

The Standard Bearer

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Passed from Death into Life

We know that we have passed from death unto life, because we love the brethren. He that loveth not his brother abideth in death.

Whosoever hateth his brother is a murderer: and ye know that no murderer hath eternal life abiding in him.
I John 3:14-15

One of the themes of John's epistle is that we love one another as brothers in the church. This is especially emphasized in the preceding verses.

In verse 11 John reminds the church of the message that they had heard from the beginning—that they should love one another. This was the message both of Jesus and of the apostles.

In verse 12 John calls attention to Cain. Cain did not love his brother Abel but killed him. He did so because Abel's works were righteous. Let none of us be as Cain.

In verse 13 John speaks of the hatred of the world for the church. We must not be surprised when the world hates us. But we must not hate one another.

In the verses we consider for this meditation, John indicates that this love that we are to have for each other as brothers is evidence that we have passed from death

into life. One that hates his brothers gives evidence that he remains in death. But when we love our brothers in the church, we may know that we have passed from death into life.

Do you give clear evidence of having passed from death into life?



This passage speaks not just of life and death. The original speaks of *the* life and *the* death, indicating that these are dominating realities in the human race recognizable to all.

Let's start with the death.

This death is the death that fell upon the human race as punishment of original sin (Gen. 2:17). This death consists of physical death, which is the loss of physical life. It includes spiritual death, which is loss of all ability to serve God and the inclination to all wickedness. Finally, this death includes also eternal death, which is the torment of God's wrath in hell.

This death has dominated the history of the world, bringing untold misery and sorrow. Because of the spiritual aspect of death, mankind lives under the control of sin. This is a wasted life of trouble and sorrow. At the end of this miserable life awaits the pain of physical death and the horrors of hell.

In contrast there is the life.

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This life is the life that God provides for His elect people in Jesus Christ.

There are several aspects to this life.

This life is, first of all, a life of loving devotion and service to God. The death that came upon us from the beginning fills us with hatred against God, so that we devote ourselves to sin and rebellion. The life that we receive in Christ is a life of loving devotion to God, so that we serve Him according to His commandments.

Second, this life is a life of friendship and fellowship with God. Those who are spiritually dead are estranged from God. As they devote their lives to sin and rebellion, they know only God's wrath and judgment. In turn, those who devote their lives to God in love find the joy of intimate friendship and fellowship with God so that they live under His blessings.

Finally, this life is an everlasting life. The new life in Christ does not prevent physical death. But neither is this life lost in death. Death rips from us everything that we own, except the life that we have with God in Jesus Christ. In fact, death becomes a means to attain this life in richer measure. Through death our souls will be brought immediately to be with Christ in glory and to serve God in the perfection of heaven. And in the day of His return, our bodies will be raised by Christ and glorified, so that we can live with God forever in body and soul in a new creation.

John speaks of passing from death into this life.

One is passed from death unto life when he leaves death behind and enters into life. Imagine! Leaving death behind and entering into life! What a blessed thing!

This is possible only in Jesus Christ.

We cannot by our own efforts escape death to enter into life. God gave us over to death as punishment for our sins. None is capable of overcoming the guilt of his sin and its terrible consequence of death.

What is not possible with men is possible with God. God in His love delivers us from death. This is the testimony of John in his gospel and in his epistles. In I John 4:9 we read, "In this was manifested the love of God toward us, because that God sent his only begotten Son into the world, that we might live through him." In his gospel, John writes, "For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life" (John 3:16).

From these and other passages we learn that God in His great love for His people sent Jesus Christ to the cross to deliver them from the power of death by making payment for their sins. This serves as the legal basis for their escape from death. Escape from death actually takes place through the spiritual rebirth of which John speaks so much. God transforms His people into His own image, so that they love and serve Him with a new life. Through this rebirth one leaves death and enters into life. It is true that death is still present with us and will be present until the final resurrection. But those born again in Jesus Christ are essentially passed from death to life. The power and hold of death is broken.

This is the salvation of God's people!



One manifests this new life by loving his brethren.

The brethren are those who have passed, with us, from death into life by a new birth. When one passes from death into life by a new birth, he becomes a child of God. This makes him a member of the family of God and brother to all those born of God.

John speaks of loving the brothers of the family of God.

To understand what this love is we must bear in mind that there are two words in the New Testament for love. The one speaks of a love that is based on the admiration and esteem that one has for another and that leads him to seek that person's welfare. The other speaks of an emotional attachment to someone. The latter is the lesser form of love and can be translated "like."

The passage that we have before us in this meditation speaks of the higher form of love.

Loving the brother, therefore, does not mean that we like and appreciate everything about him. Often the brother has mannerisms and character traits that are very unappealing. He has weaknesses that irritate us. He also has sins that can hurt us deeply. Love of the brother does not mean that we are attracted to him in all these things.

Loving the brother does mean, however, that we admire and esteem him for what God has made him to be in Christ with his gifts and devotion to the Lord. Love also means that we seek his welfare at all times. We do this by helping him in his need, even at sacrifice to ourselves. We bear with his weaknesses. Remember, love covers a

multitude of sins. When he sins, we rebuke him. When he repents, we forgive him, even though he has hurt us deeply with his sin. When he struggles, we encourage him and build him up in his faith. And as much as possible we live in friendship and fellowship with him.

This is love, indeed!

This is contrasted to hating the brother. If love is the esteem you have for someone so that you seek his welfare, hatred is to find one disgusting so that you loathe him and seek his hurt.

According to the preceding verses, the world hates the children of God. And they do so exactly because the latter are God's children (v. 13). An example of this is Cain, who slew his brother Abel on account of his righteousness (v. 12).

We also find this hatred in the church. John speaks of one who hates his brother in the church. This hatred can be occasioned by a number of things. It may be occasioned by the righteousness of the brother that is expressed in a confession of the truth, or in a godly walk. Examples could be his proper Sabbath observance, or his refusal to condone some sin. This hatred may be occasioned by unappealing mannerisms and character traits, by weakness of the brother that irritates, or by the sins of the brother that have brought hurt.

This hatred can manifest itself in a number of ways—avoiding the brother, refusing to forgive, holding a grudge, or even striking back in revenge.

Our love or hatred of the brethren is the test of whether we have passed from death into life or remain in death.

Let's look at the negative. Writes John, "He that loveth not his brother abideth in death. Whosoever hateth his brother is a murderer: and ye know that no murderer hath eternal life abiding in him."

There are two thoughts here.

First, one who hates his brother is a murderer. It is not necessary to take the life of another to be a murderer. When one hates the brother in the church, he is a murderer.

Secondly, one who continues to hate the brother does

not have eternal life abiding in him, but rather death. To have something abide or remain in you means that it has established itself permanently within your soul and exerts its power over you. It controls your whole life. One who continues to hate the brother demonstrates that the power of life is not in him but rather death. Death has taken hold of him and controls him. Hatred of the brother is the working of death in one's life.

Positively, we know that we have passed from death into life, when we love the brethren.

We are talking about loving all the brothers in the church. This includes the brother who hurt you, the brother who has annoying characteristics, the brother who has many weaknesses and has even sinned against you. We are talking about loving these brethren day in and day out through all the experiences and trials of life. When we so love the brethren, then we know that we have passed from death into life. This is because the new life that the child of God has in Jesus Christ is a power within us to love the brethren.

This love is not perfect in this life, but it is real and powerful.



All this implies a calling.

Let us love one another.

We often struggle to love some in the church. This is because the work of grace is not finished in us. We all struggle with a sinful nature full of hatred.

And so the Scriptures call us repeatedly to love one another. John even begins this section of his epistle with this calling. "For this is the message that ye heard from the beginning, that we should love one another" (I John 3:11).

Let us give heed to this calling to love the brother.

The strength to do this is God's great love for us.

Then we and all those around us will know that we have passed from death into life. ☺

*Our love or hatred
of the brethren
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Apostasy Revisited— Reflections on an Analysis of the Apostasy of the CRC in the Last Half-Century (2)

As stated in last issue, we intend to reflect on an analysis Robert P. Swierenga gave of the apostasy that took hold of the CRC the last half of the twentieth century, an apostasy that has resulted in members leaving by the tens of thousands and the denomination itself moving in the direction of cutting herself loose from the moorings of the great creeds of the Reformed and Christian faith entirely.

What is presently afoot in the CRC, a move to free its officebearers from the Formula of Subscription by removing its binding power (which consists of a vow made before God and His church to promote the truths formulated in our confessions as being thoroughly scriptural and not to militate against the same), began already in the last part of the previous century. As Swierenga points out, already in the mid-70s clergymen in the CRC such as Clarence Boomsma were lamenting

...a “loss of vigor and devotion in the defense and appreciation of the distinctively Reformed tenets of our faith.” Direct rejections of the doctrines of election and reprobation went virtually unchal-

Previous article in this series: April 15, 2010, p. 316.

lenged by church theologians. At best, the theologians felt confined by their vows of office not to engage in speculative work; at worst, theology and creedal standards no longer mattered. Secularism [!] had taken its toll on the church. Even the Form of Subscription that bound all office-bearers was under attack. In 1975 [Banner] editor Kuyvenhoven called the Form “an ecclesiastical yoke [!] by which orthodoxy is to be maintained.”

Swierenga rightly discerns that Kuyvenhoven used the word “yoke” with a pejorative connotation, indicating that the creeds were not a matter of conviction with many a CRC preacher anymore, but were viewed as restricting preachers’ freedom to exegete the Scriptures according to their own wonderful unfettered insights.

And one of those insights by the late 1990s was, as pointed out in last issue, that a homosexual relationship, as long as it was a monogamous one (which amounts to living with only *one* partner at a time), could also be considered to meet the biblical criteria of faithfulness in marriage, and hence should have the approval of the Lord and His church.

As we know, the broader assemblies of the CRC are presently in

the process of validating that fine specimen of exegesis as being in harmony with the apostolic word.

And all this stated in utmost seriousness, with piety oozing from every pore.

And in the name of the great Bridegroom of the church, mind you.

We ask, when it comes to God’s Word, what honesty is there left?

So the question, where did this great apostasy all begin?

As noted in last issue, Swierenga is of the mind that its seeds were planted back in the mid-1940s, an aftermath of the Second World War—soldier boys and army chaplains coming home with a broader affinity for the world-out-there, and tens of thousands of immigrants arriving from the old country already infected with new theological ideas lifted from the apostatizing GKN (the denomination closely associated with the name of Dr. Abraham Kuyper).

We are convinced that Swierenga, for all his insights, does not go back far enough. The seeds of which he speaks were planted not in the 1940s, but in the 1920s, when the CRC went on record as adopting and approving of a certain theory of common grace. And once those seeds were planted, and those

committed to opposing the error were expelled, the die was cast for the bitter harvest that has followed, that list of errors that Swierenga so accurately records.

Keep in mind that when it comes to apostasy (not only as affecting the CRC but all those Presbyterian and Reformed churches that succumbed to it in the twentieth century) the question is not simply this: What is it that has brought the winds of false doctrine that sweep through a particular denomination, bringing it to its ruin? But the question is, what is it that makes the membership itself so susceptible and open to this change and such fertile ground for the grievous and rotten harvest that follows?

After all, when it comes to apostasy, it is not simply that so many are busy teaching false things (as if that alone explains it), but that so many members prove willing to listen to and then adopt these unbiblical views as their own in the end. The pew, a church's membership, also bears accountability. The pulpit may be used to scatter bad seed, but, let's not forget, for there to be evil fruit that goes from bad to worse, the soil of the membership has to be receptive.

Swierenga's account demonstrates that for the CRC those years of receptivity to fundamental errors and accommodation proved to be the years following WWII.

But what accounts for that susceptibility and receptivity?

We contend, decisions taken in 1924, namely, the three points of common grace adopted in Kalamazoo.

Common grace was a virus let loose in the body of the CRC that

slowly destroyed her immunity to the even deadlier diseases that inevitably followed.

This is not so hard to demonstrate.

One can go down Swierenga's list of the controversies and errors that troubled the CRC over the past half century and demonstrate that common grace has been the gate through which they have, one and all, passed.

From the outset we want to be clear about what notion it is we object to. Contrary to what is alleged, the PRC do not deny that the Lord is a generous distributor of good things and in so doing does good to all. We sing it in our Psalter (#394) and it is thoroughly biblical. The bounties and virile health Esau received in this life were good things. God did good to him. And so it is with every gifted reprobate who has ever lived, especially those raised in a believing family.

If by common grace all one had in mind, as many an old-time Reformed theologian did, was that earthly blessings common to all, namely, the good things of life, constitute proof that God is a God of goodness and abundance, that would be one thing—though even then to equate “good things” with “grace” always carries its own dangers. The impression is left that there is a species of grace for sinners to be found outside the cross and Christ, and that is not a true and biblical thing.

The phrase itself is suspect.

But the common grace set forth in the infamous Three Points, which version is espoused by nearly every denomination today, goes far beyond that.

The version adopted by the CRC

of 1924 was nothing less than an expression of God's favor to (and a love for) every living person. It posits a grace, mind you, that comes to expression in the Holy Spirit Himself operating within every human being, be it in a non-saving way. Yes, the Holy Spirit is posited as being graciously active in carnal man, that is, as working graciously apart from Christ and His cross.

That is quite a notion. It carries a freight of deadly implications. And once it has gathered momentum in a church, it is all but impossible to stop.

History, we say, has demonstrated that this is the doctrine that lies behind the susceptibility of the CRC to what occurred from the 1950s onward.

On the one hand, common grace was the lever used by virtually every CRC teacher of falsehood to introduce his anti-confessional doctrine into the church, and then to justify his doing so.

Why was this?

Because, though the ‘new’ doctrines being introduced might first have seemed to be contrary to the confessions (and in fact were), they were, one and all, compatible with the doctrine of common grace adopted in 1924.

And then who could deny, in the name of wonderful paradox (every false doctrine's best friend), that these doctrines were also essentially Reformed!

As anyone knows who is at all familiar with the history of the infamous Dekker case that embroiled the CRC in the 1960s, one that revolved about preaching a Universal rather than Limited (and effectual)

Atonement, Prof. Dekker's ultimate appeal to justify his contention that "God So Loved—All Men" was to common grace.

It was his Ace of Spades, if you will. "There, you critics, trump that!"

We use the figure purposely. Common grace, after all, was the doctrine the CRC used to justify dancing, attendance at movies, and card playing in years following 1924.

Say what you will about liberals, they know when to play their cards.

To his critics within the CRC who objected that to declare that God loved all men was contrary to the confessions and the doctrine of Limited Atonement, Dekker's response was essentially—"So it may *appear*. But it is in complete accord with what we as denomination adopted in 1924. There we went on record approving of a grace of God to all mankind."

What especially was not lost to Dekker (nor to his colleagues) was that the First Point of Common Grace referred not only to God's distribution of good *things*, but as well to the preaching of the gospel as an expression of God's grace expressed to all men. And since the gospel is the declaration of God's love for sinners, it is a small step in the name of common grace to insist that the cross itself must be an expression of a love God has in Christ for all men in common.

Dekker rightly insisted that what he was maintaining (and what was being taught in Calvin Seminary) was nothing else than the logical conclusion of what had been adopted in 1924.

No less a defender of orthodoxy and critic of Dekker's error than R.B. Kuiper had to acknowledge that there was some truth to what Dekker claimed.

In the May-June 1964 issue of *Torch and Trumpet* Kuiper wrote:

Dekker has contended right along that God loves all men. A few of his critics to the contrary, Dekker is on solid Scriptural ground.... [T] he universal love of God is unmistakably taught in such a passage, among others, as Matthew 5:43-45 [which speaks of God making His sun to shine on the evil and the good - kk] (quoted in the *SB*, vol. 40, p. 412).

What is significant is that Matthew 5:43-45 is a text the Synod of 1924 quoted as proof for the First Point.

Kuiper went on to attempt to distinguish his view from Dekker's by arguing the need to discern some qualitative difference between a particular love and a common love found in God. It was an exercise in futility. For all intents and purposes, he and the conservatives had lost the argument, routed from the field by the lance of common grace.

The same argument was consistently used by those in the CRC who over the years challenged Scripture's historical accuracy in account after account, beginning with the opening chapters of Genesis.

It came to light in the pre-1924 years already, in the Janssen case. Dr. Janssen, trained in the Universities of Europe, home of Higher Criticism and shot through with Evolution, called into question (denied) the ac-

curacy of various scriptural accounts, and in particular the miracles. He suggested 'scientific' (naturalistic) explanations for them one and all. By inference he called into question the biblical creation account itself.

How does a man like Janssen, who claimed to be a believer, justify adopting the theories of unbelieving scholars (and scientists) even when they contradict the scriptural accounts? On the basis of common grace, of course. Unbelieving scientists also have the Holy Spirit, and so may have deeper insights into things than those who originally recorded these very matters under the influence of the Spirit. The Spirit graciously gives deeper insight to unbelievers into sacred events and creation's origins than to mere believers relying simply on God's Word.

This was Janssen's justification for his challenging various scriptural accounts, and it would become the appeal of others within the CRC as well who, on the basis of the findings of unbelieving scholars, would criticize various accounts of Scripture, and the historicity of Genesis 1-11 in particular.

True, Dr. Jansen was condemned. His was the misfortune of being born on the wrong side of the decisions of 1924. By the time Howard VanTil arrived on the scene with his far bolder denial of everything found in Genesis 1-11, the recognition of the deep insights into nature and the origins of the world that the "Holy Spirit of common grace" gave to creation-denying scientists was well established in the new generation of the CRC.

VanTil's position and credentials remained intact.

Common grace had prepared the way for the acceptance of this skeptic of the Scriptures with his unbiblical teachings, something unthinkable fifty years prior.

But common grace does more than open the way for direct assault on biblical doctrines, it is also an assault upon the life of the antithesis. And this for the CRC proved to be their beloved doctrine's deadliest side of all.

In the quotation found at the beginning of this article, Swierenga makes the astute observation that by the 1970s *secularism* had taken its toll on the denomination. Secularism threatens every church and Christian today. But why by the 1970s had it made such deep inroads into the membership of the CRC?

The answer: the common grace perspective had been adopted by its membership. And that PERSPECTIVE (which *perspective* even those of us who claim *in theory* to oppose common grace may have) destroys the antithesis, which is to say, spiritual separation from the world—a saying No! to the world's lifestyle, entertainment, and goals.

Common grace, as has been said, is the bridge between Athens and Jerusalem, the world and

the church. Common grace is what members of the CRC, and its youth in particular, used to justify as valid entertainment for Christians what the world is busy producing for its own carnal satisfaction.

The cat was out of the bag when not only the *Chimes*, the student newspaper of Calvin College, but the *Banner* itself began printing movie reviews, in time recommending even the most sordid and profane to its membership.

On what basis? On the contention that the Holy Spirit Himself is working graciously to some degree in all men.

Imply what? In even the most immoral of films (and culture) things of 'redemptive value' can be found. One just has to have the discerning eye to find it. (As if that's why teenagers go to movies.)

Regardless, common grace provided the justification for being entertained by sin, things that the apostles themselves in Rome's and Greece's corrupt culture could not reprobate strongly enough.

An honest review of what has happened in and to the CRC over the last century leads to one conclusion: in the name of common grace, one can justify just about anything. And, sad

to say, the intellectuals and spokesmen of the CRC for the last 60 years have done just that.

As the editors of this magazine have stated since its first installments back in 1924—*Beginselen werken door!*

For clarity's sake, we add this in conclusion.

Let it be understood that by our remarks we are not alleging that no one in the CRC has been committed to living the antithesis for the past century. The good brother who pointed me to Swierenga's article certainly did even prior to his leaving the CRC, requiring it of his family as well. He was not alone. BUT membership in a denomination means you and your spouse are not the only ones who instruct your children. What comes from the pulpit and is taught in catechism and in one's schools also has a profound effect upon a child's perspective. And where the evil of common grace permeates, the truth of the antithesis is sure to suffer.

What is at stake, as history has proved, is nothing less than holiness, the truly Christian life.

And what is a truer witness to the power of real grace than that?



LETTERS

Clean Mouths

I am writing concerning the article "Just Words?" in the March 15th *Standard Bearer*.

Thank you so much for a perfect sermon about cursing and profanity. It is very moving and convicting. It is a sin of which I have been guilty many times. I have now, after reading this, made a new commitment to conquer this misuse of my own lips.

God bless you for the effort you put into it, and for the reminder at the end that only Christ Himself has the power to conquer this sin and that He is the only hope of our forgiveness.

Pray for me to have a clean mouth the remainder of my days.

Albert Salmon
Moorestown, NJ

A Plain Admission

There is a raging controversy today in most Reformed and Presbyterian churches over the heresy of the federal vision, except in the Canadian Reformed Churches (CanRC). According to two of their professors, in these churches “federal vision is not a raging controversy,” but they sympathize with some federal vision emphases. This came out in the recent interview of two CanRC professors by a classis of the United Reformed Churches of North America (URCNA), as reported in the March 10, 2010 issue of *Christian Renewal*.

The magazine reported that Classis Southwest of the URCNA put sixteen questions, eight of which are recorded in the March 10 issue, to two official representatives of CanRC, Dr. Gerhard Visser and Dr. Jason VanVliet, both of whom teach at the CanRC seminary in Hamilton, Ontario.

Of late there have been on-going meetings between representatives and committees of the URCNA and the CanRC regarding a possible merger of the two denominations. *Christian Renewal* has tracked this possible merger by publishing reports on various committee meetings and printing articles from both sides, both for and against the proposed merger. A number of practical issues have been discussed, such as the song book that will be used, as well as the rather thorny question regarding whether the seminary will be denominational (CanRC) or independent of the denomination (URCNA).

But there is the well-known fact—the elephant in the room—that the CanRC are dependent for their covenantal theology on Dr. Klaas Schilder. This makes one of the questions of the interview almost humorous, if it were not so serious, “How do the ministers of the CanRC regard the covenant theology of K. Schilder?”

Like asking a child how he regards his mother.

The covenant theology of the CanRC should be a con-

cern for the URCNA because the federal vision, which the URCNA is ostensibly fighting, openly acknowledges that its covenant theology is a development of the covenant theology of Dr. K. Schilder.

It is clear from the article’s report of the interview that Classis Southwest URCNA is concerned about the covenant theology of Dr. K. Schilder, that theology as it has held sway in the CanRC, and the connection between that covenant theology and the federal vision. The questions of the classis are about the covenant, the federal vision, and K. Schilder. Among other questions, the classis asked:

1. How is the so-called “Federal Vision” theology regarded in the CanRC? Are there ministers/professors in the CanRC who support this teaching?
5. What is the dominant covenant theology of the CanRC?
8. How do ministers of the CanRC regard the covenant theology of K. Schilder?

The article just as clearly demonstrates that the two professors from the CanRC seminary showed an amazing ability to sidestep the obvious issues. In answer to Classis Southwest’s question, “What is the dominant covenant theology of the CanRC?” they answered,

The dominant covenant theology in the CanRC is expressed in the Form for Baptism.... Of course, because of our history, the teachings of Dr. K. Schilder have had, and still do have, an influence.... Having said that, concerning the covenant, there are a few points we regularly emphasize:

- covenant and election are related, but must not be equated;
- both the promises and the obligations of the covenant should be laid upon the hearts of all God’s people;
- Baptism is a sign pointing to God’s covenant promises.

No Reformed man has a problem saying that his

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covenant view is found in the baptism form, that there are obligations in the covenant, and that Baptism is a sign pointing to God's covenant promises.

No Reformed theologian has ever been so dense as to "equate" covenant and election. Election is an eternal decree. Covenant is a relationship of friendship and fellowship that God establishes with His elect people in Jesus Christ the head of the covenant.

The issue—the issue they adroitly sidestep—is the question of how precisely the CanRC relate covenant and election. If they are related, which the representatives of the CanRC say that they are, then what is that relationship, and even more pointedly, does the eternal decree of election determine with whom God establishes the covenant?

Yet, reading with some discernment, it is possible to see the classic Schilderian and CanRC doctrine of a conditional covenant cut free from the eternal decree of election come through.

Classis Southwest URCNA: "How do the ministers of the CanRC regard the covenant theology of K. Schilder?" The professors answered:

Schilder taught that those who are baptized are really in the covenant. They really receive the promises of salvation, and they really receive the obligation to respond, out of thankfulness, with a new obedience.

Schilder also points out that everyone is baptized with the same Form. We do not have a Form A for elect and Form B for non-elect.

At the same time, those who are properly and legally in the covenant [all baptized children—NJL] also have to appropriate the promises by faith....

Schilder speaks of conditions within the covenant, but he also takes pains to ensure that no one misunderstands this. He says: if you mean by condition "something whereby we bind God," or "something for which God has to wait before He can go on," or "something which we have to fulfill in order to merit something," then, "we say unconditionally: 'unconditional is the password.'" But he continues: "Do you mean by condition something which God has joined to something else, to make clear to us that the one cannot come without the other and that we cannot be sure of the one, unless we are at the same time assured of the other? Then we say unconditionally: 'conditional is the password.'"

Bearing the above in mind, CanRC are not inclined

to speak of an inward/outward covenant or an inward/outward aspect of the covenant. Using that terminology leaves us with the impression that some children of baptism are really in the covenant and really baptized, while others are not...at the same time, this does not mean that we teach that every member of the covenant is *de facto* elect. Not at all! Genuine profession of faith is a very real and important part of life in the covenant.

For the CanRC, all baptized children are in the covenant and really receive the promises of salvation. Not every member of the covenant is elect. They do not teach an inward/outward distinction in the covenant [read covenant and sphere of the covenant—NJL]. There are conditions in the covenant. Schilder may have cleverly defined conditions, but they were conditions for all that: "the one cannot come without the other."

That is a particular covenant doctrine laid out in very plain language. That is a conditional covenant that is dependent on the will of the baptized child. That is the basic covenant doctrine promoted by the men of the federal vision and on the basis of which they teach a conditional election, conditional justification, and indeed, an entirely conditional salvation. Salvation—in the covenant—according to the federal vision is by faith and good works. Salvation is conditional.

It is a covenant doctrine that is not controlled by election because every baptized child is really in the covenant and really receives the promises.

It is a covenant doctrine that teaches that the baptized child who is in the covenant, who is joined to Jesus Christ, and who has received the promise of God can—in fact many do—fall away from the covenant and perish.

It is a covenant doctrine that insists on denying the one distinction that explains how it is that all children of believers must be baptized, but not all children of believers are "in the covenant." It is this distinction between being "in the covenant" and "in the sphere of the covenant" that the apostle taught in all but name only in Romans 9:6: "For they *are* not all Israel, which are of Israel."

It is a covenant doctrine opposed to and incompatible with the truth of an unconditional covenant determined exclusively by God's eternal and unconditional decree of election. All of salvation, including salvation in the

covenant, is determined by the decree of election. This truth every Reformed believer confesses:

That some receive the gift of faith [which is to be “in the covenant” inasmuch as faith is being engrafted into Christ—NJL] from God and others do not receive it proceeds from God’s eternal decree (Canons 1.6).

Instead of this wholly comforting—and God-glorifying—confession that salvation in the covenant is dependent upon the will of God in election, it is a covenant doctrine—terrifying and God-dishonoring—in which every baptized child is in the covenant and receives the promises of salvation, but salvation is conditioned on that child’s work of appropriating the promises by faith.

In the late 1940s and early 1950s the Protestant Reformed Churches (PRC) had a life-and-death struggle with the theology of a conditional covenant as taught by Dr. K. Schilder. That makes the present-day controversy over the federal vision, a movement that openly admits that it is developing the doctrine of the covenant as taught by Dr. K. Schilder, of lively interest to the members of the PRC as well as to other readers of the *Standard Bearer*. That conditional covenant doctrine, now well-developed with its many implications by the federal vision, was officially rejected by the PRC in that controversy.¹ That controversy demonstrated that there is no peace between the doctrines of grace as confessed in the Three Forms of Unity and a conditional covenant, and that churches that will maintain the doctrines of grace must reject the doctrine of a conditional covenant.

Yet again, by means of the heresy of the federal vision, the Lord has brought to the foreground in Reformed and Presbyterian churches the age-old question, Is salvation conditional? That question was faced by Augustine, by the Reformation, by Dordrecht, by some in the Dutch Reformed churches after Dordrecht, and by the PRC in 1953. The answer of all to that question was a resounding, No!

That question must be faced again in Reformed and

¹ For the official Protestant Reformed rejection of that error, one can refer to the document known as the *Declaration of Principles* found in Herman Hoeksema and Herman Hanko, “Appendix,” in *Ready to Give an Answer: A Catechism of Reformed Distinctives* (Grandville, MI: Reformed Free Publishing Association, 1997), 203–233.

Presbyterian churches specifically with regard to the precious doctrine of the covenant. Is salvation in the covenant conditional, or is that covenant graciously established, maintained, and perfected by God with His elect alone? Is the relationship between covenant and election—never equated, but never separated either—that the decree of election determines membership in the covenant?

This brings up the plain admission by the two CanRC representatives before an official gathering of Classis Southwest URCNA.

Question:

How is the so-called “Federal Vision” theology regarded in the CanRC? Are there ministers/professors in the CanRC who support this teaching?

Answer:

Federal vision is not a raging controversy in CanRC like it is in some other federations; this is due in part to the fact that some FV emphases are the ones to which Canadian Reformed people are also sympathetic....

Sympathetic...with those denying sovereign grace in the covenant!

One wonders why the interview lasted for fifteen more questions, unless the men who asked the questions exposing the elephant in the room are unwilling to give up their white elephant—the conditional covenant. The federal vision has shown the cost of maintaining it: a fully conditional salvation and the loss of all the doctrines of grace.


It is a plain admission by the CanRC representatives.

The message is clear. We are not fighting the federal vision; we are sympathetic with some of their emphases. In fact, we wonder what all that hullabaloo south of the border is about.

It is about the covenant and whether God and His will determines the membership in that covenant, or whether man and his will determines the membership in that covenant.

That is serious.

The maintenance of the doctrines of grace—including gracious justification—depends on the answer.

Are we serious about answering that question...and fighting for the right answer? 

Food for Pilgrims

As pilgrims and strangers on this earth, we need food. The food we need is a special food, for it must nourish our souls. The food that the world has to offer is of absolutely no use to us. No matter what the citizens of this earth might present as good for us, it can never provide the nourishment and good health our souls need. In fact, it is poison. It will kill us. The food we need is spiritual. It is the food mentioned in I Peter 2:2, “the sincere milk of the word.” Without it we cannot and will not survive as pilgrims.



Scripture uses a very appropriate analogy when it mentions the spiritual food we need. That food is called “milk.” The reference is to the milk a newborn child needs and receives from his mother.

Under normal circumstances, mother’s milk is the perfect food for a newborn. It provides all the necessary nutrients so that the child will grow and thrive. It is the food that will keep the child healthy. It is the food that makes the child immune to and thus safe from sickness and disease.

That is what the Word of God is to the pilgrim: the perfect food for our souls. There is no substitute for it. There is nothing needed to supplement a diet of the milk of God’s Word. This is what the pilgrim needs, and this alone.

The Word of God, and that alone, will nourish the new life of Christ within us. It alone will give spiritual growth. It alone will cause us to gain spiritual strength and to thrive as children of God in this world.

And this milk of the Word will alone provide the spiritual immunities we need to keep us from spiritual illness. It is the food that preserves us from sins in doctrine and

life. It is the food that keeps our faith from growing dim. It is the food that stops us from wandering from the narrow pilgrim’s pathway that leads to life eternal.

Why does someone err in doctrine? Why do Christians stray? Why does a believer fall into grievous sins? Why do doubts arise in our souls concerning the goodness of God? Because we neglect the Word of God. We need that Word in order to be kept spiritually healthy and strong.

Specifically, we need that Word as it is preached. We need the preaching of the gospel of Christ, through His ambassadors. We need that preaching, for it centers in Christ. He is the content of it, and He Himself speaks to us through it.



The milk the pilgrim needs is very specifically referred to as the “sincere” milk of the Word. The literal meaning of “sincere” is “pure.”

If the milk a baby receives from his mother is not pure, the baby will become unhealthy and could eventually die. If there is poison mixed with the milk, it will kill the child. If the milk is watered down, the newborn will not receive the nourishment that is so essential to good health and growth.

So it is with the pure milk of the Word. If it is poisoned with a heresy or the lie, it will kill. If it is watered down, the child of God does not receive what he needs to stay spiritually healthy and strong. The pilgrim needs the pure Word of God.

This means that we must never desire or be satisfied with preaching that is impure. We must not hunger after or feed ourselves with heresy—either by allowing it to be taught in the church where we are members, or else by joining a church that is unfaithful to the truth. Such preaching is poisonous and deadly.

Sometimes heresy appeals to our old nature. Perhaps we allow ourselves to become weary of the same food we

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have been fed since childhood. We reason to ourselves: "I've heard the same things all my life. I've never heard anything new. And these things are now stale and uninteresting. There's nothing to stimulate my thinking. There's nothing to get me excited about my Christianity. It's time for something else!"

Then a new idea can be exciting. A minister's new insights can be attractive. These things may even appear to be good and right, for they seem to give new spiritual life and zeal.

But any unbiblical element in the preaching of God's Word is dangerous poison. Even if just a small amount of error is introduced and tolerated (a little "common grace," a little "free offer of the gospel," a little freedom to worship God as we please), it will kill and destroy. It would be similar to a mother adding a small dose of poison in the milk she feeds her child. No doubt we would be horrified if a mother ever did that. All the more so ought we to be horrified if this is ever done with the spiritual food of God's children. We must see to it that we and our children desire and are fed with preaching that is, from start to finish, faithful to the Scriptures.



There is also preaching today that is watered down milk. We must not be satisfied with this, either.

I do not have in mind preaching that is heretical, but preaching that is weak. The error is not in what is said, but in what is not said. Certain truths are not preached, because they might not be well received by the hearers. Certain lifestyles are not condemned, because some might be offended.

This can happen because the minister is interested in being liked. He gives in to the temptation to be a man-pleaser. He gives in to the "itching ears" of the people. He preaches only what the listeners want to hear.

This can also happen because a minister does not want to wrestle with the difficult truths of Scripture. It takes up too much time and effort to understand and explain these truths. He therefore preaches only on what comes easy. Or else he preaches only on the truths that appeal to himself personally, his favorite doctrines.

This is just as serious as heresy. It is an attempt to feed the people of God with just part of God's Word, and not with the whole counsel of God. They receive only a frac-

tion of the spiritual nutrients they need to survive. They have an unbalanced diet, and that is detrimental to their spiritual health.

As pilgrims on this earth, we must not be satisfied with this kind of spiritual food. We are to desire and seek the pure, unmixed, uncontaminated milk of the Word of God.



There is one more aspect to this analogy of milk that must not be overlooked: the newborn's desire for mother's milk.

That desire is a strong and urgent one. The child wants that milk, and nothing else. It is really the only thing the child is interested in. The hungry newborn will cry out for milk until he receives it. Only then will he be quiet and content.

In this same way must the pilgrim hunger after the pure Word of the gospel. We should not simply be mildly interested in it. Our hunger must be earnest, and urgent.

Our lives should revolve around the Word of God. That Word should be our delight. The Lord's Day ought to be central in our lives. Nothing should easily prevent us from being in the house of God twice each Sunday. We should want to be there so that as we worship our heavenly Father our souls may feast again from the Lord's bountiful table.

This will be true of us to the degree that we realize and remember that the Word of God is the one food our souls need in order to grow and flourish. In that Word is all our comfort. In that Word is correction. In that Word is instruction. In that Word is the assurance of God's love. In that Word is the gospel of hope and joy and peace.

There is nothing in all the world that will give us even a fraction of these blessings. No measure of wealth and pleasure and success will make our souls quiet, peaceful, and content. The pure milk of the Word is the only food that will satisfy. It is the only food that will enable us, with hope in our hearts, to continue treading the pilgrim's pathway to our eternal home in heaven.

May we always desire and seek after that pure milk of the Word of God. 

Chapter Four

Postmillennialism (6)

The Postmillennial Interpretation
of Revelation 20 (cont.)

In the past, the majority of postmillennialists explained Revelation 20:7-9 as teaching that the millennium will be followed by a final apostasy from the gospel and law of Christ and by a worldwide rebellion against the kingdom of Christ. Towards the very end of history, Satan will be loosed to deceive the nations and marshal them against the church. Among those who taught this final apostasy were the Presbyterian J. Marcellus Kik and the Christian Reconstructionist Gary North.¹ Kik's interpretation of the passage is representative: "For the thousand-year period he [Satan] was bound. He could no longer deceive the nations.... At the end of the millennium period he is again to be released to deceive the nations. That will be a woeful day for the world."²

Recently, prominent postmillennial Christian Reconstructionists Rousas J. Rushdoony and Martin G. Selbrede have rejected the teaching of a final apostasy as pessimistic. According to Selbrede, the millennium of Revelation 20 (which he understands as the glorious reign of the church over all her enemies in a "golden age") will climax in the salvation of every living human. To such a world, Christ will return. No worldwide rebellion against the kingdom of Christ will intervene between the

¹ See the previous installment in this series on the doctrine of the last things.

² J. Marcellus Kik, *An Eschatology of Victory* (Phillipsburg, New Jersey: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1971), 246.

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millennium and the coming of Christ. Selbrede calls his doctrine of the last things "eschatological universalism" and praises it as a teaching of "unbounded optimism." He acknowledges that he is dependent for both the teaching and its name upon the noted Presbyterian theologian Benjamin B. Warfield.

The Optimistic Interpretation of Revelation 20:7-9

Optimistic though this rejection of a final apostasy and rebellion may be, it still must reckon with Revelation 20:7-9: "And when the thousand years [the millennium] are expired, Satan shall be loosed out of his prison, and shall go out to deceive the nations which are in the four quarters of the earth...to gather them together to battle... [against] the camp of the saints...and the beloved city." Even optimism must be "bounded" by the word of God.

Selbrede, the contemporary Christian Reconstruction postmillennialist, relies entirely on Warfield's exegesis of the crucial passage on a final apostasy.³ Warfield's explanation is a denial that the "little season" of Satan's loosing (Rev. 20:3) follows the thousand years in history. Rather, the "little season" is contemporaneous with the thousand years. While the saints are living and reigning with Christ in heaven, Satan is constantly opposing the church on earth. According to Warfield, the binding of Satan for a thousand years (Rev. 20:2) refers to his inability to trouble the saints in heaven. The loosing of Satan for a little season refers to his warfare against the church on earth (during much of the same time that he is bound with regard to the saints in heaven). In Warfield's explanation of the binding and loosing of Satan, time is

³ See Martin G. Selbrede, "Reconstructing Postmillennialism," *The Journal of Christian Reconstruction: Symposium on Eschatology* 15 (Winter, 1998), 187, 188.

not in view. It is a mistake to think in terms of before and after, as though Satan is bound before the millennium and loosed after it.

The chaining of Satan is not in the event a preliminary transaction, on which the security of the saints follows: nor is the loosing of Satan a subsequent transaction, on which the security of the saints ceases. The saints rather escape entirely beyond the reach of Satan when they ascend to their Lord and take their seats on His throne by His side.... But while the saints abide in their security Satan, though thus “bound” relatively to them, is loosed relatively to the world—and that is what is meant by the statement in verse 3c that “he must be loosed for a little time.” ...We must here look on the time-element...as belonging wholly to the symbol and read in the interpretation space-elements in its place.⁴

Although Warfield does not make this explicit, his explanation of Revelation 20:7-9 includes that gradually Satan’s assault on the church during the “little season” (which for Warfield is the entire present age up to the beginning of the “golden age”) will weaken as the gospel converts more and more members of the nations, Gog and Magog. Then will be realized the “golden age,” which will culminate in the conversion of every living human (Warfield’s and Selbrede’s “eschatological universalism”). Finally, Christ will return to a “converted earth.”

Evidently, the “golden age” with its eschatological universalism must be inserted into Revelation 20 between verse nine and verse ten. The falling of fire from heaven upon the enemies of the church in verse nine cannot refer to the second coming of Christ, for according to Warfield and Selbrede no enemy of Christ remains at His coming. But the casting of the devil into the lake of fire in verse ten must occur at Christ’s second coming. The “golden age” of postmillennialism must, therefore, be found between verse nine and verse ten.

This is the exegesis of Revelation 20:7-9 that Selbrede recommends to his postmillennial comrades, who hitherto have been afflicted with the dread malady of pessimism inasmuch as they have allowed the passage to convince them of a final apostasy.

⁴ Benjamin Breckinridge Warfield, “The Millennium and the Apocalypse,” in *Biblical Doctrines* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1929), 655, 656.

Selbrede’s recommendation of Warfield’s exegesis of the passage comes with a high cost to postmillennialism. The cost is giving up Revelation 20 as proof of postmillennialism’s “golden age.” As I pointed out earlier in this series on the last things, Warfield demonstrated that the millennium of Revelation 20 refers to the intermediate state. The living and reigning of the saints with Christ take place *in heaven*, not on the earth. According to Warfield, there is nothing of a “golden age” on earth in the whole of Revelation 20 (Warfield finds the “golden age” of postmillennialism elsewhere in Revelation).⁵ It is very much to be doubted that postmillennialism is willing, or can stand, to pay this cost, even in order to rid itself of the incubus of a final apostasy.

Erroneous Interpretation

Warfield’s interpretation of the loosing of Satan, in Revelation 20:7-9, is erroneous. It is so egregiously erroneous as to betray that Warfield’s exegesis is driven by his postmillennial theology. A loosing of Satan towards the end of history resulting in a worldwide rebellion against the kingdom of Christ contradicts the dearest tenet of postmillennialism, namely, that history must come to a close with an earthly, visible, and complete victory of the Messianic kingdom. Therefore, the loosing of Satan must be explained away, regardless that the explanation violently conflicts with the plain language of the text and regardless that the explanation is burdened with insoluble difficulties regarding other elements of the passage, as Warfield himself admits.

The truth is that the loosing of Satan from his chain and prison *follows* the thousand years during which he had been bound: “When the thousand years are expired (Rev. 20:7).” “When” is a particle of time. The words “are expired” translate the Greek verb that means “were ended,” or “were brought to [their] end.” It is the same word used of the ending of the thousand-year period in verse three of Revelation 20 and there translated, “should be fulfilled”: “that he [Satan] should deceive the nations no more, till the thousand years *should be fulfilled*.” The thought is that Christ has a purpose with the binding of Satan for a thousand years. This purpose is the gathering of the elect church out of the nations by

⁵ See David J. Engelsma, “The Millennium (2),” *Standard Bearer* 85, no. 15 (May 1, 2009): 345.

the preaching of the gospel. This purpose would be impossible of realization, if Satan were not bound and thus prevented from deceiving the nations under Antichrist. Only when Christ's goal, or end, with the thousand years has been reached, in the salvation of the entire church, will He loose Satan for a little season, to do his damndest.

The element of time is very definitely in the passage, both grammatically and with regard to the doctrine.

That the loosing of Satan follows the millennium in time is clearly taught also in verse three. Satan is bound for a thousand years "that he should deceive the nations no more, *till the thousand years should be fulfilled* [that is, ended, in the sense of having been brought to their appointed goal]: *and after that* he must be loosed a little season." Time is everywhere in the text. Time is prominent. Time is of the text's essence. Satan is bound at the beginning of the thousand years. During the long period of the thousand years, Satan remains bound. Only when the thousand years have ended is he loosed: "after that." And he is loosed "a little season [of time]."

In opposition to Warfield's assertion that the little season of Satan's loosing is the same period of time as the thousand years during which he is bound, verse three sharply distinguishes the time of Satan's binding from the time of his loosing. A thousand years is a long time. It is the time from Christ's ascension until shortly before His coming again. In contrast, the time of Satan's loosing is very brief: "a little season" (literally: "a little *time*"; time is in the passage *literally*). And this will be a great comfort to the church that must suffer the consequences of Satan's loosing.

If further evidence of the falsity of Warfield's (and Selbrede's) interpretation of the loosing of Satan were required, it would be that this interpretation forces Warfield to explain the "nations" mentioned in verse three as the elect church in heaven. According to Warfield, the

binding of Satan refers strictly to his inability to trouble the saints in heaven in the intermediate state. When verse three, then, teaches that Satan is bound "that he should deceive the nations no more," the meaning must be that he is bound so that he will not deceive the elect in heaven. Warfield recognizes his problem: "The only real difficulty lies in the word 'nations' [in v. 3]. Should we not expect 'saints' instead—for is it not merely with reference to the saints that Satan is supposed to be bound?"⁶ Halfheartedly, Warfield suggests as the solution to his problem

that "nations" in verse three "may include Christians also."⁷ But he quickly admits that his attempt to explain "nations" in verse three is unsatisfactory. "It cannot be pretended that a real solution of its ['nations' in v. 3] difficulties has been offered in any case; it remains a dark spot in an otherwise lucid paragraph and must be left for subsequent study to explain."⁸

Apart from the usage of the word "nations" elsewhere in the book of Revelation, the word "nations" is used in verse eight of Revelation 20 to refer to masses of ungodly men and women on the earth. The "nations," identified as Gog and Magog, are the reprobate, ungodly enemies of the

true church, whom Satan unites in the little season of his loosing to attack the church. The "nations" of verse three are the ungodly in the world whom Satan cannot deceive during the thousand years, but whom he does deceive during his little season after the thousand years. The "nations" in verse three are the same as the "nations" in verse eight. They are not the elect, believing church, much less the elect in heaven. They are the reprobate wicked, who are always susceptible to Satan's influence. One thing, and one thing only, prevents them from being deceived during the thousand years, and this is Christ's binding of Satan so that he cannot deceive them before Christ has accom-

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⁶ Warfield, *Biblical Doctrines*, 656, 657.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 657.

⁸ *Ibid.*

plished His great purpose of gathering His church.

Warfield's interpretation of the loosing of Satan, let it be noted, completely distorts the prophecy of Revelation 20:7-9. The passage teaches a loosing of Satan towards the end of history that culminates in an all-out, worldwide attack on the church of Jesus Christ. The church will finally be delivered from this attack and from her ancient foe by a wonder. Fire will come down from God in heaven to devour the hordes of ungodly that assail the church. At that time, Satan will summarily be cast into hell. And then the final judgment will sit (Rev. 20:10ff.).

What is the explanation of the passage by Warfield (and presumably by the Christian Reconstructionist

Selbrede)? Satan's attack on the church throughout this present age concludes with the total conversion of the nations, Gog and Magog, that had been attacking the church. Gog and Magog will be saved, to the last man or woman. The camp of the saints and the beloved city will go up on the breadth of the earth, compass the nations that are on the four quarters of the earth, Gog and Magog, about, and successfully evangelize them so that every human then living will be saved. Then will follow a long period of earthly dominion by the saved human race, the "golden age." Where Satan will be during this "golden age," and what he will be up to, we are not told. To this "converted earth," Christ will one day return.

Revelation 20:7-9 is turned on its head. ∞

TAKING HEED TO THE DOCTRINE

REV. JAMES LANING

The Dispensational View of the Rapture (1)

A Pretribulation Rapture

What dispensationalists are especially known for is their bizarre teaching that the church on this earth is going to be raptured into heaven right before the tribulation. At any moment, they say, this could happen. There are no signs that must be seen first. It might be tomorrow. It might be today. A multitude of people are mysteriously going to vanish from this earth. Vehicles on the road will suddenly be unmanned. There will be widespread chaos. And then the period known as the Great Tribulation is going to begin.

Where did they come up with such an idea? How do they attempt to prove this? And why do they desire to teach such a thing? We turn now to consider this strange

teaching and its significance for the whole dispensational system of thought.

What is meant by the "rapture"

The term *rapture* comes from the Latin translation of the Greek word translated "caught up" in I Thessalonians 4:17 (KJV): "Then we which are alive and remain shall be *caught up* together with them in the clouds, to meet the Lord in the air: and so shall we ever be with the Lord." The rapture is that moment when the believers on earth will be caught up to meet the Lord in the air.

This verse, of course, clearly states that there will be such a moment. The question, however, has to do with *when* this will take place. Dispensationalists say this event will take place *before* the Great Tribulation, and seven years or more prior to the second coming of Christ. Furthermore, they say this event could take place at any moment, with no signs needing to take place before it occurs. It is this view of an *imminent, pretribulation*

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rapture that is uniquely characteristic of Dispensationalism.

The root error out of which a pretribulation rapture arises

There are many errors associated with the pretribulation rapture idea, but central among them is the false distinction Dispensationalists make between Israel and the church. Dispensationalists embrace a carnal interpretation of the promises to Israel found in the Old Testament, and they say these promises will not be fulfilled until the church gets out of the way. God's second people (viz., the church), they say, must be removed from the scene. Only then will God return to His first people (viz., the earthly nation of Israel).

Dispensationalists openly admit that their view of a pretribulation rapture is inseparably connected to their Israel-church distinction:

The church and Israel are two distinct groups with whom God has a divine plan. The church is a mystery, unrevealed in the Old Testament. This present mystery age intervenes within the program of God for Israel because of Israel's rejection of the Messiah at His first advent. This mystery program must be completed before God can resume His program with Israel and bring it to completion.¹

So, in their view, God has two peoples, and He has a different "program" for each one. The first program is for Israel, and this program was interrupted when the Jews rejected Christ. Then God started a second program, which involves the gathering of the church out of all the nations. This second program, they say, must come to an end before God will resume His first program. The rapture, then, is that specific moment when the second program (for the church) comes to an end, so that God may resume His first program (for Israel).

The tribulation, in their view, is something that belongs to God's program for Israel. And if it belongs to God's program for Israel, then the church program must end before the tribulation begins.

Dispensationalists make use of their Israel-church

¹ J. Dwight Pentecost, *Things to Come: A Study in Biblical Eschatology* (1958; repr., Grand Rapids, MI: Dunham Publishing Co., 1966), 193.

distinction to get around one of the main verses used to refute the idea of a pretribulation rapture. I refer now to Matthew 24:29–31, which reads: "Immediately after the tribulation of those days shall the sun be darkened, and the moon shall not give her light.... And he shall send his angels with a great sound of a trumpet, and they shall gather together his elect from the four winds, from one end of heaven to the other." This passage states explicitly that elect believers will be gathered together *after* the tribulation. This, of course, directly contradicts the dispensational view of a pretribulation rapture. In an effort to escape the teaching of this passage, Dispensationalists make use of their distinction between two groups of elect saints, and argue that this passage refers to the elect Israelites, not the elect that constitute the church.

In fact, they will acknowledge that if God has only one people, then this verse certainly does refute their position:

Obviously if the word *church* includes saints of all ages and saints are mentioned in the tribulation time, it is futile to debate the question of pretribulationism.²

In other words, Walvoord here is admitting that this passage in Matthew would refute the notion of a pretribulation rapture, if the church includes saints of all ages.

Thus we see that a proper understanding of the truth that the church does indeed include saints of all ages is enough to refute this false teaching concerning a pretribulation rapture. This is yet another example of how the truths concerning ecclesiology and those concerning eschatology are inseparably related.

The time of Jacob's trouble

Even though the truth that there is only one people of God is sufficient to refute the pretribulation rapture idea, it is worthwhile to consider some of the main arguments Dispensationalists use to try to prove their position. Along the way it will be worth noting how these different arguments are often very clearly related to their erroneous Israel-church distinction.

In an effort to make their position appear to be well grounded in Scripture, Dispensationalists list a whole host of reasons why the rapture must take place before

² John F. Walvoord, *The Millennial Kingdom* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1959), 252.

the tribulation. Although it would be quite tedious to consider all of them, it would certainly be worthwhile and beneficial to consider some of the main ones.

One of their chief arguments is that Scripture speaks of a future tribulation that Israel must go through. They frequently cite Jeremiah 30:7–9, which speaks of the tribulation as a time of *Jacob's* trouble: “Alas! for that day is great, so that none is like it: it is even the time of Jacob’s trouble; but he shall be saved out of it. For it shall come to pass in that day, saith the LORD of hosts, that I will break his yoke from off thy neck, and will burst thy bonds, and strangers shall no more serve themselves of him: But they shall serve the LORD their God, and David their king, whom I will raise up unto them.” This passage, they say, refers to a tribulation that Israel—not the church—must go through. This prophecy, they maintain, has not yet been fulfilled, seeing as David has not yet been raised from the dead. So, they argue, it must refer to a future time of trouble for Israel:

The timing of this prophecy is of great significance because it was linked to the resurrection of “David their king whom I will raise up to them” (v. 9). David’s resurrection will be connected with the second coming of Christ and will be part of the resurrection of Old Testament saints which will also occur at the time of the Second Coming (cf. Dan. 12:2–3). This prophecy has never been fulfilled and was part of the revelation contained in many Old Testament passages concerning the restoration of Israel to their land. This prophecy supports the chronology of pretribulationists that Israel must undergo an unprecedented time of trouble before the Second Advent....³

David raised up to rule over God’s people forever

There are a number of problems with this interpretation. First of all, when the passage speaks of God raising up David, it is referring to the resurrection of Christ. David was dead when Jeremiah wrote this passage. Dispensationalists, holding to their “literal” method of interpreting Scripture, argue that this passage teaches that David will be raised from the dead and will once again rule over God’s people in the millennium.

The Scriptures elsewhere, however, refer to David

³ John F. Walvoord, *Every Prophecy of the Bible*, (Colorado Springs, CO: Chariot Victor Publishing, 1999), 138.

reigning over God’s people forever. The reign is not to be limited to a thousand years:


And David my servant shall be king over them; and they all shall have one shepherd: they shall also walk in my judgments, and observe my statutes, and do them. And they shall dwell in the land that I have given unto Jacob my servant, wherein your fathers have dwelt; and they shall dwell therein, even they, and their children, and their children’s children for ever: and my servant David shall be their prince for ever (Ezek. 37:24–25).

Note the explanation dispensationalist Walvoord gives of this passage, and the maneuver he uses to try to escape its clear teaching:

The promise that David would be her prince forever must be interpreted as being fulfilled in the 1,000-year reign. Actually, the word “forever” is a translation of an expression “to the ages” which may be interpreted as forever or until eternity begins.⁴

The Hebrew expression that he says means “to the ages” means literally “to hidden time” and refers to a length of time the beginning or end of which is not defined. It is the normal Hebrew way to refer to forever. Anyone who does a search on this expression will find a multitude of places where it is translated forever, as in the statement that Jehovah’s mercy endureth “forever” (Ps. 138:8), and that God will reign forever (Ps. 146:10). Clearly, Jehovah’s reign and mercy will continue for more than a thousand years.

So when Scripture speaks here of David reigning forever, it is speaking of Christ reigning forever. David was a type of Christ. The name “David” means “Beloved One,” and Christ is the “Beloved One” to whom David pointed. David who slew Goliath will, of course, be resurrected on the last day and will reign with Christ forever. But it is Christ specifically that is referred to in these passages as reigning over God’s people forever.

But what is meant by the “time of Jacob’s trouble”? To what does this refer, and when will this take place? Is there a sense in which this prophecy has already been fulfilled? And is the final fulfillment of this still future? We will begin with this, Lord willing, next time. 

⁴ *Ibid.*, 187.

Royal Children: Set in Families

How blessed in God's sight is the family! We joyfully sing the paraphrase of the very familiar Psalm 128, where the psalmist celebrates its joys and privileges. God intended that, in most cases, royal children should grow and develop in covenant family life. He said in Genesis 2:18, "It is not good that the man should be alone...", and in Proverbs 18:22, "Whoso findeth a wife findeth a good thing, and obtaineth favor of the Lord." He created us to need others with whom we can live in an intimate communion of life. Growing up in a believing family is a blessed privilege, one we often take for granted. Psalm 68:6, in speaking of the blessings for which we praise Jehovah, includes the fact that "God sets the solitary in families"; similarly in Psalm 113:9 we read, "He maketh the barren woman to keep house, and to be a joyful mother of children...."

God is the great defender of the family. While all of the ten commandments address the way we walk in family life, five of them refer even more specifically to our walk there: the second commandment, where we receive by implication a warning regarding failure to instruct our families in the right worship of God, as well as a promised blessing in the way of obedience; the fourth, where we are reminded to teach our children to walk in the rest of the Lord's Day; the fifth, where God commands children to honor father and mother; the seventh, where the foundation of the family in the relationship between husband and wife is jealously guarded; and the tenth, where God commands, "Thou shalt not covet thy neighbor's wife." God reveals to us His special concern for those whom He has taken out of normal family life when He repeatedly tells us that He is the defender or avenger of the fatherless and widow.

We need our families. Perhaps we sometimes think to

ourselves that we would be happier were we not members of the family in which God has placed us. Perhaps we long for peace and quiet, or freedom from interference, or independence of action. Perhaps we even imagine that we could be better Christians were we not required to live with our particular families. In doing this, we set our human wisdom over against the wisdom and goodness of God in placing us in family life or in our particular family, because family life is a powerful means in God's hand to sanctify us.

God Himself established the family when He brought to our father, Adam, our first mother, Eve, as his help, meet for him. Our particular families are formed when God brings together a man and his wife, and then, in His time and according to His wisdom, gives them children. God also ordained that the family, blessed as it is, be for this present time only, in this earthy creation, as an element of the "natural," which precedes the "spiritual." We learn this from Jesus' teaching when the Sadducees tempted Him with the question about the woman with seven consecutive husbands in Mark 12:25: "For when they shall rise from the dead, they neither marry, nor are given in marriage; but are as the angels which are in heaven."

Why, then, does God place us in family life for this life? He uses the family not only to gather and build His church in our generations, but also to teach us through types and figures many spiritual realities. Marriage serves to help us understand the intimate union between our Savior and the church. In the love between parents and children, we begin to understand in a finite way the deep bond of attraction within God Himself as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Families also serve God's kingdom, however, by providing a training ground for the life of the church.

While the church invisible, which endures forever, is made of up individual believers as living stones, there is a sense in which families are the building blocks of the church in her visible, instituted form. What God works in our family lives He does for the upbuilding and welfare of His church. Just as the individual believer never views Himself apart from his or her connection to the whole body of

Mrs. Miersma is a wife and mother in Immanuel PRC, Lacombe, Alberta, Canada.

Christ, so also, as “building blocks” of the church manifested in the world, we do not view our families as little kingdoms to themselves, but as parts of that “building.”

How does God use our families to serve the church? While the preaching of the Word in the instituted church is the central fountain from which all our spiritual life flows, including the spiritual life of our families, it is also true that our family worship and prayer serves to prepare us to worship and pray together in the life of the church. We see this even on a natural level. Children must first learn to pray and sing at home and to sit quietly and reverently during family devotions or worship, so that they may take their place in the worship of the church. This does not end with mere outward forms, but includes learning to listen with comprehension and to respond according to their measure of faith.

The apostle Paul, in I Corinthians 14:35, directs the women of the church to keep silent in public worship and to learn, not by public questioning, but by asking their husbands “at home.” We often emphasize only the negative part of this admonition, but there is positive instruction here as well. Spiritual learning on the part of the wife is to take place at home. If this is true for wives, it will certainly apply to our children as well. We should encourage them to ask questions about what they hear and learn in church and in catechism class, so that we can build and expand upon this spiritual instruction in our homes. This is why God commands in Deuteronomy 6:7, “And thou shalt teach them diligently unto thy children, and shalt talk of them when thou sittest in thine house...”

The family plays the central part in the instruction of children for their place in God’s church. While some aspects of this instruction may be delegated or supplemented, it is, as we see from Scripture, in the sphere of the home that this instruction begins and continues. The book of Proverbs is filled with the instruction, “Hear, my son,” or “Hear, ye children.” While these admonitions certainly have a broader application, they demonstrate that it is primarily the responsibility of the husband and father of the family to see that there is time for this instruction and that it occurs. The mother also plays a vital role, as we see from Proverbs 31:1, where the beautiful instruction King Lemuel gives us is “the prophecy that his mother taught him.” The remain-

der of the chapter is given to us as King Lemuel quoting his mother’s words to him.

There are other ways in which life in the family “building block” serves the life of the church. In the home we learn to subject our wills to those in authority over us, whether as wives to husbands, or children to parents. How will we be able to walk in subjection to the officebearers in the church, if we have not learned this at home? It is in the home also that future officebearers must learn to rule wisely, tempering judgment with mercy, being pitiful, patiently teaching their wives and children to obey them for Christ’s sake, yet humbling themselves to the meanest tasks.

Further, as the body of Christ, we are called to walk together in a bond of brotherly love. We read in I Peter 3:18,

“Finally, be ye all of one mind, having compassion one of another, love as brethren, be pitiful, be courteous: not rendering evil for evil, or railing for railing, but contrariwise, blessing...” How much we need this instruction! How particularly suited the home is for the beginning and continuance of this instruction!

There are at least two reasons for this. First, God puts a natural bond of love in the home, so that in many cases there is some natural affinity or likeness between members of a family. While this can lead to difficulties, as when two members of a family have the same easily irritated or discouraged temperament, it can also be an aid to understanding and empathy.

When we have an almost intuitive understanding of one another because of the natural bond between us, it can help us to give spiritual counsel to one another. Secondly, it is in the intimacy of family life that we are most able to “be ourselves.” Again, this has a positive and a negative aspect. At home, you should be able to share your joys and sorrows most freely; but sad to say, it is also at home that we often reveal our horrible sinful natures to one another most readily. When we are with those outside the family, we seldom reveal this part of us. Thus the family becomes the real training ground throughout our whole lives for brotherly and sisterly forbearance and forgiveness.

None of this comes naturally to us, despite the natural ties that bind us. We must learn in family life to confess our faults and sins to one another and ask forgiveness. Family life is the spiritual proving ground. If we cannot live in love and unity in our families, we will never be able to do so in

*Families
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God’s kingdom
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of the church.*


the house of God. Again, the responsibility for the rule of the home, so that our families may be the “building blocks” that God intends them to be, is laid upon the husbands and fathers. The head of the household is called to be “one who ruleth well his own house, having his children in subjection with all gravity; for if a man know not how to rule his own house, how shall he take care of the church of God?” (I Tim. 3:4, 5).

God calls us in the church to a life of service. It is in the family that we learn to serve one another in love. We serve first as husbands and wives, the husband laboring diligently to provide for his wife, and the wife serving in the home, using well the provision of the husband to care for the needs of the house that there may be an orderly home, clean clothing, and nourishing meals prepared. Later as fathers and mothers we serve our children by caring for their earthly and spiritual needs. The royal children learn at home to serve us, their parents. How we teach our children this service may vary from house to house. There may, for example, be some place for giving, as an incentive, payment for chores done, but it is far more important that our children learn the meaning of the service of love, of, in fact, “requiting their parents” (I Tim. 5:4). We see in I Timothy 5, that, “if any provide not for his own, and specially for those of his own house, he hath denied the faith, and is worse than an infidel.” Thus in this area of service too, we learn to serve one another in the church, as we have learned in the home.

All this makes the lives of our families very important, but important with this end in view, that the instruction is to serve the life of the church. In this connection there are two extremes to be avoided. The first danger is that we neglect our family life because of the general busyness of our lives, even our lives in the church. It sometimes seems that

we must be out of the home almost every evening of the week. We participate in many good, edifying activities that serve our spiritual growth and upbuilding, but if parents are never home with their children in the evenings, or if the young people are out every evening with some good activity, there is soon little or no time for the instruction that must take place in our homes. Family devotions are vital and central to the training, but we must also be at home to teach our children their catechism lessons, to help them through their daily trials, to be there to lead them to confess their faults when they sin against each other, to help them with their homework, and to teach them the service of love.

It takes tremendous wisdom to balance all these priorities, but let us be on our guard against neglecting the time needed for our life as a family. Above all, in our busy lives, let us use well the precious time we have together as families, not squandering it in foolish activities and worldly entertainment.

The other danger is that we turn inward too much and forget that the life of the family is there to serve the life of God’s church. While some have a tendency to be too busy with life outside the family, others make the life and love of the family almost an end in itself. We love our families. We should love to be with our families—the families God has given us in His love as the place where we learn to serve Him and one another, but our true family as children of God is ultimately our spiritual family, the household of faith, the place where we are bound together not by mere earthly ties of blood, but bound together in our heavenly Father, with our elder brother, Jesus Christ. God gives our earthly family to serve our welfare and place in this family—the family of God. 

NEWS FROM OUR CHURCHES

MR. BENJAMIN WIGGER

Congregation Activities

We often read with interest the creativity of our vacant churches in providing the “lively preaching of the Word” for their congregations.

Mr. Wigger is a member of the Protestant Reformed Church of Hudsonville, Michigan.

With the number of vacancies in our churches, it is often a challenge to find supply for Sunday worship services, or the special services that come along throughout the year.

Such was the case at the Loveland, CO PRC in March. They delayed their annual Prayer Day service two weeks to March 24, which allowed their newly installed pastor, Rev. S.

Key, to provide the faithful Word of God.

The Hull, IA PRC, the church that Rev. Key left after ten years, scheduled their Good Friday service for Thursday, April 1, so that Rev. D. Overway, of neighboring Doon, IA, could fill their pulpit.

The Immanuel Fellowship Church of Kalamazoo, MI ex-

tended a cordial invitation to their community to join them for their annual Good Friday service, "The Seven Cross Words of Christ," on April 2. Rev. A. Spriensma, pastor of the Kalamazoo PRC, was one of the seven speakers at this year's service. Rev. Spriensma spoke on the 7th cross word: "Father, into thy hands I commend my spirit" (Luke 23:46).

The Men's Society of the Doon, IA PRC hosted a Combined Men's Society Meeting on Monday evening, March 29. Discussion was taken from Revelation 21, and the Men's Society of the Edgerton, MN PRC moderated an after-recess discussion on Rev. Doug Kuiper's articles in recent issues of the *Standard Bearer* concerning women assisting the deacons.

With thanksgiving to the Great Shepherd of the Sheep, the congregation of the Loveland, CO PRC witnessed the installation of Rev. S. Key as minister of the Word and sacraments. Rev. Key becomes the ninth pastor in the 52-year history of Loveland. Rev. A. Lanning, son-in-law of Rev. Key, led the March 21 service, preaching from God's Word found in Jeremiah 1:9, 10, under the theme, "The Installation of Jeremiah the Prophet." A welcome program was planned for after the evening worship service. The following Lord's Day, Rev. Key preached his inaugural sermon, preaching from Ezekiel 30:1-14, on the theme, "Dry Bones."

Our congregations in Loveland, CO; Faith in Jenison, MI; and Georgetown in Hudsonville, MI had the opportunity on March 28 to lift their voices together with

choirs in thanksgiving and praise as their choirs commemorated the glory of the mighty resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ in song after their evening worship services.

Mission Activities

The Council of the Hope PRC in Redlands, CA recently reported to their congregation on their work in Tucson, AZ. During the month of March, Elder Steve Feenstra and Deacon Darin Gritters took turns accompanying Rev. VanderWal to Tucson to conduct a Bible study with the families there. The last meeting was attended by the four regular families and one new attendee. The Bible study is on the book of Hebrews. The discussions have been going very well, and everyone is well prepared and contributes. The volunteer drivers from Hope have been leaving at 10:00 A.M. on Thursday morning and arriving back in Redlands at 12:00 P.M. on Friday.

The Domestic Mission Committee of our denomination sponsored a seminar held at the Southwest PRC in Grandville, MI on March 23 and 24. The subject of the seminar was, "The challenges of bringing the gospel to those who have little or no knowledge of the truth." Rev. A. den Hartog and Rev. R. Van Overloop each gave a presentation. Both speeches were followed by a panel discussion, with the goal to learn from one another. The panel included the two speakers, our two home missionaries (Rev. A. Brummel and Rev. W. Bruinsma), and Prof. B. Gritters, professor of missions at our Theological School.

While there, Rev. Bruinsma also conducted a class at the seminary on the subject of missions.

Young People's Activities

About 250 young people from the west Michigan churches made their way to the Southeast PRC in Grand Rapids on Sunday afternoon, March 28, for their annual Easter Mass Meeting. Rev. W. Langerak, pastor of Southeast, spoke from I Corinthians 15:58 under the theme, "Abounding in the Work of the Lord." The Young People's Society of Southeast also sang for a special number.

The young people of First PRC in Holland, MI invited their congregation to stay after their Good Friday service for an ice cream social fundraiser.

Young Adult Activities

The members of the Loveland, CO PRC extended a warm welcome to Prof. R. Dykstra and Rev. A. Lanning and the 49 young adults who attended this year's Young Adults Retreat on March 15-18 held at the YMCA of the Rockies in Estes Park. The theme this year was "Receiving Wisdom from Elders," from the book of Proverbs. Rev. Lanning spoke on "The Necessity of Seeking Wisdom from our Elders," followed the next evening by Prof. Dykstra speaking on "Getting Wisdom from our Elders."

Minister Activities

Rev. M. VanderWal declined the call extended to him to serve as pastor of the Bethel PRC in Roselle, IL.

Rev. J. Laning declined the call he received to serve as the next pastor of First PRC in Holland, MI.
Trinity PRC in Hudsonville, MI

extended a call to Rev. C. Haak, pastor of the Georgetown PRC in Hudsonville, MI, to become their next pastor.

Rev. Doug Kuiper, serving our churches in Randolph, WI, received the call from the Hull, IA PRC. ☞

ANNOUNCEMENTS

Wedding Anniversary

■ On May 9, 2010, the Lord willing, our parents and grandparents,

RON and KAY HUIZENGA,

will celebrate their 40th wedding anniversary. "I will sing of the mercies of the LORD for ever; with my mouth will I make known thy faithfulness to all generations" (Psalm 89:1).

- ★ Dave and Jennie Braaksma
David, Hannah, Kimberly
- ★ Joe and Wendy Mancusi
Ellen, Mary, Bethany, Nate, Jane,
Mike, Claire, Billy, Doug
- ★ Adam and Carrie Bosman
Adelle, Neil
- ★ Tedd and Christina Huizenga
Nickolas, Samantha
- ★ Robin Huizenga
Carly

Randolph, Wisconsin

Call to Synod!!

■ Synod 2010 appointed Southeast Protestant Reformed Church, Grand Rapids, Michigan the calling church for the 2010 Synod.

The consistory hereby notifies our churches that the 2010 Synod of the Protestant Reformed Churches in America will convene, the Lord willing, on Tuesday, June 8, 2010 at 8:30 A.M., in the *First Protestant Reformed Church*, Grand Rapids, Michigan.

The Pre-Synodical Service will be held (also in *First PRC*) on Monday evening, June 7, at 7:30 P.M. Rev. S. Key, president of the 2009 Synod, will preach the sermon. Synodical delegates are requested to meet with the consistory before the service.

Delegates in need of lodging should contact Mr. James Holstege, 1359 Spaulding Ave. SE, Grand Rapids, MI 49546. Phone: (616) 285-9073, e-mail: jimholstege@sbcglobal.net.

Consistory of
Southeast Protestant Reformed Church
James Holstege, Clerk.

Check out the
RFPA web page at
www.rfpa.org

Resolution of Sympathy

■ The Men's Society of the Hope PRC in Walker expresses its sincere Christian sympathy to member Mr. John Dykstra and his family in the death of his sister,

MISS RUTH DYKSTRA,

on March 28, 2010. May the brother and his family find comfort in Psalm 34:6, "This poor man cried, and the LORD heard him, and saved him out of all his troubles."

Harry Langerak, President
James Schimmel, Secretary

Reformed Witness Hour

May 2010

Date	Topic	Text
May 2	"The Power and Necessity of the Preaching of the Gospel"	Romans 1:16
May 9	"The Praiseworthy Woman"	Proverbs 31:10-31
May 16	"Jesus' Parting Promise: I Am With You Always"	Matthew 28:20
May 23	"The Pouring Out of the Holy Spirit"	Acts 4:1-4
May 30	"The Intercession of the Holy Spirit"	Romans 8:26, 27