

THE Outlook

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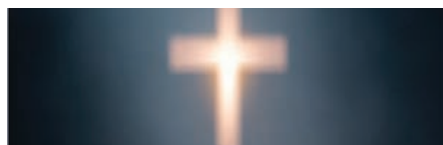
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About the cover image: Psalm 107:23-32 gives a fitting image of the Christian pilgrimage. When we face the storms of God's discipline and also the curse, by crying out to the Lord, we find our deliverance in Him as He brings us to our desired haven (v.30).

THE KING OF GLORY

“For I know that my redeemer liveth, and that he shall stand at the latter day upon the earth: and though after my skin worms destroy this body, yet in my flesh shall I see God: Whom I shall see for myself, and mine eyes shall behold, and not another; though my reins be consumed within me”

– Job 19:25–27

Throughout Advent, we remembered God’s faithful promise of the birth of the Christ child in the fullness of time. Then, the weeks of Passion focused on His death and resurrection to bring in and open the way of salvation for hell-bound sinners. Not only was salvation won and paid for, but the risen Christ revealed Himself to His disciples for forty days. He ascended into heaven receiving the crown of glory and now sits at the right hand of power. “And Jesus said, I am; and ye shall see the Son of man sitting on the right hand of power, and coming in the clouds of heaven” (Mark 14:62).

This glorious truth is passed over by many, but for those who look for Jesus, it increases their love for the One who so loved them. Living in the wilderness of this world, we look for Christ and begin more and more to hate sin because it is an offense to the One we love. We want to be rid of the three-headed enemy—the world, Satan, and self. Self is the insufferable enemy. We desire to be perfectly holy, but sin separates us from God. Hear Paul as he cries but trusts in his God: “O wretched man that I am! who shall deliver me from the body of this death? I thank God through Jesus Christ our Lord. So then with the mind I myself serve the law of God; but with the flesh the law of sin” (Rom. 7:24–25).

But Christ’s work in gathering His kingdom, the church, is ongoing. He sent the Holy Spirit on the day of Pentecost, empowering His apostles as He promised to preach His Word to a world filled with sinners. “Go ye therefore, and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son,

and of the Holy Ghost: teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you: and, lo, I am with you always, even unto the end of the world. Amen” (Matt. 28:19–20). In this, we see the unity in trinity at work using weak means (men) to fulfill His Word. The glorious gospel, the good news, is brought by men ordained by God. The Spirit opens hearts to receive the word of grace. This will continue until Jesus, the glorious King, comes on the clouds of heaven to judge the world in righteousness.

God is a covenant-keeping God. His love is revealed in the hearts of His people. He uses the preached Word, and families are also added by parents teaching their children about Jesus. “Suffer little children to come unto me, and forbid them not: for of such is the kingdom of God. Verily I say unto you, Whosoever shall not receive the kingdom of God as a little child shall in no wise enter therein” (Luke 18:16–17). This should be the prayer of every parent. “I bring the children Thou hast given me to Thee, and in prayer remember them. In mercy draw them close to Thee. Let Thy Word be fulfilled and Thy kingdom come in their hearts, and let Thy love bring them to truly love Thee.” God has loaned us these children and will answer those prayers. “My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me: And I give unto them eternal life; and they shall never perish, neither shall any man pluck them out of my hand. My Father, which gave them me, is greater than all; and no man is able to pluck them out of my Father’s hand” (John 10:27–29).

The time that God gives us on earth is very short. The King of Glory is coming; are you waiting and looking for Him?

*Let God rejoice in all His works,
and let His works proclaim*

*Forevermore their Maker’s praise
and glorify His Name.*

Psalter 288:2 (Psalm 104)



Mr. Cornelius VanKempen

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Calvin, Edwards, and the Church Fathers on our Homeland in Heaven



Rev. Dr. Mark J. **Larson**

This present world is one “in which good and evil are so mixed together as to be a sure sign that this world is not to continue forever.”¹ This was how Jonathan Edwards described the nature of life in a fallen world: a mixture of blessing and misery.

Divine Gifts in the Midst of Suffering

“The earthly life we live is a gift of God’s kindness”; indeed, “before he shows us openly the inheritance of eternal glory, God wills by lesser proofs to show himself to be our Father.” What did John Calvin mean by these statements? He reminded his readers of “the benefits that are daily conferred on us by him.”² This was the same perspective of the Apostle Paul, when he contemplated the works of God in the generations preceding his own time: “He did good, gave us rain from heaven and fruitful seasons, filling our hearts with food and gladness” (Acts 14:17). Jesus likewise spoke about the “Father in heaven” who “makes His sun rise on the evil and on the good and sends rain on the just and the unjust” (Matt. 5:45).

Daily gifts come to us from the hand of God: “Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, and comes down from the Father of lights” (James 1:17). Let us always receive the divine beneficence with grateful hearts. At the same time, we are constantly reminded that we no longer live in Paradise. “This life judged in itself is troubled, turbulent, unhappy in countless ways, and

in no respect clearly happy.” We must come to terms, Calvin noted, with these sober realities. “All the things which are judged to be its goods are uncertain, fleeting, vain, and vitiated by many intermingled evils.”³ This was the point made by James about the nature of our lives in a fallen world: “It is even a vapor that appears for a little time and then vanishes away” (James 4:14). What should we expect about our short season on this earth? Paul would answer: “We must through many tribulations enter the kingdom of God” (Acts 14:22).

We have moments of happiness in our present lives, but there is an instability in our experience. Edwards used an apt figure of speech: “this world” is “like a tempestuous sea.” It has been the case since the rebellion of Adam and Eve that “selfishness, and envy, and revenge, and jealousy, and kindred passions keep life in a constant tumult.” Is there a way for us to find peace in the turbulence that surrounds us? Edwards provided wise counsel. The “confusion and uproar” of the present is such that “no quiet rest is to be enjoyed except in renouncing this world and looking to another.”⁴

Looking to the World Above

Paul calls upon us to meditate upon the heavenly life and to recognize that we are sojourning for just a short time in this world: “Seek those things which are above, where Christ is, sitting at the right hand of God. Set your mind on things above, not on things on the earth” (Col. 3:1–2). Calvin reasoned thus: “If heaven is our homeland, what else is the earth but our place of exile?”⁵ In fact, he maintained, there is a compelling necessity for us to think properly about this world and the world above. “The entire company of believers” would “have been desperately unhappy unless, with mind intent upon heaven, they had surmounted whatever is in

this world, and passed beyond the present aspect of affairs.”⁶

Calvin stood in continuity with the church fathers in his perspective on life in this world and our homeland in heaven. Clement, in his letter to the Corinthians, written near the end of the first century, began his epistle with these words: “The church of God which *temporarily resides* in Rome, to the church of God which *temporarily resides* in Corinth.”⁷ Clement reminded the church in Corinth of the Apostle Paul, who “having come to the limits of the west and having given his testimony before the rulers,” was “set free from the world and was taken up to the holy place.”⁸ We find the same kind of thinking about heaven in Polycarp, a disciple of the apostle John. Bishop Polycarp wrote to the Philippians early in the second century. He assured the congregation that those who had lived “in faith and righteousness” were now “with the Lord.” He likewise expressed his desire that God would give the believers in Philippi the ultimate blessing: “May he give you a share and place with his saints, and to us with you, and to all under heaven who shall believe in our Lord and God Jesus Christ and in his Father.”⁹

The Place of Supreme Happiness

We need to remember that our ultimate happiness is not to be found in this fallen world. To use the language of Augustine, we must not be like those in unbelief, the earthly city that “longs for earthly joys” and “clings to them, as if they were the only joys.”¹⁰ Calvin repeated the same note, pointing out that by nature “the world [tends to] hold us bound by intemperate love of it.” “The whole soul, enmeshed in the allurements of the flesh, seeks its happiness on earth.” Calvin advised, “If we have any concern for eternity, we must strive diligently to strike off

these evil fetters.”¹¹ Many refuse this course of action. This indeed was the problem with Demas who seemed to be a servant of the Lord and who labored with Paul for a period of time (Philem. 24). Sad to say, his affections were wrongly placed resulting in spiritual disaster. Paul reflected on what had happened: “Demas has forsaken me, having loved this present world, and has departed for Thessalonica” (2 Tim. 4:10).

The world above is the place of true happiness. “That blessed world,” proclaimed Edwards, “shall be perfectly bright, without any darkness; perfectly fair, without any spot; perfectly clear, without any cloud.”¹² “Every member of that holy and blessed society shall be without any stain of sin, or imperfection, or weakness, or imprudence, or blemish of any kind.”¹³ “The saints in heaven” are “united together in one society” for “mutual subserviency and happiness.”¹⁴ Augustine wrote that the life of the believer “is happy in the expectation of the world to come.”¹⁵ We know that true happiness and peace are only to be found in the eternal City of God. Thus, “we sigh for her beauty while on our pilgrimage.”¹⁶

Our Entrance into Heaven

Calvin would encourage us to have a biblical perspective on death. He stated, “Through death we are recalled from exile to dwell in the fatherland, in the heavenly fatherland.”¹⁷ This indeed was the point made by Paul: “We are confident, yes, well pleased rather to be absent from the body and to be present with the Lord” (2 Cor. 5:8). In fact, “to die is gain,” for “to depart” is to “be with Christ, which is far better” (Phil. 1: 21, 23). This was the promise given by Jesus to the dying thief who appealed to the Lord for mercy: “Assuredly, I say to you, today you will be with Me in Paradise” (Luke 23:43).

Our greatest longing, however, focuses upon the Second Coming. We are “looking for the blessed hope and glorious appearing of our great God and Savior Jesus Christ” (Titus 2:13). We, as Calvin put it, “await the Lord’s coming, not only with longing, but also with groaning and sighs, as the happiest thing of all.” Why is this the case? “He will come to us as Redeemer, and rescuing us, from the boundless abyss of all evils and miseries, he will lead us into that blessed inheritance of his life and glory.”¹⁸ We shall hear the Lord’s invitation: “Come, you blessed of My Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world” (Matt. 25:34).

The Glory of God’s Country

Peace and happiness await the people of God. As Calvin described it, “The Lord will receive his faithful people into the peace of his Kingdom.” More than that, He “will deign to make them sharers in his happiness.”¹⁹ Augustine contemplated what the eternal kingdom will be like: “How great will be that felicity, where there will be no evil.”²⁰ He concluded his *City of God* with an expression of wonder: “There we shall be still and see; we shall see and we shall love; we shall love and we shall praise. Behold what will be, in the end, without end!” He then asked, “For what is our end but to reach that kingdom which has no end?”²¹

This is precisely what Jesus taught. All who trust in Him will dwell with Him forever and will share in His

glory. His comfort is this: “If I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and receive you to myself, that where I am, there you may be also” (John 14:3). There is not only His promise, but there is also His prayer: “Father, I desire that they also whom you gave me be with me where I am, that they may behold my glory” (John 17:24). Consider His remarkable description of our future possession: “And the glory which you gave me I have given them” (John 17:22).

The Lord’s Invitation

Edwards encourages us, unworthy and wretched sinners that we are: “This glorious world may be obtained by us. It is offered to us. Though it be so excellent and blessed a country, yet God stands ready to give us an inheritance there, if it be the country that we desire, and will choose and diligently seek.”²²

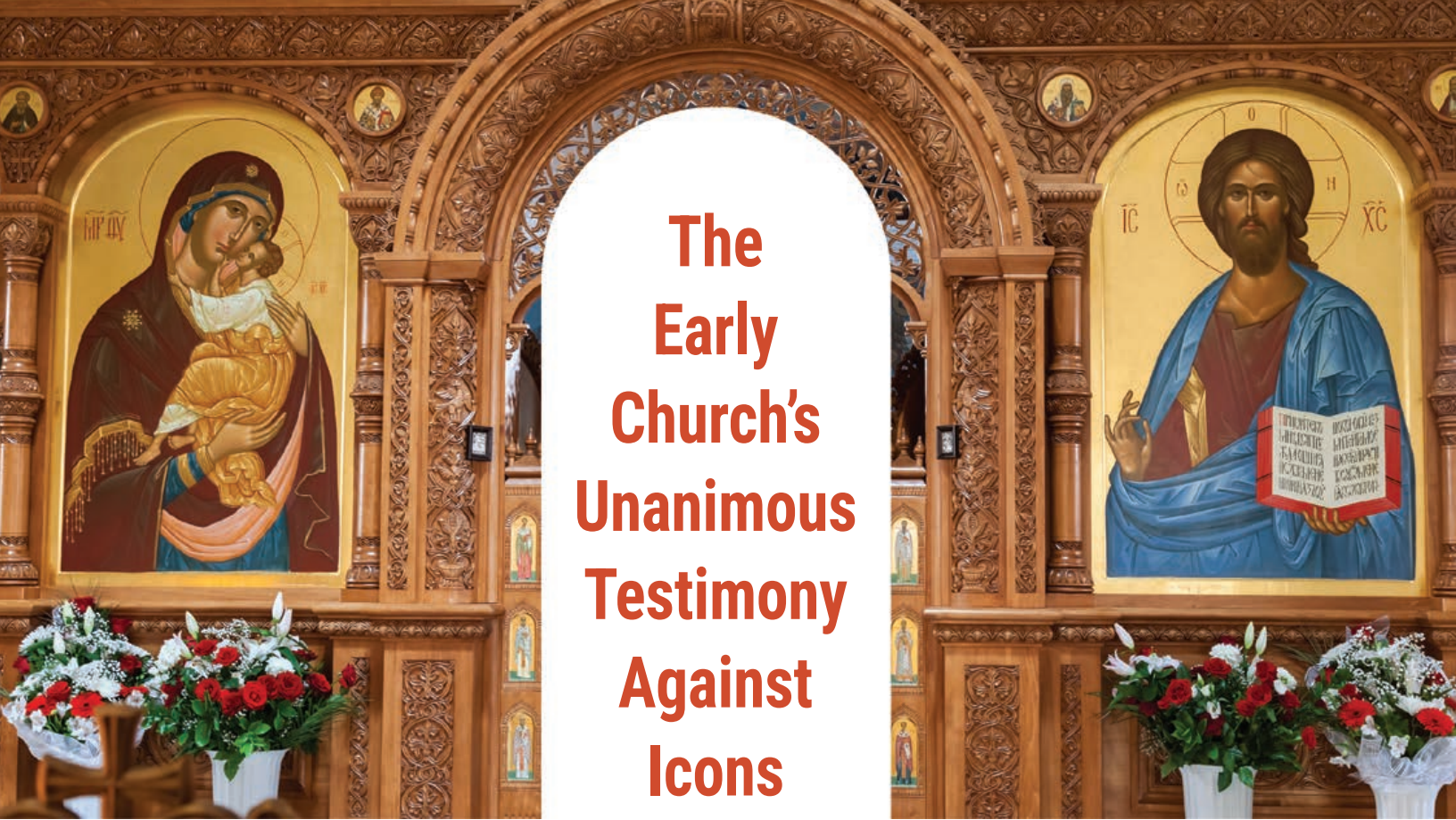
The divine invitation goes out to the world until the end of the age. Jesus assures us that all will be well if we place our trust in Him alone: “This is the will of Him who sent Me, that everyone who sees the Son and believes in Him may have everlasting life; and I will raise him up at the last day” (John 6:40). May we be comforted by the safety given to us by the Lord, protection for His sheep who hear His voice and follow Him: “I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; neither shall anyone snatch them out of my hand” (John 10:28).

1. Jonathan Edwards, *Heaven: A World of Love* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 2008), 88.
2. John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, vol. 1, trans. Ford Lewis Battles (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960), 715.
3. Calvin, *Institutes*, vol. 1:713.
4. Edwards, *Heaven*, 69.
5. Calvin, *Institutes*, vol. 1:716.
6. Calvin, *Institutes*, vol. 1:718.
7. Clement, “The First Letter of Clement to the Corinthians,” in *The Apostolic Fathers: A New Translation*, trans. Rick Brannan (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2017), 11. Emphasis added.
8. Clement, “The First Letter of Clement to the Corinthians,” 15.
9. Polycarp, “Polycarp to the Philippians,” in *The Apostolic Fathers: A New Translation*, trans. Rick Brannan (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2017), 128–29.
10. Augustine, *Concerning the City of God against the Pagans*, trans. Henry Bettenson (London: Penguin Books, 1972), 621.
11. Calvin, *Institutes*, 1:713.
12. Edwards, *Heaven*, 21.
13. Edwards, *Heaven*, 23.
14. Edwards, *Heaven*, 67.
15. Augustine, *The City of God*, 857.
16. Augustine, *The City of God*, 205.
17. Calvin, *Institutes*, 1:717.
18. Calvin, *Institutes*, 1:718.
19. Calvin, *Institutes*, 1:718.
20. Augustine, *The City of God*, 1087.
21. Augustine, *The City of God*, 1091.
22. Edwards, *Heaven*, 98.

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The Early Church's Unanimous Testimony Against Icons



Rev. Dr. John B. **Carpenter**

In the modern religious landscape, Eastern Orthodoxy presents itself as the pristine alternative for evangelicals weary of the perceived shallowness of contemporary worship. Its appeal lies in a claim of “unbroken continuity”—the idea that the incense-filled, icon-laden liturgy of today is the exact same worship practiced by the Apostles and the early martyrs. Yet, when we move past the aesthetic allure and delve into the intellectual and historical record, we find that the “continuity” claim rests on a foundation of sand. The early church was not pre-iconic; it was aniconic.¹ To understand the thinking behind this stance is to rediscover a church that viewed the visual representation of the divine not as a

window to heaven, but as a shutter closing out the light of the Word.

What Is an Icon?

We must first clear the semantic fog. Eastern Orthodox Apologists (EOAs) conflate any instance of Christian art with the practice of iconography. However, an icon in the liturgical sense is not merely a painting; it is a sacred image intended for veneration (*proskynesis*) and used as a medium for divine encounter.

The early church distinguished between art (decorative or historical) and idols (images used in worship). While archaeologists have found murals in the Dura-Europos house church (ca. 235) or the Roman

catacombs, there is no record of any Christian before AD 500 bowing before, kissing, or offering incense to these images. The early Christians were aniconic—they avoided images in worship—but they were not necessarily artless. They maintained a strict line: the worship of God must be mediated through the Spirit and the Word, not through the “sensible” (physical) representations of the material world.

The Jewish Background and the Second Commandment

The primitive church did not invent its opposition to images in a vacuum; it inherited a fierce, “Second Commandment” hermeneutic from

Second Temple Judaism. For the first-century Jew, the prohibition against graven images (and “any likeness of anything” in worship) was a defining boundary of their identity against the image-mad Greco-Roman world.

History records that when Pontius Pilate attempted to bring Roman standards bearing the emperor’s image into Jerusalem, the Jewish populace staged a non-violent protest, baring their necks to Roman swords rather than permit images in the Holy City. This was the environment that birthed the Apostles.

The “Protestant” Polemic of the Church Fathers

When we turn to the writings of the Fathers, their language sounds like that of the later Reformers. They did not see images as “books for the illiterate” (a later sixth-century justification); rather, they saw them as a return to the darkness of paganism.

Clement of Alexandria (ca. 150–215): A philosopher-theologian, Clement argued that the Law was designed to lead us away from the “sensible” to the “intellectual.” He stated flatly, “Works of art cannot then be sacred and divine.”²

Tertullian (ca. 155–240): The fiery North African was so rigorous that he questioned whether a Christian could even be an artist. He argued that the Second Commandment “interdicted” all similitudes.³

Marcus Minucius Felix (d. ca. 250): The distinguished Roman lawyer and early Latin Christian apologist had his pagan interrogator, the fictional Caecilius Natalis, ask of Christians, “Why have they no altars, no temples, no acknowledged images?”⁴ Arnobius noted that his pagan prosecutor was “in the habit of fastening upon us a very serious charge of impiety because...[we] do not set up statues and images of any god...”⁵ Romans frequently considered the lack of religious images among Christians as

prima facie evidence of atheism. These apologists were at pains to explain that it was not so.⁶

Origen (ca. 184–254): In his sophisticated defense of Christianity against the pagan critic Celsus, Origen rejected the idea that images were symbols of the divine. He argued that Christians “cannot allow in the worship of the Divine Being altars, or temples, or images.”⁷

Lactantius (ca. 250–325): Often called the “Christian Cicero,” Lactantius provided perhaps the most devastating summary: “It is undoubted that there is no religion wherever there is an image.”⁸

Arnobius of Sicca (255–330): The fourth-century North African rhetorician turned vigorous Christian apologist wrote, “What greater wrong, disgrace, hardship, can be inflicted than to acknowledge one god, and yet make supplication to something else—to hope for help from a deity, and pray to an image without feeling?... There is nothing divine in images.”⁹

Eusebius of Caesarea (ca. AD 263–339): “The Father of Church History” and scholarly bishop received a letter from the emperor’s sister, Constantia, asking him for a picture of Christ. He politely rebukes her, saying, “Did the reading escape you where God commanded not to make any likeness of anything in heaven above or on the earth beneath?”¹⁰

Epiphanius of Salamis (ca. 310–403): The fourth-century bishop and canonized “saint” in Eastern Orthodoxy and Roman Catholicism tore down a church curtain bearing an image of Christ when he found one travelling in Palestine. He wrote that he was “loath that an image of a man should be hung up in Christ’s church contrary to the teaching of the Scriptures.”¹¹

The Council of Elvira: Canon 36

If there is a historical fact that

destroys the claim of early church iconography, it is Canon 36 of the Council of Elvira (ca. 306). This council of Western bishops met just before the rise of Constantine and issued a prophylactic decree against icons arising in the church. The canon states: “It is decided that there should be no pictures in the church, lest what is worshipped and adored be painted on the walls.” This was not a regional quirk; it was a formalization of the thinking that had dominated the church for three centuries.

The Gnostic Deviation: The First Icons

One of the more revealing details in this debate is that the earliest explicit literary reference to Christians possessing images of Christ comes not from the catholic mainstream, but from a second-century Gnostic sect. According to Irenaeus of Lyons in *Against Heresies* (1.25.6), the Carpocratians claimed to have a portrait of Christ allegedly commissioned by Pontius Pilate. They reportedly displayed this image alongside portraits of philosophers such as Pythagoras and Plato, crowned them, and treated them “after the same manner of the Gentiles.”¹² While this does not prove that orthodox Christians rejected all visual representation, it does show that one of the earliest documented cases of Christ-images appears in a heterodox setting rather than within the emerging catholic tradition.

When the early Church Fathers like Irenaeus (ca. 130–202) and Hippolytus (ca. 170–235) wrote about this, they did not say, “The Gnostics are doing it wrong; here is the *correct* way to use icons.” Rather, they cited the very act of using images of Christ as evidence of the Gnostics’ pagan and heretical nature. The thinking of the early church was clear: icons were a hallmark of the “other,” not the “faithful.”

Deconstructing the Luke Myth

To bypass this wall of historical condemnation, later icon-venerators fabricated the legend that Luke was the first iconographer. This myth, which claims Luke painted the Virgin Mary, did not emerge until the eighth and ninth centuries—appearing during the height of the Iconoclast controversy to provide apostolic cover for a recent innovation.¹³

The early church knew nothing of this legend. Augustine of Hippo (354–430), one of the most brilliant minds in church history, explicitly stated in *De Trinitate* that “neither do we know the countenance of the Virgin Mary.”¹⁴ If the Apostles had passed down holy icons, the most learned bishop in the West would have been aware of them.

Conclusion: The Triumph of the Word

The Achilles’ heel of the Eastern Orthodox apologetics is, ironically,

the claim it uses to sell itself to evangelicals today: its insistence on unbroken continuity with the early church. If the church today *requires* the use of icons, but the church of the first 500 years *condemned* them, then the continuity is historical fiction. The early church’s testimony was unanimously against icons. As Epiphanius insisted, icons are “contrary to our religion.” So, contrary to the claims of Eastern Orthodox apologists trying to woo our church members, returning to the early church is not to embrace the icon, but to embrace the simplicity of the Word.

1. John B. Carpenter, “The Early Church on the Aniconic Spectrum,” *The Westminster Theological Journal*, 83, No. 1, May, 2021.
2. Clement of Alexandria, *Stromata*, 2.18, 5.5, 7.5 (*ANF* 2:530).
3. Tertullian, *Idol*, 5 (<http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/0302.htm>).
4. Minucius Felix, *Octavius*, Ch. 10, <https://www.newadvent.org/fathers/0410.htm>. On Minucius’s imaginary dialogue, see Jensen, “Aniconism in the First Centuries of Christianity,” 409.

5. Arnobius, *Against the Heathen*, 6.1.
6. Paul Corby Finney, *The Invisible God*, 40.
7. Origen, *Cels.*, 7.64 (<http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/04167.htm>).
8. Lactantius, *Divine Institutes*, Book II (Of the Origin of Error), 19.
9. Arnobius, *Against the Heathen*, 6.9, 16.
10. Eusebius, “Letter of Eusebius to Constantia,” *Ante-Nicene Christianity*, 24, <https://ante-nicenechristianity.com/articles/letter-of-eusebius-to-constantia/>.
11. Epiphanius, Letter 51, ch. 9 (<http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/3001051.htm>).
12. Irenaeus, *Haer.* 1:25.6 (<http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/0103125.htm>).
13. Bissera V. Pentcheva, *Icons and Power: The Mother of God in Byzantium* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University, 2006), 124.
14. Augustine, *De Trinitate*, 8:5 (NPNE, 3).

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Daniel R. Hyde

In Living Color

Images of Christ and the Means of Grace

Foreword by Joel Beeke

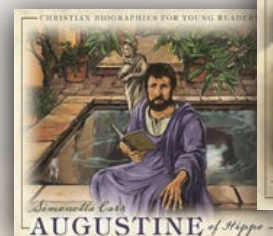
Beyond Images. Into Christ.

As this article explores, the early church rejected icons not out of hostility to Christ, but out of fidelity to the Second Commandment. Daniel Hyde shows why that matters still.

***In Living Color* exposes the problem with images of Christ and points us to God’s better provision—the Word and the Sacraments.**

Available at reformedfellowship.net

The early church fathers handled the word of truth with care, and their faithfulness provides a foundation which, as we see in this article, still helps us today. Read more in these excellent illustrated biographies, available individually or as part of a set at reformedfellowship.net.





How the Gospel Transforms Parenting (2)



Mrs. Elisabeth Bloechl

Raising our children is simultaneously one of the most natural and difficult callings. Nearly everyone who holds their baby for the first time has an automatic and innate desire to feed, nurture, and protect this helpless little one. What is not so natural and extremely difficult is knowing how to raise these little souls—and how to do it well. The weight of the responsibility is bound to crush us unless we rightly understand and live out of the gospel.

In the previous article, I discussed the way the gospel transforms our parenting by changing how we see ourselves. In this article, I want to focus the lens on our children. We will look at how God views our kids, extending the gospel to them both in word and deed, and how His posture

toward our children should shape our parenting.

How God Views Our Kids

From explicit blessings associated with children to Jesus' receptivity of children during His earthly ministry, we have only to glance through our Bibles to see that God values children. Children are not a bother, burden, or break in the system. As image-bearers, they have as much worth as any adult, be he president or priest. In a recent article,¹ I expounded this point at length, so I will not belabor it here. Suffice to say, God cares about kids. God has not withheld the beautiful truth of forgiveness and new life through Christ's atoning work from our children. One of the most tangible ways He has shown this is through the covenant He established

with Abraham and expanded and reiterated in the New Testament.

The Abrahamic Covenant

When God established His covenant with Abraham, He repeatedly reminded him it was for Abraham *and his children after him* (Gen. 12, 15). He pictured and solidified this through the sign of circumcision.

I will establish my covenant as an everlasting covenant between me and you and your descendants after you for the generations to come, to be your God and the God of your descendants after you.... This is my covenant with you and your descendants after you, the covenant you are to keep: Every male among you shall be circumcised. You are to undergo circumcision, and it will be the sign of the covenant between me and you. For the generations to come every male among you who is eight days old must be circumcised, including those born in your household or bought with money from a foreigner (Gen. 17:7, 10–12).

Abraham, a believing adult (Gen. 15:6), received the sign, then proceeded to administer it to every male in his household, not least his two sons. This sign marked their inclusion in the covenant. As covenant members, they would receive the benefits of the covenant: discipleship in the faith, exposure to true teaching, and frequent fellowship with the people of God. They would grow up in homes where parents were commanded (even if often failing) to teach their children the truths of God's salvation (see Duet. 6:20–21, 11:19, 32:46; Joel 1:3; etc.).

By bringing children into this visible covenant, God was regularly and persistently exposing the children to the gospel: the promise of the coming Messiah. He was holding out the gospel to every child of the

covenant, calling them to lay hold of the promises pictured in their circumcision: the cutting off the flesh as representing the cutting off the old self (Col. 2:11). He was calling them to the ranks of those not only in the visible but also the invisible church.² He was using a variety of means to direct covenant children to the one means of salvation—to rest in work of the coming Messiah. While the sign and covenant have changed in the New Testament, God’s heart for children and ordinary means of saving them has not.

The New Covenant and Our Kids

Peter makes plain in his Acts 2 sermon that the promise of salvation is again for you *and your children*, just as it was for Abraham and his children. “Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. For the promise is for you *and for your children* and for all who are far off, everyone whom the Lord our God calls to himself” (Acts 2:38–39, emphasis mine). Therefore, just as Abraham circumcised his children, we ought to baptize ours, bringing them into the covenant and visible church. By this means, they will receive the several benefits of being a covenant member.

How are these benefits manifested in the new covenant? Children born into Christian families are often prayed for by their parents and taught to pray by these parents. They participate in family devotions and often learn to read the Bible on their own. They are part of the visible church, in which they hear the Word preached and the gospel call; they see the gospel displayed in water, bread, and wine. They converse with Christians of various ages.³ All of these interactions are God holding out the gospel to these children just as He did to Abraham’s children long ago.

How We Ought to Respond

This means that, as parents, our most important focus should not be academics, sports, or socialization. The most important thing is first to trust that God is able to save our children. Second, it is vital that we see ourselves as one of God’s tools to expose our kids regularly to the gospel. For, as one author puts it: “Far from unconditionally guaranteeing their salvation, the promises of Scripture to believers for their children establish Christian parents’ responsibility to evangelize our children.”⁴ This does not presume that covenant children are unbelievers, but it instead reminds us that they too need to be regularly “gospelized” and reminded of Jesus’s love for His covenant children. What does this look like in practice? I will explore that in four areas: community, conversations, conflict, and confidence.

The Bible says that faith comes through hearing the Word and the work of the Holy Spirit (John 3:5, Rom. 10:17, see also 1 Pet. 1:23–25 and WCF Q/A 67). Or as the Heidelberg Catechism puts it:

Q 56: It is by faith alone that we share in Christ and all his benefits: where then does that faith come from? A: The Holy Spirit works it in our hearts by the preaching of the holy gospel, and confirms it by the use of the holy sacraments.”

In most Reformed denominations, when parents bring their child to be baptized, they are charged and swear to teach their children the truths of Scripture, how to pray, and how (from their example of piety) to live a godly life. They are also to “endeavour, by all means that God has appointed, to bring up [their child] in the nurture and admonition of the Lord, encouraging (him/her) to appropriate for (himself/herself) the blessings and fulfil the obligations of the covenant.”⁵

The church then responds with a promise to aid the parents in their duty. While God saves individuals, He usually chooses to do so through the community of His church. As parents, we would do well to lean into this covenant community, knowing that our children are most likely to be born again within the arms of this family. That does not preclude our responsibility as parents at home.

Gospel Conversations in Everyday Life

I’ve already indicated that an important means of fulfilling these vows is through prayer, family devotions, and regular church attendance. But Deuteronomy talks of something further. “You shall teach them diligently to your children, and shall talk of them when you sit in your house, and when you walk by the way, and when you lie down, and when you rise” (6:7). The picture we get here is of daily, regular conversations about the things of God. Taking time to answer a theological question over the dinner table. Teaching the kids what a Christian response would be to their friend’s mistreatment of them. Pointing out God’s handiwork on a walk. Facilitating discussions about faith with friends from church. Conversations that circle back often to the good news of the gospel.

This kind of all-encompassing conversation requires the parents have a growing and nurtured relationship with God. If we are not thinking about God, we will not talk of Him. If we do not love Him, He will not come up in conversations. We talk about those things which we love. The foundations for our communicating the gospel to our children is embracing and loving it ourselves (see part I of this series). This love for and awareness of the gospel will serve us well when dealing with conflict.

Discipline and the Hope of the Gospel

Discipline is a means of pointing our children to Christ. Each time we identify a sin in our child, we identify their need for someone to save them from this sin. When we discipline our kids, it is an opportunity to present the gospel message to them. “You sinned because you have sin in your heart. You need a new heart. Let’s pray and ask God to give you a new heart.” More honestly, “You hit your sister because you wanted your own way. I also get angry when I don’t get my way. I sometimes even yell at you. I’m sorry for that. We both need God to change our hearts and take away the anger in them. Let’s pray for that now.” We know we need the gospel as much as our kids, and we have many opportunities to share that need with them.

If we have the gospel in view, discipline is not an opportunity to control, manipulate, or use our kids. If we are deeply aware that what our kids need most is not good manners,

intelligence, or to make us look good, but the cleansing blood of Christ, we will see ourselves as tools in God’s hand—tools to point to the One able to change their hearts.⁶ And we can have confidence that God will work this change in our children.

We know we are utterly unable to change our children’s hearts—our own are so riddled with sin. We also know that God, who is more than able to change their hearts, usually chooses to do so using the unassuming tools of parents and the church. Don’t doubt that God will use these means to fulfil His promise that salvation is for both us and our children.⁷ After all, the covenant and all of its promises are evidence that God cares for our kids.

So, let us trust God, regularly exposing our children to the gospel. Pray daily for their salvation and wait with confidence on God to save, resting not in your works, but in the work of Christ on the cross.

1. Elisabeth Bloechl, “Why Children Matter.”

2. For, as the Westminster Larger Catechism states, “all that hear the gospel, and live in the visible church, are not saved; but they only who are true members of the church invisible” (WLC 61).

3. See WLC for a helpful summary of the privileges of the visible church.

4. <https://learn.ligonier.org/articles/evangelizing-our-children>

5. OPC Directory for Worship III, B. 1. (See also, URCNA and RCUS books of church order.)

6. I highly recommend Paul David Tripp’s book *Parenting: 14 Gospel Principles That Can Radically Change Your Family* for a gospel-centered approach to parenting.

7. While we ought not to doubt that God will save our children, and that using the usual means, neither ought we to presume on God. There is a movement which teaches that the faith of the parent (specifically, the father) essentially guarantees the faith of the children. In other words, if dad believes the promises of the covenant, both for himself and his kids, his children will be saved. His faith is counted to them. While this teaching rightly reacts against our neglect of the corporate church in favor of isolated individuals, it dehumanizes the individual and minimizes God’s salvation of individuals.

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GIANT REBELLION, GRACIOUS RESCUE:

A Meditation on Genesis 6:1–8



Rev. Peter **Holtvlüwer**

Meditation text: Genesis 6:1–8
Suggested reading: Matthew 24:36–51

Our passage is both very difficult and very sad. Its sadness is clear as we encounter rebellion and judgment and the Lord's determination to wipe out mankind. The difficulty in interpreting these verses is just as clear; questions abound such as who are the "sons of God" that marry the "daughters of man"? To what do the "120 years" refer? And who are these mysterious Nephilim? These cryptic verses seem only to bring bad news. Is there any good news here? Thankfully there is, for whenever the Lord announces judgment, He always plans a rescue, too.

Sons of God

It helps to see that Moses wrote this passage as a transition from the account of Adam's family through Seth (see Gen. 5:1) to the account of Noah's family (6:9). He starts by reflecting on the impressive expansion of the human race. "When man began to multiply on the face of the land and daughters were born to them" (6:1). To "multiply" always indicates a great abundance and thus we learn that by Noah's day the human race was quite large.¹

Human wickedness had multiplied, too. That's actually the point of our text starting in verse 2: "the sons of God saw that the daughters of man were attractive. And they took as their wives any they chose." Who are these "sons of God"? Some point to Job where this expression clearly refers to angels (Job 1:6, 2:1) and believe that Moses describes angels who, desiring beautiful human women, disobediently left their place in heaven, took on human flesh, and married any of the women they liked. The children born of this ungodly union would then be the giant Nephilim of verse 4. But aside from the highly doubtful assumption that angels can actually take on human form, marry,

and reproduce with real humans,² does this explanation make sense in the wider context? There is only a passing reference to angels in chapter 3 and no angelic references at all in chapters 4 and 5 or 7–11, where the focus is constantly on the development of *human* race under God's oversight. The context here is not at all the same as in Job. Also, while the action of these "sons of God" is clearly sin in God's eyes and brings on His judgment, nowhere in this account are angels punished. Instead, the Lord comments that because of man's great wickedness, he would wipe *mankind* from the face of the earth (see 6:5–7).

It would seem to fit in better with Genesis' larger story that these "sons of God" are humans doing something wicked. Why call them "sons of God"? Well, the Holy Spirit has already spelled out the two opposing human lines descending from Adam: the rebellious seed of the serpent through Cain and the godly seed of the woman through Seth (ch. 4). Moses even made a point to say that Seth was descended from Adam, who was made "in the likeness of God" (5:1). In his version of this same genealogy, Luke calls Adam a "son of God" (Luke 3:38). So it's best to see "sons of God" here as a spiritual description of the holy line, much like later Moses will refer to God's covenant people as the "sons of the LORD your God" (Deut. 14:1; cf. Matt. 5:9, Rom. 8:14). In the same way, "daughters of man" is a spiritual description of the women born in the wicked line of Cain—much like later Scripture in certain contexts calls unbelievers "children of man" to distinguish them from God's faithful ones (Pss. 12:7, 8; 53:2 & 4; 57:4; 145:12).

An Ominous Warning

Verse 1 is telling us that the men from Seth's godly line were looking over the fence at the good-looking

girls from the unbelieving line of Cain and freely entering into marriage with them—without concern for God's will. Isn't this the picture the Lord Jesus paints when He warns that the last days will be as in "those days before the flood," when men "were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, until the day when Noah entered the ark" (Matt. 24:38)? The godly men no longer wished to be exclusively devoted to the Lord.

And how does He respond? "Then the LORD said, 'My Spirit shall not abide in man forever, for he is flesh: his days shall be 120 years'" (6:3). Some think that this refers to God limiting the length of man's lifespan down from an average above 900 to 120. But since people for a number of generations after the flood lived well beyond 120 years and since later we read of man's average life-span being 70 or at the most 80 years (Ps. 90:10), this view is unsupported.

A better way to take God's statement is as a warning. Notice that God *says* these words out loud (later, in verse 5, He only "sees" man's wickedness). It's as if God calls out, "My Spirit, who is the Lord and giver of all life, will only stay with you 120 years more and then I'm pulling Him away, so repent!" For when the Holy Spirit is taken away, life is taken away. In the beginning, God's Spirit hovered over the waters of creation to hold things together but now the Spirit is about to be called back—and creation itself will come apart at the seams. As man's hatred and rebellion against God grows, something has to be done. And that something is the snuffing out of man's evil life.

Unholy Union

Can you understand why God is so upset? Remember that earlier He had separated Adam and Eve from Satan, putting enmity between the seed of the woman and the hateful seed of the serpent. But here was the seed of

the woman uniting in holy marriage *with its lethal enemy!* The line of Seth had started out walking with God (5:22), but as the tenth generation comes into its own, they walk more and more with the world until hardly any faithfulness is left. The warning for us is stark: do not become united with unbelievers—not in intimate friendship and especially not in marriage (see James 4:4 and 2 Cor. 6:14). If we truly love the Lord, we will obey this command, knowing it is for our good. Do you know what happens when believers marry unbelievers? A whole lot of spiritual tension arises in the marriage itself and children grow up confused or, more frequently, rebellious.

That's what Moses relates in verse 4. He mentions two groups: the longstanding Nephilim and the more recent offspring of the mixed marriages, the "mighty men" of were becoming famous alongside the Nephilim. He name-drops the Nephilim and creates the point of comparison as a time-marker for the reader. Who were the Nephilim? It seems likely that they were giants (Num. 13:33)³ who were feared as notorious warriors, contributing to the wide-spread violence in the period before the flood (6:11), right at home in the ungodly line of Cain. Who, then, are the "mighty men"? This expression is used elsewhere to describe skilled soldiers with a reputation for great military exploits (e.g., 2 Sam. 20:7, 23:8). As the current offspring of the mixed lines of Cain and Seth, these mighty men were gaining a reputation that rivaled that of the Nephilim. The focus of verse 4 is the rise of this new generation of oppressive mercenaries, glory-seeking "men of renown," to show that the seed of the woman had so abandoned the ways of the Lord that they were undistinguishable from the seed of the serpent.

Punishment Announced

The Lord Himself assesses the resulting corruption among men with these chilling words: “the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every intention of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually” (6:5). Man’s wickedness was wide-spread and deep—so deep that all God could see in the human heart was evil all the time. Many say today that there’s something good inside even the worst person, but the Lord says the opposite (see 8:21).

The Lord Himself is not untouched by what He sees. God “was sorry that he had made man on the earth, and it grieved him to his heart” (6:6). Did you know that your sin—and mine—brings grief to our Creator (see Eph. 4:30)? Can we think about that next time we are tempted to sin? Let’s think too about the fierce wrath of God against human rebellion for His grief led on to judgment: “I will blot out man whom I have created from the face of the land, man and animals and creeping things and birds of the heavens, for I am sorry that I have made them” (v. 7). This judgment fits the crime. Since God’s appointed king of creation had become thoroughly evil and had corrupted the earth (6:11), God sentences man and the creation he rules to be undone.

Grace Through One Man

What God is announcing here is the first fulfillment of the promise of Genesis 3:15, the crushing of the serpent’s head. The seed of the serpent as well as the unholy mixture of the two lines will be wiped out in the flood, but the seed of the woman will be preserved by God’s grace. Verse 8 literally says, “But Noah found grace in the eyes of the LORD.” Noah didn’t *earn* grace, he *found* it. That’s the thing about grace: it never depends on the one receiving it but on the one giving it, and the Lord’s grace never fails to find a way through! Wickedness was everywhere, but God’s grace settled on one man whom God will use to rescue mankind.

Do you see Jesus Christ foreshadowed in Noah? Judgment is about to rain down on the entire earth, but God’s grace to the human race is channeled through one man. Just as God would rescue a remnant of the seed of the woman through Noah’s work, so God would later rescue a remnant of mankind through Christ’s work. Noah *found* grace in God’s eyes, but Christ would *earn* the approval of God by His perfect righteousness so that He could *extend* grace to all who belong to Him, including us! Severe judgment came on the world in Noah’s day to wipe out sinners, but complete judgment later came on Christ to wipe out sin itself, so that grace can abound to sinners like us! A future awaits us where there will be no more sin to fight or flee or fear. In

Christ, you have a better Noah, a perfect Savior who gives you a complete salvation from sin.

1. How large? Scripture does not provide numbers but if we factor in that each generation lived for hundreds of years and that their time of fertility would likely have been much greater than we know today, it isn’t unreasonable to think that an average couple would bear 15 to 20 children. If so, by the time of Noah (ten generations), the population could easily have been between 1 and 2 billion people, if not more.
2. Jesus appears to suggest that such is not possible in Matthew 12:30.
3. The Greek translation (the Septuagint) of the Old Testament translates Nephilim as “γίγαντες” (*gigantes*), from which comes our English word “giants.” Since all the Nephilim were destroyed in the flood, the reference in Numbers 13:33 is not to their biological offspring but rather to a new group of giant fighters descended from Ham’s line who reminded people of the original Nephilim and thus were given their name.

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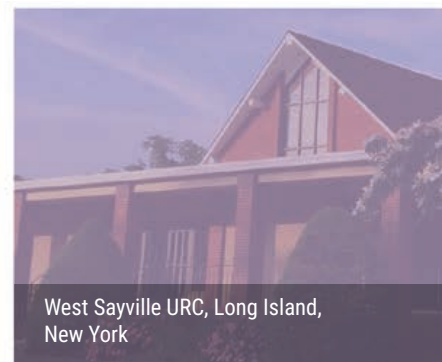
Current map of URCNA churches in North America



WSCRC sanctuary picture c. 1930



Excerpt from West Sayville Christian Reformed Church consistory minutes about a building expansion project in 1900



West Sayville URC, Long Island, New York

When you hear of Long Island, what comes to mind? For people who have never lived there, the image is usually an eastward extension of New York City cluttered with gaudy affluence and suburban sprawl. That image may be partially true, but it falls short of the full picture of Long Island—a picture that right up through my childhood included sunsets over a potato farm behind our backyard, hikes through acres of untouched woods, and

strolls to the shore of the Great South Bay in between church services.

The small town days of Long Island are mostly over, but a keen eye can discern the remaining traces in West Sayville: the old Christian Reformed Church building on Atlantic Avenue, now owned by a Pentecostal congregation; the old First Reformed Church on Montauk Highway, converted to a storefront; the tiny Netherlands Reformed Congregation on Tyler Avenue, long since turned

into a house. And in the middle of it all, even as fishermen and farms have yielded to white-collar workers and subdivisions, sits a building where an increasingly diverse community continues to gather to worship God according to the historic Reformed faith.

My last *Outlook* article was on how the United Reformed Churches in North America (URCNA) have an opportunity to lean

into their unique missional and confessional identity. Here I want to consider another simple but easily overlooked opportunity: our churches' locations. For a group of under 150 congregations, the spread of the URCNA is remarkable. We have churches across Canada from Vancouver to Prince Edward Island, and across the United States from Cape Coral, Florida, to Anchorage, Alaska. There are small congregations that meet in rented spaces and well-established congregations of upwards of 500 people. How did this come about?

Those Who Were Scattered Preached the Word

The story of the United Reformed congregation in West Sayville is a miniature version of the history of America. Immigrants from fishing communities in the Dutch province of Zeeland began to settle there around 1850. There is no particular reason why they chose West Sayville; it seems that chance encounters with a Dutch-speaking Jew in Manhattan and a farmer at a railroad station led a few desperate and confused families to a region of Long Island's South Shore where they could build houses and earn a living on the water, and others followed them.¹ It would be decades before that cluster of houses, churches, and workplaces even had a definite name. Eventually, the community formed a congregation affiliated with the Reformed Church in America. A decade later, a conservative faction split off to found a new congregation affiliated with the Christian Reformed Church. That church, which joined the URCNA in 1997, is the reason I am writing today.

It was the same in big and small pockets all across North America: northern New Jersey, western Michigan, northwest Iowa, southwest Minnesota, the central valley of

California, the plains of Alberta, and more. Immigrants from various regions of the Netherlands came seeking economic opportunities and religious freedom. They settled wherever they could find cheap land and a promise of prosperity. In some cases, the "American Dream" came true. Others were swindled by unscrupulous land brokers, forced to eke out a living from a barren wilderness and unable to afford to return home. Dutch arrivals to the United States dwindled after World War I, but after World War II, a new wave of immigrants flocked to communities across Canada.²

Some of the immigrants expressed a desire for religious freedom, like West Sayville's Bastiaan Broere, who wrote, "I rejoiced at the flourishing state in which the church was [in America], even as the Netherlands seemed to me more and more to have forsaken the truth and left God."³ Others were driven primarily by family or economic interests. In this story, the actual motivations matter little. What matters is that these groups of immigrants set up churches wherever they went. God's Word went with them. Generations later, many URCNA congregations today owe their existence to the fortitude of these early immigrants.

Acts 8:4 relates about the early church that "those who were scattered went about preaching the word" (ESV). In that case, the scattering came from direct persecution, whereas this scattering of Reformed believers stemmed from a variety of factors. But the effect was the same. Who would think that slimy land speculators on the American frontier would contribute so much to the spread of the gospel! Looking back, we can see how our sovereign God worked through economic pressures, injustices, wars, and the everyday simple decisions of ordinary people to foster a network of churches spread throughout the

continent. That perspective reveals a tremendous opportunity for the URCNA today that follows two lines: church planting and mutual support.

Church Planting

The official church planting manual of the URCNA, *How to Plant a Reformed Church*, describes proactive as well as reactive approaches.⁴ Practically, we need to be both proactive and reactive: proactive in carrying forward a vision of building faithful Reformed churches across North America, and reactive in being prepared to respond to the things God brings across our path.

Let me illustrate how these proactive and reactive elements can work together. Shortly after 9/11, West Sayville Reformed Bible Church was asked to be the overseeing consistory for a Reformed church plant in Manhattan. The sponsoring church in Brooklyn was non-denominational yet agreed that its daughter church should be part of the URCNA. With no recent church planting experience, the West Sayville consistory agreed. An opportunity to present a Reformed witness in the most densely populated region of North America had simply been laid in their lap. Messiah's Reformed Fellowship became an organized church, and then it proactively sent a church planter to Jersey City. As members became seminarians and seminarians became pastors, the churches learned to pray and care for one another. Twenty-five years later, the congregations are linked not only in confession but also by marriage and family ties, too.

The point is that we need to think practically. Sometimes church planting might begin with a pushpin on a map: "Where should there be a Reformed church?" But more often, as the URCNA manual notes, church planting will start with the networks one congregation already

has. Where is the nearest city? Where do members commute to or from? Where are the universities? If existing members are moving away, where are they going? Churches in tiny agricultural communities can have these conversations just as more urban congregations can. Such questions can help congregations in the URCNA and other Reformed and Presbyterian denominations be good stewards of God's gift of location, yielding dividends for the future. And beyond church planting, the locations of our congregations give us opportunities to practice mutual support.

Mutual Support

Now and then, some report goes around about the latest political maneuver in some state or city, and I hear some thoughtful Reformed person utter the words, "It's time for Christians to get out of..." (California, New York, Ontario, or whatever place happens to be in the headlines). Each time, I must confess to feeling dumbfounded. Of course, there are legitimate reasons that lead families to relocate. But do we really want an entire candlestick gone? Do we think the people in California or New York don't need or don't deserve Reformed churches? Do we think there aren't millions of souls stumbling around in those huge population centers who, spiritually speaking, "do not know their right hand from their left," as the Lord said to Jonah (Jonah 4:11)? And are they really that different than our own poor spiritual ancestors who stumbled off the train into West Sayville or western Michigan or western Canada a century ago? Did we end up in a "good" community with solid Reformed churches, thriving Christian schools, and, by the way, economic prosperity through our own prudence and strategy? And whether we did or didn't, what do we owe to fellow

believers—including future believers—who are not as fortunate?

I have lost count of the times some poor soul has wandered into the church in West Sayville and blurted out something along the lines of, "I don't know why I'm here, but my life is a mess, and I know I need this"—and I know that similar testimonies abound in urban and suburban congregations across North America. Do we want the precious fountains where these wanderers can quench their spiritual thirst to dry up?

My point is not to complain about a few offhanded remarks. But when things go haywire in New York or California or wherever, what would happen if our first response was not raised eyebrows but bowed knees—thankful prayer to God for preserving communities of believers in difficult places? "Dear Heavenly Father, please keep our brothers and sisters there strong. Please add to their number daily those whom You are calling to Yourself. And please show us how we can help."

There are so many ways we can help one another as a federation of churches across the United States and Canada. Sometimes it may be in the form of financial support, but it can be so much more. Think about young men who receive an excellent Christian education in an agricultural community and then become pastors or church planters in urban settings. Think about the ways that fellowship between United Reformed churches can help people in isolated places find spouses and build godly families. Think of the collective expertise and life experiences of members from such different backgrounds who join together on mission trips or as delegates to classis and synod meetings. Thank God we come from such different places!

In closing, I am reminded of Paul's words about the collection for the

Jerusalem church in Romans 15 and 2 Corinthians 8–9. There he commends the congregations of Macedonia for giving generously to their fellow believers in the midst of their own extreme poverty, "begging us earnestly for the favor of taking part in the relief of the saints" (2 Cor. 8:3–4). Paul expected the New Testament church to act as a network of support in which congregations who have much share freely with congregations who have little, and he calls this an act of grace. May that spirit of gracious generosity abound in our churches, and may the blessing that he pronounced upon the Corinthians come to pass for us also: "He who supplies seed to the sower and bread for food will supply and multiply your seed for sowing and increase the harvest of your righteousness" (2 Cor. 9:10).

1. This local history is recounted in a 1928 memoir by Almina Hage Terry, daughter of one of the original settlers, and quoted extensively in Lawrence J. Taylor, *Dutchmen on the Bay: The Ethnohistory of a Contractual Community* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 1983).
2. The standard text on this is James Bratt, *Dutch Calvinism in Modern America: A History of a Conservative Subculture* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1984).
3. Bastiaan Broere, *Korte beschrijving van het leven van en de wonderbare leidingen Gods met Bastiaan Broere, in Nederland en in Amerika* (Amsterdam: J. A. Wormser, 1887), 16.
4. Synodical Committee on Home Missions, *How to Plant a Reformed Church: The Church Planting Manual of the United Reformed Churches in North America*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Reformed Fellowship, 2025), https://www.urchna.org/file_retrieve/113352.

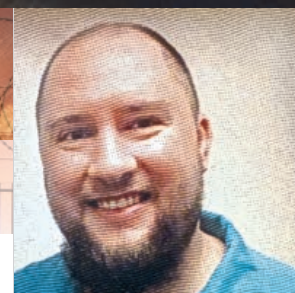
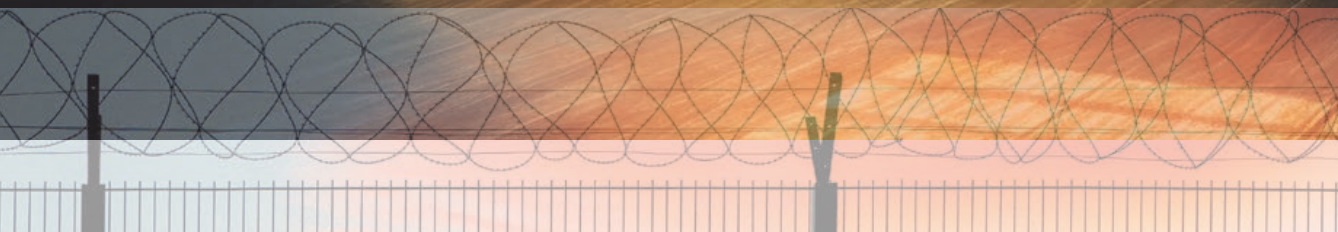
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Divine

PROVIDENCE

(4)



Mr. Daniel Olaska

Providence Article 4 of 6

Pentecost Sermon and God's Providence in History

The Bible has much to say on the topic of providence. God's sovereignty permeates the sacred Scriptures. There are passages where the beautiful doctrine of God's providence is particularly clear; Acts 2:23 is one such passage. Peter's Pentecost sermon is a beautiful explanation of Jesus Christ as the fulfillment of God's promise of the Messiah with a commensurate call to faith and repentance. Right in the middle of the sermon is also a forceful assertion of God's

providential sovereignty over history.

In the middle of the sermon, Peter proclaims: "This Jesus, delivered up according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God, you crucified and killed by the hands of lawless men" (Acts 2:23). Here, as so often occurs in the Bible, we see God's sovereignty juxtaposed next to human responsibility. Peter refers to God's definite plan and foreknowledge and says to the Jews, "You killed...." The two are not at odds with one another but rather different sides of the same coin. God is in control, but He uses real human decisions and actions to accomplish His purpose.

God's Sovereignty Over History

It's obvious that God is outside of time since time itself is merely one of God's creations. God uses time but is not beholden to it. We are creatures, too; we are not outside of time, just as we are not outside of space (another of God's creations). As such, it shouldn't surprise us that God's good purposes and plans predate and transcend time itself. This truth is particularly clear in Scripture in regard to God's plan of salvation. Note just a few examples:

- "Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with

every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places, even as he chose us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before him” (Eph. 1:3–4).

- “And all who dwell on earth will worship [the beast out of the sea], everyone whose name has not been written before the foundation of the world in the book of life of the lamb who was slain” (Rev. 13; cf. 17:8).
- “Then the King will say to those on his right, ‘Come, you who are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world’” (Matt. 25:34; see entire passage 25:31–46).

The question at hand isn’t strictly about salvation history, however; it is about God’s sovereignty over all history. The book of Isaiah contains a direct first-person quote from God regarding His sovereignty over all history: “For I am God, and there is no other; I am God, and there is none like me, declaring the end from the beginning and from ancient times things not yet done, saying, ‘My counsel shall stand, and I will accomplish all my purpose’” (Isa. 46:9–10). God does not limit Himself here; these statements are absolute and comprehensive, encompassing all time. Indeed, eternity past before time and eternity future are covered here as well.

Providence Displayed in the Affairs of Nations

The example in Isaiah 46, while comprehensive, is general. Let’s consider some examples where salvation history is not directly the subject, but God’s providence over history more broadly is (though, to one extent or another, all of Biblical history is related

at least indirectly to salvation history). “In his [Jehoiakim’s] days, Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon came up, and Jehoiakim became his servant. Then he turned and rebelled against him. And the LORD sent against him bands of Chaldeans and bands of Syrians and bands of the Moabites and bands of the Ammonites, and sent them against Judah to destroy it, according to the word of the LORD that he spoke by his servants the prophets. Surely this came upon Judah at the command of the LORD, to remove them out of his sight, for the sins of Manasseh, according to all that he had done” (2 Kings 24:1–3).

The Lord takes direct responsibility for sending the Chaldeans, Syrians, Moabites, and Ammonites against Judah. How did God do this? He used hundreds (perhaps thousands) of human decisions and actions. Imagine the political dithering necessary to launch four separate attacks! Kings, governors, and other rulers (not to mention their advisors and generals) chose to attack Judah. They did not think they were obeying the Lord; they made real decisions based on their own (often idolatrous) desires and goals. Does this mean that God couldn’t possibly have brought this to pass? Does this mean God is simply taking credit for other’s actions? To both I say a resounding No!

What this illustrates is not that God takes credit for other’s actions, but that divine sovereignty and human responsibility are not mutually exclusive. God’s ways are as high above our ways as the heavens are above the earth. How does God use real human decisions and actions? If I knew that I’d be Him, and I’m certainly not! God’s ways and means belong to the “deep things of God” which we ought not to speculate on. What is clear is that God does do this.

Does this mean that the Chaldeans, Syrians, Moabites, and Ammonites were not sinning in attacking a foreign nation to elicit submission to their rulers? Certainly not! Without doubt, many were responsible of great sin. However, God was not responsible for that sin; God is without sin and cannot sin or do any wickedness or injustice.

The same is true for those who crucified the Lord Jesus. They acted wickedly. Their motives were evil and sinful, full of jealousy and envy. God was acting perfectly justly. Indeed, the crucifixion of the Lord is the only reason God can forgive sinners and remain Himself just; God’s motives were purely good and purely loving, and the ends He accomplished were full of grace.

Hundreds, perhaps thousands, of decisions and actions were undertaken by the Sanhedrin to arrest and deliver over the Lord to Pilate. The same is true for the Roman authorities; many political considerations and circumstances contributed to Pilate deciding to forgo justice in favor of expediency. The crucifixion of Jesus Christ was a great wickedness perpetrated against a completely innocent man, in regards to the humans involved. However, it was also God’s triumph over sin and death and the greatest act of gracious mercy in history. God acted powerfully through a baffling multitude of human decisions and actions, yet without sin.

Sovereignty and Responsibility

In this article, I have examined only a small portion of the clear examples of God’s sovereignty over history, over kings, and nations. A large study could be made concerning this one aspect of divine providence. However, I believe these examples are compelling to illustrate how God is sovereign over history and yet we are responsible for our actions.

The crucifixion of our Lord is the ultimate example. God worked His will before time and throughout history to bring about His perfect plan of salvation for His elect. That working involved countless human decisions and actions—not the movements of puppets but of actual thinking, feeling human beings. Humans are held responsible for their decisions, thoughts, and actions. However, this responsibility works hand in hand with divine providential action, not counter to it.

God is indeed the Potter, and we are the clay. We are not stocks and blocks, not lifeless lumps of earth. His “clay” is not inanimate mud, but real, thinking, feeling human beings making real choices with real desires and appetites. God truly governs,

yet our responsibility is not lessened by this. While sovereign providence is an offense to some who hold to the sanctity of so-called human “free will,” it is a great comfort to God’s elect.

To the unbelieving world, history is a mere record of what happened. However, Christians know that history has an Author, that there is a plot, and that the outcome has been determined from the foundations of the world. We also know that Author is the all-good, all loving, God of the universe and so we can rest assured that “for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose” (Rom. 8:28). Even amid the greatest wickedness perpetrated throughout all time,

God’s good purposes were at work and victorious.

Praise God that we are not robots, and praise God that He is in control! Individual events may seem not to make any sense to us at a given time, yet we can rest assured knowing that these are mere threads in God’s great tapestry of history.

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The proper use of **God’s providence** will render you an **exceptional measure of gratitude** and will teach you to end in the Lord as the **only Giver of all the good** which you may receive for soul and body. It will cause you to observe **God’s goodness, faithfulness, and benevolence**. This will cause you to **rejoice, to praise and magnify God**, to speak to others about His attributes, and to place yourself with a **willing heart** in God’s service. He it is who, out of **pure love, bestowed His goodness upon you.**

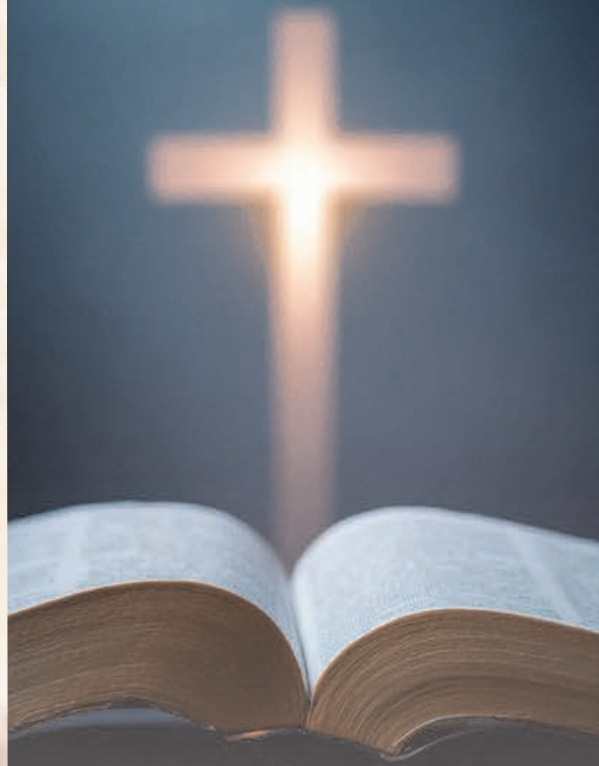
Wilhelmus à Brakel, *The Christian’s Reasonable Service* (Reformation Heritage Books, 1992), vol. 1, pg. 353

The Situation

As you drive around your town, you might wonder what all the different churches represent. There are many different faith traditions and practices. Some churches hold to historic, Christian confessions, while others do not. Many churches are Arminian in their theology and more often informal in their worship. There is one kind of church that is relatively new and gained prominence in the early part of the twentieth century: Pentecostal churches. Pentecostal churches emphasize the ongoing miraculous spiritual gifts of the Holy Spirit in the lives of believers.¹ These gifts taken from 1 Corinthians 12 are "...apostles...prophets...miracles...gifts of healing...and various kinds of tongues" (1 Cor. 12:28). Why don't we see these things take place in our congregations?

Possibly a more common interaction we might have with another believer could involve them telling you something like, "God told me to go to this university" or "I feel like my dream last night made it clear that I should take this new job." These kinds of statements

SPEAKING IN TONGUES, PROPHECY, AND MIRACLES: A REFORMED ASSESSMENT



imply God speaking directly to His people outside of the Scriptures. What do we make of these comments? How should we respond to someone who tells us that "God told me to do this" or "I am following my heart on this"?

In responding to these types of inquiries, we need to recognize that the Holy Spirit no longer sovereignly gives individual believers the miraculous gifts as He did in the New Testament (cf. Rom. 12:6–8; 1 Cor. 12:8–10, 28; Eph. 4:11). These gifts ceased with the apostles. While God certainly guides and directs His people, He does this now through His Word and Spirit.

The question sometimes arises, however, whether God still performs any miracles. In one sense, we know that God certainly is continually performing miracles, because salvation itself is a supernatural, miraculous work of God. The work of regeneration is a glorious miracle of the Holy Spirit. The miracle of salvation makes God's people honor and worship Him for His gracious work. But on the



Rev. Steven
Swets

other hand, our focus in this article is upon believers and “spiritual gifts.” There are many good articles and books written on this subject, though the arguments can be boiled down to seven reasons why we do not seek these miraculous gifts.²

1. Sufficiency of Scripture

The Bible makes clear that what we have in the Scriptures is all we need regarding God’s special revelation to us. John says, “Now there are many other things that Jesus did. Were every one of them to be written, I suppose that the world itself could not contain the books that would be written” (John 21:25). In John 20:33, John explains why not everything Christ did is recorded in the Bible: “...but these are written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.” According to 2 Timothy 3:16–17, whatever a believer may need for “every good work” is in the Scriptures. The Holy Spirit works in and through the Word. The danger of “new revelation” from God apart from Scripture is dangerous and has led many into false teaching (e.g., “God told me...”).

2. The Uniqueness of Miracles

Miracles are unique to the scriptural age, at least when we define them as *those supernatural actions performed by human beings through the power of God*. It is often thought that the Bible is full of miracles. Many thus conclude that there are a several thousand years of recorded miracles in the Scripture. However, miracles performed by men occurred primarily during three distinct periods in biblical history, each lasting roughly 65–70 years. During these times, God uniquely gifted certain individuals to perform these works. These times were:

1. Moses and Joshua (65 years)

2. Elijah/Elisha (65 years)

3. Christ and the Apostles (70 years)

The primary purpose of miracles in these periods was to establish the credibility of the divine messenger/servant. The miracles of the Lord Jesus Christ were not simply done because He was a humanitarian who healed the sick. Matthew 9:35–36a says, “And Jesus went throughout all the cities and villages, teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the gospel of the kingdom and healing every disease and every affliction. When he saw the crowds, he had compassion for them...” The miracles of our Lord testified to the fact that He was the Messiah who was prophesied from of old. Miracles performed were reserved for those who spoke God’s own words. They could say, “Thus says the Lord.”

3. The End of Apostleship

The role of apostleship has ceased. There are two places Paul calls apostleship a gift to the early church (1 Cor. 12; Eph. 4:7). In order to be an apostle, one had to meet three qualifications: first, he had to be a witness of the resurrected Jesus Christ; second, he had to be personally appointed by Christ; third, he had to be able to perform miracles. Many Pentecostals and charismatics will admit that there are no longer apostles like Peter or Paul even though there is no clear command in the New Testament that a change has happened. This is not surprising to us and would have been clearly understood by the early church. Roman Catholics do not even attribute apostleship to the pope. In the New Testament, the apostles were appointed by Christ for a specific work for the establishment of the New Testament church.

Anecdotally, on a teaching trip to Kenya, I met a nice Christian woman named Agnes. I was startled when she told me that she was an

apostle. She was the first woman “apostle” I had ever encountered. As she sat in her wheelchair, having lost both of her legs, I wondered if she realized the weightiness of such a claim. I kept wondering how she might understand her role in light of Ephesians 2:20: “build on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone.”

Nevertheless, the apostolic period has ceased with the death of John near the end of the first century.

4. The Foundation is Laid

The beautiful picture of the Church of Jesus Christ is that of a temple (Eph. 2:11–22). The foundation of the Church is laid upon the teaching of the apostles and prophets and Jesus Christ is the cornerstone in fulfillment of Psalm 118:22: “The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone.” The Church is no longer being built by the continuing ministry of prophets and apostles. Paul himself stated this in Romans 15:20: “thus I make it my ambition to preach the gospel, not where Christ has already been named, lest I build on someone else’s foundation”; and in 1 Corinthians 3:10, he writes, “According to the grace of God given to me, like a skilled master builder I laid a foundation, and someone else is building upon it.”

The Church is being made up of living stones built upon the solid foundation that has already been laid by these individuals. In the New Testament, apostles and prophets are two different groups of people: “And he gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the shepherds and teachers...” (Eph. 4:11). The foundation of the Church was built in the first century A.D.; now the structure is being built through the preaching of the inspired *and complete* Word of God.

5. The Nature of Miraculous Gifts

It logically follows that if the miraculous charismatic gifts continue today, then they should be the same as they were in the New Testament period. Yet this is not the case. For a clear example, let's consider speaking in tongues.

In Acts 2, on the day of Pentecost, the Holy Spirit was poured forth. There were many accompanying signs when the Holy Spirit came; tongue-speaking was one of them. There were believers from all different nations present (Acts 2:9–11). What amazed this international crowd so greatly is that they heard these Galileans speaking in their own languages or “tongues” (Greek: *glossalia*). In verse 11, these foreigners conclude, “...we hear them telling *in our own tongues* the mighty works of God” (emphasis mine).

Though some have claimed this is some kind of ecstatic or angelic prayer language, the context suggests that what was being spoken by the power of the Holy Spirit were *known human languages*. Peter and the others did not go to school to study the languages of the “Parthians and Medes and Elamites and residents of Mesopotamia,” etc. The Holy Spirit miraculously enabled them to speak in this way which was intelligible to the listener. Acts 11:15 and 19 also make this clear. Pentecost was a new-creation reversal of the unintelligibility of Babel; language no longer was a barrier to communication of the gospel.³

What we see happening in Pentecostal churches and on television is not the Spirit-led *glossalia* of known languages. What they are practicing is altogether different than what we see in the New Testament.

6. The View from Church History

Christians in the last two thousand years understood that the charismatic gifts were given for a unique purpose and a unique and limited time. These miraculous gifts came forth with the pouring out of the Holy Spirit, ten days after Christ's ascension to heaven. It is significant that the miraculous/charismatic gifts are seen in the New Testament primarily in the early writings of the Apostle Paul. We should expect to see their importance in those New Testament letters which give continued directive to the life of the Church, like Timothy and Titus, but we do not. Though this is an argument from silence, that does not mean it is not warranted or weighty. If God intended for these gifts to continue in the life of the Church until the return of the Lord Jesus Christ, we would expect that they would be more prominent in the letters of 1 and 2 Timothy, Titus, and Revelation 2–3.

7. The Disorderly Practice of Modern Tongues

In 1 Corinthians, we see some guidelines laid out about how tongue-speaking was supposed to function in the Church. In 14:26–40, clear rules are set on how to honor God through it. For instance, there should be an interpreter (v. 27), two or three should speak (v. 29), and women were not permitted to speak (v. 34). Yet, when one observes the behavior at a Benny Hinn or Kenneth Copeland event, this is not how miraculous gifts are being exercised. Instead of order and interpretation as prescribed by Paul, the entire crowd—men and women—can be seen speaking in tongues simultaneously with no interpreter. Paul's point in 1 Corinthians 14 is that this kind of disorder does not edify the Church and, as such, is dishonoring to God.

Conclusion

In sum, God has given us the Word and Spirit to lead us into all truth (John 16:13). Each week we have the privilege to sit under the preaching and teaching of the Word. We have Bibles in our homes, wherein we find the will of God. The believer no longer needs to look to miracles to pray to God; we have the great intercessor of Jesus Christ at God's right hand and the Holy Spirit in our hearts (Rom. 8:26). We ought to be content in the clear revelation God has entrusted to the Church. For it is through that revelation that we are established. “In him you also are being built together into a dwelling place for God by the Spirit.” The miraculous spiritual gifts have ceased with the end of the apostolic era. But that does not mark a loss for us as believers since the Scriptures are now complete so that the word of Christ might dwell in us richly (Col. 3:16).

1. Pentecostals are also called “charismatics.” This comes from the Greek *charismata* (*charis*=grace) which refers to abilities bestowed on believers for the building up of the Church. First Corinthians 12 is a prominent passage on this subject.

2. For further study, note the following resources: Joel R. Beeke and Paul M. Smalley, *Reformed Systematic Theology*, Vol. 3, *Spirit and Salvation* (Crossway, 2021); Sinclair B. Ferguson, *The Holy Spirit*, *Contours of Christian Theology* (InterVarsity, 1996); Richard B. Gaffin Jr., *Perspectives on Pentecost: New Testament Teaching on the Gifts of the Holy Spirit* (P&R, 1979); Anthony A. Hoekema, *What About Tongue Speaking?* (Eerdmans, 1966); Tom Pennington, *A Biblical Case for Cessationism: Why the Miraculous Gifts of the Spirit Have Ended* (G3 Press, 2023); O.P. Robertson, *The Final Word* (Banner of Truth, 2011).

3. See Ferguson, *The Holy Spirit*, 60.

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YOU, AS GOD INTENDED

Become the Person You're Meant to Be



Dr. Bryce **Bartruff**

I have a confession to make. Growing up, I was a dumb, naughty boy.

I had the privilege of repeating not just second grade, *but third grade as well.*

I was now two full years behind the classmates I entered school with! Why was I stuck in the academic mud while my peers were proceeding ahead?

Well, firstly, for most of my grade school experience, I always seemed to be the worst speller and had little or no aptitude for math. I was also troublesome, spending countless hours in the principal's office or meeting with a school counselor who was trying to figure out what to do with this seemingly lost soul.

I was so bad that I was the only child who was sent home with a note

from my teacher when I *had a good day.* I had to present the note to my parents, and if I did not bring home a note with my name printed on it, they knew it had been a bad day and I was in for some punishment as soon as I entered the Bartruff house.

Of course, any child who does not fit into the established norm finds themselves endlessly teased. And I was—resulting in many altercations and physical fights with my classmates. To say that life was not sweet is an understatement.

Moving Forward

Somehow, I made it through and graduated from high school. My freshman year in college did not go well—in fact, it went so badly I soon found myself back on the same academic treadmill I was on during

my grade school years. I had to start all over again at the local community college.

During my second time around the track as a freshman, I realized that taking multiple choice tests and memorization was not my forte but doing projects and writing papers was! At the latter, I excelled—and at that point everything changed.

How did I find this out? I took a political science class taught by Mr. Shadburne who required his students to prepare papers, complete projects, and provide written answers on tests. For the first time, I became an “A” student because I was now operating in my strengths. Going forward, I took every class he taught and sought out classes with instructors who used the same methods for tests and grades.

Eventually, after establishing certain academic goals and working diligently to complete them, this dumb, naughty boy found himself in possession of a college degree.

I had learned a very valuable lesson from my troubled childhood and academic futility: we all come from different places with different gifts.

Different Gifts, Different Paths

Some of you may have been the smartest kids in class. You could whip out an essay with ease and breeze through math. Others, like me, had trouble putting two words together and struggled to differentiate between a plus and minus sign.

As you travel through life, you will find the road to be much easier if you can recognize both what you are good at and what you are not so good at. As one wise person has written, our goal should be “maximizing our strengths” while “minimizing our weaknesses.”

The Westminster Catechism of Faith teaches, “Man’s chief end is to glorify God, and to enjoy Him forever.” One of the ways we can glorify Him is by developing all the resources—time, talent, and treasures—He has entrusted to us.

You need to have a realistic perspective of who God made you to be—with unique gifts and talents—and then make decisions to maximize them for His glory.

You have special characteristics because God made you different than anyone else in the world. You have different qualities and experiences that make you unique (Jer. 1:5). There are no cookie cutter people in His view. Once you establish a realistic perspective, you can begin developing those gifts and talents so you can become all God intended for you and so that He might be glorified.

To put it another way, being aware of your strengths and weaknesses can be a superpower. You can now move forward in life with confidence as you operate in your strengths, while recognizing those areas where it is best to defer to someone else. The exercise of learning your strengths,

Reformed Fellowship Essay Competition



Undergraduate Essay Prompt: 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. The essay should interact with the historic Reformed tradition and should reference at least one of the Three Forms of Unity (Heidelberg Catechism, Belgic Confession, Canons of Dort) or the Westminster Standards. Revisions of course papers are accepted and encouraged. Authors must be undergraduate students at any college or university.

Seminarian Essay Prompt: Write a 2000-to-3500-word persuasive essay that offers a Reformed, Christian, and biblical outlook on a specific public issue currently confronting the church or society. The essay should interact with the historic Reformed tradition and should reference at least one of the Three Forms of Unity (Heidelberg Catechism, Belgic Confession, Canons of Dort) or the Westminster Standards. Revisions of term papers are accepted and encouraged, with first consideration given to essays in theology, church history, ethics, and apologetics. Authors must be currently enrolled at a seminary.

Deadline: June 1, 2026

Prizes in each category: \$250 first place, \$100 second place for essays that meet publication criteria.

Winning essays will be forwarded to the Editorial & Publications Committee for publication in *The Outlook*.

weaknesses, and what you are and are not interested in provides a solid foundation for success.

Some people are reluctant to attempt such an exercise because they think it is prideful. But that misses the point. Yes, it would be prideful if we used the information we gleaned to promote or think more highly of ourselves than we ought (Rom. 12:3). But when we have a realistic understanding of who we are today, we can begin the process of becoming all we can be for the glory of God tomorrow.

Identifying Your Strengths and Weaknesses

So how can you get started?

First, I would recommend that you make a list of the things you know you are good at. If you are good at math, put that on the list. If you enjoy writing, add that. If you are athletic, outgoing, and enjoy helping others, for example, those all qualify for your list. There are also numerous online tools that can be helpful, such as the Meyers-Briggs Type Indicator (see <https://www.16personalities.com/free-personality-test>), which is a personality assessment tool, or the Clifton Strengths Assessment Guide (see <https://strengthsfindertest.org/>).

Now that you have identified those qualities, it is time to make a list of those things you do not enjoy. For me, as a child, it was math and spelling! If you do not enjoy budgeting, put that down. If you dislike reading, add that. If you would rather have time alone than be with people, make sure it is on the list. Do not exclude your passions, areas of interests, life experiences, or other opportunities God has brought into your life.

Now you have a comprehensive list of your likes and dislikes. The next step is to prayerfully determine the areas you should develop so you

can optimize the gifts, talents, and characteristics God has given you. Once you have determined these areas, you can then concentrate on identifying what steps you need to take to develop each one.

This will take time and prayer.

It takes time to develop a plan of action. To jump right in without a plan is like jumping out of a plane without a parachute. You are doomed to crash hard. But with a well-considered plan, you can calculate the proper course of events and gently land within your talent comfort zone.

For example, you may choose to create a motto or a theme verse for your life, such as “Use every gift for His glory” (1 Peter 4:10), “Grow, serve, glorify God” (Luke 16:10), or “Walk by faith, not by sight” (2 Cor. 5:7). Others have written a motto or theme that supports what they hope to accomplish over a specific year.

Prayer is essential because it establishes an attitude of humility. You are asking God to guide you through the process of identifying what you should concentrate on and what you should let go. Approach Him with an open hand, relinquishing those gifts and talents to Him so they can be best used for His glory. By doing so, you can work smart and heartily with Him in this process (Col. 3:23–24).

How God Uses Our Unique Experiences

Jeremiah 29:11 states, “For I know the plans I have for you declares the LORD, plans for welfare and not for evil, to give you a future and a hope.” These words of encouragement were written as a message of hope to the Jewish exiles living in Babylon. But they are a message of hope for us as well.

How so? Let us go back to that dumb, naughty boy—me. The academic

and social problems I had in grade school resulted in a determination to continually grow personally while appreciating others who are facing what seems to be insurmountable challenges. That is why as a mentor, administrative supervisor, and business colleague, I have found great reward in coming alongside those who have made poor life choices or encountered overwhelming obstacles and helping them move to the next step in life successfully.

Not only does the Lord create each one of us with unique gifts and talents, but He also provides unique experiences that He can then use to empower us to minister and guide others. God created young me and He knew my struggles, but He also knew how He was going to use them to help others for His glory. God provided the opportunities and experiences, but I had to do my part—to work diligently to develop in every aspect of my life to be the very best I could be for Him (1 Peter 4:10).

Becoming the person you were meant to be requires daily reliance upon the Lord. He created you and, as you spend time with Him, will reveal how your gifts, talents, and life circumstances can make an impact on others for His glory.

Dr. Bryce Bartruff

Bryce has taught on personal finance for over 20 years. He has served as an office-bearer at Tenth Presbyterian Church in Philadelphia and Highlands Church in Scottsdale, AZ, and currently serves as Board Treasurer for the Sterns Missionary Fund. A prolific author, Bryce is the founder of Marketplace Ministry, designed to help Christians thrive in the workplace. Past works include *“God, Your Money, and You”* (Crosslink), *“A Cheerful Giver”* (Reformed Fellowship), and *“I Want Your Heart”* (Reformed Fellowship).

CHURCH

Membership

ITS BIBLICAL BASIS

(1)



Rev. Dr. Shane **Lems**

For many years, sociologists and experts have said that we Americans live in a very individualistic culture, a culture driven by making all your own decisions. Individualism is when you're the master of your own life—the belief that nobody can tell you what to do, only you can determine your own values and meaning in life.

This individualism in the United States is a product of the enlightenment, of the philosophies of existentialism and secularism, and it feeds off consumerism and social media platforms. It is narcissism, essentially, because it's all about self. Now, this isn't just a new thing in the United States. America has long been known as an individualistic society. In the 1830s, the Frenchman Alexis de Tocqueville visited the United States and, when he returned home,

wrote the book *Democracy in America*. His assessment of Americans? "They always consider themselves alone and imagine their whole destiny is in their own hands. . . . This attitude throws them back upon themselves alone."¹

This individualistic mindset still permeates the air we breathe. It's also one thing in our culture that makes it sometimes pretty tough to be a Christian. Christianity is not about rugged individuals doing things their own way for their own benefit; Christians are not lone rangers carving out their own identities and destinies.

The Bible clearly says that Christians are part of Christ's body, part of His Church. They're called to love and help each other, to submit to one another, to pray for one another, and to meet one another's needs. We even say this in the Apostles

Creed: "I believe in the communion of the saints." Christianity is not individualistic, but as our culture is highly individualistic, that clash sometimes makes it tough to be godly.

We need to fight this cultural individualism in our own lives and in our church families. We need to swim against the current of this American individualism with biblical teaching and thinking. In this article, we consider what it means to be a living member of Christ's Church. Our main point is this: Being a member of the local church is *biblical* and *beneficial*.

While the phrase "church membership" is not found in Scripture, the Bible does use the term "member." Christians are "members" of Christ's body (1 Cor. 12:27; Eph. 2:19, 4:25, 5:30, etc.). Thus, the *concept* of membership is

a biblical reality, even if the literal term “church membership” doesn’t appear. Throughout the Bible it’s assumed and implied that a Christian is a member of a local church who takes part in regular Christian fellowship and community. You don’t read stories in the New Testament of Christians just dropping in once a month to a church group and then leaving for a few months. Instead, they’re a regular and active part of a local body. When someone walks away from Christian fellowship and membership, the Bible puts up a big red flag (1 John 2:19).

The Old Testament and Church Membership

For the concept of church membership, we begin in the Old Testament. Many Old Testament passages show that in the Old Covenant, God’s people were members of His covenant community. One key place is in the beginning of Numbers. The book of Numbers takes place right after Israel came out of Egypt. God told Moses to take a census of all the people. That is, he was to write down the names of the heads of the families and keep a record of who was in this group of God’s covenant people (Num. 1:2). All of God’s people had their own place and position and obeyed God’s command when they were officially recorded as members of His people.

The Old Testament also mentions members of specific tribes in Israel. First Chronicles 5:23 even uses the term “member.” These men, women, and children were officially part of God’s people. Esther was deported to Persia around 480 B.C. with the rest of the Jews. She was far from home, but she still trusted in God and she still identified with God’s people. She knew she belonged and she confessed it. When she heard about that evil government edict against the

Jews, she said, “Disaster is coming to *my people*” (Esth. 7:3–4, 8:6). She understood that she belonged to the people of God.

This is a small sample, but sufficient to show that, in the Old Testament, believers were viewed and even recorded in God’s covenant people. This forms the background for church membership in the New Testament.

The New Testament and Church Membership

The Numbering Stories in Acts

Let’s think about the New Testament now, especially the “numbering” stories of the early church in Acts. Acts 2:41 states that after Peter preached his Pentecost sermon, people were convicted of their sins, came to faith in Christ, and were baptized. And Luke reports that about three thousand people were added to their number that day (Acts 2:41).

In Acts 4:1–4, Peter and John gave their testimony before the Jewish court. They were preaching about Jesus and the Jewish leaders strongly disapproved, putting them on trial. Yet Luke notes that, not long after this, many believers “were added to the Lord” (Acts 5:14)—that is, they were added to His people. This is a regular pattern in Acts; Luke was keeping a record of the number of people who came into the Church. We don’t have details of how Luke counted, but we see that he did just that.

Unlike many today, these people who were added to Christ’s body did not just disappear. Acts 2:42: tells us that they were devoted to the apostles’ teaching, to fellowship, to breaking bread (probably a reference to the Lord’s Supper), and to prayers. And we read in Acts 2:45 that the Christians in these groups were helping one another as they sold what they could and gave to the poor. People who became followers of

Christ didn’t just believe and leave. They stayed and enjoyed regular fellowship and communion with other Christians.

In sum, when people came to faith in Jesus, they became part of the Christian Church. They were recorded in number and joined other Christians in regularly worshiping, hearing the apostles’ teaching, praying, breaking the bread, fellowship, and helping the needy in the Church.

In the New Testament, no one became a follower of Jesus and then purposely avoided fellowship with the saints. When people walk away from the Church or avoid it, it’s a bad thing. 1 John 2:19 says that “they went out from us because they were not part of us.”

The Widows Being Cared For

Church membership is also assumed and implied in the stories of widows being cared for. In Acts 6, we read that widows were being neglected. They lacked food and resources, so the leaders called a church meeting to address the problem: “Pick seven godly men from among you to serve these widows their food so they don’t go needy” (v. 3).

The early Christians couldn’t do this without official membership. How could they pick seven godly men “from among them” if they were all alone, unassociated, and had no concept of membership? The same is true of the needy widows. How would they know which widows to help if they didn’t have any formal, official membership?

In 1 Timothy 5, Paul mentions how widows were enrolled (vv. 9, 11). He said the ones who are truly widows should be added to an official church list. The church kept track of her widows. They had an official roll.

Paul’s Letters

Membership is also assumed and

implied in Paul's letters to various churches. In general terms, Paul's letters show that he was thinking about a specific group of people in a specific place, a local community of believers: "To the saints in Ephesus," Thessalonica, Corinth, etc.

Paul had visited many of these churches and even planted some of them. He knew many by name: Priscilla and Aquila, Mary, Junias, Justice, Claudia, Epaphras, etc. He knew who was part of the churches that he visited. He was not just writing to random Christians wandering out there alone. Paul was writing to certain saints who belonged to certain churches in certain cities.

These saints Paul is writing to were actively participating in the Christian life together with other believers as indicated from the "one another" texts in the New Testament ("love one another," "serve one another," etc.). Paul wrote many of his letters to Christians who knew and worshipped with one another in community.

The Leadership Texts

Another way the New Testament implies and assumes church membership is found in the texts on church leadership (elders). Hebrews 13:7 and 17 address church members and their leaders. First, Hebrews tells church members to remember their leaders and imitate their faith. Second, church members are told to submit to and obey their church leaders. Third, leaders are said to be the ones keeping watch over the souls of those in the church family. Again, these words are written to *specific* people about their *specific* leaders. It would be very difficult for leaders to lead and Christians to submit to leaders if there were no form of membership.

Church leaders were not called to watch over random Christians

wandering alone; they were called to watch over specific people under their care. And Christians are assumed to know the leaders in their local church family so that they can submit to them in the Lord. Leaders knew who they were called to lead, and Christians in the churches knew who was leading them.

Church membership in the New Testament overlaps with church discipline. Without some kind of formal church membership, it'd be nearly impossible to follow Jesus' instructions for discipline in Matthew 18. When someone sins, Jesus said, go to that brother. If that doesn't work, take it to the church (leadership). And if that doesn't work, excommunicate the person. If there were no formal membership in the New Testament church, how would they know which church to go to if the brother did not repent? And how could they *excommunicate* someone who was not a *communicate* member of a church?

When we step back and think practically about the role of a pastor or elder, we see that pastoring and shepherding becomes impossible without being ordained to oversee a specific flock. Leaders simply don't have the time, energy, or spiritual capacity to provide regular pastoral care to everyone they meet or to everyone who visits the worship services. If one needed to be a pastor to every Christian who came to a fellowship event or worship service, it would take every minute of every day.

So, for leaders to be faithful to their call, membership is a very good thing. Pastors aren't called to actively shepherd random people online who might listen to their sermons. And Christians aren't called to submit to random podcasting or YouTubing pastors. Church membership keeps the biblical emphasis on the local church and their life together.

Metaphors for the Church

Church membership is also implied and assumed by the New Testament metaphors for the Church. First, Christians make up the *body* of Christ. He's the *head*. As Paul says in Romans 12:5, "We who are many are one body in Christ, and individually we are members who belong to one another" (NET). That is, if Christ is your Lord, you belong in His body, not alone or apart from it.

Second, the Church is called God's *family*. Ephesians 2:15 says, "You are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God." As a family member, you have brothers and sisters you should be committed to loving, serving, and helping. We do that best when there is some sort of membership to know who we should serve locally.

Third, Christians are citizens of God's kingdom, they are called a holy nation. The Belgic Confession of Faith even expands on this metaphor: "This church has existed from the beginning of the world and will last until the end, as appears from the fact that *Christ is eternal King who cannot be without subjects*" (art. 27). The fact of Christ's kingship means that He knows His own.

These various metaphors of the Church show us that being part of the Church is not like a gym membership where you can work out for a couple of months, then quit, and then later go back when you feel like it. Church membership is not like being in a car club, a fishing club, a cooking club, or any similar association. It's a family and body of Christ where we are committed and commanded to serve each other.

Conclusions

In summary, church membership is indeed biblical. We've seen that these biblical texts don't really make sense without a concept of church membership. Even though

the New Testament doesn't spell out every detail of how someone becomes a member, churches must still practice membership in a biblically consistent and informed way: baptism, profession of faith, vows, membership rolls, and so on. Throughout history, churches have often used professions/confessions of faith to confirm membership. We sometimes talk about membership vows, following the concept of public vows in the Psalms (e.g., Ps. 116:14). All this is why many churches practice baptisms, professions of faith, and vows to confirm membership.

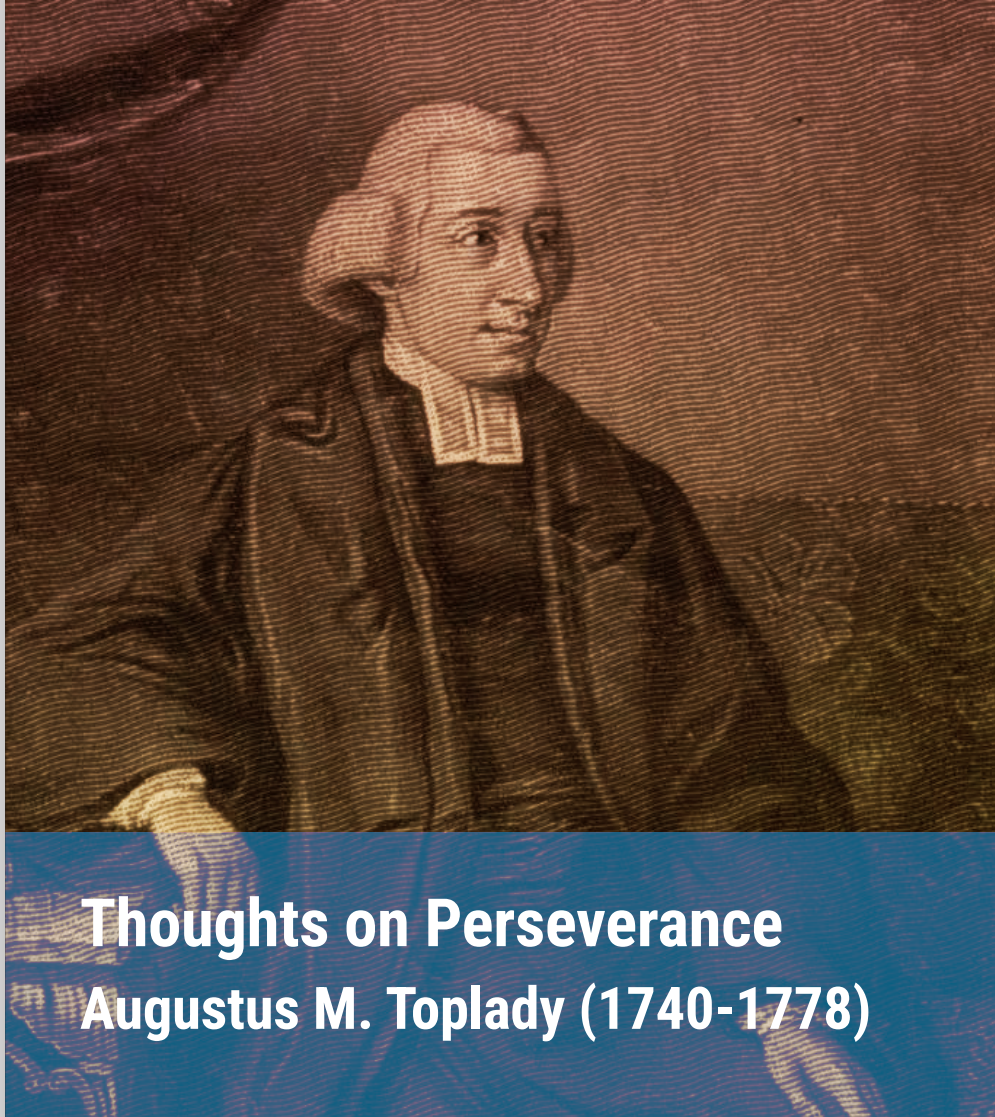
We must take seriously what it means to be a follower of Christ and therefore part of His Church. I once heard a pastor say that being a believer is certainly more important than being a church member, but that it is also Jesus' plan for you to be *both*. It's of utmost importance for you to believe in Christ. But it's also important and eminently biblical for you to belong to His Church. *Believing* and *belonging* go hand in hand.² In our next article, we'll consider key benefits of church membership.

1. Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*. This book exists in several English translations beginning already in 1835.

2. There are numerous helpful books on church membership. See *The Communion of the Saints* (ed. Philip Ryken); Megan Hill, *A Place to Belong*; Thom Rainer, *I Am a Church Member*; Sinclair Ferguson, *Devoted to God's Church*; Jonathan Cruse, *Church Membership*; Jonathan Leeman, *Church Membership*; Ryan McGraw & Ryan Speck, *Is Church Membership Biblical?* Wayne Mack, *Life in the Father's House*; and Tony Merida, *Love Your Church*.

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Thoughts on Perseverance Augustus M. Toplady (1740-1778)

Many of God's dear people are frequently afraid that, on account of their own weakness and the power of their spiritual enemies, they shall at length make shipwreck of faith, and totally fall away. Yet perhaps none stand more sure and safe than those, who think they cannot stand at all: for "Happy is the man who feareth always" (Prov. 28:14). Happy the soul that is possessed of that holy fear, which drives him to the Lord, keeps him vile in his own eyes, and causeth him to be ever dependent upon the word and promise of a faithful God, and makes him rejoice with trembling, and tremble with hope.

But we are assured from the oracles of unerring truth, "that the righteous should hold on his way; and he that hath clean hands" [whose actions are pure, in consequence of his heart being purified by faith] "shall be stronger and stronger" (Job 17:9). As this doctrine is a source of comfort and support to the children of God, I shall humbly offer some arguments to prove it, which have been matter of serious meditation and, I trust, of consolation to my own mind.

First, the economy of the covenant of grace. The covenant is said to be “ordered in all things, and sure” (2 Sam. 23:5). This the holy Psalmist triumphed in, even in the prospect of death; this enabled him to look the king of terrors in the face with composure and serenity; this emboldened him to play on the hole of the asp, and to put his hand on the cockatrice’ den (Isa. 11:8). Feeling his mortal powers decay, he rejoiced in the approaching prospect of that glory, to which, by virtue of this well ordered covenant, he possessed a valid and unalienable right.

All believers have one and the same title to glory; all are equally interested in the blessings of the covenant; and, it being sure, it follows that none of those, whom God deals with, in a covenant way, can finally perish, or it could not be termed well ordered or sure. The apostle calls it “a better covenant” (Heb. 8:6), better than that made with Adam. Our first parents were capacitated to stand and continue in obedience to their Sovereign; but, being mutable, they fell, no grace being promised to secure their standing. But believers stand and are upheld by the veracity and immutability of God that cannot lie. The covenant of grace, then, is a better covenant, and established upon better promises, which assure the people of God of grace to help in every time of need. It will, methinks, be hard to prove how it can be called a better covenant, if those that are in it may (as some suppose) fall away.

Second, the death of Christ is another argument to prove this point. Christ is the head of His church under the covenant of grace, as Adam was of all mankind under the covenant of works. As such, He graciously undertook for all His people, and, by His active and passive obedience, He fully satisfied the law and justice of God on their behalf, and opened a new and a living way for their return to God here by faith, hereafter by

sweet and blessed fruition. Nor did He die for all; for there were some, when He died, suffering in their own persons the vengeance of eternal fire (Jude 7). It would be blasphemy to say He died for those who were then in torment: this is the natural product of Arminianism. We allow the Scripture says, “He tasted death for every man [Greek: *huper pantos*]” (Heb. 2:9). *Huper pantos* cannot signify for all, but for every one. If we attend to the apostle’s strain of meaning, it is evident he speaks of many sons being brought unto glory. Christ is not ashamed to call them His brethren. “Forasmuch, then, as the children were partakers of flesh and blood, he also himself likewise took part of the same, that by death he might destroy death.” Those He represented in His obedience unto death are His brethren, the members of His body mystical, and He tasted death for every one of them. Hence we are warranted to conclude, every one of His brethren or people shall be saved. To say all may be saved, is in effect to affirm that none shall: a thing that only may be, may surely not be; and if there is but a peradventure for our salvation, it is easy to prove no soul ever can be saved. Our Savior says, “All that the Father hath given me, shall come to me; and him that cometh, I will in no wise cast out, but will raise him up at the last day” (John 6:37–44). In which words is contained, 1. the doctrine of election; 2. of faith; 3. of glorification, in order to which perseverance is absolutely necessary, and must be implied.

When we consider Christ to be God, he must know for whom he suffered; and if we also consider the greatness, merits, and efficacy of his sufferings; he could not undergo all in vain: but it would (with reverence I speak it) be in vain, if those he died for were finally to miscarry.

Third, the work of the Spirit. When the Spirit begins, He carries on His

work in the hearts of His people, until they are made meet for the inheritance prepared for them above; for He has engaged in covenant to bow the wills, to regulate the powers, and sanctify the affections, of all the elect; to lead, guide, strengthen, and direct them through this wilderness; and He never leaves the subjects of His grace, until He puts them into the arms of the Redeemer in glory. To this purpose Christ speaks in John 4:14: “Whosoever drinketh of the water that I shall give him, shall never thirst. But the water that I shall give him, shall be in him a well of water springing up ([Greek: *allomenou*], bubbling, and still ascending with energy and constancy, until it bubble up) into everlasting life.” Pertinent to this point, also, is what the apostle says, “He that establishes us with you, and hath anointed us, is God, who hath sealed us, and given us the earnest of the Spirit in our hearts” (2 Cor. 1:21–22). Those that are established and anointed, and have the sealing and earnest of the Spirit, cannot fall away. This is again mentioned in Ephesians 1:13–14.

Fourth, we may argue from God’s faithfulness and immutability. That immutability is an essential attribute of God, the Scriptures abundantly assert (Mal. 3:6, Heb. 1:12). Worthy of our attention is what an excellent author says upon the unchangeableness of God: “Could he ever be changed, it must be by others, or himself; by others it cannot be, not being in the power of any; how can the thing made have power over him that made it? Nor by himself: if so, it must be for the better, or the worse; for the worse it cannot be, for then he must cease to be the most perfect being, or cease to be God: nor for the better, for how can he be better, who is already absolutely the best?” (Jenks, *Meditations*, vol. 2, edit. 2, p. 29).

God, having bestowed His grace upon His people, never takes it from

them; His unchangeableness will not admit of it: “The gifts and callings of God are without repentance” (Rom. 11:19). “If when we were enemies, we were reconciled to God by the death of his Son, much more, being reconciled, we shall be saved by his life” (Rom. 5:10). If when we were strangers and enemies to God, and the way of salvation was revealed in the gospel, His grace reached us and proved victorious in subjecting us to His will; much more, being made willing to love, follow, and obey Him, we shall be saved and preserved to His kingdom of glory. Saving grace is the free gift of God; and He gave it to remain and abide forever (Eccl. 3:14). This is His precious promise in Isaiah 54:8–10: “With everlasting kindness will I have mercy on thee, saith the Lord, thy Redeemer. The mountains shall depart, and the hills be removed; but my kindness shall not depart from thee.” So says Christ in John 10:28, speaking of His sheep: “they shall never perish, neither shall any pluck them out of my hands.” And the apostle speaks of some who are kept by the power of God (kept as in a garrison), through faith unto salvation (1 Pet. 1:5). Consider the words of an ancient father: “If any of the elect perish, God is overcome by man’s perverseness; but none of them perish, because God, who is omnipotent, can by no means be overcome” (Augustine, *On Rebuke and Grace*). The saints, therefore, shall be brought off more than conquerors; for God hath said, “I will never, never leave thee: no, no, I will never forsake thee” (for thus that precious promise should be rendered) (Heb. 13:5). Add to this: Fifth, the testimony of God’s people in all ages of the church. Look at the generations of old and see, did any ever trust in God and was confounded? Or “when were the righteous cast off?” “The Lord will not cast off his people” (Ps. 94:14, Lam. 3:31). To this truth they are

Christ is the head of His Church under the covenant of grace, as Adam was of all mankind under the covenant of works; as such, He graciously undertook for all His people, and, by His active and passive obedience, He fully satisfied the law and justice of God on their behalf, and opened a new and a living way for their return.

now enabled, at times, to bear their joint testimony. Bucer, a little before his death, spoke thus to Bradford: “Let him chastise strongly, but never cast aside—never will he cast aside”: which exactly corresponds with the Psalmist in Psalm 73:26: “My heart and my flesh faileth; but God is the strength of my heart, and my portion for ever!” How triumphant is the apostle’s strain in Romans 8:38–39. We read of Baxter (who, though heterodox in many things, was a partaker of the one thing needful), that, when asked by a friend, when he lay on his death-bed, how he was, he replied, “Almost well,” which a person, in the view of opening eternity, could never say, unless he found God very precious, and found him faithful. Whatever dross this holy man carried about him in his life, it was consumed in his death, and he received into glory. The testimony of glorified spirits above, as it bears weight in it, so it corroborates this truth. Their song is, “Faithful and true” (Rev. 19:11). This is proved likewise: Sixthly and lastly, from the intercession of Christ. “I have prayed for thee, that thy faith fail not,” says our Savior to Peter in Luke 22:32. And we know His prayer was heard; though his faith failed as to the exercise of it, yet the root and habit of it remained, and accordingly sprung forth, revived, and grew so strong, that Peter afterwards was emboldened to suffer and to die for his Lord. Our Lord began the prayer upon earth which He now offers in heaven for His people: “Keep, through thy own name, those whom thou hast

given me” (John 17:11, 24). He prays (or rather demands, as the purchase of his death) by saying, “Father, I will, that they also whom thou hast given me, be with me where I am”; on which ground we may conclude, that all Christ died for, shall possess that crown of glory that fadeth not away—it being impossible that Jesus should intercede in vain. This is the foundation of the apostle’s challenge, “Who is he that condemneth? It is Christ that died, yea, rather that is risen again, who also maketh intercession for us” (Rom. 8:34). May all God’s people, who have their faces Zion-ward, take encouragement from these things, to go forward in the name and strength of the God of their salvation, until they arrive safe to the mansions of bliss and endless felicity.¹

1. Augustus M. Toplady, *The Works of Augustus M. Toplady* (London: J.J. Chidley, 1844), 769–71. Available here in PDF: https://archive.org/details/worksofAugustust00topl_0. Editor’s note: I have made some minor spelling changes to the text, adding a few Greek notes, and removing some Latin quotes and replacing the untranslated Latin quote with an English translation.

Augustus M. Toplady

(1740–1778) was an Anglican minister known for his debates with John Wesley where he defended Calvinism. He is known today chiefly as a hymn writer; the Trinity Psalter Hymnal contains five of his hymns: 392, 426, 434, 452, and 458.

Lord's Day 39: You Can Be Freed From Rebellion

Rev. William Boekestein



104Q. What is God's will for you in the fifth commandment?

A. That I show honor, love, and faithfulness to my father and mother and all those in authority over me; submit myself with proper obedience to all their good teaching and discipline; and also that I be patient with their failings—for by their hand God wills to rule us.

Most children have happy plans for their future. They dream of a good life and expect it to happen. And that desire is right. But many children are not taught *how* to truly live well. The fifth commandment—“Honor your father and your mother” (Ex. 20:12)—promises a good life (Eph. 6:2). The law's second table starts with a practical code “that leads us to the right perspective on values, responsibility, respect, and honor in all kinds of relationships.”¹ Put negatively, rebellious children can expect lifelong power struggles, ultimately against God Himself.

This code isn't just for children; no matter our age, we must respect “all those in authority” over us. God establishes authorities (Rom. 13:1–2), empowers authorities (John 19:11), rules over authorities (Eph. 6:9), and

rules through authorities (Isa. 44:28). How we relate to leadership reveals our relationship to God (Col. 3:22). This is why God's stance against rebels is so stern (Ex. 21:17; Num. 12:1–9; Rom. 13:4). God applies this commandment to children so that they would start learning early to submit to every kind of legitimate oversight.² But it is never too late to begin enjoying a blessed life through obedience to God and His structure of authority.

We Must Honor Authorities

The precise wording of the commandment is important: *honor* is a recognition of significance, a sense of glory, well-placed respect. So honor gets to our attitude toward superiors. This is the right place to start because attitude always drives actions. God isn't looking for

mere external obedience. In both Testaments, He chastens people for saying the right things and performing the right actions with the wrong attitudes (Isa. 29:13; Matt. 15:7–9). David's enemies “bless with their mouths, but inwardly they curse” (Ps. 62:4). God doesn't want that. Human authorities will often accept unfeeling compliance: your boss might not care about your heart attitude because he just wants your performance. But God will not accept cold-hearted, disinterested conformity to His rules. External actions alone do not constitute obedience. To truly obey, we must “show honor, love, and faithfulness to...all those in authority” over us. Those we love will feel the warmth of our hearts. Faithfulness is dependability, but it isn't perfunctory. It is heartfelt.

Good leaders are easy to honor; they do nothing to exasperate their inferiors (Eph. 6:4). A godly authority helps those under his charge to say, “We love because he first loved us” (1 John 4:19). Honor should not be merely commanded but also invited, assisted, and rewarded. But even when leaders make honor hard, our regard for God and His gracious authority can help us do what is right. Paul once apologized for accurately calling the high priest a “whitewashed wall.” “I did not know, brothers, that he was the high priest, for it is written, ‘You shall not speak evil of a ruler of your people’” (Acts 23:5). The way to honor dishonorable authorities starts by recognizing God’s pervasive authority.

We Must Obey Authorities

How must children obey authorities as a pattern for the proper obedience of everyone?

Children must heed their parents’ good teaching” (Prov. 1:8).

Parents are wiser and more experienced than children. They can see deeper and farther. They have witnessed and personally committed youthful mistakes. Parents know sin’s consequences. Even when parents misjudge in their leadership, God will honor children’s “proper obedience.” Children must obey their parents as though God spoke through them—without complaining, arguing, deceiving, or delaying.

Children must submit to their parents’ correction.

Parents must discipline; failure to do so is evidence of hatred, even if subconscious (Prov. 13:24). The best kind of discipline is painful, swift, brief, and loving. It should prove that sin hurts but that it is also forgivable (Heb. 12:9–11). Children must willingly receive parental correction: not throwing fits when disciplined,

not grumbling when forced to work or pay restitution, not secretly bad-mouthing their folks. Parents will answer to God for how they discipline (Col. 3:21); children will answer to God for how they receive discipline.

Children must not obey their parents sinfully.

Human authorities are also under authority; their commands cannot exceed their God-given mandate. When Paul commands children to obey their parents “in all things, for this is well pleasing to the Lord” (Col. 3:20), he is writing to Christian parents who are bound to instruct their children in God’s will. If parents ignore God’s rule, they are behaving “not as parents, but as strangers who are trying to lead us away from obedience to our true Father.”³ Children must submit to the “good teaching and discipline” of parents and render “proper obedience.” But no authority trumps God’s authority (Acts 4:19–20, 5:29).

We Must Be Patient with Authorities

Leaders have shortcomings. Parents and other pace-setters should imitate the “holy men of God” who wrote the Bible (2 Peter 1:21, KJV) and be honest about their failings. For example, Peter helped Mark write about his denial of Christ (Mark 14:66–72). One of the worst things we could do is try to mask over our faults. Only spiritually honest parents can teach their children to put no confidence in the flesh, and help them take their failings to Jesus.

But the failures of authorities do not excuse rebellion. Paul exhorts servants to be submissive to their masters, “not only to the good and gentle, but also to the harsh” (1 Pet. 2:18). Why is this God’s will for children? A child’s submission to deeply-flawed parents can preserve

harmony in the family. If children always push back against parental weaknesses, home life would be unbearable. Also, patient obedience can have a life-changing influence on the parents (cf. 1 Peter 3:1). When we are patient toward imperfect leaders, we please God and experience growth in godliness. All of us are tested by the shortcomings of our authorities. In our frustration over their failures, we are led to pray for their weaknesses and our own (1 Tim. 2:2).

The fifth commandment promises blessings for obedience and curses for disobedience. In this way, it is not only a code of conduct, but also a conduit to Christ. None of us completely kills our rebellious spirit; the end of the law is not our obedience but is instead Jesus, who kept the fifth commandment perfectly. He submitted Himself to the correction of the cross—even though He had done nothing wrong, and had always shown “honor, love, and faithfulness” to God. Through the cross, He gained for penitent believers their eternal life in a good land. In light of God’s mercy, He calls us to honor authority. Those who do will not be disappointed.

This article is part of a series, “Our Life’s Comfort,” which was first published at corechristianity.com on September 29, 2022, <https://corechristianity.com/resources/articles/you-can-be-freed-from-rebellion-lords-day-39>

1. Fred Klooster, *Our Only Comfort*, 2.988.
2. John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 2.8.35.
3. Calvin, *Institutes*, 2.8.38.

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Lord's Day 40: You Can Be Freed From Malice

Rev. William Boekestein



105Q. What is God's will for you in the sixth commandment?

A. I am not to belittle, hate, insult, or kill my neighbor—not by my thoughts, my words, my look or gesture, and certainly not by actual deeds—and I am not to be party to this in others; rather, I am to put away all desire for revenge. I am not to harm or recklessly endanger myself either. Prevention of murder is also why government is armed with the sword.

106Q. Does this commandment refer only to murder?

A. By forbidding murder God teaches us that he hates the root of murder: envy, hatred, anger, vengefulness. In God's sight all such are disguised forms of murder.

107Q. Is it enough then that we do not murder our neighbor in any such way? A. No. By condemning envy, hatred, and anger God wants us to love our neighbors as ourselves, to be patient, peace-loving, gentle, merciful, and friendly toward them, to protect them from harm as much as we can, and to do good even to our enemies.

The sixth commandment is a perfect storm for hypocrisy. Murder is the easiest sin to condemn and seems like the least likely for us to commit. We hear of another mass shooting and wonder, "Who could do such a thing?" But this is the wrong reaction. John Piper once said that a horrific school shooting was "a warning to me—and you. Not a warning to see our schools as defenseless, but to see our souls as depraved. To see our need for a Savior."¹ All of us have more in common with murderers than we think.

What Is the Sixth Commandment All About?

Murder is commonly defined as the

unlawful, premeditated killing of one human by another. But God's law is more exacting. Murder is the "unlawful injury" of a human, and "every desire" thereunto.² This masterful definition keeps us from interpreting murder too narrowly or too broadly.

Not all murder is killing.

Vicious thoughts, angry words, and unlawful killing all fall into the same category. Literal murder begins in the heart. "By forbidding murder God teaches us that he hates the root of murder: envy, hatred, anger, vengefulness. In God's sight all such are disguised forms of murder."

"Everyone who hates his brother is a murderer" (1 John 3:15). "Everyone who is angry with his brother" is judged by the same law that condemns murderers (Matt. 5:22, James 4:2).

Not all killing is murder.

Murder is *unlawful* injury of another. There are lawful reasons to kill. Here are three examples.

The state does not murder when it operates as "the servant of God, an avenger who carries out God's wrath on the wrongdoer" (Rom. 13:4).

The state *might* murder. Judges and law enforcement officers can and do dishonor Scripture's strict standards for taking life. But the state may

kill. “Prevention of murder is also why government is armed with the sword.” *Not* punishing evildoers violates the sixth commandment (Gen. 9:5–6).

Soldiers do not murder while serving properly in a just war. Not all wars are just; not every action in a just war is right. So Christians have a “responsibility to determine the moral legitimacy of a particular war and to govern their participation accordingly.”³ But soldiering is not inconsistent with Christianity (Luke 3:14).

Private citizens do not murder who justly take life while protecting themselves or others (Exod. 22:2–3). Lethal force should be a last resort in self-defense. But “God wants us to... protect” ourselves and our neighbors “from harm as much as we can.”

These exceptions help prove the rule that because all people are divine image-bearers. Life is sacred; we may not violate it in thought, word, or deed.

What Sins Must I Put Off?

Honoring the sixth commandment means putting off sins that the dictionary doesn’t consider to be murder. We put off such sins by admitting our guilt and seeking divine and human forgiveness.

Repent of “the roots of murder: envy, hatred, anger, vengefulness.”

“If you wish or plan anything contrary to the safety of a neighbor, you are considered guilty of murder” in God’s eyes.⁴ “We should not be like Cain, who was of the evil one and murdered his brother” (1 John 3:12). He murdered his brother first in his heart; he was envious and “very angry” (Gen. 4:3–8). “You desire and do not have, so you murder” (James 4:2). Every form of murder is our way of punishing people who challenge our glory. Murder signals our rejection of God’s providence and ability to enact just vengeance (Rom. 12:19). Our murderous anger “does not produce

the righteousness of God” (James 1:20).

Repent of dishonoring your neighbors.

Honor is a heart disposition. We belittle and insult others with heartfelt words, looks, gestures, and actions. Is this not satanic (John 8:44)? God creates; Satan kills. God builds up; Satan destroys. If we do not leave others better than we met them, we have treated them murderously.

Repent of self-harm and self-endangerment.

We might self-harm out of ambition, pride, or neglect; either way, we forget that our bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit (1 Cor. 6:19). Self-harm can also be a twisted way of exposing immaterial pain or atoning for our sins. But the hymn writer is correct: “not all my...sighs and tears can bear my awful load. Thy work alone, O Christ, can ease this weight of sin; thy blood alone, O Lamb of God, can give me peace within.”⁵

God condemns envy, hatred, and anger, and so must we—including toward ourselves.

What Virtues Must I Put On?

There are two sides to every commandment. True obedience requires more than avoidance of vice. To be anti-murderers, we must love our neighbors—even our enemies—as ourselves (Matt. 5:43–48). Anti-murderers put on patience. Like Jesus, we must suffer long through frustration. Anti-murderers put on peace; we must model contentment and comfort in God even in turbulent times. Anti-murderers put on gentleness; following Jesus we resist imitating the world’s harshness and aggression. Anti-murderers put on mercy; we speak truth married to love (Ps. 85:10). Anti-murderers put on friendliness; we are tenderhearted toward the hurting and hurtful, and strive to maintain warm and cheerful dispositions that reflect the kindness that God has shown us. Finally, anti-

murderers protect others; we show our concern for all human life by defending it even at personal cost.

More than anything, the sixth commandment, like all the commandments, makes us “more earnest in seeking the remission of sin and righteousness in Christ” (Q&A 115). We come to Jesus because there has never been a more perfect anti-murderer. Jesus came to bring life (John 1:4). He preached peace, performed good works, and healed all who were oppressed by the devil (Acts 10:36–38). Yet, in God’s perfect plan, the anti-murderer was murdered. Why? To be an atonement for His chosen people. We are all guilty of murder. Our “feet are swift to shed blood” (Rom. 3:15). Our speech cuts others down. Our looks kill. Our attitudes are vengeful. By rights, God should treat us as murderers. Instead, God pardons us of murder and says, “Go and sin no more.” Christ was murdered to free us from the sin of murder. Through His resurrection, we have been recreated to use our thoughts, words, and actions to give life to others.

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—Jude 3

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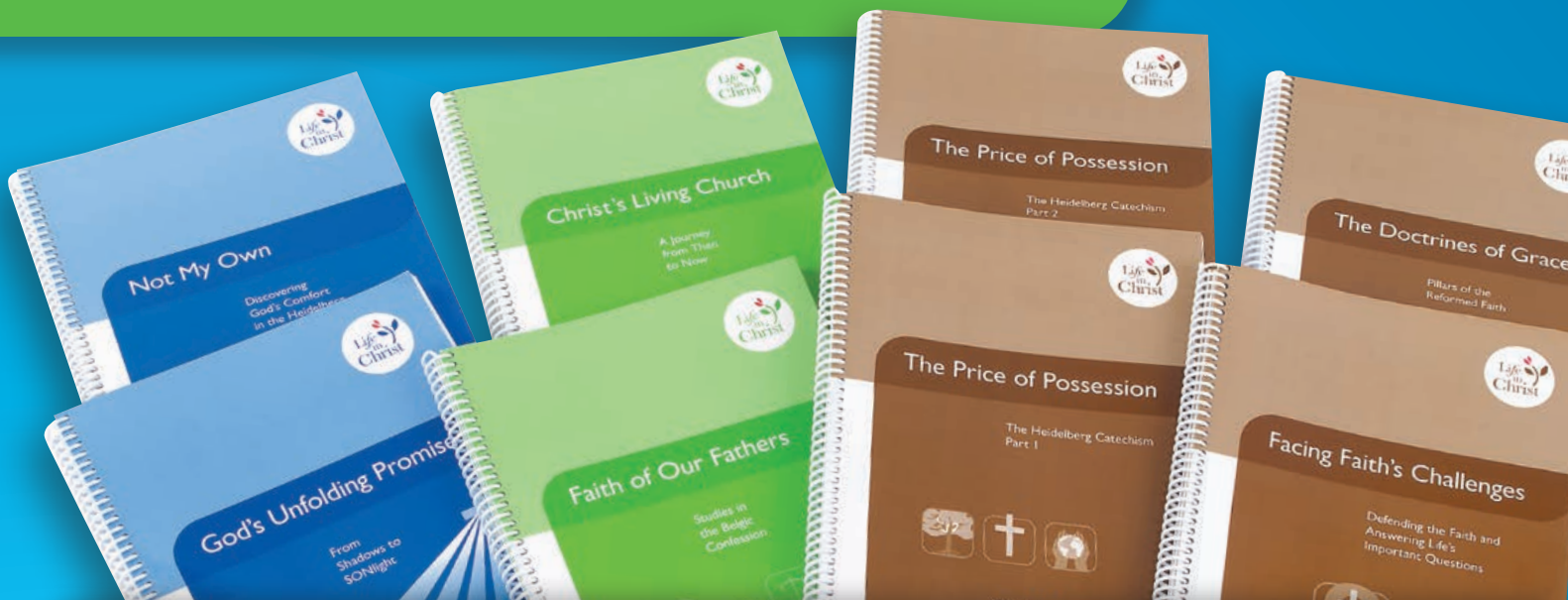
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