze out of meeting his financial obligations. The Christian testimony of the church member is quickly lost as the non-church member decides there really is no difference between the person who claims to be a child of God and the one who does not.

A Time to Love

There is one debt that can never be fully paid, and that is the debt of love. Paul exhorts his readers to love one another by fulfilling the second table of the law because love is *the* fulfillment of the law. The Christian can never say, “I have loved my neighbor by performing this task and now I am no longer under obligation to do so.” We must always love him—this day and the next—all the days of our lives. When we are filled with the love of God and seek to reflect His love, we will promote the interests and well-being of others with the same zeal and sincerity we use to tend to our own needs. As the Heidelberg Catechism puts it, “I should do what I can to guard and advance my neighbor’s good name” (Lord’s Day 43).

This is something the modern world cannot understand. We toss around words like *rights* and *entitlement*, thinking too much of ourselves and

One of the chief dangers for a Christian is spiritual backsliding. Many people who grow up in the church take the gospel for granted; therefore, they often neglect the relationship they are to have with God. They know and love the doctrines of the Reformed faith but do not know how to apply them to their everyday lives. The result is an aimless life that may well be shipwrecked for time and eternity.

Paul begins this passage by instructing his readers that they are to leave no debt outstanding—except the debt of love. This does not mean that we are not to go into any debt of any kind. In fact, quite the opposite is true. We have debts of many kinds: tribute,

honor, respect, faithfulness, to name a few. These must all be given to those to whom they are due. We must render unto Caesar what is Caesar’s.

On the other hand, it does mean that we must promptly and scrupulously pay our monetary debts. If we are able to pay our debts and fail to do so, we steal from our neighbor that which is rightly his. Years ago I had coffee with the owner of a feed mill who told me that he had paid for the Christian education of many members of our church. When I thanked him for his generosity, he replied that it had not been on purpose. Christian farmers had paid their school tuition, but not their feed bill.

Paul yearns for the believer to wake up from the sleep of indifference, carelessness, and thoughtlessness. It is time to be up and working for the kingdom because the return of the Lord Jesus Christ is nearer now than it ever has been.

what we think we deserve from life. While the United States Bill of Rights does guarantee her citizens certain freedoms, we have carried it to the point where we believe we have the right to many luxuries. We have the right to use foul language in public, guaranteed home mortgages, and free health care. Several years ago in Michigan, a senior-citizen housing project spliced into a cable TV hook-up, giving all the residents free cable TV. After all, they argued, senior citizens have the right to free cable television. Even the local newspaper painted the cable company as the villain when it disconnected the spliced wires.

So ingrained is this way of thinking that we fail to recognize the obligations God has given to us. Many of our parents and grandparents grew up understanding the word *duty*. They knew the responsibilities that God set before them and the structures He had set in place within society and neighborly relationships. They worked hard, not only for themselves but also for their neighbors when help was needed.

Paul puts the matter rather simply. He tells us that owe our love to one another. It is not up to us to decide how our love is to be given or in what measure it is to be granted. It is simply and uniquely a quality of the Christian life. God has lavished His love on all true believers (1 John 3:1). While we were still in our sin and misery, the Father sent His only Son into the world to take upon Himself our sin and impute His righteousness to us. We are to be a people who are so filled with the love of God that we

love. As those who have the mind of Christ (1 Cor. 2:16), we must love as Christ loves. It should be an automatic response to our Savior. This love is much more than mere sentiment that lasts only for a moment. It is more than loving for the sake of a reward. It is a steadfast, deliberate response to the love we have received from the Lord.

Such love does not replace the law, because it can only behave in a manner that corresponds with what the law demands. Certainly a genuine love for our neighbor would never think to steal from him or destroy his life or property. Such love is required of the Christian. Jesus said, “If you love Me, you will keep My commandments” (John 14:15). That statement is not a conditional clause, but a response: If A, then B. It is not “If you clean your room, I will reward you.” It is “If you throw a rock into the water, it will get wet.” There is an intimate relationship between law and love displayed in Paul’s writing. When we are filled with God’s love, we respond by keeping God’s law.

A Time to Wake Up

Paul tells his readers that they are to live in this love, understanding the present time. The day of salvation has come! The great mystery of salvation has been revealed by the Holy Spirit through the Son of God. The new age has arrived! Wake up and live in that age!

Since Paul is addressing the wake-up alarm to believers, he does not want to wake us up from the sleep of sin. The Christian knows that he is a sinner who has been delivered through the sacrifice that Jesus Christ made on

the cross. Rather, Paul yearns for the believer to wake up from the sleep of indifference, carelessness, and thoughtlessness. It is time to be up and working for the kingdom because the return of the Lord Jesus Christ is nearer now than it ever has been.

Even for us, two thousand years later, salvation is nearer to us than when we first believed. We are traveling rapidly toward the time when Jesus Christ will come again. The believer knows that this world is not heading toward some blind dead-end brought about by global warming, nuclear holocaust, or terrorist uprising. No, this creation is headed toward the appointed time when Christ returns. Paul had written earlier that the whole of creation is looking forward to the day when the sons of God will be made visible (Rom. 8:19). In God’s timetable, everything is right on schedule.

It is an absolutely inescapable fact in God’s program for the world and the human race that Jesus will come again. This time, when Christ comes it will not be as a baby wrapped in strips of cloth to be ignored by the world. He is coming as the One who has been given all authority in heaven and on earth—as the judge of all the world.

Time to Dress Properly

When we prepare for a special occasion, we dress appropriately. As believers we anticipate the full revelation of our salvation when Christ returns. Paul exhorts us to dress properly for this fast-approaching moment when our earthly life will be finished and we enter the glory and rest of heaven. At that time our faith

What percentage of your life are you, as a Christian, like Jesus? What percentage of your life are you projecting your own image rather than that of Christ?

shall be sight. Until that time arrives, we should be preparing ourselves by putting away the deeds of darkness that encumber us. Instead, we are to clothe ourselves in the armor of light.

There is a misconception among many Christians that when Jesus comes again, suddenly, we are all going to be changed and become like Him. That may be true when it comes to our bodies. Certainly our old, decaying, sinful bodies will suddenly be transformed. All of our groaning, weakness, pains, and ills will disappear. I can't wait until the time when that happens!!

While that is true, we have to remember that our bodies are only the outward shell of the inner life. We are not suddenly going to change in character or personality. No passage in all of Scripture teaches that. In fact, John teaches that when Jesus comes again, we shall be like Him (1 John 3:2). The goal of our lives, then, is that until Jesus comes again we must conform our lives to be like His life. What percentage of your life are you, as a Christian, like Jesus? What percentage of your life are you projecting your own image rather than that of Christ?

Paul insists that we prepare ourselves for the day of His appearing by reflecting the love that God has lavished on us toward one another. If our hope is truly fixed on Jesus Christ as our Savior and we long for the day that He returns, then we need to prepare ourselves for that day.

For as long as we are in this period between Jesus' ascension and His return, we must behave decently, clothed in the Lord Jesus Christ.

This is not just being clothed in the righteousness of Jesus Christ—it is rejoicing in His righteousness. It is living in gratitude to God for the good news of salvation. Living in that thanksgiving to God, we strive to become like Jesus.

As those dearly loved by the Father and bought by the blood of Jesus Christ, this is to be the goal of our lives. We want to be Christlike. The love that the Father has lavished on us must become so exciting, so overwhelming, and so real in our lives that we want to be like Him. We want to serve Him. We want to love Him.

No longer do we want to be engaged in the deeds of darkness. Do you love God? Then of course you do not want to take His name in vain. Do you love God? Then of course you do not want to love some other god. Do you love God? Then of course you will worship Him. That must become the desire of your heart. It is the goal of the Christian's life. It is what we pray to be.

Points to Ponder and Discuss

1. Does Paul teach in verse 8 that Christians are not to have financial debt?
2. Which would you pay first—and why?
 - a. payment of debts, or providing food and clothing for the family?
 - b. paying the dentist, or buying a new television?
 - c. making a car payment, or your contribution to the church?
3. The way Paul uses the word, is love a concept or an emotion? Explain.
4. Why is the debt of love never fully paid?
5. Since love is the fulfillment of the law, do Christians still need the Ten Commandments? Explain your answer.
6. What kind of sleep is Paul referring to in verse 11? Why must we wake up?
7. Do you think Paul expected Jesus Christ to return in his lifetime? Do you expect Jesus to return in your lifetime?
8. What bearing does the coming of Christ have on your moral behavior?

Bible Studies on Romans

Lesson 31: Passing Judgment

Romans 14

Rev. Wybren
Oord

In Romans 13, Paul encouraged Christians to fulfill their obligations to the state. In this way, the church would be a positive influence to the world as she reflected the love of Christ in her activities. In Romans 14, Paul turns his attention to conflicts that arise within the church.

Converted Jews still observed Mosaic law concerning clean and unclean animals as well as how to drain blood from clean animals when they were slaughtered. In the pagan city of Rome, most butchers did not keep Jewish regulations, which caused many Jews to abstain from eating meat. Unfortunately, these differences escalated into arguments, causing Christian Jews and Christian Gentiles to become judgmental toward one another.

Paul explains that each group has the right and freedom to live according to their consciences as they seek to honor God. Neither the Jew nor the Gentile is wrong in his practice. Both should be welcome in the church. While the arguments in Rome centered on impure meat, Paul broadens the issue in verse 21: "It is good not to eat meat or drink wine or do anything that causes your brother to stumble." In Corinth, the issue was about meat sacrificed to idols (1 Cor. 8 and 10). The problems that Paul addresses in Galatians

and Colossians were caused by Judaizers, who threatened the very core of the gospel. Obviously, Paul approached their situation in a much sterner fashion.

Paul's sage advice can be of aid to elders and members of the church when issues arise that cause strife. Let's face it, there is friction in every church. Sometimes a church will face major disagreements over doctrinal issues such as salvation by grace alone through Christ alone. Other times

churches get bogged down in minor disagreements such as the color of the carpet in the sanctuary. Unfortunately, both can lead to divisions and schisms within the church of Jesus Christ.

Some of us remember familiar rules of days gone by: you could have buttons on your coat, but not zippers; you could sleep on Sunday afternoon, but not knit; you could drink root beer, but not cola; y o u



could go to the doctor for a cold, but not to have a baby. Many readers may remember the tensions that arose when churches dropped the Dutch service, went to single communion cups, or changed Bible translations. As long as we are in the church militant, there will always be strife in the church—both from the outside and inside. The devil likes nothing more than to have believers in Jesus Christ argue with one another.

In a society where we like to put labels on people, we have divided Christians into those who are strict and those who are not so strict. We label them as conservative and liberal. Even within the conservative Reformed community we often label ourselves more conservative than the Reformed church on the corner of another denomination but not as strict (because we would never dare label ourselves as liberal) as the Reformed church on the other side of town of another denomination. Frequently we even use these labels within our own federations and churches, not realizing that such labels are more secular than biblical.

Not Judging Others

Paul addresses first those who consider themselves to be strong in the faith. By this, Paul meant Christians who understood the freedoms that were given to those who believed in Jesus Christ. They had come to realize that through Christ there is a righteousness from God that is apart from the law (Rom. 3:21). They were not bound by the law but clearly saw obedience to it as a means of expressing their gratitude to God for the salvation He had provided through His Son.

Often, those who considered themselves strong Christians would ridicule those who were weak in the faith. In Paul's day, converted Jews were often considered to be the weaker brothers because they tried to maintain a stricter lifestyle. The strong Christian would eat whatever

meat was available at the butcher shop, unconcerned about whether that meat had been sacrificed to an idol. On the other hand, Jewish converts were careful not to eat meat that had been consecrated to idols. Strong brothers would not celebrate the feast days, while reborn Jews did.

It is interesting that today everyone wants to consider himself the stronger Christian. Some consider themselves stronger because they still celebrate the feast days, including Ascension Day and Prayer Day. Others consider themselves stronger because they have only one worship service on Sunday and can engage in different activities during the day. Still others use Christian liberty as a means to justify things that God speaks against very clearly in His Word. Through it all, factions develop in the church, and the gospel is not being brought to the world.

Paul reminds his readers of the strong attachment that Christians are to have with one another: "For none of us lives to himself, and none of us dies to himself. For if we live, we live to the Lord, and if we die, we die to the Lord. So then, whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord's" (vv. 7–8). Strong and weak alike belong to Him. Instead of taking pride in the stronger position we claim to have, we should humbly acknowledge that we were once dead in our trespasses and sins and that Christ has redeemed us from certain death. It is wrong to destroy God's work or the faith of a fellow believer by insisting on enjoying nonessential things that may cause another person to stumble. By doing so, friction enters a place that should be a haven of peace. We are but slaves (Romans 6) called to be living sacrifices to God (Romans 12). We have been purchased by the blood of Jesus Christ, so He has sole ownership over us.

As Christ's possession, we cannot sit in judgment over another whom He has purchased and claimed as His

own. John Calvin writes, "As then it would be absurd among men for a criminal, who ought to occupy a humble place in court, to ascend to the tribunal of the judge; so it is absurd for a Christian to take to himself the liberty of judging the conscience of his brother."

Judging Others

Those who consider themselves to be strong Christians may rejoice in the freedoms that they have been given through Christ, but they ought not to flaunt those freedoms in front of those they know would take offense to their actions. Can you imagine the tension that would arise in Paul's day if a Gentile invited a converted Jew to a pork roast? Yet how often do we find ourselves doing the same thing? It is as if we have to prove our freedoms as evidence that we are stronger Christians. How foolish that makes us look! How much better to have a clear conscience before God while refraining from activities that we know would offend those around us.

All too often we use Christian liberty as a license to sin. We claim that because of Christ we are free to attend movies that are graphic in language and sexual content, accumulate riches with no regard for our laborers, or neglect our calling to go into the world and proclaim Christ. The liberties that we receive through Christ are not unlimited. They focus on matters of indifference. Christian liberty is not a license to break the Ten Commandments; it is a freedom to work together in God's kingdom despite minor differences that we may have. Having dietary differences should not hinder brothers and sisters in Christ from coming to the Table of the Lord.

The stronger Christian has a great responsibility placed upon him, lest he cause a brother to sin. God places in our midst Christians who question the validity of certain freedoms that the stronger brother may take for

granted. The weaker brother, for example, may consider it wrong to drink alcohol. While the stronger brother agrees that excessive alcohol consumption is wrong, he does not see anything wrong with having a glass of wine with dinner. The weaker brother should refrain from consuming alcohol lest his conscience accuse him of sinning. Should the stronger brother invite the weaker brother for dinner, he should abstain from serving alcohol lest he cause his brother in Christ to stumble.

There are many more examples of these types of conflicts over minor issues. Over the few decades that I have been in the ministry, I have seen a plethora of intense debates over minor issues. In almost every case, both parties consider themselves to be the stronger Christian until they begin to find themselves on the losing end of the discussion. Then they claim themselves as the weaker brother, and those who disagree with them should concede on that point.

Rather than judging one another, Christians must help each other in their walk with the Lord. Love for

one another should be the deciding factor in all our actions. What gain is there in failing to focus on the riches that we share in Christ because we are too busy quarreling over matters that are nonessential? The joy of our faith in Christ should not be reduced to debates over matters of eating or drinking. The kingdom of God should be reflected in our lives through a display of the fruit of the Spirit. The sacrifice of Christ should remain the strength of the church.

Summary

It is most inappropriate for brothers and sisters in Christ to judge one another on nonessential things within the church. In the end, we will all stand before the ultimate Judge to give account of how we conducted ourselves.

Paul ends the chapter on a positive note, calling Christians to strengthen one another in the Lord. Not only should we ask what we are free to do as Christians, but we also need to be concerned about what leads to the well-being and building up of the church.

In considering whether an action is right or wrong for a follower of the Lamb, we should answer three questions:

- 1. Does the Bible forbid my doing this activity?**
- 2. Could this activity lead me to be tempted by sin?**
- 3. Would this activity offend a weaker brother, who, through my participation, would be led into sin?**

If you can truly answer no to all three questions, then the action is not wrong.

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Points to Ponder and Discuss

1. How do you respond to rules made up by someone else's conscience?
2. Whom would Paul consider to be a Christian weak in faith?
3. In what sense were the Jewish believers weak? In what sense were the Gentile believers weak?
4. Discuss the difference between a weaker brother and a Pharisee.
5. What is the true Christian's governing motive in all that he does?
6. What does it mean to live and die to the Lord?
7. What is the difference between judging for ourselves the rightness or wrongness of an action and judging our brother with respect to the same issue?
8. Explain why Christian liberty does not allow for excessive alcohol consumption, moderate gambling, or leaving one's spouse. What are issues on which differing views are possible for fellow Christians?
9. How can something that is not wrong in and of itself be wrong for a particular Christian?
10. What are the essential blessings of the kingdom that we should promote? How will this resolve the question of the nonessentials?

When people think about the women's rights movement, they usually think of the right to vote. In Canada, that was taken care of in 1918 when women were given the same voting rights as men (Munroe). Most people would probably say that nowadays men and women are equal—they both can have the same jobs, they both can vote, and, overall, they have the same rights. However, men and women are not equal in today's society. We need a new women's rights movement because girls are being killed simply because they are girls. This is far worse than not being able to vote, yet no one wants to even talk about this issue. The government wants to ignore the issue and will not even discuss it. Even though one of the most fundamental arguments of the pro-choice movement is women's rights, the abortion of girls because they are girls is a complete violation of women's rights. Women's rights and gender-selective abortion cannot truly coexist because gender-selective abortion abuses the rights of women. By opposing this practice, pro-lifers can protect women's rights by giving girls and boys an equal chance to survive.

Woman's rights and gender-selective abortion cannot truly coexist because if a person makes a distinction between a male and female in an important decision and chooses the male solely because he is male, he risks ignoring women's rights. Any time a person makes a decision based on gender and not circumstances or qualifications, he is in danger of violating the rights of women. If an employer was looking for a new employee and a man and woman

both applied for the job, and the employer chose the male just because he was a male even though the woman was more qualified, it would be discrimination against the woman. How much more discriminatory is it if a child in the womb is chosen to be aborted because she is a girl? This is more than just a violation against women's rights—this is gendercide. Gendercide is defined as “the deliberate and systematic extermination of baby girls, typically through sex-selective abortion and infanticide” (“Gendercide: The Systematic Killing of Girls”).

Girls are being killed just because they are girls, yet the pro-choice activists say that they are fighting for women's rights. One pro-choice activist says, “The state should trust these women to make the right decisions for their own lives and their own bodies. It should grant them the right to choose how to handle their own reproductive health. . . . Until women have the right to determine what they will do with their own bodies, they will never be equal” (Miller). This individual argues that women will not be equal with men until they have the right to decide what to do with their pregnancies. However, there are two main problems with pro-choice activists using “women's rights” as a platform. First, women do have the right to choose what to do with their bodies without abortion ever coming into the picture. Their choice comes when they agree to have sex, not afterward. Second, the “right” to have an abortion is being misused. Since girls are being killed because they are girls, abortion is what is causing a violation to women's rights, not laws

against abortion. The very thing that pro-choice activists are fighting for—abortion—is violating women's rights and is contrary to their platform. Mara Hvistendahl, pro-choice author of the book *Unnatural Selection: Choosing Boys over Girls, and the Consequences of a World Full of Men*, states, “After decades of fighting for a woman's right to choose the outcome of her own pregnancy, it is difficult to turn around and point out that women are abusing that right” (150). Pro-choice activists say that women will not be equal with men until they have abortion rights, but in reality, men and women will not be equal until people stop killing girls because of gender. This is the largest abuse against women's rights possible.

Another reason women's rights and gender-selective abortion can never truly coexist is that the woman having the abortion acknowledges that the child, or fetus, as she would probably call it, is a female, and she is killing the child because of that fact. The woman having the abortion and the doctors doing the abortion all know that this child is being killed just because she is a girl. This alone shows that women and men are not equal in today's society. The sole reason that this woman does not want the child to live is that the child is a girl. The woman wants this child never to have a chance at life, never to exist outside the womb, simply because she is a girl. The reason for the abortion is not that she could not support the child or take care of it. It is just that she is a girl. If the child had been a boy, he would be allowed to live. This shows how girls are being seen as less valuable or less important than boys.



“Around the world, gender-selective abortion and female infanticide are targeting girls, resulting in 200 million missing women and girls globally”

Pro-lifers can effectively oppose gender-selective abortion by standing up for the little girls in the womb. Ninety-two percent of Canadians already believe that sex-selective abortion is wrong and that it should not occur in Canada (Somerville). Many people in Canada would not have a problem with gender-selective abortion being made illegal. They just have to be made aware of the issue and that it is, in fact, occurring in Canada. Pro-lifers need to talk to people about gender-selective abortion and let them know it is taking place in Canada and around the world.

Gender-selective abortion is a problem around the world. In order to combat this issue, pro-lifers need to make people aware of the negative effects gender-selective abortion has on societies. The government does not want to touch the issue, but if it was made aware of the negative impacts gender-selective abortion can have, the government might be willing to at least discuss the issue. Many of the negative effects of sex-selective abortion on society come as a result of “surplus men.” These are men who cannot marry because there are not enough women. This results in men going to great lengths to find women. “As the first generation touched by sex ratio imbalance grows up, the silent biological discrimination that is sex selection has been exacerbated by more visible threats to women, including sex trafficking, bride buying, and forced marriages” (Hvistendahl, *Unnatural Selection*, 15). As it becomes more difficult for men to find a bride, they many start buying or bidding for them. “Men in wealthier countries poach women

from poorer ones” (Last). Also, another result of a high male to female ratio is that risks of violence increase. “Today in India, the best predictor of violence and crime for any given area is not income but sex ratio” (Last). These are some of the effects of sex-selective abortion that even someone who agrees with abortion would want to avoid and would know were wrong. These are effective arguments to use with people who believe in a woman’s right to choose abortion and who do not believe that abortion is murder because these people would be able to acknowledge that even if abortion is okay, sex-trafficking and increased violence are not. This is how pro-lifers can oppose sex-selective abortion in a world that sees nothing wrong with abortion.

Around the world, gender-selective abortion and female infanticide are targeting girls, resulting in 200 million missing women and girls globally (“Gendercide: The Systematic Killing of Girls”). In nature, 105 boys are born for every 100 girls (Hvistendahl, *Unnatural Selection*, xiii). However, around the world, this ratio is being skewed as a result of sex-selective abortion. In India, the ratio is 112 boys born for every 100 girls, and in China, the number of boys is 121 for every 100 girls (Hvistendahl, *Unnatural Selection*, 5). There are several reasons families do not want girls. In some countries, girls are not wanted because the cost of a dowry is so expensive. One Indian clinic put out an ad saying, “Better 500 rupees now than 500,000 later,” when referring to

the price of a sex test versus the cost of a dowry (Hvistendahl, *Unnatural Selection*, 49). Other explanations for why boys are wanted are that sons stay in the family and eventually take care of their parents in their old age, as well as that certain ancestor and funeral rites can only be performed by the male children (Hvistendahl, “Where Have All the Girls Gone?”). Also, people often reason, “Well, I only want two kids so definitely we have to have one girl and one boy” (Shaw). This means that if a girl is the first child, any other girl conceived will be aborted so that a couple can have one boy and one girl.

Sex-selective abortion and women’s rights can never truly coexist because sex-selective abortion discriminates against women. It does not attest to their rights, but against them. Pro-lifers can oppose sex-selective abortion by letting other people know that it is occurring, as well as letting people know the negative effects of a society with surplus men. Pro-lifers need to stand up for girls since being a girl should not be a reason to kill.

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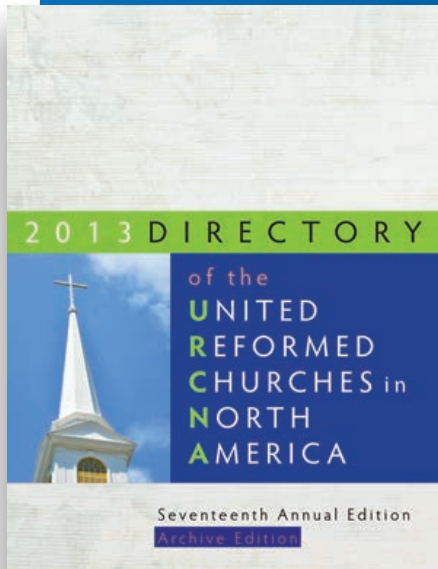
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M My name is Carleous Clay, and I am an inmate at the Danville, Illinois, Correctional Center. I am also a student at Divine Hope Reformed Bible Seminary, which is located within the walls of the prison. This is my life story of resisting God's call and living a life of crime, until He would not let me resist Him any longer.

I was born in Muskegon, Michigan, and was raised by my mother. My father was absent from my life until four years ago. I have five brothers and one sister. My mother is a Christian. She is Baptist but worships with a Reformed Church of America congregation in Michigan. She was raised by my grandmother, who was raised in the church. My grandmother is a God-fearing woman who instilled Christianity into my mother, who then introduced it to me. My mother was not as committed to the church as her mother. My grandmother has always been a faithful, active, church-going Christian while my mother went to church when she wanted to.

When I was six months old, my mother left Michigan and took my brothers and me to live in Los Angeles, California. We went from living in a four-bedroom house to a two-bedroom apartment, where I had to share a bedroom with four brothers. The apartment building where we lived was infested with rats and roaches. When I was about six, I was attacked and bitten by an army of roaches while I was asleep. Being raised in California was a big challenge for me. We spent the first five years in the projects. Life was not great for us, but we made the best of it. We did not go to church regularly.

My older brothers were living like the people in the times of the judges: they did what was right in their own eyes.

From the projects we moved to south central L.A., which was a dangerous part of the city. My mother struggled to make ends meet, making a living from welfare and selling drugs. There was no father figure in the house other than my oldest brother. There was no fear of God and no proper upbringing as far as the preaching of God's Word. As a child I heard of Jesus, but I did not understand who Jesus was. I grew up listening to the famous song "Jesus Loves Me," which had no real significance for me. I had no understanding of the real significance of Jesus Christ. There was no reading Bible stories together. Sometimes we prayed before eating meals, but even our prayers were prayed without any real knowledge or understanding of God.

I attended one of the worst schools in Los Angeles. When I was in the third grade, I joined a gang. I had watched my brothers get recruited into one of the most well-known gangs in Los Angeles. I was encouraged by their folly, and I wanted in. Like a snare, I was enticed and led astray into fornicating with the world. A couple of guys jumped on me, and I had to defend myself. This was their way of initiating me into the gang.

From this point on, I went through a rough time. Emotionally I was a wreck. Because I did not have the fear of God in my heart, I did not see that fornicating with the world put enmity between me and God. I was excited with the foolishness that came with gang-banging. My love for

the hood increased day by day. The book of Malachi describes my life perfectly. I played the whoremonger with crime and drugs, committing spiritual adultery against my Creator. "I abandoned Him for the lowest things of His creation," as Augustine says of himself.

Gang membership meant rules and regulations. I was signed up to die. Most people would not risk their lives for the one true God. I was willing to die for my gang. I agreed to the rules of the gang, that I would do anything necessary that would benefit the gang. Like the church is one body that makes up the kingdom of God, gang members are one body that makes up the gang.

I got involved in basketball and football to escape the street life. I was good enough to make the football team and won several trophies for my participation. Then things changed: "The fate of the fool will overtake me also. What then do I gain by being wise?" (Eccles. 2:15). Unfortunately, I could not escape the street life. I was like the Israelites who were in bondage to Egypt. Although they were delivered from out of Egypt, Egypt was still in them. The gang was with me wherever I went. I could not escape representing an idol and a false god. Thinking that I was wise, I became a fool through worshiping the creation over the Creator. I exchanged the glory of God for gang-banging.

God gave me up to the lusts of my mind and to impurity. I started gang-banging full time. I dropped out of school in the eighth grade and traded in my school books for gangs and crooks. I gave up my desire to

be a firefighter to starting a fire. My mother dreamed of me with a college degree, but I chose a career in drugs. Instead of earning A's and B's, I was getting shot at and shooting at people. I was assaulting the crown rights of God. At times I hungered for things that were right because my desire was to make my mother proud.

I started carrying guns, selling drugs, and doing violent things. Augustine was right when he talked about how friends can have a negative influence. Many of Augustine's sins resulted from building bad friendships. Instead of friends, it was my own brothers who had a bad influence on me. We would leave the house in the morning, pretending that we were going off to school. We would get our guns and team up with others, and together we would commit crimes. We split into two groups of five to ten members and would catch the bus to cities outside of our neighborhood. From 8:00 AM to around 3:30 PM we would break into people's houses. This became a normal school day for us. We were like the living dead. On many occasions we entered houses where people were waiting for us with their guns pulled. I've been in altercations and shoot-outs as a result of this.

Never once did I stop to think about the people I was robbing. Some of them were God's elect. I was robbing the kingdom. I was using the gifts that God gave to me to build up the kingdom of darkness. I was like Jephthah's brothers in the book of Judges, who tried to rob their brother of his inheritance.

I was first arrested at fifteen and charged with attempted murder. I had nothing to do with that murder except that I was guilty by association. Because I was a known gang member and befriended the shooter, I was accused of being with him at the time of the shooting. The truth was

discovered a few weeks later, and I was released from juvenile home.

After this experience, jail became part of my life. I was one of the well-known, respected members of the gang. I was considered to be down for the hood. I was involved in the Rodney King riots. I helped sinners sin and rebel against God. We thought we were doing a good thing at the time, but really we were stirring up the wrath of God. We had become consumed by sin and became comfortable with our sins.

The riots brought a lot of the gangs together. Our focus changed from hurting one another to hurting others. We turned our animosity toward the authorities instituted by God. I saw God's authority figures, like the police, as enemies. I never saw them as supervisors of the King. It never occurred to me that God has placed police officers in their positions and that to rebel against them is to rebel against God.

At sixteen, I met my first love. She was everything to me, or so I thought. Little did I realize how much of an idol she was. I had become an adulterer and fornicator against the Creator. My heart had become what John Calvin called an idol factory. I had placed an object and things before God. What should have been my first love I made my second love. I was lukewarm in my feelings toward God.

My girlfriend became pregnant and had an abortion against my will. She rebelled against God and assaulted His crown rights as the life-giver. She murdered the child to whom God had given life, my only child. I think of my child every day. He or she would be fourteen in 2014. My girlfriend claimed that she was not ready for a relationship or a child. She was woman enough to lay with me, but not woman enough to stay with me. I ended the relationship with her and really felt like I had hit rock bottom.

Not only did I lose my girlfriend, but I also lost my child.

I moved out of my mother's house to become an independent young man. I broke God's commandments. I didn't honor my mother and instead rejected the authority that God had given to my mother over me. I stopped listening to her advice and began doing as I pleased. I talked back to her and lied to her. I was like the three people in Exodus who coveted the authority God had given to Moses. I feel like a fool today and still hurt from hurting my mother. I hurt from hurting God. I sold drugs to provide for myself. I was worse than the prodigal son, who at least had enough sense to return home. I, on the other hand, returned to jail! How foolish I was to think that I could treat my mom in whatever way I wanted! I thought that I could live as I desired.

At seventeen, I watched a couple of my best friends get murdered. This should have caught my attention, but it did not. I felt like I could be next. I understood that dying was a part of life, and I was so caught up in sin that I was willing to give my life for it. I had no motivation to change. I was a friend of the world. My mother could not figure out what had gotten into me.

Again, I found myself back in the place I hated, which was in jail. I remember sitting in a jail cell thinking about everything that I had experienced. In my heart I knew that if I did not change my way of living, I would spend the rest of my life behind bars. Still seventeen years old, I got out of jail and thought that I was old enough to make my own decisions. I packed my stuff and moved to Michigan to live with my older sister. This was a major breakthrough. I managed to find a good job working as a third-shift stocker at a Meijer store.

I held a job long enough to make some friendships. Having lived in



California gave me an advantage with the gangs of Michigan. They were not as dominant or aggressive as I was. I surrounded myself with people whom I considered dumber than myself. I had every intention to start my own posse with myself as the chief sinner. I can relate to Saul of Tarsus, who was a persecutor of the church. I was leading others astray for the glory of the kingdom of darkness.

I lived a life that was constant folly. I dishonored God and myself. I broke every one of God's commandments

and willfully submitted myself to the devil. I forfeited life in Christ for no life at all. I was a friend of the world. Two years after my arrival in Michigan, I again found myself in prison. I had degraded myself in the worst way. I was given a sentence of five-and-a-half to ten years.

During my incarceration, I realized that I had become more rebellious than when I was sent to prison. I did not take advantage of educational programs that were available. I was

hypocritical like the Pharisees. I didn't know anything about God's grace. I thought that if I would clean the outside of myself that would be sufficient to undergo a metamorphosis of the whole. I was a fool to think that I could rob God of His glory. I considered myself to be good without a transformation by the Holy Spirit.

I was a grown man with a childish mind, a weak mentality. I was a weak link who portrayed toughness on the outside. I was influenced by others, and, instead of standing up for God, I fell. I did not stand up for myself in the way that I should have, which is why I landed in prison again.

My brothers followed the same path. Every one of us has served time either in prison or jail. We have been split up since we were teenagers. I cannot even remember the last time all of us were out of jail at the same time. I haven't seen one brother in thirteen years and another one for twenty-five.

God ordained a second bit for me. This was a hard thing to swallow. I thought that I was making my own decisions out of my own free will. There is no such thing as having a free will because even that which we think is free is governed by God. I believe there were several times when I had guns pointed at me and I could have been killed. I prayed and asked God to rescue me, promising that if He would, I would change my life. I lied to God. It was foolish for me to think that I could change myself. Three different times I was facing up to life in prison for crimes that I did not do. When I contemplate my past, I know that there were many times when God spared my life. Now I see that God was with me all the time. I truly believe that God in His providence had His shield around me.

It is such a blessing that God has pulled me out of the mire. He has set my feet upon a rock. He has given me a new foundation through His Son,

Not only did God save me from my sins but He also saved me from myself.

Jesus Christ. I have a desire to preach God's Word. I believe that God is calling me to preach. He had ordained that I would become a minister of the Word of God even before I was born. I was fifteen years old when I started seeing shadows of what was to come. Although I was a gang member, I was also a peacemaker. I was a type of Christ, but for all the wrong reasons. I was a mediator between my friends and our enemies.

Thinking back now, I see that I was more of the Jonah type. I knew there was a calling for my life, but I ignored it. I chose to run from God every chance that I got. I was like Moses when he told God that he was not qualified for the task ahead. Moses tried to use his inability to speak as an excuse to rob God. I tried to use my shyness as a justification for ignoring the call of God.

In my ignorance, I did not realize that God had predestined a plan from which I could not escape. God knew that I would get tired of running before He became tired of waiting. So many folks tried to bring me down, destroy me, or lock me away in prison forever. The truth is that what God has blessed no man can curse. Hallelujah!

God was speaking to me, but I would not listen. I would not allow God to have fellowship with His child. I put enmity between us by my submission to sin. If I had listened to God back then, I would not be in the mess that I am in now. Knowing what I know now, a lot of things would be different. I would have stayed in church and school. I would have joined the navy, which was one of my goals as a child. I wanted also to be a firefighter. I made all of these plans only to become a prisoner. God, in His providence,

used the foolishness of this world to shame me. But I am grateful that God used my imprisonment for His glory. I could not be who I am without my experiences.

There was always a part of me that enjoyed going to church. I enjoyed the singing and hearing about Jesus. I did not see myself as being a preacher at that time; however, I knew that I had the ability to communicate well with people and believed that I could get people to listen to me. I made intercession for people—just not in a godly way. My interceding was more in a negative way that glorified Satan. Had I used the gifts that God had given to me, I would never have been a prisoner. I would have been obedient to God and His Word.

God used my present incarceration to awaken me. The Holy Spirit led me to the cross. I was able to see my sins for the first time in life and understand my state of depravity. Not only did God save me from my sins but He also saved me from myself. I started to fight against engaging in willful sins. I was headed down a path that would have either killed me or led me to prison for the rest of my life.

I believe that God in His providence ordained my incarceration. God had a plan for me, and prison was the means He used to reveal His plan to me. God knew that I would not have reformed had I not experienced prison. I would never have presented myself in the way that I have, as a living sacrifice of gratitude.

Being in prison was a state of humiliation for me. It is humiliating sometimes to see myself as a prisoner, and I have tried to encourage myself by looking at my experiences as a lesson. It was a chance for me to learn about the one true God. Prison was my elementary school for seminary.

It was here that I learned about Jesus and the Holy Spirit. It was a tool used to equip me. I appreciate and thank God for His sovereignty over all of my humiliations because it was through them that I saw Him. He became real to me when I had to face my Red Sea. He used prison to sanctify me.

I remember when I was criticized by family, friends, and the media. I was looked at as a failure and loser. Thinking that I was a failure was what turned my attention to God. Throughout all of this, God revealed Himself to me. He showed me exactly who I was in Him. I was able to understand my purpose for living and that I was put here to glorify God.

Now that I understand a few things about who God is, His omnipotence, and His omnipresence, I know that He is sovereign over everything. I know that He was in control of my past. I think that He was molding me at such a young age to raise me up as one of His elect. While I was out sinning, Christ had died for me. He had given His life up so that I could have a childhood in Him. I thank God for revealing Himself to me through His Word. Because of God's grace, I have a chance to be a child all over again with Him as my father. Right now God is equipping me and training me to honor Him. He is teaching me how I must obey Him rather than man.

In 2012 I began to accept my calling to be a prophet, priest, and king for God. I began to seek God, and I asked Him to make a way for me. I recall telling people that I was going to go to school to learn about God. I didn't know anything about theology or what a seminary was. I did not know then that at Danville Corrections, a Reformed Bible seminary was in the making. When it came into existence, I knew this was God's way of speaking to me. I was amazed! I was excited because for the first time in my life I felt like I saw God face to face. I saw what He was doing in me.

Divine Hope Seminary has been a blessing for me. In fact, it has been one of the greatest experiences of my life. Not only has God used Divine Hope to sanctify me, but He has also used it to give me hope. Since joining the seminary I have come to the realization of a lot of things concerning God and His Word. My love and respect for God have increased.

When I think about what I thought I knew beforehand. I now realize that I didn't have a clue. Previously I would read through God's Word like any type of book. Now I read through His Word with a different pair of eyes. Now I have the Holy Spirit leading and guiding me into His truths. He is showing the connections of His Word and how it relates to Christ. I am able to understand things like the covenant and how it was applied back then and how it is applied to me today.

I find myself doing things I never thought myself capable of doing. God is using me in awesome ways that I am grateful for. I understand how to write and read Greek now. It is such a blessing to be able to read the Holy Scriptures in its original language.

I remember how well I thought I knew God's Word, but little did I realize that I could take those same words and see things completely differently. I was ignorant of things like the knowledge of God because I always thought that I knew Him. The names of God have been significant in showing me who God was and is. Things like His attributes can easily be overlooked by the naked eye, but He has shown me what is meant when we speak of His communicable attributes. These are the things He allows us to see and be able to testify to.

I have learned that in order to be able to understand and explain God's Word, a person must know things like the doctrine of sin, which deals with total depravity and the fall; Christology, which deals with the offices of Christ;

justification; resurrection; and more. Now I understand anthropology and the doctrine of man. I am aware of the origin of man, creation, and man's role in creation. I enjoyed learning about ancient church history and brothers such as John Calvin, Martin Luther, Augustine, Tertullian, Origen, and others. Before joining seminary I was against catechisms and any creed or confession. This was because not only was I ignorant in these areas but also I wouldn't give these documents a chance. Now that I've taken classes on the Heidelberg Catechism and the Canons of Dort and understand them, I have to admit that I am guilty of loving them. The Belgic Confession is one of my favorite documents. I love what brothers like Guido de Bres and Elector Frederick stood up for. I can't get enough catechism in me. That tool has helped me to grow in many areas.

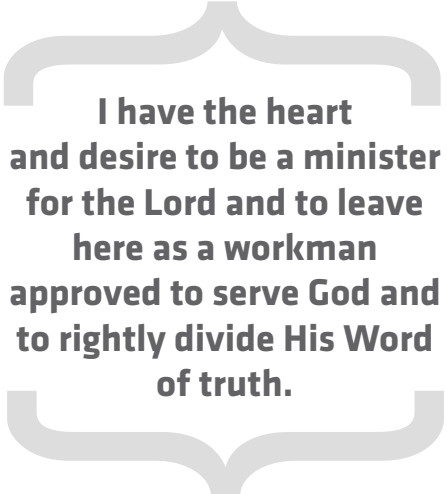
I did a study on the book of Romans, and the Holy Spirit really opened up my eyes. Every important theme of the Bible is in that book. It helps us know how the Old Testament points to the New Testament. We can see the connection between the two and how Christ is illuminated in them both.

How did I come to the Reformed faith? It was truly because of God. God has helped me to see and believe what is true concerning His Word. I was raised with a Baptist perspective, but truthfully I don't know what I was. I think I didn't know enough of God's Word to say who or what I was.

The Holy Spirit, along with my professors, John S. and Nathan Brummel, have played a major role in my transformation. As I began to pray and understand more of God's Word, I was led to see that the Reformed view is biblical. The Reformed doctrine highlights Scripture and honors the Word as having the final authority. The doctrine appears to be real and true to me, and I believe

it a hundredfold. It is sufficient in its teachings and solid in its unity. I don't believe in any other doctrine apart from the Reformed faith, nor do I ever see myself departing from its teachings. To be informed is to be Reformed.

The Spirit has been working in my life, sanctifying me and guiding me into all of God's truth. I will continue seminary training following my release from prison in the winter of 2014. God through His Spirit has made His plan for me perfectly clear.



**I have the heart
and desire to be a minister
for the Lord and to leave
here as a workman
approved to serve God and
to rightly divide His Word
of truth.**

I am thankful for the seminary and for brothers and sisters like you who help support it. I love you all. God bless you! Peace like a river.

Visit the Divine Hope Reformed Bible Seminary website to learn more about its professors, curriculum, and students and to find out how you can visit and be a help to it: <http://www.divinehopeseminary.org/>.

Mr. Carleous Clay

is an inmate at the Danville, Illinois, Correctional Center. He is also a student at Divine Hope Reformed Bible Seminary, which is located within the walls of the prison.



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Where are all the young people going? Why do the visitors never seem to stick? Why have there been so many fights in our church history? Unfortunately, these are common questions in the Reformed tradition. In my years as a pastor, I have been shocked over how much antipathy there has been toward Reformed churches. It took me more than a few years to get a handle on why the reaction has been so strong. While Reformed churches historically have been staunch defenders of the doctrines of grace, at times the very grace that is proclaimed has not been evident in practice. The sad reality is that many people have experienced fighting, church splits, abuses, hatreds, contentions, jealousies, all undergirded by a hard kind of legalism within the confines of a closed community that demonstrates nothing of the joy of Christ. What are we to think of these things? Amid all the beauties of the Reformed faith, are there any legitimate criticisms of the Reformed faith that we should evaluate?

The Bible contrasts two very different kinds of ministries. In 2 Corinthians

3 the apostle Paul says that we are ministers of the new covenant. The contrast the apostle is making is between the new covenant as the fulfillment of the promises made to Abraham, which he calls the ministry of righteousness, and the particular phenomenon of the giving of the law on Sinai to Moses, which he designates as the ministry of condemnation. The contrast is important because each kind of ministry produces its own kind of fruit in its recipients.

Nothing exposes this more clearly than when Jesus came upon the Jewish community of his day. This community was under the ministry of condemnation, and the bad tree was bearing bad fruit. The Jewish community was a legalistic, self-righteous club only for those who conformed to the super-imposed interpretations of the law and the tradition of the elders. No one could enter the club until there was complete conformity and uniformity.

Full of self-righteous pride, the Sanhedrin condemned everyone except themselves. The Pharisees

would go so far as to condemn Jesus and his disciples for not washing their hands properly before eating bread (Matt. 15:1–2). This ministry was killing the people in a practical way. The Sanhedrin did nothing but fight over the minutest points of the law, and their whole shepherding of the people proved to be nothing but a heavy-handed yoke of manipulation. They were grumpy. There was no joy, no confidence, no hope, no freedom—only sorrow and guilt and a whole bunch of fighting and division, tragic consequences of a ministry that kills. How different this all was from the ministry of Christ, whose goal was to loose people from bondage and secure a joy that was complete.

This has been a serious problem in Reformed churches. Many of the Reformed divisions are driven by a Reformed pastor or authority who has steadily and consistently delivered the ministry of condemnation to the people. This kind of ministry is concerned only to bring people into conformity to the law of God with its heavy yoke. The grace of God revealed in Christ, who is the “end of the law for righteousness to everyone who believes,” has been forgotten or is neglected (Rom. 10:4).

When the ministry is unable to make this basic distinction, the condemning or killing power of the law is used to motivate new obedience (see Rom. 7:6–13). For the Christian, the law no longer becomes a standard for grateful living but reverts to a standard of obtaining one’s own righteousness before God—the very error of the Galatian church. This has the sad consequence of leaving the people under its heavy yoke and wondering

whether they have done enough to really be accepted before God. The pastor fails to create a sense of awe and wonder over the person and work of Christ, who has fulfilled the law in himself for his people. In this case, the pastor has forgotten the primary goal of gospel ministry and robbed the people of their joy in Christ. Consider Calvin's summary of gospel ministry in his commentary on John 20:23:

Many other things, undoubtedly, are contained in the Gospel, but the principal object which God intends to accomplish by it is, to receive men into favour by not imputing their sins. If, therefore, we wish to show that we are faithful ministers of the Gospel, we must give our most earnest attention to this subject; for the chief point of difference between the Gospel and heathen philosophy lies in this, that the Gospel makes the salvation of men to consist in the forgiveness of sins through free grace.

Here Calvin notes that the principal object of all ministry is to lead people to confess sin and receive the free grace of forgiveness offered in the gospel. All other pagan religions focus merely on correcting the behavior of individuals.

Some basic questions are important in this light: When the pastor is treating the sanctification of Christians with God's law, using the law as what Reformed theology designates a third use, or rule of gratitude, is the pastor using the killing power of the law in anger to correct a perceived lack of spirituality, or is he speaking to them as believers under the grace of God? Conversely, when the pastor is crushing with the killing power of the law to convict of sin, is his goal to lead the people to Christ to receive his forgiveness and grace? Consequently, what are the fruits that follow in the life of the congregation—joy or guilt?

If the ministry in question has not made clear that its primary aim is to bring a ministry of righteousness to

sinners, the consequences are severe. Six kinds of bad fruits follow from the ministry of condemnation.

1. *Cultlike behavior is fostered.* As particular interpretations of the law are pounded into the people, a guilty hold is fostered over them. The people are brainwashed to believe that if they depart from the tradition of the elders on any point, they are departing from the only true church and endangering their souls before God. In these environments, the church becomes its own kind of club. To really belong, one has to adopt the fine interpretations of the law as the hard-lined pastor has forced them.

2. *A martyr complex is promoted.* When the ministry is exposed for what it is, a ministry of condemnation coercing people with the fine points of the law for conformity, these groups love to retreat into a kind of martyr complex as the last ones standing on the truth, or the last "seven-thousand who have not bowed the knee to Baal."

3. *The law itself becomes a rule of self-promotion and pride.* As the pastor swings hard with the law to the condemnation of everyone else, the churchgoer actually develops a confidence in his own conviction and good record of keeping the particular commandment being addressed. This produces a kind of self-confidence in the particular nuances of the tradition itself.

4. *Church splits and divisions are common.* The use of the heavy hand of the law to justify one's own position to the condemnation of everyone else tends to arouse the works of the flesh in the people. The apostle makes this case in Romans 7:8; the law, when used to promote self-righteousness, actually has the effect of arousing all manner of sinful desire. As the works of the flesh are aroused in this way, the ministry is actually moving the people to the inevitable consequence of division since mutual love and unity are only promoted by those who have

been deeply touched by the love of Christ in the gospel.

5. *Joy in Christ is absent.* True joy is a fruit of those who have been set free by the truth of the gospel. The ministry of condemnation in contrast produces a host of malcontents.

6. *A bunch of churchgoers remain unregenerate.* When the ministry of righteousness is absent, people are not brought into contact with a message that can truly give life. You create a closed community of many who are not born again (See John 3).

These problems at times have become so bad that many people have walked away from the church altogether, or they have jumped to the opposite extreme, rejecting anything that they associate with being Reformed—discipline, commitment, doctrine, catechism, structure, evening worship, ties, coats, organs—as everything becomes governed by how it makes one feel in reaction to the legalism. This also has sad consequences for our young people as many end up leaving the church.

Reformed churches would do well to consider whether their history of ministering to God's people has promoted the fruit of the Spirit or the works of the flesh. If the latter is what people have experienced, it's no wonder there has been such a reaction against Reformed churches. We have a rich heritage in the Reformed tradition of the doctrines of grace. "Woe to me if I do not preach the gospel!" said the apostle (1 Cor. 9:16). Woe to the Reformed churches if they bury the very gospel they once uncovered.

This article first appeared on his blog, *The Gordian Knot* (<http://christopherjgordon.blogspot.com>), and has been reprinted with his permission.

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The Canadian and American Reformed Churches (CanAmRC)

The Canadian and American Reformed Churches (CanAmRC), more commonly referred to as the Canadian Reformed Church (CanRC), consists of fifty congregations in Canada and four congregations in the United States.

History¹

The Netherlands

The Canadian Reformed Churches are rooted in the Protestant Reformation as it developed in the Netherlands. The cause of the Reformation made great inroads there, which led to the establishment of a vigorous Reformed church life grounded in the key confessional documents of the Reformed Churches: the Belgic Confession and the Heidelberg Catechism.

Before long these churches faced threats from within that attacked the heart of the Reformation's emphasis on salvation by grace alone. At the center of the controversy was Jacob Arminius, whose teaching subtly undermined the sovereignty of God in saving sinners. He ascribed to fallen man the power to accept or reject God's grace. This became known as arminianism. Beginning in fall 1618, a synod was held in Dort that was attended by delegates from the Netherlands, England, Scotland, Germany, and Switzerland. The synod refuted the teachings of Arminius and maintained the sovereignty of God's grace. The decision of this synod, the Canons of Dort, became the third confessional document of the Reformed churches in the Netherlands in 1619.

While the Reformed churches

enjoyed peace and had the support of the state during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, religious vitality gave way to nominal Christianity. In the nineteenth century two groups separated from the state-supported church, the first in 1834 and the second in 1886. In 1892, the majority of the churches of these two groups merged and became the Reformed Churches in the Netherlands.

Eventually, new troubles arose within these united churches. The key issue concerned teachings regarding covenant and baptism. A synod held in 1942 imposed one particular explanation on all its members. When a number of ministers was deposed and excommunicated, a separation occurred that involved about ten percent of the membership. Since those who separated indicated that they were liberating themselves from extrabiblical teachings that conflicted with the Three Forms of Unity, they became known as the Reformed Churches in the Netherlands (Liberated). The separation that occurred in 1944 is called "The Liberation."

North America

After the Second World War there was a massive immigration from the Netherlands to North America, especially to Canada. When members of the Reformed Churches in the Netherlands arrived in Canada, they first took up contact with already existing churches of Reformed persuasion, hoping that they could join with them. That hope soon disappeared when it became clear that one of those churches, the Protestant Reformed Church, expected the

newly arrived immigrants to accept a document called the Declaration of Principles, which essentially equated election and covenant. The immigrants refused to do this, as they did not wish to be bound by theological formulations that they believed to be beyond the Three Forms of Unity. The other Reformed church under consideration was the Christian Reformed Church. Joining it also proved impossible when it became clear that this church sided with those in the Netherlands who had earlier expelled the newly arrived immigrants.

These immigrants decided to organize their own congregations, and the first Canadian Reformed congregation was instituted on April 16, 1950, in Lethbridge, Alberta. That same year also saw churches instituted in Edmonton and Neerlandia, Alberta; Orangeville, Ontario; and New Westminster, British Columbia.

The Present

Over the years, the CanAmRC has grown to a federation of fifty-four churches. Twenty-seven of its churches are located in southern Ontario, four in Manitoba, eight in Alberta, and eleven in British Columbia. There are four American Reformed Congregations, one each in Pennsylvania, Michigan, Colorado, and Washington State. The CanAmRC has two regional synods and is made up of eight classes.

The CanAmRC church order follows closely the church order adopted by the Synod of Dort, which in article 29, "The Ecclesiastical Assemblies," states, "Four kinds of ecclesiastical assemblies shall be maintained: the

Consistory, the Classis, the Regional Synod, and the General Synod.”

Each church sends one or two delegates, and, together, all the delegates form a regional synod. The members of a regional synod have been delegated by classes, while the members of a general synod have been delegated by regional synods. At a classis the delegates come as representatives of their churches; at a regional synod the delegates represent all the churches in their area.

The Canadian Reformed Theological Seminary, located in Hamilton, Ontario, is operated by the Canadian Reformed Churches primarily for the training of ministers of the Word in that federation of churches. The seminary falls under the supervision of a board of governors, which directly reports to the general synod

of the Canadian Reformed Churches.

The Canadian and American Reformed Churches is a federation with which the United Reformed Churches (URC) has interacted most extensively as a church in phase 2 of ecclesiastical fellowship. Phase 2 is one of recognition and is entered into only when the broadest assemblies of both federations agree this is desirable. The intent is to recognize and accept each other as true and faithful churches, with a desire for eventual organic union. The URC views the CanAmRC as generally the federation with which it shares most in common in terms of confession, history, and church polity. The two have worked together toward an organic union, but some differences exist, which has slowed the progress of federative unity. Both synods urge continued work toward union, and

their respective synodical committees continue to dialogue together. Many of the churches of both federations have pulpit exchanges with each other.

1. Information for this article comes from the federation's website, <http://www.canrc.org/>, where you can find more complete information about the Canadian and American Reformed Churches.

Mr. Myron Rau

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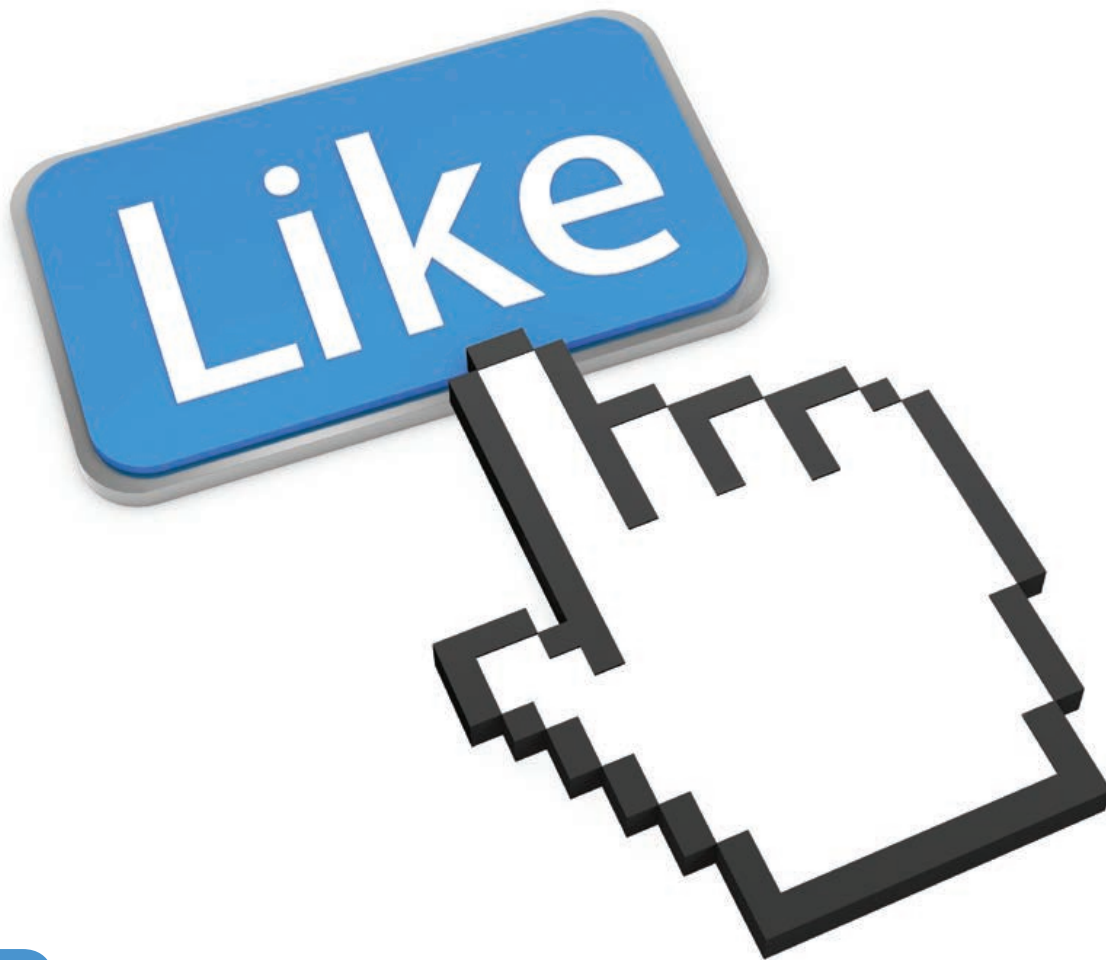
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Does God Like Me on Facebook? (Part 1)

The Next Generation

Rev. Michael J. Schout



I do not have a Facebook account. Go ahead and laugh if you want! I'm secure with who I am. I know who my friends are, and my friends know me.

I don't have a Facebook account, nor do I want one, but I don't think the Bible forbids it. (You can take back your "He's either legalistic or really old-fashioned" thoughts.) Probably most of you do have an account, and that's not *necessarily* bad.

In this edition of *The Next Generation*, I want to address the positives of Facebook. I do have some concerns, though, and plan on tackling those next time. But is it possible to use Facebook well, for the glory of God?

The Bible tells us to "give thanks in all circumstances" (1 Thess. 5:18). It also teaches that "nothing is to be rejected if it is received with thanksgiving" (1 Timothy 4:4). Of course this does not mean that everything is permissible as long as we say thanks. Being thankful for pornography does not make it right.

A good question to ask when we come to matters of Christian conscience is this: Can I truly thank God for this? Can I thank God for this movie? Can I thank God for this music? Can I thank God for this use of my time? Can I thank God for this friendship? I think you could ask the same thing about Facebook. Is this something I can thank God for? Let's

consider how you might be able to answer yes to that question in three ways.

Communicating Information

My decision not to have a Facebook account does not make me technophobic. I preach from an iPad and I text from an iPhone. The problem is not technology per se.

The world has been advancing technologically from the beginning. Part of God's image in man is his capacity and creativity for making things. The invention of the wheel was cutting edge for its time, as was the Gutenberg printing press, the telephone, and the automobile. You get the idea.

We live in a Facebook society. According to a survey from the Pew Internet and American Life Project, together with Harvard's Berkman Center, 95 percent of teens use the Internet, and 81 percent of them use social media sites. Of these, Facebook is by far the most used by an estimated 94 percent.

The most convincing argument I have heard for getting an account is the ability it gives to disseminate information with remarkable ease. With the click of a button, I could post an announcement about youth group or let my friends know what time we are meeting for dinner. In this way, Facebook is a great mechanism for communicating information to others, whether in the form of announcements or updates.

My friend was a missionary in Africa for five years, and Facebook served as a free and easy way for him to communicate with his family, friends, and supporting churches. At one point, he was the only American in a French-speaking city of one million people. The days and especially the weekend were lonely. Fellowship was hard to find. Facebook was a blessing for him, a reason to thank God for His gifts to men.

Facebook also serves the purpose of sharing pictures and posting updates, which can be a wonderful blessing for families separated by distance. My spiritual mentor has children and grandchildren living in Arizona, Michigan, and Massachusetts. Facebook helps keep them informed and in some ways closes the geographical gap.

Ministering to Others

Another potential benefit of Facebook is the unique platform it provides to encourage and minister to others. Our family recently went through a tragedy. Facebook was a tool that God used to bring encouragement. People from all over the world, when they heard of the events, could communicate with my brother-in-law and sister-in-law and offer them

words of hope and comfort from God's Word. The magnitude of prayer and encouragement was multiplied because of Facebook. I know for a fact that they can thank God for it.

Paul writes to the Thessalonians, "Therefore encourage one another and build one another up, just as you are doing" (1 Thess. 5:11). Social media came long after Paul. He did not have a Twitter account (Would he tweet something like this: "Just saw another conversion to Christ #denyyourself?!). Christians without Facebook can and must encourage others. But Facebook can serve as a mechanism.

So let me ask you this: Are you using Facebook to build others up? When is the last time you wrote something that encouraged someone else? Words have power. They can build up or destroy. Says James, "Look at the ships also: though they are so large and are driven by strong winds, they are guided by a very small rudder wherever the will of the pilot directs. So also the tongue is a small member, yet it boasts of great things" (3:4-5).

Defending the Faith

The third positive of Facebook I would like to consider is its capacity to defend the faith. If Martin Luther lived in the twenty-first century, would he have posted his Ninety-Five Theses on the Wittenberg door—or on the Internet?

Apparently there is a lot of debating happening in online chat rooms and Internet forums. This can turn ugly fast, but it also provides a unique opportunity for Christians to engage non-Christians with the truth of the gospel.

A mom of six children from our congregation is routinely having Facebook discussions with atheists, agnostics, and people from different religions. Sometimes she sends me the highlights (or lowlights, depending on context). I am delighted to see her engaged

in this sort of activity and doubtful she would have the opportunity to do so without Facebook since all six of her children are under the age of fourteen.

A lot of churches use Facebook as a tool of communication and invitation to attend services and special events. Most people do not use phone books anymore (for those of you too young to remember, a phone book is a book that includes a list of names and phone numbers). Facebook is the new phone book! It makes me wonder if my children's children will even know what Facebook is!

The Great Commission is the church's call to spread the gospel to every nation. With modern technology, including Facebook, we can take the ancient Word and broadcast it for modern times.

Conclusion

Was I able to convince myself, after considering Facebook's positive benefits, of setting up my own page and joining the millions of other users? Not quite.

But I hope this article makes you think. Can you say "Thank you, God" for Facebook? Much of it depends on how you use it. It can be a great way to communicate information. It can be a platform for encouragement. It can even be a tool for defending the faith.

In part 2, I hope to consider three dangers of Facebook. But until then, e-mail me some other benefits that I left out. I would love to hear them. And who knows, maybe then I will ask you to like me on Facebook. But don't count on it.

Rev. Michael J. Schout

is the pastor of Grace URC in Alto, Michigan. He welcomes your feedback at mikeschout@gmail.com

**“Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children. And walk in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.”
– Ephesians 5:1-2 (ESV)**

An imitation is a copy of the original that is considered a success when the difference between the copy and the original is indistinguishable. When it comes to people, to imitate is to follow someone as a model. Most of the time, however, we do not like imitators very much. Those who imitate other people usually do it poorly. They are not being themselves. Imitation can be a form of deceit when people put on airs, act more important than they are, or fake various kinds of behavior. We would tell the imitator, “Don’t put on an act. Don’t impersonate, ape, or mimic—it’s not you. Don’t be so shallow. Be yourself.”

When it comes to the Christian life, being yourself is a problem. As a Christian, you do not want to be yourself. If we truly know ourselves in our sin, the last thing we would want is to be ourselves. A Christian would say, “I don’t want to be me! I know the horror of being me. I know the sins, the bad things in my life, the slander, the lying, the cheating, and the failure that I am. That is not how I want to live anymore. Instead, I need to learn how to live as the new creation I am by Christ’s Spirit.”

Christians know they need a role model. We need someone to show us what real living actually is. The only choice, the only One who is different from everyone else, is Jesus Christ. Paul told us to look to Him when he wrote: “Be imitators of God.” Look to Jesus, the God-man. Be imitators of Him.

The reasons Paul calls us to imitate Christ are given in Ephesians 4. Paul warns us against walking like the unbelievers, who are in darkness. Instead, if Jesus is our Lord and master, our life will look different, and Paul spells out how different that life would be. He writes, “That is not the way you have learned Christ.” He follows that up with a list of things that are expected from godly people, such as putting off our old self; not lying, but telling the truth; being angry but not sinning in our anger; not keeping our anger alive; not stealing; doing honest work; not talking trash; letting what we say be good; and not grieving God the Holy Spirit who lives in us. The apostle tells us, “Do not be bitter; do not be angry; do not slander other people. Put all that stuff behind you.” Paul’s point is this: You are different. You are Christian. You are supposed to look different and live differently: “Be imitators of God as beloved children.”

Most of us have seen children play house. Often they imitate their parents and even pick up on mannerisms their parents may not be aware of. This kind of imitation generally never leaves us completely as we grow older, although we often prefer not to admit it. Not only do we tend to look like our parents because of our shared DNA but we also tend to grow into the same mold as we get older. Young people may say that they do not want to be like their parents and that their prospective future family will be different. However, as time goes by, they start to do things the same way, and you can see the familial patterns emerging. Many parents are able to see their reflection in their children. Herein lies a subconscious, natural imitation. Paul wants that and still more. He calls us to imitate the One who has the single biggest influence in our life. “Be imitators of God like beloved children.” This is the consequence of being a Christian: do

tenderhearted, ¹ forgiving one another, as
God in Christ forgave you.

Walk in Love

5 ¹ Therefore be imitators of God, as be-
loved children. ² And ^k walk in love, ¹ as
Christ loved us and ^m gave himself up for us,
a ⁿ fragrant ^o offering and sacrifice to God.
³ But ^p sexual immorality and all impur-
or covetousness ^q must not even be na-
among you, as is proper among saints
there be ^r no filthiness nor foolish-
which are out of

Matt. 6:14
Chapter 5
1 | ch. 4:32;
Matt. 5:7,
Luke 6:3
2 | Rom.
14:1
3 |

not be like everybody in the world out there, but be like the One who has rescued you from eternal death.

Thus, our imitation of Christ must not only rise from our subconscious but it must also be a conscious effort. Paul pinpoints our imitation as a walk in love as Christ loved us and gave Himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God. There was nothing subconscious about that as He purposefully strode to the cross on our behalf.

Love, contrary to popular opinion, is not just a nice feeling we have about someone that rises mostly from our subconscious. Love goes much deeper than that. Love is a decision. We decide to love, and we must do so in an ongoing way. Love is to be our guide, and it is to govern our emotions, actions, and decisions. This is completely consistent with the two great commandments to love God above all and to love your neighbor as

you love yourself. Love comes before the law and all the guidelines we live by. Those only work if there is love. You have to live love, breathe love, and smell like love. It has to shine in everything and everywhere. Walk in love.

Paul points us to the example of how that exactly works. Do it—love as Christ loved you. And we know the whole story of His love. Most of us were brought up with it. You know how He loved. He came to earth motivated by love. He would have come if you were the only sinner on earth. He suffered for you. He died for you. His love is a deep and personal love. That is the love to look at, imitate, and live out.

To be Christlike, to be imitators, our relationship must not be one of seeking what's in it for us. Jesus was not like that, and we may not be like

that either. Rather, our lives must be one of self-sacrifice and servanthood to Christ and our neighbor, always remembering that we are objects of God's mercy and that our only hope is in Him.

Let our prayer be this: "We are looking to You, Lord. Help us to deal with each other and love each other in the same way You deal with and love us. Help us to have mercy and loving kindness in a big way, yet such a small way when compared to the mercy that You have shown to us."

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To Show Them Grace

Book Review of Cornelius Van Til's *Christ and the Jews*

K. Smith

If you had asked me, I would have said that I knew about the Jews. I thought they were just Israelites waiting for their Savior, but they did not believe Jesus was the Messiah. I thought Judaism did not have any great reforms or thinkers. In my eyes, they were a paused religion, an inactive religion, a backward, waiting, old-fashioned religion. I was wrong.

When I decided to read Cornelius Van Til's book *Christ and the Jews*, I was expecting a traditional Reformed book. Something with a little Heidelberg, a little Westminster, a good dose of Calvin, and some TULIP thrown in for good measure. I was expecting the same thing I had read before, revamped and re-presented to be applied to Judaism. I was wrong about that too.

Van Til's book was difficult to read. It assumed I was familiar with many philosophers and theologians I had never heard of. It assumed I had a working knowledge of Greek, Latin, and German. Despite the hindrance of not understanding German and my own ignorance of Jewish doctrine, this well-researched, well-argued book of complex philosophies and doctrines completely changed my outlook on the Jewish religion.

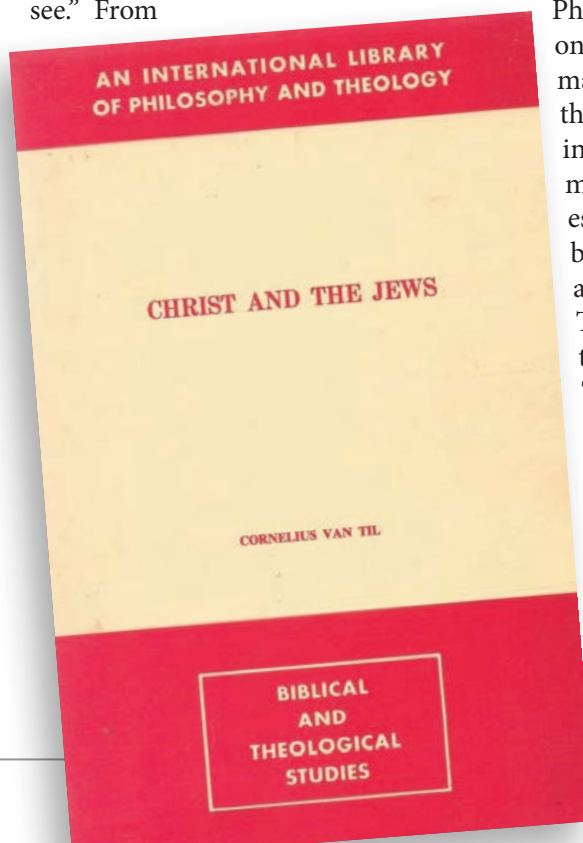
Christ and the Jews delves into Jewish thinking. It begins with Philo Judaeus of Alexandria (20 BC–AD 50) and follows through to Martin Buber's (1878–1965) complex *I-Thou* philosophy. It presents the thoughts of contemporaries and commentators who reacted to Buber's ideas. The book compares all of this to modern Protestantism, Hellenistic thought,

Eastern mysticism, and orthodox Christianity. In four in-depth chapters, Van Til's book presents Judaism. It shines the light on the inner workings and belief structure, all to better understand how to witness to the modern Jew.

Van Til starts, almost abruptly, with a Hellenistic Jewish philosopher named Philo Judaeus. As a philosopher living in Alexandria at the dawning of the era of Christ, Philo attempted to synthesize Judaism and Stoic thought. He begins with what he calls the "Unknowable God." He describes God as unmentionable, inexpressible, and in every way incomprehensible. While this seems to be an imitation of Plato's "Unmovable Mover," Philo does not get his idea from the Greeks. On the contrary, Philo developed his idea from the Old Testament, beginning with Exodus 33:23, where God says to Moses, "Thou shalt see what is behind me, but My face thou shalt not see." From

this verse, Philo asserts the incomprehensibility of God. He then goes on to argue that if God cannot be understood, He cannot be named. He cites the Old Testament texts "I am He who is" and "I appeared to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob as their God, but my name, Lord, I did not reveal to them." After establishing the unknowable and unnamable nature of God, Philo assumes that human reason and divine revelation are in full harmony. To state it simply, if God cannot be fully known by man, then God cannot be known at all. Thus, man's knowledge is autonomous. This is the crux of Philo's thought. Of course, Van Til argues that God would not let His own creation blot out His holy name: "He sent his Son, the full expression of his substance to speak out his name among sinful men. This Son allowed his name to be blotted out on the cross in order thus to rename a people in his own name."

Philo, however, continues to build on his philosophy to claim that man's knowledge is rational and that he can actively participate in divine knowledge through means of the Logos, which he establishes as the Mediator between God and man. Philo also demythologizes the Old Testament, converting the truth to simple allegory. Van Til summarizes Philo's thought with the words: "Since he did not read the Old Testament in terms of its fulfillment in Christ, he must demythologize it and thereby reduce its message to that which the higher religions of the East



and the best philosophy of the Greeks already knew.”

After Van Til establishes Philo’s position, he moves on to the more contemporary thinker Martin Buber in his second chapter. Buber was an early twentieth-century Jewish philosopher who became famous for his concept of *I-Thou* dialogue. Buber claims that his years of study led to his view of Christ as nothing more than a “great brother.” He sees Christ as an equal and states that Jesus and the Pharisees were in harmony, both focusing on the condition of the heart and not the letter of the law. Van Til argues that by rejecting Christ, Buber and other Jews cannot claim to be monotheists at all. They cannot claim to know the law if they cannot see Jesus as the fulfillment of Moses and the law. Van Til echoes this thought throughout this chapter as he discusses Buber’s dialogical principle and other philosophers, such as Spinoza and Sabbatai, who helped develop these ideas. Not only does Buber disregard Christ but he also reduces the entire Old Testament to simple allegory. Buber’s writing carries strong overtones of Eastern mysticism. An example of this is his perception of evil: “The wickedness of man’s actions [do] not derive from a corruption of the soul, but from the intervention of the evil ‘imagery,’” which is a direct contrast to the Reformed idea of total depravity. Van Til concludes this chapter with a comparison of modern thinkers and their evaluations of Buber’s work. All of these men label Buber’s thinking as “representative of a high or spiritual type of existentialism.” In summary, Buber’s philosophy disregards Christ, the law, and the Torah. It resembles existentialism and mysticism more than any sort of traditional monotheism.

The burning question that remains after Van Til’s coverage of Martin Buber is how Buber could even consider himself a Jew when his ideas are so far from the traditional Old

Testament teachings. *Christ and the Jews* answers this in the third chapter, “The Torah.” Van Til explains how, as Judaism progressed, the method of teaching the Torah was adapted to the progressing times and thought. There was never a single creed that, if believed, made one a Jew. Within certain limits, “belief was free.” However, there was a problem, in that there were so many “customs and practices that had established themselves” that the rabbis could not assert “divine sanction.” The Torah was considered the “ultimate authority,” and since the Torah did not explicitly promote or forbid these practices, the rabbis could not either, as there cannot be two ultimate authorities. Eventually, the concept of the “Unwritten Torah” was solidified to resolve this dilemma. This was the idea that “the Torah contained more than what was set forth in the written text.” It was thought that there was “an Unwritten Torah alongside of the written one, not as its rival nor even its commentary, but so that the two together, written and unwritten constituted *the* Torah as it essentially was.” The Torah had been reduced to a form that, as one expert states, “transformed the Torah from being only a written document already ancient and in danger of becoming obsolete into a continuous revelation keeping pace with the ages.” This is why Buber was able to consider himself a Jew. He was operating within the Unwritten Torah.

In his final chapter, Van Til turns from normative Judaism to catholic Judaism, explaining some key differences between Christianity and Judaism. The orthodox Christian belief is grounded in articles of faith that cannot be deviated from. It is focused on creed and confession. In contrast, the Jewish faith is a voluntary expression of religious consciousness. It claims no dogma. It has no liturgy. A Jew is born into his faith, and it is this birthright that instills in him the

“obligation to work and strive for . . . Israel.” The Jewish aim is to “unite all nations and classes of men in the divine covenant.” It believes in the “autonomy of man” and denies the Reformed doctrine of original sin and depravity. Judaism believes that mankind does not need redemption, but only a return to the right path. This return to God and the divine image is “an internal process within the moral consciousness of man.” This is why the Jew rejects Christ. Not because he is still waiting on his Messiah but because he doesn’t believe he needs one. This is the heart of what Van Til has been saying the whole time. The Jews are ethical optimists; their only creed is that of man’s goodness. They consider the messianic idea of Christianity to be utterly mythological. There is no need for grace, for salvation. Man takes the kingdom of God upon himself.

Who is the Jewish God? I had thought Jews believed in the same Lord as I. But I do not recognize Him in their “wholly unknown and unknowable” God. I do not see Him in their Unwritten Torah or allegorical Pentateuch. I cannot find even a need for Him in their declarations of man’s inherent goodness. To witness to the Jews is not to simply tell them their long-awaited Savior has come. No, to witness to the Jews requires the same approach Paul used as he stood in the center of the Areopagus. We must proclaim to them the Unknown God and that He is not as distant as they think. Not only that, but we must “beseech the Jew to really repent from sin, to repent not in the strength of a righteousness that he has within himself but in the strength of righteousness God has in Christ given unto men.” To witness to the Jews is to introduce them to grace.

K. Smith

was a college student at the time this article was written.

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