

THE Outlook

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God Does It: Jeremiah 24 and the Monergism of Grace

The Lord Floods the World with Judgment: A Meditation on Genesis 7

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Subdue the Earth: An Ethical Approach Toward Christian Environmental Stewardship

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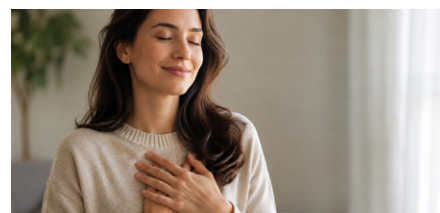
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Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Happiness

“The spirit of the Lord God is upon me; because the Lord hath anointed me to preach good tidings unto the meek; he hath sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and the opening of the prison to them that are bound...”

—ISAIAH 61:1

LIFE, LIBERTY, AND THE PURSUIT OF HAPPINESS are the desire of every human being on earth. When God created the world by the word of His mouth and man from the dust of the earth, He gave him life and liberty to pursue true happiness in glorifying His Creator perfectly without sin, living forever. The only requirement was obedience to his benefactor. The Garden of Eden was richly prepared with all that a heart could wish for.

Only one tree, the tree of knowledge of good and evil, was off limits. But man, by the prompting of Satan, lusted after this tree with its forbidden fruit so that instead of life, death reigned. Instead of liberty, earth became his prison, and the pursuit of happiness was turned into sorrow. “Lo, this only have I found, that God hath made man upright; but they have sought out many inventions” (Eccl. 7:29).

Man thought to become as God, and instead he turned into a child of Satan without realizing his miserable condition! Man is dead while he lives. He goes about the world looking for life, liberty, and happiness where it can never be found. The wisest man to ever live, Solomon, tried everything to find happiness and then concluded, “Vanity of vanities, saith the preacher; all is vanity” (Eccl. 12:8). Any life or liberty found in the world is fleeting. True life and liberty are found outside of ourselves in Jesus Christ, resulting in true happiness. Happiness is found in returning to and being reconciled to the Triune God through Jesus Christ. “Happy is that people, that is in such a case: yea, happy is that people, whose God is the LORD” (Ps. 144:15).

O happy people, favored land,
to whom the Lord with liberal hand
Hath thus His goodness shown;
Yea, surely is that people blest
By whom Jehovah is confessed
to be their God alone.

—Psalter 393:3

By the world’s standard, God’s people are without life, liberty, or happiness; but they have eternal life and liberty, and they do not need to pursue happiness but shall possess it for all eternity. Jesus Christ is their life, liberty, and happiness. Is He yours? ■



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The Reformed Church under Fire

Cornelius Van Til as a Faithful Watchman of Christ's Church



Van Til's *Letters from America*
NOW AVAILABLE IN OUR BOOKSTORE

Rev. Dr. J. Brandon **Burks**



CORNELIUS VAN TIL'S *LETTERS FROM AMERICA* gives a lens into his broad ecclesiastical vision of the band of brothers waging spiritual warfare against the kingdom of darkness. In these letters, Van Til recounts the valiant efforts of the faithful to stand on the Reformed confessions against the cultural and theological storms that threaten to engulf Christ's church. Van Til himself stood in wonder of this: "God works even now His works of grace through insignificant and small men" (140). Periodically, it seemed that the darkness was winning; but there were times in which a bright torch appeared to lead the faithful further on their pilgrimage to the Celestial City. Each of Van Til's letters gives the church a real-time view into a small sliver of the unfolding story of Christ's Church from May 1935 to January of 1940.

Dan Ragusa, who translated these letters into English for the first time, has blessed this publication with an introductory history of the Dutch Reformed church. This historical background is indispensable since Van Til was a Dutch apologist and churchman writing from America to a Dutch audience. Refusing to succumb to the tunnel vision of the immediate problems, Van Til was able to navigate the challenges he faced by connecting them with the history of the Reformed churches in the Netherlands. Ragusa wrote, "But through the eagle eyes of Van Til our own sight is sharpened to see Satan's subtle schemes against the Scripture and the saints" (10).

Machen's Afscheideing

Klaas Schilder, editor of the Dutch magazine, *De Reformatie*, invited Van Til to write letters from America to the Reformed readers in the Netherlands. Schilder likely saw him as an ally, given Van Til's confessional convictions and his willingness to reject superficial unity (35). Van Til's letters not only kept Dutch

churchmen abreast of developments within American Presbyterianism, but also encouraged them to stand firm upon Scripture (35).

From his very first letter, Van Til highlighted a great problem that threatened the Presbyterian churches in America: modernism. Karl Barth was a leading advocate of this new modernism plaguing the church—a plague that threatened to renounce the "self-attesting authority of Scripture as the believer's starting point" (14), to base unity in "the lowest common denominator" (57), and to forge a new "logic" of contradiction (66-67).

Van Til wrote proudly of J. Gresham Machen, a torch whom God had raised up to lead the charge against modernism in the Presbyterian Church U.S.A. (PCUSA). When the Presbytery of New Brunswick failed to remove modernists from the board of foreign missions, Machen forged a new independent foreign missions board. Sadly, many non-modernists were so-called "peace-at-any-price" men, who joined the modernists in rejecting Machen's new independent board (41).

By then, the writing was on the wall, and Van Til—using language from the Dutch Reformed secession (*Afscheideing*) movement of 1834—asked, “Will a secession [*afscheideing*] be needed in 1936?” (53). Just as Hendrik de Cock, after rediscovering the Reformed confessions, led a secession out of an unfaithful church and into a new, Reformed, confessional church in 1834, was it now time for another *Afscheideing* in 1936? (17–20). Van Til’s understanding of the 1834 *Afscheideing* (and, later, the second secession in 1886 known as the *Doleantie*), helped him to interpret and to navigate the current crises. He only lamented, “It is regrettable that there is no book in the English language that tells the history of the *Afscheideing* and the *Doleantie* in the Netherlands” (56). Van Til knew that the American Presbyterians would be greatly helped if they studied previous secession movements.

While Van Til saw the writing on the wall in his October 1935 letter, his August 1936 letter told of the Presbyterian *Afscheideing*. Van Til wrote, “What seemed inevitable last year has happened. The General Assembly (general synod) of the Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A. suspended Dr. Machen and many others with him” (79). Appealing to his Netherland readers, Van Til explained, “For the readers of *De Reformatie* who are familiar with the history of the *Afscheideing* and the *Doleantie*, this is simply a repetition of what has already happened more than once” (80). With realism, boldness, and mature hindsight, Van Til concluded, “The old church has been deformed; so, the synodical-yoke had to be thrown off” (81).

As all secession movements before, the faithful who left the PCUSA did not wish to forge something new, but to restore something old—namely, the Reformed faith as expressed

in the Reformed confessions (81). Leading this charge was Machen and those who stood with him. While Barth was conquering Princeton, Machen led the formation of a new seminary, Westminster Theological Seminary (WTS), which would carry on the tradition of “Old Princeton” (54, 119). Once Machen was deposed in the PCUSA, he led the formation of a new denomination, the Presbyterian Church of America, which later became the Orthodox Presbyterian Church (OPC) (79, 149).

Just as the new *Afcheiding* was increasing and bearing much fruit, Machen suddenly died at the age of fifty-five (97). The great leader who seemed to have “no end to his strength,” the torch that led the way to the formation of WTS and the OPC, was gone (97). Van Til’s sober reflection revealed how highly he and the other Westminster faculty esteemed Machen. “We thought he was truly indispensable,” wrote Van Til; “he was the Kuyper of the whole church movement over here” (98). Nevertheless, Van Til’s confidence was not ultimately in Machen, but in God: “God will carry on and accomplish his work still even now. Despondency would be a great sin; a greater confidence of faith than ever before is our clear duty” (98).

As in Israel’s exodus when not everyone who departed shared the same theological convictions (Exod. 12:38), so too with Machen’s exodus from the PCUSA (109). Fundamentalism was no friend to modernism. The time for fighting the modernists was over; now the time for a “positive construction in the Reformed style” was upon the church (109, also see 140). Van Til wrote, “The two sides are now the Reformed and the fundamentalists, most of whom are also permeated with the leaven of dispensationalism” (109). Van Til lamented that the new church must face the teetotaling,

Arminian, dispensational, chiliastic fundamentalists “without the leadership of Dr. Machen” (110; also see 59, 91–93, 107–09, 113–14, 140, 152).

Even without Machen’s leadership, the Presbyterians stood on Scripture and not the spirit of the age. When the third General Assembly was held in 1937, the Reformed clashed with the fundamentalists. The result was fourteen ministers and four elders separated to form the Bible Presbyterian Church (113). They envisioned a denomination that was teetotaling, slightly more Arminian, and explicitly premillennial. Van Til, however, considered it “a great blessing” that they left, for “they only did damage to the Reformed work that had begun here” (114).

Ecclesiastical Challenges

For Van Til, doctrinal controversy was never merely academic or personal. Because Christ governs His church through her ordained assemblies, theological errors inevitably become ecclesiastical errors. Consequently, Van Til watched the actions of Presbyteries (Classes) and General Assemblies (Synods) as carefully as he evaluated books and professors. He was deeply concerned with how false theology was shaping the church. Accordingly, he consistently reported to his Dutch readers on the work of the broader assemblies. He wrote of the problems of the foreign missions board at the PCUSA General Assembly (41); he gave a synopsis of the PCUSA’s 147th General Assembly in Cincinnati, OH; and when things began to falter with the Presbytery of Philadelphia, Van Til lamented to his Dutch audience, “The liberals in the Presbyterian church have won another victory” (75). Even after Machen and others formed a new Presbyterian denomination, Van Til reported on the new denomination’s General Assemblies. The story of the American church unfolded

for the Dutch readers through Van Til's summaries of ecclesiastical assemblies.

Van Til's concern extended well beyond his own denomination. For Van Til, the actions of General Assemblies revealed the theological health of the church. In July of 1938, he reported to the Netherlands a summary of the issues that faced the United Presbyterian Church of North America, the Presbyterian Church in the United States, the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America, and finally the Presbyterian Church of America (prior to their name change to the OPC). Van Til kept his finger on the pulse of the broader Reformed and Presbyterian landscape out of concern for the church (137–40).

Like a faithful night watchman, Van Til not only remained attentive to the broader Reformed ecclesiastical contexts, but also the issues facing the various seminaries. In his November 1938 letter, he warned, "So, it appears that Union and Princeton will become the two ports through which the new theology of Europe will stream towards us" (147). Van Til's interest in examining how false theology was plaguing the churches and the seminaries was not an interest in idle gossip, but out of concern for the gospel. "The salvation of countless people is at stake," he wrote (131). When the "autonomous man is thus enthroned at the expense of the inerrant Word of God" (148), souls hang in the balance, for the health of the seminaries and General Assemblies not only reflects but also shapes the health of the churches—and thus of individual Christians.

The Reformed Brotherhood Marches On

For us in 2026, having just concluded a season of Synods and General Assemblies, Van Til's *Letters* are timely. Multiple Reformed and Presbyterian assemblies are being assaulted by some of the same cultural and theological storms. For example, the issue of Kinism and Race-realism are affecting many churches. Synod Calgary of the United Reformed Churches of North America (URCNA) joined the Associate Reformed Presbyterian Church (ARPC), the Presbyterian Church in America (PCA), the Reformed Presbyterian Church of North America (RPCNA), and the Orthodox Presbyterian Church (OPC) in condemning theological and political teachings that promote racial or ethnic superiority, while also appointing a study committee to examine these issues further.¹

Another issue on the theological horizon is Christian Nationalism. The 92nd General Assembly of the OPC formed a special committee to study the subject and to bring a report to the 94th General Assembly. With the label "Christian Nationalism" being used in various ways,

carefully defining the term and evaluating it based on Scripture and the Reformed confessions will greatly aid the churches.²

The 54th General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in America (PCA) tackled similar issues, but they also dealt with overtures related to female deacons (or "functional female officers"). Twelve different overtures were presented to the General Assembly related to the issues of the diaconate or to women's service within the church. Ultimately, the commissioners rejected the proposals for women officers—functional or otherwise—and stood upon Scripture's teaching.³

Conclusion

Nearly ninety years after Van Til penned these letters, they remain strikingly relevant. Having just concluded another season of Synods and General Assemblies, Reformed and Presbyterian churches continue to wrestle with theological and cultural questions that demand careful ecclesiastical discernment. Although some of the issues differ from those of Van Til's day, his habit of watching the church's broader assemblies as barometers of her theological health remains instructive. By translating Van Til's *Letters*, Ragusa has given the church great encouragement both for being thankful to Christ's care and nourishment of the church in the past, and also for following Van Til's example of being a faithful watchmen in this present evil age.

Though with a scornful wonder men
see her sore oppressed,
by schisms rent asunder, by heresies distressed,
yet saints their watch are keeping,
their cry goes up, 'How long?'
And soon the night of weeping shall be
the morn of song.⁴ ■

1. Christopher Smith, "URCNA Synod Calgary 2026: A Retrospective," in *The Heidelbergblog* (15 June 2026), <https://heidelbergblog.net/2026/06/urcna-synod-calgary-2026-a-retrospective/>.
2. Everett Henes, "A Retrospective of the 2026 OPC General Assembly," in *The Heidelbergblog* (11 June 2026), <https://heidelbergblog.net/2026/06/a-retrospective-of-the-2026-opc-general-assembly/>.
3. Sean Morris, "The Welcome Of God: The PCA General Assembly 2026," in *The Heidelbergblog* (29 June 2026), <https://heidelbergblog.net/2026/06/the-welcome-of-god-the-pca-general-assembly-2026/>.
4. From "The Church's One Foundation" by Samuel J. Stone (1866), in *Trinity Psalter Hymnal* (Willow Grove, PA: Trinity Psalter Joint Venture, 2018), 404.

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God Does It

Jeremiah 24 and the Monergism of Grace



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



I AM PREACHING THROUGH JEREMIAH, and I stumbled across what I believe is a chapter as pregnant with the doctrines of grace as Romans 9. It is Jeremiah 24.

That may sound surprising. Jeremiah 24 is not usually placed in the ranks with Romans 8, Romans 9, Ephesians 1, or John 6. It does not use our later theological vocabulary. It does not use the vocabulary of Reformed scholasticism. It does not lay the doctrines of grace out in scholastic sequence. But it does picture them; it gives them flesh with word pictures. It sets them before us in two baskets of figs and causes us to ask the decisive question: Who does it? Who makes the good figs good?

About the time people learned that the physical universe does not revolve around us, they began to think that the spiritual universe does. Once we learned that the earth moves around the sun, we began to imagine a man-centered spiritual

world, with God revolving around our will, works, religion, suffering, sincerity, family, and decisions. God stocked salvation on the shelf and we became the shoppers. God made grace available; we made it actual.

Jeremiah 24 corrects that spiritual egocentrism. Seven times the Lord says, “I will.” Not “you must first”; not “if you will, then I will.” Salvation is not synergism with God and man each contributing a necessary share. It is monergism: God alone does the saving work that makes sinners His people.

The Displayed Figs

Jeremiah sees two baskets of figs set before the temple of the Lord. The timing here matters. Nebuchadnezzar

has carried Jeconiah, or Jehoiachin, king of Judah, into exile, along with the officials, craftsmen, and leading citizens of Jerusalem. Ezekiel is among those exiles while Zedekiah remains in Jerusalem.

To the eye of flesh, the conclusion seems obvious: the people left in Jerusalem are fortunate. They still have the land, the city, the temple, and the visible securities of covenant life. The exiles in Babylon look cursed. If religion were read by immediate circumstance, Zedekiah would look elect and Jehoiachin rejected.

But God reads the baskets differently. The exiles are the good figs and those remaining in Jerusalem are the bad figs. That is the offense of grace. It overturns appearances; it will not let us infer divine favor from comfort, status, ritual privilege, or proximity to holy places. Jerusalem cannot save

bad figs. Babylon cannot destroy good ones.

Jehoiachin's name means, "The Lord establishes." That is the lesson. The Lord establishes who His people are. The difference between the baskets is not ethnicity, geography, or visible religious access; both baskets are Jewish. The good figs are in Babylon. The bad figs are nearer the temple. The difference is mercy. God makes the distinction.

Regarded as Good

The first great word of divine favor comes in verse 5: "I will regard as good the exiles from Judah." The Lord does not say, "They are good, and therefore I must recognize what they are." He says, "I will regard them as good."

This is forensic language. It concerns verdict, judgment, and standing. It pictures justification. God declares sinners righteous not because they are intrinsically righteous, but because He regards them according to His gracious verdict. In later theological language, this is *iustitia imputata*, or imputed righteousness. It is not righteousness infused as the ground of acceptance. It is righteousness reckoned, credited, counted to the sinner by God.

Jehoiachin becomes a striking Old Testament picture of *simul iustus et peccator*: at the same time righteous and sinner. Second Kings 24:9 says that Jehoiachin "did what was evil in the sight of the Lord." Yet, Jeremiah 24 says that the Lord regards the exiles, including Jehoiachin, as good. Grace gives a verdict sinners cannot earn.

The Christian knows how this can be just. God justifies the ungodly in Christ. The righteousness by which sinners stand before God is not manufactured by the sinner, but received by faith because it is accomplished by Christ. The ground

is outside us. The verdict is from God and the glory is His.

Eyes for Good

The second word is, "I will set my eyes on them for good." This is not bare observation. God does not merely notice His people; He fixes His favorable attention on them. He determines to do them good.

This pictures election. Election is God's sovereign, gracious, uncaused selection of His people in Christ. It is not God's response to foreseen works, willpower, humility, or religious aptitude. Romans 9 makes that explicit with Jacob and Esau: "though they were not yet born and had done nothing either good or bad," God's purpose in election stood. Salvation "depends not on human will or exertion, but on God, who has mercy."

Some soften election by making the good basket an empty category. God elects to have a people, they say, but leaves it to us to decide whether we will be in that people. God chooses the basket; we choose whether to be in it. But Jeremiah 24 resists that. These figs do not choose their basket. God identifies them, and when He sets His eyes on His people for good, good will come.

Brought Back, Built Up, Planted

The Lord then says, "I will bring them back to this land." That promise was fulfilled historically when the exiles returned under Ezra and Nehemiah. But the return from exile is more than political relocation. It is a picture of restoration. God brings His people home.

Here Jeremiah 24 gives several pictures related to the golden chain of salvation, though we should be careful. The chapter is not arranging the *ordo salutis* in technical or causal order. It is not saying that justification causally precedes

election, or that faith precedes regeneration. It is painting the whole work of grace in covenant colors. The links are displayed pictorially, not ordered systematically.

"I will bring them back." God restores.

"I will build them up, and not tear them down." God edifies and sanctifies.

"I will plant them, and not pluck them up." God roots and preserves.

The Lord does not merely spare His people; He reconstructs them. The God who tears down in judgment builds up in grace. The God who plucks up the wicked plants His people like trees whose roots go down into covenant mercy. They are not tumbleweeds. They are not loose leaves. God plants them.

That is why monergism does not produce passivity. The same grace that justifies also sanctifies. We are God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand that we should walk in them (Eph. 2:10). We walk. God prepared. Grace does not make works unnecessary. Grace makes them possible.

The Given Heart

Then comes the center of the chapter's saving work: "I will give them a heart to know that I am the Lord." In Hebrew, the heart is not mere emotion. It is the center of the mind, will, affection, and desire. The problem with sinners is not that they lack information only, but that they lack a heart to know God.

This is regeneration. The new birth is not self-improvement, moral polishing, or religious education. Education can inform the mind. Discipline can train habits. Parents and pastors can teach the truth. A church can administer the sacraments. But only God can give the heart to know Him.

Jesus expected Nicodemus to know this. “Are you the teacher of Israel and yet you do not understand these things?” (John 3:10). He should have known from Jeremiah 24 that the new birth is the sovereign work of God. “I will.” The wind blows where it wishes. So it is with everyone born of the Spirit. The children of God are born “not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God” (John 1:13).

This destroys the myth of self-salvation. Dead hearts do not restart themselves; stone does not soften stone. God gives the heart. Jeremiah 24 presses the point with special force: “for they shall return to me with their whole heart” (24:7). “Return” could also be translated as “repent.” The Lord is saying that those He gives new hearts to repent. They don’t repent and then God makes them born again. Rather, they are born again and then they repent. Their turning to God is a result of God turning them.

Many assume repentance comes first as an independent human contribution. We repent, and then God responds. We turn, and then God gives grace. Jeremiah says otherwise. God gives the heart, and then they return. Grace produces repentance. The sinner acts, but he acts because God has acted first and deeper. He gives them a new heart so that they love what they once hated and know the One they once avoided. Man-made conversions can produce half-hearted religion. God-made conversion returns with the whole heart.

My People, Their God

The promise culminates in covenant communion: “They shall be my people, and I will be their God.” This is the ancient covenant formula, now shining with renewed grace. God does not merely improve exiles; He receives and claims them. In Christ, this covenant communion includes

adoption. Enemies become children and strangers become household members. They receive not only pardon but a home—not only acquittal but inheritance.

The order in the chapter is pastoral and pictorial: God regards, watches, restores, rebuilds, plants, renews, and receives. The theology underneath is rich: justification, election, restoration, sanctification, regeneration, repentance, covenant communion, and adoption. But the repeated grammar is simple enough for a child: “I will.” God does it.

The Rotten Basket

This chapter also contains judgment. The bad figs are Zedekiah and those left in Jerusalem. The Lord says, “I will treat them like bad figs.” That is dreadful because it is just; they are treated as they are. This pictures reprobation and condemnation. The bad figs receive justice, not mercy.

They will become “a horror,” “a reproach,” “a byword,” “a taunt,” and “a curse.” Sword, famine, and pestilence will come. The covenant curses are not empty threats. God is not mocked. Bad figs do not become good by sitting in a temple basket.

That warning belongs in a Reformed essay on grace because the doctrines of grace never make judgment unreal. They make grace amazing. If the good figs receive mercy, it is not because they were less guilty; likewise, if the bad figs receive justice, it is not because God has wronged them. Mercy is free and judgment is deserved.

Who Does It?

So, who makes the good figs good? Not Babylon. Not Jerusalem. Not exile. Not temple access. Not ancestry. Not willpower. Not ritual. God does.

God gives the verdict sinners cannot earn. He sets the favor sinners cannot trigger. He restores the exiles who

cannot come home by their own strength. He builds what sin has broken and plants what judgment could have uprooted forever. God gives the clean heart sinners cannot create. God receives enemies as His people.

Jeremiah 24 is not a technical treatise, but it is a theological treasure. It sings the same melody as Romans 9. It is not a scholastic *ordo salutis*, but it displays the same salvation. It holds up two baskets of figs: one is good because God regards it as good, and the other is rotten because it is treated as it truly is.

The natural man wants a spiritual universe that revolves around him. He wants grace on the shelf, waiting for his decisive act. Jeremiah 24 gives us a better universe because it gives us the true one with God as the sun. Grace revolves around His will. Salvation shines from His mercy.

So do not first ask how to get God to revolve around you; ask whether God has given you a heart to know Him. If He has, even Babylon cannot destroy you. If He has not, even Jerusalem cannot save you.

Come to Christ. Ask Him to do what only He can do. Ask Him to regard you with mercy, set His eyes on you for good, restore you, build you, plant you, renew your heart, and be your God forever. And if you find yourself turning to Him, do not boast in your turning. Your turning to God is a result of Him turning you. ■

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THE LORD FLOODS THE WORLD WITH JUDGMENT

A Meditation on Genesis 7



Rev. Peter **Holtvlüwer**

Meditation text: Genesis 7
Suggested reading: 2 Peter 3

THERE IS A PICTURE OF THE STORY of Noah's ark that draws in kids and adults alike. It's the scene of animals coming two by two to a large boat captained by old man Noah. With his long, flowing, white beard and welcoming smile, Noah guides the animals on board. It's warm and endearing, prompting many to say, "Aw, so cute!"

But how cute is the real story as the Bible tells it? With water rising everywhere, lifting this massive boat high above the land while animals outside struggle for their last breath and humans hopelessly try to find higher ground, this scene is not charming but blood-curdling! What God reveals in Genesis 7 does not call for warm, fuzzy feelings but for sober reflection: what lessons should we learn from God's historic, catastrophic judgment that literally flooded the entire world?

Historical Flood

The flood is indeed a true story, carefully laid out in four lengthy chapters with historical precision (Gen. 6–9). Even dates are included: the rains started falling on the seventeenth day of the second month in the 600th year of Noah's life (7:11); the waters dried up from the surface of the earth on the first day of the first month of Noah's 601st year (8:13); and on the twenty-seventh day of the second month the earth had "dried out" so that Noah, his family, and all the animals could exit the ark (8:14). The flood is not a fable but a historical event that the ancients could mark on their calendars.

When we work out the details of the chronology presented in Genesis 5, we discover that the year when Noah turns 600 is the very same year that his grandfather Methuselah—the last of his living ancestors—died. The time for judgment was ripe: 1656 years after God in love created the earth in six days and put Adam into the garden of Eden, the same God in His holy wrath now sends water to destroy it all.

Terrifying Judgment

The Holy Spirit spends a lot of time describing what happened in order to impress upon us the Creator's

overwhelming and terrifying judgment: "...[O]n that day all the fountains of the great deep burst forth, and the windows of the heavens were opened. And rain fell upon the earth forty days and forty nights" (7:11). Can you imagine? If it rains for four days straight, how do you feel? Don't you start feeling down? Don't you start to worry whether your basement might soon flood? Now imagine seven days or even fourteen days of constant downpour—would you not become seriously alarmed? Forty days straight is almost unthinkable. When local rivers and lakes rise up over their banks, and eventually the great big sea sweeps inland, where can you go to escape the waters? Outside of the ark, full-blown fear was running rampant with animals and humans in total panic for there was no safe place to go.

"The waters increased and bore up the ark, and it rose high above the earth" (7:17). Is God describing a localized flood as some imagine? The same people who feel pressured by secular science to say that the earth cannot have been created in six days of ordinary length also feel pressured to say that the flood could not have covered all the earth. That would have been impossible, something that the laws of nature would not allow. It must have been a local flood that killed all the people and in that sense fulfilled God's judgment.

Yet Scripture is clear: "And the waters prevailed so mightily on the earth that *all* the high mountains *under the whole heaven* were covered. The waters prevailed above the mountains, covering them fifteen cubits deep" (v. 19). *All* the mountains were covered with water so that they could not even be seen (see 8:5). If the flood was only local to Mesopotamia, how could water possibly rise higher than the mountains without draining off to the other side? And why would God

have Noah build an ark and bring in all the animals if He could have sent Noah and those animals to a dry spot far away from where the rest of humanity was living?

Creation Undone

The truth is simple and chilling to the bone: God was angry with man for spoiling His creation with wickedness and acted to wipe out that wickedness (6:5–7). God designed the flood as a massive warning for the human race. Because man, the crown of God's creation, rebelled against the Creator, death comes to man and to everything that had charge over and to which God had given the breath of life: land animals, creeping things, and birds (7:21–23; cf. Gen. 1).

The punishment goes even further. In Genesis 1, God created and ordered the cosmos, separating the waters above from the waters below, and then separating land from water. But now as God punishes man, He reverses that. The waters come up from below and pour out from above so that the good separation of things on days 2 and 3 of creation comes apart at the seams; all that anyone can see is water everywhere. When His patience with rebellious man runs out, when His righteous judgment finally comes, the Creator will rip apart the very fabric of His own creation!

Peter highlights the flood as a foreshadowing of God's end-time judgment: "For they [the scoffers] deliberately overlook this fact, that the heavens existed long ago, and the earth was formed out of water and through water by the word of God, and that by means of these *the world* that then existed was deluged with water and perished" (2 Peter 3:5). Peter's point is that the first global catastrophe using water will one day be paralleled by one using fire: "But by the same word the heavens and earth that now exist are stored

up for fire, being kept until the day of judgment and destruction of the ungodly" (v. 7). God is not going to send a local fire any more than he sent a local flood. *All* unbelieving humans everywhere will be killed and creation itself will be undone with the purifying fire of God's wrath.

The punishment fits the crime—do we understand that? The thought of all that suffering and death outside of the ark can be nauseating and the idea of endless hell for unbelievers when Jesus comes back can be a cold shock, but can we see it from the Creator's perspective and learn to love Him for it? Can we grasp that He who created man sinless and in His image, with all the advantages and blessings of fellowship and love, is profoundly affronted by man's corruption? Man's sin is no small thing: "The LORD saw that wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every intention of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually" (6:5). Can we learn from the flood how much of a stench our own sin is to the Almighty, making us worthy to be destroyed (see Rom. 6:23)?

Only then can we see how much mercy God provides us inside the ark.

Safe Haven

The ark is indeed the only safe place in the world—and not meant for humans alone. Notice how God makes deliberate and extensive plans to save the animals, too. Noah is to take seven pairs of all clean animals and a single pair of all unclean animals into the ark. Representatives of all birds and land creatures are to find refuge on the ark. Noah is to prepare spaces for them and bring along enough provisions (6:19–21; cf. 7:1–3).

And those animals were totally cooperative. A literal translation of verse 9 tells us that the animals "came to Noah, into the ark." Noah did not

have to go scouring the hills and valleys to capture all these creatures for God brought them to him. Doesn't that remind you of how the LORD brought all the land animals to Adam to see what he would name them (2:19)? At that time (in a sinless world), the creatures were *naturally* friendly and submissive to man but here in the corrupt world the Creator *supernaturally* makes them cooperative. Noah is a new Adam! Even as God prepares horrific judgment over man and all creation, He preserves the work of His hands and prepares a new beginning with a godly man ruling over and caring for the animals just like at creation.

That's what those forty days and nights of rain signifies, too (v. 12). Later, when the flood waters are subsiding, Noah waited for forty days after seeing the tops of the mountains before sending out a raven as a kind of scout (8:6). In the Bible, the period of forty days and nights is regularly connected to significant events. Think of Moses fasting on Mt. Sinai while he met with God for forty days and nights to mediate the covenant to Israel. Elijah travelled through the desert forty days and nights to meet

with God at Sinai where the LORD confirmed His covenant promises to him. And did not God say to Noah in Genesis 6:18, "But I will establish my covenant with you, and you shall come into the ark, you, your sons, your wife, and your sons' wives with you"? Forty days and nights is a sign from God that, while His people may be entering a new time that seems uncertain to them, His covenant promises to save, protect, and provide for them remain as solid as ever.

Noah was a new Adam, who, like the original, foreshadowed the last Adam Jesus Christ, who "was in the wilderness forty days, being tempted by Satan. And he was with the wild animals, and the angels were ministering to him" (Mark 1:13). Jesus, who came to usher in God's new covenant in His blood, was also safely surrounded by animals for forty days and nights. But unlike Noah or Adam, Christ faced the greatest of temptations from the devil himself all while being without food or family or any human companion in the wilderness.

Jesus is far greater than Noah especially because the wrath of God

did not fall *around* Him outside the ark but it fell *directly upon Him*. The Last Adam spent His whole life taking upon *Himself* the flood, the fire, the fury of God's anger against my sin and yours—so that we might be preserved. He opened the way for those who are in Christ by faith to emerge from the last judgment unharmed, to live on a purified earth in glorified bodies with our God forever.

The final judgment that is coming need not fill us with dread. On the one hand, it won't be cute or mild. But for those who belong to Christ, it will be comforting and cleansing. All wickedness will be gone, including the remnants in our own hearts. Creation will be preserved and made perfect forever. And we will be eternally with our Savior. ■

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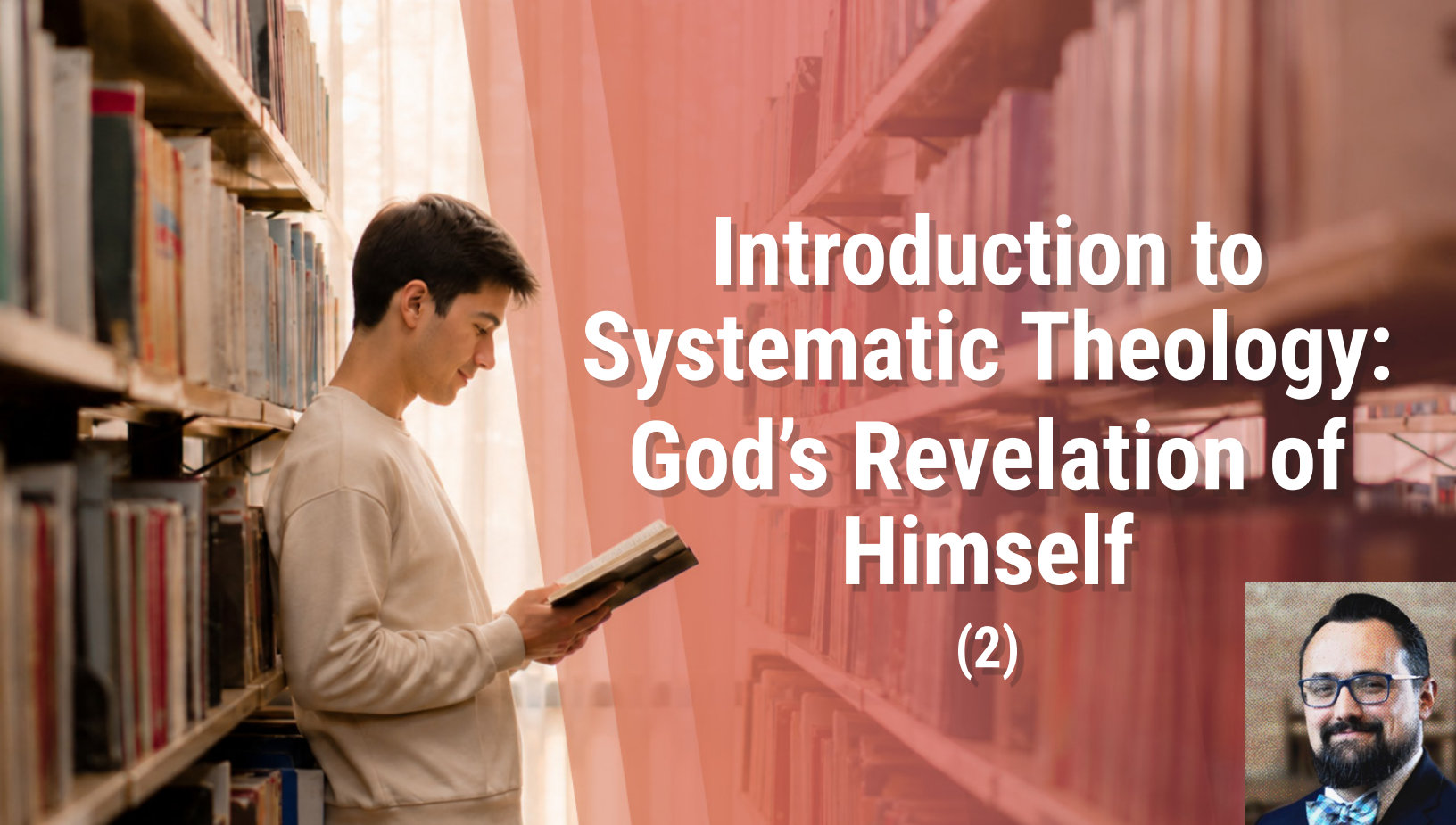


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Introduction to Systematic Theology: God's Revelation of Himself (2)



Rev. Dr. Daniel **Schrock**

MOST CHRISTIANS DON'T THINK OF THEMSELVES AS theologians. We imagine systematic theology belongs to professors, pastors, or seminary students sitting in offices or libraries full of thick books. Yet every time we open our Bibles and ask, "What does this teach me about God?", we are already doing theology. It's impossible to open the Bible and *not* be confronted with what God is revealing about Himself.

That raises the question: If God is infinitely greater than we are, how can finite people ever know Him? We cannot place God under a microscope or discover Him through our own cleverness. If we are to know Him at all, He must first make Himself known to us. That divine self-disclosure (i.e., the Bible's doctrine of revelation) is the necessary foundation and source of all true theology.

This article continues our series introducing systematic theology. In this article, we will begin with God's own perfect knowledge of Himself,

then consider how He reveals Himself through creation and special revelation, and finally see how every act of God's self-disclosure finds its fulfillment in Jesus Christ. While thinking through these introductory details to systematic theology involves a lot of work, it lays the foundation for a clear and defensible articulation of Christian doctrine that systematic theology aims to present.

Can Finite People Really Know the Infinite God?

To understand how we know God, we must begin with an important

truth: our finite knowledge of God depends on God's infinite knowledge of Himself. Theology is done first in the eternal life of the Godhead (i.e., among the persons of the Trinity) before it is ever done in the life of creatures. Jesus said, "No one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal him" (Matt. 11:27). And Paul tells us that the Holy Spirit is the only one who comprehends the thoughts of God (1 Cor. 2:11).

Within the triune life of the Godhead, our Creator knows Himself in an absolute, eternal, immutable, indivisible, and comprehensive way. Theologians call this "archetypal theology," using Greek words that refer to an ultimate (arche) pattern (typal). This is why God can make Himself known to us: because He knows Himself truly in an absolute way.

Yet this is also the reason God can reveal Himself to us *only* in a way that we will never fully comprehend. His greatness will always remain unsearchable to us (Ps. 145:3; Isa. 55:8–9). God’s essence will always remain beyond human understanding (1 Tim. 6:16). Cornelius Van Til notes, “It is not because God is irrational that we cannot comprehend him; it is because God is...ultimately rational...”¹

We should not, however, think that God being incomprehensible means God is unknowable. We do indeed know God, but it is adapted to who and what we are as creatures. Our understanding of Him is true, though it is what theologians call “analogical”; that is, it is not identical with His own eternal and divine understanding of Himself, but is based on the way He “lisps” to us as Calvin is famously quoted.² (This word “lisp” refers to God speaking down to us, almost like He is using baby talk.) The truthfulness of our knowledge of God depends not on us comprehending Him but on Him “stooping down” to make Himself known to us. Yet, because of this, a great deal about God remains mysterious.

Doesn’t Mystery Keep us from Knowing God?

Mystery is not a bad thing. In fact, it will always accompany true theology. This is most evident when we consider doctrines like the Trinity and the Incarnation. But this doesn’t mean that mystery is limited to these. Every compartment or question of theology involves mystery. In all our thinking and speaking about God we are dealing with the relationship between the infinite Creator and His finite creatures; that relationship will always exceed the full grasp of our intellect.

But this is actually very good for us. Mystery is not an obstacle to our theology but a stimulus to drive us to express our theology

in a posture of awe and praise (Rom. 11:33–36). Herman Bavinck observes, “Comprehension excludes amazement and admiration. I comprehend or think I comprehend the things that are self-evident and perfectly natural.... Where comprehension ceases, however, there remains room for knowledge and wonder.”³

Our systematic theological formulations will always remain inadequate. They will always be confronted with the question of Psalm 106:2, “Who can utter the mighty deeds of the LORD, or declare all his praise?” Or, as a great Lutheran hymn puts it, “My utmost powers can ne’er aright declare the wonders of his might.”⁴ Yet the unfathomable mystery of the true and living God should always compel us to offer Him the best worship we can. The mysterious character of theology is not meant to drive us to frustration, but to adoration!

Faithful study of theology leads to doxology, and doxology gives us a thirst for more study of theology. The life-imparting revelation of God drives this cycle as in theology we do not simply aim to know *about* God but to know *God* and be known *by* God (Gal. 4:9). He graciously invites us into this joyous cycle.

But if we can’t discover God, where do we find Him? Answer: God discloses Himself then in two distinct, yet organically related ways. He does so in general revelation and in special revelation.

General Revelation: Is Creation Enough to Help us Find God?

General revelation is sometimes called natural revelation, though both terms are appropriate. “Natural” refers to the *means* of this revelation: nature (Ps. 8:1; 19:1–2). All creation showcases who God is. Through

“the things that have been made,” God’s invisible attributes are clearly perceived (Rom. 1:20). This reminds us that creation is not an obstacle to God’s self-revelation, but a tool He designed for that very purpose.

The word “general” refers to the *scope* of this revelation. It goes out to *all* humanity—“through all the earth” and “to the end of the world” (Ps. 19:4). No one can escape this revelation; it is unavoidably plain (Rom. 1:19). It has always been present with humanity (even prior to the Fall), and it always will be.

Before the Fall, creation displayed the pleasure of God—the fact that His blessing rested upon all the works of His hands and that they were all very good (Gen. 1:1–31). But after the Fall, general revelation manifests something new: God’s displeasure (Rom. 1:18). There is a painful groaning which can be heard in the fabric of the world (Rom. 8:22), a groaning which indicates that God’s blessing has been replaced with the curse.

Because of this, general revelation is now insufficient in some key ways. It is still sufficient for rendering man inexcusable before the Lord (Rom. 1:20). Natural revelation guarantees that no person in history will be able to plead ignorance before God on Judgment Day. All are culpable. Yet no possibility of salvation can come from general revelation. Nature reveals to man his problem, but not its solution. For that a different species of revelation is needed.

Special Revelation: Why Isn’t Creation Enough to Help Us Find God?

Special revelation is where we encounter the hope of salvation, although this species of revelation did appear even before the Fall: it was an indispensable element of man’s original relationship to God

in his state of innocence. Eden was a place of communion with God, a temple, a place in which life was filled with the joy of walking with the Lord. Man was made in the image of God, which entailed a rich, communicative fellowship that man was designed to enjoy with his heavenly Father (Luke 3:38).

As just noted, special revelation is not the result of the Fall; it predates the Fall. It showed what it meant for man to bear God's image and be created for communion with Him. In special revelation man encounters his God as one who *speaks* to him in *human language* (Gen. 1:26–30; 2:16–17). And here we are reminded that just as the created world was a fitting means for God's revelation, so are human words (Exod. 4:11–12). Man's own ability to communicate in speech is a creaturely and finite replica of God's eternal Word. After sin disintegrates man's blessed relationship with God, human speech still stands as a most fitting instrument to restore that relationship. Even though it was misused by man in his encounter with the serpent and in many horrific ways since then, human language first stood as God's own appointed means of drawing man into fellowship with Himself. It remains, then, as a means to reclaim man from the wreckage of his rebellion.

We've emphasized speech so far, but it is important to see this as just the first step; special revelation after the Fall involves more than speech. Man needs something more than mere information to remedy his fallenness. So God's special disclosure of His mercy after the Fall also includes deeds. In fact, redemptive history will involve a long history of both.

From Seed to Full Flower: God Reveals Himself Gradually

This redemptive revelation (in both word and deed) did not come all

at once. Rather, it developed or "advanced" throughout biblical history. The Gospel is announced in *seed* form in Genesis 3:15. Though the seed contains the full potentiality of the tree, it does not appear yet in the fullness of that maturity. God was pleased to have the seed of His revelation of grace germinate and unfold over time. What began with smaller installments—usually in type and shadow early in Old Testament history—grew into the fullness of New Testament revelation we find in the life, death, resurrection, and ascension of Christ.

The author of Hebrews impresses this fact upon us. The divine speech which reaches a climax in "these last days" in the Son comes as the culmination of a long process in which God spoke to our fathers "at many times and in many ways" (Heb. 1:1–2). There were many episodes in the biblical "story of divine speech." God unfolds this long process of revealing Himself redemptively in such a way that His mighty acts of salvation never stand alone. His wonderful works are always accompanied by gracious words, which come before and after to explain and interpret the saving work which has been accomplished in those deeds.

Both word and deed find their fulfillment in the One who is the Word made flesh. Jesus is the mightiest of God's redemptive works and the source of all His redemptive words. The extensive history of the special revelation of the Old Testament comes from the activity of (the pre-incarnate) Christ (1 Pet. 1:10–11; 1 Cor. 10:1–4; John 8:56–58), and it culminates and is fulfilled in Him as He has been incarnated (2 Cor. 1:19–20; Luke 24:27; Acts 3:18–24). One can hardly put it better than Herman Bavinck: "All the revelations and words of God, in nature and history, in creation and

re-creation, both in the Old and New Testament, have their ground, unity, and center in him. He is the sun; the individual words of God are his rays. The word of God in nature, in Israel, in the New Testament, in Scripture may never even for a moment be separated and abstracted from him."⁵

From Eden to Eternity: Christ at the Center of Revelation

The Son—equal in being, power, and glory with the Father and the Spirit—is the perfect Mediator and Revealer of God. As "the radiance of the glory of God and the exact imprint of his nature," He alone can answer Philip's request in that He alone can "show us the Father" (John 14:8). "No one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal him" (Matt. 11:27). All of God's revealing activity emerges from and converges upon Jesus.

Christ will even bring God's revelation in creation to its fulfillment. When the Father completes His plan to reconcile all things through His Son (Col. 1:20), every creature will declare the praises of the Lamb (Rev. 5:13). In the new creation, general revelation and special revelation will be perfectly united in Christ; i.e., what creation reveals and what Scripture proclaims will at last be seen together as pointing perfectly to Christ. On the Last Day, every eye will see, and every tongue will confess that Christ is indeed preeminent in everything (Col. 1:18). Then general/natural revelation will have become the special revelation of grace. Nature/creation will have been completely reconciled and restored by the grace of Christ.

(article continues at the bottom of page 21)

Subdue the Earth



Mr. Carsten **Koopman**

An Ethical Approach Toward Christian Environmental Stewardship

1st place winner on the
REFORMED FELLOWSHIP ESSAY CONTEST
Seminary Category



THE CARE OF THE ENVIRONMENT HAS BECOME A COMMON topic of discussion at every level of society. These kinds of discussions have often become polarizing as many people and groups have different opinions surrounding how humanity is to relate to the environment. Common debates surround climate change (global warming) contributing to rising sea levels and melting glaciers or the increased production of electric vehicles leading to vast strip mining in third-world countries, among many other issues.¹

While nations and non-profits groups have been quick to respond to some of these pressing concerns, the church has been rather slow in addressing them, leaving many Christians to wonder what their responsibility to the environment is. They see the errors of many social and political strategies to confront these problems but still do not know how to respond. Do Christians have a moral responsibility to the environment? If so, what is it?

The Bible has much to say regarding the creation and how we relate to the environment. A look at the Bible's teaching about the environment reveals that humans, and especially Christians, do indeed have moral obligations to the environment. Humanity's ethical and moral obligation will be shown by examining two common yet flawed approaches to the environment and evaluating them according to the Ten Commandments. Then, a brief

survey of the Bible's teaching on the creation and the environment will be given to reveal a better way to care for the environment before concluding with some practical applications concerning environmental care.

The Law of God and the Environment

Before examining various approaches to the environment, an explanation of the moral law as summarized in the Ten Commandments is needed. Even though eight of the Ten Commandments are stated negatively, each commandment both prohibits *and* prescribes something. Each negative command necessitates a positive response to that command.²

Beyond that, each commandment highlights a specific area or aspect of life that God is protecting,

promoting, or preserving. The Reformed confessions, specifically the *Heidelberg Catechism* and the *Westminster Larger Catechism*, provide much insight into the Ten Commandments and how to interpret them. The main commandments associated with the care of the environment are the third commandment regarding God's name and the fifth commandment regarding the nature of authority.³

Third Commandment: Protection of God's Reputation

The third commandment is found in Exodus 20:7: "You shall not take the name of the LORD your God in vain, for the LORD will not hold him guiltless who takes His name in vain" (cf. Deut. 5:11). This commandment protects God's name in the world by prohibiting its misuse. However, God's name reflects His whole being—His attributes, character, and reputation. As such, the *Westminster Larger Catechism* (Q&A 112) says of the third commandment,

Q. What is required in the third commandment?

A. The third commandment requires, That the name of God, his titles, attributes, ordinances, the word, sacraments, prayer, oaths, vows, lots, his works, *and whatsoever else there is whereby he makes himself known*, be holily and reverently used in thought, meditation, word, and writing; by a holy profession, and answerable conversation, to the glory of God, and the good of ourselves, and others.

In the garden of Eden, man was created in the image of God and given dominion over the created order (Gen. 1:26–28). They were to be God's representatives on the earth as they ruled over it faithfully. Because of man's unique creation and his special calling, he and his posterity became one of those means "whereby [God] makes himself

known." However, because of the fall into sin, man cannot represent God to the world faithfully. Nevertheless, this high calling still stands. And if it still stands for sinful humanity, how much more should Christians, who are being restored in the image and likeness of God (Eph. 4:24; Col. 3:10) seek to fulfill their calling in the world! Failure to obey this command and fulfill this calling is to damage God's reputation among creation and to bring His name into disrepute. This has significant implications for our use and care of the environment, especially in light of the fifth commandment.

Fifth Commandment: Protection of Authority Structures

The fifth commandment is found in Exodus 20:12: "Honor your father and your mother, that your days may be long upon the land which the LORD your God is giving you" (cf. Deut. 5:16). The connection between the fifth commandment and the environment is not so easily seen. However, the fifth commandment protects God-ordained authority structures by calling people to respect their superiors. However, the command also applies to those who exercise authority over others—protecting them from abuse, as the *Heidelberg Catechism* (Q&A 104) demonstrates:

Q. What does God require in the fifth commandment?

A. That I show all honour, love, and fidelity, to my father and mother, *and all in authority over me*, and submit myself to their good instruction and correction, with due obedience; and also patiently bear with their weaknesses and infirmities, since it pleases God to govern us by their hand.⁴

The connection between the fifth commandment and all kinds of authority is made clear through the *Catechism's* exposition. But

this commandment does not only have implications for those under authority, but also for those who exercise authority over others. The *Westminster Larger Catechism* (Q&A 126) says,

Q. What is the general scope of the fifth commandment?

A. The general scope of the fifth commandment is, the performance of those duties which we mutually owe in our several relations, *as inferiors, superiors, or equals*.

In light of these confessional statements, the man's responsibility to the environment becomes clearer, especially when one considers God's command to subdue the earth and to exercise dominion over it, as already mentioned in the discussion of the third commandment (Gen. 1:28).

In summary, these two commandments reveal that man was created in the image of God to be His representative in this world. He was also given authority over the created order as a means where he could faithfully serve God as His representative. These commands seem to indicate man's *purpose* for environmental care (imaging God) and also man's *responsibility* for environmental care (having dominion).

Common Approaches to the Environment: Elevation and Apathy

Whether they realize it or not, everyone has a view on the environment. These views are very diverse in degree and approach. What most people do not realize is that their view of the environment has moral and ethical implications. As such, Christians must re-examine their view of the environment to make sure it is in accordance with the Word of God. There are two common approaches to the

environment, both of which fall short of God's standard as presented in the Ten Commandments. These approaches can be classified as the *elevation* of the environment and the *neglect* of the environment.

Elevation of the Environment: Environmentalism

Issues like overhunting or overfishing, deforestation, pollution of air and water, climate change or global warming, or rising sea levels are not uncommon in the social and political consciousness today. Environmental advocates or lobby groups are often at the center of these discussions. However, with their proposals, environmentalists seek to care for the environment in such a way that they elevate the environment above man. There are many kinds of environmentalists ranging from more moderate environmentalists to the extreme environmentalists who contribute to climate alarmism.

Wayne Grudem engages with this position in his *Christian Ethics* and identifies some governing principles for it. The first principle is the ideal of "untouched nature." This leads many environmentalists to object to the use of animals or the use of nature for human benefits.⁵ This idea leads to an overwhelming fear regarding the environment and its resources. They are plagued with the fear of damaging the environment, harming animals, polluting the air or water, and depleting natural resources.⁶

The second major principle of environmentalism contributes to the first. This is the problem of humanity. In their minds, humans are the ones, by way of their very existence, who create waste, pollution, introduce invasive species (if they themselves are not one), destroy the environment, damage the atmosphere, and devastate the oceans—all leading to climate change and global warming.⁷

While many of the issues raised by this group have some weight (such as the development and use of renewable energy sources, or the need to plant trees after major building projects, etc.), these groups often make the problem seem more urgent and the consequences more devastating.⁸ By way of summary and evaluation, we might say that environmentalism suffers from an abrogation of authority. As such, environmentalism has the tendency to break a number of commandments.

The first commandment can easily be violated when the environment is elevated to a position that it does not have a claim to.⁹ Often, the environment is elevated to such an extent that it becomes an idol—a false god that steals worship and devotion from the one true God (consider the common expression "Mother Earth"). As such humanity is subordinated to the environment, working to serve and preserve the environment rather than using it to serve others. In this way, environmentalists live in fear—not of the one true God, but of potentially misusing the earth's resources. This is not the right kind of fear that should govern our lives. Rather, we should

fear God and obey His commands, even those that pertain to the care and use of the environment.

This fear leads to breaking the third and fifth commandments. Not using the earth's resources for the glory of God and the betterment of our neighbors is no better than the steward in the parable of the talents who buried his portion until his master's return (Matt. 25:14–30). Environmentalism proposes an abrogation of man's God-given authority (fifth commandment) which denies God's representation and rule to the world by His faithful image bearers (third commandment). Environmentalism, therefore, misses the mark and falls short of fulfilling humanity's obligation to the environment.

Neglect of the Environment: Environmental Apathy

Over and against environmentalism is the perspective that, in my experience, is more common among the Reformed—*environmental apathy*. This is largely the case due to an ignorance of the environment which can either be genuine or willful. This apathy can also be expressed passively or actively.

"Stewardship recognizes humanity's delegated authority and God's supreme ownership over all things as the basis for environmental care. The certainty of new creation is no reason to neglect the environment any more than the reality of being saved is no reason to pursue true righteousness and holiness."

The passive expression of environmental apathy is largely due to consumerism but can also relate to genuine ignorance of man's responsibility to the environment. Consumerism contributes to the amount of waste that is generated as a society. The need to always be following along with the current trends leads to this passivity towards environmental care. Alternatively, environmental apathy can be expressed actively in response to the environmentalist position—a willful ignorance. As such, this leads to an awareness of the environment which has no bearing on one's decisions concerning the environment. In other words, by their lives, they protest environmentalism for its skewed emphases. Either way, environmental apathy—in its passive or active expression—has moral implications and violates many commandments.

However, by way of evaluation, while the case for ignorance may be valid and the desire to avoid the pitfalls of environmentalism may be understandable, such an apathetic response exposes an abuse of authority, which reveals a number of violated commandments. When it comes to ignorance, regardless of if it is willful or not, we bring disgrace on God's name by not faithfully representing Him and caring for His earth (third commandment).

In regard to consumerism (passive expression), this apathy violates the first commandment as it can become idolatrous, elevating material products and possession above God. Furthermore, if we cannot keep our desires for these new material things, we risk breaking the tenth commandment as well. In its active expression, environmental apathy reveals a misuse of our delegated authority, thus violating the fifth commandment.

While these summaries of common approaches to the environment

are brief, the moral and ethical implications are clearly seen. The first question has been answered; Christians do have a moral responsibility to the environment. However, the second question remains and may even seem more unclear: since Christians have a moral responsibility to the environment, what is it?

An Alternative Approach to the Environment: Biblical Stewardship

In answering the second question, the Bible teaches many things regarding the environment and its care. Over and against, the two common approaches above, the Bible provides an alternative: stewardship. Stewardship recognizes humanity's delegated authority and God's supreme ownership over all things as the basis for environmental care.

God: Supreme Authority over Creation

Central to the environmental issue and a right understanding of stewardship is the question of ownership.¹⁰ This question can be answered by looking to the Creator of it. Genesis 1:1 says, "In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth." Another well-known verse speaks of this as well: "The earth is the LORD's, and all its fullness, The world and those who dwell therein" (Ps. 24:1). This truth is known all throughout the Scriptures (see also Exod. 19:5; Deut. 10:14; Job 41:11; Ps. 50:10–11). Furthermore, God's creation of the world speaks not only to His ownership, but also the intrinsic value of creation.¹¹ The opening chapter of Genesis permeates with the goodness of creation.¹²

Man: Delegated Authority over Creation

However, God is only part of the answer to the question of ownership. Genesis 1 also reveals that humanity

owns the creation as well—albeit a different kind (Gen. 1:26–28).¹³ While God lays claim to creation on the basis of His creating power, humanity also lays claim on the basis of delegated power.¹⁴ Psalm 115:16 testifies to this: "The heavens, even the heavens, are the LORD's; But the earth He has given to the children of men."

Throughout the opening chapters in Genesis, humanity's mandate regarding the environment becomes clear. Man is told to "have dominion" over the animals (1:26, 28), to "subdue" the earth (1:28). Man was further told that he and the animals could eat of the plants—herbs and trees (1:29–30). Man was placed in a garden and commanded to "tend and keep it" (2:15). In order to accomplish this vast task of ruling the creation, man was given the command to "be fruitful and multiply; [to] fill the earth" in order to expand the garden.¹⁵ In other words, he was to bring *all* of creation into submission.

Sin: Stewardship After the Fall

Man disobeyed God's command, and he was cursed (Gen. 3:14–19). But this curse extended beyond man to the whole creation (see 3:17–19). However, implicit in the curse on man (and creation) is the reality that man's delegated authority remains. The earth which was subjected to man so that it could be tended and kept by man (Gen. 2:15) ended up being subjected by man in the fall into sin (see Rom. 8:20–22).

Covenant: Creation Preserved Despite Sin

The fall into sin marked the spread of sin to all men (see Rom. 5:12). Man became increasingly evil leading to God destroying the earth with a flood (Gen. 6–9). A major theme running through the flood narrative is God's preservation of the creation despite man's sinfulness.¹⁶ God preserves creation because of man's sinfulness (Gen. 8:21) and because of

the hope of redemption for man and the restoration of the creation.

At this point, it is useful for a discussion of the necessity of preserving the creation for future generations, which has downstream implications upon the sixth commandment. Deuteronomy 22:6–7 establishes this principle:

If a bird's nest happens to be before you along the way, in any tree or on the ground, with young ones or eggs, with the mother sitting on the young or on the eggs, you shall not take the mother with the young; you shall surely let the mother go, and take the young for yourself, that it may be well with you and that you may prolong your days.

Grudem defends this principle well when he writes, “We should not use the earth in such a way that we destroy its resources or make them unusable for future generations. *We should use the resources of the earth wisely, as good stewards, not wastefully or abusively.*”¹⁷

Consummation: Creation Made New

Stewardship also has an eschatological focus. Romans 8:19–22 reveals that the creation “also will be delivered from the bondage of corruption,” waiting eagerly for Christ’s return when it will be restored. Colossians 1:15–20 proves to be a key text surrounding the restoration of creation. This Christological text is a reminder that “All things were created through Him [Christ] and for Him” (1:16). Furthermore, these verses point to the reconciliation of all things—including things on earth—whereby they can glorify Christ perfectly again (1:20). John Jefferson Davis writes on this verse, “Consequently, no plant, animal, tree, forest, or ecosystem can be rightly viewed only in terms of utilitarian value for man, but should be seen by the Christian

in terms of its final purpose to reveal the glory and excellence of the one who created it.”¹⁸ The reality of future restoration motivates humanity in its stewardship of the environment now; the certainty of new creation is no reason to neglect the environment any more than the reality of being saved is no reason to pursue true righteousness and holiness.

Concluding Application

Stott summarizes humanity’s obligation to the creation well: “The dominion God has given humankind is a conscientious and caring stewardship which involves the husbanding of the earth’s resources.”¹⁹ Stewardship must proceed from the same reason as good works, namely, out of gratitude for the grace that has been given. When it comes to practical application, it is difficult to prescribe specific actions that people must do to be faithful stewards and image bearers in this world. There certainly is Christian liberty in this regard.²⁰

The Puritan William Greenhill provides helpful principles here. Drawing on part of 1 Corinthians 7:31,²¹ Greenhill writes, “We may use the world, but not abuse it.”²² Greenhill goes on to list six principles for using the world in the right manner.²³

First, we are to “*Use all things for the end that God has made them.*” Recognizing that God owns all things and has designated a purpose for them, we would do well to use them for that purpose. The ultimate purpose of all things is the glory of God (see Col. 1:15–20).

Second, “*Walk with God in the use of the World and answer God’s call.*” We must seek God’s wisdom as we answer His call in this world. As has been mentioned many times, we have a responsibility to the environment, and we need to apply God’s Word

to our care of the environment in obedience to this calling.

Third, “*Use the things of the world to promote spiritual good in ourselves and others.*” The world should be used as the means by which we can testify of God’s goodness and grace. Meditation upon God’s work in this world—including the environment—and seeking to see Him in all areas of life will prove most beneficial, not only for us but also for those around us.

Fourth, “*Use the world slightly and consider the things of God and my soul as my main business.*” We must recognize that this earth is not all that there is. This reality will help us keep our focus on spiritual matters and can even provide an antidote to consumerism or the temptation to over-emphasize the creation.

Fifth, “*Use the world in moderation, keeping your affections in check.*” We must strive to keep our hearts of the world and the things of this world. Again, this principle provides an antidote to our consumeristic tendencies. Greenhill writes, “Let our moderation be toward things as if they were not ultimately ours.”²⁴ This reminds us to recognize that we do not own this world but have been granted authority over it.

Lastly, “*Give a good and cheerful account to God concerning what we have had in the world.*” We must seek to give a good account of our work in this world. This should stir us on to make sure our emphases are right as we seek to serve God and obey Him, prioritizing the spiritual but not neglecting the physical. This encourages us in our obedience to His command to subdue the earth and exercise dominion over it, keeping Christ at the center. ■

- 1 John Stott and John Davis raise many other issues such as population growth, waste management, resource depletion, deforestation, pollution, and sanitation and clean water. John Stott, *Decisive Issues Facing Christians Today* (Chicago: Fleming H. Revell Company, 1990), 114–17; John Jefferson Davis, *Evangelical Ethics: Issues Facing the Church Today*, 3rd ed. (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2004), 267–69.
- 2 See the *Westminster Larger Catechism* (Q&A 99): “...That as, where a duty is commanded, the contrary sin is forbidden; and, where a sin is forbidden, the contrary duty is commanded...”
- 3 While I am arguing that the third and fifth commandments are at the heart of the Christian’s care for the environment, this does not mean that the other commandments have no bearing on the discussion at hand. In fact, I would also argue that not caring for the environment (or caring too much) can lead to violations of the first, fourth, sixth, eighth, ninth, and tenth commandments. This issue has bearing on at least eight of the Ten Commandments.
- 4 See also *Westminster Larger Catechism* (Q&A 124).
- 5 Wayne Grudem, *Christian Ethics: An Introduction to Biblical Moral Reasoning* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2018), 1102.
- 6 Grudem, *Christian Ethics*, 1104.
- 7 Grudem quotes Paul Watson, an environmentalist, who calls humans the “AIDS of the Earth.” As cited in Grudem, *Christian Ethics*, 1105.
- 8 Grudem analyzes data for common environmental issues (e.g. population growth, food production, pollution, waste disposal, deforestation) showing that things are not as troubling as many environmentalists argue. Grudem, *Christian Ethics*, 1107–163.
- 9 Wayne Grudem writes, “Again and again, ‘untouched nature’ receives a higher priority than human well-being.” Grudem, *Christian Ethics*, 1103.
- 10 “The biblical approach to the environmental issue is to ask this basic question: to whom does the earth belong?” Stott, *Decisive Issues Facing Christians Today*, 117.
- 11 Davis, *Evangelical Ethics*, 270.
- 12 In Genesis 1, the creation is called “good” six times (1:4, 10, 12, 18, 21, 25) and ‘very good’ once (1:31).
- 13 Stott writes that “the earth belongs...to God because he made it, to us because he has given it to us.” Stott, *Decisive Issues Facing Christians Today*, 117.
- 14 “The dominion we exercise over the earth does not belong to us by right, but only by favour.” Stott, *Decisive Issues Facing Christians Today*, 120.
- 15 “This responsibility to ‘subdue’ the earth and ‘have dominion’ over it implies that God expected Adam and Eve and their descendants to explore and develop the earth’s resources in such a way that they would bring benefit to themselves and other human beings.” Grudem, *Christian Ethics*, 1101.
- 16 In Genesis 6:19–20, God gives Noah the command to bring every kind of animal with him, guaranteeing their preservation. The changing seasons are preserved in Genesis 8:22. Furthermore, the covenant God makes in Genesis 9 extends to the creation as well as Noah and his descendants.
- 17 Grudem, *Christian Ethics*, 1102. Emphasis original.
- 18 Davis, *Evangelical Ethics*, 272.
- 19 Stott, *Decisive Issues Facing Christians Today*, 124.
- 20 See *Westminster Confession of Faith*, chapter 20 for a discussion of Christian liberty.
- 21 1 Corinthians 7:31a: “...and those who use this world as not misusing...”
- 22 William Greenhill, *Stop Loving the World*, ed. Jay T. Collier, Puritan Treasures for Today (Reformation Heritage Books, 2011), 33.
- 23 The principles listed are taken from Greenhill, *Stop Loving the World*, 33–36.
- 24 Greenhill, *Stop Loving the World*, 36.

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(continuing article “Introduction to Systematic Theology: God’s Revelation of Himself” from page 15)

As we yearn for that day, we can even now experience something of what awaits us. In the fellowship we have with Father, Son, and Holy Spirit in the economy of his special, redemptive self-revelation, we participate in “things into which angels long to look” (1 Pet. 1:12). This present era of God’s gracious self-disclosure enables the task of theology and ensures that it is not some kind of barren exercise of intellectual speculation, but truly the sum and substance of eternal life.

That life consists not just in knowing about God, but in knowing Him (John 17:3). His revelation of Himself not only makes this possible but a reality in His people. ■

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3. Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2003), 1:619.

4. O That I Had a Thousand Voices by Johann Mentzer, trans. Catherine Winkworth.
5. Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2003), 1:402.

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CRISPR-Cas 9

Is it Worth a *Perfect* Child?



Miss Elsie R. Vander **Kolk**



1st place winner on the
REFORMED FELLOWSHIP ESSAY CONTEST
Undergraduate Category

IMAGINE A CHILD DESIGNED EXACTLY HOW YOU WANTED. Every aspect and detail about this child is according to your liking. This child will be designed without a single disease or mutation coded into its DNA. On top of that, this child could be designed to be very athletic and intelligent. Finally, as the cherry on top, this child could have the exact eye color, hair color, and height that you prefer. What more could someone ask for? Through the use of CRISPR-Cas 9 technology, this perfect design is actually possible. However, one would question, is this ideal perfect child truly ideal? Is this child designed to be perfect in the eyes of God, or in the eyes of man?

According to the Heidelberg Catechism, God created humanity good and in His own image, “in true righteousness and holiness, so that [we] might rightly know God [our] Creator, heartily love Him, and live with Him in eternal happiness, to glorify and praise Him” (HC Q&A 6). Human efforts to redesign this image through CRISPR-Cas 9 risk usurping God’s creative work as we are reminded in Genesis 1:27 (NKJV): “So God created man in His *own* image; in the image of God He created him; male and female He created

them.” Although CRISPR-Cas 9 gene editing can help prevent diseases and genetic mutations, enhance health, and improve the quality of life, Christians should be hesitant to support this new technological movement because of the high cost, lack of reliability, and ethical dilemmas regarding designer babies.

Editing Life

Gene editing has become increasingly common as science continues to advance. Cleveland

Clinic defines gene editing as “the process of altering genetic material.”¹ In recent years, CRISPR-Cas 9 has become one of the leading forms of gene editing because of its simplicity and precision. According to Cleveland Clinic, CRISPR-Cas 9 “was originally identified in bacteria, as a bacterial defense system.”²

CRISPR, or Clustered Regularly Interspaced Short Palindromic Repeats, refers to palindromic DNA patterns repeated many times throughout the DNA sequence. Between each section are short segments of random spacer DNA. Research found that the spacer sequences “matched completely with the bacteriophages, prophages, and plasmids, and the resistance of the bacteria and archaea was directly linked with these sequences.”³ This was a huge breakthrough in the study of CRISPR-Cas 9 because it proved that the spacer segments were related to the “prokaryotic immunity.”⁴ This information was used to transcribe CRISPR fragments into an RNA guide sequence which then binds to

portions of DNA and either alters or deletes them with the help of enzymes such as Cas 9.

CRISPR must be combined with an enzyme to snip the DNA. Often in genetic editing, CRISPR will be paired with the Cas 9 enzyme; however, other enzymes can be used as well. Further, these crRNA segments are modified to match the portion of DNA that needs to be edited. Using this method, crRNA is altered to match that of the diseases or mutations in DNA. The “guide sequence and enzyme” binds to the DNA code of a specific disease or mutation.⁵ The DNA is then altered to eliminate the specific area of code leading to the removal of the disease or mutation. In short, the CRISPR segments bind to specific sections of DNA while the Cas 9 enzyme snips, alters, or deletes that section of DNA.

The Promise of CRISPR

CRISPR-Cas 9 gene editing has many benefits in the health department. Missouri Medicine states that “the CRISPR-Cas system has the potential to aid in diagnosing diseases, preventing their spread, and contributing to potential treatments.”⁶ Through CRISPR-Cas 9 therapies, people can be cured of diseases such as sickle cell anemia and cystic fibrosis. Additionally, scientists have found that “by screening embryos for specific genetic disorders...it may be possible to prevent the transmission of debilitating and life-threatening conditions to future generations.”⁷ By preventing disease at the beginning of life, future generations will be safeguarded from these various diseases and mutations.

Genetic editing also leads to the enhancement of health and a reduced chance of genetic disorders. CRISPR-Cas 9 can alter and design the DNA of an embryo to code for desired traits. As an embryo continues to develop, “genetic modifications

could help increase resistance to certain diseases, improve immune systems, or enhance overall physical and cognitive abilities.”⁸ These early modifications can help a person throughout their lifetime by providing them with ample protection against disease, as well as benefiting them with physical and cognitive advantages.

Finally, CRISPR-Cas 9 gene editing overall improves the quality of a person’s life. Through the elimination of disease and enhancement of health, some say that CRISPR-Cas 9 “may offer the opportunity to enhance the quality of life for individuals by giving them a better chance of being born healthy and disease-free.”⁹ Some even predict that CRISPR-Cas 9 editing will lessen the wear and tear of aging. Stanley Qi, a bioengineer at Stanford University, states, “[M]y hope is that in the future, CRISPR-Cas 9 isn’t just being used to save lives, but also to improve the quality of life when people age.”¹⁰ While eliminating disease, enhancing health, and improving life are all good things, people question where to draw the line in gene editing.

When Medicine Becomes Design

In recent years, scientists have begun using CRISPR-Cas 9 very radically. While gene editing was once used to eliminate disease and mutation in DNA, it has now been developed to program and create the perfect designer children. Parents were able to request phenotypes such as eye color, hair color, and height to be coded into their child’s DNA. However, using CRISPR-Cas 9, embryos can now be altered to achieve characteristics like high intelligence and strong athletic abilities. In an interview, Qi states that designer babies are a “scary topic,” and further development of the CRISPR-Cas 9 technology

may lead to creating a “new human species.” He also mentions that this method “not only affects that single person, but also the children that person could have in the future.”¹¹ Again, this brings forth the question, where is the line drawn for gene editing and designer children?

The Price of Perfection

Additionally, the excessive costs of CRISPR-Cas 9 gene editing leads to greater social inequalities. It has been argued that “designer babies could further widen the gap between those who can afford genetic modifications and those who cannot.”¹² This directs to “a divide between the genetically enhanced and the unmodified population, leading to social inequality and discrimination based on genetic makeup.”¹³ The upper class will be given an even larger advantage over lower-class people who can afford neither genetic editing nor medical help necessary for such diseases. Furthermore, if CRISPR-Cas 9 gene editing was to be made more affordable, it would be immensely difficult to make it accessible to the entire population. While first-world countries could have easy access to these technologies in the future, it will be near impossible to offer it in poorer areas. These hereditary diseases are often found in areas where there is little access to and knowledge of medical advantages. Some sources say that the imbalance is “rooted in structural racism” and that there is “inadequate or biased distribution of health care resources.”¹⁴ While there are good benefits to CRISPR-Cas 9, is it worth growing social divides so a portion of the population can have a *perfect* child?

CRISPR-Cas 9 gene editing is not failsafe, leading to many dead embryos and others that are unsuccessful in their modifications. For example, in an experiment run by a group of Chinese scientists, “of

the 86 embryos...reportedly used, 71 survived for two days. Of the 54 that were tested, 28 showed a genetic change, or had been 'edited.'"¹⁵ With these stats, one would wonder if it is worth the risk. Is it ethical to use a method that "knowingly sacrifices the lives of some to potentially improve someone else's life"?¹⁶ These embryos are commonly seen as objects and variables in a field of experimentation. But, in the eyes of God, an embryo is a life, however small and vulnerable it may be. As the Psalmist declares, "For You formed my inward parts; You covered me in my mother's womb. I will praise You, for I am fearfully *and* wonderfully made..." (Ps. 139:13–14, NKJV). God knows and forms each person from the earliest stages of life (see also Jer. 1:5).

Additionally, several studies have shown that the "CRISPR-Cas 9 system can induce a substantial amount of off-target mutagenesis."¹⁷ This means that if the technology is slightly off in its cuts, it can lead to other diseases or mutations being formed in the genetic code. This off-target effect is one of the most common errors in CRISPR-Cas 9 editing leading embryos to form with mutations that are often fatal. The errors of CRISPR-Cas 9 often cause the death of an embryo, the death of a human life. Is the death of many worth the possibility of a *perfect* child?

Children: Gifts or Products?

Finally, the use of CRISPR-Cas 9 to create designer babies is ethically wrong. Human life is a beautiful gift of God and parents are called "to appreciate children as gifts or blessings" and to "not to be passive in the face of illness or disease."¹⁸ As Psalm 127:3 (NKJV) declares, "Behold, children *are* a heritage from the Lord, The fruit of the womb *is* a reward." A parent should not view their child as their perfect design, product, or instrument, but rather

"A parent should not view their child as their perfect design, product, or instrument, but rather a child is a gift perfectly created by God.... No mere human can design a child in the perfect ways that God does."

a child is a gift perfectly created by God.¹⁹ The Heidelberg Catechism reinforces this by teaching that God sovereignly creates and upholds all life, "since all creatures are so in His hand, that without His will they cannot so much as move" (HC Q&A 28). A child is therefore not raw material for parental customization but part of God's providential order. No mere human can design a child in the perfect ways that God does.

Drawing a line of what is ethically right and wrong when designing a child is exceedingly difficult. Many people question how far is too far. If it is permissible to eliminate disease, then is it okay to design eye color? If it is permissible to design for eye color, then is it okay to code for height? Then perhaps coding for athletic ability and intellect are allowable as well? And so this cycle continues until a parent believes that they have designed their ideal baby. Many argue that "this type of direct intervention threatens to distort our understanding of children as a gift to children being treated as products of choice and intention."²⁰ Not to mention the "unrealistic expectations" that a genetically modified child will then be held to.²¹ A parent will design their child to the standard deemed by society to be perfect. Now imagine the disappointment of a parent when a child is born perfectly healthy but without blue eyes like they expected.

Rather than rejoicing in the birth of a healthy child, they are angry about minor and unimportant characteristics that offset their idea of a perfect child. This is such a flawed way of thinking. In reality, there is no such thing as the *perfect* child. This world is depraved and fallen and there is no perfection apart from Jesus Christ and His love. As Psalm 51:5 (NKJV) reminds the reader, "Behold, I was brought forth in iniquity, and in sin my mother conceived me"; further, Romans 3:23 (NKJV) reads, "for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God." The Heidelberg Catechism expounds on this saying, our original goodness was lost through the Fall, so that we are all "conceived and born in sin," making human attempts to engineer perfection both futile and an overreach of our earthly limitations (HC Q&A 7). This leads one to again ask, is a so-called *perfect* child really worth the risk and struggle?

Trusting God's Design

CRISPR-Cas 9 gene editing has benefits such as eliminating disease, enhancing health, and thus improving the overall quality of life. However, due to the high cost, lack of reliability, and ethical dilemmas concerning designer babies, Christians should not support this technological movement. While the concept of curing and eliminating diseases is good, once one begins genetic editing, it is hard

to draw a line of where to end. Genetic editing is very expensive and is not reasonable for the vast majority of the population, leading to large social divides. Furthermore, the CRISPR-Cas 9 technology is not foolproof or absolutely reliable. While it is simple and precise, many studies show the potential for off-target mutations that are often fatal to the embryo. CRISPR-Cas 9 research sacrifices the lives of many embryos leading one to question the ethics behind gene editing. Is advancement in this field worth the mutilation of “embryonic human life”?²²

Christians must consider the blessing of children perfectly designed by God. Children are a gift, not manufactured

tools or objects. As Scripture reminds us, “Before I formed you in the womb I knew you; Before you were born I sanctified you” (Jer. 1:5, NKJV). Additionally, there is no such thing as perfection in this fallen world apart from Christ. Do not meddle with the design of a child that God has seen as perfect. As the prophet declares, “Woe to him who strives with his Maker!... Shall the clay say to him who forms it, ‘What are you making?’” (Isa. 45:9, NKJV). Rather, consider the gift of life and God’s perfect design, and praise Him for the care and keeping He has bestowed on you throughout your life. ■

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Webinar with Bryce Bartruff and
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November 12, 2026

Reformed Fellowship is pleased to announce we will be holding our membership meeting on Nov. 12 at Bethany URC in Wyoming, Michigan, in conjunction with a webinar presentation by author Bryce Bartruff.

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GOD IS OUR REFUGE AND STRENGTH

*150 Devotionals
Through
the Psalms*

WILLIAM BOEKESTEIN
& ROB VENTURA

Review of

God is Our Refuge and Strength: 150 Devotionals through the Psalms

by William Boekestein and Rob Ventura
(Banner of Truth Trust, 2026)

Dr. Michael R. **Kearney**



WILLIAM BOEKESTEIN AND ROB VENTURA WRITE, “We are not a meditative generation. Frantic busyness is often seen as a virtue.... But those who are close with God discipline their minds to turn to him and his ever-present help” (89). For that reason, Boekestein and Ventura offer contemporary Christians a gift in their book, *God is Our Refuge and Strength: 150 Devotionals through the Psalms*. With this devotional, they join a chorus of voices attesting to the value of the Book of Psalms for the spiritual life of today’s church. Their unique contribution can be summed up in a single word: challenge.

Studying the Book of Psalms is, indeed, challenging. The sheer number of Psalms can impede deep familiarity with the book, and the length of particular Psalms, like Psalm 119, can be daunting. The content and tone of certain Psalms can confuse or trouble contemporary readers, while the stylistic qualities of ancient Hebrew poetry demand interpretive skill. Boekestein and Ventura are able to say something brief and helpful about all 150 Psalms while recognizing the

impossibility of saying everything. Their work provides an accessible field guide to this book of the Bible for dedicated students of God’s Word.

The introduction explores how the Psalms are distinct from the rest of the Scriptures and why they matter for Christians today. Believers often find it difficult to talk to God in the full variety of life’s circumstances. The Psalms challenge our preferences and comfort levels, provide models and inspiration for prayer, lay a foundation for biblical worship, and

increase our love for the Lord Jesus Christ.

Yet the Psalms are also not an instruction manual for spirituality. They rest outside the reach of a pragmatic worldview interested only in “how-to” approaches to faith. The Psalms give utterance to the deepest recesses of the human heart while honoring what cannot be spoken. Additionally, the Psalms demonstrate a divinely inspired ambiguity as they portray both the history of Israel and “the greater story of Jesus who is the true Davidic King and representative of God’s people” (xxi). The authors also acknowledge the uncomfortable character of Psalms that call for God’s judgment on evil persons and regimes. Ironically, the Psalms lose their power for the Christian church when we feel too much at home with them. Their chief purpose is not therapeutic but Christocentric; they serve to reshape self-centered sinners into heavenly-minded saints.

After their succinct but thorough introduction, Boekestein and

Ventura proceed directly into a series of short essays on each Psalm, usually three to five paragraphs in length. The three goals they set for their commentary are “exegetical, practical, and experiential” (xv–xvi). Exegetically, these brief devotions suggest a central theme of each Psalm while interweaving other relevant Scripture passages. The book omits the full text of each Psalm, requiring readers to follow along in their own Bibles or psalters. Throughout, the authors quote individual verses from a variety of translations, from the King James to the English Standard Version to The Message; perhaps multiple articulations give greater insight into the poetry of the Psalms.

Practically, the book is full of accessible and pastoral implications. For instance, commenting on the structure of Psalm 4, Boekestein and Ventura write, “This is the best way to face any trial: Start with God, end with God. Pour out your heart before him, then rest in his loving care. His promises are true, and he will never fail those who trust him” (6). Other summaries include citations that invite further study and heuristic aids that could assist pastors and worship leaders, such as “four faithful responses to

ungodly pride” in Psalm 94 (134). The Reformed tradition is present implicitly and at times overtly—for instance, Psalm 107 is illuminated in light of the three divisions of the Heidelberg Catechism. The book takes for granted that God’s people have historically been a singing people, and it is encouraging to find references to rhymed versions of the Psalms as well as hymns that echo their redemptive themes.

Experientially, the devotional is not saccharine or superficial. Boekestein and Ventura write as pastors who daily feel their own brokenness and the brokenness of the congregations they lead. They are clear that the faith portrayed in the Psalms is not the domain of “jolly and carefree people” (13), and they are not afraid to admit when a Psalm may be “uncomfortable” and “shocking” (61). At times, the applications become repetitive, just as the Psalms themselves recount themes that faithful people know and continually forget: trust the righteous Judge, cry out to God in faith, and pursue wisdom grounded in God’s revelation. The theme of human relationships also recurs, as in Psalms 54–56, where friendship and betrayal are highlighted. In each case the authors treat the Psalms as

sources of direction and inspiration for believers to love God and others more ardently.

Being simple but not formulaic, this devotional is adaptable to a variety of scenarios. For instance, someone could read one Psalm from the Bible each morning and the accompanying commentary each evening. Or a household could sing a musical version of each Psalm while using this book as a framework for family devotions and prayer.

The authors never stray from their central goal: not merely knowing the Psalms, but knowing God in the Psalms. Indeed, the Book of Psalms helps us know God both through doctrinal clarity and through the recognition of what cannot be uttered—what can be only indirectly gestured towards through poetry and song. As the Belgic Confession states, He is not only “good” but “the overflowing source of all good” (Article 1). ■

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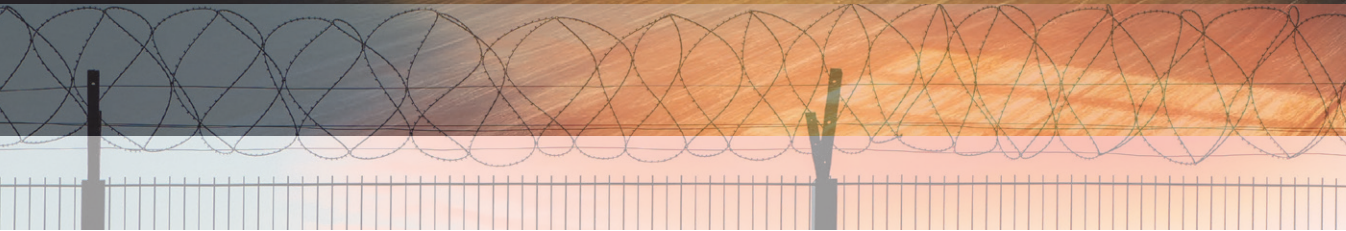


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Divine PROVIDENCE

(6)



Mr. Daniel **Olaska**

Providence Article 6 of 6

The Blessing of Understanding and Believing the Doctrine of Providence

I have greatly enjoyed researching and writing all six of the articles in this series on the providence of God, but, in a way, this last one has been the most fun. This final article is the one I have most wanted to write and share with others the application of all I've presented in this series. It is all about what a blessing it is to understand the doctrine of divine providence.

It seems at first to many like the doctrine of providence is a primarily intellectual matter. This is far from the reality however. In reality, this precious doctrine provides great comfort and confidence to God's beloved children. I want to share that comfort and confidence with you, and that is my motivation behind this entire series of articles.

Smack-dab in the middle of the Sermon on the Mount, the Lord highlights divine providence and provides its eminently practical application, namely, do not worry: "Therefore I tell you, do not be anxious about your life, what you

will eat or what you will drink, nor about your body, what you will put on. Is not the life more than food and the body more than clothing?" (Matt. 6:25). Jesus then instructs us to consider the little birds and flowers, highlighting how the Father takes care of them, meeting their every need. He also points out that worrying after such things is characteristic of the Gentile nations, those who don't know the One true God. Finally, He provides us with the practical application of this knowledge: "But seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness and all these things will be added unto you. Therefore

do not be anxious about tomorrow, for tomorrow will be anxious for itself. Sufficient for the day is its own trouble” (Matt. 6:33–34).

Thus we see that in being aware of divine providence, the child of God can utterly trust in the goodness of His heavenly Father. They need not partake in the worry of the world, a world which has “no hope and [is] without God” (Eph. 2:12b). God sees and meets need. This is especially the case for His beloved children, though of course He sends the rains on the just and the unjust alike. He is gracious and bountiful even towards those in open rebellion against Him. His patience is meant to bring about repentance, it isn’t affirmation of evil. What need is there to worry when “we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to His purpose” (Rom. 8:28)? We aren’t guaranteed to understand how all things work together for our good, but we can know that they do.

Often it will seem that there is no possibility of good coming from a given situation. Take it from me; I am in prison for an incredibly serious and tragic crime. Indeed, the evil involved was all mine; God isn’t the author of sin. I certainly deserve substantial prison time for such an act. There seemed no possibility of good in that situation at the time and for the first bit of my incarceration. However, God has used my imprisonment to bring me back to Himself—from being the kind of man who would earn such a sentence, to the kind of man who can love God for His discipline and share that love with others.

By being aware of divine providence, we can ask ourselves in every uncomfortable situation: what is God seeking to accomplish in my life by this? His purposes are only good and His means no harder than absolutely necessary for any given purpose.

Of course, we can also identify the blessings of God in comfortable situations and praise Him for it, but we can praise God even in tribulation when we understand providence.

In the Epistle to the Hebrews we are shown that: “It is for discipline that you have to endure. God is treating you as sons. For what son is there whom his father does not discipline? If you are left without discipline, in which all have participated, then you are illegitimate children and not sons” (Heb. 12:7–8).

Therefore, in the midst of trials and tribulations the child of God can praise Him for His discipline and seek to understand the lesson His loving Father is teaching. Sometimes, we never see the fruit of this work of providence in this life. Jesus, in the Beatitudes, said: “Blessed are you when others revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you” (Matt. 5:11–12). No doubt, worldly persecutions can build steadfastness in the believer, but primarily the reward of enduring such without sinning in return is not going to be apparent in this life.

As Christians, we are to be constantly aware of the eternal reality of things, though our flesh will tend to lead us to focus on the temporal. There is a beautiful (if limited) metaphor for our perspective in this life in regards to God’s providence. This metaphor is of a specific type of needlepoint art representing life and providence. In such a needlepoint art (take, for example, a picture of flowers), if one looks only at the back, it’s all crazy loops with no apparent pattern or purpose. It’s very messy and not particularly attractive. However, when flipped over and viewed from the front, a beautiful picture presents itself. That beautiful picture is the product of all those crazy loops and

all that seeming chaos. To the artist, those loops weren’t crazy at all, and there was no chaos, rather purpose. This is much how life is. We see the ‘back’ of the needlepoint for now, yet God is the wise and loving artist, and in glory we will see the beauty of all of this life’s crazy loops and seeming chaos. Then we will praise God for His wisdom, grace, and mercy.

I will undoubtedly praise God in eternity for all He does in my life, but already, I thank Him for providentially disciplining me. The life of ease and comfort I previously led only drew me further from Him. My crime was horrible, and I wish more than anything I could take it back. However, despite this regret, I have now come to the point where I can praise and thank God even for my imprisonment. Yes, you read that correctly: I am thankful for my imprisonment. I am not crazy, of course I would prefer to be free, but I am thankful for God’s loving discipline, treating me as a son. I didn’t merit it. I would have earned damnation if left on my own, but I praise God that I am:

Justified by His grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus. Whom God put forward as a propitiation by his blood, to be received by faith. This was to show God’s righteousness, because in His divine forbearance he had passed over former sins. It was to show his righteousness at the present time, so that He might be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus (Rom. 3:24–26).

God has shown me great mercy in imprisoning me and using that to bring me to repentance. Praise God!

I rejoice that God is in control and also that I am held responsible. This means that providence is not an excuse for sloth. God’s ways are as high above our ways as the heavens

are above the earth. He can work through every situation while human decisions are real decisions, our thoughts are real thoughts, and our actions are real actions. In fact, knowing about divine providence, we have all the greater responsibility to act in a manner that pleases our Father.

For those who do not know God's gracious character, the doctrine of divine providence would appear terrifying. Indeed, if all we knew of God was His holiness, justice, and wrath, we should also be terrified by this doctrine. But, those of us who have seen not only God's holiness, justice and wrath on display on Calvary but also His grace, mercy, goodness, and pity, we take greatest comfort in this precious doctrine. The governance and upholding of the entire universe is in the hands of God, who displayed (and continues to display) the greatest love conceivable in the life, death, and resurrection of His Son on our behalf. Rest easy, brothers and sisters, and praise God for His wise and gracious providential work!

Afterword by the Author:

I am very thankful to *The Outlook* for the opportunity to write this series of articles on the doctrine of providence. I am also thankful for the Divine Hope Reformed Bible Seminary, which I attend at Danville Correctional Center, and for all those who support Divine Hope. I am so thankful for the love and support of my family, friends, and church family throughout my incarceration and indeed throughout my whole life. Finally, I am most thankful for the grace God has shown me through His Son, the Lord Jesus Christ. ■

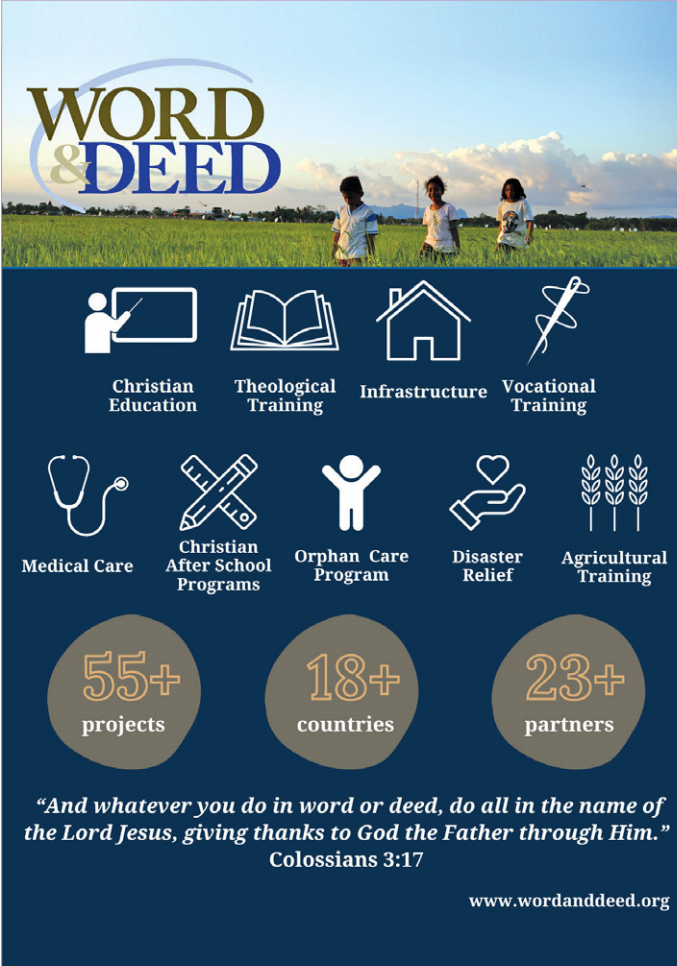
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CHURCH

Membership

BENEFITS OF BELONGING (3)



Rev. Dr. Shane **Lems**

IT'S EASY TO FIND PROBLEMS TO COMPLAIN ABOUT. For various reasons, as I mentioned at the end of the last article on church membership, the spirit of criticism is alive and well all around us. Online forums, social media comments, and video shorts are full of grumbling, protesting, and criticism. I sometimes find myself adopting this critical mindset, so I have to remember to “do all things without grumbling or disputing” (Phil. 2:14 NASB). Instead of complaining in all circumstances, we should remember to give thanks in all circumstances (1 Thess. 4:18). God has given us numerous blessings that we don't deserve. The proper mindset is one of gratitude and thankfulness.

One great blessing that God has given His people is that they belong in the body of Christ. As I mentioned in earlier articles, being part of a church family is a major blessing in the Christian life. We aren't solitary individuals clawing and gritting our way along the narrow path, alone and helpless. Instead, God has rescued

us from evil through Christ's death and made us members of His family. We are brothers and sisters in Christ, fellow members of God's kingdom, and we all equally belong. In the last essay, I mentioned three benefits of church membership: 1) having accountability, 2) having a place to use our gifts to serve, and 3) being

surrounded by Christian examples. In this final essay, I'll list three more benefits of membership in a local church.

1. Belonging

I don't know about you, but I've sometimes been in places where I thought, “I do *not* belong here.” Let's say you won tickets to a hockey or football game. Even though it's not your favorite sport, you go just for the experience. And let's say you're sitting right next to a group of rowdy men who are too into the game, drunk, obnoxious, and vulgar. You're terribly uncomfortable with the situation. As you sit next to these guys, you think, “I don't belong here. This is *not* where I belong.”

Everyone, I think, wants a sense of belonging. This is another blessing of being part of a local church:

you belong there! As a follower of Christ, you are with other followers of Christ and part of His kingdom. In the church, you experience this sense of actually belonging somewhere among people. This sense of belonging is a blessing, and it's an important part of a Christian's identity.

And you, as a believer, literally *belong* in the family of God. You *belong* in the body of Christ. Being involved in the day-to-day life of a local church family helps you sense this belonging. This means you don't have to drift and wander alone. Christ loves you, and you belong with His people just as much as other Christians. You and other believers belong together in the body. We should not think that some Christians do not belong in the church; nor should we think that other Christians belong in the church more than we do.

I'm thinking of 1 Peter 2:9—a well-known verse in which the apostle tells us that we are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation. We are God's special possession. This is true for all Christians. And this sense of belonging to God's special people is best and most fully found in the church. If you stay away from God's people in a local church, it's pretty much impossible to experience what it means to belong to God's chosen people.

One of the many beautiful things about Christianity is the sense of belonging. Even if you have different political views, different hobbies, or drastically different income levels, and even if you're from different backgrounds and ethnicities, you belong together in the family of God. You belong in the body of Christ. He died to rescue you from sin. He gives you His Spirit. We all equally belong to His body as members of one another because there is one body and one Spirit (Eph. 4:4).

A question arises: What if you don't feel like you belong? If you have that feeling, remember that feelings sometimes come and go. Be patient with yourself. Sometimes the sense of belonging comes and goes, then comes back again. Also, remember that you can't always trust your feelings. Our feelings don't always tell us the truth, so don't let feelings run your life.

But still, what if you don't have that sense of belonging even though you're part of a church? I have two answers to the question. First, it could be that your church family doesn't have the strongest fellowship. Churches aren't perfect because Christians in churches aren't perfect. Maybe a local church isn't very good at making people feel they belong in the family. Maybe church members avoid other people; maybe some people in church don't reach out to others; or maybe there are obvious cliques. Sadly, sometimes churches fail to invite everyone to various events. Surely churches can improve at giving people a sense of belonging and being loved. Many churches could be more welcoming and improve on making members feel loved and connected. Members like you can help churches feel more welcoming by being more welcoming.

A second reason you might not feel like you belong in the church family could be your fault to some extent. Maybe you've failed to reach out to people in church to get to know them. Maybe you've been avoiding church functions or leaving the worship service right after it ends. In other words, your sense of not belonging could be the result of some anti-social habits you've gotten into—habits which make it difficult for other Christians to get to know you.

When a Christian lacks a sense of belonging in the body, there are likely several reasons. Although it is an objective fact that Christians

belong to the body of Christ, all Christians must work to help others enjoy that blessed sense of belonging. (Note: Our sense of belonging will be at its highest when we're with the Lord together in glory.)

2. Safety Net

Another wonderful blessing of being a member of a local Christian church is that it provides you with a strong safety net in life. I'm thinking about Acts 2:44–47. In the early church, Christians looked out for each other. Some were needy, poor, and lacking necessities. Other Christians sold some of their belongings and gave the money to those in need. I call that a safety net. Some people had tough times and were struggling, but church members lovingly reached out to catch them in a safety net.

If you're a member of a local church, you have this duty and obligation—not just to hold each other accountable, but also to help and care for one another. In Galatians 6:2, Paul is speaking to the church and says, "Bear one another's burdens, and fulfill the law of Christ." This is not a mere suggestion. Paul isn't saying we should chase money and hobbies and live for ourselves, and with the scraps of time we have left, maybe we should bear someone else's burden if we feel like it. That's not it at all. It's a very clear command: *bear one another's burdens*. It's one aspect of the command to love one another.

As a church family, we're all part of this safety net; if somebody falls, we're all to be there to catch and to help. If you get into a horrible car accident, if you lose your job, or if you struggle with mental challenges, the church family is there to help. Your brothers and sisters are there as a safety net under you. We all know Christians who have gone through very severe trials in their life: excruciating trials that some of us can't even comprehend. But during the trial and after the trial, those

believers said to me, “I couldn’t have gotten through it without the church family. They brought meals, they kept texting me that they were praying for me, and they visited me when I was lonely. I felt so incredibly loved.” That’s the safety net of love that the church family provides.

I once saw a sign that said, “Walk alone, walk strong.” It might look nice on a poster or on X, but that statement is totally wrong. We have to fight this foolish American arrogance that says, “I don’t need any help. I can do it myself.” The truth is, we all need help sometimes. If someone thinks they never need help, they are out of touch with reality. Let’s accept the truth that we all need help from time to time. Even right now, someone reading this might be going through an extremely difficult situation. Maybe it’s so bad that you don’t know if you can go on. If that describes you, please go to someone in your church family for help. Although it might not always feel like it, I am certain that some people in your church family love you and will certainly help you.

Many people are very good at pretending they have things under control and need no help. But in reality, most people don’t have things under control and do need help. Let me say this clearly: there’s no shame in asking for help. The greatest Christians in history needed a lot of help! Don’t think you’re a bother if you ask for help. And don’t forget to look around in your church family to see if anyone needs help. Don’t be so busy with your own schedule and life that you fail to see others in need. Be part of the church safety net.

3. Prayer

Very closely related to this safety net is the blessing of prayer in the church family. Brothers and sisters, pray for one another. This is a bigger blessing than most people realize. Let’s say you weren’t a member of any church.

If you had a serious need, you could probably text three or four Christians to pray for you. That would be a good thing. But if you’re a member of a local Christian church, you’ll have 50 or 100 people praying for you when you’re in need.

Think about this a bit more. Let’s say you end up in the emergency room. You contact someone in your church family and ask for prayer. The prayer request would go out via text or email. In less than an hour, you would have fifty or more people praying for you. We might not think about this much, but having many people praying to God for our well-being is one of the greatest blessings in life. Praying for other Christians and having them pray for you are among the amazing benefits of belonging to a church family.

If you’ve ever been prayed for while going through a difficult time, you know the power of prayer. Someone has told me that the prayers of the church “carried” them through the ordeal. Don’t forget to pray for others in your church family when you get that prayer text or email.

Concluding Remarks on Biblical Membership and Its Blessings

There are certainly more than six benefits of belonging to a local church family. But these six are wonderful blessings: accountability, belonging, a place to serve, a safety net, prayer, and Christian example. Speaking of the blessings of belonging, I also want to mention a helpful book called *How Church Could (Literally) Save Your Life* by Rebecca McLaughlin. Check that book out if you want more information on this topic.

When it comes to being a member of a local Christian church, I know that it’s against American individualism. But, as I’ve argued in these three articles, church membership is a

biblical reality and a great blessing in a Christian life. Those six benefits are benefits you can’t get from chatting with AI. You can’t get those blessings scrolling through Instagram reels all day or spending hours on Facebook. Living online will not benefit you as church membership will. Those blessings come only from being a living, active part of a local Christian church.

This is simply living the Christian life together. It’s a very biblical thing, based on the gospel. As I mentioned in the first essay, church membership has everything to do with what Jesus did for us to rescue us from sin. He didn’t just rescue us from sin and set us off on our own way, but He brought us into His body, where He protects and preserves us. As part of His body, we are gifted to serve one another in Christ-like love. As we walk the narrow path to the Celestial city, we do so together, side by side.

I want to end on the “together” language in Ephesians 2. In this text, Paul wrote that because of Christ’s peace-making death on the cross, *you are no longer foreigners and noncitizens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints and members of God’s household, because you have been built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the cornerstone. In him the whole building, being joined together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord, in whom you also are being built together into a dwelling place of God in the Spirit* (Eph. 2:19–22 NET). ■

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Lord's Day 43: You Can Be Freed from Dishonesty

Rev. William Boekestein



112 Q. *What is God's will for you in the ninth commandment?*

A. That I never give false testimony against anyone, twist no one's words, not gossip or slander, nor join in condemning anyone rashly or without a hearing. Rather, I should avoid, under penalty of God's wrath, every kind of lying and deceit as the very works of the devil; and, in court and everywhere else, I should love the truth, speak it candidly, and openly acknowledge it. And I should do what I can to defend and advance my neighbor's honor and reputation.

IN A RECENT DOCUMENTARY, the host pressed a university professor to truthfully answer a simple question. Eventually the professor objected: "You keep invoking the word 'truth,' which is condescending and rude." Truth is no longer seen as an objective standard to which we should conform; it's now fluid and personal. Instead of reality shaping ideas, ideas now shape reality.

But a relativistic view of truth simply reveals one's preferences and ambitions. And relativism is self-defeating; it insists on the validity of personal truth-claims while denying a standard of verifiable truth. A culture built on lies is as fragile as a castle made of sand.

Scripture teaches a better way than living by our whims and bearing the burden for creating meaning. "The ninth commandment exhorts us to form true representations of all things—of God, the world,

humanity," and "our neighbor."¹ In His gracious act of revelation, God offers us the truth that can free us from ignorance, autonomy, guilt, and the absurdity of ideas divorced from reality.

The Idea of Truth

According to Scripture, truth is the harmony between reality and ideas. We don't create truth and we can't nullify it. Truth simply is. And truth exists because there is a God who created all things and in whom all

things exist (Heb. 11:6; Acts 17:28). Real, dependable, unchanging truth is linked to the reality of a dependable and unchanging God. The universe did not begin randomly but "was created by the word of God" (Heb. 11:3); it is reasonable because it is ordered by a good and powerful sustainer. God is true (Deut. 32:4). His word is truth (John 17:17). Therefore, truth is.

Truth is accessible to us. We can't know things exhaustively as God does, but as a revealer, God delights when His people share with Him a meaningful understanding of how things are. Lies violate God's desire for true knowledge to fill the earth (Hab. 2:14); He wants us to accurately know ourselves, our world, and our Maker. He has built a rationality into the universe so that theories can be developed and tested. Truth

is enduring and unchanging. God's Word can rescue us from ignorance and deception.

Here's the problem. Our ability to discern, delight in, and practice truth has been radically hindered by sin. Because the first sin was brought on by disinformation, lies are systemic to our misery (Gen. 3:4). We imitate the devil when we suppose we can manipulate reality to our own advantage. Every malicious lie has Satan's accent (John 8:44). We do not have the right or the power to change the meaning of what is...but we still try. We give false testimony. We twist others' words. We gossip and slander. We rashly condemn others. We lie and deceive, and we mislabel good and evil. Whenever we choose lies to shield our sins, protect our image, or avoid consequences, we further erode our good conscience. Unchecked, a lying heart is a passport to hell (Rev. 21:8). The ninth commandment exists because lies have poisoned the world.

God wants us to live by what is real and to treat others with that same courtesy. So how do we walk in the way of truth?

The Way of Truth

Truth tellers trust in Christ.

Paul's command to "put away falsehood" (Eph. 4:25) is predicated on learning the truth in Jesus (Eph. 4:20–21). In Adam, we have become enslaved by the lie that we can be like God even while disobeying His will. Every man is a liar (Rom. 3:4). But Christ came to fix this problem. In Him, truth shines light into our deceptive hearts (Jer. 17:9). Jesus told ignorant Pilate, "For this purpose I was born and for this purpose I have come into the world—to bear witness to the truth. Everyone who is of the truth listens to my voice" (John 18:37–38). Jesus is the truth (John 14:6). He calls us to stop distorting reality by pretending that we are

complete in ourselves. He invites us to believe that life's meaning is found in Him in whom all things hold together (Col. 1:17).

Truth tellers "love the truth."

Those who have found truth in Jesus will "[b]uy truth, and... not sell it" (Prov. 23:23). We will rejoice in the truth because it is a reflection of Christ; we will hate lies which are the native language of Satan (1 Cor. 13:6; John 8:44). "A righteous man hates lying" (Prov. 13:5) but loves truth (Zech. 8:19).

Truth tellers practice truth.

Believers put away lying and speak truth with our neighbors (Eph. 4:25). As truly authentic people, we will be forthright so that others will have no cause to question our sincerity. But we will never separate our insistence on truth from our commitment to love. We will speak the truth in love (Eph. 4:15). We will communicate what is real in a way that builds up, "that it might impart grace to the hearers" (Eph. 4:29). "If there is good to be said about anyone, we are to say it."² We will take the time to answer hard questions so that we don't impulsively protect ourselves with untruth. We will refuse to use facts uncharitably or selectively. We will guard the reputations of others believing that their good name "is to be chosen rather than great riches (Prov. 22:1). Because truth is precious, we will protect it from those who would manipulate it for evil purposes (Matt. 27:14); we will refuse to share with others more information than is helpful (Luke 24:18–19) or waste truth on those who hate it (Matt. 7:6).

Truth tellers are rewarded by the truth.

Jesus promised that the truth will free all those who abide in His Word (John 8:32; cf. Gal. 5:1). Believing God's truth justifies us and frees us from the law's condemnation (Acts

13:39). But truth telling can also free us from day-to-day complications like people-pleasing and pot-stirring. Honesty is a sure way to free yourself from the tyranny that sin exercises over an unclear conscience. Who wants to live worrying about how to hold together a long string of lies?

The ninth commandment confronts us with profound spiritual questions: Are we living in bondage to the opinions of men, to the chains of our flesh, to the guilt of lies? Or have we been overwhelmed by God's radical truthfulness and begun to live freely in the truth of Jesus? The ninth commandment technically forbids us from lying in court. But believers steeped in the truth wouldn't even consider it; we've been trained in a thousand little ways to tell the truth. God wills our truth-telling to be a delightful and rewarding reflex. ■

1 Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Ethics*, 2.462.

2 Fred Klooster, *Our Only Comfort*, 2.1024.

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Lord's Day 44: You Can Be Freed from Covetousness

Rev. William Boekestein



113 Q. *What is God's will for you in the tenth commandment?*

A. That not even the slightest desire or thought contrary to any one of God's commandments should ever arise in our hearts. Rather, with all our hearts we should always hate sin and delight in all righteousness.

114 Q. *But can those converted to God keep these commandments perfectly?*

A. No. In this life even the holiest have only a small beginning of this obedience. Nevertheless, with all seriousness of purpose, they do begin to live according to all, not only some, of God's commandments.

115 Q. *Since no one in this life can keep the Ten Commandments perfectly, why does God want them preached so pointedly?*

A. First, so that all our life long we may more and more come to know our sinful nature and thus more eagerly seek the forgiveness of sins and righteousness in Christ. Second, so that we may never stop striving and never stop praying to God for the grace of the Holy Spirit, so that we may be renewed more and more after God's image, until after this life we reach our goal: perfection.

IMAGINE THERE WAS NO TENTH COMMANDMENT. We might pretend to faithfully obey each of the other laws like the rich young ruler did. Jesus asked him about each command from the second table of the law, except for the last. The ruler answered, "All these I have kept from my youth." But when Jesus forced him to examine his desires, he wasn't so confident (Luke 18:18–23).

How can the command that seems the least outwardly harmful be the most revealing? Because our desires, even more than our actions, are basic to who we are. We are what we want. Some of the sins we would never do we desperately *want* to do. A technically "faithful" man might

passionately desire his neighbor's wife. The apostle Paul knew that he was a sinner—that he violated all of God's laws—because his desires were wrong (Rom. 7:7).

Because the tenth commandment demands that we examine our

passions, it also provides an opportunity to test our relationship to all the commandments.

How Does the Tenth Commandment Work?

In condemning covetousness, the tenth commandment doesn't name a new sin. Instead, it warns against "even the slightest desire or thought contrary to any one of God's commandments." "The best way to keep men from committing sin in act is to keep them from desiring it in heart."¹

We might have expected a different answer; such as: God “requires full contentment with our own condition with a proper and charitable frame of spirit toward our neighbor, and all that is his.”² That’s a good answer. It’s wrong to pursue the good desire for intimacy through adultery or fornication, or even to fantasize about such sins. We may not satisfy the noble desire for acquiring wealth by taking what belongs to our neighbor or even by envying his possessions. So moderating our good desires by contentment with our current lot is part of what the tenth commandment requires.

But the tenth commandment also regulates our attitude toward God. Our misplaced cravings reveal spiritual brokenness. Discontent with God was the root of the first human sin. Adam and Eve—having no actual unmet needs—sinned by suspecting that God was withholding something from them, and by acting out that suspicion (Gen. 3:5). They were unhappy—not with their circumstances, but with God. “The highest good of people in this life cannot be obtained from goods” but from God.³ Still, our doubts about His sufficiency lead us to seek satisfaction in what can never satisfy. Wrong desires enslave, the very thing God doesn’t want for His people (Exod. 20:2).

The only cure for covetousness and its rotten fruit is to become satisfied with God and His providence. When we delight in God, we can appreciate what we have without craving more; God is enough for us. The rich young ruler’s external conformity to the law was meaningless because he wasn’t satisfied with Jesus. Only by contentment with God in Christ can we happily “live in the bodies we have, in the houses we own, with the husband or wife God has given us, with the jobs we have.”⁴ Material contentment—the obvious demand of the tenth commandment—requires spiritual contentment.

Because of its summary character, the tenth commandment also provides the perfect segue to evaluating the law’s role in our sanctification.

How Do the Ten Commandments Work?

What use it is to study God’s law if we always come short of its holy standard?

The law leads us to Jesus.

Studying God’s law helps us confirm 1 John 1:8. We sin. We are idolaters, false worshipers, blasphemers, Sabbath breakers, authority despisers, murderers, adulterers, thieves, liars, and coveters. “Nothing good dwells in me, that is, in my flesh” (Rom. 7:18). “We deny not that the keeping of the law is true righteousness: but as no one performs it, and never has performed it, we say, that all are excluded from it, and that hence the only refuge is in the grace of Christ.”⁵ Only by knowing our sin can we hunger and thirst for Jesus’s righteousness (Matt. 5:6), to which the law witnesses (Rom. 3:21; 10:4). Knowing our weakness, we pray for God’s renewing grace, believing that “if we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness” (1 John 1:9).

The law guides believers in holy living.

We cannot “keep these commandments perfectly.” The more we know of God’s law, the more we agree that “In this life even the holiest have only a small beginning of this obedience” (cf. Eccl. 7:20). Still, “with all seriousness of purpose” believers must and do “begin to live according to all, not only some, of God’s commandments.” We can’t do them on our own. We desperately need God to sustain in us this “seriousness of purpose.” We need the Spirit to make sin more offensive and godliness more desirable. With God’s help, we do become

“wholeheartedly willing and ready from now on to live” according to His holy will (Q&A 1).

The law helps us anticipate a sinless eternity.

The law is one way God portrays His purity and the possibility of real sinlessness. Believers long for a life where, both within and without, sin and its desires are eradicated and obedience is complete. In our struggle for faithfulness, let’s remember that there is a glorious finish line. As Jesus finished the race in victory, so will every believer. Christ is bringing a day when the “full deliverance” of the elect shall be perfected. “Therefore we expect that great day with a most ardent desire, to the end that we may fully enjoy the promises of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.”⁶

The law is frustrating because it is perfect. It reveals our guilt because it reflects Christ’s beauty. It tells us we have not yet arrived by describing what life will be like when Christ completes His work in us (Phil. 1:6). No mere creature has perfectly kept the law. But Jesus has. He did so for us, and He’s helping us keep it, too. One day even our desires will finally align with God’s. ■

1 A.W. Pink, *The Ten Commandments* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1994), 63.

2 Westminster Shorter Catechism, Q&A 80.

3 William Ames, *A Sketch of the Christian’s Catechism* (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 2008), 7.

4 J. Douma, *The Ten Commandments: Manual for the Christian Life* (Phillipsburg NJ: P&R, 1996), 345.

5 John Calvin, *Commentary on Romans*, 13:8.

6 Belgic Confession of Faith, Art. 37.

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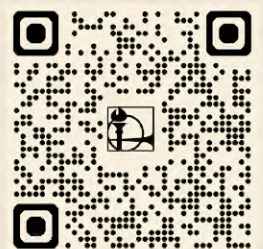


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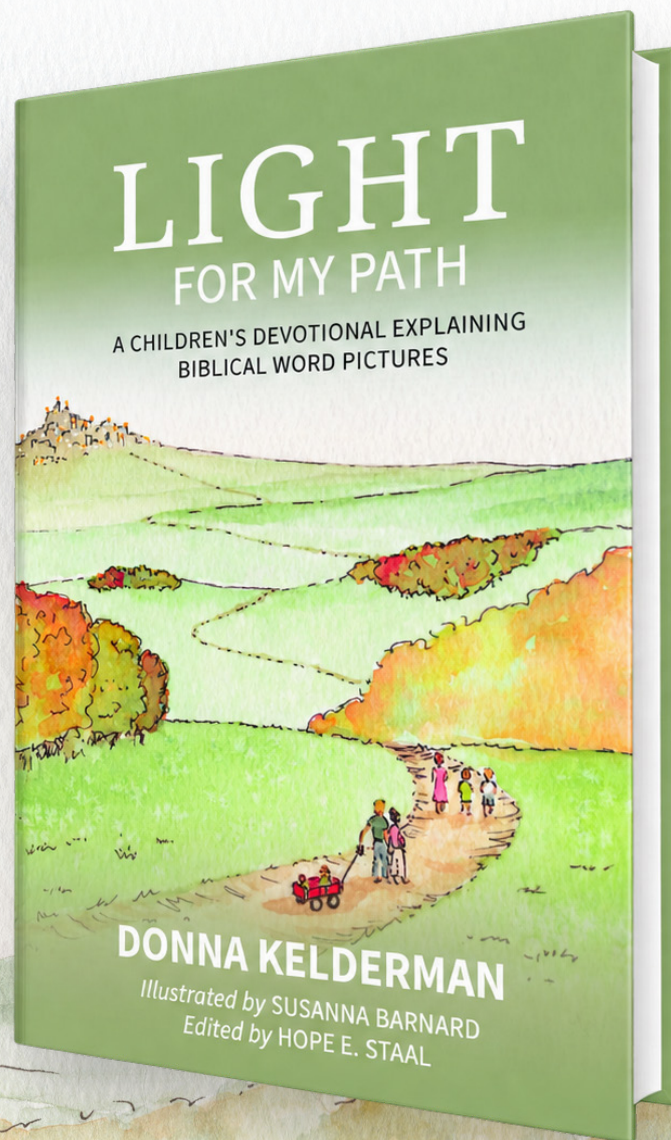
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