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Volume 83 ◆ Number 7

Uphold Me That I May Be Safe

"Uphold me according unto thy word, that I may live: and let me not be ashamed of my hope. Hold thou me up, and I shall be safe: and I will have respect unto thy statutes continually."

Psalm 119:116, 117

As we begin a new year, it is best that we do so with a prayer. Our text is a prayer for God to preserve us with His promised upholding.

It is our desire to be obedient to our God in this new year. We want to be more faithful in the doing of His will. But we face much opposition. Our obedience is hindered from without: "evil-doers" (115). And the desire to obey is interrupted from within: "vain thoughts" (113). It is the knowledge of the greatness of the difficulty to be obedient that leads us to pray. We cannot faithfully do His will in our own strength or in

the power of our will. So the prayer is necessary. And the prayer is urgent.

Throughout this psalm, as well as in this fifteenth section called "Samech," the psalmist makes sincere resolutions to live not only according to *some*, but according to *all* the commandments of God (Heidelberg, Q. 114). The resolutions found earlier in this section are the following: "I hate vain thoughts." "Thy law do I love." "Thou art my hiding place and my shield." "I hope in thy word." "I will keep the commandments of my God."

In the acute awareness of his spiritual weakness the psalmist accompanies all his resolutions with prayers. His resolutions do not arise out of self-confidence. That is why he told the evil-doers to depart from him (115)—so easily and quickly they are a snare to him. We make our resolves to reject the ungodly and to adhere to God and His Word, but just expressing this sincere desire is not sufficient. We need help—divine help. Therefore

the psalmist salts his resolutions with cries to God for the grace of the Holy Spirit that he may be more and more conformable to the image of God (Heidelberg, Q. 115).

As long as we live on this earth in the body of this death, we in ourselves are as unstable as water. If the angels stand only as they are upheld by God, much more do I, who am pressed on every side with daily conflict and temptation, and am weak and prone to fall, need God graciously to uphold me. Mindful of his weakness, the psalmist commits himself to God's upholding grace.

"Uphold" means to support, and thus to hold up. "Hold up" means to support, sustain, establish, strengthen, and comfort. The picture portrayed in the Hebrew words is that of a mother holding up a little child who is just learning to walk. The child easily falls. He is very unstable on his feet. He is insecure and unsure of himself at such new heights. He even refuses to try to walk unless his mother's hand is holding him up.

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If the mother lets go of him, then he quickly wearies of his ability, convinced that he will utterly fall (Is. 40: 30). He wants his mother's hand holding him up. Only then does he believe that he can walk and not fall.

Likewise does the child of God know that he needs God to uphold him. God upholds His children by working in them to will and to do His good pleasure. He upholds when He opens our eyes to the horribleness of sin and sinfulness so that we repent. He upholds when He strengthens the gift of faith in our complete justification in Christ. He upholds when He manifests again and again His love toward us in that while we were yet sinners Christ died for us.

When we ask God to hold us up, then we are really asking Him to keep the promises He has given in His Word that He will uphold us: "according to thy word." In giving us spiritual life, God promised all that is essential for sustaining that life. We can simply plead the fulfillment of His promise. God has promised that as the days of His people, so would be His strength for them (Deut. 33:25). He has promised that He would never leave us nor forsake us.



The purpose of our requests for divine upholding are two.

First, we desire to be upheld "that I may live." Our physical life must be continually sustained by God in order for us to continue to exist. Spiritually, too, God must continually sustain what He gives. Regenerated life in Christ is given and sustained only by the power of God's gracious favor. To live by faith in Christ the Savior requires God working in us to will and to do His good pleasure.

If God does not hold us up, then we will not live in God's ways and keep His commands. We would fall under the slightest difficulty and collapse under any discouragement. We would certainly

fall away completely and lose our salvation. But when God upholds us, we live. The good work that He began He will perform until the day of Jesus Christ (Phil. 1:6).

And, second, it is only divine holding up that keeps us "safe." The idea of being safe is to be secure in the present and in the future in spite of many dangers and enemies. Safe are all those who are in the hands of Christ, enclosed in the arms of His everlasting love. Safe are all who are upheld with the right hand of Jehovah, supported by His promises and grace, surrounded by His power, sustained by His love, and preserved in Christ Jesus.

Uphold us, Father. Then we will live and be safe.



The fruit of the assurance of divine preservation is the vow to "have respect unto thy statutes continually." When we experience our safety because of God's gracious, upholding hand, then we express our gratitude and joy by continually striving to keep all the tasks God has prescribed for us.

An ungodly response to the knowledge and assurance of God's upholding, preserving grace is that we can live as we please. This is never the response of the sincere Christian. The converted, while knowing that they have only a small beginning of obedience to God's commands, are sincere in their resolution to live according to every one of God's commands. They "have respect unto" God's statutes, that is, look at and upon them, even gaze on them. No one will outwardly keep God's law for long unless he keeps considering it—and this will never happen unless God is perpetually holding his heart in holy love. Nothing more strongly helps us to maintain a constant regard for God's laws than a sense of His love, with its consequent safety and security.

We are resolved to regard God's statutes "continually." Our

striving to obey is a persevering to the end. Being upheld by God's loving and sure hand we desire to walk obediently, not for a while, but for as long as we live.

Another fruit of our being upheld by God's grace is that we shall not be ashamed of our hope. To be "ashamed" is to be disappointed for not obtaining what we hope for. This "hope" is the believing heart anticipating with eagerness and with expectancy the experience of partaking of glory with Jesus. Our hope is based on the promises God has given of the experience of full justification and redemption in Christ. In verse 114 the psalmist said that his hope was founded on the Word. So now he asks for the fulfillment of that Word, so that his hope might be justified in the sight of all. We will be ashamed of anything that comes from ourselves, but never if our hope for it springs from God.

Praise the Lord that our hope will be realized, for we are upheld by God's powerful preserving grace! 

I hate vain thoughts: but thy law do I love.

Thou art my hiding place and my shield: I hope in thy word.

Depart from me, ye evildoers: for I will keep the commandments of my God.

Uphold me according unto thy word, that I may live: and let me not be ashamed of my hope.

Hold thou me, and I shall be safe: and I will have respect unto thy statutes continually.

Psalm 119:113-117

“Penitence and Petition, 2007”

(A Prayer for and of the church, in light of Leviticus 26 and I Kings 8)

Jehovah God of Israel, in heaven above or on earth beneath there is no God like Thee. Great God and Father of Jesus Christ, Thy believing people beseech blessing for the year coming, year of our Lord, 2007, this many years into the age of the new covenant. We, the congregation of Israel, the “city” Thou hast chosen, are from different lands and federations of churches who seek to be faithful to Thee and walk before Thee with all our heart. Redeemed by strong hand and stretched out arm from the furnace of iron, we are Thine inheritance. Thou hast broken the bands of our yoke. And made us to go upright.

For *blessing* we ask. For a powerful word of favor for us, for our children, and for our churches we make supplication on the threshold of a new year. For spiritual dew and rain upon our land. For threshing that reaches to the vintage, and the vintage to the sowing time.

We plead *covenant* blessings. Set Thy tabernacle among us. Let Thy soul cherish us. Have respect to us and make us fruitful. Multiply us. May the women be fruitful in the bearing of spiritual children: sons as plants grown up in their youth, daughters as corner stones, polished after the similitude of a palace.

We entreat for victory. For strength to chase the enemies so they fall by the sword of Thy Spirit. For five chasing a hundred, and a hundred putting ten thousand to flight. We ask for faith, the victory over the world.

Walk among us. Be our God; assure us that we are Thy people, apple of Thine eye. Open Thine eyes toward us night and day. O God, bless, be gracious. Show mercy.



Father, although some of us are eating bread of heaven to the full, others of us are famished with spiritual famine. Famine of the Word. No rain falls. Pestilence, blasting, mildew, locusts, caterpillars ravage the lands.... Sermons are without truth, light, joy, life. Or, though true, unaccompanied by the dew of the Spirit to make them fruitful unto assurance and holiness.

Some have had rain in due season so that the land yielded her increase, others among us have sown their seed in vain. What fruit, Lord, from evangelism? Enemies eat the harvest. What converts from missions? Where the new congregations? The trees bear little fruit ... spiritually.

It is worse, Lord. Although some of us dwell safely, have peace in their land, and lie down without fear, others are carried away into strange lands. By wild beasts parents are robbed of their children. Others fall into the hands of the enemy. Instead of growing, fellowships become fewer in number; communion of the saints languishes. Even the church’s mighty men are smitten down before the enemies.

Though some rejoice, some are brought very low.

Under Thy heavy hand.

We recognize chastisements. Thy hand comes upon Thy people.



Is this a quarrel of Thy covenant? Art Thou walking contrary to us? Because we have not been reformed by the lesser afflictions, is now Thy face set against us?

We know, Father, that at times Thy dear people suffer afflictions as Thy judgments fall upon the world among whom they live. Because of idolatry and filthiness and foolish talking, uncleanness and covetousness, “the wrath of God falls upon the children of disobedience.” Thy people suffer in those days of visitation too.

But Thy heavy hand...O, it is a hand of love!... also falls upon the disobedience of Thy people. Has Thine anger delivered us to the enemy? Because of our guilt are we afflicted?

Search us, Lord, and know our hearts. Try us, and know our thoughts. See if there be any wicked way in us. Speak, Lord. Thy servants hear.



If heaven is shut up because of our iniquities, Father, show them to us.

Is it our breaking of Thy covenant: not doing all Thy commandments, despising Thy good statutes, abhorring Thy judgments?

We have trespassed against our neighbor, our unbelieving neighbors and our believing but sinning neighbors; we have not loved them as we have loved ourselves, have allowed their sins (and ours) to come between us and them. But Thy statutes call us first to love Thee ... with all our hearts. We have served other gods, loved them, found pleasure and satisfaction in them. The gods of this world. We have bowed down to gods of stone and the standing images of filthy lucre, of the uncleanness of Baal-Peor, of Sloth. ...and all the forms of the god Man, the ubiquitous Antichristian monument "666."

We have sinned, and done perversely, and committed wickedness.

We acknowledge pride.

We confess the plague of our own hearts.

We are humbled by the perversity of our uncircumcised hearts.

Who is there that does not go wrong? None is without sin.



Covenant-keeping Father, forgive. We bethink ourselves in the ways of our captivity, repent, and make supplication. With all our heart and all our soul we make supplication. Our uncircumcised hearts are humbled... we accept of the punishment of our iniquity. Remember thy covenant; remember thy land; remember Thy people. Cast us not away; destroy us not utterly; do not abhor us. Jehovah, be our God.

Make Thine afflictions profitable for Thy children.

Take away our guilt; impute to us righteousness. Hear thou in heaven, and forgive. Hearken to our cry and to our prayer.

Not for our sakes, but for the sake of Thy servant, Jesus Christ. In His name we pray. The glorious King of Peace of Whom Solomon (whose prayer here we follow) was beautiful type. Toward Thy house we pray, with

eyes of our faith on the Holy Priest. And His perfect sacrifice. Assured that in Him, in Him alone, in His works and worth, we may be heard. In the name of the great Son, come forth from David's loins.

For His sake, and Thy name in Him, give us spiritual rain in due season. Have respect unto us. Make us fruitful. Allow our work to yield the increase of knowledge of Thee in Jesus Christ. No longer make us stoop under the load of sin. We sow in tears, many; may we reap in joy, soon.

Make the preaching fruitful unto many good works in the lives of us and our children. Bless the Word unto the gathering of many into the fellowships of saints—in many lands. By that gospel, encourage the scattered saints; bring them into good fellowships of believers. Give peace in the churches. Unite the divided. Heal the wounds. Lift up those cast down. Restore the wayward. Forgive the disobedient. Cast down our idols. Cause us to return.

Rescue our children from the teeth of beasts; give them to their families again. Restore them to Thyself. Give them Thy peace. Prepare them for battle. Enable them to be discerning of good and evil. Incline them to love the good and pure. Cleanse their hearts and hands. Make them shining lights.

Raise up our sons to be mighty soldiers of war. Before all else, implant in them new, humble hearts. May our sons be godly, men after Thy own heart. Whose hands also are clean. Faithful men. Then, appoint some to be standard bearers before the gathered hosts of Jesus Christ; others to be trumpet-blowers who sound no uncertain sound to warn of enemies... and direct us toward the promised land. Teach them (and us all) skillfully to wield the sword of the Spirit, the powerful Word of God. It is able not only to make us wise unto salvation but to put

the enemies to flight and dismay. With that sword, a few shall again put many to flight. "One little word shall fell them."

Grant us daughters, Father, many of them. Bless them with covenant wisdom and godliness. With hearts like Sarah's, the courage of Deborah, the charity and mercy of Tabitha. Give them Priscilla's aptitude to teach, the bold cunning of Shiphrah and Puah, Ruth-like determination in the face of hopeless circumstances. The sacrificial spirit of Hannah ("I have lent him to the Lord"). The hospitality of Elijah's hostess. The prayers, hope, and fullness of joy of Anna.

And under Thy preserving power, may all the churches' mighty men stand strong.

We believe, Father. Help our unbelief. Give us assurance of answer to these prayers. Enable us to pray with confidence. Grant us not to look at ourselves, but at the perfect obedience, the works and worth of Jesus Christ, who loved us and gave Himself for us.



As old-covenant Israel awaited the coming of the Son of David, we await His coming again. In this, the year of our Lord 2007, may the hope of His coming be increased in our hearts. Quicken in us a desire for redemption. By Thy grace, lift up our heads and hearts to wait for Him in the heavens. In these dark days, give us the Light. Life. Joy. Christ.

Blessed be Thy name, who hast given us rest according to all Thy promises! May not one of them fail! Lord our God, be with us, as Thou wast with our Fathers; leave us not, nor forsake us. Incline our hearts unto thee. Maintain the cause of Christ, and of His servants, the church.

That all the people of the earth may know that Thou, Jehovah, art God. There is none else. We love Thee.

In Jesus Christ, AMEN.

The Prophecy of Malachi (13)

Covenant Faithfulness and Unfaithfulness

The Fourth Disputation: Chapter 2:17-3:6 (continued)

3. *And he shall sit as a refiner and purifier of silver: and he shall purify the sons of Levi, and purge them as gold and silver, that they may offer unto the LORD an offering in righteousness.*

Here Malachi speaks in further detail of Christ's work as Savior under the figure of a refiner of gold and silver, but adds something about the ultimate purpose of His work as refiner and shows that it will be "the sons of Levi" who are purified by Him.

Who are these sons of Levi? In the Old Testament, of course, they were the Aaronitic priesthood and the rest of the tribe of Levi, including the temple singers, porters, and others who assisted the priests in their work. Even in the Old Testament, however, Malachi did not have them in mind exclusively when he spoke these words, but the whole nation, which was in great need of purifying. He speaks of the priests, therefore, as the leaders and representatives of the people and through them of the whole nation.

But insofar as this looks ahead to the New Testament it is a proph-

ecy of the cleansing of God's people in every nation, and of the fact that they are all "sons of Levi," priests and prophets. We have here, then, another allusion to the priesthood of all believers, something of which we have already spoken.

The great result of this purifying of the sons of Levi would be, God says, that His offerings would no longer be polluted and defiled and despised, but an "offering in righteousness" would be brought to Him by these previously disobedient sons of Levi. Whether or not there was a true and complete purifying of the Old Testament priesthood following these prophecies of Malachi, we do not know from the sacred record. Nehemiah and Ezra speak of their efforts in this direction, but there is no indication of the extent to which these efforts were successful (cf. Ezra 10:18-24 and Neh. 13:1-31). In the New Testament they *are* successful in that God's people are, by grace, a "holy priesthood, to offer up spiritual sacrifices, acceptable to God by Jesus Christ" (I Pet. 2:5).

Of those sacrifices we have already spoken. They are not offerings of beasts to be slain and burnt, but the sacrifice of ourselves to God in worship and holy obedience, a sacrifice that is designed to "show forth the praises of him who hath called you out of darkness into his marvelous light" (I Pet. 2:9). This sacrifice is offered in the offering of the heart to God, but also of the lips, the hands, and the

mind in His service and in thankfulness to Him.

That offering is called an offering in righteousness because it is acceptable to Him, being offered by righteous hands, hearts, and lips. The righteousness that makes their offerings acceptable is not, however, inherent in those who bring this offering, but is the free gift of God's grace in Jesus Christ, a righteousness that is theirs not by works, but by faith only. It is a righteousness that is theirs through the work of the Messenger of the covenant.

4. *Then shall the offering of Judah and Jerusalem be pleasant unto the LORD, as in the days of old, and as in former years.*

That the offering brought to God by a cleansed and renewed priesthood is acceptable to Him the prophet now states more plainly, speaking of God's delight in their offerings. He would delight in them, Malachi says, as in the days of old and as in former years, referring both to the early history of the nation, when the priesthood and sacrifices were first instituted, and to more recent times, those immediately following the return to Canaan, when the offerings of the people were brought with a willing heart and without hypocrisy.

That their offerings were and would be pleasant to Him does not mean that there is anything of value in the blood of calves and goats, but that the sacrifices of the

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Previous article in this series: December 1, 2006, p. 103.

people would be offered in obedience to God and not carelessly as before, and that they would be offered in faith, looking to the coming of Christ as the one who fulfilled all sacrifices by the offering of His own body on the tree of the cross. This the people had not done, but would by the grace of God do once again.

We bring that same pleasing offering in the truest sense of the word, no longer bringing the types and shadows of Christ at all, but through Him offering ourselves to God. We do that not as an atonement for sin, for atonement has been made and no other atoning sacrifice may now be offered, but we do it in grateful acknowledgment of that perfect sacrifice of Christ.

5. And I will come near to you to judgment; and I will be a swift witness against the sorcerers, and against the adulterers, and against false swearers, and against those that oppress the hireling in his wages, the widow, and the fatherless, and that turn aside the stranger from his right, and fear not me, saith the LORD of hosts.

Though Christ will come and purify the sons of Levi, His work is limited in its extent. Not all will be purified by Him, but only those who have been given to Him by God. The rest will perish through the judgment that He brings. Indeed, He Himself will be the dividing line between those who are purified and those who perish. It is in Him and through Him that God comes as a swift witness against the sinners mentioned in this verse.

That He comes as a swift witness refers to the fact that He always comes quickly. That may not have seemed to be true in the days following Malachi's prophecy, when four hundred years of spiritual darkness came to separate Malachi's prophecy from its fulfillment. It does not always seem so now, as we wait through the ages of the

New Testament for Christ's return. Nevertheless, He comes quickly.

He comes quickly, first, because He comes not according to our clocks and reckoning of time, but according to the reckoning of God Himself, to whom a day is as a thousand years and a thousand years as a day. He also comes quickly in that He does not delay a moment beyond the fulfillment of all that God has planned—He comes as soon as He can. He also comes quickly in that when the time is ripe He appears suddenly and without warning, to the joy of His people and the terror of His enemies.

The sins that He judges are sins not previously mentioned in the book of Malachi, but Malachi shows here that the wickedness of the people was not just in a few matters, but was very widespread, as it always is. Though his main concerns, since he is speaking of covenant unfaithfulness, were the corrupting of the sacrifices and the matter of marriage, he does not overlook the fact that the people were guilty of many other sins.

Nor are these sins uncommon today in the church. There are many who dabble in the occult, in fortune-telling, astrology, and demonology, the sins that Malachi is speaking of when he mentions sorcerers. Indeed, many who practice what they call "spiritual warfare," exorcism and healing, are dealing in an unbiblical way with things that are dangerous and wicked.

The sin of adultery is committed not only in divorcing and remarrying, but in the co-habiting of those who are not married, in fornicating, in homosexual behavior, and today in the widespread use of pornography. Today, as then, these sins often have the tacit if not the open approval of the leaders of the church, just as they did in the days of Malachi.

False swearers are not only those who lie under oath but all those who do not keep their pledged word—those whose word

cannot be trusted in business or in the church, whether they are officebearers who do not keep the promises they made when ordained to office, or members who have a reputation for untruth and for dishonesty. God hates such sins because He is the Truth.

Those who oppress and steal from the hireling, the widow, the orphans, and the strangers are not only found in society at large, but are those "Christian" employers who do not pay their employees a decent wage, those who take advantage of others, especially when those they cheat are easy prey because they do not speak the language or know the customs of the country to which they have come. They are the televangelists who use every opportunity to enrich themselves with the pennies of the widows, who even claim revelations from God in order to bilk the people.

Such are as common today as they were in the days of Malachi, and the Word of God through Malachi makes it clear that God hates all such sins as well as those that are still socially unacceptable, robbery, murder, perjury, and such like.

The fear of which Malachi speaks is that holy fear and reverence of God that is the true source of obedience. It cares to please God more than it cares to please men, because it knows how great He is. It counts God's favor of more value than all the pleasures and treasures of this world. It knows that life with Him is the only guarantee of blessing and prosperity, for it knows Him as the LORD of hosts, and it knows too that the only prosperity that matters is spiritual and heavenly.

6. For I am the LORD, I change not; therefore ye sons of Jacob are not consumed.

God concludes this part of the prophecy with a reminder of His own immutability (unchange-

ableness). This may seem out of place at first, but most certainly it is not. It is important both for those who stand in jeopardy before God's judgments and for those to whom He promises salvation through the coming of Christ to know that He is unchangeable.

Those who continue to live wickedly and who show no fear of His judgments must know that He is unchangeable, especially because His judgments do not always come immediately. When they do not see those judgments, then they begin to think that God is not going to judge them at all and they become hardened in their rebellion and disobedience.

Those to whom God promises salvation, the true sons of Jacob, must also know that He does not change, because the revelation of their salvation does not always come immediately either. The believing Jews in these last days of the Old Testament had to wait an-

other four hundred years for the fulfillment of God's word, and we too, who have seen the beginning of that fulfillment, are still waiting for its completion. In the face of those who doubt, we must know that "the Lord is not slack concerning his promise, as some men count slackness" (II Pet. 3:9), and that "the day of the Lord will come" (II Pet. 3:10).

They must know His unchangeableness also as the great God of their salvation. They deserve to be consumed, for they are in themselves no different from the ungodly among whom they live. They also are guilty of the sins mentioned in the previous verse. But they are not consumed, because God is unchangeable. He is unchangeable as the God of election who has chosen His people as His own from eternity and whose eternal love for them cannot fail. He reveals His unchangeableness in the sending of the Messenger of the covenant when He does not al-

low the sins of His people to separate them from Himself, but redeems and delivers them by His Messenger. He shows His unchangeableness in giving them His Spirit and causing the gospel to be preached to them, so that through faith the righteousness of Christ becomes theirs and they stand justified before Him.

Though Israel and Judah thought that God had changed because they were not enjoying His promised blessings, it was not He but they who had changed and departed from Him. Nevertheless, He would save from among them the remnant according to election, whom He had eternally loved and whom He would not cast away. He would save them for the glory of His own name and to show that He is Jehovah, the God of the covenant, the one who does not change. That He did do, and He continues to do the same today in His unchanging faithfulness. 

All Around Us

By Rev. Rodney Kleyn

Does God want you to be rich?

Perhaps you've heard of the Prosperity theology, or heard your pastor speak of the Health and Wealth gospel, or run across a televangelist with a two-story hairdo, a thousand-dollar suit, and the message that "if you just accept Jesus tonight and give us your money, God will make you rich."

And maybe you've wondered to yourself, "Is this for real? Can it really be true that someone who calls himself Christian, and reads the Bible, thinks such a thing about the gospel? Is it fair for me to pass a biblical judgment on these people and their message?"

Well, a recent lengthy article from *Time* magazine (September 18,

2006), packed with interesting interviews and analysis of both the advocates and opponents of Prosperity theology, helps one to see that the Health and Wealth gospel is a reality.

When George Adams lost his job at an Ohio tile factory last October, the most practical thing he did, he thinks, was go to a new church, even though he had to move his wife and four preteen boys to Conroe, a suburb of Houston, to do it. Conroe, you see, is not far from Lakewood, the home church of megapastor and best-selling author Joel Osteen.

Osteen's relentlessly upbeat television sermons had helped Adams, 49, get through the hard times, and now Adams was expecting the smiling, Texas-twanged 43-year-old to help boost him back toward success. And Osteen did. Inspired by the preacher's insistence that one of

God's top priorities is to shower blessings on Christians in this lifetime—and by the corollary assumption that one of the worst things a person can do is to expect anything less—Adams marched into Gullo Ford in Conroe looking for work. He didn't have entry-level aspirations: "God has showed me that he doesn't want me to be a run-of-the-mill person," he explains. He demanded to know what the dealership's top salesmen made—and got the job. Banishing all doubt—"You can't sell a \$40,000-to-\$50,000 car with menial thoughts"—Adams took four days to retail his first vehicle, a Ford F-150 Lariat with leather interior. He knew that many fellow salesmen don't notch their first score until their second week. "Right now, I'm above average!" he exclaims. "It's a new day God has given me! I'm on my way to a six-figure income!" The sales commission will help with this

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month's rent, but Adams hates renting. Once that six-figure income has been rolling in for a while, he will buy his dream house: "Twenty-five acres," he says. "And three bedrooms. We're going to have a schoolhouse (his children are home schooled). We want horses and ponies for the boys, so a horse barn. And a pond. And maybe some cattle."

"I'm dreaming big—because all of heaven is dreaming big," Adams continues. "Jesus died for our sins. That was the best gift God could give us," he says. "But we have something else. Because I want to follow Jesus and do what he ordained, God wants to support us. It's Joel Osteen's ministry that told me. Why would an awesome and mighty God want anything less for his children?"

Who is this Joel Osteen?

Osteen is a second-generation Prosperity teacher. His father John Osteen started out Baptist but in 1959 withdrew from that fellowship to found a church in one of Houston's poorer neighborhoods and explore a new philosophy developing among Pentecostals. If the rest of Protestantism ignored finances, Prosperity placed them center stage, marrying Pentecostalism's ebullient notion of God's gifts with an older tradition that stressed the power of positive thinking. Practically, it emphasized hard work and good home economics. But the real heat was in its spiritual premise: that if a believer could establish, through word and deed (usually donation), that he or she was "in Jesus Christ," then Jesus' father would respond with paternal gifts of health and wealth in this life.

And what influence do he and his cohorts have?

Of the four biggest megachurches in the country, three—Osteen's Lakewood in Houston; T.D. Jakes' Potter's House in south Dallas; and Creflo Dollar's World Changers near Atlanta—are Prosperity or Prosperity Lite pulpits (al-

though Jakes' ministry has many more facets). While they don't exclusively teach that God's riches want to be in believers' wallets, it is a key part of their doctrine. And propelled by Osteen's 4 million-selling book, *Your Best Life Now*, the belief has swept beyond its Pentecostal base into more buttoned-down evangelical churches, and even into congregations in the more liberal Mainline. It is taught in hundreds of non-Pentecostal Bible studies. One Pennsylvania Lutheran pastor even made it the basis for a sermon series for Lent, when Christians usually meditate on why Jesus was having His Worst Life Then. Says the Rev. Chappell Temple, a Methodist minister with the dubious distinction of pastoring Houston's other Lakewood Church (Lakewood United Methodist), an hour north of Osteen's: "Prosperity Lite is everywhere in Christian culture. Go into any Christian bookstore, and see what they're offering."

In a TIME poll, 17% of Christians surveyed said they considered themselves part of such a movement, while a full 61% believed that God wants people to be prosperous. And 31%—a far higher percentage than there are Pentecostals in America—agreed that if you give your money to God, God will bless you with more money.

We might ask, "Well, what does this Osteen and his Prosperity theology actually teach and why do people believe it and follow it?" From *Time* we learn that this is the old Jimmy Swaggart and Jim Bakker repackaged in a language that touches real life and that appeals to real people. After *Time* describes Osteen's book *Your Best Life Now* as "an extraordinarily accessible exhortation to this-world empowerment through God," it says this.

"To live your best life now," it opens, to see "your business taking off. See your marriage restored. See your family prospering. See your dreams come to pass..." you must "start looking at

life through eyes of faith." Jesus is front and center but not his Crucifixion, Resurrection or Atonement. There are chapters on overcoming trauma and a late chapter on emulating God's generosity. But there are many more illustrations of how the Prosperity doctrine has produced personal gain, most memorably, perhaps, for the Osteen family: how Victoria's "speaking words of faith and victory" eventually brought the couple their dream house; how Joel discerned God's favor in being bumped from economy to business class.

The *Time* author also shows some perception, recognizing that even though Osteen and others say "rich Christianity" is not their message, it really is.

A recent Sunday at Lakewood gives some idea of the emphasis on worldly gain that disturbs Warren. Several hundred stage lights flash on, and Osteen, his gigawatt smile matching them, strides onto the stage of what used to be the Compaq Center sports arena but is now his church. "Let's just celebrate the goodness of the Lord!" Osteen yells. His wife Victoria says, "Our Daddy God is the strongest! He's the mightiest!"

And so it goes, before 14,000 attendees, a nonstop declaration of God's love and his intent to show it in the here and now, sometimes verging on the language of an annual report. During prayer, Osteen thanks God for "your unprecedented favor. We believe that 2006 will be our best year so far. We declare it by faith." Today's sermon is about how gratitude can "save a marriage, save your job [and] get you a promotion."

"I don't think I've ever preached a sermon about money," he says a few hours later. He and Victoria meet with TIME in their pastoral suite, once the Houston Rockets' locker and shower area but now a zone of overstuffed sofas and imposing oak bookcases. "Does God want us to be rich?" he asks. "When I hear that word rich, I think people say, 'Well, he's

preaching that everybody's going to be a millionaire.' I don't think that's it." Rather, he explains, "I preach that anybody can improve their lives. I think God wants us to be prosperous. I think he wants us to be happy. To me, you need to have money to pay your bills. I think God wants us to send our kids to college. I think he wants us to be a blessing to other people. But I don't think I'd say God wants us to be rich. It's all relative, isn't it?" The room's warm lamplight reflects softly off his crocodile shoes.

In the article ample space is given to Christian opponents of Prosperity theology.

Confronting such stories, certain more doctrinally traditional Christians go ballistic. Last March, Ben Witherington, an influential evangelical theologian at Asbury Seminary in Kentucky, thundered that "we need to renounce the false gospel of wealth and health—it is a disease of our American culture; it is not a solution or answer to life's problems." Respected blogger Michael Spencer—known as the Internet Monk—asked, "How many young people are going to be pointed to Osteen as a true shepherd of Jesus Christ? He's not. He's not one of us." Osteen is an irresistible target for experts from right to left on the Christian spectrum who—beyond worrying that he is living too high or inflating the hopes of people with real money problems—think he is dragging people down with a heavy interlocked chain of theological and ethical errors that could amount to heresy.

Most start out by saying that Osteen and his ilk have it "half right": that God's goodness is biblical, as is the idea that he means us to enjoy the material world. But while Prosperity claims to be celebrating that goodness, the critics see it as treating God as a celestial ATM. "God becomes a means to an end, not the end in himself," says Southwestern Baptist's Phillips. Others are more upset about what it de-emphasizes. "[Prosperity] wants the positive but not the negative,"

says another Southern Baptist, Alan Branch of Midwestern Baptist Theological Seminary in Kansas City, Mo. "Problem is, we live on this side of Eden. We're fallen." That is, Prosperity soft-pedals the consequences of Adam's fall—sin, pain and death—and their New Testament antidote: Jesus' atoning sacrifice and the importance of repentance. And social liberals express a related frustration that preachers like Osteen show little interest in battling the ills of society at large. Perhaps appropriately so, since, as Prosperity scholar Harrison explains, "philosophically, their main way of helping the poor is encouraging people not to be one of them."

Most unnerving for Osteen's critics is the suspicion that they are fighting not just one idiosyncratic misreading of the gospel but something more daunting: the latest lurch in Protestantism's ongoing descent into full-blown American materialism. After the eclipse of Calvinist Puritanism, whose respect for money was counterbalanced by a horror of worldliness, much of Protestantism quietly adopted the idea that "you don't have to give up the American Dream. You just see it as a sign of God's blessing," says Edith Blumhofer, director of Wheaton College's Center for the Study of American Evangelicals. Indeed, a last-gasp resistance to this embrace of wealth and comfort can be observed in the current evangelical brawl over whether comfortable megachurches (like Osteen's and Warren's) with pumped-up day-care centers and high-tech amenities represent a slide from glorifying an all-powerful God to asking what custom color you would prefer he paint your pews. "The tragedy is that Christianity has become a yes-man for the culture," says Boston University's Prothero.

This is a modern-day form of simony. Rev. Ted Pike, director of the National Prayer Network (www.truthtellers.org), gives this analysis on his website.

In 1517, Martin Luther heard

Tetzel, representative of the Pope, telling the German people that if they paid money to the church, the souls of their loved ones would be released from purgatory. He was outraged. He wrote 95 theses, which protested "simony"—the promise of spiritual and material benefit in exchange for giving money to the church.

Well, simony is back with a vengeance. Three times a year, Trinity Broadcasting Network, the globe spanning Pentecostal "Christian" TV network with an audience of billions worldwide, raises approximately 50 million dollars per "Praisethon" with the following message: "Give money to TBN and God will give back to you one hundred times as much money or material benefit. Jesus guarantees it!"

It's working—at least for the bank account of Trinity broadcasting. Praisethon lights glow as believers, ranging from the elderly on Social Security and mothers on welfare to wealthy business people, swell TBN's budget—funding 21 satellites and 2,117 TV stations internationally.

Yes, it brings in big bucks, as it did when Luther was outraged by it nearly 500 years ago. Yet it is still simony—a practice as wicked today as when Simon Magus, a Jewish magician in the Book of Acts, offered to pay money to the Apostle Peter in exchange for spiritual and material blessing, and barely escaped Peter's curse by repenting on the spot (Acts 8:9-24).

Jesus, we should remember, although creator of all things, chose a life of such poverty that at times He was without the comfort which the foxes and birds enjoyed in their dens and nests (Matt. 8:20). He said: "Blessed are the poor" (Luke 6:20), and "It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter heaven" (Matt. 19:24).

As Protestant Reformed people we can agree with many of these sentiments opposed to Prosperity theology. We can also be sure that wherever Pentecostalism has influence, and wherever megachurches

are springing up in our neighborhoods, they are not far from this kind of a gospel. And this is another nail in the coffin of the church; another indication of her utter apostasy and her feeding into the whole mentality of the coming Antichristian kingdom, the number of which will be the number of man, six-six-six. The cross as the center of the gospel is replaced with man as the center of religious exercise. Christianity is supposed to make you a happy person by giving you the things you want, and not giving the things every sinner needs. Blessings in Jesus Christ are to be found in material things, and there is no understanding anymore of the blessings that come

from the cross through the atoning blood of Christ. Nobody needs to find joy in the forgiveness of sins, but being a Christian means smiling because your wallet is full, you are on a six-figure income, and you drive a new Lexus.

But also, there is a connection in this thinking to the whole idea of “common grace.” Common grace theology says God’s grace and goodness are to be found in material things, and, in its modern form, that the church’s duty is to redeem culture. The jump from this thinking, to Prosperity theology, is not a big one.

What can we learn from this? Certainly there are things to learn

about materialism and about setting our hearts and sights on things above and not things here on the earth. Often a wrong theology is developed to keep up with a wrong lifestyle among church-goers. Prosperity and common-grace theology are in many ways a theological attempt to justify materialism in the lives of churchgoers. Our focus does need to be the cross and the biblical gospel message of sinners and redemption, of sin and satisfaction, and of Christ and spiritual blessings. And then our lives and all our religious service need to be God-centered worship and not man-worship. This was Jesus’ message. “Ye cannot serve God and mammon.” 

Marking the Bulwarks of Zion

Prof. Herman Hanko

Modern Heresies: Common Grace

Introduction

The controversy over common grace is of particular interest to the Protestant Reformed Churches, for it was the immediate occasion for the existence of these churches as a separate denomination. The founders of these churches, under God, were expelled from the Christian Reformed Church for refusing to agree with common grace as a doctrine taught in Scripture and the confessions. These leaders, Revs. Herman Hoeksema, George Ophoff, and Henry Danhof, refused to preach and teach it in their congregations as was required of them.

As the error of common grace was adopted officially by the Christian Reformed Church, it dealt with two ways in which the grace of

God was said to be common to all men: 1) The operative and powerful grace of God in the hearts of the reprobate through the Spirit of Christ by which sin in the reprobate is restrained and the unregenerate are enabled to do good works of value to God and the church. 2) A grace that is common because it was a general manifestation of an attitude of favor and love towards all men manifested not only in the good gifts that all men receive from God, but also especially in the well-meaning and gracious offer of the gospel, which invites all men to believe on Christ. The common invitation of the gospel is an expression of God’s heartfelt longing for all men to be saved.

We will take a brief look at both kinds of common grace.

The Common Grace of the Gospel Offer

Although the term was not used, the idea of a gracious gospel offer was found in the church from

very early times in the history of the church of the new dispensation. Already at the time of the great church father Augustine, in the last of the fourth and the first part of the fifth centuries, an issue between Augustine and Pelagius and his followers was sovereign and particular grace over against common grace. Augustine held to eternal and sovereign predestination. The followers of Pelagius held to a general desire of God to save all men and a universal atonement that made salvation possible for all men.*

Shortly after the great Synod of Dordt a heresy arose in France called Amyrauldianism, named after its chief defender, which proposed the same ideas as the Pelagians of Augustine’s time. The influence of this heresy, sometimes

* For a detailed study of the history of the well-meant offer of salvation, see my syllabus, published by the Protestant Reformed Seminary, entitled, *The History of the Free Offer*.

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known as "Hypothetical Universalism," was significant in France and the British Isles, and to a lesser extent in the Netherlands.

Although the Westminster Assembly, with a few Amyrauldians on the assembly, did not adopt the heresy, it nevertheless survived in such men as Richard Baxter and Edward Fisher. In the Marrow controversy of the eighteenth century it was revived by the so-called Marrow Men.

From Scotland, where the Marrow Controversy took place, it was imported into the Netherlands. Close contact between the church of Scotland and the church in the Netherlands made a transfer of doctrinal ideas inevitable. The emphasis on a gospel offer and a certain universality of the death of Christ (Christ did not die for all men, but He is dead for all men) crept into the thinking of the more Reformed in the Netherlands. The State Church in the Netherlands had become apostate, and the pious and orthodox people were forced to meet in conventicles to maintain their piety and orthodoxy. The emphasis on and spiritual warmth of piety and experience that characterized the Marrow Men appealed to the faithful in the Netherlands who were left cold by the apostasy in their own church. But along with such piety came the idea of the offer of the gospel.

At the time of the Separation of 1834 under DeCock and others, the idea of a well-meant offer had taken deep root. DeCock himself, along with VanVelzen, did not hold to such an idea of the gospel. But Brummelkamp, and quite likely VanRaalte, did. Thus it came into the thinking of the Reformed Churches in the Netherlands and, through immigration, into America.

Although Abraham Kuyper was opposed to the well-meant gospel offer that was current thinking in parts of the Reformed churches, and although his followers in America did not teach such

a view, many of those who had their ecclesiastical roots in the Separation of 1834 (De Afscheiding) did believe this doctrine. So it was freely taught in the Christian Reformed Church by various preachers from the middle of the nineteenth century on.

It thus entered the thinking of the Christian Reformed Church, and it is no surprise that, when the CRC made decisions on common grace, it included a statement on the well-meant gospel offer.

The main ideas imbedded in the gospel offer are these.

1) The preaching of the gospel is and must be an expression of a desire on God's part to save all who hear the gospel. That is, God's will is that all who hear the gospel be saved. He earnestly desires this and expresses this desire in the preaching. Preachers therefore are duty bound to tell all who hear that God wants them to be saved and does all He possibly can to assure them that salvation is available to them.

2) It is claimed by those who defend this view that it is impossible to do evangelism work and missionary work on foreign fields unless one can assure his listeners that God truly desires their salvation, and that it is God's will that they be saved. Thus also the door is open for the minister to plead with sinners to accept Christ, to invite them to come to Christ, and to urge them to close with Christ — a phrase popular with the Marrow Men.

3) Such a desire on God's part to save all who hear the gospel is rooted in a certain favorable attitude towards all men. God is favorably inclined to all men and expresses that inclination in His will to save all. This is where grace enters in. God's favorable inclination is His gracious attitude towards all men. This gracious attitude towards all men is revealed in other ways, such as rain and sunshine, health and prosperity, and a good and prosperous life.

But it is especially revealed in God's express statements to all who hear the gospel that God, on His part, really wants those who hear to be saved.

4) But grace is only one aspect of a favorable attitude of God toward all men. Grace includes all God's attributes: love, kindness, longsuffering, mercy, etc. God loves all men, is merciful to all men, is kind towards all men, and does nothing but that which will underscore His desire to save all men.

5) Because one necessarily must ask concerning the judicial ground for such an attitude of favor, this idea of common grace involved also a certain universal atonement. The judicial ground is the universal character and efficacy of the suffering of Christ. God cannot want to save those for whom no salvation is available. God cannot offer blessings that are not in God's storehouse. A universal gracious gospel offer involves a universal aspect to the atoning sacrifice of Christ.

6) If the preaching expresses what God wants, it is obvious that whether a man is saved or not depends on what man wants. God does all He can, including atoning for sin in His Son; it remains to be seen what man will do. Thus a blatant Arminianism is tied to the gracious gospel offer. Salvation hinges on the free will of man.

Those defenders of common grace who are still somewhat committed to Calvinism and its five points have attempted to preserve their Calvinism by insisting that man has no free will, but that God gives special and saving grace to His elect only. But such harsh contradictions arise from a God who both wants to save and does not want to save, that free will wins out, and those committed to a gracious and well-meant gospel offer have openly espoused the Arminian doctrine of free will.

7) Almost always, if not always, this common grace that

comes through the preaching of the gospel is not only an objective statement of God's love for all men, but it is also a subjective bestowal of grace on those who hear the gospel, which grace is applied to the hearts of the hearers. This grace gives to those who hear the spiritual ability to choose for or against the offer of the gospel. It is a grace, therefore, that can be resisted.

Objections

The objections against this view of the gospel, which have been brought throughout the centuries and particularly by the Protestant Reformed Churches, are the following.

1) The Protestant Reformed Churches have insisted that the gospel cannot be and never is a mere offer, for it is "the power of God unto salvation to all who believe" (Rom. 1:16). A power unto

salvation is quite different from an offer that depends on man's will for the reception of its contents.

2) Along with a well-meant and gracious gospel offer goes a whole package of doctrines that do dishonor to God by destroying the doctrines of sovereign and particular grace. Scripture and the confessions teach that God does all things for His glory as the sovereign Lord of all. He, in salvation, determines who will be saved and who will not; for whom Christ died and for whom He did not die; in whom the Spirit works salvation and who is hardened by the Spirit. God saves His own elect through the power of the cross, and His work of salvation is entirely His own. Thus, while the heresy of the gracious offer of the gospel is Arminian, the Scriptures teach a sovereign and particular grace of

God that gives all glory to God.

3) The whole concept of a gracious gospel offer introduces an impossible contradiction into God's own mind. It teaches (at least among those who claim to be Reformed) that God both wills the salvation of all men and does not will the salvation of all men. When confronted with such a contradiction, the defenders of this heresy fall back on the lame doctrine of paradox and apparent contradiction.

4) The view that the gospel expresses God's desire to save all men puts those who hold it into the camp of a long line of heretics beginning with the Pelagians of the fifth century. Sovereign and particular grace was the truth of the church from ancient times.

Such are the issues of the common grace of the well-meant gospel offer. 

Sounding Out the Word

Rev. Carl Haak

Shepherds After God's Own Heart

What does God promise to a church that is filled with sincere repentance?

The answer is this: ministers, elders, and deacons – after His own heart.

In Jeremiah 3:15 we read this promise of God: "And I will give you pastors according to mine heart, which shall feed you with knowledge and understanding." Jeremiah is referring to men like David, for the Scriptures refer to David as a "man after God's own heart." The people of Israel, especially the ten tribes who fell away

from the house of David, were walking in a way of spiritual adultery. And in that way of spiritual adultery, forsaking the Lord their God, they did not receive kings or princes or priests who were after God's heart. They received men under whom they suffered; men who led them to ruin; men who seduced them to apostasy and encouraged them in the way of folly. Here God says that, to a people who are moved in their heart to return to Him in a way of repentance, He will show His mercy in a tangible way. He will give to them spiritual leaders who will truly care for their souls and rule them in the spirit of David.

The fulfillment of this promise in Jeremiah is in Jesus Christ, the Shepherd of the sincerely repentant church. And Jesus Christ gives to

His repentant people and church shepherds: elders, deacons, and pastors to feed them, on His behalf, with knowledge and understanding. This promise is fulfilled in the church of our Lord Jesus Christ when Christ gives to His church servants after His own heart.

Our Lord Jesus Christ has a tender regard for His church on earth. Having purchased the church with His own blood, and having laid down His life for the sheep, He gives them shepherds after His own heart. And it is in the presence of such men – faithful pastors, diligent elders, dedicated deacons – that we as the church have the tangible evidence of God's goodness to us. Christ our Lord is, therefore, pleased to care for His repentant children gathered into the church by means of pastors, el-

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ders, and deacons. Let no one take that for granted. Let not one believer in Christ fail to see the significance of faithful and godly elders, pastors, and deacons in the church. The pastor, elder, and deacon are not simply functionaries in the church. They are not simply officers appointed by the corporation. But they are men appointed by Christ. And in the way of their faithful and dedicated labor, they are a sign to us of the love of Christ and His care for us, whose faith we must also follow.

But let no one fail to see the connection between our own spiritual life and the presence of such godly officers in the church. When the church backslides; when the people of a church no longer have a heart for God and His glory, then that will be evident in God's removing from them men of conviction, men who are true spiritual leaders. If we forsake the way of God, if we minimize God's Word, if we say that the Word of God is no longer the power and authority in the church, and if we corrupt the worship of the church and begin to worship in the church as we would like, then God's judgment is often found in this, that to such a church He does not give men after His own heart, but men after their own heart, who will lead the people of God to ruin.

It is in the church that is alive and repentant, it is among believers who seek to humble themselves before God and to obey God, that God fulfills a promise to give men after His own heart, godly officebearers. Let no one say, "Well, the spiritual state of the church is none of my business." Oh yes it is! Our own spiritual life and the presence of faithful servants are inseparably connected.

God is saying to us that when He gathers His people together into a church, then that church must be governed by the offices of pastor, elder, and deacon. In Jeremiah 3 God says, "I will bring them to Zion." He does not go on and say,

"I will bring them to Zion that they may live as they would, doing their own thing." But He says, "No, I will place them under leadership, under discipline, under proper spiritual government." He uses the figure of a flock of sheep under the care of their pastor or shepherd. The church of the Lord Jesus Christ is not to be compared to a savanna, with wild beasts roaming at their own pleasure and little ones learning the ways of the wild. The church is under the figure of sheep in a pasture, under the care of shepherds. Those shepherds are vital for the defense, care, and feeding of the flock. The shepherd is entrusted with the most precious thing in the universe—the care of the flock that Christ has purchased with His own blood (Acts 20:28).

So God says, "These men whom I entrust with the offices of pastor, elder, and deacon are to be men after My own heart." The Scriptures bring out many graces that a pastor and an elder and a deacon must covet. They must be faithful. They must be steadfast. They must be wise. They must be self-denying. They must be patient. But there is one attribute that sums them all. There is one that makes everything else possible. There is one that must be cultivated above all things. It is this, that they must be men after God's own heart—like David, of whom we read in Acts 13:22, "I have found David the son of Jesse, a man after mine own heart, which shall fulfil all my will." Note that. When your heart is after God's heart, you will be one devoted to doing the will of God. When the things of God's heart are in your heart, then the practical result will be a concern that His holy will and His holy name be glorified in the church—not yours, but your Lord's.

What does that mean, to be after God's own heart? Obviously, it is a figure of speech. God's heart refers to all of those things that God desires, wills, yearns for, and loves. From His heart God loves His church. God loves His elect whom

He has chosen from eternity. And He wills also that they know and love Him and are comforted in Him and see His glory. From His heart He wills to save those whom He loves in Jesus Christ. Therefore men after God's own heart burn with the same purposes of God. They desire as God desires. They seek what God seeks. The things that are dear to God have been made dear to them, so dear to them that it is the only thing that counts. They are God-like in their desires, they are God-like in their spirit, in their words, in their temper, in their demeanor. By grace they desire to be in tune with the things of God's heart and to be pleasing to God.

There are many things that we could say about being after God's own heart. But certainly it means that shepherds are to be men who are renewed in heart and live godly in Christ Jesus.

A pastor, an elder, or a deacon must not be a wolf in sheep's clothing, but he must be a man who has experienced the washing of regeneration and the renewal of the Holy Spirit (Titus 3), a man who is sanctified in Christ Jesus with the Holy Spirit dwelling within him, a man who is purged daily from the vicious appetite of his own flesh, from his own pride, his self-importance, his self-esteem, and is now a man with an eye single to the divine glory and the building up of the precious body of Christ. He must be a man with a gracious sincerity, not ruled by a selfish spirit, but one who will naturally care for the church of the Lord Jesus Christ. That means that you, as a pastor, an elder, or a deacon, are to care for the faith, for the repentance, for the souls of the people of God. How can a person do that without first experiencing the reality of that life within his own heart? The aim of his work, the single aim, is the honor of the Redeemer and the life of the people entrusted to his care.

That means that he must walk daily with them. A shepherd walks among his sheep. That means that

we must walk among them as elders, deacons, and pastors as examples of godly life in Jesus Christ. It means that we must be full of eyes: quick to spy out danger, vigilant. We must be men of a heart after God. That certainly means that by the grace of God we are constantly extinguishing the fires of sin in our own souls.

Elders, deacons, and pastors after God's own heart are men of the Word. They know the Word. They love the Word. They are sound in doctrine, doctrine that is reviving and strengthening and refreshing. They destroy and detest all error against God's holy Word. That means that an elder, a deacon, and a pastor must be acquainted with the Master's will as it is revealed in holy Scripture. They must be men of conviction, not of stubbornness, not making their own headstrong feelings a matter of principle, but men whose judgments and opinions are forged by the principles of holy Scripture, and whose principles are prayed into their souls.

They must be, further, men of godly graces, of a humble spirit, of wise and prudent demeanor, patient, plain, and forthright, men of prayer, not easily provoked, not irritable, not soon sinfully angry. In short, a man after God's own heart is a man who possesses a dove's innocence, an eagle's eye, a lion's courage, an angel's zeal. He is a man who desires to show the heart of God to His people. Imagine that! One who is called to show the heart of God to His people.

Such shepherds (elders, deacons, and pastors) are God's gift to His church.

Now, you who are called to the office of elder, deacon, and pastor, and you who are under their leadership, you must not start looking, first of all, to self, to the man. It is not of self. We acknowledge that. We must acknowledge that every servant in the church, by his own nature, is the very opposite of a man after God's own heart. This is not a natural gift. This is not to be found

among the sons of men. This is a gift of the ascended Lord who pours out this gift upon the church. He says, "I will give you pastors after my own heart. I will give this." The presence of such men in the church is the evidence of God's gift of grace. It is the mighty power of Christ crucified. The presence of such men in the church is the presence of the gracious power of Jesus Christ. That means that God raises them up. God apprehends them by His grace and Spirit. They have nothing of which to boast. God orders the time of their birth, their rearing, their preparation. God works within their heart. The office of faithful elders, deacons, and pastors is God's gift. It is something that Christ has purchased. It is something that Christ alone can give.

It is His great favor to the church to give such men to the church. That means that as a member of the congregation of the Lord Jesus Christ you will be much in prayer that you may be given such men. And you will be in prayer for them. Do you pray for your elders, your deacons, and your pastor? Do you stand in the place of prayer asking God to be with them? Do you abound in prayer, wrestle in prayer for them? Paul asked in Romans 15:30 that the church of God strive in their prayers for him—literally, wrestle in prayer for him. For him! The apostle Paul. We would say, "Well, there was certainly a gifted servant. If anyone could do it, Paul could." Oh, no! says Paul. Do not ever think such a thing. I am dependent upon the prayers of God's people. They must strive for me. They must pray for me or I cannot perform my duties.

Still more. You must avail yourself of them. You must come under their care. You must come under their ministry with love and humility.

Still more. You must honor and love them from the heart, inwardly. You must do so for Christ's sake.

"I will give unto you pastors after My own heart, who will feed

you with knowledge and understanding." Knowledge and understanding are often mentioned together in the Bible. Very briefly, knowledge here refers more to the content of what we believe. Pastors especially, but also elders and deacons, are given to the church in order to give to the people of God knowledge. Not just a cold knowledge, not a merely intellectual knowledge, but a vibrant, heartfelt knowledge of all the content of the Christian faith as it is revealed in holy Scripture.

The word "understanding" is more the *acting out* of knowledge. It refers to acting prudently, acting in accordance with the knowledge that one has, the ability to apply the knowledge. God says, I will give shepherds who will feed My people with understanding—that is, I will give them men who will show My people how to respond to that Word. I will feed them. I will feed them through the ministry of pastors, elders, and deacons in order that they may know My Word, see it, and grasp it; and that they may know how to act in response to it to the glory of My name, so that My church may be built up in faith and love and peace and unity.

Then the church is built up. Then repentant sinners are gathered into Zion and are comforted and healed and restored. Then the sheep may rest and the lambs may grow and the flock may be cared for.

Let me put a solemn question to you as a pastor, an elder, or a deacon: Are you a pastor after God's own heart? Let me put a question to you, congregation of the Lord Jesus Christ and believer: Is this the kind of elder and deacon and pastor you want—a man after God's own heart? Then let us be much in prayer and let us continually ask God personally, in our own lives, for the great grace of repentance. For it is to a repentant people that God promises the gift of pastors after His own heart.



Door

When Jesus said, “I am the door,” He invoked a rich covenantal metaphor. In general it refers to any opening that can be closed or shut. Thus, Job spoke of the doors of a womb, seas, leviathan, and death. There are doors of hope, lips, and mouth (Hos. 2:15; Ps. 141:3; Mic. 7:5). But, most importantly, doors open to habitations. Every home has its door. City walls have doors. And God’s house has its doors. The one on the tabernacle was colorful embroidered cloth, those in Solomon’s temple were ornate gold-covered olive, and the temple of Jesus’ day had a door called Beautiful (Ex. 26:36; I Kings 6:32; Acts 3:10). Then there are the everlasting doors of heaven that opened for the ascended King of glory, and from which all blessings flow (Ps. 24:7; 78:23).

Doors provide entrance into fellowship. There the lover meets his beloved (Song 5:4). Therefore, at God’s door the women of Israel assembled, the priests ate their food, and His people pleaded for justice and gathered at the sound of the trumpet (Ex. 38:8; 29:32; Num. 27:2; 10:1-3). There, God stayed His anger, divided the inheritance, and spoke to Israel (Num. 16:50; Jos. 19:51; Lev. 8:3). Doors have been the site of many gospel tidings. Wisdom cries at the doors of her house, and blessed is the man that hears (Prov. 8:3). In a tent door, Jehovah appeared to Abraham, and Sarah heard the promise of a son (Gen. 18:1ff.). In her door, a believing Shunammite was told she would have a son, and behind it he was raised from the dead (II Kings 4:8-37). For cleansing, Naaman met Elisha at his door (II Kings 5:9). And many times at a door Jesus Himself healed, cast out devils, and preached (Mark 1:33; 2:2).

But doors have also been the site of bad news and shameful deeds. Before the closed door of the King, the foolish are told, “I know you not” (Matt. 25:10; Luke 13:25). By the tabernacle door, Israel wept, complained, rebelled, and Eli’s sons lay with Israel’s women (Num. 11:10; 16:19; I Sam. 2:22). Behind their doors, Israel fornicated with the nations (Is. 57:8). At the door of a hospitable old man, a Levite’s concubine was killed by Israelite thugs (Jud. 19:1ff.). At the doors of Gath, David scabbled like

a madman, and while faithful Uriah slept at his palace door, David plotted his murder (I Sam. 21:13; II Sam. 11:9).

Doors represent the guilt or blessedness of a household. When Cain murdered Abel, the sin lay at his door (Gen. 4:7). But by splashing the blood of the lamb upon their doorposts, the believing Israelite’s family was protected from the avenging angel (Ex. 12:7). At the family door, slaves were freed (Ex. 21:6). At the tabernacle door, the sinner was cleansed (Lev. 4:1ff.), priests were consecrated (Ex. 29:4), and a Nazarite was separated unto God (Num. 6:18). And because of its proximity to the altar of burnt offerings, sacrifices laid upon that altar were said to be brought “to the door of the tabernacle” where God dwelt (Ex. 29:11; Lev. 1:3).

Doors can provide safety and refuge—for the wicked, a false sense of security. Thinking themselves safe behind closed doors, Eglon was slain by Ehud (Jud. 3:23) and Sisera by Jael (Jud. 4:18). To expose the weakness of the Philistines, Samson simply carried away their doors (Jud. 16:3). To provide safety, doors must have keepers. God must be that keeper. Behind a single door, He saved Noah and seven souls from a world’s destruction (Gen. 6:16), protected Lot from the Sodomites (Gen. 19:1ff.), and kept Rahab and her family safe from the devastation of Jericho (Josh. 2:19). And so, covenant fathers must keep their family door by writing God’s law on its posts (Deut. 11:20), and elders must keep the kingdom door by the diligent use of its keys (Matt. 16:19).

Jesus is THE door—the great and effectual door (I Cor. 16:9), the only entrance into the kingdom, city, and family of God (John 10:7). He opens a way for the Gentiles (Act 14:27). He keeps the door of death and hell (Rev. 1:18), and is master of the household door (Luke 13:25). With the key of David, He opens and no man shuts, shuts and no man opens (Rev. 3:7). A door of stone could not keep Him in the tomb (Matt. 27:60). Locked doors cannot prevent His fellowship (John 20:19-26), or hold His own in prison (Acts 5:16; 16:26). He is near, even at the door (Mark 13:29; James 5:9). And He promises: “By me if any man enter in, he shall be saved” (John 10:9). 

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Worship in His Fear (5)

Congregational Prayer

Prayer properly belongs in the worship services of the church. Just as prayer is vital for the spiritual life of the individual believer, so is it vital for the life of the church. When she worships, the church must spend time in congregational prayer to God.

The Scriptures teach us that the early New Testament church was a praying church. "They continued steadfastly in the apostles' doctrine and fellowship, and in breaking of bread, and in prayers" (Acts 2:42).

The Scriptures also give specific admonitions to the church to pray. In writing to the church at Ephesus, Paul points out that she must pray always "with all prayer and supplication in the Spirit, ... watching thereunto with all perseverance and supplication for all saints" (Eph. 6:18). And in instructing Timothy concerning the proper running of the church, Paul states: "I exhort therefore, that, first of all, supplications, prayers, intercessions, and giving of thanks, be made..." (I Tim. 2:1). These admonitions show that prayer is to be a priority for the church, and must occupy a very important part in worship.

All of this is summarized in Lord's Day 38 of the Heidelberg Catechism, where we are told that keeping the Sabbath day holy

means, among other things, that we "diligently frequent the church of God ... publicly to call upon the Lord."



The church as a whole prays to God in the congregational prayer. The prayer is not merely that of the man who leads, but it is the prayer of the whole congregation. All of God's people unitedly speak to their Father in heaven.

We must keep in mind, in this connection, that worship is characterized by conversation. When we gather in worship we enjoy and experience fellowship with God through speech. At times in that holy conversation the minister speaks to the church as God's mouthpiece. At other times, however, the minister speaks to God on behalf of those who have gathered in worship. The latter is what takes place with the congregational prayer.

The congregational prayer is, therefore, the prayer of every believer who is present in the worship service. When the minister speaks the words of the prayer, all God's people are to participate in speaking to God.

This means that the congregational prayer is not a time to be passive and inattentive in worship. It is not a time to let the mind wander elsewhere, while simply listening out for and hoping to catch the "Amen." And it is certainly not a time to relax and take a nap. Those who have come to worship God

must be fully aware of the words the minister speaks to Him on their behalf, consciously making the prayer their own.

This takes concentration and great effort. The congregational prayer is a difficult part of worship for the members of the congregation. In other aspects of worship (such as singing, giving of gifts, listening to the sermon), the child of God more actively takes part. During prayer, however, one can easily let the mind wander, either to other things, or to further thoughts concerning something the minister mentions in the prayer. Then he or she is not praying.

Active participation is absolutely essential, for otherwise God does not hear our prayers. The only prayers acceptable to Him are those prayed "in spirit." Our prayers must be sincere and from the heart. If they are not, they are an abomination to God, and the whole activity of bowing the head, folding the hands, and closing the eyes is seen by Him as hypocrisy. Let us be sure to "draw near with a true heart" (Heb. 10:22a).



With regard to the content of the congregational prayer, it should include especially four things: praise of God, confession of sin, petitions, and giving of thanks. Just as these ought to be a part of our personal prayers, so also of the church's prayers.

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The responsibility in this regard rests, of course, on the shoulders of the man who leads the worship service, and thus also the prayer. In leading in prayer, he must see to it that he expresses not merely his own personal praise, confession of sin, petitions, and thanksgiving, but that of the whole church.

Leading the congregation in prayer is therefore an important part of the minister's work. He needs to prepare for this part of worship. And as he leads, he must be thinking of the praise and gratitude and needs (both physical and spiritual) of those who have gathered to worship. He must strive to pray well on behalf of God's sheep.

Because they feel the burden of this part of their calling, many ministers testify of the fact that they find leading congregational prayer to be one of the most difficult aspects of the whole worship service.

And yet what a most blessed part of worship—that all God's saints, through each making the congregational prayer his or her own, together bow before their God and unitedly open up their hearts to Him.



Closely related to the content of the congregational prayer is the fact that it must serve as a means to prepare God's people spiritually to enter His presence and to worship Him aright. It must serve to humble them before the Lord their Maker. It must be a means to turn their minds away from earthly cares to things spiritual and heavenly.

This is necessary because of the fact that those who gather in worship come from many different walks of life. In the week that has gone by, each child of God has faced unique struggles. Each has confronted temptations and battled with sin. Each has experienced various trials and distresses in life. And the saints often bring these

things with them into the house of God. Because of this they can easily be preoccupied with earthly cares and struggles as they enter God's presence.

This is perhaps mostly so on Sunday morning. One of the main reasons for this is that often God's people do not prepare themselves for worship as they should. Little thought is given, ahead of time, to the fact that they go to church to meet with God. They fail to come into God's house as humble sinners. They fail to realize they are approaching the holy Lord of heaven and earth before whom even the holy angels cover their faces.

By means of prayer, therefore, God's people need to come consciously into the presence of their Lord and Maker. They should direct their minds to consider the greatness and holiness and majesty of the God before whom they bow. They must realize their unworthiness as sinners to be in His presence. They must understand the great wonder of God's grace in being willing to fellowship with them. Doing this, they can then lay aside their earthly cares and worship God in spirit and in truth.

And when God's people remember all this, they will also show proper reverence and respect. This attitude will determine what they say to God, and how they say it. It will also determine their posture in prayer. One who has in mind that he is speaking to the great and holy God of heaven and earth does not slouch in the pew during congregational prayer. Nor does he distract himself and others by noisily fiddling with candy. Rather, he shows due honor and respect by quiet attention and a respectful posture.



Congregational prayers are possible only because of the Lord Jesus Christ.

The church is sinful and made

up of sinners. And those who are sinners have, of themselves, no access to God. Thus the church is, by nature, separated from God because of sin. She has no right to speak to God or to call Him "Father." She has no right to His favor and fellowship.

Yet God, by a wonder of grace, allows His church to draw near to Him, even very near. He allows her to open up and pour out her heart before Him. The saints may cast all their burdens and cares upon the Lord, knowing that He cares for them.

This is possible only through the Lord Jesus Christ. By paying the price for our redemption, He has brought us into God's family and earned for us the right to call God our Father. Because of His work we are pleasing in God's sight.

In addition to this, Jesus Christ is our Advocate. This means that He intercedes with God on behalf of the congregation. As the church's Bridegroom and Head, He prays to God for her. He knows what His people truly need and brings those needs to the throne of grace. And as the church's Advocate, He also perfects the prayers she brings to God. He makes those prayers acceptable to God and pleasing to His ears.

Because of Christ, God receives and hears and answers the congregational prayers of His church.



What a wonderful gift and blessing congregational prayer is!

It is an opportunity for God's people to express and experience their unity as the body of Christ. Just think of it—during congregational prayer fifty, or two hundred, or even five hundred believers together confess their sins to God, together pour out before Him all their needs, together give Him thanks and praise. They are all speaking, at the same time, the same words to God. What a wonderful expression of the oneness of

God's people as a communion of saints.

It is also an opportunity for God's people to pray for each other. We ought to do this in our individual and family prayers, too. But certainly congregational prayer is a most significant way, perhaps even the main way, in which God's people bring petitions to Him on behalf of their fellow saints. If one

would happen to forget to do this during the week (which, of course, would be to his shame), he nevertheless does it through the congregational prayer. And at the same time he is reminded to do this in his personal prayers. What a wonderful thing that saints can pray for each other.

Finally, congregational prayer is especially an opportunity for

God's people to experience together what is at the very heart of all worship, namely, fellowship with God. What a blessing that the church as a whole may enjoy this intimate fellowship with her Father in heaven.

May the church ever make good and proper use of the gift and blessing of congregational prayer.



When Thou Sittest in Thine House

Mrs. Jan Miersma

Royal Children: Stewards of God-given Abilities (2)

Continuing to consider the subject of stewardship of the gifts and talents that God has given to us, let us look at ways in which these abilities are developed as our children move into their school years. The purpose of much of their formal education is to bring out and develop their God-given abilities, not only those that are natural gifts, but the abilities they will need in order to labor as citizens of the kingdom of heaven. While this calling and responsibility is ours as parents, we can be grateful for those who also serve as teachers of our covenant children. What a blessing to be able to entrust aspects of this most important labor to godly men and women, who will not see our children's abilities as matters of pride and vainglory, or as failure and inadequacy, but will hold before them the calling to faithful ser-

vice with their unique gifts and to an obedient development of their abilities. Ideally, in the school, their service to others will expand beyond their families to the service of fellow-saints.

Not leaving this task simply to the school, we can and must as parents lead and guide our children. As we continue to stress the principles of love and obedience, our children will gradually spend less time playing and more working. Increasingly children will take more responsibility for the development of their own abilities. Since in school much of their time will be directed for them, the temptation for our children may then be to regard "free" time and vacations as simply time to use as they please. While we need not, and indeed ought not, fill every waking moment of our children's lives with planned activities, neither should they simply be left to while away their time. They need direction. They need an atmosphere that will stimulate growth, exploration, and development. Just as we provide our children with nutritious meals to grow and develop

healthy bodies, we will provide a "nutritious" atmosphere to develop their abilities. Expecting our children to flourish in an atmosphere devoted to entertainment, television, videos, electronic and computer games, and mindless toys (just walk through most toy stores today) is like expecting them to grow strong and healthy bodies on sugary snacks and junk food.

Further, as we well know, it's very easy to develop a taste for junk food and reject healthy food. So it is with entertainment. Sinful laziness plagues all of us. It's much easier for our children to be entertained or to do some minimal amount of work to be entertained. Because it keeps them "out of our hair," it is often tempting to allow or even encourage this type of activity. Everyone in the family can now be hooked up to his own electronic gadget. Further developing the analogy to junk food, it's not only more work to make nutritious meals than to open a bag of snacks, but it often makes less mess for us. A "nutritious" environment for our children will create more mess and work for us and them than a

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plugged-in life. We do not reject technology; we may use it, but let us beware of the temptation to abuse it.

What is an environment that will encourage the development of our and our children's abilities, abilities like listening and reading with concentration and understanding, logical and critical thinking, expressing the godly thoughts and emotions that live within us by God's grace in various ways, and the ability to express in word and deed sympathy and compassion for others? Every child of God should seek to develop these gifts or abilities in himself or herself and in his or her children. I hope in a future article to write in more detail about each of these, but in general terms, what kind of atmosphere will foster these abilities?

Our homes should be filled with books, books that need not necessarily be purchased, or purchased new. These should include books on a wide variety of subjects of many different types: spiritual books, biographies, history, science, geography, fiction, especially classic works that have been proven over time, and how-to books, to name but a few. We can regularly visit the library *with* our children. Given the character of some of the material you will find in libraries today, careful supervision is essential, but there is much available that will help our children to develop their knowledge and abilities. As in other areas, children learn by imitation, so if we read ourselves, read with our children, and talk about what we read, they will see this as something to be valued.

We will have some toys, not the mindless television-spawned toys that serve only to entertain and often promote violent or wicked behavior, but construction toys of various kinds that help our children not only to develop the manual skills to manipulate them and the mental skills to figure out how to assemble them, but will re-

quire them to use their own imaginations. Working puzzles not only develops abilities to recognize shapes and patterns but requires concentration. Paper, crayons, markers, paints, scissors, and other materials for making things will help them begin to take an idea and make some visible expression of it. Young girls may enjoy dolls, but let's focus on baby dolls and "little girl" dolls, not the fashion model dolls. Encourage them, as they get older, to make clothes for their dolls and to care for their "babies." Find dolls they can bathe and diaper and dress. Teach children knitting, crocheting, or other handcrafts. Not only will they have a visible reminder of their work, but they will learn patience and persistence in the process. Have children help with cooking and baking tasks, not just the "dirty work" of household chores, although those are necessary as well.

Good music to listen to, to sing with, and instruments to play will develop abilities of listening and expression. Learning to play an instrument is, I believe, especially valuable. Some children are more musically gifted and are able to learn more quickly than others, but the discipline of regular practice, attention to detail, and mental concentration required will be of benefit in many other areas as well.

Growing plants, setting up aquariums, making collections of natural objects, or having pets will develop skills of observation and a wonder and appreciation for God's creation. By these means they can also develop in the responsibility of caring for a fellow creature, although this is something they will need to learn with many reminders at first.

Playing games of various kinds with our children can help them sharpen various skills and learn needed facts. Let us avoid certainly the games that rely heavily on what men call chance, focusing rather on developing thinking skills (chess, checkers, and similar strat-

egy games), language skills (spelling and word games), Bible, math, history, or geography facts, or even physical coordination. Games may also help to develop skills of listening and cooperation with others. It may expose sins and weaknesses in our or our children's characters. Playing games together as a family can be a real challenge when our children are highly competitive or poor losers. We may be tempted to despair and have each one just play his or her own game on the computer, but playing together builds not only knowledge, but also social skills and relationships.

Looking over this far-from-complete list of suggested activities, we see that many of these "nutritious" activities are messy and noisy, and sometimes emotionally and mentally challenging, but without them it will be difficult to reap a harvest in ourselves or our children of being faithful stewards of talents and abilities. Obviously, no one will ever have time to pursue all of these ideas; each family will focus more on one area than another, depending on their natural bent.

Let us encourage our children then to develop skills, things they must practice and work at to improve, skills that, because of time and material limitations, it is difficult for the school to develop. This could be practicing a musical instrument, a sports skill, learning a foreign language, drawing, painting, cooking, sewing, carpentry, animal training, gardening, to name but a few examples. While we might be tempted to focus more on those skills that have a practical value, the concern here is not necessarily so much on the skill itself, but on the ability to learn to do something by practice and discipline, and increasingly by self-discipline. If we have time, we should set an example by our own efforts. Further, because of the complexity of the way in which children learn, the skills we might

dismiss as useless may serve later in developing the very ability or abilities God intends them to use either in their own vocation, in training their own children, or in their service as members of the body of Christ.

Very few, if any, of the abilities acquired by passively sitting in front of a screen, however, will serve this function. While some computer games may teach various thinking or math skills, we should be leery of relying too heavily on these. There are tremendous resources available in the form of videos, DVDs, and on-line resources for learning skills, and these can certainly be used, but interaction with a loving parent, teacher, sibling, aunt, or uncle in the course of real life situations will still be needed. This takes work and discipline on our part because very few children will have the motivation or self-discipline, initially, to pursue these skills on their own. Further, with many skills, it takes the achievement of a certain level of competence before it becomes something they will seek to work at on their own, but if we don't provide opportunities for them to do this, and guidance in learning the needed self-discipline, they likely never will.

In the high school and college years, the abilities of our young men and women have become more evident. They may still need help with accountability, but as

they mature they will also grow in their understanding in this area. Our young people, partly out of necessity, become more and more involved in working with computers. For us and our young men and women, computers are wonderful tools, but ways to abuse them are many. Sometimes they seem to lead to as much time wasted as they purport to save. Even apart from the horrors of the kind of filth that can be found online, there are so many opportunities to waste time with games, surfing the Internet, and instant messaging. Not only does very little of this time serve to develop the abilities our young people will need as royal children, but it also supplants far more profitable activities. Better to encourage our children and young people to regard the computer as a tool, first of all, with its entertainment value in a much lower place. Are we aware of how our young people are using the technology so readily available today? Do our young people use these means to develop the talents of godly communication by which they may better serve the Lord?

Young men, especially, should be reminded to develop those talents that will enable them to lead their families with the Word of God by preparing for catechism class and young people's society, but also be encouraged to read books, according to their ability, that will increase their knowledge of the Re-

formed faith, that they may prepare themselves to labor as officebearers, should God so call them. While young women may prepare for a vocation, since it is not God's purpose for every woman to marry, they also should develop the abilities needed to "guide the house" (I Tim. 5:14), including not only traditional domestic skills, but also the knowledge of God's Word, which will enable them to be helps meet for their husbands and to instruct their children. If we ourselves are weak in any of these areas, perhaps we can use this incentive to develop our own talents in them.

Whatever the special or particular gifts God bestows on our children, let us encourage them continually to develop their abilities in a number of different areas and to be active in the pursuit of knowledge and skill, not as ends in themselves, but as means whereby they may better serve their heavenly Father. We often overlook the second part of the fourth commandment: "Six days shalt thou labour and do all thy work..." (Ex. 20:9). We and our children have a positive calling to work. "Even a child is known by his doings, whether his work be pure, and whether it be right" (Prov. 20:11). In this way the Lord will prepare our children for, and lead them to, the particular place and calling in His kingdom that He has uniquely prepared for them.



Book Reviews



The Confessions and the Church Order of the Protestant Reformed Churches. Published by the Protestant Reformed Churches in America, 431 pp. (hardcover). \$9.00. [Reviewed by Prof. Russell Dykstra.] (The book may be ordered from the Protestant Reformed Churches in America, 4949 Ivanrest Ave., Grandville, MI 49418 U.S.A. E-mail: catechism@prca.org.)

The long anticipated study edition of the confessions and church order is off the press and now available. This is a significant and valuable book for those who love and honor the Reformed confessions, the Reformed liturgical forms, and the church order of Dort.

The preface of the book recounts the history of its coming into existence. Back in 1995, the synod of the PRC "went on record as favoring" the concept of a study edition of the confessions. Various subsequent synods decided on the content until in 2005, the synod gave final approval.

This book gives evidence of a tremendous amount of work—good work—by the catechism committee, Mr. Fred Hanko, and still others who assisted in the formatting of the book (some of this latter work I witnessed taking place at the computer of Mrs. Don Doezema). The result of this careful work is a fine product.

The book contains the three main creeds of the Reformed churches of the Netherlands tradition—the Heidelberg Catechism, the Belgic Confession, and the Canons of Dordrecht—commonly called the Three Forms of Unity. It also includes the ancient creeds (Apostles, Nicene, Athanasian, and Chalcedon). Each of these seven creeds has its own introduction, briefly explaining the history and significance of the creed.

Also included in the book are liturgical forms largely formulated by the Reformed churches in the Netherlands (most of them in the Reformation era). The Protestant Reformed Churches still utilize these forms with only minor adaptations. Included are such forms (ten in all) as the Form for the Administration of Baptism, the Lord's Supper form, and various ordination forms, plus two more—the document entitled "Consolation of the Sick," and the "Formula of Subscription."

Additionally, this study edition includes the Church Order used by the PRC (with an index), and the Declaration of Principles.

Thus this book brings together the documents found in the back of the Psalter and the "green Church Order book" used in the PRC. That combination all by itself would make it a valuable book.

However, it is the painstaking work of indexing that gives the book its major, significant value as a study edition of the creeds. The confessions have *four* different kinds of indices. The first is a *harmony* of the Three Forms,

useful for determining, for instance, that the doctrine of Lord's Day 16, Q. & A. 44 (Christ's descent into hell) is also discussed in the Belgic Confession Article 21 and in the Canons, Head II, Articles 2-4.

The second is a *doctrine* index (which includes the ancient creeds and the Three Forms, as do the next two indices) divided according to the Reformed systemization of doctrine, namely, six divisions (called *loci*)—Theology, Anthropology, etc. *Very* useful.

The third index to the creeds is a rather complete (forty-five page) *word* index. From this one can quickly learn where in these confessions the concept "children" is discussed, or "works," or "free will," and many others.

The fourth index to the creeds is a *Scripture* index listing where in the creeds various texts are quoted, expounded, or used as proofs for particular doctrines. It could be noted that the proof texts of the three Reformed creeds are given in full in footnotes to the creeds themselves.

It is an impressive work. But there is more.

There are three indices to the liturgical forms—a doctrinal index, a word index (thirty-five pages), and a Scripture index as well.

The only document not indexed is the Declaration of Principles, probably because it is not a creed.

The one concern I have is with the Scripture references attached to the various articles of the Belgic Confession. A significant matter is whether the texts are valid as proof texts for the articles to which they are attached. That in turn depends on whether or not the Reformed church adopted these texts in the past. The Synod of Dort adopted the Three Forms, including the Belgic Confession. However, solid evidence exists that while the Synod adopted the Heidelberg Catechism *with* proof

texts, it deliberately adopted the Belgic Confession *without* Scripture references.* For this reason there is no agreed-upon body of Scripture references to the Confession. For the most part, the references in the study edition seem to be accurate. However, Psalm 33:17 (An horse is a vain thing for safety: neither shall he deliver any by his great strength.) is given as a reference to the truth that the Spirit proceeds from the Father, obviously an incorrect reference. There may be others. I suggest that the Catechism Book Committee study this further, at the least to clarify the status of the Scripture references in future editions.

Doubtless there will be mistakes found, typos identified, etc, but this copy has no obvious mistakes that I could find.

This hardcover study edition is a real bargain—available for cost—at \$9. The binding is of excellent quality. It is also attractive.

But for all that, it is worthless unless it is used in harmony with its purpose—a *study* edition of the confessions. Teens, parents, grandparents, officebearers—all of us can profit from the diligent use of it. Consistories may well want to obtain a supply of the books, for easy examination and purchase by members of their congregations. The Reformed confessions are a precious heritage, but are too often neglected. There is great personal, spiritual profit in reading and studying these documents. With publication of this study edition, access to the content of the creeds became easier. Let's study! 

* Gootjes, Nicholas H. "Problems with Proof Texts," *Calvin Theological Journal*, 36, no. 2 (Nov., 2001), pp. 372-378.

Minister Activities

Rev. M. VanderWal, pastor of Hope PRC in Redlands, CA, declined the call extended to him from the Doon, Iowa PRC to serve as our denomination's next missionary to the Philippines.

Mission Activities

As we reported in our last "News," during the first worship service on Sunday morning, November 19, in the Berean mission in Manila, the sacrament of baptism was administered to five adults and five children, and the public confession of faith of fifteen members was heard, including the missionary's daughter, Jessica Spriensma. In the second worship service, the organization of the families and individuals into an instituted Reformed congregation, now known as the Berean Protestant Reformed Church of the Philippines, including the installation of officebearers, took place under the oversight of the delegation from the calling church and the Foreign Mission Committee. Tears of joy were seen in many eyes. As a denomination and as individuals we pray that the Lord will now send a man of His choosing to water that which has been planted. New elders are Eric Mescallado and Rod Bongat, and the deacon is Edgar Bansale. The church consists of twelve families. Text for the first worship service was I Corinthians 15:10 and for the second worship service I Samuel 7:12. Continue to thank God for the glorious work He is performing among the saints in the Philippines, and let us also remember in prayer Missionary Rev. A.

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

Spriensma and his family, who will be moving soon, the Lord willing, to Kalamazoo, MI, to begin their labors in the Kalamazoo PRC.

As a follow-up to his Reformation Day lecture in Pittsburgh, PA, Rev. W. Bruinsma, our churches' missionary to the Fellowship in Pittsburgh, has been scheduling weekly seminars at two different area locations. The first seminar dealt with the topic of "Acquiring Bible Knowledge in the Church and in the Home," followed by the subject of "The Fruit of Bible Knowledge," or how we as believers can equip ourselves to fight the good fight of faith and to walk a life of holiness before God.

Congregation Activities

The Adult Bible Society of the Lynden, WA PRC invited everyone in their congregation to a special Bible study Thursday, November 30. Plans called for a special look at our churches' mission work in the Philippines by means of a DVD of the work there, followed by a time to discuss that particular effort of our churches and missions in general.

On Saturday, November 11, members of the Girl's Fellowship and Activities Program, or LIFE group, of the Hudsonville, MI PRC, met together at the home of one of Hudsonville's members, for a hayride and lunch, followed by time together making brownie-treats and greeting cards for various members of their congregation.

Members of First PRC in Grand Rapids, MI enjoyed a Request Night Program following their evening worship service Sunday, November 12. There were instrumental and vocal numbers by

members of all ages, as well as audience singing of several Thanksgiving songs.

There was a Couples' Fellowship Potluck Dinner for couples married ten years or less at the Georgetown PRC in Hudsonville, MI on Friday evening, December 1. Prof. B. Gritters gave a message on "Couples Having Devotions Together."

Members of Georgetown PRC were also asked to reserve November 10 for a family pizza night and hymn sing/concert by the Voices of Victory, sponsored by TRAC (Transylvania Reformed Assistance Committee). The evening was to benefit the Bogota Orphanage in Romania.

Members of Grace PRC in Standale, MI were invited to celebrate with their church choir on Sunday morning, November 26 by staying after the worship service for a concert to celebrate in songs of thanksgiving the advent and salvation of our Lord.

Members of area PRCs near the Hudsonville, MI PRC were invited to gather together Sunday evening, November 26, at Hudsonville for an hour of song and praise to our heavenly Father presented by their Choral Society.

The Covenant Ladies Circle of First PRC in Edmonton, AB, Canada invited the ladies and daughters of their congregation to their annual Christmas Cookie Exchange at their church Thursday evening, November 30. Everyone was asked to bring a food item to share, as well as to contribute a musical, vocal, or reading number for a short program. Ladies could also bring three dozen cookies if they wanted to take part in the exchange.

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THE STANDARD BEARER

School Activities

A promotional supper for the Midwest Society for PR Secondary Education was held November 27 at the Hull, Iowa PRC. After supper there was a slide show followed by a question and answer period.

The annual Thanksgiving chapel and lunch was held at the Loveland Christian School in Loveland, CO on November 22. Chapel began at 11:00 A.M., with devotions for lunch in the church

basement at 11:45. Donations for the lunch were accepted, with proceeds to benefit the Heidelberg PR School Society in Roselle, IL.

Members of our congregations in Iowa were invited to hear the junior high students from Hull and Northwest Iowa PR Christian Schools perform both instrumental and vocal numbers December 1 at the Hull PRC.

Young People's Activities

The Young People's Society of Immanuel PRC in Lacombe,

AB, Canada invited their congregation to a soup supper and pie auction on November 24.

The members of the Young People's Society of the South Holland, IL PRC invited the young people from neighboring PR churches to a cookout, hayride, and bonfire on November 18.

The Young People's Society of the Loveland, CO PRC sponsored a Thanksgiving Singspiration after their evening service on Sunday, November 19. 

Announcements

First PRC of Holland MI
Winter Conference 2007
"The Antithesis:
Godly Living in Ungodly
Times"

January 12:
"Antithetical
in a Technological Age"
Speaker: Rev. Daniel Kleyn

January 19:
"Antithetical
in an Age of Covetousness"
Speaker: Rev. Garrett Eriks

January 26:
"Antithetical
in an Age of Great Immorality"
Speaker: Prof. Herman Hanko

All three dates are **Fridays**, speeches will begin at **7:30 P.M.**, and refreshments and fellowship will follow each speech, D.V. Tapes of the lectures will be available upon request.

NOTICE:

The Evangelism Committee of Hope Protestant Reformed Church, Redlands, CA, has published the book *Christ's Spiritual Kingdom: A Defense of Reformed Amillennialism*, written by Prof. David Engelsma. We offer this book for sale at our publication cost of \$8.95, plus shipping. To order a copy, please e-mail: thereformedwitness@hopeprc.org, or write the Evangelism Committee, Hope Protestant Reformed Church, 1307 E. Brockton Ave., Redlands, CA 92374

NOTICE

With thankfulness to God, the faculty of the Protestant Reformed Seminary announce that they have licensed third-year seminarian, Mr. Heath Bleyenberg, to speak a word of edification in the worship services of the congregations. The scheduling of Mr. Bleyenberg's speaking in the churches is done by the rector of the seminary.

For the Faculty,
Prof. David J. Engelsma, Rector

Reformed Witness Hour		
January 2007		
Date	Topic	Text
January 7	"Put on the Lord Jesus Christ!"	Romans 13:13, 14
January 14	"With Him in His Glory"	John 17:24
January 21	"God at Work in Every Womb (1)"	Job 31:13-15
January 28	"God at Work in Every Womb (2)"	Job 31:13-15