

# THE Outlook

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# THE ABSOLUTE NECESSITY OF CHARITY



“And though I have the gift of prophecy, and understand all mysteries, and all knowledge; and though I have all faith, so that I could remove mountains, and have not charity, I am nothing”  
—1 Corinthians 13:2

What is charity (love)? Why is it a must according to God’s standard and the most important characteristic in the life of a Christian? To answer that question, we must learn who God is in His trinitarian being. God is one in three—God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit—and yet only one God. He is the very definition of love.



**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.

God’s love is a supremely holy love. Sin cannot live and have a part in His love. This is vividly on display at Calvary where the Son of God, clothed in the sin of His people, suffered and died for them. The awful display of God’s wrath against sin brought out the love of the triune God in the salvation of His hell-worthy people. “In this was manifested the love of God toward us, because that God sent his only begotten Son into the world, that we might live through him. Herein is love, not that we loved God, but that he loved us, and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins” (1 John 3:9–10).

This same great love is required of His people if we are to ever be reconciled with Him. “O righteous Father, the world hath not known thee: but I have known thee, and these have known that thou hast sent me. And I have declared unto them thy name, and will declare it: that the love wherewith thou hast loved me may be in them, and I in them” (John 17:25–26). The God of love offers the greatest act of charity, the gift of all gifts, by giving His precious, only begotten Son as the ransom. Jesus Christ earned for His elect people the holiness needed to be united

eternally to Him as His perfect body. “That he might sanctify and cleanse it with the washing of water by the word, that he might present it to himself a glorious church, not having spot, or wrinkle, or any such thing; but that it should be holy and without blemish” (Eph. 5:26–27).

This love is the one thing needful. All other benefits are added blessings given to glorify the triune God in Jesus Christ our Lord and King. Without the cleansing blood of Jesus, we will die in our sins and be cast out forever.

*What shall I render to the Lord for all His benefits to me?*

*How shall my soul by grace restored give worthy thanks, O Lord, to Thee?*

*Salvation’s cup of blessing now I take, and call upon God’s Name;*

*Before His saints I pay my vow and here my gratitude proclaim.*

*His saints the Lord delights to save their death is precious in His sight;*

*He has redeemed me from the grave, and in His service I delight.*

*Psalter 311:1–3 (Psalm 116)*

# In Good Conscience:

*Interview with Timothy R. Scheuers*



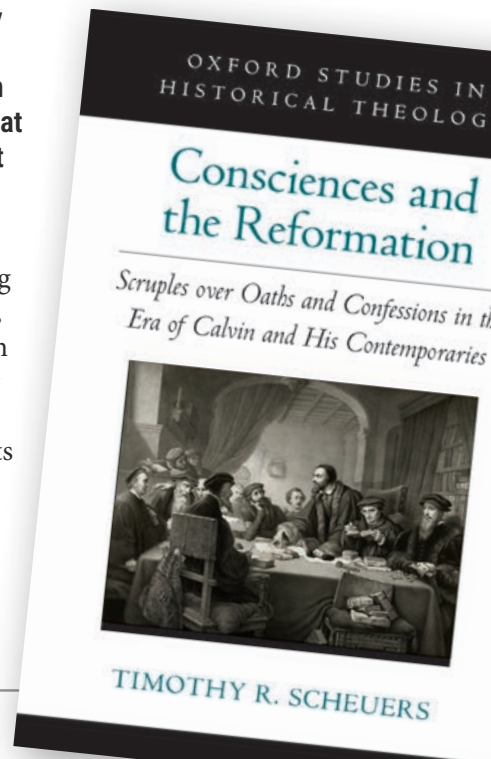
Dr. Michael R. Kearney

Rev. Dr. Timothy R. Scheuers

Rev. Dr. Timothy R. Scheuers, Pastor of Congregational Life at First United Reformed Church in Chino, CA, recently published a scholarly book entitled *Consciences and the Reformation: Scruples over Oaths and Confessions in the Era of Calvin and His Contemporaries* (Oxford University Press, 2023). Reformed Fellowship board member Michael Kearney interviewed Rev. Scheuers about practical implications of Calvin's stance on consciences, oaths, and faithfulness.

**Michael R. Kearney (MRK):** From the very first word of your title, we are reminded that consciences are a vital topic, both in the time of the Reformation and now. What first inspired you to choose the topic that became your dissertation and now this book?

Timothy R. Scheuers (TRS): I was writing a paper for a seminar on Calvin, Geneva, and the Reformation, and stumbled upon a series of historical vignettes illustrating the repeated struggles Calvin and his pastoral colleagues faced in their attempts to inculcate a Reformed conscience and confession of faith among the faithful of Geneva. Perhaps surprisingly, pushback against their oath-dominated measures



for reform came not only from the laity but also from the civil and ecclesiastical sectors, and it often came in the form of complaint against the alleged violation of the freedom of conscience—much to Calvin and his allies' chagrin.

I began to look for other instances of these conflicts not only within Reformation centers but also in the centuries leading up to the early modern period. I discovered there were more related cases of "conscientious dissent" not yet explored within Reformation scholarship, which, happily, meant that I had stumbled upon my thesis topic. From that point on, my focus settled on isolating and explaining a nexus of related concerns—namely, oath-taking, confessional subscription, and the freedom of conscience—that had a somewhat tenuous relationship in early decades of reform.

**MRK: How do the notions of consciences and oaths belong together?**

**TRS:** The swearing of oaths and vows necessarily engages the human conscience (Heidelberg Catechism Lord's Day 37, Q/A 102). When a person voluntarily links his or her heart to a confession of faith, a promise of marital fidelity, or a vow of membership, they ought to do so in *good* conscience—that is, with a judgment of sound reason, with a Spirit-wrought integrity, and in accord with one's innate knowledge of God's law. The Reformers routinely encouraged Christians under their charge to assess their consciences before, during, and after making promises in good faith.

**MRK: How do you explain oaths when counseling prospective church members or engaged couples?**

**TRS:** This practice continues today in Reformed churches that take

seriously promises of marriage, subscription to confessions and ministerial oaths, and membership or baptismal vows. As a matter of pastoral care, I make a point of impressing upon my congregants the importance of always speaking and acting in good conscience, only making promises they intend to keep, and valuing their membership vows. I also try to remain sensitive to members with weaker consciences by treating them gently, avoiding situations where they might feel forced to make promises they are not ready or able to keep. In these latter cases, pastoral patience and dutiful instruction are needed to help such people gain a sound conscience leading toward a firm confession or heartfelt oath.

**MRK: In your chapter on reform in Strasbourg, you describe a set of Anabaptist appeals to conscience that you call "vague," "obscure," and "ill-defined" (72). Do these kinds of poor appeals to conscience still occur?**

**TRS:** These appeals to conscience were heavily influenced by a type of Anabaptist piety that is highly subjective, mystical, spiritualistic, and generally resistant to external rites of the church. Anabaptists such as Sebastian Franck and Caspar Schwenckfeld claimed that the pure meaning of God's Word is mostly spiritual, communicated to the conscience by the immediate operation of God's Spirit. One must interpret Scripture as a confirmation of one's own heart or conscience and should not be wedded to the Bible—what they called the "paper papacy." According to these radicals, good conscience resides in the righteousness of one's heart, not in outward displays of piety, discipline, or ceremony. They therefore encouraged resistance to the exercise of church authority, whether in requiring ceremonies to confirm faith or to discipline carnal behavior.

In response, the Reformers sought to inculcate a sense of conscience that would give *external* expression to one's internal commitment to God and His Word. No one person, they argued, had the right to exercise their private judgment at the expense of their neighbor. While conscience is personal, it also has far-reaching communal implications relating to the order and harmony of church and society more broadly. One does not have the personal right, for example, to resist the wise methods employed by ordained church officials for consolidating, organizing, and purifying the church simply because they do so in the name of "conscience." All believers are conscience-bound to do what makes for peaceful accord in the church—to do what is good for their neighbors—and not simply to take account of their own sensibilities. In other words, the reformers were often striving to inculcate a sense of the "communal conscience."

The effect of American individualism upon the conscience is, sadly, alive and well in the church today. I occasionally encounter vague or ill-defined appeals to conscience even in our Reformed churches, usually as a means of avoiding obligations relating to church office or to buck expectations that are manifestly well-suited to maintaining order in the church. We have to regain the Reformers' vision for maintaining a good conscience—one that spares people from spiritually burdensome regulations that undercut gospel assurance, to be sure, but also one that helps them understand that they don't live for themselves alone but also for others, and that obligations and rules that are good for the health of Christ's church ought to be followed joyfully.

**MRK: Where does the term “Nicodemite” come from?**

**TRS:** These were closeted Protestants hiding out in Catholic lands. Out of fear or convenience, they continued to go through the motions of Catholic worship while secretly holding Protestant convictions. They were labeled “Nicodemites” after the biblical Nicodemus, a Pharisee by day, follower of Jesus by night (John 3).

**MRK: Why did these Christians pose such a concern in Calvin’s day?**

**TRS:** John Calvin, Guillaume Farel, and Pierre Viret were particularly critical of such individuals because they refused to confess with their mouths what they believed to be true in their hearts—a clear sign of a weak or compromised conscience. On top of this, Calvin and his pastoral colleagues were concerned that Nicodemite behavior would set a compromising and spiritually damaging witness to weaker Christians suffering under Catholic oppression. They warned against the scandalizing effects that false worship—even feigned idolatry—would have upon troubled consciences already vacillating between right and wrong.

**MRK: But others, like Bucer, thought that French Protestants “could remain within the Catholic Church and seek to ‘gain brothers’ through their clandestine witness” (99).**

**TRS:** Bucer, and Capito with him, are certainly remembered for taking a more irenic, strategic approach to dealing with Catholics-in-transition. They saw opportunities for Protestant evangelism in Catholic lands, driven by the everyday, gentle faithfulness of ordinary Christians toward their Catholic neighbors. Bucer, in particular, argued that the external rites of Catholic worship

were in themselves indifferent; that a person did not actually embrace Catholic superstition was the main thing. Calvin and those of his persuasion, on the other hand, maintained a closer link between a person’s heart and mouth; no one should confess with their mouth what they did not believe in their heart or conscience.

**MRK: Given this difference of opinion, how might you counsel a Christian who, for example, travels to an area that lacks a Protestant church or attends a mass with a Roman Catholic family member?**

**TRS:** I can appreciate Bucer’s pastoral sensitivity to morally complex situations and might tend to show sympathetic patience toward Christians transitioning from one ecclesial context to another. But I would certainly advise committed believers to hold fast their confession of faith, not compromising it by contrary outward behavior. To profess belief is to assert that one’s conscience is bound by the truth of their confession; and unless one’s conscience is found to be in error against the ultimate standard of Scripture, a person is obliged to maintain their confession, even by external observances, without compromise. A Protestant might visit a Catholic mass for, say, the purpose of observation and research, but should not participate in its idolatrous rites as if giving them any measure of credence or admiration.

**MRK: Are there other ways in which you think Christians are persuaded to be “Nicodemites” in the twenty-first century? For instance, how might Calvin counsel an individual or a church confronted with denials of God’s created order of human sexuality or the appropriate leadership of the church? Would he say that remaining silent in these instances is always an act of “compromising one’s confession” (135)?**

**TRS:** To be sure, Calvin would rebuke any believer today unwilling to maintain biblical doctrine and willing to capitulate to the spirit of our age. Remaining silent while the authority and clarity of God’s Word is questioned is itself an act of unbelief.

I think we deal less with Nicodemism proper these days—holding orthodoxy while hiding out among the unorthodox. Rather, we’re seeing a calculated compromise of God’s Word while openly embracing the so-called wisdom of man. Calvin would certainly warn that such religious compromise amounts to a complete abandonment of the voice of conscience—a deadly state of affairs.

**MRK: So do Reformed churches have an obligation to protect freedom of conscience? You quote a scholar who calls Reformed churches “a school for consciences” (169).**

**TRS:** One of the most sacred duties of ordained elders and pastors is ministering to consciences. This happens in two main ways. First, elders and pastors feed the souls of believers by maintaining the pure preaching of the gospel, by which the Spirit of God removes fear and self-loathing from the Christian’s conscience and gives deep-seated comfort and assurance of forgiveness. This is, in essence, the freedom of conscience.

But consistories also have the task of correcting erring consciences. When believers act in bad conscience toward one another or resist the instruction and correction of Christ through His officials, the consistory bears responsibility to expose error, rebuke sinners, and call them to exercise a submissive spirit.

The goal of all spiritual discipline should be the *interiorization* of God’s law, rather than mere external

compliance to it. Its aim is that believers would know in their very conscience the freedom of forgiveness and the joyful promise of sanctification by the grace of the Spirit. In this way, the church most certainly remains a school for consciences today.

**MRK: How is your final chapter on the Genevan Academy and the Lausanne Academy related to the overall thrust of the book?**

**TRS:** My last chapter illustrates how quickly Reformed institutions, historically, have lost their way once they loosen the grip on their confessional distinctives. Compromise rarely happens overnight; it takes decades, even centuries, to develop. It starts with changing words, then removing sentences, and finally abandoning concepts that were essential to maintaining biblical institutional standards. And none of this happens without violating one's conscience and confession.

The spirit of compromise that took over the Genevan Academy, beginning in the late sixteenth century, arose for various reasons, including *ambition* (wanting to remodel the academy after the grand medieval universities and attract more students), *expediency* (an expanding school required a wider faculty pool, making it harder to maintain strict confessional requirements), and *panic* (challenging social and economic hardships resulted in calls for abolishing the student oath to the Confession of Faith). Loosening standards seemed to be the best way to keep the school viable and gain prestige. This continued into the early seventeenth century, by which time the school could better be

described as “broadly non-Catholic” as opposed to uniquely “Calvinistic.” Accommodation for the sake of viability largely undercut Calvin's founding vision for the school, both in terms of its educational goals and spiritual character. The school underwent a reformulation under Napoleon in 1798 and has existed ever since as a secular university.

Sadly, the story of the Genevan Academy has been replayed many times over among Calvinistic institutions. And it's a lesson of history that many modern Reformed institutions refuse to learn. What this chapter (and my entire book) hopefully illustrates is the ongoing value of confessions and confessional subscription (as an act of a sound conscience) for guiding the instruction, discipline, and fidelity of the church. All the vignettes in this book illustrate that the church was strongest, most faithful, and most effective at having a transformative effect upon believers when it held on to its confessions and fine-tuned its methods for maintaining confessional adherence. Confessional subscription (pledging to submit one's conscience to a biblical statement of faith) proved to be the most effective method for maintaining doctrinal faithfulness; when it was abandoned, all sorts of problems arose (e.g., lax morals, loss of identity, and church breakdown).

I would encourage all parents and their children who are considering higher education to find a school that has held fast to its Reformed confessional distinctives—even at the expense of worldly recognition—by maintaining standards for properly gauging confessional commitments among its faculty and staff. It's one thing to say you're Reformed; it's quite another thing to *stay* Reformed.

**MRK: How has writing this book helped your pastoral ministry?**

**TRS:** I've been surprised by the practical pastoral payoff of writing this book. In pastoral counseling cases, I've encouraged conflicted individuals to consider the communal aspects of conscience, appreciating the needs and weaknesses of others before insisting on their own way. Such considerations have dovetailed into matters relating to membership and marital vows, submission to church authorities, and how to bear patiently with one another during morally complex situations in the church. I've also had opportunities to encourage various Reformed institutions to remain true to their founding vision and confession, to learn from the errors of our forebears. In short, writing this book has allowed me to gain some of the pastoral balance exhibited in Calvin's Genevan ministry—a ministry staunchly committed to the changeless truths of God's Word while also sensitive to weak and conflicted consciences in need of correction and assurance.

**Dr. Michael R. Kearney**

is a board member of Reformed Fellowship.

**Dr. Timothy R. Scheuers**

(PhD, Fuller Theological Seminary) is Pastor of Congregational Life of First United Reformed Church (Chino, CA) and Adjunct Assistant Professor of History at Providence Christian College (Pasadena, CA). Scheuers' research and publications have focused on the theology and pastoral ministry of John Calvin, as well as various topics of systematic theology.

# RCUS Tricentennial: 300 Years of God's Faithfulness

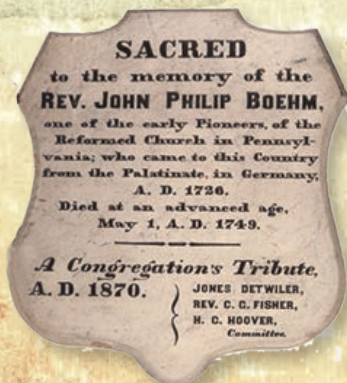


Mr. Wayne **Johnson**



Captain Peter Humrickhouse

John Philip Boehm



John Peter Zenger



Anna Catharina Zenger



President, George Washington



Baron Friedrich von Steuben

The year 2025 marks the Tricentennial Anniversary of the German Reformed Church in America, today known as the Reformed Church in the United States. We remain a church that bears the marks of her history, a history intertwined with the history of America itself. Her founders were not just immigrants, but refugees; and like refugees everywhere, their trials would leave an imprint that would last generations.

While there were enclaves of German Reformed settlers scattered from New Amsterdam down through the Carolinas, the first three formally organized churches were the result of the labors of one man, John Philip Boehm. A schoolteacher and relatively new immigrant to



Pennsylvania, Boehm agreed to lead worship for the growing groups of German Reformed colonists, many of whom were refugees from their war-ravaged homeland. These immigrants often arrived with their Bibles, Heidelberg Catechisms, and precious little else. They not only shared an affection for the simple German Reformed liturgy, but also a love for political and religious liberty.

In 1725, Boehm organized the first three Pennsylvania Deutsch Reformed churches, all with a common constitution. These three would grow to thousands and become the Reformed Church in the United States. Boehm would spend the rest of his life traveling more than 25,000 miles throughout the mid-Atlantic states organizing German Reformed congregations.

One group of refugees had found refuge in England, where Queen Anne arranged for their passage to what is today New York and New Jersey. Here they found Dutch Reformed brethren, with many of our forebears being absorbed into congregations there. One young lad named John Peter Zenger was apprenticed to a printer, and, every Monday morning, the zealous young German Reformed lad showed up with the sermons preached by the Reformed ministers the day before. He prevailed upon his employer to print copies which young Zenger would then distribute around town.

In time, Zenger would open his own print shop and newspaper, which he promptly used to pillory the royal governor and his corrupt administration. What followed next with his arrest and trial, according to many, kindled the flames of American liberty.

According to British law and custom, mere criticism of a royal governor constituted libel, regardless of the underlying facts. Zenger hired two lawyers, whom the governor

promptly disbarred. When the trial commenced in 1735, before judges appointed by the governor, prominent lawyer Andrew Hamilton made a surprise appearance. It was here that another British right came into play: the right to trial before a jury of one's peers. Ignoring tradition, Hamilton argued that "the truth is a sure defense." Few could argue that the administration was not manifestly corrupt. The jury of colonists took a mere ten minutes to return their verdict of "Not Guilty," the first time a jury had ever ruled against the Crown. Presaging the Battle of



*... during our march through the Jersey my men for want of shoes could be tracked for miles through the snow, the blood running from their feet.*

–Testimony of Captain Peter Humrickhouse

Concord, it was "the verdict heard round the world."

During his imprisonment, Zenger's paper continued to be published under the able oversight of his wife, Anna Catharina, who herself had arrived in the New World with the Palatine Reformed refugees. She thus became America's first female newspaper publisher. Every journalism student is taught about the Zenger trial and how it led to the First Amendment protection of free speech and religious liberty.

When the War for Independence began, the German Reformed were found among its strongest supporters. General Washington, encamped at Germantown, would grow close to the German patriots, and would select his personal bodyguards almost exclusively from among the German Reformed and Lutheran brethren. Germantown

wagonmaker Peter Humrickhouse would enlist early, crossing the Delaware with Washington, serving as his officer-of-the-day at Saratoga, and suffering the ravages of Valley Forge alongside his general. Late in the war, Captain Humrickhouse was personally commissioned by Washington to lead a wagon train of powder and ammunition to Yorktown, helping to turn the tide of battle, bring the war to an end, and secure American liberty. Humrickhouse would survive the war, and along with his wife, Mary, is buried in the graveyard of the

Reformed church in Hagerstown, Maryland.

In Philadelphia, the German Reformed had rescued the Liberty Bell from the British, hiding it in the basement of our church in Allentown. At Valley Forge, Baron Friedrich von Steuben would turn the farmers and tradesmen into the Continental Army that went on to defeat the British army. After the war, von Steuben retired to New York and served as an elder in our New York congregation. Upon his inauguration as President, George Washington wrote a public letter of thanks to the elders and pastors of the German Reformed Church for their steadfast devotion to the cause of liberty. Twenty percent of her pastors had volunteered as chaplains in the Continental Army.

Several years after the first churches were organized by Boehm, first Rev.

Michael Weiss and then the Swiss schoolteacher Rev. Michael Schlatter would arrive to continue Boehm's labors. Weiss was scandalized that Boehm was unordained, so Boehm travelled to New Jersey and prevailed upon the Dutch Reformed pastors to examine and ordain him.

Soon, however, they would confront the assault of Count Zinzendorf and his allies that attempted to sweep up the Reformed congregations into a union with the various Pietist movements. The resistance led by Boehm and Weiss succeeded in strengthening the resolve of the German Reformed, though not without losses.

With the Reformed Church in war-ravaged Germany in shambles, the colonial German Reformed Church sought oversight from the Dutch Reformed. This led to the German Reformed Coetus answering to the Classis of Amsterdam for a half century. Though not without difficulties, we remember this labor of love fondly. It was well into the twentieth century before relations would once again blossom with our beloved Dutch brethren.

The mid-1800's proved a trying time for our church, as the Mercersburg Seminary began to exert an oversized, largely negative impact on the church. Under the leadership of Philip Schaff and John Williamson Nevin, the "Mercersburg Theology" would introduce a Hegelian and Romanizing influence that soon separated the "high church" Eastern churches from the plain worship of the farmers and frontiersmen of the West. The battle raged for a hundred years.

For the RCUS, the Mercersburg movement was an exceedingly dark chapter, as it was for the broader believing church as well. Mercersburg theology shifted the emphasis to the Person of Christ and away from the work of Christ, focusing the Lord's Supper on what they saw as an objective sacramental union instead of forensic justification. Nevin was contemptuous of the Dutch Reformed emphasis on predestination, as well as the Puritan element he detected among the lower church German Reformed. At root, Mercersburg was classic Hegelianism, committed to the new synthesis that would result when, as Schaff hoped, Protestantism and Catholicism merged. The low-church Zwinglians had none of it.

While affirming the personhood of Christ and union with Christ, they saw the focus of the Lord's Supper as the Atonement, not the Incarnation, rejecting Nevin's altered language of "spiritual *real* presence." While a "Peace Commission" sought to promote unity between the Mercersburg acolytes and the "Old Reformed," it amounted to little more than a temporary ceasefire. Mercersburg theology was alien to the Old Reformed, like another gospel.<sup>1</sup> With a steady stream of Mercersburg men converting to Roman Catholicism, disunion was inevitable.

In the early 1870s, there was a second significant influx of Germans who came to the US and primarily settled in Nebraska and the Dakotas. These new immigrants originally came from the Palatinate in Germany. Due to great difficulties in their country, they responded in the mid-1700s to an invitation by Catherine the Great, Tsarina of Russia, to settle unoccupied land in Russia. They were given free land and other promises. When those promises were forgotten a hundred years later, free land became available through the

## GIVE THE GIFT OF A BIBLICAL, REFORMED OUTLOOK



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Homestead Act in America. So once again, many of these Germans, living then in Colonies in Russia and known as the Volga and Black Sea Germans, emigrated to the Midwest, settling in Nebraska and homesteading in the Dakotas.

In God's providence, these new settlers in the Midwest immediately became a part of the RCUS due to its German heritage. They came with a strong commitment to God and a faith as expressed in the Heidelberg Catechism. The RCUS today has largely survived because of their faithful legacy and God's grace.

When the proposal arose in 1934 for a new denomination to be formed from the RCUS and the Evangelical Synod, only one Classis successfully held out in the vote—the Eureka Classis, composed predominantly of Volga Germans. They would be joined by the South Dakota Classis a year later. Continuing as the Reformed Church in the United States, they were twice challenged in court over use of the RCUS name, and twice prevailed. The judges ruled that only the Eureka Classis still adhered to the confession of the Reformed Church in the United States and, by forming a new denomination with the Evangelical Synod,<sup>2</sup> the majority had lost their claim to the name and its legacy. It was the only time the majority liberal wing of a church would lose a denomination to a conservative minority.

During the time leading up to World War 2 and after, the continuing RCUS struggled mightily, but persevered. At one point during the war, a photo of the Eureka Classis showed only two ministers present; all the remaining delegates were elders. Indeed, she was an elder-led church for many years, existing on the plains separated by distance and dialect from the broader Reformed community. Pastors would routinely travel to two, three, and sometimes more congregations on a Sunday, with many churches holding

reading services conducted by elders.

It was not until the late Rev. Lloyd Gross, a son of our church in Hosmer, South Dakota, was sent to study at Westminster Seminary in Philadelphia that the door was nudged open. The Presbyterian patriarchs led by Gresham Machen had an impact, but the stream of RCUS men that followed were particularly drawn to the Reformed professor, Rev. Cornelius Van Til and his Heidelberg-laced lectures.

Soon, fraternal relations with the Orthodox Presbyterian Church would flourish, but relations with the Christian Reformed Church would not. While the RCUS was stubbornly seeking to become more Reformed, a different spirit animated the conversation with Grand Rapids. Soon, those relations would cease. In time, we found other fraternal friends within the NAPARC and eventually would find our way back into fellowship with Dutch brethren, the Canadian Reformed, and the fledgling United Reformed Churches in North America.

Today's RCUS is small, except when compared to our wilderness years referenced above. At our last synod meeting, we welcomed seven new ministers and three new churches. There is a renewed interest in missions, both here and abroad. While we cherish our German Reformed history and heritage, it is our confessionalism that has brought new churches into our fold, particularly in California.

On June 9–13, 2025, in conjunction with our synod meeting, we will hold a Family Convention (to which you are all invited) in Rapid City, South Dakota, and a commemoration of our Tricentennial at Mount Rushmore. For more information, please see <https://www.accelevents.com/e/tricentennial>.

It has been a remarkable and difficult journey, but as a church

body, the Reformed Church in the United States today is a vibrant and remarkably unified group of confessional churches. Its ecclesiology and practice reflect both its Palatinate and Swiss origins. The churches today still hold a great measure of affection for political and religious liberty. While our churches consider themselves to be in organic union with one another—our name is the Reformed “Church” not “churches”—most decision-making is consistorial. Synod operates as an appellate judicatory, not an original court. This federal system recognizes the essential liberty of the local church while enabling corporate action. That is the theory, of course, but it also works out quite well in practice.

The boundaries of the nations are established by God; in His good pleasure, He has dealt with each of us according to His good pleasure. We should not be proud of our respective histories, we should be humbled by them; He is the Potter, we are the clay. We know you share with us a desire to faithfully serve wherever the Lord has chosen to place us. May all glory be unto Him alone.

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1. The revival of Mercersburg theology today is surprising, whether by popular Reformed authors, seminaries, or those espousing a Federal Vision (see <https://theaquilareport.com/mercersburg-and-the-federal-vision/>). It will not end well.

2. The new 1934 denomination was composed of majority elements from both the Reformed Church in the United States and the Evangelical Synod, a church with a mixed Lutheran heritage. This Evangelical and Reformed Church would later merge with the Congregationalists to form today's United Church of Christ.

## Mr. Wayne Johnson

is Chairman of the RCUS Tricentennial Celebration, Provost of City Seminary of Sacramento, and past Editor-in-Chief of *Leben Magazine*.

# Judgment & Grace for the Man



Rev. Peter **Holtvliüwer**

He even let Himself be put to the utmost shame by being nailed to a cross without any clothing. No animal skin for Jesus, not even a fig leaf. He hung in humiliation, with the shame He carried for us fully exposed.

**He did that so that you and I could be clothed with the white robes of His righteousness.**

**Meditation Text: Genesis 3:17–19 & 21**  
**Suggested Reading: Romans 8:18–24**

The Lord God finally addresses Adam for his sin. Before getting into the details, we should notice how God singles out Adam as the key person in charge of the garden. Right from when the Lord entered the garden, He called out to the man (not the woman) and interacted first with him (Gen. 3:9–12). When Adam shifted the blame to Eve and Eve to the serpent, the Lord addressed each of them in turn, but in the end returned where he started, speaking to Adam (v. 17). This order shows the authority of Adam as both head of his wife and also king of creation.

Going back to the eating of the fruit, Eve ate first but it was only when Adam ate that the eyes of *both of them* were opened. Eve certainly has her own responsibility for her sin, but it is Adam's fall that triggers a wholesale change in the hearts of both Adam and his wife. In our text, Adam's fall brings down the judgment of God not just on himself as a man but over the very earth that he rules.

## The Cursed Earth

It's striking how the Lord does not curse Adam directly but rather the ground beneath his feet: "Because you have listened to the voice of your wife and have eaten of the tree of which I commanded you, 'You shall not eat of it,' cursed is the ground because of you; in pain you shall eat of it all the days of your life" (v. 17). Mankind and the ground (or earth, soil) are intimately related. Man's flesh had come from the ground; in Hebrew, the word "ground" and the name "Adam" (which means "man") share the same root—Adam is literally an *earth-ling*. And more than that, man's calling was specifically to till and cultivate that ground, exercising dominion over the earth including all the animals, but now that ground will in no way cooperate. Just as the woman will have pain in bearing children, so the man will have pain in scratching out a living from the earth.

The very earth on which we live is corrupted on account of Adam's sin. Does that not show how Adam was given the high responsibility of not only representing the human race but also serving as God's appointed king over the earth? By God's design, a kingdom is tied to its king. If the king flourishes in faithfulness, so do the people and the land he rules. But if the king flounders in rebellion, his people and land suffer accordingly (see 2 Sam. 7:10–16; Prov. 29:4, 13–14). Thus, when Adam rebelled

against the only and absolute King of Kings, he brought down punishment not just on his own head or on his descendants, but also on the very land he ruled—on all of creation. Paul teaches this plainly: "For the creation was subjected to futility" and is in "bondage to corruption" (Rom. 8:20–21).

## Suffering

We have to face this ugly fact head on: because of man's sin—our sin—the entire created order has fallen under God's judgment. What this means practically is that everything God made, everything that He pronounced "very good" (Gen. 1:31), we by our sin have now contorted into something *not* good. We have brought disorder, disharmony, and death into a creation that had been well-ordered and harmonious, knowing only abundant life. The animal kingdom has turned into a survival of the fittest where the strong prey on the weak; the delicate balance of whole ecosystems is now regularly upset with floods, volcanoes, earthquakes, hurricanes, and tornadoes; and man, who was appointed to exercise a royal stewardship in caring for the animals and the earth, is frequently a source of fear for animals (and often vice versa) and a cause of unnecessary disruption of ecosystems. The cosmos is in bondage to corruption because of our rebellion.

Even closer to home, suffering has become a part of life for all humans. All sicknesses from seasonal ailments to diabetes to cancer, and everything in between, befall us because of our sin in Adam. Illnesses of the mind or soul like depression, anxiety, schizophrenia, Alzheimer's, and countless others plague us because of our original sin. It has caused relationships to break down in or outside of the home, tension to form in the workplace, disagreements to occur in politics or theology or

academia—more broadly, all forms of distress. On top of that, every nation on earth deals constantly with poverty, crime, and punishment, not to mention the constant threat of economic hardship or war or both. Everything evil in this world, every source of sorrow, and every cause of misery can be traced back to mankind's sin in Eden.

## Sweat of your Brow

This suffering extends even to our daily work. In fact, the Lord highlights how daily work becomes a daily toil: "cursed is the ground because of you; in pain you shall eat of it all the days of your life; thorns and thistles it shall bring forth for you; and you shall eat the plants of the field. By the sweat of your face you shall eat bread" (vv. 17b–19a). Instead of a pleasant tilling of arable soil, it will be back-breaking work by the sweat of the brow. Instead of plentiful crops easily grown and gathered, the man will have to contend with thorns and thistles. So it is to this day.

We are blessed with many technological advances. Tractors and excavators and dump trucks and other heavy machinery do our slugging; computers and robots and artificial intelligence assist with numerous tedious tasks; but even with all that, you still have to work hard to make a living, don't you? And the earth doesn't easily give of its fruits, does it? Farmers and landscapers still have to spray for insects and weeds each season and if the weather is off, even just a little, a whole crop can be ruined.

Those in management positions dealing with employees and guiding a business along: will any of them say their job is easy, "no sweat?" There is the constant pressure of more business, solving employee problems, assuring there is sufficient cash-flow, and chasing down unpaid bills. Nothing comes easy in this life.

He provided a totally different set of clothes—garments of skin. He did not take cotton or the wool of the sheep and spin two wonderful suits of clothing for Adam and Eve. Nor did He weave together bigger leaves or perhaps tall grass into outfits that would provide better coverage. Instead, He took two animals, put them to death, and used their skins to clothe Adam and Eve. Astoundingly, the Lord shed blood that day in order to cover the shame of His children.

Sin has its tentacles spread out into every facet of our lives until it brings us all right back to the very ground from which we were taken: “for you are dust, and to dust you shall return” (v. 19b). Every day, the obituaries tell the story of innumerable people returning to dust—seniors, adults of all ages, teens, children, and even babies. Not one day goes by without death claiming another soul. We’re born in pain, we live in pain, and we usually die in pain, too. It’s enough to leave you in deep despair.

## Grace

Yet there is a ray of light here, a beam of God’s grace. As oppressive and gloomy as these judgments are, they are actually much lighter than we deserve, aren’t they? The punishment God threatened was this: “on the day you eat of it you will surely die” (2:17). We humans, both men and women, should have been gone. Done. Finished. And yet, though work and life will be hard, *we will live to work!*

Recall that for both the man and the woman no curse falls directly on them as it had upon the serpent. Humanity should have been wiped off the face of the earth, but they are spared. They are even promised redemption! Satan will be crushed and God’s children brought back into fellowship with their God! Though misery there will be, yet the woman and the man will be able to continue in life, bearing children and tilling the earth, eking out a living until the day comes when the Seed of the

woman arrives to undertake His great work of salvation.

This grace is further highlighted in verse 21: “The LORD God made for Adam and for his wife garments of skins and clothed them.” Why did the Creator of heaven and earth concern Himself with the clothing of man? Why is He replacing their fig leaves with animal skins? This act connects back to when Adam ate the forbidden fruit. At that moment, both Adam and Eve’s eyes were opened; they knew they were naked and shame filled them. We still have this sense deeply imbedded in us today: our guilt, our rebellion, is made plain in that awful feeling of shame we have in being naked and exposed in front of others but especially in the sight of God. That is why God acted to clothe our first parents. It was an act of grace designed to cover our guilt.

## New Clothes

The fig leaves were not enough to hide their shame from God. Their own human effort to run and hide and cover themselves was not able to alleviate their guilt, but God could. He provided a totally different set of clothes—garments of skin. He did not take cotton or the wool of the sheep and spin two wonderful suits of clothing for Adam and Eve. Nor did He weave together bigger leaves or perhaps tall grass into outfits that would provide better coverage. Instead, He took two animals, *put them to death*, and used their skins to clothe Adam and Eve. Astoundingly,

the Lord shed blood that day in order to cover the shame of His children. Physical death did come into the garden that day—only not to Adam and Eve as it should have, but to two animals who died in their place. That is what truly takes away man’s shame.

This act gave Adam and Eve tremendous hope, for that shedding of blood and sacrifice of life was a message, a sign of another great sacrifice that would be given in the future by the great Seed of the woman. He would one day come and shed, not the blood of animals, but His own blood in order to cover man’s shame once and for all.

Is that not exactly what the Lord Jesus Christ did? He came as a man to let our punishment fall on His head so that all our guilt could be cleared away. He even let Himself be put to the utmost shame by being nailed to a cross without any clothing. No animal skin for Jesus, not even a fig leaf. He hung in humiliation, with the shame He carried for us fully exposed. He did that so that you and I could be clothed with the white robes of His righteousness and so that the ground beneath our feet can be freed from its curse.

The last Adam is not just saving people but a planet, for “creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the sons of God” when it “will be set free from its bondage to corruption” (Rom. 8:19, 21). Set free: all Christians are waiting for that moment when the curse will be reversed, the earth will be purged, and we as renewed people will be given a home on a renewed earth where sin will be no more. Come, Lord Jesus, Maranatha!

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# Church Order

Article 31: Appeals by Church Members

Article 32: Admitting a Church



Rev. Greg Lubbers

# URCNA

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

## ARTICLE 31: Appeals by Church Members

If any church member complains that he has been wronged by the decision of a narrower assembly, he shall have the right to appeal to the broader assemblies. An individual's appeal must proceed first to the Consistory, and only then, if necessary, to a broader assembly. Until a decision is made upon such appeal, the church member shall conform to the determination and judgment already passed. (See Appendix 7)

### The Distinction within an Appeal

Within the tradition of Dutch Church Orders, the *Church Order of the URCNA* is unique in its inclusion of two separate articles addressing the matter of appeals. Many of the basic principles already described in a previous article on Article 29 also apply to the process described in Article 31.

*(Continued on next page)*

## ARTICLE 32: Admitting a Church

Any church may be admitted into the federation upon the recommendation of a consistory and provided that its office-bearers subscribe to the Three Forms of Unity and agree with this Church Order. Any such church shall be provisionally accepted into membership in the federation by the classis pending ratification by the following synod. Any of these office-bearers who are ministers shall be examined being declared minister of the Word and sacraments among the United Reformed Churches in North America according to the regulations adopted by the federation. (See Appendix 5 and 6).

### The Nature of a Federation

Article 32 addresses how a local church enters the federation of the United Reformed Churches in North America. While most churches have a long history of using the term

*(Continued on next page)*

(Continuation of article 31)

The main difference between Articles 29 and 31 is that Article 29 addressed appeals brought by assemblies, either a consistory or a classis, while Article 31 addresses appeals brought by individual members of a church within the federation.

It should be noted that a person who is not a member of a federation of churches does not have a right to appeal a decision of an assembly within that federation. This has implications for those who may have resigned their membership from a church within a federation. Having resigned, they have no right to appeal. Only church members,

including anyone under ecclesiastical discipline, have the right to appeal.

## The Reason for an Appeal

Reformed church polity seeks to balance at least three important truths. The first truth is the inerrancy and infallibility of the Word of God. The second truth is the authority, but not infallibility, of ecclesiastical assemblies. The third truth is the freedom of the individual conscience before God.

Church Order seeks to balance these truths by providing an avenue for help that members can take when they believe their consciences has

been seriously wronged by an official decision taken by an ecclesiastical assembly that is “in conflict with the Word of God or the Church Order” (Article 29).

## The Process of an Appeal

Thankfully, the URCNA has clarified the process of appeals over the past decade. A detailed guide for the process of appeals is included in Appendix 7 of the Church Order. That detailed guide falls outside the scope of our present consideration. However, a few general observations are in order.

(Continued on next page)

(Continuation of article 30)

“denomination,” the churches that organized into the URCNA purposefully chose the term “federation” to describe their ecclesiastical organization. The root of the word “federation” has a meaning of “allying” or even “covenanting.” As such, it is a fitting word to describe the organization that results from a number of churches allying and covenanting themselves together. Such an action of federating together is a voluntary action but, once taken, brings various obligations in relationship to the federation.

## The Basis for a Federation

Reformed ecclesiology seeks to balance the autonomy of the local church and the unity of the universal church. Each local body is a complete church, governing itself through its local leadership underneath the lordship of Jesus Christ. Yet, the churches are ultimately one with “one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all, who is above all, and through all, and in you all” (Eph. 4:5–6). These two truths—the autonomy of the local church and

the unity of the local churches—find expression within a federation of local churches.

The basis for federative unity is unity in doctrine and practice. This explains the Church Order’s requirement that a church seeking entrance into the federation must have office-bearers who “subscribe to the Three Forms of Unity and agree with this Church Order.”

All the churches within the federation cannot possibly have an intimate knowledge of a church seeking entrance into the federation given such realities such as geographical distance. Therefore, a consistory of a church within the federation is given the responsibility to make a recommendation to its classis for provisional acceptance into the federation of a church seeking admission. Ideally, this “sponsoring Consistory” (Appendix 5) would make such a recommendation after some time of getting to know the neighboring church’s understanding of and commitment to the Three Forms of Unity and the URCNA Church Order. A time of instruction and clarification may also be warranted.

## The Entrance into the Federation

With the recommendation of a consistory of a church within the federation, there are two more steps by which a church “may be admitted into the federation.” The first step is a provisional acceptance into the federation by a classis of the URCNA. If the church seeking admittance into the federation has a minister or ministers, they are required to undergo a *colloquium doctum*, or “learned conversation,” at the meeting of classis to ensure they understand and agree with the doctrines and practices of the churches in the federation as well as possess “ministerial competence.” This *colloquium doctum* serves as an “entrance exam” into the federation. More details about this procedure are included in Appendix 5 of the Church Order.

Upon the sustaining of a *colloquium doctum*, the minister is “declared a minister of the Word and sacraments among the United Reformed Churches in North America.” This is not an ordination or installation of the minister. It is simply a recognition that he now serves as



(Continuation of article 31)

The URCNA is a federation of churches that place great emphasis on consistorial authority. This explains the stipulation that “an individual’s appeal must proceed first to the Consistory, and only then, if necessary, to a broader assembly.” A church member does not have the right to appeal directly to a broader assembly. His appeal must always start with his consistory.

An appeal is a cry for help regarding a specific action an assembly has taken. That specific action is to be referenced in the presentation of an appeal. This should be done

by an exact quote of the motion, ideally along with its grounds, determining the action that is being appealed. For example, if a church member is appealing an action of ecclesiastical discipline placed upon him, he should have access to the motion exactly as recorded in the consistory minutes. This helps clarify matters for all parties involved in the preparing, presenting, and adjudicating of an appeal. One reminder on the matter of minutes is that most states have laws requiring 501(c)(3) organizations, including churches, to keep formal minutes of their meetings.

In making an appeal, a church

member is crying out for help from the assemblies of the church, the consistory, classis, or synod. The member who believes “he has been wronged by the decision of a narrower assembly” is not to cry out to his fellow church members in an attempt to gain popular support or agitate the congregation against the assemblies. While an appellant has the right to seek counsel in the preparation and presentation of his appeal, he is also duty bound to “conform to the determination and judgment already passed.” In doing so, he fulfills the command to “keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace” (Eph. 4:3).

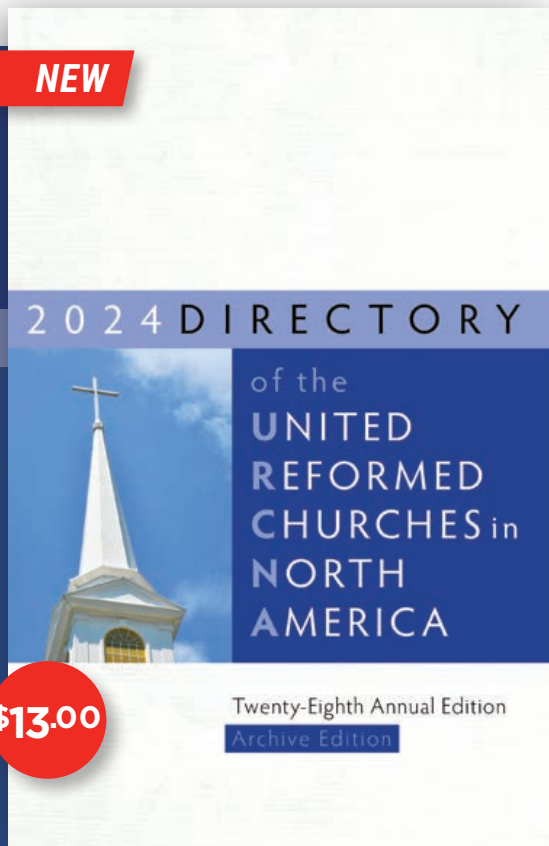
a minister within the URCNA. A separate vote is taken by the classis to admit the church itself into the federation. It is wise for classis to first vote on the *colloquium doctum* and then vote on provisionally accepting the church since a potential failure of a *colloquium doctum* could impact a

church’s desire to seek admission into the federation.

The second step is the provisional acceptance being ratified by a majority vote of the delegates to the next synod. It is then that the church is accepted fully into the federation.

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**W**e all have them in our lives. The people who rub us the wrong way, the people who break all our ideas of social decorum. The people who seem bent on offending, hurting, or betraying us.

The people who are difficult to love.

Some of them we interact with daily: a stubborn spouse, rebellious toddler, or overbearing co-worker. Others we only see occasionally: on a Sunday morning, at Thanksgiving, when we get our groceries. Sometimes someone usually loveable becomes difficult: the typically sweet teenager after a late night, a wife under unusual stress, the boss when he is sick.

Regardless of the variants, the fact remains: we cannot escape people who are difficult to love. If you are like me, your gut response is to mistreat, malign, or avoid them altogether. Or, in keeping with our culture, you label them as “toxic” and cut off ties with them as a means of achieving personal peace. These are both unbiblical responses.

### **Character and Command**

Jesus summarized the law thus: “Hear, O Israel; The Lord our God, the Lord is one. And you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.’ The second is this: You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ There is no other commandment greater than these” (Mark 12:29–30). In His other teachings, Jesus expounds on these commands, defining neighbor broadly (Luke 10:25–27), expanding love to enemies (Matt. 5:44), and praying for His disciples (and all believers) to love one another, regardless of the lovability of the object (John 15:17).

The Christian's call to love others—not just the most loveable—is a clear command. We are not given the luxury of choosing whom to love. Nor is this an arbitrary command, but one rooted in the very character of God. In Exodus, the Lord proclaimed to Moses, “The LORD, the LORD, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love for thousands” (Ex. 34:6). This refrain is echoed time and again throughout the Old Testament (Deut. 5:10, 2 Chron. 5:13, Ps. 103:8, to list a few). In the New Testament, the apostle John states simply and poignantly: “God is love” (1 John 4:8b). In short, God commands us to love others because that is what He does and who He is (see John 13:34). As His image-bearers, we are designed to share in and reflect certain aspects of God's character—one of those being love. Therefore, God commands we live according to our design. We misrepresent God and mar His image when we fail or refuse to love our difficult neighbor.

Some of you may be saying, “I understand, and I agree, but I'm not even sure what love is.” Let me start by explaining what love is *not*.

## What Love Is Not

Susan spent the weekend moving her mom into an assisted living facility. She grumbled and griped the entire time, but if you asked, she would say she did it out of love for her mom.

Jim wanted to buy a new truck but knew his wife would never agree. So, he spent several months doting on her. He bought her flowers, massaged her feet, cooked supper, even finished that landscaping project. He was sure that, after all his effort, she couldn't refuse him the truck.

Dan prays every day, volunteers for every church event, and regularly visits the elderly shut-ins. He says he

does so out of his love for God. Yet, he lives in constant fear that he will fall from grace if he fails to faithfully serve.

Barb is flying to California to help with disaster relief. She is using the last of her vacation time to spend the week with a team of people who drive her crazy in a state she hates. She does not fail to tell everyone she knows how much she is sacrificing to serve in this way.

In the above examples, every person is motivated not by love but by self-interest. Susan is disgruntled because she cares more about her “wasted” Saturday than her mom. Jim's kind attentions toward his wife are motivated by his own desire for a new truck. Dan serves to ensure his own salvation, while Barb serves to feed her ego.

Jesus makes it plain in the Sermon on the Mount, and elsewhere, that He is looking not at outward acts but the inward motivations of the heart (see Luke 6:43–45). It is not enough to do something kind for another. The motivation of the heart, not simply the act itself, determines whether it is an act of love.

That said, loving someone genuinely from the heart is never divorced from acting on that love. We know that a friend who professes to love us but inexplicitly disappears during trials does not really love us. Time and again, Jesus challenges the Pharisees' on these kinds of professions of love for neighbor that are backed up by nothing (Matt. 23:1–4, 15, Mark 7:5–13, and Luke 13:10–16). The apostle John echoes this teaching when he calls us to love in word and deed (1 John 3:18).

It is clear, then, that love is neither simply action nor simply motivation; it is a wedding between them.

## What Love Is

To give an imperfect definition: love is an inward disposition of the

heart that leads to action—action that seeks the welfare of the other at any cost. This inward disposition is a fruit of the Spirit, characterized by patience, kindness, humility, contentment, courtesy, selflessness, and a peaceable spirit that is eager to forgive and rejoice with the truth. It “bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things” (1 Cor. 13:4–7).

While this explanation of love may seem abstract, Christ made it concrete in His life and death. During His life and ministry, Jesus embodied the characteristics of love. His very coming into the world was an act of humility, not to mention the humility required to reside with His sinful and broken creatures. Furthermore, He was patient with them and gave up His time, comfort, treasure, reputation, to serve them. He endured the scoffing and shame of the cross, and, in His greatest display of love, laid down His very life to save a rebellious rabble. Of this act, the apostle John writes, “By this we know love, that he laid down his life for us, and we ought to lay down our lives for the brothers.” He did all of this not for personal gain or out of self-interest but for the joy set before Him—the joy of saving lost sinners, not the most loveable ones (Heb. 12:2).

In short, when God commands us to love our neighbor—pleasant or otherwise—He calls us to lay down our life for that neighbor out of love. The question remains: how?

## How Do We Love the Unlovable?

Before we can love the difficult person (or anyone), we must have a heart made new by the Holy Spirit's application of Christ's work. Love is a fruit of the Spirit; we cannot hope to love others in a biblical and selfless way unless our hearts are transformed. We only love because He first loved us (1 John 4:19). If your heart has not been made new

by the cleansing blood of Christ, cry out to Him in repentance, confessing your lovelessness and asking for His mercy. He is loving and merciful and eager to forgive (1 John 1:9).

If you have been given a new heart, able to love rightly, remember from whence it came. After the sinful woman anointed Jesus' feet with costly oil, Jesus explains that the woman loved Him with an extravagant, selfless way because she understood two things: the magnitude of her sin and the magnitude of Christ's forgiveness (Luke 7:47-50). The same is true of us. The more we grasp our own sinfulness and the extent of Christ's forgiveness, the more we will find our heart spilling over with love for even the most unlovable. So, if you want to love others, meditate on the gospel daily and pray for eyes to understand it more fully. Then pray for a heart that responds in love toward God and neighbor.

As I have stated repeatedly, loving others is an act of God. We are dependent on Him to create in us a heart of love. To that end, we must not only meditate on the gospel but pray that God would fill us with a love for Him and others. We must confess our lack of love and pray for eyes to see how we can love those we otherwise despise. Then we must pray for God's grace to help us do it.

What does this look like daily? Setting aside your own interests for that of others. As Elisabeth Elliot wrote, it is "to aim at loving instead of at being loved requires sacrifice. Love reaches out, willing to be turned down or inconvenience, expecting no personal reward, wanting only to give." We do this in ordinary and mundane ways. We pray for others. Rather than avoid the cranky co-worker, we try to engage her in conversation. We willingly give up our "me time" to talk with our troubled (and troublesome) teen. We invite the awkward church member over for lunch. We make a

meal for the rude neighbor after his surgery. In short, we set aside our interests and comforts to serve the other, even when we don't feel very loving.

We do this because that is what Christ did for us. When we were the most unlovable and unlovely, He laid down His very life out of love for us (Ezek. 16:1-6, Rom. 5:6-8). While loving the difficult friend, neighbor, spouse, or co-worker is not always easy or natural, we can take joy in knowing that, in doing so, we obey God's command and are reflecting Christ's love for us. And as we move toward others in love, we can rest assured that God will supply us with the love we need and lack. Let us, then, love boldly and extravagantly, looking for nothing in return.

### Mrs. Elisabeth Bloechl

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

## GOOD QUESTION

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# HOW CAN I BE A PEACEMAKER?

God's remedy to worldly conflict is to create a new, peace-loving humanity cleansed by His blood and renewed by His Spirit. Restored peacemakers are truly blessed; they will be easily identified as children of God (Matt. 5:9). So how do we get there?

**Become pacified by the gospel.** The disease of original sin inclines us to pass our "days in malice and envy, hated by others and hating one another" (Titus 3:3). When the Holy Spirit comes into a person's life, He draws us to trust in Jesus and begins to extinguish our hatred toward God and others.

**Deliberately practice peace.** Peacemakers renounce the weapons of the flesh and pledge to walk only in the "gospel of peace" (Eph.6:15). Martyn Lloyd-Jones said that the first practical step in peacemaking is this: learn not to speak. Being quick to talk is disastrous; our strongest feelings are often poisoned by ignorance and grandiosity. Listening corrects faulty first impressions (James 1:19) and promotes empathy. Christ-like peacemakers also sacrifice their right to exact a penalty over every offense, and initiate reconciliation. Jesus made peace by a bloody cross (Col. 1:20). How far will you go?



# Ezekiel's Action Prophecies Part 2 (4)

Ezekiel 3–5



Dr. R. Andrew Compton



In the last article, we began to consider Ezekiel's action prophecies. We examined the techniques used to shock and emotionally impact his audience while also noting how his sign-acts underscored his ongoing priestly identity. Though now called to be a prophet, Ezekiel did not cease to be a priest, and the sign-acts themselves seem designed to reinforce this reality to him. Despite being far removed from Jerusalem and the temple, he remains engaged in a priestly-prophetic ministry, a fact made especially evident in the dual roles he plays in these action prophecies.

In the model siege sign-act (4:1–3), Ezekiel began by assuming the role of a priest. When he set up an iron griddle, he performed a ritual meant to mitigate God's wrath (v. 3a). But when he set his face toward the model of Jerusalem and pressed the siege against it, he played the role of the Lord Himself acting via His agent of judgment, the Babylonian army (v. 3b). But then, in 4:4, Ezekiel resumed the role of the priest, symbolically bearing the sin of the people and demonstrating solidarity with them.

This rapid shift in roles is precisely what we would expect from a priest who regularly stands in the gap between God and the people. Andrew Malone describes this priestly role-playing: "There are hints that the priests represent the people before God, especially when the high priest 'bears' in his breastpiece the twelve inscribed gemstones 'as a continual reminder before Yahweh' (Exod. 28:29). More frequently, we find the priests representing God to the people, especially in instructing them about God's expectations (esp. Lev. 10:10–11)."<sup>1</sup>

As we study Ezekiel's sign-acts, it is helpful to identify which role Ezekiel is playing—the people, the priest, or the Lord (or some combination of these)—and how the audience is drawn into the performance and invested in its outcome.

## Action Prophecy #3: Ezekiel's Rations and Purity (4:9–17)

In verses 9–17, Ezekiel is commanded to prepare bread using a mixture of grains and eat portions that resemble siege (or starvation) rations. Additionally, he is instructed to cook a barley cake over human dung. After objecting to this, the Lord relents and allows him to use cow dung as fuel instead. Most commentators focus on the ingredients and the quantities in these verses, which is certainly important. However, the issue of cooking fuel stands out when we are paying sufficient attention to Ezekiel's priestly identity.

The listed ingredients (wheat and barley, beans and lentils, millet and

emmer) are all common, though the last two are rarely mentioned in the Bible. Yet it is their very commonness that is significant. This is the most basic and austere diet imaginable. For one, there is nothing on this list that suggests luxury. Though modern-day “Ezekiel Bread” is sold as a boutique item in specialty food stores like Whole Foods, these ingredients are completely non-boutique!

In addition to this, the random mixtures listed suggest scraping together the little bits of leftovers in order to present something palatable. There is not enough of any single ingredient to make enough to eat. To understand the impact of this, consider the plight of starving mothers in Haiti who make *bonbon tè*, Creole for “clay cookies,” to fill their children’s stomachs. These “cookies,” consisting of nothing more than dirt and oil, may stave off hunger pains, but provide no nourishment and instead lead to serious health problems.<sup>2</sup> While Ezekiel’s bread does not contain mud, it is intended evoke a similar, horrified reaction to “clay cookies” in Haiti. Jerusalem’s days of plenty are coming to an end.

Unpalatable ingredients. Miniscule quantities (Iain Duguid notes this is only eight ounces of food and two-thirds of a quart of water per day).<sup>3</sup> But now verse 12 lists an especially disgusting cooking fuel: human feces. Why? The Lord says: “Thus will the sons of Israel eat their bread unclean among the nations where I will banish them” (v. 13, NASB).<sup>4</sup>

At this point something unexpected happens: Ezekiel objects. But his protest is not merely due to physical disgust. Instead, this objection is further evidence of Ezekiel’s commitment to his priestly call. The fuel threatens his goal of priestly purity: “Ah, Lord GOD! Indeed, I have never defiled myself from my youth till now; I have never eaten what died of itself or was torn by

beasts, nor has abominable flesh ever come into my mouth” (4:14).

In the Pentateuch, dung often appears in discussions of purity and impurity. Deuteronomy 23:12–14 is a key example of the defiling nature of human waste. Verse 9, for example, presses the need for keeping the army camp from “every wicked thing,” though several translations note that the word “wicked” (*ra*) is better translated in this context as every “impure/unclean thing” (NET, NLT, NIV). Since verses 10–11 began this section with a reference to uncleanness caused by bodily emissions, this suggests that verse 9 is in the context of keeping uncleanness outside the camp. Verses 12–13 then give instructions for the army’s latrine: it should also be located outside the camp. Why? “For the LORD your God walks in the midst of your camp, to deliver you and give your enemies over to you; therefore your camp shall be holy, that He may see no unclean thing [Hebrew: nakedness] among you, and turn away from you” (23:14).

While the NKJV uses the expression “unclean thing” to translate the Hebrew word “nakedness,” this word takes the uncleanness found in verse 10 and applies it also to verse 14. While nakedness is elsewhere seen as unbecoming of priests (e.g., Exod. 20:26), waste, which is only expelled through partial nakedness, is clearly still part of the concern in verse 14. Proverbs 30:12 is instructive, pairing waste with impurity: “There is a generation that is pure in its own eyes, Yet is not washed from its filthiness [lit. dung].” Though the Old Testament does not explicitly state that cooking over human waste causes impurity, Ezekiel’s objection suggests that this was a well-known taboo.<sup>5</sup>

As noted above, God acquiesces to Ezekiel’s request, allowing him to use cow dung instead. This demonstrates that the sign-act is not merely about teaching the rebels their fate; it is about forming Ezekiel in his priestly

identity. It is significant that the instruction ends by modifying the original emphasis of the sign-act. Initially the act emphasized purity/impurity—“So shall the children of Israel eat their defiled bread” (v. 13)—yet, by the end, the emphasis shifts to scarcity: “I will cut off the supply of bread in Jerusalem; they shall eat bread by weight and with anxiety, and shall drink water by measure and with dread, that they may lack bread and water, and be dismayed with one another, and waste away because of their iniquity” (vv. 16–17). Rather than seeing these verses as separate messages, we should recognize that scarcity (vv. 16–17) reinforces the theme of defilement (v. 13).

While the audience doesn’t actually witness Ezekiel cooking over unclean fuel, the sign-act serves as a dual message. For the people, it warns of food shortages; for Ezekiel, it underlines the importance of his priestly office and the necessity of maintaining purity, even in exile with its additional challenges to purity.

#### **Action Prophecy #4: Ezekiel’s Shaving and Sword Play (5:1–17)**

The final sign-act in this opening sequence is unique due to its lengthy explanatory section. In 5:1–4, we read instructions on how Ezekiel is to use a sword and what he is to do with his shaved hair, while 5:5–17 extensively explains the significance of each action. Compared to the previous sign-acts—where six verses describe the action (4:9–12, 14–15) and only three verses explain the meaning (4:13, 16–17)—this passage devotes four verses to the action and twelve to its explanation. This does not mean that action prophecies #1–3 are less significant; rather, it concludes this initial sequence of sign-acts by inviting us to consider how meaningful are all the individual elements of all the acts. And while the Lord does not explain all the details of

the earlier actions explicitly, we are reminded that all these prophetic actions invite the audience to pay close attention and reflect deeply on the details.

This final action prophecy consists of two sub-actions: a shaving rite and a hair manipulation rite. Much like the previous sign-act, which contained a message for both the people and Ezekiel himself, this one also serves dual purposes. In verse 1, Ezekiel is commanded to shave off and divide his hair. Hair typically symbolizes health and vitality in the Bible.<sup>6</sup> This is why baldness is often depicted negatively, as in Isaiah 7:20, where Assyria's conquest of the Northern Kingdom is likened to a personified Samaria having its head, face, and body hair shaved: "In the same day the Lord will shave with a hired razor, with those from beyond the River, with the king of Assyria, the head and the hair of the legs, and will also remove the beard." Unlike in modern times, where baldness is a common and even fashionable choice (e.g., Jeff Bezos, Dwayne "The Rock" Johnson, Vin Diesel, and Michael Jordan, to name just a few prominent individuals), in ancient times to be shaved bald was a mark of humiliation (see 2 Sam. 10:1–5) and mourning (Job 1:20; Isa. 22:12; Jer. 7:29; Micah 1:16).

Here Ezekiel's hair represents the people of Jerusalem, whose health and well-being is about to be cut off due to their rebellion. After shaving, he uses a scale to weigh out three portions of hair. Scales are universally associated with justice—in this case, they represent God's own righteous justice. The burden of verses 5–9 is to present this destruction of life as a righteous and fitting act of the LORD against an unjust and idolatrous people.

Verse 12 explains the fate of each portion of hair: "One-third of you shall die of the pestilence, and be consumed with famine in your midst [burned in fire]; and one-third shall

fall by the sword all around you [chopped with the sword]; and I will scatter another third to all the winds [hair scattered], and I will draw out a sword after them." While this action give Israel a glimpse of a real-life event to come, that future event will itself be a sign-act, a lesson to the nations surrounding Israel that the Lord will not tolerate His people misrepresenting His holy character by their perverse actions (vv. 5–8, 14–15).

As we saw with the iron griddle in 4:3 and Ezekiel's symbolic iniquity-bearing in 4:4–5, this sign-act displays yet another mitigation of God's wrath. In 5:3, Ezekiel takes a few of the hairs and protects them from the fire, sword, and wind by hiding them in the hem of his garment. Scholars widely recognize that these hairs represent the remnant who will be spared from the siege that devastated Jerusalem in 586 B.C. In the sequence of sign-act actions, these hairs are hidden after the shaving and weighing; but this does not mean that they don't symbolize Ezekiel and the exiles who avoided the siege by being deported before it took place. Though life by the Chebar Canal was no Club Med, it is not as catastrophic as the starvation and even cannibalism (see 5:10) that would plague Jerusalem.<sup>7</sup>

The remnant theme in Scripture is typologically layered. Presence in the hem as the object of God's mercy in this temporal sense does not mean that every hair in the hem is the object of God's mercy in a salvific sense. Those who are delivered from typological examples of God's wrath (e.g., Noah's flood, the exile, the siege of Jerusalem, etc.) point toward those who will be delivered from the consummation of God's wrath at the end of the age.<sup>8</sup> Thus not every hair in the hem remains there; some do not even remain through the temporal, typological event of judgment. Verse 4 warns that some of the hairs will be removed from Ezekiel's garment

and thrown back into the fire. This foreshadows a later purge of the hypocrites—those who claim ancestry from Abraham but lack true faith (e.g., see 9:1–11, 14:12–23, 20:33–44, etc.; cf. Belgic Confession, 29; Westminster Confession 18.1; 30.3–4). Yet those who trust in the LORD will find themselves tucked safely away, not just for their present life, but also for the life to come (see Canons of Dort, Fifth Main Point of Doctrine).

## Shaving and Ezekiel's Priestly Identity

Though the primary message of this sign-act is one of judgment, there is also an undercurrent of symbolism that reinforces Ezekiel's priestly call. While definitely subtle, the shaving act relates to biblical and extra-biblical practices involving the ritual significance of hair. Ezekiel 5:1 states: "And you, son of man, take a sharp sword, take it as a barber's razor, and pass it over your head and your beard. . . ." Most interpretations and Bible translations relate the terms "sharp sword" and "barber's razor" as an adverbial accusative construction, meaning Ezekiel is to use the sword as a razor (the word "as" is supplied in nearly all English translations). There are a few noteworthy features of this verse:

**1. The phrase "head and beard" occurs frequently in priestly contexts.** This expression occurs only eleven times in the Old Testament, five of which are in Leviticus (Lev. 13:29, 30; 14:9; 19:27; 21:5), describing actions prescribed for or forbidden by the priests. Psalm 133:2 uses it to describe the anointing oil running down Aaron's head and beard. In Ezra 9:3, it describes the mourning of Ezra the priest (cf. Isa. 7:20, 15:2, and Jer. 48:37). These occurrences suggest a connection between Ezekiel's shaving and priestly concerns.

**2. The phrase "razor and sword" is unique.** Nowhere else in the Bible are these two terms used together.

While the sword is an instrument of God's wrath throughout Ezekiel, the sword in 5:1 is depicted primarily as a barber's razor.

**3. The word “barber” (Hebrew *galab*) appears nowhere else in the Old Testament.** It is found commonly in extra-Biblical texts where barbers are often associated with temples and rituals.<sup>9</sup> In the temple of ancient Mari, barbers would ritually place their razors before the goddess Ishtar. And in the temple of ancient Larnaca (Cyprus), a Phoenician text lists barbers as permanent temple workers. Though the Old Testament does not mention temple barbers, it frequently associates hair with priestly duties. Note the following examples. In Numbers 5:11–31, the priest unbinds the hair of a suspected adulteress—perhaps a sign of disgrace or a symbol of being laid open to the community. Shaving is the remedy for impurity-causing ailments in several passages in Leviticus.<sup>10</sup> Shaving rites also occur with the commissioning of Levites in Numbers 8:7 and the Nazirite vow in Numbers 6:1–18. Though shaving is an acceptable aspect of mourning for most people, priests were forbidden from doing so (Lev. 21:5; cf. Ezek. 24:16–17, 44:20). In sum, hair and shaving played a role in the Israelite priesthood, which should orient us toward priestly meanings when analyzing this sign-act.

This action can be seen as yet another formative action for Ezekiel's priestly identity. This is further confirmed by the explanatory section of the sign-act in 5:5–17, which draws heavily on the curses from Leviticus 26:14–46 (cf. Ezek. 5:2, 6, 10, 12, 14, 16, 17) and explicitly mentions the defilement of the sanctuary (v. 11, “you have defiled my sanctuary with all your detestable things and with all your abominations”).<sup>11</sup> The whole sign-act reverberates with priestly concerns.

## Conclusion

We have walked quite slowly through these opening sign-acts of Ezekiel, but this has enabled us to get a good feel for the interpretive task. Other action prophecies of the book can be more easily understood with these reading strategies in mind. Of course, the many details of the sign-acts can tempt us to overinterpret. There is a fine line between appreciating subtleties and engaging in distracting speculation. The Dutch Puritan, Wilhelmus à Brakel, suggests a way to walk this line: “[E]ach particular matter [of Old Testament priestly ceremonies] had its specific meaning. However, we do not presume to be an expositor of each particular. *We do indeed have our thoughts concerning this subject, and find meditation thereon a sweet work*, but we as we cannot speak about it with certainty, we shall remain silent, *leaving everyone free in his thoughts concerning this.*”<sup>12</sup> While we should exercise restraint in interpreting minor details, we should not be surprised when details draw our attention to clearer elements of God's revelation.

Above all, Ezekiel's sign-acts point us toward an even more profound act, one laden with eternal significance. Landon Dowden explains: “As we consider Ezekiel's visible sermons, we would be remiss if we did not note the greatest sign act ever: the cross of Christ. In the cross of Christ, God communicated in a visual way His deep hatred for sin and His overwhelming love for His people. As we ponder the cross, we not only hear what God is preaching, but we also see and feel the weight of our sin and His commitment to die for us rather than ‘let us go.’”<sup>13</sup> In our own life as sojourners and exiles (1 Pet. 2:11), this action by the consummate prophet, our Lord Jesus Christ, orients us towards God's unfathomable grace and His infallible truth.

1. Andrew S. Malone, *God's Mediators: A Biblical Theology of Priesthood*, NSBT 43 (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2017), 46.
2. <https://www.fmsc.org/the-feed/marketplace/2016/november/haitian-clay-mug-how-its-made>.
3. Iain M. Duguid, *Ezekiel*, NIVAC (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1999), 89.
4. Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture citations are from the New King James Version (NKJV).
5. Anthropologists have shown that human dung is an almost universal taboo. See James J. Preston, “Purification: An Overview,” in *Encyclopedia of Religion*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., ed. Lindsay Jones (Detroit, MI: Macmillan Reference USA, 2005), 11:7504.
6. Leland Ryken, James C. Wilhoit, and Tremper Longman III, eds., *Dictionary of Biblical Imagery* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 1998), 359–60.
7. A similar scene of siege-induced cannibalism in Jerusalem from 650+ years after this is recounted in Josephus, *The Jewish War*, VI.3.4–5; see *The Works of Josephus: Complete and Unabridged*, new updated ed., trans. William Whiston (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1987), 737–38.
8. M.W. Elliott, “Remnant,” in *New Dictionary of Biblical Theology*, eds. T. Desmond Alexander and Brian S. Rosner (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 2000), 723–26; *Dictionary of Biblical Imagery*, 703–4.
9. Cf. Hayim ben Yosef Tawil, *An Akkadian Lexical Companion for Biblical Hebrew: Etymological-Semantic and Idiomatic Equivalents with Supplement on Biblical Aramaic* (Brooklyn, NY: KTAV Publishing House, 2009), 65.
10. Saul Olyan, “What Do Shaving Rites Accomplish and What Do They Signal in Biblical Ritual Contexts?” *JBL* 117, no. 4 (1998): 619–20.
11. For the relationship to Leviticus 26, see Michael A. Lyons, *From Law to Prophecy: Ezekiel's Use of the Holiness Code*, LHBOTS 507 (London: T&T Clark, 2009), 162–65; idem, “Out of the (Model) City, into the Fire: The Meaning of Ezekiel 5:3–4,” *JBL* 138, no. 3 (2019): 605–23.
12. Wilhelmus à Brakel, *The Christian's Reasonable Service*, trans. Bartel Elshout, ed. Joel R. Beeke (Grand Rapids, MI: Reformation Heritage Books, 1995), 4:431. Emphasis added.
13. Landon Dowden, *Christ-Centered Exposition: Exalting Jesus in Ezekiel* (Nashville, TN: Holman, 2015), 29.

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# Lord's Day 27: Should Infants Be Baptized

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72Q. Does this outward washing with water itself wash away sins?

A. No, only Jesus Christ's blood and the Holy Spirit cleanse us from all sins.

73Q. Why then does the Holy Spirit call baptism the water of rebirth and the washing away of sins?

A. God has good reason for these words. To begin with, he wants to teach us that the blood and Spirit of Christ take away our sins just as water removes dirt from the body. But more importantly, 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.

74Q. Should infants also be baptized?

A. Yes. Infants as well as adults are included in God's covenant and people, and they, no less than adults, are promised deliverance from sin through Christ's blood and the Holy Spirit who works faith. Therefore, by baptism, the sign of the covenant, they too should be incorporated into the Christian church and distinguished from the children of unbelievers.

This was done in the Old Testament by circumcision, which was replaced in the New Testament by baptism.

Is infant baptism—even when practiced in evangelical churches—an unfortunate holdover from medieval theology? The Catholic Encyclopedia defines baptism as “the sacrament by which we are born again of water and the Holy Ghost . . . by which we receive in a new and spiritual life, the dignity of adoption as sons of God and heirs of God's kingdom.” The Roman Catholic Church teaches that in baptism “the guilt of original sin is remitted.”<sup>1</sup> So the question is important: “Does this outward

washing with water itself wash away sins?” Is this why many Christian churches baptize infants?

In truth, baptism is called “the washing of regeneration” (Titus 3:5) and the “washing away of sins” (Acts 22:16) not because it does those things but because it signifies and seals God's gracious promises to do them. “Preaching and sacraments are neither mere witnesses to grace nor causes of grace, but means of grace inasmuch as they ratify the promise and thereby strengthen our faith in the one who promises.”<sup>2</sup>

While distinguishing between Reformed and Roman Catholic baptismal theology, the Catechism gives four arguments for infant baptism.

## Children of Believers are Members of the Covenant

John the Baptist's father Zechariah said that, in Christ's coming, God remembered “his holy covenant, the oath that he swore to our father Abraham” (Luke 1:72–73). God told Abraham, “And I will establish my covenant between me and you and

your offspring after you throughout their generations for an everlasting covenant, to be God to you and to your offspring after you.” That divine promise, like the rest, finds its Yes in Jesus (2 Cor. 1:20).

God has made one covenant of grace, a religious bond between God and His people by which they receive life and blessing.<sup>3</sup> God gives these gifts to the elect whom He enables to trust His promises. But He is pleased to communicate covenant promises to the church—the community of believers and their children. It is still true that “infants as well as adults are included in God’s covenant and people.” Children of believers “ought to be baptized and sealed with the sign of the covenant, as the children in Israel formerly were circumcised upon the same promises which are made unto our children.”<sup>4</sup>

### Children of Believers have Precious Promises from God

God promises believers and their children “deliverance from sin through Christ’s blood and the Holy Spirit who works faith.” The New Testament doesn’t strip God’s promises from covenant children; it specifically applies those promises to them. Baptism seals God’s commitment—for believers and their children—to forgive sins and give the Holy Spirit (Acts 2:38–39). Truly “Christ shed His blood no less for the washing of the children of the faithful than for adult persons; and therefore they ought to receive the sign and sacrament of that which Christ hath done for them.”<sup>5</sup> Infants are not yet able to affirm God’s promises, but they should not therefore be denied the sign and seal of the promise.

Nor does the sign and seal minimize the need for conversion. Covenant children must repent and believe. But baptism should not discourage them from doing so. In fact, the Catechism’s author believed that

“denying baptism to the children of the church . . . weaken[s] in parents and children . . . the desire which they should have to perform their obligations to God.”<sup>6</sup> “Through baptism, God calls us and places us under obligation to live in new obedience to Him,”<sup>7</sup> trusting in, loving, and obeying Jesus.

### Children of Believers must be Distinguished from Unbelievers

God is growing a community of disciples whom He marks out by baptizing them in the name of the “Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit” (Matt. 28:19). Children of believers are disciples; in baptism, their parents vow to diligently teach them to love the Lord (Deut. 6:4–9). As a master marked his servants by piercing their ears (Exod. 21:6), so with visible signs the church of God must be “separated from all other people and strange religions.”<sup>8</sup> Children with even one believing parent are not “unclean” but “holy” (1 Cor. 7:14).

However, baptism distinguishes tentatively, not ultimately. Children of believers are clearly “in the sphere in which the Spirit is at work visibly.”<sup>9</sup> But “grace and salvation are not so inseparably” added to baptism “that all that are baptized are undoubtedly regenerated”;<sup>10</sup> “for not all who are descended from Israel belong to Israel” (Rom. 9:6). Baptism is a “judgment of charity”<sup>11</sup> toward covenant members too young to demonstrate active faith—a judgment that can train them to believe that they belong to God.

### Children of Believers were Formerly Circumcised

In the Old Testament, the sign of the covenant was suitably bloody. “Indeed, under the law almost everything is purified with blood, and without shedding of blood there is no forgiveness of sins” (Heb. 9:22).

The sign was given only to males who represented the entire people as set apart to God, and who sacrificially received the painful covenant sign.

Of course, circumcision may not seal the new covenant. The blood of Christ has made the blood of circumcision obsolete. Christ is the end of the law (Rom. 10:4), including the law of circumcision. On the cross, He made an end of all bloody atonement by bleeding for us. So baptism—the circumcision made without hands (Col. 2:11–12)—becomes our trustworthy testimony that we have an eternal covenant with God.

Covenantal baptism can be a great comfort. “Godly parents have no reason to doubt of the election and salvation” of their infant children.<sup>12</sup> We are prone to doubt, but God’s promise and sacrament are meant to overcome our doubts and lead us to trust God to bless His children with saving faith. We hope not in the sign and seal but in God’s promise. With the help of baptism, we teach our children to do the same.

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1 Decrees of Trent, Session 5, Canon 5.

2 Michael Horton, *The Christian Faith* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Academic, 2011), 791.

3 J.G. Vos, *Genesis* (Pittsburg, PA: Crown & Covenant, 2006), 161.

4 Belgic Confession, 34.

5 Ibid.

6 Ursinus, *Commentary on the Heidelberg Catechism*, 367–68.

7 “Baptism of Infants—Form 1,” <https://formsandprayers.com/liturgical-form/#1>.

8 Belgic Confession, 34.

9 Horton, *The Christian Faith*, 791.

10 Westminster Confession of Faith, 28.5.

11 Conclusions of Utrecht, point 4.

12 Canons of Dort, 1.17.

# Lord's Day 28: Why the Lord's Supper Matters

Rev. William Boekestein



75Q. How does the holy supper remind and assure you that you share in Christ's one sacrifice on the cross and in all his benefits?

A. In this way: Christ has commanded me and all believers to eat this broken bread and to drink this cup in remembrance of him. With this command come these promises: First, as surely as I see with my eyes the bread of the Lord broken for me and the cup shared with me, so surely his body was offered and broken for me and his blood poured out for me on the cross. Second, as surely as I receive from the hand of him who serves, and taste with my mouth the bread and cup of the Lord, given me as sure signs of Christ's body and blood, so surely he nourishes and refreshes my soul for eternal life with his crucified body and poured-out blood.

76Q. What does it mean to eat the crucified body of Christ and to drink his poured-out blood?

A. It means to accept with a believing heart the entire suffering and death of Christ and in this way to receive forgiveness of sins and eternal life. But it means more. Through the Holy Spirit, who lives both in Christ and in us, we are united more and more to Christ's blessed body. And so, although he is in heaven and we are on earth, we are flesh of his flesh and bone of his bone. And we forever live on and are governed by one Spirit, as the members of our body are by one soul.

77Q. Where does Christ promise to nourish and refresh believers with his body and blood as surely as they eat this broken bread and drink this cup?

A. In the institution of the Lord's Supper: "The Lord Jesus on the night when he was betrayed took bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it, and said, 'Take, eat, this is my body which is broken for you. Do this in remembrance of me.' In the same way also he took the cup, after supper, saying, 'This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it in remembrance of me.' For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes." This promise is repeated by Paul in these words: "The cup of blessing that we bless, is it not a participation in the blood of Christ? The bread that we break, is it not a participation in the body of Christ? Because there is one bread, we who are many are one body, for we all partake of the one bread."

We all have ways of remembering departed loved ones, of remaining connected to them despite their absence. We repeat stories, cherish

keepsakes, and observe rituals to not forget them. God has a similar plan for keeping us close to Jesus while He is physically absent from us.

"Both the word and the sacraments . . . focus our faith on the sacrifice of Jesus Christ on the cross" (Q&A 67). The Bible tells us that Jesus is

the Christ, God's Son, and that by believing in Him we might have life (John 20:30–31). The sacraments are rituals that engage our senses in the act of remembering and trusting.

## What is the Lord's Supper?

The Lord's Supper is a ritual, commanded by Christ, in which believers eat bread and drink wine to strengthen their faith in God's promises. It is more than a memorial; in it, we "eat the crucified body of Christ and . . . drink his poured-out blood." It is an opportunity to truly commune with Christ, if we understand what this meal means and how we should eat it.

So how does this means of grace help us?

### *The Lord's Supper Teaches the Gospel*

Jesus used bread and wine as symbols of His body and blood (I Cor. 11:23–26) to declare the best news ever: "Christ died for our sins" (I Cor. 15:3). The bread helps us hear Jesus say, "I am the bread of life; whoever comes to me shall not hunger," and the wine tells us that whoever believes in Jesus shall never thirst (John 6:35). The Lord's Supper is good news that you can taste and see.

### *The Lord's Supper Tells Us to Believe the Gospel*

The gospel is more than a message of grace; it is also a "command to repent and believe."<sup>1</sup> So the Supper is more than a symbol; it is also a summons. "The bread is not only broken, but also given unto us to be eaten."<sup>2</sup> Christ commands us to eat and drink but also to believe His promises. The best way to use good food is to eat it. Likewise, the best way to use good promises is to believe them.

## The Lord's Supper Promotes Assurance

Jesus's body and blood were given to nourish your soul for eternal life "as

surely as" you see, taste, and receive the elements of the Supper. Eating the bread and drinking the wine is Jesus's way of allowing you to put your "finger into the mark of the nails" and your "hand into his side" (John 20:25). It is as close as you will get on this side of glory to touching our Lord.

## How Do We Commune Profitably?

### *Remember Christ*

When Jesus served His disciples the bread and wine, He said, "Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me" (I Cor. 11:25). If we forget Christ and His sacrificial love, we lose our greatest motive for faithful living. We rightly participate in the Lord's Supper by remembering Jesus as God's pure lamb who purges our sins.

### *Accept Christ's Suffering and Death*

But we do more than just remember in the Lord's Supper. "Unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you" (John 6:53). To be saved from our sins, we must actually accept God's gift of righteousness with a believing heart (Q&A 60).

### *"Receive Forgiveness of Sins and Eternal Life"*

The Lord's Supper helps us agree with Christ's cry from the cross, "It is finished!" Believers can sing, "My sin—O the bliss of this glorious thought!—my sin, not in part, but the whole, is nailed to the cross and I bear it no more; praise the Lord, praise the Lord, O my soul!" Until we are sure that we belong to God, gratitude cannot spur us to godliness.

### *Become "United More and More to Christ's Blessed Body"*

Every believer is inseparably united to Christ. In the new birth, we become "flesh of his flesh and bone of his bone" (Eph. 5:29). But this

union can grow and deepen. Truly commune with Christ in the Supper (I Cor. 10:16). Deliberately eat Jesus's flesh and drink His blood by faith, abiding in Him and trusting that He abides in you (John 6:56).

### *Submit to God's Spirit*

As we commune with Christ, we learn to be "governed by one Spirit." In the Supper, we give up our will to sin and commit to bearing Christ-like fruit (John 15:5). The Lord's Supper commands us to "put to death the deeds of the body" and live (Rom. 8:13). We use the Supper to let go of besetting sins and hold tighter to Jesus, that we might bear more fruit.

Christ knows we need this simple meal. "He would not do anything just before his death, except that which was of the greatest importance."<sup>3</sup> "Neglecting this sacrament . . . causes the life of God's people to languish."<sup>4</sup> Using it rightly is one of the best ways to grow in grace and godliness.

This article is part of a series, "Our Life's Comfort," which was first published at [corechristianity.com](http://corechristianity.com) on July 14, 2022, <https://corechristianity.com/resources/articles/why-the-lords-supper-matters-lords-day-28>.

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1. Canons of Dort, 2.5.

2. Ursinus, *Commentary on the Heidelberg Catechism*, 378.

3. Ursinus, *Commentary on the Heidelberg Catechism*, 384.

4. G.H. Kersten, *A Treatise of the Compendium* (Grand Rapids: Inheritance Publishing, n.d.), 122.

## Rev. William Boekstein

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.

# deception and

# DISCERNMENT



Mrs.  
Annemarieke  
**Ryskamp**

In His discourse about the end times in Matthew 24 (ESV), Jesus warns us several times to not be deceived (vv. 4, 11, 24). This is apparently a very important issue in the time before He returns, which is the time in which we now live.

Deception was an important part of why the first woman, Eve, sinned against the God who created her. She was led astray by the serpent, who was the devil, according to Revelation 12:9, where it also says that he came down to earth and sea in great wrath, because he knows that his time is short (v. 12). The devil has not changed his tricks. By having a closer look at the very first deception, we can get a better idea of its elements and thus how we can live a prepared life.

## Eve

The story of the fall of humanity, beginning with Adam and Eve, is told in Genesis 3:1–7. According to The Reformation Study Bible (Student Edition) this is what happened: “Satan tempts Eve by emphasizing God’s prohibition, not His provision; reducing God’s command to a question; casting doubt upon God’s sincerity and defaming His motives; and denying the truthfulness of His threat. The woman gradually yields to Satan’s denials and half-truths.”

I would like to distill this process down to two important elements: first, his appeal to feelings or emotions; and second, Eve’s listening to someone other than God. Being aware that these elements are part of every deception will help us not be led astray.

## Feelings

We were made in God’s image with feelings and emotions, but, in this fallen world, our feelings have become a mixed blessing. Emotions are powerful. We cannot see, taste, or touch them, but we are constantly affected by their forceful presence and the incredible influence they have over us. They are able to alter how we view our day, other people, and even the past events of our lives. Temptations often start with emotions and, when we act upon them, we often fall into sin.

In Genesis 3:6, we see feelings getting the upper hand for Eve: “So when the woman *saw* that the tree was good for food, and that it was a *delight* to the eyes, and that the tree was to be *desired* to make one wise, she took of its fruit and ate . . .” (italics mine).

In our culture, feelings are elevated to a very high level, even holding ethical value: If something feels good, it must be good. This culture has also infected some churches where it is more important that you are in touch with your feelings—that you

*feel* saved, or *feel* spiritual, or *feel* that you will go to heaven—than what the Bible has to say about it. In the world around us, examples are plentiful and getting more and more extreme, such as, if you feel like a girl in a boy’s body today, then you are a girl today. If you feel differently tomorrow, you *are* different tomorrow. You are what you feel.

Arguably the most powerful emotion is fear. Fearful people are easy to manipulate. The devil knows that they are easy to deceive, but God knows it, too. Perhaps that is why God the Father and Jesus say, “Do not fear” 365 times in the Bible—one for every day! Be alert when fear mongering arises in the media, by people who call themselves scientists, or even your friends. Keep your common sense and sense of reality and read your Bible. How did the serpent use fear to tempt Eve? He distorted the words of God in order to make her doubt God’s goodness.

Fear is the basis of many other negative emotions such as pride, discouragement, despair, jealousy, anger, and even depression. The devil is in the business of infusing the world with negative emotions in order to cause division among God’s people or make them feel hopeless when bad things happen. It is our responsibility to identify what we are telling ourselves or believing from others, and bring it to God in prayer (2 Cor. 10:5). It’s living out the first commandment—to love him with all our heart, mind, and strength—and to give everything (our worries, our fears, our feelings) to Him. See Philippians 4:8 for a list of what should be occupying our thoughts in a wholesome, God-honoring way.

We should seek Him, live for Him, and trust Him enough that what He is saying in His Word is the truth. Jesus died on the cross and won the battle against the devil. All we need to do is accept His gift, join Him, and make sure we stay as close to Him as

possible. God is more than willing to make “the path of life” known to you and “in his presence there is fullness of joy” (Ps. 16:11). He knows exactly how we feel and how to heal us, and that will make us a lot less susceptible to deception.

## Listening to Others

Let’s look at the serpent’s conversation with Eve in Genesis 3. He successfully engages her with a provocative question, twisting God’s words into a half-truth: “Did God actually say, ‘You shall not eat of any tree in the garden?’” This comes with a suggestion of knowledge about what God has said. Eve thinks she should answer it because she thinks she knows better. But at the same time, the question also generates feelings of doubt in her mind about the Lord’s intentions and character.

Eve is not familiar enough with God’s words and probably thinks she’s defending Him when she answers with another twist of His words: “We may eat of the fruit of the trees in the garden, but God said, ‘You shall not eat of the fruit of the tree that is in the midst of the garden, *neither shall you touch it*, lest you die’” (v. 2, italics mine). But even if you think you’re good because you listen to sermons all day or only read books about the Bible, you can be put on the wrong path without the proper knowledge of God’s Word. And just like with Eve, it can lead us by half-truths into temptations and deceptions.

A modern version of this kind of question is asking children in their phase of puberty if they think it’s normal to feel confused about their gender sometimes. Like Eve, they won’t have a good answer and the seeds of “gender-doubt” are sown, which can be cultivated for the devil’s purposes.

Those of us who may not be quickly led astray by feelings can still be tricked into believing what others say

and buy into the lies that have been incorporated in our cultural thinking. A glaring example is the elevation of science. Science is often pitted against faith in God, as if it knows more than God and that we should trust it completely. However, it is dangerous to assume that scientific research is always unbiased and fact-based. In our culture, it wants to make us comfortable with death, with self-imposed mental conformity, with self-censorship, and with a divisive fear of our fellow man. We must be alert to how naturalistic thinking poisons our culture. We should be aware and prepared to combat blind faith in the scientific majority.

Being misled by other people's words is happening to us all the time; our memories are not perfect and we experience things differently. So how do we ever know the truth? The devil quoted God to Eve and she took the bait. The Jews at Berea, however, did not even take Paul and Silas at their word, although they were very

trustworthy sources. Acts 17:11 tells us: "Now these Jews were more noble than those in Thessalonica; they received the word with all eagerness, examining the Scriptures daily to see if these things were so." So don't believe everything, not even when presented with a lot of convincing science. Rather, check everything you hear with God's very own words in the Bible. Only believe what God says.

## Conclusion

This is a call for discernment, a prompt to believe absolutely nothing until you have personally checked it with the Bible and prayed about it. If you think there are issues not addressed in the Bible, you are underestimating the power of the Holy Spirit. Jesus gave us the Holy Spirit to be our counselor in any situation, if we remember to pray. And the Bible is God's living Word because of it.

There is nothing new under the sun anyway (read Ecclesiastes and

Proverbs); that is also why we can learn from Eve's fall. Do as Paul advises in Romans 12:2: "Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind." When you search the Scriptures, you will find Jesus because they testify of Him. When you come to Him, He will develop a loving relationship with you, and He will give you everything you need to belong to Him, to set you free, and to have everlasting life with Him. If you would still fall for a scheme, He already paid the price and He will be your Savior when you repent and return to Him.

## Mrs. Annemarieke Ryskamp

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**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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**Deadline:** June 1, 2025

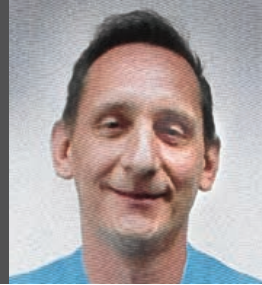
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More information and submission form at: [reformedfellowship.net/essay](http://reformedfellowship.net/essay)

# Being a Shining Light In a Dark World



Mr. Craig **Prendota**

I am twenty-two years into my forty-two-year prison sentence, and I am required to serve 85% of that sentence. If you have never been, prison is its own world. One of the hardest things for me is that I am separated from my parents, siblings, children, and grandkids. God has blessed me with visits and to be able to talk to my family on the phone; however, they are temporary escapes from the dark world of prison.

There is one thing that connects the outside world to the prison world: sin. There is homemade alcohol, drugs, homosexuality, violence, slander, and a whole list of other sins. In the past twenty-two years, I have seen things that no one should ever see. I have suffered physical and verbal attacks, depression, anxiety, and PTSD. I thought I was strong enough to endure anything, but unfortunately, I was wrong. I tried to take my own life in 2010, but, by God's grace, the shoestring I used broke, and I came crashing down to the cell floor. I was amazed because that shoestring was not that old. That's when I knew God wanted to use me for His glory.

When I first got locked up, I dabbled with Christianity. I claimed to confess my sins and accept Christ, but I was not regenerated (John 3). I was playing church; I thought I could manipulate God to do what I wanted. I was still partaking in my addictions: drugs and alcohol. I knew of God but I did not know God. I had been in prison for five

years and I was preparing a legal brief called a post-conviction. I was praying over it as I was preparing it and before I put it in the mail. My prayer was that God would grant the brief and take some time off my fifty-five-year original sentence. Part of that prayer was that if God would answer my prayer, I would serve him wholeheartedly and seriously.

Well, God answered my prayers, and I was given a new sentence—however, I was only given a thirteen-year reduction. I was being ungrateful and was expecting more. I selfishly asked God, “What happened to my sentence reduction?” In response I could hear God's voice in my heart: “You were not specific. I answered and did as I promised, but will you make good on your promise?” I was dumbfounded; God was right! I had a choice to make. I was going through some real dark depression and that was when I decided to try to take my life. I found out that day when the shoestring broke that God makes all the final decisions for my life. That's when a flood of tears started to stream down my face. It was at that point that I knew something had to change deep within me. I cried out to God and asked for His forgiveness; I had true “godly” sorrow (2 Cor. 7:10) and was regenerated. I am not perfect and I still make mistakes and fail, but that's part of our ongoing sinful nature. I continue to persevere, stay in my Bible, pray, and continue my personal relationship with Jesus Christ. I am not going to sugarcoat

things: it is hard. But Matthew 5:6 gives me comfort and help as it reads: “Blessed are they which do hunger and thirst after righteousness: for they shall be filled.”

Christ-followers in prison are widely viewed in a bad light compared to other religions. We are in a fishbowl on display for everyone to see. When I miss the mark in the slightest way, accusations fly, “Aren't you a Christian?” As if being a Christian makes me or you perfect and more righteous than anyone else. Being a Christ-follower, I get criticized and judged, and I am fine with that. Christianity is the only religion where the one true God holds us accountable for our actions. In other religions, you can use profane words, use God's name in vain, and act any way you wish without being held accountable. But Jesus Christ will hold us accountable for what comes out of our mouths (Matt. 12:36).

Since my salvation, God has opened many doors that I never thought possible. He allowed me to take and pass my GED while I was in Menard, a maximum-security prison that was really dark and depressing. He allowed the Illinois Department of Corrections to change the requirements for transfers from max prisons to medium prisons; I was able to transfer to a medium prison and begin to work as a cook and then start to take college courses. I have been blessed to be able to transfer to another medium prison in Danville, where I have been enrolled



What does your light look like? How can you make your light shine brighter? I encourage you to walk in a way that is pleasing to the Lord and allow your light to shine bright so those in a dark world can see the living Jesus Christ that is illuminated to the fullest in you.



for the last two years at Divine Hope Reformed Bible Seminary.

Please don't think that I am bragging about my accomplishments because I am not. It is only by God's perfect design that I have been blessed with earning a two-year certificate in Christian studies and am now in my third year.

God has blessed me and seen fit for me to be a teacher's aide. I am involved in a class called Practice for Preaching. I truly enjoy this class because I have learned how to research and develop God's Word in a rich, theological way with Christ at the center and teaching from the Bible is important. I also then give brief supporting sermons or messages for our chapel services. I have been blessed by God throughout my seminary career.

Divine Hope Reformed Bible Seminary has also taught me how to defend my faith and be courageous in the Lord. They have taught me how to be a better witness so that

I can teach my family about God. My foundation is firm now and I have a better understanding of my faith. My faith has been tested many times, especially when deaths hit my family—one of which was particularly tragic.

I know people watch me because of my faith and I am okay with that. God has given me opportunities to talk and teach men whose candle has been put out, who are walking blindly and who have lost hope and see nothing good in themselves and others. I walk in love because God loves me. I feel that it is my Christian responsibility to speak about Christ and His love and what He has done for me so that the next generation of men and women coming into prison will break that cycle of curse.

God gives each one of us gifts (Rom. 12:4–11), and we are called to use them. If we are not a shining light in our dark world of prison, how can we go back out there into the other dark world on the streets and expect to be a shining light?

Being a follower of Christ is not easy. We will fall, we will be judged, we will be looked at differently, but this is no surprise because we are told this in the Bible. What does your light look like? How can you make your light shine brighter? I encourage you to walk in a way that is pleasing to the Lord and allow your light to shine bright so those in a dark world can see the living Jesus Christ that is illuminated to the fullest in you.

May the LORD bless you and keep you; the LORD make his face shine upon you and be gracious to you; the LORD lift up his countenance upon you and give you peace (Num. 6:24–26).

## Craig Prendota

is a student at Divine Hope Reformed Bible Seminary at the Danville Correctional Center in Danville, IL.



# Haiti: Gospel Work in the Midst of Darkness

Mr. Dave  
Vander Meer



of the rebellion of slaves in 1791. Plantations were burned and some of the owners were killed. Since before the beginning of Haiti as a separate state, Vodou has been practiced. Today, it is mostly practiced by Roman Catholics, who see no contradiction between the two (syncretism at its worst). In 2003, the Haitian government recognized Vodou as an official religion.

The economic and educational conditions of Haiti are horrendous. According to statistics from four years ago, unemployment is at 50%, and 66% of their population are living on two dollars a day. An astounding 50% of the population is illiterate, and 66% of students drop out of school by sixth grade. Things have only gotten worse in the last four years.

You may have heard of the recent troubles in Haiti and its repeated destabilization as a nation. The assassination of their president, Jovenel Moïse, by mercenaries in July of 2021 seems to have been the flashpoint for what is going on now. However, Haiti's problems go further back than this. There have been coup d'état in 1988, 1991, and 2004, with dictators running the country in the time before 1988. The death of President Moïse in 2021 sparked an avalanche of gang violence, particularly in Port-au-Prince but in other places as well. Gangs have controlled most of Port-au-Prince and some other parts of the island since then. Kenya sent 400 police officers in June 2024 and another 200 in February 2025 to help bring some order, but it seems to have had little effect.

In the last several years, many Haitians have fled the country due to increased theft, violence, extortion, killing, and kidnapping. Rival gangs vying for territory try to secure limited resources. They also kidnap other Haitians for ransom. The story of the abduction of seventeen missionaries in October 2021 was widely publicized (a book was even written). The killing of missionaries last May also made the news.

While Haiti may come in and out of mind for us in North America, this has been the daily reality of the people of Haiti for years now, particularly those in Port-au-Prince. This situation has caused many missionaries and humanitarian programs to be pulled out of or paused in Haiti. One example is the OPC having to pull their

**H**aiti is a unique island country situated about 700 miles away from the United States but worlds apart. Being an island in the Caribbean, it has much beauty. It is known as the Pearl of the Antilles, but sadly now is far from that in many ways. Haiti is the poorest country in the Western Hemisphere and has been that way for some time.

Haiti shares the island of Hispaniola with the Dominican Republic; the island was discovered by Christopher Columbus in 1492. Haiti was once a prosperous French territory producing sugar, rum, coffee, and lumber, but on the backs of slaves. In 1804, Haiti became free through a slave uprising that started in 1791 and led to a thirteen-year war. Haiti then became the second republic in the Western Hemisphere.

Haiti has a dark past even beyond slavery. Vodou has been a part of Haitian culture for centuries, and this, I believe, is the reason that Haiti is in much of the turmoil that it is today. A Vodou ceremony commenced the beginning

church-planting missionary out. Thankfully, the work of Word & Deed's partner in Port-au-Prince has been able to continue. One of our areas of emphasis has been to work with indigenous Christian leadership in our projects. The advantage of this is obvious: these partners know the language and culture and hold a unique understanding of situations and people. When a disaster hits, boots are already on the ground and the difficult decision to send North American workers home is irrelevant. Our partners are serving their own people already, bringing the gospel, and are trusted members in their community.

Word & Deed has two partners who have continued their work despite the brokenness within their country. One is a micro-loan program that is operating in both the North and South of Haiti. The other, Adoration Christian School, is working in the heart of the pain and turmoil of Haiti in Port-au-Prince, bringing hope with the message of the gospel, educating students, and working to have a positive name in the community for the Kingdom of God. Adoration Christian School has been a Word & Deed partner since 2012, but the school had its beginnings around 2007 with the involvement of Canadian Reformed and United Reformed Churches in Ontario, Canada. As the work grew, the churches turned to Word & Deed for support and leadership.

Word & Deed first came alongside Adoration in the aftermath of a devastating 7.0 magnitude earthquake that rocked Haiti on January 12, 2010. The earthquake caused \$7.5-8.5 billion in damages and destroyed thousands of homes and other buildings. Estimates were that over 200,000 people were killed, 300,000 injured, and 1 million displaced. Adoration Christian School's building collapsed; however, by the grace of God, not a soul was

in the building at the time of the earthquake. Many students had gone home for the day and others were watching a soccer game that was being held in the backyard. Word & Deed responded with disaster relief funding for the provision of food and water along with medical aid. Later, Word & Deed also provided aid in the form of funding the construction of forty-five homes and repairs to two hundred more homes. We also supplied funding to purchase a school building to replace the rental facility that had collapsed. In 2021, there was another earthquake after which Word & Deed provided relief, and, during COVID-19, we also supplied the means for food relief to the families of the school and some community members multiple times.

When Word & Deed first partnered with Adoration, the school had about a hundred students in grades 4-9. Today, due to the dedication of the board and staff of Adoration, they have over five hundred students in grades K-13. They also have a much-appreciated program for special needs children (you can read about this program in the Winter 2025 Word & Deed magazine). A trade program that offers sewing, construction, and electrical classes has been added (although due to the current climate in Haiti, these classes have been paused). All students receive one meal per school day which helps sustain them and improve their studies. Most importantly, the students are taught the Christian faith in a loving environment.

Despite these troubling times, by the grace of God, the school is currently operational. They have had to pause classes for periods of time when violence or kidnappings ramped up. Students are also not wearing their uniforms so as not to draw attention to themselves, and the trade program has been paused, but the school is

still operational. They have lost staff who moved away or came from some distance and had to travel through dangerous areas. However, even with these overwhelming challenges, they completed their last school year and most of their students passed the national testing requirements. They are well on track to do this again this year.

It is only through God's blessing the efforts of the board, administration, and staff of Adoration that the school continues to operate. These Haitian Christians have the ability to continue their work and are working tirelessly to bring Reformed Christian education to their small slice of the world. It is through the leadership of Wilfred, the Director of Adoration, and Pastor Octavious Delfils, who is a Bible teacher and Board President, that the school continues and is successful. Adoration is having an impact in a spiritually dark place filled with violence and Vodou. In a small tangible way, Adoration is announcing to the world that these square inches belong to God, as all of Haiti does, including the Reformed and Presbyterian church that continues to meet on the grounds of Adoration, led by Pastor Delfils.

The cost of educating a student at Adoration is just over \$800 a year. As you might expect, in the people's condition and economic times, families cannot pay. If you are so inclined to support the work of Adoration, you may go to [www.wordanddeed.org/donate](http://www.wordanddeed.org/donate) and choose to support the Adoration project to help support Christian education in this tumultuous country.

## Mr. Dave Vander Meer

works for Word & Deed Ministries, a Reformed international relief and development ministry, in both public relations and projects. He is a member of Cornerstone URC in Hudsonville, MI.

# I Believe in God the Spirit

*I believe in the Holy Spirit.*

1. I be-lieve in God the Spir - it who, to-geth - er with the Son  
2. He who is my life's re-new - er to new life my spir - it lifts

and the Fa - ther, power from heav - en, is true God, the time-less One.  
that by faith in Christ my Sav - ior I now share in all His gifts.

He, who is both Lord and Giv - er, is the liv - ing breath of God.  
He will com - fort me for - ev - er and re - main with me al - ways.

He gave life to all cre - a - tion. Ho - ly Spir - it, You I laud.  
I will praise the Ho - ly Spir - it and ex - tol Him all my days.

Text: QA 53, Heidelberg Catechism (Art.. 8 Apostles' Creed); vers. George van Popta, 2019  
Tune: William P. Rowlands, 1905

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BLAENWERN

# Meditation: “I Believe in the Holy Spirit”



Rev. George **van Popta**

Lord’s Day 20 of the *Heidelberg Catechism* teaches us about the Holy Spirit, affirming that “He is also given to me, to make me by true faith share in Christ and all His benefits, to comfort me, and to remain with me forever.” This profound truth invites us into a deeper relationship with the third person of the Holy Trinity.

When I reflect upon the greatness of the Triune God and of the Holy Spirit, I feel the weight of my own inadequacies and sins. I am weak, but the Holy Spirit reminds me of the sufficiency of Christ’s sacrifice. He assures me that I am a partaker of all Christ’s benefits—not by my merit, but through faith. This brings immense comfort: I am not alone in my life’s journey!

The abiding presence of the Holy Spirit is a source of daily strength.

In seasons of doubt or fear, He is my Comforter who brings peace that surpasses human understanding. His indwelling presence is a constant reminder of God’s unwavering love and commitment to His children—and I am God’s child!

Embracing the Holy Spirit’s work in our lives leads us to a life of gratitude and obedience. He empowers us to live out our faith as people transformed by the power of the gospel. As we yield to His guidance,

we experience the fullness of the life that Christ promised.

Lord’s Day 20 calls us to acknowledge and cherish the Holy Spirit’s role in our lives. He is not a distant or abstract force but a personal Comforter and Guide, ensuring that we remain connected to Christ and His redemptive work.

May we continually seek to be filled with the Spirit that we may more and more be shaped by Him into the image of our Savior.

## Rev. George van Popta

is minister-emeritus of Jubilee Canadian Reformed Church of Ottawa, Ontario.



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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

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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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