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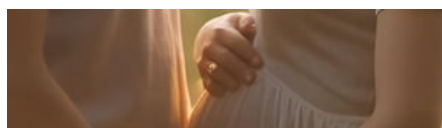


A Call to Holiness | Judgment & Grace for the Woman | Ezekiel's Action Prophecies
A Few More B. J. Haans? | Why the URCNA Left the CRCNA | Why We Wait | Good Question
Church Order Articles 29 and 30 | How Can I Become Godlier? | Why Baptism Matters | From
Maintenance to Missional: A Plea for Reformation | The Death of Christ and the Righteousness
of Faith: Signed, Sealed, and Administered | The Empty Tomb | Book Review: A Wise Guide to the
Mental Health Minefield | The Knowledge of Future Judgment Is a Great Comfort

3 | **A Call to Holiness**

Mr. Cornelius VanKempen

The highway of holiness, undamageable because it is paved with the precious blood of Christ.



4 | **Judgment & Grace for the Woman**

Rev. Peter Holtvlüwer

In the wake of our rebellion, God imposed punishments on humanity, beginning with the woman. What does this punishment entail? How does Christ's redeeming work change things for Christian women and men?

7 | **Ezekiel's Action Prophecies**

Dr. R. Andrew Compton

Ezekiel's action prophecies vividly impress upon Judah the seriousness of their sins while also ritually forming Ezekiel as God's prophetic priest.



11 | **A Few More B. J. Haans?**

Dr. Michael R. Kearney

The legacy of Rev. B. J. Haan on the pages of *Torch and Trumpet/The Outlook* deserves renewed attention.



14 | **Why the URCNA Left the CRCNA: By a Young Person for Young People**

Mr. Joseph Dick

Ignoring church history will spoil you; learning church history will enrich you. URCNA history, case in point.

18 | **Why We Wait: Part 2**

Mrs. Elisabeth Bloechl

As time-bound creatures living in a time-bound world, waiting is a reality. What is God's purpose in and for our waiting?

20 | **Good Question**

Rev. William Boekestein

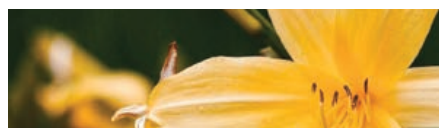
Good Question 132: How can I discover and develop my spiritual gifts?

21 | **Church Order Articles 29 and 30**

Rev. Greg Lubbers

Article 29: Appeals by Assemblies

Article 30: Withdrawing from the Federation



24 | **How Can I Become Godlier?**

Rev. William Boekestein

Lord's Day 25 - Q&A 65-68.

26 | **Why Baptism Matters**

Rev. William Boekestein

Lord's Day 26 - Q&A 69-71.

26 | **From Maintenance to Missional: A Plea for Reformation (5)**

Rev. Paul T. Murphy

What would a visitor, maybe a non-Christian, say about visiting your church? Would they say they were warmly welcomed as if they had 'come home'?

30 | **The Death of Christ and the Righteousness of Faith: Signed, Sealed, and Administered (2)**

Rev. Casey Freswick

The Scripture clearly teaches that circumcision and baptism are signs and seals with the same meaning and administration.

33 | **The Empty Tomb**

Mrs. Nancy Moelker

A poem from the book *In God's Arms*.

35 | **Book Review: A Wise Guide to the Mental Health Minefield**

Rev. Wes Bredenhof

Mental Health and Your Church: A Handbook for Biblical Care

36 | **Meditation: The Knowledge of Future Judgment Is a Great Comfort**

Rev. George van Popta

This is the seventh of ten songs based on the Heidelberg Catechism's explanation of the Apostles' Creed.

Cover: Easter Lilies are strongly associated with Easter because they symbolize purity, rebirth, and hope, mirroring the Christian belief in Jesus' resurrection; their white petals represent Christ's purity and their growth from a bulb underground signifies new life emerging from death, making them a common decoration in churches and homes.



A CALL TO Holiness

And an highway shall be there, and a way, and it shall be called The way of holiness; the unclean shall not pass over it; but it shall be for those: the wayfaring men, though fools, shall not err therein.

—Isaiah 35:8

Isaiah 35 begins in a desert wilderness where there is rejoicing. Deserts and wildernesses are not known as places of rejoicing; they are dry and miserable, mostly untraveled and dangerous. But as Isaiah continues, he says the wilderness will blossom like a rose—even “blossom abundantly,” making the wilderness glorious like Lebanon, Carmel, and Sharon (v. 2).

This must be a mirage. What would make this wilderness blossom? The sight of the glory of the Lord and the excellency of our God. Without the Lord our God, it would be a wilderness of hopelessness and sin, but now, there is rejoicing in hope. “Strengthen ye the weak hands, and confirm the feeble knees. Say to them that are of a fearful heart, Be strong, fear not: behold, your God will come with vengeance, even God with a recompense; he will come and save you” (vv. 3–4). In this wilderness of death, there is also healing for our deadly disease. “Then the eyes of the

blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf shall be unstopped. Then shall the lame man leap as an hart, and the tongue of the dumb sing: for in the wilderness shall waters break out, and streams in the desert” (vv. 5–6). God’s poor and afflicted people, born in the wilderness, see God’s promises fulfilled in the promised seed, Jesus Christ. This is the seed that makes this wilderness blossom abundantly.

“And an highway shall be there, and a way, and it shall be called The way of holiness; the unclean shall not pass over it; but it shall be for those: the wayfaring men, though fools, shall not err therein” (v. 8). Not everyone in this wilderness is aware of the blossoming and rejoicing because they do not see the glory of Christ Jesus and His way. God calls them fools. They are happy in their misery and have no desire to leave. His highway is a highway of holiness; sin must be left behind. Jesus, the Son of God, was sent into the wilderness

of this world to seek and to save His people. This is God’s sovereign decree: out of sheer unmitigated grace He opens the eyes of the blind, makes the lame walk, and makes the mute sing. “For thou art great, and doest wondrous things: thou art God alone. Teach me thy way, O LORD; I will walk in thy truth: unite my heart to fear thy name” (Ps. 86:10–11).

But the best is yet to come. The highway of holiness that they travel is safe, despite the corruption in and around them. It is the highway God prepared for His people. It is cemented in the blood of their Savior, Jesus Christ; it will admit none but the redeemed, with the Good Shepherd, their Lord and Savior, leading them through all the dangers to their eternal home with Him forever.

“No lion shall be there, nor any ravenous beast shall go up thereon, it shall not be found there; but the redeemed shall walk there: and the ransomed of the LORD shall return, and come to Zion with songs and everlasting joy upon their heads: they shall obtain joy and gladness,

and sorrow and sighing shall flee away” (vv. 9–10). One view of Jesus ruins them for this world’s so-called joy; they cannot live without Him. Nothing else will do, not even all the love of friends and family. It is Jesus and Jesus alone!

By all whom Thou hast made
be praise and worship paid

Thro’ earth abroad; Thy Name
be glorified, There is none
great beside,

Matchless Thy works abide, for
Thou art God.

Help me Thy will to do, Thy
truth I will pursue,

Teach me to fear; give me the
single eye Thy Name to glorify,

O Lord, my God Most high,
with heart sincere.

How great Thy love appears
that bade death’s gloomy fears

No more dismay; O God to
anger slow, save me from ev’ry
foe,

Thy lovingkindness show, Thy
truth display.

Show me Thy mercy true, Thy
servant’s strength renew,

Deliv’rance send; to me Thy
goodness show, Thy comfort
Lord, bestow;

Let those that hate me know
Thou art my friend.

Psalter 236 (Psalm 86)



Mr. Cornelius VanKempen

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

Judgement & Grace for the Woman



Rev. Peter H. Holtviüwer

Meditation Text: Genesis 3:16 & 20
Suggested Reading: Ephesians
5:22–33

After speaking first to the devil-possessed serpent and cursing him, the Lord goes on to address the woman about her sin. He will get to the man in a moment, but in the same order in which the perpetrators of the rebellion acted, so the Lord pronounces judgment over each one in turn, and in verse 16, he singles out the woman. We might have expected God to deal with the man and the woman as one unit since he had brought them together as husband and wife and declared the two one (Gen. 2:24). Yet each is addressed individually, which means that every person has his own responsibility before the Lord. As Paul later writes, “For we will all stand before the judgment seat of God” (Rom. 14:10). On Judgment Day, no one will be able to hide behind a spouse or anyone else; “each of us will give an account of himself to God” (Rom. 14:12). It’s a question we all need to consider: am I ready to stand before God as Judge?

Pain Multiplied

The Lord’s message to the woman is not very long, but it certainly is hauntingly powerful. It’s a word to both this woman and all women at the same time: “I will surely multiply your pain in childbearing; in pain you shall bring forth children.” In 1 Timothy 2:8–15, Paul connects this first woman to all women when speaking of a woman’s role

in church life, citing the events of Genesis 3:1–7 and later also 3:16. He concludes, “Yet she [singular] will be saved through childbearing—if they [plural] continue in faith and love and holiness, with self-control” (v. 15). All women are caught up in the first woman’s sin and its resulting punishment: any woman who has given birth can give her personal testimony that God’s judgment is still in effect. Even with all the medical advances of today, childbirth remains difficult and painful.

That is the first consequence of the woman’s sin mentioned by the Lord: increased pain in childbearing. Apparently, some level of pain existed before the Fall, but now it will be multiplied significantly. This certainly refers to a surge in the physical anguish of the body but it also includes the emotional grief of the heart; the Hebrew word for “pain” can also be translated as “sorrow.” The woman’s sorrow will be multiplied—not just during pregnancy and delivery either, for the Hebrew word for “childbearing” has in mind the entire process from conceiving to birthing and beyond. From beginning to end, the woman will experience pain and sorrow in bringing forth children. From the first menstrual cramp to morning sickness to labor and delivery to the last hot flash, the entire process of bearing children is fraught with grief, sorrow, and pain.

And that’s just if life follows its normal course. Some experience the added sorrow of not receiving any children or receiving fewer than



Every woman who puts her trust in Jesus will begin to experience the lifting of her guilt and sorrows in her marriage, her child-bearing, and in all of life, for sin's curse has been shattered and renewal is underway.

Christian women and men have been filled with the Spirit of Christ; Christ leads them back to the harmonious relationships of Paradise.

hoped for. More than a few Christian couples know the sorrow of infertility. How many tears have been shed over what might not ever be? Right in Genesis we see women (and men) struggling with this sorrow: Sara, who was barren for so long, or Rebekah for whom Isaac had to especially pray. Rachel was so filled with grief that she cried out to Jacob, "Give me children or I shall die!" (Gen. 30:1). Judgment befalls the woman for her sin, and it is miserable.

Friction

The next consequence is no better: "Your desire shall be for your husband, and he shall rule over you." There's been a lot of discussion over what this means. Is this the woman's sexual desire for her husband? As if to say, though the woman will know much grief in childbearing, yet she still will desire sexual union with her husband (and thus the possibility of becoming pregnant is unavoidable). But if that is the case, it's hard to see how that is a form of punishment for either the woman or the man. Isn't that what they were created for in the beginning, and didn't God give them to each other to "become one flesh" (Gen. 2:24)? Does anyone consider a wife's sex drive a bad thing? And how would the adjoining phrase "and he shall rule over you" be connected to her desire for intercourse?

A better interpretation is to see this not as her desire for sexual intimacy but rather as her desire for control over her husband, to basically rule over him. This makes sense in the wider context; it also fits well with the next phrase. In this sentence, the Hebrew word "and" can legitimately be translated as "but" in order to bring out the contrast: "Your desire will be for your husband *but* he will rule over you."¹ The woman will—contrary to the way she was created—want to dominate her husband but the husband will instead dominate her.

The two verbs used in the second part of verse 16 are used by Moses in the neighboring chapter where their sense is more plain. In Genesis 4:7, the Lord says to Cain, "If you do well, will you not be accepted? And if you do not do well, sin is crouching at the door. Its desire is for you, but² you must rule over it." Its desire is *for you*, that is, to control you, to rule over you; but you (Cain) are called instead to master your desire and control it. That requires a battle of the will. In the same way, the wife will desire to rule over her husband but will not succeed; after a battle of their two wills, he will end up ruling over her. It's a distortion of the creation relationship between husband and

wife. Eve had already once usurped Adam's role as head (and he had passively allowed it to happen), and now her punishment is that she will continually want to have that position again. But, at the end of the struggle, her husband will rule over her.

"Rule" is a forceful word. By itself in Scripture, it can be either a beneficial ruling or a domineering ruling; here it tends toward the latter because of the friction between the wife's desire to exercise authority and the husband's God-given authority in the marriage. Gone is the wife's voluntary following of her husband's loving lead; in its place is the judgment that, as much as she strives to set the direction for her husband, he will impose his will on her. The glorious and harmonious fellowship of husband and helper created by God has been perverted by our sin. All that's left is a simmering tension between husband and wife that undermines their one-flesh unity.

Hardship & Hope

All this is hard on a woman, isn't it? Inside of her a battle rages. Created to follow her husband's guidance, she now has an instinctual resistance to it. Created to focus on helping her husband, a woman now frequently adopts her own agenda, and trouble erupts between the two of them. Additionally, the husband no longer has the instinct to love his wife selflessly and lead her gently, and often finds himself being rough or domineering. It doesn't take long for these distortions to show up in Scripture; soon we meet Lamech who abuses the oneness of the marriage bond by taking two wives and arrogantly parades his might before them (Gen. 4:19–24). Instead of sacrificially protecting his wife, Abram lies about Sarai and puts her at great risk (Gen. 12:10–20). Later, Sarai pushes Abram to make Hagar pregnant but then blames him for the resulting trouble (Gen. 16:1–5). Rachel is irrationally upset that Jacob

hasn't given her children and later goes behind his back to steal Laban's idols (Gen. 30:1; 31:19). Michal wrongly despises her husband David and dies childless (2 Sam. 6:16, 23). Hosea's wife Gomer, redeemed out of the life of prostitution, defies her husband and returns to her old ways (Hosea 3:1–3). God's righteous judgment over the woman has made life hard for her.

And yet she lives! And, more than that, she will produce life! A ray of hope shines through in verse 20: "The man called his wife's name Eve, because she was the mother of all living." This shows that Adam was listening to the Lord and understood the grace granted to both of them. By their actions, Adam and Eve had brought upon themselves death, but the Lord intervened to promise them life. Adam had no right to father a child and Eve had no right to conceive and give birth; yet, together, under God's blessing, they would bring forth new life. Eve would have pain and sorrow in the child-bearing process, but she would bear children! Humanity would not end there and then. One generation after another would come forth from Eve until at last the promised Seed of the woman would be born to do His work of crushing the head of the serpent.

Healing Begins

When that Seed of the woman arrives, He will not only destroy Satan but also bring forgiveness and healing to the woman and the man—to all who belong to Him. At His birth, God assigned Him a special name: "He shall be called, Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins" (Matt. 1:21). Jesus Christ rescues women and men from sin's guilt and sin's consequences, for He bore our curse for us on the cross! Every woman who puts her trust in Jesus will begin to experience the lifting of her guilt and sorrows in her marriage, her child-bearing, and in all of life,

for sin's curse has been shattered and renewal is underway. Christian women and men have been filled with the Spirit of Christ; Christ leads them back to the harmonious relationships of Paradise.

That's what Paul is writing about in Ephesians 5: "Wives, submit to your own husbands, as to the Lord." This is the very opposite of "your desire shall be for your husband," to rule him. And notice that this is a command to the married woman, not to the husband. The husband has the command to love her as Christ loves the Church, and that will keep him plenty busy. His task is to make her submission easy by putting her ahead of himself and leading by sacrificing for her good, not to compel her to submit. The wife is commanded to willingly follow her husband's Christ-like lead. And now she can! And she will, for she is already being led by the Spirit of Christ to follow the will of the Father as He designed marriage to be from the beginning.

Submission has its limits, of course; no husband may lead his wife into sin and, if he does, she not only may but must resist and even disobey as the apostles teach (Acts 5:29). But the Christian wife will know happiness and joy when she embraces the freedom Christ gives her and loves her Lord by loving her husband according to the Creator's design: serving her husband as his glorious helper and following him as her glorious head.

1. The Christian Standard Bible translates: "yet he will rule over you."

2. Here the ESV translates the identical Hebrew conjunction as "but," not "and." It's a translator's decision, depending on how the sentence is understood in context.

Rev. Peter H. Holtvlüwer

is minister of Ancaster Canadian Reformed Church (ON) and editor of *Christ's Psalms, Our Psalms*.

Ezekiel's Action Prophecies Part 1 (3)

Ezekiel 3:22-5:17



Dr. R. Andrew Compton



Modern interpreters have fascinated themselves with Ezekiel's psychological state. Beginning in the late 1800s, scholars began to interpret Ezekiel's behavior in this section as signs of psychosis or trauma. David Halperin's 1993 book, *Seeking Ezekiel: Text and Psychology*, even viewed these chapters as Ezekiel reenactment of being neglected during infancy, something Halperin concocted from a hermeneutically bizarre interpretation of Ezekiel 16:4-5.

While Ezekiel's sign-acts continue to puzzle readers, most scholars took Halperin's book as a warning and returned to more responsible approaches. In the next two articles, we consider the sign-acts of Ezekiel 3:22-5:17.

Though Ezekiel and Jeremiah are best known for their action prophecies, other such actions are found in 1 Kings 11:29-31, 22:11 (see also 2 Chron. 18:10); 2 Kings 13:14-19; Hosea 1:29, 3:1-5; Isaiah 20:1-6; and Zechariah 6:9-15.¹ But how do we interpret these passages? They often are viewed as visual aids, although this hardly does them justice. Instead, it is better to view them as rhetorical nonverbal communication used to heighten the persuasiveness of the message. Iain Duguid goes further, proposing that we treat the sign-acts as "affective aids," aimed not at people's eyes but at their hearts and wills. . . . They are designed not merely to help people *see* the truth, but to *feel* the truth."²

In Ezekiel, however, the sign-acts also play a role in shaping Ezekiel's personal, vocational identity as a priest. By acting out the prophetic message for the sake of impacting the exiles, Ezekiel also finds himself embodying priestly actions. As we look at the actions in 3:22-5:17, we'll consider how each one not only persuades the audience but also ritually forms Ezekiel in his priestly prophetic ministry.

Aren't Prophets Against Ritual?

We Protestants can easily conflate ritual with empty ritual. John Calvin was undoubtedly right when he critiqued the Roman Catholic religion of his day: "Hereby it doth easily appear what horrible confusion doth reign in Popery. There is there a huge heap of ceremonies, and to what end but that they may have instead of one veil of the old temple an hundred."³ And yet Calvin also saw that bodily actions play an important role in knowing God's truth. While reflecting on Psalm 51:7, he explained this relationship between body and mind well:

He speaks of hyssop, in allusion to the ceremonies of the law; and though he was far from putting his trust in the mere outward symbol of purification, he knew that, like every other legal rite, it was instituted for an important end. The sacrifices were seals of the grace of God. In them, therefore, he was anxious to find assurance of his reconciliation; and it is highly proper that, when our faith is disposed at any time to waver,

we should confirm it by improving such means of divine support. All which David here prays for is, that God would effectually accomplish, in his experience, what he had signified to his Church and people by these outward rites; and in this he has set us a good example for our imitation. It is no doubt to the blood of Christ alone that we must look for the atonement of our sins; *but we are creatures of sense, who must see with our eyes, and handle with our hands; and it is only by improving the outward symbols of propitiation that we can arrive at a full and assured persuasion of it* (emphasis added).⁴

While ritual can be done in a rote, thoughtless way, it can also be done intentionally, as a fitting bodily response to important theological truths. Look around on a given Sunday and you will notice several rituals that, though not mandated in Scripture, are fitting for practicing the truths proclaimed. What do the deacons do with the offering plates after the collection? Do congregants stand or sit during Scripture readings? Do congregants close their eyes and bow their heads during the benediction? Do they come forward for communion? Many such customs reflect the desire to respond bodily in intentional, biblically consistent ways.

In sum, not every ritual is empty and sinful. The prophets who condemned the ritual of the Israelites—particularly as it was practiced while robbing the poor (e.g., Isa. 61:8; Mal. 1:13)⁵—presumably still engaged in rituals as prescribed in the ceremonial law. We should not be hesitant to associate Ezekiel’s sign-acts with ritual, recognizing that ritual is common to us all and not something that is, in fact, formulaic and sinful.⁶

Action Prophecy #1: Ezekiel Bound and Mute (3:22–27)

In our last article, we considered how Ezekiel’s muteness showed that he could not intercede as a legal “man

of rebuke.” We also saw how his muteness structured the book as a whole due to its relationship to the watchman commission in 3:16–27 and 33:1–22. Having already considered his speechlessness, in this article we’ll note the role of the significance of the “ropes” in 3:25.⁷

While it is true that ropes paint a picture of Ezekiel as bound to speaking only God’s Word, the kinds of ropes described here (Hebrew *‘abotîm*) play an important role in priestly passages. These bind the ephod and breastplate (with the stones engraved with the names of the twelve tribes) to the high priest (see Exod. 28 and 39), symbolically and ritually binding the priest and the people. Admittedly, there is no mention of priestly objects being bound to Ezekiel via the ropes, but there is something striking about objects used to underscore priestly solidarity with the people being placed upon Ezekiel as the priestly prophet. The next sign-acts will build on this.

Action Prophecy #2a: Ezekiel’s Siege (4:1–3)

This action is often delineated into separate sign-acts: besieging the siege model (4:1–3) and Ezekiel’s laying on his side (4:4–8). But considering this as a single act with two separate sub-actions or ritual rites makes the best sense of the repetition of “siege” (vv. 2–3, 7–8).

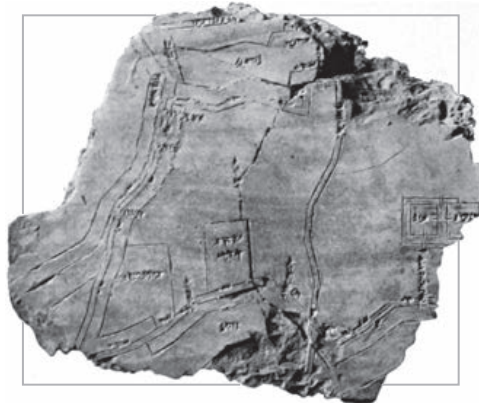
The first sub-action is the building of a model. He is to take a clay tablet and carve a city upon it. This was not an uncommon practice in the ancient world. The inscribed clay map of the Old Babylonian city of Nippur, dating from around the 14th century BC, provides an analogy for what Ezekiel may have carved of Jerusalem.

From here, the prophet surrounds the map with models of siege implements. Ezekiel 4:2 lists several items: a siege wall for observing the siege and preventing people in the

city from escaping; a mound or ramp piled against the city wall that would enable siege engines better access for undermining the walls; and battering rams, which would climb the ramp and strike the walls with a heavy, blunt ram, and also serve as a platform for archers. Ezekiel even builds model camps for the soldiers besieging the city. This is a very detailed model! Why is he doing this? Because Ezekiel himself is laying siege to the city (vv. 2–3).

But then something unexpected happens. Verse 3 says that Ezekiel is to place an “iron plate,” like a cooking griddle, between himself and the city. It is to be an iron wall between himself (the besieger) and the city (the besieged). Many writers have interpreted this as God’s presence being symbolically cut off from Jerusalem—i.e., the LORD, acted out by Ezekiel, is separated from Jerusalem by an impenetrable, iron wall and will no longer show patience and mercy.

When we study the plate itself, however, we actually see a picture of mitigation of the LORD’s wrath. This type of plate (Hebrew *mahavat*) is only mentioned five times in the Old Testament. The four occurrences outside Ezekiel are all in the context of the sacrificial system of the tabernacle or temple. Three times in Leviticus, the plate is used to prepare the grain offering (2:5, 6:21, and 7:9). Once in 1 Chronicles 23:29, it is found in a list of Levitical, priestly duties. While translations usually translate the plate here as the food item usually prepared



on the plate—e.g., “what is baked in the pan” (NKJV), “the baked offering” (ESV), “the round cakes” (NET)—others preserve the non-food nature of the word “plate” itself—“the baking” (CSB) or “the work of the pan” (YLT). It is simplest to just translate the word in 1 Chronicles 23:29 as “plate,” thereby treating it as a uniquely priestly item used in priestly work.

What does this all mean for Ezekiel’s besieging sign act? Two things seem to be conveyed. First and foremost, Judah will know that God is going to punish her rebellion precisely as He said He would in passages like Leviticus 26 and Deuteronomy 28, 30–32. She will one day be besieged as was the northern kingdom and find herself looking down the barrels of Babylon’s fiercest implements of war.

Second, the perceptive viewer (and reader) will sense that God’s wrath will not be total, something also taught in the passages we just mentioned. Though it is subtle, we find a wisp of the remnant theology that Ezekiel will detail later in the book. In the act of placing the plate, Ezekiel acts out the role of a priest, performing the role of an intermediary who mitigates the LORD’s wrath. Jerusalem will eventually be restored and purified (see 16:50–63) and will receive a stunning new name: “the LORD is there” (48:35).

Isn’t this something? Already we’re seeing a glimmer of what we learn more fully in the New Testament:

“My son, do not despise the chastening of the LORD, nor be discouraged when you are rebuked by Him; for whom the LORD loves He chastens, and scourges every son whom He receives. If you endure chastening, God deals with you as with sons; for what son is there whom a father does not chasten? But if you are without chastening, of which all have become partakers, then you are

illegitimate and not sons.” (Heb. 12:5b–8)

Of course, exile will still be painful. All discipline is (Heb. 12:11). For many in Judah, exile will harden their hearts against the LORD even further. But the true believers, caught up in exilic pain that did not differentiate between themselves and their nominal countrymen, needed to know that God had not forgotten them.

In his classic book, *Precious Remedies against Satan’s Devices*, Thomas Brooks notes that some of Satan’s schemes—his “devices” as translated in 2 Corinthians 2:11 of the KJV and NKJV—involve keeping believers “in a sad, doubting, questioning and uncomfortable condition.” He explains: “Though he can never rob a believer of his crown, yet such is his malice and envy, that he will leave no stone unturned, no means unattempted, to rob them of their comfort and peace, to make their life a burden and a hell unto them, to cause them to spend their days in sorrow and mourning, in sighing and complaining, in doubting and questioning.” And what does this tempt them to say? “Surely we have no interest in Christ; our graces are not true, our hopes are the hopes of hypocrites; our confidence is our presumption, our enjoyments are our delusions.”⁸

Though Ezekiel will devote sustained attention to watching against covenant despair beginning in chapter 33, the “precious remedy” against Satan’s despairing device offered here is a glimpse of the mediatorial, priestly plate that deflects the full force of God’s wrath. A remnant will remain (6:8; 12:16; 14:22) because God still has a beloved son, Israel, whom He will purify through discipline.

Action Prophecy #2b: Ezekiel’s Side (4:4–8)

As noted previously, verses 4–8 continue to relate to Ezekiel’s

model siege (4:7 makes this clear). But we begin to see the suffering Ezekiel experiences as God’s chosen priestly-prophetic instrument. My Mid-America Reformed Seminary colleague, Dr. Mark Beach, puts it strikingly: “Up to this point, Ezekiel could act a bit more like a spectator, but now God requires him to be part of the action. He is called upon to suffer in his body as he enacts this ‘street-theater’ sermon—a sermon that isn’t finished in, say, 30 minutes. No, this is a sermon that will go on for 390 days and then 40 more.”⁹

Commentators have debated the time it took for Ezekiel to perform these signs as well as the meaning of the numbers 390 and 40. Concerning the time: as 430 days total would seem to extend beyond Ezekiel 8:1 which took place 413 days after the vision in 1:2, it is suggested that Ezekiel may have performed both acts concurrently (i.e., for 40 of the 390 days, Ezekiel would spend time on both sides of his body). But there are numerous unknowns here.¹⁰ It seems almost certain, however, that Ezekiel would not have spent every waking hour bound, seeing as God commands him to perform more sign-acts in 4:9–5:4 for which he would need to be up and mobile. This was a busy season of prophetic action for Ezekiel!

Concerning the meaning: though 40 is a number with significant symbolic meaning in the Bible (e.g., days and nights of rain in the flood, years of Israel’s wandering in the wilderness, days and nights Moses spent on Mt. Sinai, and days Jesus spent being tempted in the wilderness), 390 is not so much. Some have interpreted it as the length of time between key events (e.g., Saul’s reign to Josiah’s reform, David preparations for the temple to the year of the exile, the division of the kingdom until the end of the exile). The problem is that none of these commend themselves with sufficient clarity or precision.

Adding the two numbers yields 430, the number of years Israel suffered bondage in Egypt. This is certainly a more compelling proposal, though it still exhibits a conundrum: why is it divided as it is and how does that relate to the house of Israel (left side, 390) and Judah (right side, 40)? In the end, the mere fact of this laying bound would itself have an emotional impact on Ezekiel's audience, as well as on Ezekiel himself. How precisely? Let's consider the additional information of this sign act.

While Ezekiel 3:25 stated that the prophet would be bound in priestly solidarity to the people, here we read that Ezekiel is bound in a priestly position: laying on his side so that he might "lay the iniquity of the house of Israel upon it. According to the number of the days that you lie on it, you shall bear their iniquity" (v. 4). The Hebrew word translated as "iniquity" or "sin" (*'aavôn*) in the NKJV, KJV, NET, NASH, NLT, and NIV can also be translated "punishment" as it is in the ESV. Either way, this is difficult to understand.

"Bearing the sin" sounds wrong because Christian theology recognizes that this is impossible for a sinful human to do (e.g., Ps. 49:7; Heidelberg Catechism Q&A 14 & 16). "Bearing the punishment" also sounds wrong because this is impossible for a mere human to do (e.g., Heidelberg Catechism Q&A 17; Westminster Larger Catechism Q&A 38). But to rightly understand these expressions, one must note that they are common priestly acts associated with rituals of expiation (see Exod. 28:38; Lev. 10:17, 16:22). While Ezekiel does not actually atone for Judah's sins (Judah herself is punished via exile—i.e., she bears her own sin; cf. Ezek. 18:19–20), in his act of bearing the sin Ezekiel performs a priestly function of identifying with the people. He is a sign for them as he symbolically experiences the bondage of sin and punishment the exiles

will face in exile, and he is a sign for them as he symbolically portrays the people's greatest need: a substitute to bear their sin in their place.

Conclusion

In our next article, we will finish our study of these action prophecies and also look at some of the others that are found throughout the book. But as we conclude here, we have an opportunity to reflect on the One to whom Ezekiel ultimately pointed. Our Lord Jesus Christ fulfilled the Old Testament, Aaronic priesthood in His own Melchizedekian priesthood (Heb. 7:11–28). Ezekiel's sign-acts dramatized much of what the priests accomplished in their sacrificial rituals in the temple. And yet the sign-act nature of his actions showed that he was not actually doing the typologically redemptive work done in the temple. He was exiled from the place where God demonstrated His atoning work. His priesthood was modified due to his exilic setting.

From our New Testament perspective, however, we find in Ezekiel's sign-acts something truly inspiring, for we know the One greater than Ezekiel and greater than the greatest of the Old Testament priests. Jesus is the priest forever (Heb. 7:21, 24) who does not just placard the need for a substitute, but who is that substitute. Listen to what Hebrews says He does in this role:

Therefore, He is also able to save to the uttermost those who come to God through Him, since He always lives to make intercession for them. For such a High Priest was fitting for us, who is holy, harmless, undefiled, separate from sinners, and has become higher than the heavens; who does not need daily, as those high priests, to offer up sacrifices, first for His own sins and then for the people's, for this He did once for all when He offered up Himself. For the law appoints as high

priests men who have weakness, but the word of the oath, which came after the law, appoints the Son who has been perfected forever (Heb. 7:25–28).

Whatever discipline we face in our Christian pilgrimage, we know that we have a substitute who saves us "to the uttermost." Ezekiel's powerful action prophecies with their intense emotional impact drive us toward the even greater emotional impact that Jesus's perfect work has upon us.

1. See Kelvin Friebe, "A Hermeneutical Paradigm for Interpreting Prophetic Sign-Actions," *Didaskalia* 12, no. 2 (2001): 25–26. For a more general treatment, see idem, "Sign Acts," in *Dictionary of the Old Testament Prophets*, eds. Mark J. Boda and J. Gordon McConville (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2012), 707–13.
2. Iain M. Duguid, *Ezekiel* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1999), 93.
3. John Calvin and Henry Beveridge, *Commentary upon the Acts of the Apostles* (Bellingham, WA: Logos Bible Software, 2010), 92.
4. John Calvin and James Anderson, *Commentary on the Book of Psalms* (Bellingham, WA: Logos Bible Software, 2010), 294.
5. Cf. Jonathan Klawans, *Purity, Sacrifice, and the Temple: Symbolism and Supersessionism in the Study of Ancient Judaism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 84–89.
6. E.g., James K.A. Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom: Worship, Worldview, and Cultural Formation* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2009); Dru Johnson, *Knowledge by Ritual: A Biblical Prolegomena to Sacramental Theology* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2016).
7. Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture citations are from the New King James Version (NKJV).
8. These quotes from Thomas Brooks, *Precious Remedies Against Satan's Devices* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 2021), 157.
9. J. Mark Beach, "Actions Louder than Words (2): Sympathetic Suffering," *Mid-America Journal of Theology* 29 (2018): 195–96 (<https://www.midamerica.edu/uploads/files//pdf/journal/08beachjournal12018.pdf>).
10. For helpful suggestions, see Peter Naylor, *Ezekiel* (England: EP Books, 2011), 90, 756 n.102.

Dr. R. Andrew Compton

is professor of Old Testament studies at Mid-America Reformed Seminary (Dyer, IN).

A Few More B. J. Haans?



Dr. Michael R. **Kearney**



Many readers of this magazine may remember Rev. B. J. Haan (1917–1994). Nowadays, my work includes regular visits to the B. J. Haan Auditorium. My only access to Haan’s legacy comes from recordings of his radio broadcasts, the articles and memoirs he left, and the memories of those who knew him. I want to learn more about this man who exerted an indelible influence on Reformed churches in northwest Iowa and whose name is almost synonymous with the history of Dordt College (now Dordt University).

Early in his ministry, Rev. Haan had the dubious honor of being cited in the national magazines *Time* and *Life*. In the postwar 1940s, the largely Reformed community of Sioux Center, Iowa, was embroiled in controversy over the arrival of a cinema in town. The local drama of enterprising American veterans, concerned parents, and political maneuvering by the city council attracted national attention, and Haan was cast in the role of a “hellfire-and-brimstone preacher,” who denounced movies as full of “sex, drunkenness and crime . . . a hindrance to the Kingdom of God.”¹ The magazine reporters assumed a tone that wavers between sneering and genuine incredulity at Haan’s zeal. How could any modern person campaign against anything as innately American as a movie theater, anything as innocent as entertainment?

Haan’s anti-movie stance seems even more foreign in today’s entertainment frenzy. The campaign against movies, along with the other “worldly amusements” defined by the Christian Reformed Church in 1928, was decisively lost long ago.² And that seems to be a welcome defeat for many in the broader Reformed community, signaling a move from a Christian ethic of isolationism to one of bold cultural engagement.³ So we could puzzle over the enigma of a man who was progressive enough to found a Christian college that has educated tens of thousands, yet not progressive enough to endorse movies.

Of course, that only holds true if these positions are really as inconsistent as we think. But I also discovered that Haan wrote several articles for early issues of *Torch and Trumpet/The Outlook*. Based on those articles, perhaps B. J. Haan’s legacy needs a second look.

The Campaign for a Christian Junior College

Haan wrote three articles for *Torch and Trumpet* in 1952 and 1953 in support of the “Christian junior college movement,” focusing particularly on the establishment of such a college in northwest Iowa.⁴ Since the Midwest Christian Junior College in Sioux Center opened its doors in 1955, these articles are significant artifacts in the history of Dordt University.

The movement to found Christian junior colleges faced numerous problems. Besides the investment and time required, Haan also faced opposition related to Calvin College and Seminary, the official (and officially funded) institutions of higher education in the Christian Reformed Church. Many thought that requesting financial support for a new college in Iowa would either erode support for Calvin or lay an unwelcome additional cost on Reformed churches and families.

Haan’s campaigning evoked at least two reader letters to the *Torch and Trumpet* editor. Ray Elgersma of Sheldon, Iowa, challenged Haan to found a Christian college based on grassroots support rather than official denominational endorsement. But A. C. Boerkoel of Ontario, California, agreed with Haan and called for a denominational change in attitude, using the West Coast as an example: “It is economically impossible to send these young people to Calvin College. We must become realists. There are no accidents in the divine program. It is *not* accidental that California is about 2,500 miles from Grand Rapids. With a Junior College in these remote sections of our country a large number of these young people might see their ideal of a college education at least somewhat realized.”⁵

Haan was a practical visionary, not an idealistic one. He saw the concrete problems: too few Christian school teachers and too many with inadequate educational preparation. He saw the challenges faced by students who had to travel hundreds or thousands of miles to attend college in Grand Rapids, and he saw junior colleges as a viable though imperfect solution.

Haan also connected the “why” and the “how” in his leadership. He thought a Christian world-and-life view should naturally express itself in a love of learning, producing “students that are education-minded.”⁶ In Haan’s view, there could be no such thing as a “neutral” education. Education always carries a worldview, and the Christian Reformed Church’s worldview involved “the principle of a distinctively covenantal Christian education”⁷ free from state sponsorship or control.

Haan clearly envisioned Christian higher education in subservience to God. The founding of a Christian college was part of his campaign for a separate and distinct world-and-life view that prepared students to be salt and light.

Understanding the Antithesis

B. J. Haan’s emphasis on separateness continued in four essays published in *Torch and Trumpet* in 1968 and 1969. The first was the text of an address Haan had presented to the Midwest Christian School Teachers’ Convention in October 1967.⁸ Haan identified “open, blatant, fierce opposition to the mind and will of Jesus Christ in modern education”—opposition that glorified individual autonomy and a humanistic spirit. At the heart of the conflict was “full worship and enjoyment of the material world,” worshiping the creation rather than the Creator. Haan’s response came in the form of a vision of “total covenantal Kingdom

service” in education, demanding that students consider their calling “to be slaves of Christ, to seek the things above.”⁹

Second, Haan commented about the popularity of the notion of dialogue in his day.¹⁰ Without rejecting the notion entirely, he called for careful consideration of the ground of dialogue. He opposed a humanistic dialogue that relativizes all truth to the status of opinion, and instead espoused a kind of dialogue that emerges from “learning and responding obediently to the guiding principles laid down in God’s Word.”¹¹ That sort of dialogue, rooted in a shared obedience to Christ and commitment to the Scriptures, enables Christians to apply biblical wisdom in a changing world.

Third, Haan penned a manifesto in 1969 entitled “Calvinism and the Contemporary Crisis in the Church.”¹² He reflected on the successes and failures of the Calvinist legacy in the Netherlands and North America, pivoting on the notion of the antithesis. Abraham Kuyper and his followers often used the term *antithesis* to portray the total opposition between the kingdom of God and the kingdom of Satan. Haan clarified that Christians do not come with the antithesis; they are not the ones antagonizing the world. Rather, it is Christians’ faithful and communal witness to the kingship of Christ that engenders the world’s “stubborn resistance and fierce opposition”; when Christians historically failed to grasp the true character of this conflict, “worldliness was reflected in their living, an unspiritual attitude prevailed.”¹³ Haan’s cry for a comprehensive view of Christ’s kingship encompassed personal piety and institutional reform, both guided by the call to be holy, set apart for the work of the Lord.

Fourth, Haan outlined a philosophy of Christian social action grounded

in personal union with Christ.¹⁴ He reminded readers that “the believer’s allegiance is not first of all to the Bible as such, but to the person of Jesus Christ. . . . Their life flows out of him and finds all its desire, meaning, motivation, purpose and direction in him, their living Lord. No part or aspect of their life lies outside of his rule. In all things, thoughts, words and deeds, they are to reflect covenantal fellowship with and loving obedience to him as their Sovereign.”¹⁵ Here, Haan identifies holiness itself as the basis for cultural engagement. Total personal dedication to “the one Person, Jesus Christ,” is the only ground for Christian social action.

Education for Holiness

Two additional essays from 1970 clarify Haan’s position. One was the text of his 1970 commencement address at Dordt, which described the ongoing conflict and polarization in the world as a helpful thing for Christian education.¹⁶ The second was a panel discussion from the annual meeting of Reformed Fellowship, at which Haan had been a speaker.¹⁷

On that panel, Haan pinpointed the problem confronting Reformed Christianity in even starker terms. He called it “a deeply spiritual, deeply personal matter relative to the individual and collective relationship of all of us to Jesus Christ. We are not attached to Him personally and consciously as we should be.”¹⁸ As symptoms of this detachment, “our prayer life has lost its glow and fervency. We are too self-sufficient. . . . We are wide open to the influence of strange ideas which harmonize with our own lusts and justify us in our unfaithfulness.”¹⁹

The answer that Haan proposed, there as elsewhere, was “a calling apart, a coming out from among, a new beginning”—but not secession or schism, at least as

long as the Reformed confessions were still maintained. Again, Haan championed holiness, a total separation from worldly thinking in order to serve the Lord with heart, soul, mind, body, and resources. That holiness, he tenaciously believed, was key to the personal and collective life of Christians in the final years of the twentieth century.

Haan’s life drew to a close as strife wracked his own denomination, the Christian Reformed Church. He had clearly agreed with the conservatives in the CRC in opposing the “new theology” being promoted at Calvin College and elsewhere, yet he also worried about the effects of “a kind of pietistic, fundamentalistic, individualistic thrust and tone” in response to those controversies.²⁰ An article on Haan’s legacy in *The Standard Bearer* noted that, in 1993, on the last radio broadcast he recorded for Dordt College, Haan expressed continuing hope in the conservative wing of the CRC and urged people not to leave.²¹ He warned against placing all the blame on a particular institution without serious examination of the assumptions driving the whole community.

Dale Grotenhuis offered a memorial to B. J. Haan in *The Outlook* in 1995, honoring Haan’s “concept of discipleship” as a primary part of his legacy for future generations.²² Who knows how Haan might articulate that notion of discipleship for the URCNA, the CRC, and Reformed institutions and individuals today? Who can imagine how he might respond to things like Netflix, TikTok, or sports betting? One thing is for sure: he would continue to uphold daily holiness as the primary criterion of every Christian’s walk. And if even the thought of opposing a movie theater strikes us as too radical or too countercultural today, perhaps we need to rediscover that kind of bold holiness for ourselves.

1. Scans of both articles are available at <https://www.rescueeetheperishing.org/2018/10/18/1948-bj-haan-time-and-life-magazines/>.

2. The original “Report on Worldly Amusements” as approved by the CRC can be found at the beginning of the Agenda for Synod 1928. That report was referenced favorably in the early pages of *Torch and Trumpet/The Outlook*. See Clarence Werkema, “A Time to Laugh—A Time to Weep,” vol. 28, no. 4 (1978), and John Vander Ploeg, “Whatsoever Things Are Pure . . .,” vol. 30, no. 6 (1980). All of the *Torch and Trumpet/The Outlook* articles referenced here can be located by searching Reformed Fellowship’s online magazine archive at <https://outlook.reformedfellowship.net/>.

3. For examples of this kind of response, see William D. Romanowski, “John Calvin Meets the Creature from the Black Lagoon: The Christian Reformed Church and the Movies 1928–1966,” *Christian Scholar’s Review* 25 (September 1995): 47–62, and Will Katerberg, “The Right Kind of Worldliness,” *The Banner*, October 15, 2021, <https://www.thebanner.org/features/2021/10/the-right-kind-of-worldliness>.

4. Bernard J. Haan, “Growing Interest!” vol. 2, no. 5 (1952); “Growing Need!” vol. 2, no. 6 (1953); “Organization and Administration,” vol. 3, no. 1 (1953).

5. “The Junior College Problem,” vol. 3, no. 2.

6. Haan, “Growing Interest!”

7. Haan, “Growing Interest!”

8. Bernard J. Haan, “Servants of Christ,” vol. 18, no. 3 (1968).

9. *Ibid.*

10. See “Viewpoint,” vol. 18, no. 12 (1968).

11. *Ibid.*

12. Bernard J. Haan, “Calvinism and the Contemporary Crisis in the Church,” vol. 19, no. 2 (1969).

13. *Ibid.*

14. Bernard J. Haan, “C.A.F.: A Call to Christian Communal Action,” vol. 19, no. 5 (1969).

15. *Ibid.*

16. Bernard J. Haan, “Convocation Address at Dordt,” vol. 20, no. 11 (1970).

17. Haan gave another address to the Northwest Iowa chapter of Reformed Fellowship on March 22, 1972. I have only found the announcement, not his actual text. See “Northwest Iowa Chapter Organized,” vol. 22, no. 3 (1972).

18. “Crisis in Doctrine, Crisis in Morals Crisis in Education,” vol. 20, no. 12 (1970).

19. “Northwest Iowa Chapter Organized,” (1972).

20. Haan, “Calvinism and the Contemporary Crisis.”

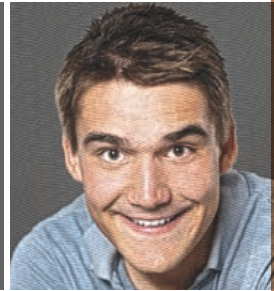
21. Robert D. Decker, “Dordt College Founder Dies,” *The Standard Bearer*, vol. 71, no. 9 (1995), <https://sb.rfpa.org/all-around-us-506/>.

22. Dale Grotenhuis, “In Memoriam: Bernard J. Haan,” vol. 45, no. 3 (1995).

Dr. Michael R. Kearney

is a board member of Reformed Fellowship.

Why the URCNA Left the CRCNA: By a Young Person for Young People



Mr. Joseph Dick

Are We in the URC Spoiled Brats?

A kid grows up in a mansion, wears designer jeans, is sent to an academy by helicopter, and receives a Porsche for his sixteenth birthday. What kind of kid do you suppose he is?

The spiritual equivalent of a stereotypical rich kid is the Reformed young person. I am one. We grow up in a spiritual mansion of sound doctrine and godly living. Exegetical preaching feeds us God's Word every Sunday. Catechism teachers pour God's doctrinal diamonds over us. Examples in the church model godly conduct. With so many chances to hear Christian doctrine, so many chances to see Christian living, so many chances to do Christian things, we are spiritually spoiled brats if we don't realize how good we've got it.

If those of us in the URC don't learn about the riches we have, we might lose them. That's what's happening in America. Who cares about freedom because no one remembers the soldiers who died and the fathers who framed our nation. If we can lose a nation because we forgot her history, we can lose a federation for the same reason.

It's been about thirty years since the URCNA was officially organized in 1996. My generation doesn't remember it, so I dedicate this story from URCNA history to my generation of Reformed young people. We don't remember it, but if we just knew the history, we'd be better for it. Even if you're not a member of the URCNA,

there's something in this story for you as well.

It All Started When . . .

Want the history in a nutshell? Beginning in the 1950s, conservative members and churches of the Christian Reformed Church in North America (CRCNA) wanted to reform the denomination from within while liberal members and churches wanted to liberalize the denomination. Many controversies erupted before this group conservatives lost hope of reforming the CRCNA. In 1996, they officially joined together, creating the United Reformed Churches in North America (URCNA).

Cornelius Venema, a prominent witness to URCNA history, lists eleven of those controversies and surveys the early history of the federation.¹ Robert Swierenga, from the Van Raalte Institute at Hope College, investigates the disputes over biblical infallibility, women in office, ecumenicity, theistic evolution, and homosexuality.² This article details the controversies over the new hermeneutic and theistic evolution.

Some of my friends are already tuning out—like when your dad starts to tell you about how expensive gas used to be and how he worked for a dollar an hour.

But don't be a spoiled rich kid. Here's the gold: at the bottom of most of the controversies in the URCNA was the issue of the Bible's authority³ and the derivative authority of the creeds and church order.⁴ That's not the case with

many church controversies. Often, we fight over the color of the carpet and the taste of the windmill cookies. That's not the history of the URCNA.

And here's a lesson in URCNA history that will change your life (if you'll take it to heart): toleration of false doctrine in our lives and in our churches will destroy the URC. The current problems in the CRCNA began not because of full-fledged allegiance to false doctrine, but because of subtle toleration of false doctrine. I want to consider the pattern of tolerating false doctrine in the CRCNA in the years leading up to the formation of the URCNA. In this article, we consider how too many in the CRCNA tolerated the new hermeneutic.

A Name for a False Doctrine: The New Hermeneutic

Our conservative fathers in the CRCNA saw false doctrine coming. They called it "the new hermeneutic." *Hermeneutics* just refers to the way someone interprets the Bible. Everyone who interprets the Bible has a hermeneutic, a lens through which they make sense of Scripture. Conservatives called progressive CRCNA interpretation "the new hermeneutic," a term which technically refers to hermeneutics developed by liberal European theologians.⁵

Venema explains how this term was used by conservatives within the CRCNA context. "The language of 'new hermeneutic' was often used broadly to embrace three features of the CRC's handling of the Scriptures," which features were

Ignoring church history will spoil you; learning church history will enrich you.



tied to three attributes of Scripture. “First, the nature and extent of the Scripture’s *authority* was increasingly limited to the gospel message of salvation through faith in Jesus Christ.” Additionally, the CRCNA “compromised” the doctrine of the *sufficiency* of Scripture, believing it “w[as] shaped by historical and cultural assumptions of a bygone era.” “And third, the *perspicuity* or clarity of the Scripture’s teaching was likewise compromised,” which allowed for “two different, even opposed, interpretations [to] be drawn from the relevant biblical texts that speak to the issue,” as in the dispute over women in office.⁶ The new hermeneutic was the theory of interpretation used by CRCNA progressives that undermined the Scripture’s authority, sufficiency, or clarity.

The New Hermeneutic Tolerated in the CRCNA

The new hermeneutic was tolerated in the CRCNA. Not a big deal, you might think. Who cares about hermeneutics anyway? However, the controversy regarding the doctrine of Scripture and the new hermeneutic shows how important these teachings are for the church.

In the first issue of the magazine you are reading now (it was then called the *Torch and Trumpet*), CRCNA theologian William Hendricksen warned against the influence of Karl Barth. Though he doesn’t use the term *new hermeneutic*, Hendrickson thought Barth’s view of Scripture wasn’t orthodox: “I once heard a Barthian deliver a lecture on *The Infallibility of the Word of God*. However, let not this phrase deceive you. In the camp of the Barthians infallibility is affirmed only of the message which the Holy Spirit brings home to the believer. The book, as it lies there, is not infallible.”⁷

This theologian was not the only one concerned about the undermining of Scripture. One historian notes that in the early 1950s, conservatives at Calvin Seminary feared that Barth’s teachings had made their way into “certain students’ ideas of Scripture,” which contributed to a controversy at the seminary.⁸ Conservatives raised early opposition to the new hermeneutic, but it was tolerated in their denomination. Then, during the 1950s and 1960s, the new hermeneutic took root in Calvin Seminary during a controversy over infallibility.⁹ In *Stromata*, a Calvin Seminary periodical for students, seminarian

Marvin Hoogland wrote “Infallibility Questioned,” where he argued that Scripture was not infallible. Hoogland accepted the “divine inspiration” of the Bible; he even accepted the authority of the Bible “for life and doctrine.”¹⁰ But he questioned infallibility since he believed “the Bible nowhere explicitly claims to be infallible,” there seemed to be “mistakes” in the writing, and “the doctrine of infallibility [is not] essential to Christianity.”¹¹ The article raised a storm of controversy.

In a later article, his brother, John Hoogland, also a seminary student, echoed Marvin’s sentiments with a slightly different emphasis from that of “Infallibility Questioned.” While Marvin had disputed the “word ‘infallible,’”¹² John seemed more comfortable with the word. He made the dispute over infallibility a difference in “what sense the Bible is infallible.”¹³ John Hoogland wrote, “The Bible is infallible from the point of view of faith and conduct,”¹⁴ but “the Bible is not infallible in its natural science, history, grammar, and mathematics . . . when the Bible is looked at from these abstract points of view.”¹⁵ John’s willingness to use the old term “infallible” and fill it with

Marvin's meaning clouded the real doctrinal differences at play.

Also, the rhetoric that infallibility did not discount the authority of Scripture tended to make the errors more tolerable. Holding to the message of the Bible regarding Christ and allowing for errors in "grammar," history, and "astronomy" did not undermine "the authoritative character of Scripture . . . [and] our faith," Marvin argued.¹⁶ Similarly, John wrote, "Belief in the authority of Scripture will not be shaken if infallibility is defined in terms of the purpose which the Holy Spirit had in writing the Bible."¹⁷ Arguing that infallibility did not undermine authority, the two students urged toleration of their views.

Although many administrators of Calvin Seminary believed that the Hooglands' views could not be tolerated, the brothers' position received support from other students. When John faced difficulty for his views on infallibility, eleven classmates rallied around him, sending a "note" to the faculty which said that they "shared John's views."¹⁸ The note pressured the faculty to allow for John's viewpoint, and the significant number of those who held to the new hermeneutic prevented easy removal of the teaching.

Some faculty members held to this view. Calvin Seminary professor Henry Stob argued that the "mistakes" Marvin Hoogland had believed existed in the Bible were in the areas of "peripheral matters."¹⁹ In the same way that John Hoogland defended his brother, Stob argued that "he is questioning not infallibility, but a certain theory of infallibility."²⁰ Stob interpreted creeds to allow for the student's theory of infallibility.²¹ Years after the infallibility controversy, Stob disclosed his own views on infallibility in his memoir: "That the autographa were in every respect inerrant was, of course, a possibility, but no one living had seen or inspected them, and the claim that

they were this could not be empirically verified."²² For now, his defense of the student was cautious and subtle.

Similarly, John Kromminga, the president of and a professor at Calvin Seminary, defended Marvin Hoogland in a document titled "What Shall We Believe about Infallibility?"²³ Kromminga was well motivated to argue for the student's position: he "was [partly] responsible for allowing [Marvin's] article to appear in print." He contended that "the article . . . [did not] deny the teaching of the creeds."²⁴ The historic Reformed position on infallibility was not "that the lost autographa [was] infallible on science, grammar, and geography."²⁵ Rather, Kromminga expressed this belief about infallibility: "I recognize and admit no errors, inaccuracies, contradictions, or other inadequacies of any sort in Scripture which affect its authority on . . . its message."²⁶ Infallibility, yes, but only in the message of Scripture, not in all its details.

Kromminga's belief about infallibility was hard to spot because he used the term *infallibility*. He aligned with others who camouflaged proponents of the new hermeneutic. Years later, but still facing the new hermeneutic, Dick Wynia would comment, "If there are people among us using the new hermeneutic, would we expect them to be open about it?"²⁷

Synod Tolerates the New Hermeneutic

The relatively conservative CRCNA might have rejected this new teaching, but overall the actions of Synod demonstrated a policy of toleration. Of course, some conservatives had problems with the doctrine: the policy of toleration practiced by seminary professors and the CRCNA synod was continually opposed by conservatives. Probably representative of conservative thought was Professor Martin Wyngaarden from Calvin Seminary, who launched a very serious critique of Kromminga's "What Shall

We Believe about Infallibility?"²⁸

One of many charges Wyngaarden brought concerned a question that Kromminga had written: "Granting that the Holy Spirit infallibly conveyed what it intended to teach, how shall we interpret Scriptural items which are on the periphery of that teaching?"²⁹ Wyngaarden countered that it was an "unwarranted distinction" to identify periphery areas because "according to our Creed [Belgic Confession], infallibility extends to everything on the so-called 'periphery.'"³⁰ Wyngaarden brought his protest to Synod.

Synod seemed reluctant to get to the bottom of what Kromminga believed. For example, the *Acts of Synod* read, "President Kromminga assures Synod that in using the term 'periphery' he does not mean 'this or that word' in Scripture, but rather 'some aspect' of the content of the words which is not germane to the Spirit's purpose."³¹ For the time being, this vague clarification of Kromminga's position was sufficient for Synod. They largely cleared Kromminga from the charges he faced³² and established a study committee to deal with Kromminga's "ambiguous" idea of "periphery" elements of Scripture.³³ Synod slowed the investigation of Kromminga down, though Wyngaarden had called on them to act quickly in response to Kromminga's hermeneutics.³⁴

Also, Synod 1959 was to decide whether John Hoogland would be eligible for a call.³⁵ Although the delegates cleared ten other seminarians for candidacy, they rejected John Hoogland at first. Then, ten seminarians wrote to Synod: "We share essentially Mr. John Hoogland's views on Inspiration and Infallibility, in so far as we understand them."³⁶ If they were going to reject John Hoogland, they would be inconsistent to not reject the other ten students. Although professors had voiced doubts about his orthodoxy,³⁷ Synod declared John Hoogland eligible

for the ministry, supposedly “after satisfactory interrogation with respect to his position on infallibility of the Scriptures.”³⁸

Similarly, the Board of Calvin College and Seminary allowed Marvin Hoogland “to exhort.”³⁹ Although Stob and Kromminga had defended Marvin Hoogland, Synod tenured Stob in 1959⁴⁰ and gave Kromminga another year to be president of the seminary in 1961.⁴¹ The supporters of the new hermeneutic were allowed to continue to spread their teaching.

One might expect that this toleration accompanied radical denials of God’s Word. It was more subtle than that. In 1959, the CRCNA synod issued a conservative affirmation of the infallibility of Scripture regarding its teachings on history.⁴² With its largely conservative exegesis of key Bible passages, the committee report of 1961 (commissioned in 1959) must have looked to many to be business as usual.⁴³ But a wary conservative might have noticed that the report of 1961 cleared Kromminga of the charge that Wyngaarden had alleged concerning Kromminga’s belief in “periphery” elements of Scripture.⁴⁴ Although in official statements the CRCNA recommitted itself to strict infallibility, in practice they tolerated the new hermeneutic by allowing proponents of the new hermeneutic to continue to teach and preach. With the Bible’s authority crumbling in “periphery” matters, the authority of science could dictate interpretation of Genesis. Next time, we’ll consider the toleration of theistic evolution in the CRCNA. I believe that evolutionism, women in office, homosexuality, and the other evils that entered the CRCNA in later years entered because the new hermeneutic was tolerated. Deny the Bible’s authority, and you are free to assert your own opinions or trust the science.

Let’s never do that. Let’s never listen to the devil’s old lie, “Yea hath God said?”

The reason we have respect for the Bible today in the URCNA is because of the men who defended it in the CRCNA during the 1950s.

Is anyone willing to defend the Bible today? If we don’t, we’ll be spoiled of its riches tomorrow.

1. Cornelius Venema, “Integration, Disintegration, and Reintegration: A Preliminary History of the United Reformed Churches in North America” in *Always Reformed: Essays in Honor of W. Robert Godfrey*, ed. R. Scott Clark and Joel E. Kim (Escondido, CA: Westminster Seminary California, 2010), 228–30. Venema’s emphasis is not on the controversies themselves.

2. Robert Swierenga, “Burn the Wooden Shoes: Modernity and Division in the Christian Reformed Church in North America,” June 2000, https://www.swierenga.com/Africa_pap.html.

3. Henry Gysen (former CRCNA member, now an elder in URCNA) in conversation with the author (May 2024) pointed to the authority of the Word of God as having a place of utmost importance in the conflict between conservatives and progressives in the CRCNA. From my experience, a common theme in conversations about the years leading up to secession is the controversies’ relation to the Bible. See also Venema, “A Preliminary History,” 233, footnote 31.

4. Venema, “Integration, Disintegration, and Reintegration,” 228.

5. Cf. Dick Wynia, “Understanding the New Hermeneutic,” *The Reformed Witness*, December 1991, 13. Wynia sees connections between the New Hermeneutic and the liberal arguments of progressives in the CRCNA.

6. Cornelius Venema, quoted in John Van Dyke, “A Forgotten Anniversary: The URCNA Turned 25 Almost Unnoticed (Part 3 in a Series),” *Christian Renewal*, March 12, 2022, 17. Emphasis Venema’s.

7. William Hendricksen, “The Word Under Fire,” *Torch and Trumpet*, December/January 1951, 3.

8. James Bratt, *Dutch Calvinism in Modern America: A History of a Conservative Subculture* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1984), 190. Bratt implies their fears were one reason that a “progressive/’traditionalist’ quarrel” broke out in the early 1950s between professors.

9. Cf. Swierenga, “The Infallibility Question” in “Modernity and Division.” Swierenga passingly comments that “Hoogland . . . had introduced . . . the new hermeneutic.” It seems more likely that Hoogland learned the new hermeneutic from his professors.

10. Marvin Hoogland, “Infallibility Questioned,” *Stromata* 4, no. 1 (September 1958):8.

11. Hoogland, “Infallibility Questioned,” 8–10.

12. Hoogland, “Infallibility Questioned,” 9.

13. John Hoogland, “Infallibility and the Road to Liberalism,” *Stromata* 4, no. 4 (January 1959): 1.

14. Hoogland, “Infallibility and the Road to Liberalism,” 2.

15. Hoogland, “Infallibility and the Road to Liberalism,” 3.

16. Hoogland, “Infallibility Questioned,” 10.

17. Hoogland, “Infallibility and the Road to Liberalism,” 3.

18. Henry Stob, “The Infallibility Controversy (1958–1959),” in *Summoning Up Remembrance*, accessed May 7, 2024, <http://stobfamily.com/summoning-up-remembrance/chapter-22/>. This chapter is included in the online collection of *Summoning Up Remembrance*, not in the print version.

19. Henry Stob, “Synod and Biblical Infallibility,” *The Reformed Journal* 9, no. 5 (May 1959): 3–9.

20. Stob, “Synod and Biblical Infallibility,” 5.

21. Stob, “Synod and Biblical Infallibility,” 5.

22. Stob, “The Infallibility Controversy.” Stob reflects on a strict decision of Synod 1959 that declared the complete infallibility of the Bible.

23. Christian Reformed Church, *Acts of Synod, 1959*, 569–76.

24. *Acts of Synod, 1959*, 569.

25. *Acts of Synod, 1959*, 574.

26. *Acts of Synod, 1959*, 576.

27. Dick Wynia, “Understanding the New Hermeneutic,” 13.

28. *Acts of Synod, 1959*, 563–69.

29. *Acts of Synod, 1959*, 572.

30. *Acts of Synod, 1959*, 568.

31. *Acts of Synod, 1959*, 66–68.

32. *Acts of Synod, 1959*, 66–71.

33. *Act of Synod, 1959*, 68–69.

34. *Acts of Synod, 1959*, 564.

35. *Acts of Synod, 1959*, 11.

36. Stob, “The Infallibility Controversy”; see *Acts of Synod, 1959*, 24–25, 79.

37. Stob, “The Infallibility Controversy.”

38. *Acts of Synod, 1959*, 87.

39. Stob, “The Infallibility Controversy.” Marvin Hoogland apologized. The apology does not retract “Infallibility Questioned” but clarifies its purpose. “What was evidently not made clear enough in the article was that what was being criticized was a criterion of error which is not demanded either by Scripture itself or by our creeds.” See *Acts of Synod*, 326, for the apology.

40. Stob, “The Infallibility Controversy.” *Acts of Synod*, 86.

41. Christian Reformed Church, *Acts of Synod, 1961*, 87.

42. *Acts of Synod, 1959*, 68.

43. Christian Reformed Church, “Infallibility and Inspiration in Light of Scripture and the Creeds,” 258–81.

44. *Acts of Synod, 1961*, 78–79.

Joseph Dick

is a seminary student, a landscaper, and a member at Sovereign Grace URC. He invites your correspondence concerning URCNA history: sufferwithglorywith@gmail.com.

Why We Wait: Part 2



Mrs. Elisabeth **Bloechl**

When I started baking my own bread, I quickly realized I needed to plan ahead. The yeast didn't leaven my lump of dough instantly; it took time. When I grew impatient and decided to bake the barely risen bread, I ended up with a dense brick. But when I waited, allowing the yeast to transform the flour and water, the result was a soft, fluffy loaf. God often uses waiting to work the same effect in us: to transform us.

In my last article, I explored how God intentionally made us timebound creatures, for whom waiting is an ever-present reality. God uses these seasons of waiting to reveal Himself and His character to us. But He also uses waiting to transform us, as we will discover in this article. He does so in three ways: first, by using waiting to reveal our hearts; second, as a means of driving us upward and outward; and third, as a tool of sanctification.

Waiting as a Mirror

“When the people saw that Moses delayed to come down from the mountain, the people gathered themselves together to Aaron and said to him, ‘Up, make us gods who shall go before us. As for this Moses, the man who brought us up out of the land of Egypt, we do not know what has become of him’” (Exod. 32:1).

“And Sarai said to Abram, ‘Behold now, the LORD has prevented me from bearing children. Go into my servant; it may be that I shall obtain children by her.’ And Abram listened to the voice of Sarai” (Gen. 16:2).

Julie had waited weeks for the results of her blood tests. She spent her days on edge, panicky and paranoid. She grew more and more short-tempered and often cried at the least convenient times.

What do these examples have in common? They reveal the heart of those who are waiting. The Israelites, who, only days before, had promised to obey God's commands (Exod. 19:8), reveal their changeable and idolatrous hearts. Abraham, despite believing God's promise of a son (Gen. 15:6), shows a heart as likely deviate from God's path during times of testing as any of us.¹ The indefinite season of waiting reveals that Julie is putting her hope and trust in her health instead of God.

So, too, God uses seasons of waiting in our lives to strip away the comforts under which hide our deepest desires. Do we desire God's will or ours? Do we want to be conformed to His image or the world to conform to our dreams? Do we trust God's promises or our own intellect? Sometimes God encourages us by revealing His work in us to conform our will to God's.

For example, David waited years to claim the throne, hunted all the while by Saul. Yet, when given the chance to kill Saul and wear the crown, he does not (1 Sam. 24:1–15, 26:1–25). Waiting revealed his greatest desire: to do God’s will. But this is not always the case. Often, as illustrated in the examples above, our desires run contrary to God’s and waiting opens our eyes to that reality.

We often blame circumstances for our sins. Sue yelled at her kids because she was stuck in traffic for an hour. Bill spent many evenings watching X-rated movies because his job was stressful. Lindsey started cutting to dull the ache of her miscarriages. But it was not the external circumstances, however difficult, that forced these people to sin; the circumstances only caused what was in their hearts to surface—sinful or otherwise.² James tells us that we sin not because God is tempting us, but because we are carried away by our innate lusts and desires (what is in our hearts) (James 1:13–15). In other words, the sins we commit upon experiencing the trial of waiting are a result not of the waiting but of what was in our hearts before entering this trial. Many of us find that what bubbles to the surface from our hearts is ugly and sinful. Yet we can be encouraged, knowing that this painful exposure is part of God’s purpose behind all our trials.

Providence, Prayer, and People

The more clearly we see our desires and their sinful offspring, the more apparent it becomes that we cannot change them. We first need a new heart—a heart that desires what God desires. This we receive as a gift of grace apart from any works of our own (John 3:3–8). Then, we need the Holy Spirit to work in our heart (new in Christ but still riddled with sin) to sanctify and purify it (see Phil. 2:13, 2 Thess. 2:13). While we are called to pursue holiness and work out our

own salvation, we do so only through our union with Christ and the work of the Spirit in us (Phil. 2:12, John 15:5).

We need God to change us, but we also need Him to change our circumstances. We cannot. Abraham couldn’t open Sarah’s womb; the Israelites were helpless to escape exile under Babylon. We cannot call into existence the husband for whom we’ve been waiting. We cannot get a job that isn’t there. Sure, we can apply for jobs, we can be proactive in meeting other singles, just as Abraham and Sarah could keep trying for a baby. But in the end, God must, in His providence, act. The longer God waits to act, the more our dependence becomes apparent. Having us wait is like God putting on the brakes so that we see the reality of our helplessness and His omnipotence. Or, as the Heidelberg Catechism so poetically puts it when describing God’s providence:

“The almighty and everywhere present power of God, whereby, as it were by His hand, He still upholds heaven, earth, and all creatures; and so governs them that herbs and grass, rain and drought, fruitful and barren years, meat and drink, health and sickness, riches and poverty, yea, and all things come, not by chance but by His fatherly hand.” (Heidelberg Catechism, Lord’s Day 10, Q&A 27)

When these twin truths of our helplessness and God’s providence reach our hearts, we are driven to prayer. What else can we do? Daniel understood this. As the days of the Jewish exile dragged on, Daniel prays, knowing God had promised they would end after seventy years. His prayer reveals a heart that knows its own sin as well as that of God’s people—made more apparent through this season of exile. Daniel knows only God can and, because of His merciful character, is willing to forgive, free, and restore them.

Therefore, he pleads with Him to do so (Dan. 9:1–19). So also Hannah, as her hope of having a child grew fainter with each year, rends her heart in prayer (1 Sam. 1:5–16). Jesus Himself, during the long hours before His betrayal, pours out His petitions to the Father (Luke 22:41–44). God uses the trial of waiting to turn our eyes upward.

Lest we, in our individualistic age, conclude that during these times of trial we are to hide out in our closet praying, let me hurry to remind us of the communal nature of the Christian life. Our triune God lives in eternal relationship. He created us to be relational creatures, too; we are created for relationship first with Him, and next with our fellow man. This is why people with long-lasting and deep friendships tend to live longer, and why isolation zaps life.³ There is a reason God commands us not to neglect corporate worship, to bear one another’s burdens, and to pray for one another (Heb. 10:25, Gal. 6:2, James 5:16). We need each other. If this is true during times of ease, how much more so during times of testing and waiting?

What a comfort it is for pregnant mothers to know the church is praying for them during their long wait and preparation for their babies. Consider how it ministers to you when a fellow believer joins you in the hospital waiting room during your husband’s operation. When our faith falters under the trial of waiting, the gentle and direct words of a friend strengthen it. God uses seasons of waiting to remind us of our need for one another.

Sanctification

What is the result of God’s revealing our hearts and pushing us outward? Our sanctification. God is not a tyrant who delights in our suffering. Rather, He is a good Father who disciplines us that we may grow in godliness and conform to the image

of His Son (Heb. 12:10). He is not satisfied to leave us in our sins and immaturity. He is committed to renewing us “in the whole man after the image of God [and enabling] us more and more to die unto sin, and to live unto righteousness” (Westminster Shorter Catechism, #35). One of the ways He chooses to do this is through waiting.

Consider what Scripture tells us about trials in the life of a believer (remember various trials or sufferings include the trial of waiting):

“Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds, for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness. And let steadfastness have its full effect, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing” (James 1:2–4).

“In this you rejoice, though now for a little while, if necessary, you have

been grieved by various trials, so that the tested genuineness of your faith—more precious than gold that perishes though it is tested by fire—may be found to result in praise and glory and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ” (1 Pet. 1:6–7).

“Not only that, but we rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not put us to shame, because God’s love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us” (Rom. 5:3–5).

Trials of all kinds are tools in the hand of our loving Father to sanctify us and grow our faith in Him. Knowing this, we can rejoice when we find ourselves in a long and arduous period of waiting, being assured that God will use it for our good. Instead of considering waiting as an annoyance, we will start to look

for God’s hand in it. We will learn to ask God what He is trying to teach us about ourselves and Himself through the trial. We will learn to look up to Him and out to others. Let us, in the quiet moments of waiting, thank God for the waiting.

1. John Calvin, *Commentaries on the Book of Genesis*, vol. 1., repr. (Grand Rapids, MI: Bakers Books, 2003), 426.

2. See *How People Change* by Timothy S. Lane and Paul David Tripp (ch. 7) for an excellent explanation of this.

3. Druver Khullar, “How Social Isolation is Killing Us,” *New York Times*, 2016. David Robson, “Want to live a long life? Start prioritising your friends,” *BBC*, 2024.

Mrs. Elisabeth Bloechl

is a pastor’s wife and homeschooling mom living in Minnesota.

GOOD QUESTION

132

How can I discover and develop my spiritual gifts?

Here are seven places to start:

“Eagerly desire the best gifts” (1 Cor. 12:31).

Aim high in fulfilling your “duty to use your gifts readily and joyfully for the service and enrichment of the other members” (H.C. Q/A 55).

Invest in people. Our incarnate Savior did not merely perform a task; He entered into the lives of His beloved people. So should we.

Weigh your experiences, capabilities, and interests.

How might your past help you serve today? What special abilities do you have that others might lack? What do you love to do?

Heed your conscience. Unless there are biblical or practical reasons not to, take seriously surprising and even mysterious urges to serve.

Listen to others. God often mobilizes Christian service through the power of spiritual suggestion. Be open to reliable leads even if you feel inadequate, scared, or uninterested.

Meet needs. Instead of complaining about unmet church needs, prayerfully commit to doing your part to meet them. You don’t need permission to love your neighbor!

Get to work! Paul told Timothy to “Stir up God’s gifts” (2 Tim. 1:6). Many people do not know what their gifts are without experimenting.



Church Order

Article 29: Appeals by Assemblies
Article 30: Withdrawing from the Federation



Rev. Greg Lubbers

URCNA

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

ARTICLE 29: Appeals by Assemblies

If any assembly complains of having been wronged by the decision of another assembly, it shall have the right to appeal to the broader assemblies. All decisions of a broader assembly are to be received with respect and submission, and shall be considered settled and binding, unless it is proved that they are in conflict with the Word of God or the Church Order. Consistories who are convinced that they cannot comply with a decision of a broader assembly because it does not agree with the Word of God cannot be compelled to do so, provided that they state to the classis the points at which the decision of the assembly disagrees with the Word of God. If a Consistory refuses to comply with the final decision of the synod and a subsequent synod rules by majority vote that submission in the matter is essential for the unity of the churches, the congregation is no longer eligible for membership in the federation. (See Appendix 7)

(Continued on next page)

ARTICLE 30: Withdrawing from the Federation

Having availed herself of the avenues for appeal, a church through its Consistory may withdraw from the federation at any time by submitting a written statement to the classis to which the church belongs.

The Setting for this Article

Like the preceding article, Article 30 is unique in the tradition of Dutch Church Orders. In understanding Article 30, it is helpful to bear in mind that the churches that adopted the *Church Order of the United Reformed Churches in North America* in 1996 were churches that had just recently seceded from another denomination over theological and polity differences. Such acts of secession were not taken lightly but out of deep conviction and with much struggle. This article offers historical perspective on how the

(Continued on next page)

(Continuation of article 29)

The Occasion for an Appeal

The provision within the Church Order for an orderly appeal process presupposes the possibility of the fallibility of the church and its assemblies. While the Word of God is infallible, there is the possibility of error within the ecclesiastical courts of the church.

While Church Orders of the Dutch lineage have a long history of a provision for an appeal process, the contents of Article 29 of the *Church Order of the United Reformed Churches in North America* are somewhat unique in that it specifically addresses appeals made by assemblies.¹ Article 29 prescribes the course of appeal to be taken by an assembly whereas Article 31 prescribes the course of appeal to be taken by a church member.

In essence, an appeal is a cry for help. In Article 29, it is a cry for help from a narrower assembly (ex., a Consistory, a classis) to a broader assembly (ex., a classis, a synod). Not every decision made by an assembly with which a narrower assembly does not fully agree need be nor should be appealed. Just because a consistory does not agree with a decision of their classis does not mean they begin the appeal process. Humility and patience should be consistent virtues exercised within the churches.

An appeal is warranted when an assembly is convinced they have “been wronged by the decision of another assembly” or when they believe a serious injustice towards them has taken place by way of another assembly violating the Word of God and/or the Church Order.

The Basis for an Appeal

While Appendix Seven of the Church Order details the formal procedures of appeals, Article 29 identifies the basis upon which an appeal is to be made. An appeal is warranted only when an assembly is convinced that the Word of God and/or the Church Order have been violated by a decision of another assembly, and that the decision has resulted in a serious injustice being committed against them.

It is the responsibility of the assembly making the appeal to prove the unbiblical and/or disorderly nature of the decision that it is appealing. They are to state clearly and concisely how and where the Word of God and/or the Church Order have been violated. In doing so, it is most helpful to state the exact decision being appealed as recorded in

(Continued on next page)

(Continuation of article 30)

action of secession had just been taken as well as setting forth the course if such action would ever need to be taken again.

The Polity in this Article

Reformed church polity typically understands and protects the autonomy of the local church. Each local church is viewed as a complete church that is self-governing through its local office-bearers exercising the authority of Christ, the only Head of the Church.

While federative unity is often beneficial for a local church, it is not essential for a local church. That is to say, while it is usually advantageous for a local church

to join with other churches of like faith and practice, thereby giving visible expression to the unity of the church, it is not absolutely required for a local church to federate with other churches in order for it to be a church.

The Provision in this Article

Article 30 describes the way a local church that is already in federation with the URCNA would go about withdrawing from the federation. Such an action should occur only after having “availed herself of the avenues for appeal.” We must always be “endeavoring to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace” (Eph. 4:3).

Nevertheless, a situation may arise where a local church believes grievous decisions have been made

by broader assemblies that “are in conflict with the Word of God or the Church Order” (Article 29). Ultimately, the collective conscience of that congregation is bound to the Word of God and not to federative unity. In such sad instances, a local consistory simply submits a “written statement to the classis to which the church belongs” of its decision to withdraw from the federation. The withdrawing consistory should state, in a fraternal manner, its biblical grounds for withdrawing, thereby giving the classis and the federation material for sober self-reflection.

(Continuation of article 29)

the minutes or acts of the alleged offending assembly. As a side note, assemblies are to make clear decisions, preferably with identified grounds, keep formal records of such decisions, and make those records available to interested parties upon request.

The Response to an Appeal

An assembly may either sustain or not sustain an appeal. It must do so on the grounds of the appeal itself as evaluated in relationship to the Word of God and the Church Order. If an assembly sustains an appeal, it basically agrees that the decision appealed must be re-adjudicated, modified, or reversed because it seriously contradicts the Word of God. It is worth noting that the broader assembly to which the appeal was made does not

re-adjudicate, modify, or reverse such a decision. Rather, it directs the assembly whose decision was appealed to re-adjudicate, modify, or reverse.

To avoid endless wrangling in ecclesiastical courts, “all decisions of a broader assembly are to be received with respect and submission, and shall be considered settled and binding” unless an orderly appeal is sustained. However, if a narrower assembly is convinced a decision of another narrower assembly or of a broader assembly is contrary to the Word of God, they have the liberty to reject humbly such a decision as long as they state to the narrower assembly where they believe the decision contradicts the Word of God.

Nevertheless, if the broadest assembly of the churches, the

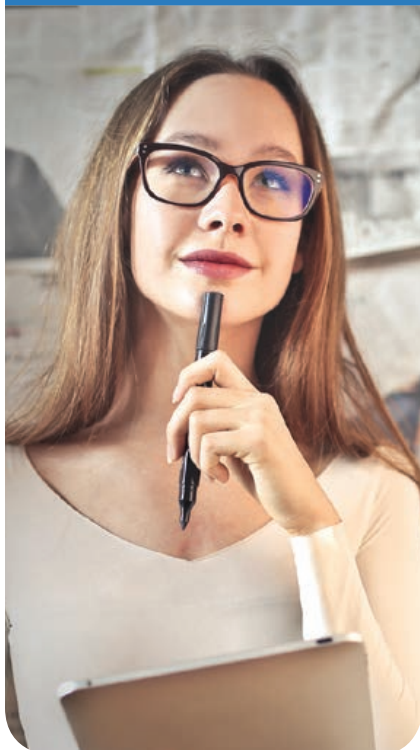
synod, determines by majority vote that the matter at question is essential to federative unity a consistory that refuses to comply with a decision loses eligibility to part of the federation of churches. This provision is crucial for the preservation of unity of doctrine and practice within the federation of churches.

1. Article 16 of the Church Order identifies three assemblies: “the Consistory, the classis and the synod.”

Rev. Greg Lubbers

is currently serving as Minister of the Word and Sacraments at Covenant Reformed Church (URCNA) in Pella, IA.

Reformed Fellowship College Essay Competition



Write a 1500-to-2000–word persuasive essay that offers a Reformed, Christian, and biblical outlook on a specific public issue currently confronting the church or society.

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Lord's Day 25: How Can I Become Godlier?

Rev. William Boekestein



65. Q. It is by faith alone that we share in Christ and all his benefits: where then does that faith come from?

A. The Holy Spirit works it in our hearts by the preaching of the holy gospel, and confirms it by the use of the holy sacraments.

66. Q. What are sacraments?

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

67. Q. Are both the word and the sacraments then intended to focus our faith on the sacrifice of Jesus Christ on the cross as the only ground of our salvation?

A. Yes indeed! The Holy Spirit teaches us in the gospel and confirms by the holy sacraments that our entire salvation rests on Christ's one sacrifice for us on the cross.

68. Q. How many sacraments did Christ institute in the New Testament?

A. Two: holy baptism and the holy supper.

If you asked ten people how to grow in grace, you might hear ten different answers. And many of the answers might have little scriptural support. So, is there a sure way to becoming more Christ-like?

Without using the phrase "means of grace," the Catechism recognizes that God uses means to heal His people. God works His saving and renewing grace in certain ways. And He has revealed to us His methods. God has said to us, "If you want to become godlier, do this."

What are the Means of Grace?

If sinners "share in Christ and all his benefits" only on the basis of faith in Christ (Q&A 53), the question is vital: "where then does that faith come from?" This isn't a theological curiosity; it's more like what a thirsty woman once asked Jesus: "Where do you get that living water?" (John 4:11). The Bible teaches that "the Holy Spirit ordinarily produces faith" by the two-part ministry of "the word and the sacraments."¹

Preaching is a Means of Grace

Because "faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ" (Rom. 10:17), God "wants the Christian community instructed by the living preaching of his Word" (Q&A 98). Through preaching, "the kingdom of heaven is opened by proclaiming and publicly declaring to all believers, each and every one, that, as often as they accept the gospel promise in true faith, God, because of Christ's merit, truly forgives all their sins" (Q&A 84).

Preaching helps us to “more and more come to know our sinful nature and thus more eagerly seek the forgiveness of sins and righteousness in Christ”; only by habitually sitting under God’s Word do we “never stop striving . . . to be renewed more and more after God’s image” (Q&A 115).

Sacraments are Means of Grace

Sacraments confirm the faith that “the Holy Spirit works . . . in our hearts by the preaching of the holy gospel.” Sacraments depend on preaching and also reinforce preaching. Abraham’s numbering of the stars—a sacrament-like action—only confirmed his faith because God had attached a word of promise: “so shall your offspring be” (Gen. 15:5). Sacraments aren’t better than preaching; they complement preaching by speaking in a different language, the language of sense.

To become more godly, we need to be convinced that God works saving and sanctifying faith through the means of grace: preaching and sacraments. The Catechism’s study of the Apostles’ Creed summarizes the content of biblical preaching: the gift of God and His works to needy sinners.

What are Sacraments?

Sacraments are divinely mandated signs and seals of God’s gospel promise.

Sacraments are “Instituted by God”

Not everything that creates a spiritual impression—a sculpture, a cross, a nature walk—is a means of grace. A sacrament is “a holy ordinance instituted by Christ.”² Christ insisted that every disciple be baptized (Matt. 28:19) and commune with Him in the Lord’s Supper (1 Cor. 11:23–26). The early church obeyed Christ and emphasized baptism and Holy Communion (Acts 2:41–42).

Sacraments are Visible Signs and Seals of God’s Gospel Promise

As signs, the sacraments “make us understand more clearly the promise of the gospel.” Our senses are like gates through which data enters our minds and hearts. The invisible promise of the gospel takes shape in the water, bread, and wine. Baptism is a tangible witness to Jesus’s promise to wash away our sins (Acts 22:16) and the Lord’s Supper helps us perceive in a different way that Jesus’s body was broken and His blood was shed for us.

But sacraments are more than a visible gospel. They also confirm the authenticity of the promise, like an official seal on a formal document. Abraham’s circumcision was “a seal of the righteousness of the faith which he had while still uncircumcised” (Rom. 4:11). Circumcision authenticated the Lord’s earlier promise that, by faith, Abraham was righteous before God. Sacraments are God’s way of proving to believers that “we have been sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all” (Heb. 10:10). Jonathan Edwards said that the best way to know honey is to “taste and see” (Ps. 34:8); sacraments allow us to taste and see the gospel.

Five sacraments were added by the church throughout the centuries as it increasingly saw itself, rather than God, as the dispenser of grace.³ But only baptism and the Lord’s Supper fit the biblical definition of a sacrament and take the place of circumcision and Passover.

How do the Sacraments Work?

“How do the sacraments become effectual means of salvation?”⁴ The sacraments have no power themselves. They do not contain grace to be dispensed. We must not trust in sacraments; rather, by faith we use them to embrace Christ. Nor are the sacraments dependent on the character of the one administering them. Paul was glad that he baptized only infrequently, lest people think

that their baptism was made more valuable by his involvement (1 Cor. 1:12–17).

Rather, sacraments “focus our faith on the sacrifice of Jesus Christ on the cross as the only ground of our salvation.” If Scripture is like eyeglasses, sacraments are like binoculars: they narrow our field of vision, block out distractions, and magnify and focus on Jesus. That’s why the sacraments aren’t elaborate—just bread, wine, and water. They keep salvation simple: Jesus’s broken body and shed blood wash away our sins.

Without a Spirit-worked faith, Scripture and the sacraments are like “the sun shining upon blind eyes.”⁵ The means of grace require faith. But, for believers, they answer the vital question, How can I become godlier? To become fruitful, the best place to be is in the field that God is tending. God gives the growth, but he does so through the means of planting and watering (1 Cor. 3:7). If you want to trust in Jesus and be like Jesus, the best thing you can do is come to church often “to learn what God’s Word teaches” and “participate in the sacraments” (Q&A 103). What God promises to do there, He does not promise to do anywhere else.

This article is part of a series, “Our Life’s Comfort,” which was first published at corechristianity.com on June 23, 2022, <https://corechristianity.com/resources/articles/how-can-i-become-godlier-lords-day-25>

1. Zacharias Ursinus, *The Commentary of Dr. Zacharias Ursinus on the Heidelberg Catechism* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing Co., 1992), 340.

2. Cf. Westminster Shorter Catechism, 92.

3. Michael Horton, *The Christian Faith* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2011), 765.

4. Westminster Shorter Catechism, 91.

5. John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 4.14.9.

Lord's Day 26: Why Baptism Matters

Rev. William **Boekestein**



69 Q. How does holy baptism remind and assure you that Christ's one sacrifice on the cross benefits you personally?

A. In this way: Christ instituted this outward washing and with it promised that, as surely as water washes away the dirt from the body, so certainly his blood and his Spirit wash away my soul's impurity, that is, all my sins.

70 Q. What does it mean to be washed with Christ's blood and Spirit?

A. To be washed with Christ's blood means that God, by grace, has forgiven our sins because of Christ's blood poured out for us in his sacrifice on the cross. To be washed with Christ's Spirit means that the Holy Spirit has renewed and sanctified us to be members of Christ, so that more and more we die to sin and live holy and blameless lives.

71 Q. Where does Christ promise that we are washed with his blood and Spirit as surely as we are washed with the water of baptism?

A. In the institution of baptism, where he says: "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit." "Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved; but whoever does not believe will be condemned." This promise is repeated when Scripture calls baptism "the washing of regeneration" and the washing away of sins.

Christian baptism is a beautiful symbol. Even if you knew nothing about Christianity, witnessing a baptism might convince you that something significant was happening. But as with most actions, baptism requires explanation. What does it mean to be baptized "in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit" (Matt. 28:19)? To keep the ceremony from lapsing into a beautiful but empty or superstitious ritual, we must know why we do it.

What is Baptism?

In baptism, a member of God's covenant is sprinkled with or immersed in water in connection with God's promise to wash away the sins of believers (Acts 22:16). But how do the action and promise relate?

Remember that baptism is a means of grace. "Our gracious God, mindful of our insensitivity and weakness, has ordained sacraments . . . to nourish and strengthen

our faith."¹ Baptism is one of the "ordinary, external ways Christ uses to bring us the benefits of redemption."² It is a visible sign and seal that God uses to "more fully declare . . . to us the promise of the gospel" (Q&A 66) and to shower on us His gifts, which "are found in Christ alone."³ So baptism is both a symbol and a redemptive act. "Taken up by the Word and Spirit, baptism itself as 'visible word' is not merely representative or symbolic, but 'living and active.' Like preaching, it is the lively

action of God's energies."⁴ God uses baptism to "confer" His promised grace⁵ by "focus[ing] our faith on the sacrifice of Jesus Christ on the cross as the only ground of our salvation" (Q&A 67).

To better understand how baptism works, we should know where the practice came from. While Christ instituted baptism in the New Testament, its roots are in the Old Testament. Noah's flood symbolized the baptism of Christ that now saves us (I Pet. 3:18–22). Later, God commanded Abraham to be circumcised as a token of God's covenant promise (Acts 7:8). Circumcision symbolized spiritual renewal (Deut. 30:6) and threatened separation from God because of unbelief (Gen. 17:14). It looked ahead to Christ, who was both circumcised and baptized to sympathize with sinners and to indicate that He would endure the covenant curse and baptize God's children with His life-giving Spirit (Luke 3:16). Likewise, God's people today are circumcised in Christ, "having been buried with him in baptism" (Col 2:11–12).

The Israelites fleeing Egypt were united to Moses as their covenant mediator when they were baptized in the Red Sea (I Cor. 10:–4). By marking the beginning of a new relationship between God and His covenant people, the great flood, the rite of circumcision, and the crossing of the Red Sea all preview New Testament baptism. Is it surprising then that the man who introduced Jesus was known as a baptizer? By baptism, John identified those who had changed their mind about sin and were beginning a new life of holiness in Christ (Luke 3:1–22).

Near the end of His ministry, Jesus commanded the baptism of all disciples. The apostles practiced baptism and explained its role in linking believers with Jesus's death (Rom. 6:1–4). They help us

understand it as a vital means of God's grace.

How Should I Use Baptism?

The Catechism helps us honor baptism with three biblical applications.

Remember Christ's Sacrifice

Baptism is a divine teaching tool; God uses it "to teach us that the blood and Spirit of Christ take away our sins just as water removes dirt from the body" (Q&A 73). Like learning a foreign language, effective teaching is repetitious. To rebellious sinners, grace is an unfamiliar language. Baptism reminds us (Q&A 69) of the truth we often forget: God gives new life to everyone who repents of their sins (Acts 2:38).

Be Assured that Christ Died for You

Sometimes the gospel sounds too good to be true. All I must do to escape condemnation and receive salvation is to "accept this gift of God with a believing heart" (Q&A 60). To encourage his hearers that salvation truly could be theirs so simply, Peter said, "Repent, and let every one of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins; and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit" (Acts 2:38). Baptism teaches the gospel; it also confirms God's verbal promise with a visual pledge. He "wants to assure us, by this divine pledge and sign, that we are as truly washed of our sins spiritually as our bodies are washed with water physically" (Q&A 73).

Commit to Holiness

Baptism warns against apostasy, against spiritually falling away. "To be placed into the name of someone else is to be brought into a special, close relationship to him."⁶ A baptized unbeliever literally takes God's name in vain, and the "Lord will not hold him guiltless who takes his name in vain"

(Exod. 20:7). On Judgment Day, baptized unbelievers will be treated not like strangers but as traitors whom God will judge more strictly. Baptism warns us not to be like the unbelievers who drowned in Noah's flood and in the Red Sea, or who were cut off from God's people for having uncircumcised hearts. Like gospel preaching, baptism must be combined with faith.

To believers, baptism promises that "[t]he Holy Spirit has renewed and sanctified us to be members of Christ, so that more and more we die to sin and live holy and blameless lives" (Q&A 70). Jesus's blood can wash away your "soul's impurity" (Q&A 69). He can give you a new start every day. He can cleanse your mind and heart so that you begin to happily say no to sin and yes to righteousness.

Baptism is a beautiful mystery. As we come to better know it and live out its meaning, we will see it more and more as a priceless gift from our gracious God.

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1. Belgic Confession of Faith, 33.
2. Westminster Shorter Catechism, 88.
3. John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 4.15.6.
4. Michael Horton, *The Christian Faith* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2011), 792.
5. Westminster Confession of Faith, 28.7.
6. Jason Van Vliet, *Growing in the Gospel*, 3.126. Cf. Horton, *The Christian Faith*, 788.

Rev. William Boekestein

is the pastor of Immanuel Fellowship Church in Kalamazoo, MI. He has written several books and numerous articles. He and his wife, Amy, have four children.

FROM

MAINTENANCE

TO

MISSIONAL

A Plea for Reformation (5)



Rev. Paul T. **Murphy**

In this series, I have set forth a picture of what an outward-focused, Christlike church might look like. In my last article, Part 4, I wrote of the “forgotten office of believer” and that significant role in the efforts to reach the lost in their local community. In this article, I will share some suggestions as to how to steer the church from being a maintenance church to being a missional one. The suggestions have to do with the infrastructure of the congregation.

Being missional is something that must be built into the DNA of a church. It is not about doing more evangelism nor hiring more missionaries or extra staff. Rather, it is to be reflected in the life of the church. We believe that Christ by His Word and Spirit is “gathering,”¹ and gathering means into the church. We do not believe evangelism is complete until people are baptized into local membership. Where does that start? At the front door of the church!

Occasionally, visitors might not be “our kind of people.” How are those people going to be welcomed and treated when they visit your church? If we are reflecting the character of God gathering His people, then

we must be prepared to have the disposition of a personal God to warmly welcome visitors. Maybe they’ve never been in a church before. Do you have any idea of how scary and intimidating that can be? How reassuring it is to just to say, “Hello, my name is Paul, what’s yours? Welcome to First Church today. It’s so nice to meet you. How can I help you?”

My wife and I regularly visit churches for my work. We recently visited a URC church and a PCA church where not one person greeted us or welcomed us. Both congregations were around 500 people; at both, we were the first to arrive and the last to leave. Personally, that is the

kind of church I would never visit again. Jesus has open arms to all! “Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest” (Matt. 11:28). Yet we can turn them away from the Savior by a cold and impersonal reception at the front door.

I suggest that you put yourself in the position of a visitor. Imagine being someone who comes but has never been in a church or a Christian worship service before. You have probably gone to worship your whole life, but they might have no idea what to expect. I recently spoke to an elder in the URC who was converted as an adult. His first time in church, he had no clue what was going on and was lost from the call to worship through the benediction. I have been evangelizing a young man here in New York City. He came to worship for the first time and whenever the speaker referred to a book of the Bible, he had to turn to the index to find what page it was on. I sat next to him and quickly looked up the passage and gave him my Bible for every subsequent reference.

How about the order of worship (usually printed in a bulletin)? Why do we do what we do in worship, and do we just expect that all visitors will understand? When I served in Michigan, we developed a welcome brochure that explained every element of the worship service. That was a very helpful tool. I encourage you to do something similar.

In 1 Corinthians 14, Paul writes, “If an unbeliever walks in, he will fall down and exclaim ‘God is really among you’” (v. 25). He expected unbelievers to be in worship. Do you? If they enter, will they find the service accessible?² Take the time to explain technical and theological terms. Address the children in this as well, and you will kill two birds with one stone, considering covenant children as members of the church who need to grow in grace and knowledge as well as the new visitor.

After worship, be on the lookout for anyone that appears to be out of place or lost in the crowd. Go over and greet them, show them where to get coffee and cookies, go with them and try to get to know them. If you just fall into your comfortable little cliques, the danger is that the visitor

is left alone. They don’t know anyone. This is shameful! They have none of the social relationships that you have with others in the church. They are unable to play Dutch Bingo.³ You are sending a clear, loud, non-verbal message: “You don’t belong. You’re an outsider. You’re not one of us.” Maybe even, “You’re not Dutch, so you’re not much.” Instead, introduce them to others and be sure they get to meet several other people. Make them feel at home. After all, that is what we believe: when someone comes to Christ and becomes a member of God’s family, they have come home.

Lastly, a warm welcome should not end in the narthex. Take notes from Rosaria Butterfield’s playbook.⁴ Invite them to your house for lunch and to meet the family.⁵ A conversation might start like this: “Hi, I am so glad you are here today. You know, I’d really be interested in what you thought of our worship service, and what you thought of the sermon? Why don’t you come to our home and have lunch?”

Just as a sinner is saved and changed from the inside out, so the DNA of our churches must be. This can only

happen if our hearts are like our Lord Jesus, who came to seek and to save the lost.

1. Heidelberg Catechism, Q. 54.
2. I want to be careful here. According to Hebrews 12, when God calls His people to worship, He lifts us into Heaven itself and into the presence of the risen and reigning Jesus Christ. Worship should not be horizontalized, as if it is for the purpose of unbelievers and not God’s covenant people. Yet there needs to be accessibility if one is to fall down and exclaim God is really here. Notice how many times the unbeliever is referenced in 1 Corinthians 14:16–25 (6 times).
3. If you don’t know what Dutch Bingo is, this New York City boy will not tell you. Ask your pastor!
4. Rosaria, a converted post-modern lesbian, is an excellent author whose writing is spiritually edifying. One of her books is entitled “The Gospel Comes with A Housekey,” about how the Lord used hospitality in her conversion.
5. Remember that though many of us consider Sunday a family day, but it is first and foremost the Lord’s Day.

Rev. Paul T. Murphy

is the emeritus pastor of Messiah’s Reformed Fellowship in New York City. He has been asked to stay on as a full-time evangelist for the congregation.

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THE DEATH OF CHRIST AND THE RIGHTEOUSNESS OF FAITH

Signed, Sealed, and
Administered
(Part 2)



Rev. Casey D. **Freswick**



Administered Only Once

As we examine the historical administration of circumcision and the present administration of baptism, a number of points should be agreed upon by all, including that circumcision and baptism were both commanded in the Bible. Circumcision was practiced by God's people before Christ; baptism is practiced by God's people after Christ.

How often should this sign and seal be administered? The redemptive reality of circumcision and baptism, Christ's death, was a one-time act. Hebrews 9:12 reads, "Not with the blood of goats and calves, but with His own blood He entered the Most Holy Place once for all, having obtained eternal redemption." The term here "once for all" does not

mean once and for all people. The expression means "once and never again." It emphasizes that His death was a one-time event in history, never to be repeated. The righteousness of faith granted to us by the Father is a one-time act inseparably connected to the one-time act of Christ's death. Justification is completed once and for all. The resulting state is ongoing—our righteous stand before God and a life of faith.

Circumcision as a sign was a one-time act; it physically cannot be repeated. Baptism as a sign is a one-time act; although it could be physically repeated, to do so would be a misuse. In our increasingly Biblically illiterate world, some churches allow the practice of repeated baptisms. But repeated baptisms would be analogous with crucifying Christ over and over on the cross.

Administered without Blood

The blood sacrifices and sacraments of the Old Testament are no longer practiced by the New Testament people of God. The book of Hebrews makes this clear. We no longer sacrifice the Passover lamb; because of the blood sacrifice of Christ completed on the cross, we no longer have the blood ceremony of circumcision as a sign and seal of the righteousness of faith. The words of Jesus apply to every Old Testament ceremonial shedding of blood: "It is finished." Now we have the "ceremonies" of the Lord's Supper and baptism. Both are signs and seals of the sacrifice of Christ; after His death on the cross, both are administered without the shedding of blood.

Administered to Both Male and Female

Circumcision was a sign and seal administered to males. Baptism is a sign administered to both male and female believers. Circumcision and the male lamb at Passover were prophetic markers looking to the one Person, Jesus, who would accomplish the work of paying for our sin on the cross. The New Testament clearly commands that baptism be administered to both males and females. This points out that Christ's saving work is needed by all in the same way. The result is that all God's people, male and female, are all children of God in Christ. All true believers share the status of firstborn son standing righteous before the Father by of the power of the Holy Spirit.

Administered to Converts: Repent, Believe, and Be Baptized

The Bible makes clear that the pattern for all adult converts was and is as follows: hear the promise, repent, believe, and receive the sign and seal. This clear pattern held for both adult circumcision and adult baptism. The Old Testament teaching on infant circumcision was to be circumcised, hear the promise, believe, and repent. The New Testament teaching on infant baptism is to be baptized, hear the promise, believe, and repent. The Biblical truths about adult and infant circumcision and adult and infant baptism exist side by side.

Romans 14:11 summarizes the historical pattern of Abraham's circumcision. He received the reality of circumcision, the righteousness of faith, while still uncircumcised. He heard and believed the promise. Therefore, the Biblical pattern for the administration of circumcision to Old Testament converts was repent, believe, and be circumcised. Abram heard the promises of good news in Genesis 12: "Now the LORD had said

to Abram: 'Get out of your country, from your family and from your father's house, to a land that I will show you. I will make you a great nation; I will bless you and make your name great; and you shall be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and I will curse him who curses you; and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed' (vv. 1-3)." Abram received the promises. He was called. He was changed. Righteousness was given to him.

The key promise was that God would be his God and the God of his descendants. This word came to Abraham in Genesis 15:1: "After these things the word of the LORD came to Abram in a vision, saying, 'Do not be afraid, Abram. I am your shield, your exceedingly great reward.'" But the sign of his new relationship to God and of the righteousness of faith—of his being a separate people—came later: "Abraham was ninety-nine years old when he was circumcised in the flesh of his foreskin" (Gen. 17:24). After he received the promises and was declared righteous, after he believed, he was circumcised. In addition, all the adult males of his household were circumcised as well. So, we have the Old Testament pattern of circumcision: hear the word, believe, repent by forsaking the world, and be circumcised. Circumcision followed a personal profession of faith.

Adult circumcision continued throughout the Old Testament period. All adult males desiring to leave their false gods and look to the one true God had to profess faith in God, embrace the promises given to Abraham, and be circumcised. "And when a stranger dwells with you and wants to keep the Passover to the LORD, let all his males be circumcised, and then let him come near and keep it; and he shall be as a native of the land. For no uncircumcised person shall eat it" (Exod. 12:48). This pattern

also points out that a proper administration of circumcision in relationship to the Passover was circumcision first, then the Passover. In the same way, baptism is the first sign and seal for New Testament believers; the Lord's Supper follows.

Following the pattern of adult circumcision, the book of Acts makes clear that all unbaptized strangers to the gospel of Jesus Christ must repent, believe, and be baptized. Who were strangers to this promise? Everyone: both Jew and Gentile. Although the Jews were near to the promise (the circumcised) and the Gentile far off (the uncircumcised), all needed to profess faith in Christ. They needed the sign of the completed work of Christ; they needed to be baptized in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

It is good to affirm "believers' baptism" or "adult baptism" like the book of Romans affirms "believers' circumcision" and "adult circumcision." The first administration of circumcision in the Old Testament followed this pattern: hear the promise, repent, believe, and be circumcised. But this pattern of adult circumcision does not answer the question about the circumcision of the children of Old Testament believers, just like the pattern of adult baptism does not answer the question about the baptism of the children of New Testament believers. There is another Biblical pattern that signs and seals the death of Christ and the righteousness by faith to the children of believers: receive the sign, hear the promise, repent, and believe.

Administered to Children of Believers: Be Baptized, Repent, and Believe

Because of the clear pattern of repent, believe, and be baptized for converts, many reject the administration of baptism to the children of believers. They maintain that baptism is only

for believers because of that New Testament pattern seen in the book of Acts. Because New Testament baptism is tied to the righteousness of faith, they conclude that infants do not have faith and thus should not be baptized. They may also claim circumcision had nothing to do with the righteousness of faith.

But we have clearly demonstrated that faith is an essential part of the promise of the righteousness of faith proclaimed to the world and signed and sealed in baptism and circumcision. Faith is not the cause of that righteousness, nor is it an absolute condition for all proper administration of the signs and seals. Churches that practice infant baptism do not deny the pattern of “repent, believe and be baptized” but recognize it as the pattern for adults who are not raised under the gospel. We do deny the unsubstantiated conclusion that this is the only pattern for circumcision and baptism. We have seen that the Old Testament and Romans 4 teach believers’ circumcision and Acts teaches believers’ baptism. So just as believers’ circumcision does not forbid the circumcision of believers’ children, neither does the affirmation and teaching of believers’ baptism forbid the baptism of believers’ children.

Another argument against infant baptism is that there is a fundamental difference between the meaning of circumcision and baptism. Many claim that circumcision was a sacrament that had nothing to do with salvation in Christ and the imputing of righteousness by faith. But we have clearly shown that this is a false understanding of circumcision. Circumcision signed and sealed the washing away of our sin by Christ and our new status before God as righteous—and baptism is the same. The children of the covenant community, set apart and brought near to the promises by God, received circumcision as a sign

of the promises of the covenant of grace including the promise of the forgiveness of sins and righteousness made possible because of Christ’s future work. In the same way, the children of believers receive the sign of the righteousness of faith in water baptism. The children of believers in the Old were—and the children of New Testament believers are—near to the promises of God. The Old Testament circumcised children were part of the nation; New Testament baptized children are part of the church. So those who reject infant baptism should also reject infant circumcision. But the word of the Lord to Abraham is clear about the administration of the sign and seal of circumcision to his descendants:

“Also I give to you and your descendants after you the land in which you are a stranger, all the land of Canaan, as an everlasting possession; and I will be their God. And God said to Abraham: As for you, you shall keep My covenant, you and your descendants after you throughout their generations. This is My covenant which you shall keep, between Me and you and your descendants after you: Every male child among you shall be circumcised; and you shall be circumcised in the flesh of your foreskins, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between Me and you. He who is eight days old among you shall be circumcised, every male child in your generations, he who is born in your house or bought with money from any foreigner who is not your descendant. He who is born in your house and he who is bought with your money must be circumcised, and My covenant shall be in your flesh for an everlasting covenant. And the uncircumcised male child, who is not circumcised in the flesh of his foreskin, that person shall be cut off from his people; he has broken My covenant. (Gen. 17:8–14).”

The descendants of Abraham received

the sign and seal of the promise of the righteousness of faith: that God would be their God, that they would be eternally with Him, that their sins were forgiven, and that they were clothed in righteousness. Romans 4:12 informs us that Abraham was “the father of circumcision to those who not only are of the circumcision, but who also walk in the steps of the faith which our father Abraham had while still uncircumcised.” Here we have two types of circumcised: those who are circumcised as children, and those who are circumcised as adults like Abraham. Peter declares that the promises of God in Christ are for those near (already signed and sealed) and those far off (not yet signed and sealed). “For the promise is to you and to your children, and to all who are afar off, as many as the Lord our God will call” (Acts 2:39). This is why believing households in Acts include both patterns of the administration of baptism. The sign and seal of that promise of the righteousness of faith is for both believing adults and for their children.

Arguments from silence are not the strongest arguments, but in the case of baptism I am convinced that there is real significance to the fact that the letters to New Testament churches assume the covenant community is baptized. Unlike in the book of Acts, there is never a command in the letters to the churches to repent, believe, and be baptized. There are commands to believe the promises given in baptism. There are commands to profess Christ as Lord and Savior. There are commands to trust in a righteousness that is not our own but is apart from the law. Therefore, all children of believers who are near to the promise are called and taught to believe the promise of the righteousness of faith consistently preached and signed and sealed to them in baptism, just like the children of the Old Testament were called to believe the promise of

a righteousness of faith preached to them and signed and sealed to them in circumcision. New Testament children of believers today follow the Old Testament pattern of yesterday: receive the sign, hear the promise, repent, and believe the promise of the righteousness of faith.

My prayer is that these teachings on the meaning and administration of circumcision and baptism will convince you or strengthen your

conviction that God calls believing baptized parents to baptize their children. If you are unsure of this pattern of covenantal faithfulness, I pray that you may be convinced of the blessing of baptism administered both to far-off converted adults and the children of believers who are near to the promise. These are the patterns of the circumcision of Abraham and Isaac and the daughter of Lois and her son Timothy. My pray is that all children who have received the sign

of baptism may profess their faith in Christ and His death on the cross, through whom all believers receive the blessing of the righteousness of faith: forgiveness of sins and His imputed righteousness.

Rev. Casey D. Freswick

is pastor emeritus of Bethany United Reformed Church (Wyoming, MI).

THE EMPTY TOMB

From the book *In God's Arms*
by **Mrs. Nancy Moelker**

Come! See the empty tomb
That through all time, to every land,
Bears witness of the Risen One
Who sits at God's right hand.
That, though He died in agony
Our debt of sin to pay,
He rose triumphant o'er the grave
On this most glorious day!

We stand in awe before You, Lord;
The cost of sin to You
Was nothing less than Your own life—
No other blood would do.
Your finished work upon the cross
Brought us eternal life.
Your resurrection from the dead
Wrought victory o'er death's strife.

And now, when we face sickness, death,
Or any other loss,
We run for refuge to the One
Who died upon the cross.
We find in Him our comfort
And we cast on Him our care,
For we know the tomb is empty
And there's no need to despair.

For this we want to thank You, Lord,
And lift Your name in praise.
For this we want to serve You, Lord,
Through all our earthly days.
And when that great day dawns, Lord,
And You come with trumpet sound,
Because the tomb is empty
We will all be heaven bound.

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To meet the spiritual and physical needs of people in the developing world in accordance with biblical principles for the glory of God.

Word & Deed works with indigenous (local) churches and Christian partners. Our key areas of emphasis are that all of our projects have a Gospel focus, that our partners rely on their local people's skills and assets, and that they work towards local sustainability.

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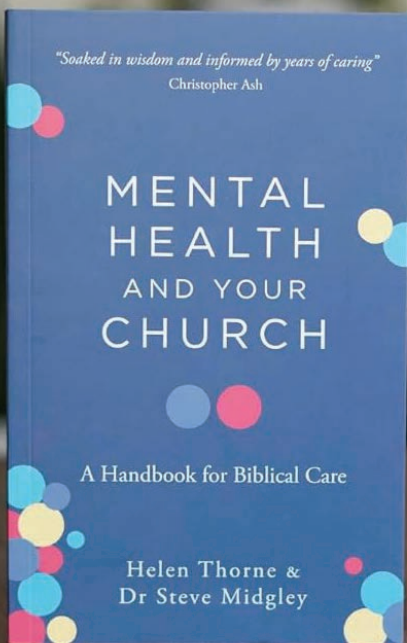
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"And whatever you do in word or deed, do all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through Him."
Colossians 3:17



A Wise Guide to the Mental Health Minefield



Rev. Wes **Bredenhof**

Contents

The authors write that the aim of their book is “not to turn you into mental-health professionals but to equip you with knowledge and wisdom, and to help grow that attitude of love and compassion towards those who struggle” (p. 17). To achieve this, the book is broken down into three sections: Understanding Mental Illness, What Can We Do?, and Caring in Practice. Woven through the book are the stories of five people. Chi struggles with severe anxiety, Andy with clinical depression, Siobhan with addictions/substance abuse, Ben with psychosis, and Kelly is trying to help her anorexic daughter. Each chapter finishes with Questions for Reflection, and it also includes a section of Further Resources at the back of the book.

Mental Health and Your Church has several strengths leading me to recommend it. One is a clear commitment to the Word of God as our ultimate authority. Another is a solid understanding of how the gospel relates to mental illness. But the authors also help us understand the complicated nature of mental illness. There is always a spiritual component to every struggle in this broken world, but often the way forward is more than a spiritual solution. Christians may make use of the insights of modern medicine and psychology. When it comes to the latter, Thorne and Midgley note that “secular therapies can offer vital help for people in distress. What may be wise, however, is that those receiving such therapy find a godly Christian friend to help them reflect on the help they are getting” (p. 63).

Benefits

Additionally, I appreciate the way the authors discuss trauma. This cannot be overlooked in discussions about mental health. So many Christians have experienced traumatic events like childhood sexual abuse or family violence. Sadly, well-intentioned church leaders at times have retraumatized struggling members. “Trauma is a complex area. It would be deeply unwise for the average pastor or congregation member to encourage someone to relive a traumatic event to try to address flashbacks” (p. 105). They insist (rightly) that trauma needs to be addressed by “someone with significant training and relevant experience” (p. 106).

These authors bring a heap of knowledge and experience to their readers. Steve Midgley is currently a pastor but previously worked as a medical doctor in psychiatry. His co-author Helen Thorne is a counsellor. Together they’ve written a great book with much helpful wisdom for church leaders and members alike. This is not a technical, scholarly sort of book; it is written for everyday Christians. If you want to learn how better to support brothers and sisters struggling with mental illness—helping rather than hurting them—this practical guide would be a fantastic start.

(This review originally appeared in Clarion magazine. Used by permission.)

Mental Health and Your Church: A Handbook for Biblical Care, by Helen Thorne & Dr. Steve Midgley. (Charlotte: The Good Book Company, 2023). Paperback. 191 pages. \$16.00 USD.

The area of mental health can seem like a dangerous minefield. There are dangers to the left and to the right, and churches don’t always lead their members safely through. For example, there are those who believe mental illness is a myth. Medication is just a get-rich-quick scheme for Big Pharma. All we need is in the Bible. But on the other side, there are those who believe the Bible has little or nothing to offer to those suffering from mental illness. They only need medical help or various therapies. *Mental Health and Your Church* was written to guide churches through the complexities associated with mental illness.

This book is now available for \$12.00 in our online bookstore at reformedfellowship.net

Rev. Wes Bredenhof

is a minister at the Free Reformed Church of Launceston, AU.

Meditation: The Knowledge of Future Judgment Is a Great Comfort



Rev. George van Popta

Question 52 of our catechism asks, “What comfort is it to you that Christ shall come to judge the living and the dead?”

If you, guilty of a crime, were summoned to appear before a judge, comfort is an emotion you would not be feeling. And yet our catechism says we can be comforted knowing that we will one day stand before the judge of all the earth. How can that be?

The answer given speaks directly to our fears and longings: “In all my sorrow and persecution I lift up my head and eagerly await as judge from heaven the very same person who before has submitted himself to the judgment of God for my sake, and has removed all the curse from me.”

There’s a profound peace in knowing that the one who will judge us is the same one who loved us enough to suffer for us.

When we face hardships, be it distress or persecution, we might feel alone or abandoned. But this assurance tells us that Christ is not only our Redeemer; He is our future judge—and this judge has already borne our judgment. He knows the depth of our struggles, our failures, and yet, He will come for us with mercy. His return isn’t a day to fear but to anticipate with hope.

While we wait, when life’s burdens press on us, this hope lifts our gaze. Christ’s return means justice for the oppressed, freedom from pain, and

eternal life with Him. Our sins are already dealt with; our Savior comes not to condemn but to complete His work of restoration. “He who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ.” (Phil. 1:6). So, we lift our heads, knowing that the same love which saved us will also welcome us on that great day. Let this truth comfort and strengthen your heart as you wait.

Rev. George van Popta

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



My Comfort is that Jesus Christ Will Come Again for Me

...from there he will come to judge the living and the dead.

1. My_ com - fort is that_ Je - sus Christ will come a - gain_ for me.
2. The_ judge will come from_ heaven a - bove, and be the ver - y one,
3. His_ en - e - mies are_ mine as well, and I will see_ them cast,

He'll_ judge the liv - ing and the dead with_ per - fect eq - ui - ty.
who_ bowed him - self in low - li - ness be - fore_ the judg - ment throne.
in - to per - di - tion with - out end, by_ jus - tice un - sur - passed.

Though per - se - cu - tion, grief, and pain, af - flict my mor - tal life,
It was for my sake that he bore the aw - ful wrath of God.
But me, and all his cho - sen ones, un - to him - self he'll take

I lift my head with_ ea - ger hope for_ res - cue from the strife.
He has re - moved the_ curse from me, and_ its_ dis - tress - ing rod.
to heav - en - ly glo - ry, — joy, and bliss. He'll nev - er us for - sake.



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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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Send all copy to:
Editor, Dan Van Dyke
3718 Earle S.W. Grandville, Michigan 49418
Email: djvan1951@gmail.com
Website: www.reformedfellowship.net

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Editorial Office

Dan Van Dyke
3718 Earle S.W. Grandville, Michigan 49418
Email: djvan1951@gmail.com

Circulation Office

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

Business Mailing Address

1988 140th Avenue, Dorr MI 49323
Email: office@reformedfellowship.net

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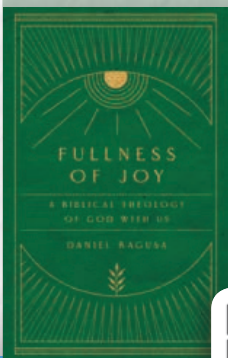
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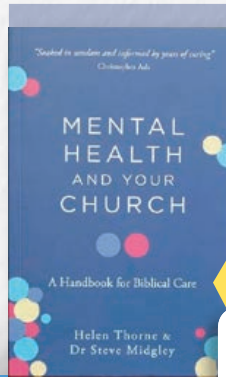
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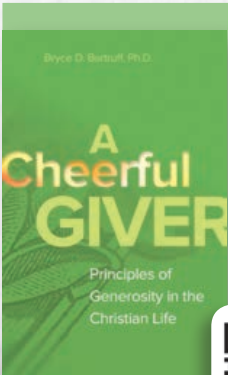
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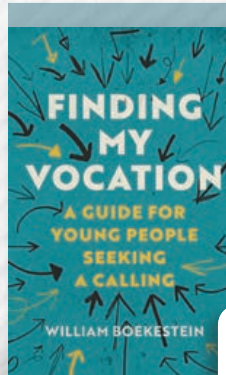
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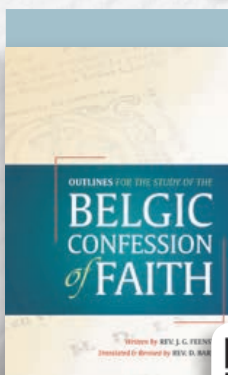
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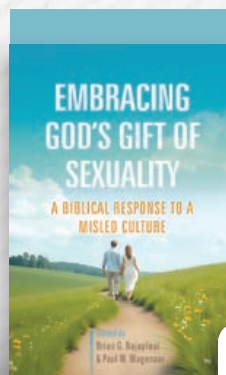
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