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Volume 82 ◆ Number 11

Knowing the Power of Christ's Resurrection

That I may know him, and the power of his resurrection...if by any means I might attain unto the resurrection of the dead.

Philippians 3:10, 11

At one time Paul had confidence in the flesh. He was confident that he could attain eternal life on the basis of his circumcision, his pedigree (he was an Israelite, of the tribe of Benjamin), his position as a Pharisee, and his works.

However, the things that were once gain to him, he now counts as loss for Christ. Once he considered his circumcision, his pedigree, his position, and his works to be an advantage to him in the pursuit of salvation. Now he considers them to be a loss. In his pursuit of salvation he has cast them away. The only thing that matters is that he has Jesus Christ.

In fact, Paul considers all things loss for the excellency of the knowledge of Jesus Christ. All things are expendable just to know Christ. To Paul the all-important things are to win Christ, to be found in Christ Jesus so that he has the righteousness of Jesus, to know the power of Christ's resurrection, and ultimately to attain to the resurrection of the dead.

These last two concerns of Paul are the focus of this meditation.



The apostle Paul desires above all to know the power of Christ's resurrection.

The resurrection of Jesus Christ has power. The power of His resurrection is the power of salvation. It is the power to deliver us from our sins and miseries.

This is why it is so tragic that many in the church world are denying Christ's resurrection. Many view the biblical account of the resurrection as a fabrication of the disciples or a myth intended to convey that Jesus lives on in the

memory of His followers. Jesus, they say, never did rise from the dead; He is still in the grave. By this denial they deny a key work of God in salvation and turn their backs on the power of salvation.

It was Paul's desire to know the power of Jesus' resurrection. He was not interested merely in knowing the facts of resurrection and its power. He wanted to know the power of Christ's resurrection personally in his own life. He wanted to experience the saving power of the resurrection as it brought him salvation. That knowledge was of all things most precious to Paul. He considered all things expendable to attain that knowledge.

Is this knowledge most precious to you?



The power of Christ's resurrection is threefold.

First, it is the proof of our justification.

Justification is the verdict of God that, even though we have sinned terribly, we are righteous

Rev. Slopsema is pastor of First Protestant Reformed Church in Grand Rapids, Michigan.

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EDITORIAL OFFICE

Prof. Russell J. Dykstra
4949 Ivanrest
Grandville, MI 49418
(e-mail: dykstra@prca.org)

BUSINESS OFFICE

The Standard Bearer
Mr. Timothy Pipe
P.O. Box 603
Grandville, MI
49468-0603
PH: (616) 531-1490
(616) 538-1778
FAX: (616) 531-3033
(e-mail: doezema@prca.org)

CHURCH NEWS EDITOR

Mr. Ben Wigger
6597 40th Ave.
Hudsonville, MI 49426
(e-mail: benjwig@juno.com)

NEW ZEALAND OFFICE

The Standard Bearer
c/o B. VanHerik
66 Fraser St.
Wainuiomata, New Zealand

UNITED KINGDOM OFFICE

c/o Mr. Sean Courtney
78 Millfield, Grove Rd.
Ballymena, Co. Antrim
BT43 6PD Northern Ireland
(e-mail: cpraudiostore@yahoo.co.uk)

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before Him. It is the verdict of the Judge of heaven and earth that He sees no sin in us, and that in His judgment all that He requires of us in the way of obedience has been accomplished. This favorable verdict of God is all-important. It makes us heirs to eternal life and all the blessings of God.

The key to this justification is found in what Paul says in verse 9. There Paul expresses the desire that he be found in Christ, not having his own righteousness, which is of the law, but that which is through the faith of Christ, the righteousness that is of God by faith. The righteousness that we can present to God through our keeping of the law is woefully inadequate to serve as a basis for a favorable verdict from God. Were we to appear before God with our own works, we would be found guilty and would be destroyed forever. In Jesus Christ, however, there is a perfect righteousness. It consists of a complete payment for sin and a perfect obedience. A favorable verdict of God depends on possessing that righteousness when we appear before God. This will happen only when we are joined to Jesus Christ by faith and thus are found by God to be in Christ. Then He accounts the perfect righteousness of Christ as ours.

This is the great reality of justification.

In Christ, God justifies sinners!

And Christ's resurrection from the dead is proof that there is this righteousness in Christ and that, therefore, if we are found in Him, we will be justified from all our sins.

This truth is stated in Romans 4:25, which speaks of Jesus Christ, "Who was delivered for our offences, and was raised again for our justification." Notice, Jesus was delivered to the cross for (on account of) our sins. God placed our sins on Jesus. This required that He suffer the torments of hell on the cross. He endured it all in perfect obedience, so that He covered all our sins, which were upon

Him. He who was made guilty with our sins is now righteous before God. This righteousness demanded Jesus' resurrection to life and glory. Death and hell could no longer claim Him. And so it is that the resurrection of Jesus is the proof of a perfect righteousness, not only for Jesus but for all that are found in Him. It is the proof of our justification.

This proof is necessary in light of the enormity of our sins. The sinner who really understands his sin wonders how God can ever declare him righteous. God presents nothing less than the resurrection of Christ to convince him.

This is the power of the resurrection.

And those who know the power of the resurrection come to know and experience their own justification.



But there is more.

The resurrection of Jesus Christ is also the power of a new life.

By nature we are dead in sin. This means that we are incapable of doing anything that is truly good. We are also inclined to all wickedness. Our hearts are filled with hatred. Everything that is evil and crooked is in us. This depravity of nature places us outside the joy of God's fellowship and brings upon us His terrible wrath.

But Jesus' resurrection is the power of a new life in us. This new life consists of a life of wonderful obedience to God, a life of loving God and the neighbor. In this new life of obedience also comes a blessed life of intimate friendship with God. This new life requires a fundamental and radical transformation in the very depths of our spiritual being. We must become new creatures. The old must pass away and all things must become new. This transformation is described in the Bible as a new birth, a new creation, and also a spiritual resurrection from the dead.

The power to bring about this transformation is the resurrection of Jesus Christ. Jesus was raised by God to eternal life and to great power. In the power of His resurrection, Jesus Christ also raises up to a new life all that belong to Him.

This power and work of the risen Lord is referred to in Colossians 3:1: "If ye then be risen with Christ, seek those things which are above, where Christ sitteth on the right hand of God."

Those who know the power of Jesus' resurrection know this new life.



Finally, Jesus' resurrection is the power of our own bodily resurrection.

Those who have a new life in Jesus Christ do not lose that life when they die. They lose many things in death. They lose all things earthly — their possessions, the natural relationships that are so precious. In a few generations even the memory that people had of them is lost. But one thing they do not lose is their new life in Christ. In fact, this life is enriched as the soul is taken immediately up to the glory of heaven.

But the body is laid to the grave to be destroyed by death so that it returns to dust.

How important that body is. It is an essential part of our human nature. What would life be without the body? And so God assures those whom He finds in Christ that He will preserve the essence of their bodies in death and raise them up in the day of Christ's return. And, wonder of wonders, He will raise them up in the same manner in which He raised up Christ's body. Through this final resurrection their bodies will be made heavenly and immortal so that they can enjoy the bliss of a new creation forever in both body and soul.

The resurrection of Jesus Christ is the power of this final resurrection into glory. Through His own

resurrection Jesus received power and authority to raise us in the day of His return.

In keeping with that, God presents Jesus' resurrection as a solemn pledge that He will also raise us up through Jesus Christ. Romans 8:11: "But if the Spirit of him that raised up Jesus from the dead dwell in you, he that raised up Christ from the dead shall also quicken your mortal bodies by his Spirit that dwelleth in you."

Those who know the power of Jesus' resurrection have this pledge of God. And it gives them good hope for the future.



To know the power of Jesus' resurrection we must know Jesus.

Twice Paul speaks of knowing

Jesus. First, in verse 8, he writes, "Yea doubtless, and I count all things but loss for the excellency of the knowledge of Christ Jesus my Lord." And then, in verse 10, Paul reiterates his desire to know Christ and the power of His resurrection.

Notice how knowing Christ and knowing the power of His resurrection are linked. If you will know the power of Christ's resurrection in your life, you must know Jesus Christ.


This knowledge is not just intellectual. Yes, you must know about Christ. You must know who He is and what He does as Mediator and Savior. But this knowledge must be more. It must be the knowledge of a born-again heart. Then it becomes the knowledge of faith in which you know Jesus in-

timately and personally as your Savior. With that knowledge you embrace Him, trust Him, and rely upon Him for all things.

Those who know Jesus know the power of His resurrection.

Do you know Jesus?

Paul considered this knowledge above all precious. He considered all things loss for this knowledge. He would and did sacrifice all things earthly to have and grow in the knowledge of Jesus Christ. His goal was to know the power of Jesus' resurrection that would one day enable him to attain unto the resurrection of the dead.

May that passion be also in our hearts, so that one day we too may attain unto the resurrection of the dead. 

Editorial

Prof. Russell Dykstra

Another Look at the Declaration of Principles (3)

The Declaration of Principles intends to set forth what the confessions teach, and thus what is binding in the Protestant Reformed Churches, on a few specific doctrines. The Declaration delineates doctrines that are connected, directly or indirectly, with God's covenant of grace.

When the Dutch immigrants asked, "What is binding in the PRC?" they had in mind particularly the doctrine of the covenant. Everyone knew that the Reformed confessions did not contain a complete treatment of the covenant.

However, the PRC were convicted that some of the covenant conceptions being proposed could not fit within the bounds of the confessions. The Declaration of Principles, in harmony with its purpose and scope, does not offer a definition of the covenant. Neither does it spell out a particular conception of the covenant that is Reformed, and exclude all else. Rather, it sets forth the confessional perimeter for a Reformed doctrine of the covenant.

In the first section, the Declaration demonstrated from the confessions that God's saving grace is only for the elect, and that there is no grace at all for the reprobate. It demonstrated likewise — from the confessions — that although the

gospel is to be preached promiscuously wherever God sends it, yet the preaching of the gospel is not a gracious offer of salvation to all who hear the preaching. On the contrary, the preaching contains a *command* to repent and believe. It also includes a promise of salvation, but that promise is particular — not to all who hear the preaching, nor to every baptized child. Rather the promise, say the confessions, is to the one who *believes*. That this can refer only to the elect of God is plain from the confessions' teaching that God gives faith (belief) only to His elect.

Thus in its first section, the Declaration (without naming it) has already demonstrated that one particular conception of the covenant

Previous article in this series: February 15, 2006, p. 220.

is outside the confessions, namely, the Heynsian view. Prof. William Heyns of Calvin Theological School taught that the essence of the covenant was God's conditional promise of salvation, and that God made this personal promise to every child of the church at baptism. In addition, he maintained that the common grace given to all — elect and reprobate alike — enabled each child to make a decision on whether or not to fulfill the condition, namely, of faith. However, the Heynsian covenant conception is contrary to the confessions, since they teach a grace of God only to the elect, and maintain that the promise of the gospel is particular, namely, to the (elect) believer alone.

In the second section, the Declaration continues to lay down the foundations for the doctrine of the covenant, before proceeding to treat it more directly in the third part.

Section II begins:

They [the PRC] teach on the basis of the same confessions:

A. That election, which is the unconditional and unchangeable decree of God to redeem in Christ a certain number of persons, is the sole cause and fountain of all our salvation, whence flow all the gifts of grace, including faith.

As a basis for this assertion, the Declaration references the Canons, I, 6 & 7, already quoted, and the Heidelberg Catechism, Q. & A. 54, which confesses the redeemed "church chosen to everlasting life." In addition, it quotes the first part of the Baptism Form:

For when we are baptized in the name of the Father, God the Father witnesseth and sealeth unto us that He doth make an eternal covenant of grace with us, and adopts us for His children and heirs....

After summarizing the blessings of salvation promised by the triune God, the Form concludes this part:

"till we shall finally be presented without spot or wrinkle *among the assembly of the elect* in life eternal" (emphasis mine). Take note, that the same "we" who are promised the blessings of salvation are the "we" who will be "among the assembly of the elect in life eternal." Hence, the "we" includes not all baptized children, but only the elect baptized children.

The Atonement — for the elect alone

Next the Declaration presents the confessions' teaching on the extent of the blessings of Christ's atonement. The Declaration states: "That Christ died only for the elect and that the saving efficacy of the death of Christ extends to them only." It then quotes Canons II, 8, the beautiful confession that fully supports the statement of the Declaration.

The Declaration next draws out some implications from the Canons article. It states: "This article very clearly teaches: 1. That all the covenant blessings are for the elect alone."

How does the Declaration arrive at this?

Canons II, 8, emphasizes that the benefits of the death of Christ are not for all, but "extend to all the elect," adding, that God bestows "upon them alone the gift of justifying faith, thereby to bring them infallibly to salvation." And, that Christ "should effectually redeem out of every people, tribe, nation, and language, all those, and those only, who were from eternity chosen to salvation." The article then spells out some of the blessings of salvation. Significantly, Article 8 connects the atonement with the covenant by maintaining that it is by the same blood of the cross that Christ "confirmed the new covenant."

From that connection, as well as from the Baptism Form quoted above, it is evident that the blessings of the covenant are the blessings of salvation. It has already

been confirmed from the confessions that there is no grace to the reprobate, no matter if the reprobate is born in a covenant home or in the home of an unbeliever. Since there is no grace to the reprobate, the Declaration rightly concludes that there can be no covenant blessings to the same.

As an aside, we point out that no one denies that God gives many good gifts to the reprobate baptized child. He has the gifts of his covenant home and the instruction of believing parents. He has the privilege of attending Christian schools, catechism, and worship services. Displayed before him are the pictures of redemption in baptism and the Lord's Supper.

However, these good gifts do not become a blessing to the reprobate child raised in a covenant home. That is obvious from the fact that God's curse — His word of death — rests upon that reprobate child from the moment he first takes breath. God's condemnation of that child increases as he is instructed and brought up in the truth of Scripture. This condemnation is heavier still when the child openly repudiates his baptism, his instruction, and all the good gifts of the covenant, such as he had them. He never had the essence of the covenant — fellowship with God — but he knows *about* even that, and he rejects Jehovah and despises fellowship with Him.

Although God gives good gifts, He does not intend them to be blessings to the reprobate child. In fact, all the good things of the covenant upbringing are the Holy Spirit's instruments to harden the child. Sooner or later he reaches the point where he cannot abide in the church. He can no longer pretend to be a believer. He openly rebels.

We digress. However, the point of the Declaration is that Canons II, 8 teaches "that all the covenant blessings are for the elect alone."

Based on the same Article 8,

the Declaration declares: "That God's promise is unconditionally for them [the elect] only: for God cannot promise what was not objectively merited by Christ."

Notice that this statement has two parts, the declaration and its proof. The proof, that "God cannot promise what was not objectively merited in Christ," is beyond dispute for any Reformed believer.

The contention that "God's promise is unconditionally for the elect only" arises out of the conflict of the 1950s. The defenders of a conditional covenant maintained that God promised all the blessings of salvation — including forgiveness of sins and eternal life — to each baptized child, *objectively*. That is to say, the child was not given them *subjectively*, so that the child actually possessed these blessings. However, he would be promised them objectively, in the sense that these blessing *could be* the possession of the child. To use an illustration, it would be like a father promising an inheritance of a million dollars to his five year old son. He can have it when he grows older, he is promised. Some insisted that God promises forgiveness, salvation, and eternal life to every baptized child objectively, conditioned on the child's faith and obedience.

The Declaration argues that such an idea is contrary to the confessions, "for God cannot promise what is not objectively merited by Christ," which is to say, if Christ did not pay for the sins of a particular man, God cannot promise him life. Hence, God's promise *is* only to the elect, and that without conditions.

The third inference of Canons II, Article 8 flows directly from what has been said. It is:

That the promise of God bestows the objective right of salvation not upon all the children that are born under the historical dispensation of the covenant, that is, not upon all that are baptized, but only upon the spiritual seed.

This follows logically from the truth confessed by every Reformed believer, namely, that Christ earned salvation only for the elect. However, since this is so crucial a point in the debate, the Declaration is not content to ground it only upon Canons II, 8. It cites the Heidelberg Catechism, Q. & A. 65 & 66, which explain how elect believers partake of the blessings of the cross. The Catechism insists that "we are made partakers of Christ and all His benefits by faith only," and that the Spirit "works faith in our hearts."

Then the Declaration adds:

If we compare with these statements from the Heidelberger what was taught concerning the saving efficacy of the death of Christ in Canons II, A, 8, it is evident that the promise of the gospel which is sealed by the sacraments concerns only the believers, that is, the elect.

If the word "concerns" seems vague, as it was alleged by some in the 1950s, the context makes it clear. The Declaration already demonstrated that the promise is to the believer, and the promise is that every believer shall be saved. Even though that promise is spoken in the hearing of many, it does not follow that all who hear it are guaranteed what is promised. The elect believers *are* promised eternal life. Thus, the promise "concerns" them only.

In that connection, the Declaration turns to Q. & A. 74, which is extremely significant in the debate over whether or not all baptized children are promised the blessings of the covenant.

Q. 74. Are infants also to be baptized?

A. Yes: for since they, as well as the adult, are included in the covenant and church of God; and since redemption from sin by the blood of Christ, and the Holy Ghost, the author of faith, is prom-

ised to them no less than to the adult; they must therefore by baptism, as a sign of the covenant, be also admitted into the Christian church; and be distinguished from the children of unbelievers as was done in the old covenant or testament by circumcision, instead of which baptism is instituted in the new covenant.

Conditional covenant supporters insist that Answer 74 must be read as follows:

... since they [i.e., all baptized children] ... are included in the covenant and church of God, and redemption from sin by the blood of Christ, and the Holy Spirit ... is promised to them [i.e., all baptized children]....

The Declaration rejects that interpretation, insisting that in Answer 74 the brackets should rather contain the words "i.e., all elect baptized children." This stands at the heart of the issue.

Notice, first, that the Catechism does not state either position explicitly, and thus an evaluation is necessary to determine the Reformed interpretation. Secondly, the proper way to discover the Reformed interpretation is by making a comparison with what the Reformed confessions as a whole teach.

The Reformed confessions insist that "the saving efficacy of the death of Christ is for the elect alone." Since no Reformed man denies this, and since Answer 74 speaks of the promise (again — that *particular promise*) of "redemption from sin by the blood of Christ," the reference in the answer is not to all children that are baptized, but all the spiritual seed, that is, the elect.

The point of Q. & A. 74 is that infants are to be baptized because salvation and the Spirit are promised to elect *infants*, not merely to elect *adults*. If God waited until the elect were adults before He gave the promise, baptism would

not be administered to infants. It is that simple.

The Declaration presents proof from the confessions that the Protestant Reformed understanding of Q. & A. 74 is Reformed.

The (Belgic) Confession of Faith, Article 33, teaches that the sacraments are “not vain or insignificant, so as to deceive us. For Jesus Christ is the true object presented by them.” Thus the sacraments are “visible signs and seals of an inward and invisible thing, by means whereof God worketh in us.” If the “us” in this article is every baptized child, then the article teaches that God by His Spirit is working in both the elect and the reprobate child what the sacrament signifies. That would be a flat contradiction of the Reformed confessions’ teaching that God’s grace is sovereign and particular.

Similarly, Article 34 teaches that baptism is a “testimony to us that he will forever be our gracious God and Father.” And later, “Therefore the ministers, on their part, administer the sacrament ... but our Lord giveth that which is signified by the sacrament ...,” after which the article lists the blessings of salvation. Obviously, this testimony and gift of God can only be to God’s elect.

The Declaration points also to the instruction of Article 35 of the

Confession of Faith, which indicates concerning the Lord’s Supper that “the ungodly indeed receives the sacrament to his condemnation, but he doth not receive the truth of the sacrament.”

A final reference in this connection is made to the Baptism Form, which testifies concerning “our young children” that “as they are without their knowledge partakers of the condemnation in Adam, so are they again received unto grace in Christ....” How could anyone argue that all baptized children are “received into grace in Christ”? The confessions reject that with the clear teaching that God’s grace is for the elect alone.

Faith — no condition

There remains yet in this second section of the Declaration the affirmation of a third foundational truth, namely, “That faith is not a prerequisite or condition unto salvation, but a gift of God, and a God-given instrument whereby we appropriate the salvation in Christ.”

This truth is self-evident to one who rejects the conditional election of Arminius with consistency. However, a couple comments are in order.

It is worth noting that the Declaration quotes Q. & A. 20 of the Heidelberg Catechism.


Q. 20. Are all men then, as they perished in Adam, saved by Christ?

A. No; only those who are ingrafted into him, and receive all his benefits, by a true faith.

The significance of this Q. & A. is that faith is not first an act of believing. It is that in our *experience*. However, the Catechism reminds us that faith is first a spiritual bond by which the elect is grafted into Christ. That being the case, to speak of faith as a condition that man must fulfill is utter nonsense.

To complete the proof that faith is all of God and thus cannot be a condition, the Declaration quotes the Canons, III, IV, Article 14.

Faith is therefore to be considered as the gift of God, not on account of its being offered by God to man, to be accepted or rejected at his pleasure; but because it is in reality conferred, breathed, and infused into him; or even because God bestows the power or ability to believe, and then expects that man should by the exercise of his own free will consent to the terms of salvation, and actually believe in Christ; but because he who works in man both to will and to do, and indeed all things in all, produces both the will to believe, and the act of believing also.

... to be continued. 

Taking Heed to the Doctrine

Rev. James Laning

The Idea and Importance of the Sacraments (1)

Rev. Laning is pastor of Hope Protestant Reformed Church in Walker, Michigan.

Under ecclesiology (the study of the church) we consider not only what the church is, but also what the church does. We have now moved into this second area, and are con-

sidering the church’s calling to preach the gospel and administer the sacraments.

The preaching and the sacraments together are called the means of grace, because they are

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means that God uses to cause us to partake of the grace that Christ purchased for us. They are sometimes also referred to as means of faith, since it is by means of these two that we come to conscious faith. This is what we confess in Question and Answer 65 of the Heidelberg Catechism:

Q. 65 Since then we are made partakers of Christ and all His benefits by faith only, whence doth this faith proceed? (i.e., Where does this faith come from? – JAL)
A. 65 From the Holy Ghost, who works faith in our heart by the preaching of the gospel, and confirms it by the use of the sacraments.

Having considered the preaching of the gospel, which is the chief means of grace, we proceed now to the sacraments, the secondary means.

The sacraments, though secondary, are important. They are means that God has given to the church to strengthen the faith of His people. Even though we no longer live in the Old Testament days of types and shadows, with all its symbols and ceremonies, there are still some signs and symbols that are used to confirm our faith – signs that God Himself has given to us.

God-Given Signs to be Used by Faith

Often when a church declines she starts to invent more and more symbols to take the place of the spiritual realities that are lacking. People tend to turn to symbols instead of the preached Word to assure themselves that God is really present among them. They place their trust in these symbols for comfort, and thus fall into the sin of idolatry. This is a great danger, against which we must constantly be on our guard.

Yet we must also be thankful for and make proper use of the signs that Christ has instituted to strengthen our faith. The sacra-

ments are signs that God, and not man, has instituted. They are signs that were given to be observed by the whole church, and that are used by the Spirit of Christ to confirm our faith. We show we are thankful for this by using these sacraments for the purpose for which Christ has ordained and instituted them.

Even God-given signs can be wrongly used as idols. God gave Israel the ark of the covenant to symbolize His presence among them. But Israel used it as an idol, trusting in it to save them from the Philistines (I Sam. 4:3ff.). For this great act of wickedness, Israel was defeated; Hophni and Phinehas, the sons of Eli who bore the ark, were slain; and the ark of the covenant was taken. We must use the signs Christ has given to us, but we must place our trust not in the signs, but in the God who uses the signs to strengthen our faith.

This is why our fathers placed admonitions in both our Baptism Form and our Lord's Supper Form to warn against a misuse of the sacraments. Before parents come up to have their child baptized, the following statement from our Baptism Form is read to them:

Beloved in the Lord Jesus Christ, you have heard that baptism is an ordinance of God to seal unto us and to our seed His covenant; therefore it must be used for that end, and not out of custom or superstition. That it may then be manifest that you are thus minded, you are to answer sincerely to these questions....

Parents come to make use of the God-given sign. But before they do so, they must show by their confession that they are trusting in God, and not the sign.

Right before we partake of the Lord's Supper, there is a similar exhortation:

That we may now be fed with the true heavenly bread, Christ Jesus, let us not cleave with our hearts

unto the external bread and wine, but lift them up on high in heaven, where Christ Jesus is our Advocate at the right hand of His heavenly Father, whither all the articles of our faith lead us; not doubting but we shall as certainly be fed and refreshed in our souls through the working of the Holy Ghost, with His body and blood, as we receive the holy bread and wine in remembrance of Him.

The Lord's Supper is another sign that God, and not man, has instituted. Yet it also must be used rightly, by one who truly is seeking to be fed in his soul, that is, by one who is cleaving to God and not "the external bread and wine."

To make a proper use of these sacraments we must understand what sacraments are, and how Christ uses them to bless those who are members of His body.

Visible Signs of Invisible Grace

The sacraments are signs. Signs are things visible that picture things that are invisible. The rainbow is something visible that points to the invisible covenant mercy that God is showing towards "every living creature of all flesh that is upon the earth" (Gen. 9:16). The stars in the heavens are signs that point to the glory that believers will one day radiate in the new heavens and the new earth. The sacraments are also signs, but they are a special kind of sign. They are signs that Christ has given to be observed by every true instituted church, signs that signify for her the gracious work that Christ is performing in her midst, while she waits for the final coming of Her Husband and Lord.

The sacrament is a sign consisting of an earthly, visible substance and activity. In baptism, there is a substance (water) and an activity (washing). In the Lord's Supper, there is a substance (bread and wine), and some activities (breaking and distributing the bread, eating the bread, blessing the cup of blessing, and drinking the cup of

wine). This is what is referred to as the sacrament.

The substances and activities that constitute the sacraments serve to illustrate for the church the invisible operation of the grace of God. We cannot see with the eye of the body the gracious work that God is performing in our souls. Therefore God has given to us visible signs that illustrate for us this spiritual cleansing and renewing work that He is performing within us.

Word and Sign: Better Than the Word Alone

The sacraments are signs that God gave to the church in order more fully to declare to us His promise. In Answer 66 of the Heidelberg Catechism, we confess that God gave us sacraments,

that by the use thereof He may the more fully declare and seal to us the promise of the gospel.

This answer must not be misunderstood. The Catechism says the sacraments “more fully declare” the promise of the gospel. The ques-

tion is, More fully than what? One might be tempted to say, More fully than the preaching of the gospel. But this would be a serious mistake.


The Romish church has long held that, when it comes to having a positive influence on the people of God, pictures are more effective than the preaching of the Word. This same thinking is often found in churches that apostatize from the faith. Gradually they place more emphasis on symbols, and less on the preaching of the Word. Soon their churches and their worship services are filled with man-made symbols, and the preaching of sound doctrine is nowhere to be found.

Over against this error we must maintain that the preaching of the Word, not the administration of the sacraments, is the chief means of grace. Without the proper preaching of the gospel we could not even understand the meaning and significance of the sacraments. The preaching is what is primary; the sacraments are secondary.

What our fathers meant is that the preaching and the sacraments together are better than the preaching alone. The combination of Word and picture more fully declares God’s promise than the Word does by itself. The world says, “one picture is worth a thousand words.” But one needs words to explain the picture. So rather we must say, “words and a picture are better than the words by themselves.”

The sacraments cannot be separated from the Word. God has joined them to the Word, and that for a specific purpose:

the better to present to our senses, both that which He signifies to us by his Word, and that which He works inwardly in our hearts ... (Belgic Confession, Article 23).

The sacraments go with the Word, and when rightly used with that Word they function as a real means of grace. What is this means and who receives this grace will be considered, Lord willing, next time. 

Ministering to the Saints

Rev. Doug Kuiper

The Diaconal Care of Non-Poor Christians (1) *The Propriety of Such Care*

Is the proper work of the deacons limited to the care of the poor? Or ought they also care in some way for those who are sick, aged, widowed, orphaned, displaced, or enduring some other heavy burden in life?

The question arises because, in

explaining the duties of deacons in Reformed churches, both the Church Order (Articles 25, 26, and 83) and the Form of Ordination of Elders and Deacons speak exclusively of the care of the poor. I say exclusively — but there is one possible exception to this: Church Order, Article 25 requires the deacons to “visit and comfort the distressed,” which raises the question whether the “distressed” are only those who are poor.

The argument could be made,

therefore, that the proper work of the deacons is the care of the poor only, and that the care of fellow saints who are sick, aged, or otherwise afflicted ought not at all be the concern of the deacons, so long as their circumstances of life do not bring them into poverty.

We wish, however, to devote a few articles to argue the opposite point of view: that the deacons, who are called to manifest the mercies of Christ to His church, ought to care also for other needy members of the

Rev. Kuiper is pastor of the Protestant Reformed Church in Randolph, Wisconsin.

church, even if their afflictions do not bring them into poverty.

To argue this point is not to contradict the Church Order and the Form of Ordination. Indeed, the care of the poor is the deacons' fundamental task. But it is my judgment that the word "distressed" in Article 25 of our Church Order ought not be limited to the poor. And this is the opinion of VanDellen and Monsma as well, who, commenting on the phrase "visit and comfort the distressed," write: "Moreover, sometimes the distressed may not need money, food, or clothing nearly as much as assistance in some other form, *such as sick care* (emphasis mine, DJK), or words of comfort from Holy Writ."¹



Our defense begins with scriptural principles.

It is scriptural to say that sin, not poverty, is the root cause of our misery; and that sin's consequences extend to all of life's troubles, not only poverty. That some are widows or orphans is a consequence of sin, inasmuch as "the wages of sin is death" (Rom. 6:23). And the manifestation of death in us, in the form of sickness, handicaps, and old age, is the consequence of sin. The word "death" in Romans 6:23 can be understood to include both spiritual death and physical death, with all the earthly and bodily troubles that precede it.

It is also scriptural to say that the alleviation of these troubles is the work of mercy. Manifesting His mercy, Jesus raised some from the dead, cast out devils, and healed many that were sick. Matthew 8:16-17, a passage that I bring often to those who are sick, proves this:

When the even was come, they brought unto him many that were possessed with devils: and he cast out the spirits with his word, and healed all that were sick, That it might be fulfilled which was spo-

ken by Esaias the prophet, saying, Himself took our infirmities, and bare our sicknesses.

Here Matthew quotes Isaiah 53:4. Isaiah 53 is primarily a prophecy of Christ's atoning suffering on account of our sin. Strikingly, in verse 4 Isaiah prophesies that Christ's atoning death would be the ground for the removing of our sicknesses as well. This is because sickness is an effect of sin.

While the final realization of this prophecy is enjoyed in heaven, where there is "no more death, neither sorrow, nor crying, neither shall there be any more pain" (Rev. 21:4), Matthew notes in 8:17 that Jesus Christ began to fulfill this prophecy regarding Himself already while He was on earth, by healing the sick. The point is simply this: today also, in the care of the sick and those with other needs, the church is called to manifest the mercies of Christ.

Jesus underscores this in His notable description of the day of judgment, at which time He will separate the sheep from the goats. Those who inherit the kingdom showed during their life on earth that they were citizens of that kingdom, in supplying Christ's needs when He was hungry, thirsty, a stranger, naked, sick, and in prison. They provided for Christ in all these circumstances, inasmuch as they provided for one of the least of Christ's brethren (Matt. 25:34-39).

These manifestations of mercy by Jesus while He was on earth, and by individual saints of Jesus toward fellow brothers and sisters in Christ, the church must also show as a body. And the God-appointed means for her to show this mercy as a body is that of her diaconate.



Secondly, our defense is taken from church history.

The deacons in Calvin's Geneva were devoted not only to

the relief of the poor, but also to the care of the sick, aged, and widows. That they undertook this work is clear from the "Ecclesiastical Ordinances," what we might call the "Church Order," of the church in Geneva, adopted in 1541: "There were always two kinds of deacons in the early Church. The one kind was deputed to receive, dispense, and keep the goods for the poor...; the other kind to care for and remember the sick and administer the allowance for the poor, a custom which we still retain at present."² This document further provided for the deacons to oversee the communal hospital, which housed the sick in one wing, and widows, orphans, and homeless poor in another, and to oversee a hospice for travelers. In this connection, Prof. William Heyns writes,

The fact that Calvin in his regulations for the Genevan Church provided for the appointment of Deacons specifically for taking care of the sick, and also Deaconesses for nursing them, shows that he was fully convinced that care for the sick was a duty of the Church, to be performed through the Deacons.³

Exactly how this happened in Geneva we will examine in the following article, the Lord willing. For now we note that the situation in Geneva was due at least in part to the thought and teachings of John Calvin. This is clear from his writings. In the 1559 edition of his *Institutes*, Calvin writes:

The care of the poor was entrusted to the deacons. However, two kinds are mentioned in the letter to the Romans: "He that gives, let him do it with simplicity;... he that shows mercy, with cheerfulness" [Rom. 12:8]. Since it is certain that Paul is speaking of the public office of the church, there must have been two distinct grades. Unless my judgment deceive me, in the first clause he designates the deacons who dis-

tribute alms. But the second refers to those who had devoted themselves to the care of the poor and sick.... If we accept this (as it must be accepted), there will be two kinds of deacons: one to serve the church in administering the affairs of the poor; the other, in caring for the poor themselves.⁴

To make it more clear, Calvin's point is that one kind of deacon is to busy himself with distributing alms, while the second kind of deacon is to manifest the practical, hands-on care of the poor — at which point it is noteworthy that Calvin adds "and sick."

This influence of Calvin with regard to having deacons who did more than simply care for the poor, but who also cared for other afflicted saints of God, was felt throughout Europe.

The French Confession of Faith, prepared by Calvin and adopted at the Synod of Paris in 1559, gives as reason for including the deacons as an office in the church that "the poor and all who are in affliction may be helped in their necessities."⁵ The confession was not being redundant when it added "and all who are in affliction"; it had in mind others who were not poor. Peter Y. DeJong is of this opinion as well, for he writes that the deacons of the French Reformed Churches "were to gather and distribute the alms of God's people, visit the sick and imprisoned, and whenever possible render all lawful assistance."⁶ In the French Reformed churches, however, there was no division of the office of deacon into two parts, as there was in Geneva.

The same distinction in the office of deacon was found in the Netherlands. In 1568 a convention similar to a synod met in Wesel and made a similar requirement. In the fifth chapter of the record of its proceedings, dated November 3, 1568, and entitled "Concerning the Deacons," we read:

(5) It would, however, be helpful if especially in the large localities two sorts of deacons would be established, one part of which shall apply itself to the gathering and distribution of the alms and at the same time see to it that, in case there are any goods that have been bequeathed to the poor, these will be claimed from the heirs in a lawful way and distributed faithfully to those for whom they had been intended in the bequest.

(6) The other kind will in the main care for the sick, the wounded and the prisoners; these deacons ought to be gifted not only with faithfulness and diligence but also with the gift of comforting and a better than average knowledge of the Word; and they must diligently inquire from the elders if in their district there are perhaps sick or infirm people who are in need of comfort and encouragement.

(8) The duty of love demands that attention shall be given also to those who come from outside and to strangers.

(9) It shall therefore be the calling of the deacons carefully to inquire from the elders and other members of the church if by any chance travellers or strangers have arrived in town who are believers to the end that the benefit of hospitality may be conferred upon them and further faithful and Christian assistance may be given. And in case they are indigent they shall be given what they need. It is furthermore beyond doubt that their care belongs to the first kind of deacons.⁷

The Church Order of the Provincial Synod of Dordrecht, which met in June of 1574, makes this statement "Concerning the Visitation of the Sick."

Visiting the sick belongs to the office of the ministers of the Word, and it is risky to assign other persons to that task. Therefore, the ministers shall request the elders and deacons to help them with their task. They shall do so because their office [that of elders and deacons, DJK] in comparison with other Christians requires more with respect to visiting, com-

forting, and strengthening the sick, the poor, and members in need of comfort.⁸

It is a fact that explicit references to this aspect of the work of the deacons disappeared from Reformed church orders over the years, beginning already in the late 1500s. But this does not mean that Reformed churches have changed their mind regarding the propriety of deacons caring for Christians whose needs are other than poverty. The indication that this is still part of the deacons' work, according to Reformed standards, is found in the continual mention of the "poor and....," in which another word is used, which word is not merely synonymous with poor. For example, the Belgic Confession,

1. Idzerd VanDellen and Martin Monsma, *The Church Order Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1941), p. 117.

2. Philip E. Hughes, ed and transl, *The Register of the Company of Pastors of Geneva in the Time of Calvin* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publ. Co., 1966), p. 42.

3. Prof. William Heyns, *Handbook for Elders and Deacons* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1928), p. 334.

4. John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill, transl. Ford Lewis Battles (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1960), p. 1061.

5. Philip Schaff, ed, *The Creeds of Christendom* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1990), vol. 3, pp. 376-377.

6. Peter Y. DeJong, *The Ministry of Mercy for Today* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1963), p. 62.


7. Richard R. DeRidder, *Translation of Ecclesiastical Manual, including the decisions of the Netherlands Synods and other significant matters relating to the government of the churches*, (the original work authored by P. Biesterveld and Dr. H. H. Kuyper), (Grand Rapids, MI: Calvin Theological Seminary, 1982), p. 33.

8. DeRidder, p. 69.

which was approved by the Synod of Dordt 1618-1619 as a confession of Reformed churches, requires deacons to relieve and comfort “the poor and distressed.”⁹ One question that the Protestant Reformed classical church visitors are required to ask the ministers and elders regarding the deacons is whether they are faithful in attend-

ing to “their calling in the care and comfort of the poor and oppressed.” And, as we have noted at the beginning of the article, our Church Order implies the need to care for more than the poor, when it speaks of the deacons visiting and comforting the “distressed.”

So, we argue, the care of such by the deacons is proper. What

other God-ordained vehicle does the church have than the deacons, to care in an organized manner for her sick, aged, widows, etc.? For deacons are the ministers of Christ’s mercy. 

8. Schaff, vol. 3, page 421.

Decency and Order

Prof. Ronald Cammenga

Excommunication: The Extreme Remedy (1)

“After the suspension from the Lord’s table, and subsequent admonitions, and before proceeding to excommunication, the obstinacy of the sinner shall be publicly made known to the congregation, the offense explained, together with the care bestowed upon him, in reproof, suspension from the Lord’s Supper, and repeated admonition, and the congregation shall be exhorted to speak to him and to pray for him. There shall be three such admonitions. In the first, the name of the sinner shall not be mentioned that he be somewhat spared. In the second, with the advice of the classis, his name shall be mentioned. In the third, the congregation shall be informed that (unless he repent) he will be excluded from the fellowship of the church, so that his excommunication, in case he remains obstinate, may take place with the tacit approbation of the church. The interval between the admonitions shall be left to the discretion of the consistory.”

Church Order, Article 77.

The Necessity of Christian Discipline

Article 76 of the Church Order dealt with the first stage of ecclesiastical discipline: silent censure. Article 77 concerns the second

stage: public discipline and excommunication. Already Article 76 stated that, should the sinner obstinately reject the admonition of the elders after having been placed under silent censure, “... the consistory shall at last proceed to the extreme remedy, namely, excommunication....” Article 77 tells us how the consistory is to proceed in applying this extreme remedy.

From the very beginning, the Reformed churches were convinced of the biblical necessity of Chris-

tian discipline, and, if need be, excommunication from the church. That biblical basis is found in passages like Matthew 18:15-18; I Corinthians 5:3-5; II Thessalonians 3:14, 15; I Timothy 1:19, 20; and Titus 3:10. On the basis of this biblical testimony, the Reformed creeds affirm the necessity of Christian discipline. Q.A. 82 of the Heidelberg Catechism speaks of the duty of the Christian church to exclude from the Lord’s Supper those who show by confession and

Prof. Cammenga is professor of Dogmatics and Old Testament in the Protestant Reformed Seminary.

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life that they are unbelieving and ungodly. Q.A. 85 describes the shutting and opening of the kingdom of heaven by the key of Christian discipline. According to this question and answer, those who despise the admonition of the elders are to be excluded from the Christian church, which exclusion amounts to exclusion by God Himself from the kingdom of heaven. The Belgic Confession, Article 29, identifies the marks of the true church. The third mark is "... if church discipline is exercised in punishing of sin...." By contrast, the false church either distorts Christian discipline, using it as a means by which to persecute true believers, or dispenses with it altogether, leaving sinners at ease in the church. Article 32 of the same confession, the title of which article is "Of the Order and Discipline of the Church," teaches that for the nourishment and preservation of the church's unity and in order to keep all men in obedience to God, "... church discipline is requisite, with the several circumstances belonging to it, according to the Word of God."

The Early Dutch Reformed Synods

The earliest Dutch Reformed synod, the Synod of Wesel 1568, mandated the exercise of Christian discipline in the emerging Dutch Reformed churches. The following are some of the significant statements relating to discipline found in the Church Order adopted by this synod.

One ought to be totally on guard, that at the organization of a newly established church, church discipline is nowhere neglected. For not only the institution but also the doctrine of the Lord Christ and the apostles teach us how beneficial and necessary this is, as well as the practice of the apostolic and the entire early church and finally also daily experience.

It is therefore also only right

that no one ought to be admitted to the ministry of the Word but he who is prepared to maintain and preserve this rule of discipline.

We are of the opinion that discipline consists partly in the censure of doctrine or religion and life, partly in the reprimands according to the law, and partly also in excommunication, in which lies the power of the keys which has been given by the Lord to the church.

If therefore there is someone who secretly or publicly has disseminated strange teachings and heresies, his name shall be reported by the elders to the consistory. After having been called there, he shall be admonished and if he submits himself to this judgment of the church, he shall again be accepted in mercy. However if he, after having been admonished two or three times, stubbornly hardens his heart, he must be excluded from the communion of the saints.

The Synod of Embden 1571 included several articles relating to Christian discipline in the Church Order it adopted for use in the Dutch Reformed churches. It was the first synod to specify the three distinct announcements to the congregation, along with the contents of each announcement. This provision was carried over in subsequent church orders and is retained in our own Church Order. This article also required the ministers to explain the significance of excommunication to the congregation, and called them to admonish the congregation against too friendly dealings with someone who has been excommunicated.

The minister shall publicly admonish the obstinate sinner from the pulpit. He shall clearly explain his sin, and how diligently he has been punished and kept from the Lord's Supper; he shall exhort the congregation to diligently pray for this impenitent sinner, before the congregation is forced to come to the final remedy of excommunication. Three

admonitions shall be made: in the first the sinner shall not be named that he be somewhat spared. In the second he shall be named. In the third the congregation shall be informed that he shall be excommunicated or excluded, unless he repents, so that he, should he remain obstinate, by means of silent consent of the congregation is cut off. But concerning the length of time between the admonitions, this shall be left to the judgment and discretion of the consistory. If he cannot be brought to conversion through this diligence of the ministers, then the banning and cutting off from the body of Christ of such an obstinate person shall be announced to the congregation. The minister shall fully explain the use and the purpose of the ban and shall admonish the believers not to have any overly familiar or unnecessary conversation and company with the banned person, but to shun his company mainly to the end that the banned or excluded one, being ashamed, may earnestly consider conversion.

The Synod of Dordt 1578 reaffirmed Embden 1571. The Synod of Middelburg did the same. However, in response to a question that was put to the synod, the synod made mention of seeking the advice of the classis. This was the first time that this stipulation was added to the steps of Christian discipline. The question and the synod's answer follow.

How shall one proceed to excommunication of the obstinate sinner? Answer: If someone, having been barred from the Lord's Supper because of his obstinacy, shows no signs of repentance, the minister shall announce the sinner's obstinacy publicly to the congregation, explain the sin, together with the diligence shown him in discipline, barring from the Lord's Supper and after that frequently admonishing him, and the congregation shall be admonished to pray for this impenitent sinner before it be necessary to come to the extreme remedy of excommunication. Three such admonitions shall take place. In the first one

the sinner shall not be named. In the second *with the advice of the classis* (italics mine, RC) his name shall be mentioned. In the third he shall be excluded from the fellowship of the churches, so that his excommunication if he remains obstinate takes place with the silence and consent of the churches. The time which shall pass between the admonitions shall be left to the judgment of the consistory.

The Synod of the Hague 1586 was the first synod to incorporate the “advice of classis” in the body of its church order.

Before proceeding to excommunication the obstinacy of the sinner shall be publicly announced to the congregation, the offense explained, together with the diligence shown to him in admonishing him, barring him from the Lord’s Supper and the repeated admonitions and the congregation shall be exhorted to speak to him and to pray for him. Three such admonitions shall take place: in the first the sinner shall not be named so that he is somewhat spared. In the second with the advice of classis his name shall be mentioned. In the third, the congregation shall be informed that unless he repents he shall be excommunicated from the fellowship of the churches, so that his excommunication, if he remains obstinate, takes place with the silent consent of the churches. The time between the admonitions shall be left to the judgment of the consistory.

The provisions of the Synod of the Hague 1586 were taken over by the Synod of Dordt 1618-19, and from Dordt to Article 70 of the Church Order of the Protestant Reformed Churches.

The Three Steps of Public Discipline

The main feature of Article 77 is that it outlines the three distinct steps in the public discipline of the impenitent sinner. These three steps are to be distinguished from silent censure.

The first step of public discipline is the announcement to the congregation, in which announcement the name of the sinner is not mentioned. This announcement, as with all the announcements made to the congregation in the course of a discipline case, is to be an announcement previously approved by the consistory. A minister must not frame his own announcement. It is not the minister’s announcement; it is the *consistory’s* announcement to the congregation. Neither ought he to make this announcement extemporaneously. The matter of Christian discipline is far too serious for that. The consistory must carefully formulate and approve any announcement concerning Christian discipline made in the congregation.

This announcement and all subsequent announcements ought to be brief and clear. It should include mention of the sin in which the member is walking impenitently, the care of the elders in calling the erring member to repentance, and the admonition to the congregation to pray for the member, and later to visit him.

The second step of public discipline is the announcement to the congregation that now includes mention of a name. In this announcement the impenitent sinner is identified. The second announcement is not to be made to the congregation, however, without prior advice of the classis. This is a significant aspect of public discipline and excommunication in Reformed churches. There comes a time when the advice of the broader assembly, the classis, must be sought. No one may be excommunicated from a local congregation without the advice of the classis. A consistory must seek this advice of the classis before proceeding to the second step and making the announcement to the congregation that includes the name of the wayward member. The advice of classis is a precaution that the churches have agreed on in order to prevent someone from being

excommunicated wrongly or too hastily. We will come back to this matter of the role of the classis in the discipline of the local congregation in our next article, and so reserve further comment until then.

The third step of public discipline is the announcement made to the congregation that, besides mentioning the name of the sinner, now also announces the date on which he will be formally excommunicated from the church. On that date, perhaps a couple of weeks or a month from the Sunday on which this last announcement is made to the congregation, the “Form of Excommunication” is read in the public worship service. From that date forward, the impenitent sinner is considered excommunicated from the fellowship of the church. And from that date forward the members of the church are to regard the individual as one who has been excommunicated, breaking off fellowship and keeping no company with him (Matt. 18:17; I Cor. 5:9-11). The excommunicated person has been placed outside of (“ex”) the communion of the church. That he is excommunicated must impact the way in which the members of the church regard him and deal with him.

... to be continued. 

Three Steps of Public Discipline

Step 1. Announcement to the congregation, without mentioning the name of the sinner.

Step 2. Announcement to the congregation, mentioning the name of the sinner, after receiving the advice of the classis.

Step 3. Announcement to the congregation, setting the date for excommunication.

The Prophecy of Malachi

Covenant Faithfulness and Unfaithfulness (5)

The Second Disputation: Chapter 1:6-2:9 (continued)

1:6. *A son honoureth his father, and a servant his master: if I then be a father, where is my honor? and if I be a master, where is my fear? Saith the LORD of hosts unto you, O priests, that despise my name. And ye say, Wherein have we despised thy name?*

1:7. *Ye offer polluted bread upon my altar; and ye say, Wherein have we polluted thee? In that ye say, The table of the LORD is contemptible.*

1:8. *And if ye offer the blind for sacrifice, is it not evil? And if ye offer the lame and sick, is it not evil? offer it now unto thy governor; will he be pleased with thee, or accept thy person? saith the LORD of hosts.*

1:9. *And now, I pray you, beseech God that he will be gracious unto us: this hath been by your means; will he regard your persons? saith the LORD of hosts.*

W

e must understand that the worship and service that went on in the temple is a picture and foreshadowing of the worship we bring to God. Many Scripture passages speak of our worship as an offering (Rom. 12:1, 2; I Cor. 5:8; Heb. 13:15). That offering must be

brought according to the Word of God and in real gratitude and faith. When it is not, it is blind and lame and sick, like the offerings of these Jews.

How often is not the offering that is brought to God in worship poor and lame and sick! Sometimes it is that because the act of worship itself is not what He has commanded — when all sorts of things are done in the worship of God that have no place there. Sometimes the offering that is brought is poor and lame and sick, not because the act itself is wrong, but because the heart of the worshiper is not right with God. He comes in unbelief, superstitiously and as a mere formality.

Even more often, polluted offerings are allowed by those who like the priests of old are God's ministers and representatives in the church! And most often it is the case that they allow the people to bring such offerings, though they themselves know better, in order that they may profit — that they may have large congregations, expensive buildings, vestments, larger collections, houses and lands of their own. Few will suffer loss and impoverishment for the sake of maintaining purity in doctrine or in the worship of God. Every reformer whom God has raised up in His church has heard pious words of encouragement from those who appeared to be his supporters but who left him standing alone when their own livelihood

and physical well-being were threatened. Every minister of the gospel, every elder and leader in the church, who puts himself and his own things before the worship and service of God is as guilty as these wicked priests, and is being addressed as well as them.

Such leaders today allow the truths of God's Word to be compromised and the worship of God to be corrupted. They allow man-made songs to be substituted for the Psalms contrary to God's command, entertainment to take the place of the preaching of the gospel, and frivolity to take the place of reverence and serving God. They themselves, like these priests, bring such offerings to God as though they will be acceptable to Him. What Malachi says is as much for today as for his own times, though most today will say, like the priests, "Wherein have we despised thy name?" "Wherein have we polluted thee?" Such actions, verse 8 reminds us, are evil, acts of rebellion against God, not only because they violate His command, but because they show no regard whatever for His holiness and glory.

In order to impress upon the priests the seriousness of their sin, God suggests that they bring to their governor, probably Nehemiah himself (cf. Neh. 5:14), the kind of offerings they brought to God. God's question, "Will he be pleased with thee, or accept thy person?" is a rhetorical question, the answer

Rev. Hanko is pastor of the Protestant Reformed Church of Lynden, Washington.

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to which could not possibly be in doubt. Nehemiah took nothing from the people during his years among them (Neh. 5:15), but that does not change the fact that the kind of offerings they were bringing were unfit and unlawful even for such uses, and that he, as governor, would have been insulted by such offerings.

Verse 9 is irony. Malachi is telling the priests that if the governor would not accept the kind of offerings they were bringing, then certainly God would not either. The idea is: "Go with your offerings to God and make intercession on the basis of the offerings, praying that God will be gracious to us. Do you really think He will accept your ragged offerings and hear your prayers?" The phrase "this hath been by your means" is part of the irony and is saying: "You are the only ones who can do these things, the ones who have been called to do them. Do you think God will be pleased with you and accept you?"

1:10. Who is there even among you that would shut the doors for nought? Neither do ye kindle fire on mine altar for nought. I have no pleasure in you saith the Lord of hosts, neither will I accept an offering at your hands.

Verse 10 goes even further in showing God's disgust and displeasure with the priests. The verse is usually taken to be a further exposure of the mercenary attitude of the priests: "You will not even shut the doors of my house without pay." But more in line with the second part of the verse is the interpretation that sees this as God's rejection of them and their work. He is telling the priests to shut the doors of His house and to cease offering sacrifices, since that would be better than their continuing to bring the useless, polluted offerings they did bring. "Is there no one," God is saying, "with sufficient zeal for Me and for My worship to put an

end to this hypocrisy and wickedness?" And lest they would continue deliberately to misunderstand and to stand amazed and disbelieving that God should be so upset with them over nothing, God tells them plainly that He has no pleasure in them and will accept no offering from them.

How the church today needs to hear this. In spite of all the excitement and enthusiasm, the large crowds and huge churches in which they gather, God receives nothing from them and has no pleasure in them. Better would it be if their doors were shut and silence reigned, than that they bring to God the polluted offerings they do: "Christian" rock music, holy laughter, silly miracles, jokes and stories, and all the rest are not acceptable to God in place of what He has commanded.

The priests, of course, never listened to this word of God, and the doors of the temple remained open and their foolish formal sacrificing continued until God Himself shut it all down permanently in AD 70 when temple and altar were destroyed by the Romans. What a warning to all those who offer strange fire and polluted sacrifices on God's altar and who pay no attention when He tells them that He would rather have no worship at all from them!

Moore sums it all up thus:

Then, as now, men sought, as for a philosopher's stone, a cheap religion — one that would insure heaven to them on the easiest terms. Hence they made a shuffling compromise with duty, compounding for the lowest possible percentage of self-denial and effort. God assures them that a cheap religion, like most cheap things, was always dear, since it would cost more than it was worth — for it was worth just nothing. God will not despise the widow's mite, but he will despise the miser's mite — especially when the blinded man is dreaming that by this beggarly shift he

is securing the favor of God. As he drops his pittance into the treasury of the Lord, a voice comes forth from the throne, Who is there among you that will close the doors against this insulting mockery, and tell the starveling giver that he had better keep his miserable apology for a gift, for it was worse than thrown away when presented as an offering to God. O! that this voice of indignant scorn could be rung through the laggard Churches of Christendom, who are striving to solve the same impossible problem in the maxima and minima of spiritual calculus, with how little self-denial and active labor a man may reach heaven at last.¹

Let us not forget either, that it is always God's name that is at stake in the worship of God. Though many do not realize it, His name does not include just the few words with which we address Him, but includes everything that is connected with His glory as God. The Westminster Larger Catechism includes in the name of God "his titles, attributes, ordinances, the word, sacraments, prayer, oaths, vows, lots, his works, and whatsoever else there is whereby he makes himself known." The misuse of any of these, therefore, dishonors and blasphemes His name. Thus it is that the priests were guilty of abusing His name by their offerings and attitude. Thus it is that we can be and often are guilty of the same sin.

All this, though not yet stated, required a priest who would love the glory and honor of God and who would cleanse the church of its impurity and wickedness and teach God's people to "offer unto the LORD an offering in righteousness" (3:3). The coming of such a priest, the Messenger of the covenant, is prophesied in chapter 3.

1:11. For from the rising of the sun even unto the going down of the same my name shall be great among the Gentiles; and in every place incense shall be offered unto my name,


and a pure offering: for my name shall be great among the heathen, saith the LORD of hosts.

When we do not cherish spiritual things, God takes them away from us. That is the reason for the gift of the gospel to the Gentiles, and it is the reason why the gospel has moved from one Gentile nation to another in the course of New Testament history. Here, for their lack of regard for the priesthood and offerings, God promises that He will take both away from the Jews and give them to the Gentiles.²

Though the gathering of the Gentiles and the preaching of the gospel to them are not specifically

mentioned in the verse, it is clear that the verse has that in view. The only way God can become great among the Gentiles is by grace, that is, that God graciously forgives the sins of the Gentiles, causes the gospel of grace to be preached to them, graciously gives them the gift of faith that they may believe the gospel, and, through the same gift of faith, gives them not only the gift of forgiveness, but the knowledge of forgiveness, so that they understand what God has done for them and thankfully glorify His name.

All this, however, depends on the coming of the Messenger of the covenant. He alone is able to purify the sons of Levi, whether they be Jews or Gentiles, that they may

offer to God a sacrifice in righteousness. It is through the coming and work of Christ that God Himself makes sure that there are always those who do worship Him in spirit and in truth and do not trifle with His worship and service. He will glorify His name and see that it is glorified in every age; and the wickedness of men, even in the church, will not defeat that purpose. 

1. *Commentary*, pp. 120, 121.

2. It should be noted that the words "Gentiles" and "heathen" in verse 11, though translated differently in the KJV, are really the same word in Hebrew.

Church and State

Mr. Brian VanEngen

Eroding Parental Control Over Instruction of Children

Reformed parents have always cherished the ability to train up their children in the covenant. In the United States, parents have always enjoyed broad control over the upbringing of their children. A recent decision by the Ninth Circuit, however, has ruled that parents do not have the exclusive right to determine what their children are taught. The case, *Fields v. Palmdale School District*,¹ involved the distribution of information of a sexual nature in the public school setting, but the case could have drastic implications for parents and children

in other settings as well. This article will look at the facts of the case, the legal analysis of the case, and the implications of the case.

The Palmdale Case

The facts of the case were rather simple. The plaintiffs were parents of children enrolled in the Palmdale, California school district, at Mesquite Elementary School. The parents objected to information of a sexual nature that was both indirectly given to, and obtained from, their children through a survey that was administered in the school.

A woman who was working on obtaining her master's degree in psychology volunteered at the school as a "mental health counselor." The Palmdale school district

collaborated with this woman, her college, and the Children's Bureau of Southern California to develop and administer a psychological assessment questionnaire. These questionnaires were given to children in the first, third, and fifth grades. Letters were sent to parents requesting consent for their children's participation. While the letter to the parents indicated that the survey could make the children uncomfortable, it did not provide details. The plaintiffs later learned from their children that the surveys asked the children probing, explicit questions, including questions about sexual subjects.

Mr. VanEngen, a member of the Protestant Reformed Church of Hull, Iowa, is a practicing attorney.

1. *Fields v. Palmdale School District*, No. 03-56499 (Ninth Cir. filed Nov. 2, 2005).

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The parents filed suit against the school district and two of its officers, seeking damages and injunctive relief. They claimed that the school district had violated their constitutional rights, and had acted negligently. The school district moved to dismiss the lawsuit on the basis that the parents had failed to state a claim. The federal district court granted the defendants' motion to dismiss and the plaintiffs appealed to the Ninth Circuit court of appeals.

The Ninth Circuit decision

A three-judge panel for the court of appeals upheld the decision of the district court. In analyzing the case, the court looked at three main arguments: 1) that the school district had violated their fundamental constitutional due process right to control their children's upbringing; 2) that the school district had violated their constitutional right to privacy; and 3) that the school district's actions were not rationally related to a legitimate state interest.

The first argument made by the parents was based on the "*Meyers-Pierce*" right, so named because of the two United States Supreme Court cases on which it is based.² The *Meyers-Pierce* right basically says that the Due Process Clause of the Fourteenth Amendment to the United States Constitution protects the fundamental right of parents to make decisions concerning the care, custody, and control of their children. The parents argued that they did not want anyone else teaching or introducing their children to sexual, moral issues.

The court noted in its analysis that the *Meyers-Pierce* right is not absolute. The court's decision refers to prior decisions in which the U.S. Supreme Court had ruled that the state as *parens patriae* could require school attendance, limit child labor, and similar restrictions on absolute parental control.

The court then went on to place particular emphasis on a case

known as the *Brown* case, which had previously been decided by the First Circuit court of appeals.³ In the *Brown* case, the First Circuit had decided that a public school could require students to attend an assembly on the topic of sex education relating to AIDS and other health concerns. It is important to note that the *Brown* case was decided by another circuit court of appeals, and not the U.S. Supreme Court, and is therefore not necessarily binding precedent. Nonetheless, the Ninth Circuit relied on the *Brown* case, stating "As the First Circuit made clear in *Brown*, once parents make the choice as to which school their children will attend, their fundamental right to control the education of their children is substantially diminished."⁴ The court went on to say "In sum, we affirm that the *Meyer-Pierce* right does not extend beyond the threshold of the school door."⁵

The Right to Privacy

The court then turned to the parents' argument that the school district's actions had violated their right to privacy. The parents argued that the surveys given to the children gave the children information about sex and obtained information from the children, all of which should have been within the exclusive purview of the parents. The Ninth Circuit first noted that the right of privacy protects important parental decisions. The court stated "We cannot overstate the significance of these rights."⁶ However, the court then went on to state summarily that "Here, however, the survey simply did not interfere with the right of the parents to make intimate decisions."⁷

Rational Basis

Finally, the court found that the school district's actions were rationally related to a legitimate state interest. The court noted several times in the decision that it was not expressing a view on the

wisdom of posing some of the questions to the children. However, the court found that the questionnaires could aid education by identifying barriers to learning caused by childhood trauma.

Analysis of the Decision

At first blush, this decision appears to apply only to families whose children attend our nation's public schools. However, there are troubling aspects of this decision that have implications for all parents.

First, the court's analysis of the *Meyer-Pierce* right could apply to almost any government programs. The language of the decision itself is narrowly tailored to the public school setting, such as the court's somewhat chilling statement that parents' *Meyer-Pierce* rights end at the threshold of the schoolhouse door. Incidentally, this statement alone should make us thankful for private schools and for our own covenant schools in particular.

However, even though the opinion specifically refers only to public schools, the same reasoning and analysis could apply equally to any state-run program in which parents voluntarily enroll their children. This could even be a public health-care program, in which the state could disseminate information on topics, such as sex, that are presented with an entirely different set of moral values than the parents would approve. This becomes more and more of an issue in a political climate in which the government increasingly uses tax dollars to develop and administer subsidized or free programs in virtually every area of society. Under the reasoning of the *Palmdale* case, those who enroll their children (or themselves) in such programs lose their right to control the instruction their children receive.


The aspect of this decision that is perhaps even more troubling is the court's analysis of the right to privacy. Although no right to privacy is specifically provided in the Constitution, the United States Su-

preme Court has repeatedly relied on an inherent right to privacy to limit the use of laws prohibiting morally questionable behavior. In the landmark cases of *Roe v. Wade* and *Lawrence v. Texas*,⁸ the Supreme Court relied on the Privacy Right to strike down laws banning abortion and prohibiting homosexual behavior, respectively. Under these cases, the state cannot impose a morality on a person by limiting “private” acts that supposedly do not affect anyone else. The Ninth Circuit referred to both *Roe* and *Lawrence* in its decision, but glossed over the parents’ privacy rights, allowing the state to provide information that the parents felt was in conflict with their own moral views. Surely if the privacy right allows people to expose themselves to sexual behavior or information, it should also protect those who do not wish to be exposed to such information or behaviors. But

under the court’s analysis, the state can impose a different set of morals on children through “educational” materials. This situation presents a perfect opportunity for those with a different agenda in the “culture war” to indoctrinate with their own moral code.

Conclusion

The United States Supreme Court has not ruled specifically on the right of privacy of parents with respect to instruction in moral issues. Unless the Court issues a ruling reversing cases such as *Palmdale* and *Brown*, it appears that the State is free to instruct our children as it sees fit if that instruction comes through state programs with voluntary participation. Although the Constitutional “Privacy Right” protects the ability of people to engage in morally questionable behavior, it does not necessarily protect those who wish to avoid exposure to in-

formation or behaviors they consider immoral. As government involvement in societal programs increases, it may be more and more difficult to avoid participation, so that we can rear our children according to scriptural mandates, rather than the agendas of others who wish us to be tolerant and accepting of alternative moral standards. We must be careful to avoid participation in such programs, regardless of the cost. 

2. *Meyer v. Nebraska*, 262 U.S. 390 (1923); *Pierce v. Society of Sisters*, 268 U.S. 510 (1925).

3. *Brown v. Hot, Sexy & Safer Prods., Inc.*, 68 F.3d 525 (1st Cir. 1995).

4. *Fields v. Palmdale School Dist.*, at 14-15.

5. *Id.*, at 16.

6. *Id.*, at 18.

7. *Id.*

8. *Roe v. Wade*, U.S. (1973); *Lawrence v. Texas*, 539 U.S. 558 (2003).

Understanding the Times

Mr. Cal Kalsbeek

ISLAM (5)

Western Responses to Islam: Nominal Christianity’s Response

And of the children of Issachar, which were men that had understanding of the times, to know what Israel ought to do; the heads of them were two hundred; and all their brethren were at their commandment.”

I Chronicles 12: 32

Mr. Kalsbeek is a teacher in Covenant Christian High School and a member of Hope Protestant Reformed Church, Walker, Michigan.

Previous article in this series: December 1, 2005, p. 106.



One might be able to understand why a secular society would be sympathetic to Islam and antagonistic to biblical Christianity, but that that which calls itself the Christian church would be conciliatory, and even supportive of what historically has been a fierce competitor, appears almost unbelievable. Those seeking to understand the times should examine where nominal Christianity is coming

from in this regard, and where it appears to be going.

Pre 9/11

Before the use of airplanes as bombs by radical Muslims on September 11, 2001, there was a growing acceptance of Islam by much of what could be identified as nominal Christianity. As early as October 1986 Pope John Paul II brought representatives from nearly all the world’s religions to

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Assisi, Italy for an ecumenical day of prayer for world peace. In this setting Pope John Paul II “proposed that they all worship the same God.”¹ The obvious implication of that idea in the context in which it was presented is that people of any religion are saved even apart from the knowledge of Jesus Christ.

Evangelist Billy Graham expressed this same heresy on Robert Schuller’s “*Hour of Power*” television program of June 8, 1997. In response to Schuller’s question: “Tell me, what do you think is the future of Christianity?” Graham replied:

...I think there’s the Body of Christ which comes from all the Christian groups around the world—or outside the Christian groups....

...He is calling people from out of the world for His name, whether they come from the Muslim world, or the Buddhist world, or the Christian world, or the non-believing world, they are members of the Body of Christ because they have been called by God.

They may not even know the name of Jesus, but they know in their heart that they need something that they don’t have, and they turn to the only light that they have. And I think that they are saved, and that they are going to be with us in heaven.²

Notice that Rev. Graham isn’t saying that God will *call out* from these groups those who will follow Christ. Rather it is his belief that while they are still in these religious systems they are members of the Body of Christ. Astoundingly, Graham makes these assertions without support from Scripture but solely on the basis of what he thinks. If there is any doubt as to what Graham (and Schuller) believes, they will be dispelled by reading a little more of their discussion:

Schuller: What I hear you saying is, that it is possible for Jesus

Christ to come into a human heart and soul and life, even if they have been born in darkness and have never had exposure to the Bible. Is that a correct interpretation of what you’re saying?

Graham: Yes it is. Because I believe that. I’ve met people in various parts of the world in travel situations, they had never seen a Bible or heard about a Bible, and never heard about Jesus, but they believe in their heart that there was a God, and they tried to live a life that was quite apart from the surrounding community in which they lived.

Schuller: This is fantastic! I’m so thrilled to hear you say that! There is a wideness in God’s mercy!³

The interview then goes on to challenge the listeners to bring Muslims the message of God’s love for them wherever they are, no matter their religious background.

Post 9/11

If one would have thought that 9/11 would move nominal Christianity to pause and rethink its acceptance of Islam, he would be disappointed. Apparently nothing has changed since 9/11.

That Rome’s position has not changed is evident from what Pope John Paul II expressed twelve days after 9/11. In a message to the predominantly Muslim nation of Kazakhstan the Pope declared:

There is one God. The Apostle proclaims before all else the absolute oneness of God. This is a truth which Christians inherited from the children of Israel and which they share with Muslims....

(W)e can bring together Christians and Muslims, and commit them to work together for the “civilization of love.” It is a logic which overcomes all the cunning of this world and allows us to make true friends who will welcome us “into the eternal dwelling-places” (Luke 16:9), into the Homeland of heaven.⁴

Pope John Paul II then concluded his homily with this prayer:

And in this celebration we want to pray for Kazakhstan and its inhabitants, so that this vast nation, with all its ethnic, cultural and religious variety, will grow stronger in justice, solidarity and peace. May it progress on the basis of particular cooperation between Christians and Muslims, committed day by day, side by side, in the effort to fulfill God’s will.⁵

That’s Rome’s non-response to 9/11, but what about some in the Protestant fold? Rev. David Benke, president of the Atlantic District of the Lutheran Church Missouri Synod, took part in the interfaith service at Yankee Stadium, which was conducted in response to the attacks of 9/11. Benke’s participation in the event was challenged. In the process of defending himself, Rev. Benke had this to say:

Theologically, when Christians interact in the public arena by prayer or reading or speaking, they are presenting themselves as witnesses to the truth. God takes care of the rest. The Muslim God is also the true God (there is only one true God) but worshipping in an inadequate way. In other words, the Muslim is worshipping God but understanding God’s law (and there is really no religion like Islam when it comes to the law).⁶

Others in the Protestant camp echo that sentiment:

A leading evangelical Christian seminary is using federal funds to launch a \$1 million program to ease strained relations with Muslims with an interfaith code of ethics.

Fuller Theological Seminary’s proposed code would ask members of either faith to refrain from making offensive statements about the other, affirm a mutual belief in one God and prohibit proselytizing over the two-year span of the project.

The initiative, funded by a grant from the Justice Department, includes teaching the code to Muslims and Christian community leaders in the Los Angeles area and publishing a book....

Some Muslim leaders who have already begun participating in the initiative said they were delighted by the Fuller program.

"We are changing the course away from accusations and poisoning the well of relations to what can develop into a project in the service of God," said Yahia Abdul-Rahman, who began participating in the initiative last year when he headed the region's network of mosques, known as the Islamic Shura Council of Southern California.⁷

Promoting Syncretism

In light of the above it might be concluded that nominal Christianity's post 9/11 response to Islam is one of syncretism. Emphasis is placed on what various members of the "People of the Book" (Jews, Christians, Muslims) have in common, while at the same time downplaying, if not totally ignoring, the significant differences. In the approving words of Philip Yancy it sounds like this:

...We disagree over important doctrines, but are united in our being accountable to God, our being objects of God's concern, precious in his eyes.

Indeed, Jews, Christians, and Muslims have much in common: They honor the authority of Moses and the Hebrew prophets; they believe in the Creator, the God of Abraham; they want to fulfill God's commands of justice and mercy; they see life as sacred. All three acknowledge that we must oppose evil with a holiness that begins with a proper humility before a sovereign God.⁸

These ideas of religious tolerance and pluralism are not mere wishful thinking on the part of a few. The World Council of Churches (WCC), no less, is busy promoting the same program. In

November of 2005 a WCC colloquium was held in Geneva, the theme of which was "My Neighbor's Faith and Mine." WCC spokesman and speaker at the event, Rev. Dr. Hans Ucko, in part had this to say:

This colloquium is to explore an issue that speaks to, as well as challenges, religion and society. The theme "End of Tolerance" has been chosen because it would hopefully help us to take a closer look at the concept of "tolerance" itself, and would open up dimensions of relationships of living in pluralistic societies especially as minority and majority communities. In this way, it is closely related to the overall theme of this weekend: living together interreligiously.

...One needs to go beyond tolerance, because tolerance is today mostly understood as non-interference.... We need to find a new concept of society, where plurality is affirmed....

Can we re-imagine and rethink a society that is able to cope constructively with religious and cultural plurality? In such a process, there are some questions to be addressed.... In re-imagining and rethinking a society that needs to be truly plural, can we speak of a common universe of discourse? Are concepts such as truth, freedom, justice, prudence, order, law, authority, power, knowledge, certainty, unity, peace, virtue, morality, religion, God, the human being, universal or what are the equivalents in order for us to reach a consensus, robust enough to build the truly interreligious and intercultural society?⁹

A Post-modern Delusion

This developing syncretistic thinking appears a lot like what Revelation 17 describes as the deception by the whore of Babylon. About this Rev. Herman Hoeksema wrote:

In the words of our text, therefore, we have a picture of the harlot church, the false

church, the counterfeit church. For even as the devil aims at establishing a counterfeit kingdom, so he also establishes a counterfeit church. Naturally! We have told you before that he uses all the institutions which God has placed on earth in this dispensation for the maintenance and establishment of his kingdom, that he employs them all for his own purpose and for the propagation of his own principle. The same is true of the church. Also the church as an institution in this dispensation, designed to be the army of the kingdom,—also that church the devil shrewdly employs in his service.

...Gradually her bridal alliance with the opponent of Christ shall be brought to light.

...the false church will openly reveal herself as such, will openly separate herself from all that calls itself after the true and living Christ, not so much in name, but in very fact. The church shall deny the Christ, shall trample under foot the blood of Christ, shall invent a religion, a Christianity, of its own, and thus shall become a mighty, apostate church, calling itself Christianity, and in reality being related to the kingdom of Antichrist.¹⁰

1. "New Gospel Emerging," *Media Spotlight*, vol. 20, no. 2. 1997:24.

2. "New Gospel Emerging": 24.

3. "New Gospel Emerging": 24.

4. Richard Bennett and Robert Nicholson, "The Papacy and Islam," *The Christian News* 10 March, 2003: 14-15.

5. Bennett 15.

6. Frederick E. Davison, "The Muslim God Is Also the True God," *The Christian News* 17 March, 2003: 16.

7. *The Journal*, A Summit Ministries Publication, February, 2004: 5.

8. Philip Yancy, "Hope for Abraham's Sons," *Christianity Today*, November, 2004: 120.

9. Ucko, Hans. "An End to Tolerance?" 14 Nov. 2005. Available WWW: <http://wcc-coe.org/wcc/interreligious/forbetterorforworse-ucko.html>.

10. Herman Hoeksema, *Behold He Cometh* (Grandville, Michigan: Reformed Free Publishing Association, 2000) 561-564.

Modern-day Issachar might wonder, What is going on here? Are we witnessing the development of the Kingdom of Antichrist: a kingdom in which even the religions of the world can unite? How can these things be?

In a series of moves to make Christianity compatible with science and some accepted biblical contradictions (which some call paradoxes), nominal Christianity has made some fatal concessions, and in the process has given up its only weapon, the sword of the Word. Consequently, nominal Christianity is left with a Bible that merely "contains the Word of God," and that no longer expresses itself definitively on much of anything. With nothing left on which to base doctrinal conviction (if such a thing still exists) or with which to combat Islam (or any other false religion), nominal Christianity is vulnerable. About this Alvin J.

Schmidt, in his book *The Great Divide*, concludes:

...American society resembles Jahiliyah (state of religious ignorance), similar to what Muhammad found in Arabia in 622 when he began to fabricate the religion of Islam.... Americans, exposed to years of relativism and secularism in their schools and the media, have lost their biblically based moral beliefs and values. This phenomenon has gained momentum in recent years through the dogma of political correctness, which portrays all religions as having equal value. Truth, religious or any other, lies only in the eyes of the beholder. What is true for you is not necessarily true for me. If this is what Westerners, including Americans, have accepted—and research shows many have—then what harm could there possibly be if Islam became the religion of the West and the United States? If that someday should happen, America and the rest of

the West will have traded their Christian heritage for a mess of religious pottage concocted by a man who on the Arabian sands, 1,400 years ago, distorted the work and teachings of Jesus Christ and replaced them with his own man-made religion.¹¹

Whether the West accepts Islam, as Schmidt suggests, or a new religion of consensus is forming, as Hoeksema believed, it really makes little difference. At bottom, both Islam and nominal Christianity have an impotent God: a God that is dependent upon the will of man. That being the case, Allah and the Christian God are nearly indistinguishable!

... to be continued. 

11. Alvin J. Schmidt, *The Great Divide* (Boston, Massachusetts: Regina Orthodox Press Inc., 2004) 257.

News From Our Churches

Mr. Benjamin Wigger

School Activities

The conclusion of the first semester at Heritage Christian High School in South Holland, IL brought not only the dreaded week of exams but also an opportunity for students to enjoy a week of interim courses. January 3 through 10 the student body of Heritage enjoyed an interim course entitled, Practical Theology. Mr. Ralph Medema taught the introduction, and then Rev. N. Brummel spoke on Christian philosophy, Rev. A. Brummel on missions, Prof. H. Hanko on prayer, and Rev. J. Mahtani on world view and discipleship. Rev. A. and N. Brummel each taught two days, Rev. Mahtani four days, and Prof. Hanko a total of six days. Heri-

tage has a total of fifty students, so the student body was divided in half. The teachers duplicated their instruction, teaching the first half of the students for the first three fifty-minute sessions and then teaching the same material to the rest of the students for the other three fifty-minute sessions. So two pastors were present each day. One of the students at Heritage, Maggie Lenting, wrote a nice article in their school's newsletter the next week regarding her impressions of the interim course. She wrote in part, "We enjoyed the break from our usual routine and the stimulating lessons and discussions of our interim speakers.... Overall, interim was a fun and memorable experience..., something we will never forget."

Eastside Christian School in Grand Rapids, MI promoted a collection recently for International Aid, a worldwide relief agency

based in Spring Lake, MI. Students were encouraged to bring items ranging from large bars of soap, to hand towels, toothbrushes, toothpaste, and shampoo.

The Society of the Free Christian School in Edgerton, MN met the evening of January 10 at the Edgerton PRC and decided to reopen their doors for full-time classes in the fall of 2006.

Evangelism Activities

The Evangelism Committee of First PRC in Holland, MI presented a three-evening Winter Conference entitled "Justification — the Heart of the Gospel." The first lecture took place on January 13, with Rev. R. VanOverloop speaking on "Justification by Faith Alone." On January 20 Prof. D. Engelsma spoke on "Justification and Good Works." And on January 27 Rev. W. Langerak spoke on "Justification and the Believer."

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

In mid-January, Rev. M. Dick, pastor of Grace PRC in Standale, MI and frequent speaker for "Christianity on Campus," the outreach work of Grace on the campus of Grand Valley State University, was asked to "represent Christianity" for a program on world religions sponsored by a dormitory at GVSU. A good number of people heard Rev. Dick give an introduction to the truth of the Word and gospel. There was also opportunity to engage in an "open forum" with representatives of other religions, and before a very attentive student audience.

Congregation Activities

The Adult Bible Society of the Southwest PRC in Grandville, MI hosted a speech by Prof. D. Engelsma entitled "Has Christ Already Come (AD 70): A Refutation of the Heresy of Preterism," on January 24.

Members of the Southeast PRC in Grand Rapids, MI were asked in a recent bulletin if they were interested in Sunday-night discussion groups, after-church suppers, fall outings, or other activities for all ages. If the answer was yes, then they were invited to an organizational meeting on January 26 to become charter

members of a Fellowship Society at their church.

Friday evening, January 27, members of our churches in west Michigan were invited to an auction fund-raiser at Georgetown PRC in Hudsonville, MI to help the Transylvania Reformed Assistance Committee (TRAC) rejuvenate a remnant of Hungarian Christians living in post-communist Romania. Most of the proceeds went to buy supplies for construction of a Christian school in Felor, Romania, while some went to help several young people visit the region this summer.

January 24 the senior members of Bethel PRC in Roselle, IL gathered for their quarterly Senior-Get-Together at the home of one of the senior members. These members of Bethel had such a wonderful time when they met several months ago, that they decided to do this on a quarterly basis. It is simply a time of informal fellowship in the homes of Bethel's seniors as their pastor visits with and listens to their concerns, advice, and suggestions.

Mission Activities

Rev. D. Overway and Rev. W. Bruinsma visited the Philippines as the annual delegation to

evaluate the mission field there on behalf of the congregation of the Doon, IA PRC, the calling church, and the Foreign Mission Committee. They left January 17 and returned home on January 30. We pray that the time spent there was spiritually fruitful both for the emissaries and the saints on the mission field, including the Spriensmas.

The consistory of the Southwest PRC in Grandville, MI formed a delegation to go to Pittsburgh for their annual visit January 20 to 23. Pastor denHartog planned to preach at the Mission on January 22. In addition to Rev. denHartog, elder Ron Kuiper and deacons John Ophoff and Jeff Potjer also made the trip.

Minister Activities

Since the last "News," three of our vacant churches have extended calls.

The Edgerton, MN PRC has extended a call to Candidate Dennis Lee. The Faith PRC in Jenison, MI met on Sunday morning, January 30, and voted to extend a call to Rev. R. Kleyn to serve as their next pastor. The Kalamazoo, MI PRC also met on Sunday evening, January 30, and extended a call to Rev. S. Key to become their next pastor.



Announcements

RESOLUTIONS OF SYMPATHY

The council and congregation of Byron Center PRC express their Christian sympathy to the Ken Rietema and the James Slendebroek families in the death of Ken and Rhonda's father,

MR. KENNETH RIETEMA.

"Precious in the sight of the Lord is the death of his saints" (Psalm 116:15).

... and to the Henry Westhuis family in the death of his father,

MR. HENRY WESTHUIS.

"Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life: and I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever" (Psalm 23:6).

Rev. R. VanOverloop, President
Mike Elzinga, Clerk

NOTICE!!!

The Protestant Reformed Scholarship Committee is offering scholarship awards to prospective Protestant Reformed teachers and ministers. If you are interested in receiving a packet, please contact Melinda Bleyenbergh at 616-453-8898 or e-mail darylme1@altelco.net by April 1, 2006.

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WEDDING ANNIVERSARY

With thankfulness to God, on March 2, 2006 we celebrate the 50th anniversary of our parents and grandparents,
GERALD and CELIA FEENSTRA.

We are thankful for the many years God has given them together. We are also grateful for the love and guidance they have given us through the years and the godly example they continue to show us every day. We pray that our faithful God will continue to bless them and keep them in the years to come.

"But the mercy of the Lord is from everlasting to everlasting upon them that fear him, and his righteousness unto children's children; To such as keep his covenant, and to those that remember his commandments to do them" (Psalm 103:17, 18).

- * Randy and Barb Feenstra
- * Greg Feenstra
- * Ryan and Karla Feenstra
- * Doug and Kathy Wassink
15 grandchildren
2 great-grandchildren
1 grandchild in glory

Jenison, Michigan

WEDDING ANNIVERSARY

With gratitude to God, on February 14, 2006 our parents and grandparents,

DARYL and SHARON KUIPER, celebrated their 30th wedding anniversary. We are thankful for God's covenant keeping of them throughout the joys and trials of life. We rejoice with them and pray that God will continue to bless them in their marriage in the years to come. "But they that wait upon the Lord shall renew their strength; they shall mount up with wings as eagles; they shall run, and not be weary; and they shall walk and not faint" (Isaiah 40:31).

- * Kristin Kuiper
Hayley
- * Katie Kuiper
- * Jonathan Kuiper
- * Kerrie Kuiper
- * Karissa Kuiper

Hudsonville, Michigan

RESOLUTION OF SYMPATHY

The Doon Adult Bible express their Christian sympathy to Mrs. Barb Hunter on the passing away of her father-in-law,

MR. CHESTER HUNTER, SR.

Our prayer is that she and the family live in the hope of the future resurrection, "Then we which are alive and remain shall be caught up together with them in the clouds, to meet the Lord in the air: and so shall we ever be with the Lord. Wherefore comfort one another with these words" (1 Thessalonians 4:17, 18).

Rev. David Overway, President
Helinda Wiersma, Sec/Treas.

WEDDING ANNIVERSARY

On March 9, our parents and grandparents,

VIRGIL and GENEVIEVE WARNER, celebrate their 60th wedding anniversary. We rejoice with them and thank God for their Christian parenting, and pray for His continued blessing on their marriage.

"The lines are fallen unto me in pleasant places; yea, I have a goodly heritage" (Psalm 16:6).

- * Rev. Stephen and Virginia Steenstra
Philip and Kate Steenstra
Kaley, Joel, Rebecca
Chris and Paula Naranjo
Elena
- * Paul and Beverly Neerhof
Mike and Carissa Hoiom
Ron and Julie Thenn
Michael
- * Jack and Kim Warner
Chad, Kevin, Justin, Jayna, Kara
- * Barry and Mary Warner
Kristin, Rachel, David, Lauren, Kelly

Zeeland, Michigan

WEDDING ANNIVERSARY

We give thanks to God for His covenant faithfulness and mercy shown to our parents, grandparents, and great-grandparents,

**CHARLES and BETTY
VAN MEETEREN.**

They celebrated 50 years of marriage on February 3. Throughout all the circumstances of this life, both in joy and in sorrow, Christ has been at the center of their home. We, their children and grandchildren, have been privileged to enjoy the rich treasure of a godly upbringing. It is our prayer that the Lord will continue to bless them with His nearness in their remaining years together. "I will sing of the mercies of the Lord forever, with my mouth will I make known thy faithfulness to all generations" (Psalm 89:1).

- * Charles and Beth VanMeeteren
- * Randy and Nancy Hendriks
- * Donald and Shelly DeVries
- * Gary and Mary Gaastra
- * Steven and Beth Potjer
19 grandchildren
4 great-grandchildren
1 grandchild in glory

Redlands, California

NOTICE!!

All standing and special committees of the synod of the Protestant Reformed Churches, as well as individuals who wish to address Synod 2006, are hereby notified that all material for this year's synod should be in the hands of the stated clerk no later than April 1. Please send material to:

Don Doezeema
4949 Ivanrest Ave.
Grandville, MI 49418

Reformed Witness Hour

Topics for March

Date	Topic	Text
March 5	"Teaching Our Children to Pray"	Luke 6:40
March 12	"The Last of the Vinegar"	Mark 15:35-37
March 19	"Jesus Dies in Triumph"	Mark 15:37
March 26	"And the Earth Did Quake"	Matthew 27:51b