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From Everlasting to Everlasting

But the mercy of the LORD is from everlasting to everlasting upon them that fear him, and his righteousness unto children's children.

Psalm 103:17



Once more we stand at the beginning of a new year. We are reminded of how quickly time passes by. It would seem that the older we get, the more quickly it goes. The psalmist thus pictures the life of man as a flower growing in the middle of an open field. It is exposed to the rough wind that blows regardless of the delicateness of the flower. Soon it is gone, and the place of it knows it no more.

That is also our experience. We are soon cut off, and we fly away. When a child is born we rejoice over it; but hardly are the pangs of birth forgotten when men already mourn over us. The grave yawns to swallow us up. All that lies between the pangs of birth and the sorrow of death is one hopeless

struggle of the tender flower with the fierce winds that blow. Our life is nothing but a continual death because of sin and iniquity. There is nothing abiding, and we fly away.

But the mercy of the LORD is from everlasting to everlasting. It is eternal as God Himself is eternal. The objects of it are those that fear Him. It is not perceived by the natural eye, nor is it tasted by the natural heart, but it is certainly apprehended by faith, which our God implants into the hearts of His people. This is none other than the faith that is in Christ Jesus our Lord. They that fear Him certainly experience this mercy of the LORD: for it is not far above them, is not outside of them and beyond their reach, but it is upon them, right in the midst of this fleeting world. It is the one abiding reality in the midst of all things transient.

This mercy is *from* everlasting. Even as God is eternal, so is His mercy. Its foundations are not among us. It constantly sheds its blessings upon us, yet itself transcends our boldest perception. It never had a beginning, for mercy is of God the eternal One.

The mercy of God is His eter-

nal will to bless His people, to remove from His own all misery and death, and to fill them with eternal good. It is His everlasting will to wipe away from them all tears, and cause them to sing and to shout with joy. It is to give them heavenly beauty for the ashes of sorrow and the oil of joy for mourning, and to make them taste forever that it is blessed to be righteous and holy.

This is necessary, for it is the will of God that they be blessed. That will is eternally perfect in its realization, for He is indeed the ever and infinitely blessed God. As the living God, the Triune Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, subsisting in one Being of infinite perfection, He lives a divine life of perfect bliss and infinite joy in Himself.

This same mercy is also from everlasting to everlasting upon them that fear Him. God willed to have a people that would in the highest possible sense of the word be like unto Himself in righteousness, holiness, and truth. He willed a people that may know Him as they are known, that may dwell in His tabernacle, that may taste that the LORD is good. He willed that they may eternally acknowledge

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His goodness, and that they may experience His blessedness and rejoice with a joy unspeakable and full of glory. He ordained a people that would be like unto His Son.

This mercy is upon them that fear Him, upon those who live in the midst of the suffering of this present time, and whose life is nothing but a continual death. It is upon those who are in darkness because of the present night of sin and death, upon those whose days are like the grass, which today is and tomorrow is cast into the oven. It is upon those who cry and lament in present misery, who groan and moan because of want and poverty. It is upon them that fear Him, who by His grace in Christ Jesus know and realize that the mercy of the LORD is forever, reaching out to us who live in hope that He will bless us, change our mourning into rejoicing, and make us partakers of the highest conceivable bliss in eternal glory.

This mercy of God is a sovereign mercy rooted in Him only. It is not conditional or contingent on anything we may be or not be, do or not do. It is unchangeable because it is from everlasting.

This everlasting mercy we experience during our present lifetime. It is that which constantly abides, as the immovable rock in the midst of the swiftly flowing stream of time. We experience it by faith, and we rely on God's unchangeable attitude toward them that fear Him. His mercy denotes the motive of all that He does in time for His people, to them, and in them.

It was upon them when God sent His only begotten Son in the likeness of sinful flesh. He sent Him into our deepest woe, and caused Him to bear our sins on the accursed tree and made Him taste death. He raised Him from the dead and gave Him a name that is above all names. He sent His Spirit into our hearts, by which we cry "Abba, Father," even in the midst of our present death. His mercy

reaches out for us when He has His gospel of grace preached unto us that we might believe. His mercy reaches out for us when He calls us out of darkness into His marvelous light by His efficacious Word, that we might show forth His praises and declare that the LORD is good.

This mercy is constantly upon us from age to age, from day to day, from hour to hour, and from moment to moment. It never leaves us or relinquishes its hold upon us. This is true even when the way is dark, steep, and rugged, when poverty causes us to be filled with anxiety with regard to the things of this present time. It is upon us when the pain of death causes us to writhe in agony, and when sorrow upon sorrow overwhelms our soul.

Rejoice, therefore, in hope, even in the midst of the darkness of this present time. Your sorrow shall pass away, but His mercy never.

That mercy, which was from everlasting and through this present time, is also *unto* everlasting. It is eternal also with respect to the future. Not only do we look backward and contemplate the reality of God's eternal mercy and say that it is from everlasting, but we may look ahead and say the same thing. The mercy of the LORD is never-ending. In the future it will always be. That is also true of that mercy with respect to us. That implies that we will be the never-perishing objects of His never-ending mercy. The world passes away and the lust thereof, for they are not the object of the Father's mercy. Therefore they can never abide. How can anything abide that God does not choose to bless? Therefore, love not the world, neither the things that are in the world. If you love the world, the love of the Father is not in you, neither is His mercy upon you. But he that does the will of the Father, he that fears God, abides forever. We shall not perish, but continue to be, even


through death. We shall not die, but live in everlasting glory, being the objects of His everlasting mercy.

What a marvelous comfort! Abundant and steadfast is the mercy of the LORD. It is so abundant that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory that His mercy shall reveal to us.

This mercy is not general but particular, for it is only upon them that fear Him. And it is not upon them that fear Him because they fear Him. It is not our fear of His name that evokes His mercy, but it is His everlasting mercy that is first. That mercy is the everlasting cause of our fearing Him. God is always first, and His mercy is always sovereign.

Yet the truth remains: His mercy is not upon the ungodly, but is confined to them that fear Him. The way is narrow and it becomes narrower as you go on in the midst of the world. Not one step to the right or to the left can you make without forfeiting the taste and the blessed experience of His mercy. That mercy is for them that hate sin, that repent of their sin before the LORD, and that seek forgiveness day by day in the blood of our Lord Jesus Christ. It is for them that love righteousness and pursue it, for them that are indeed still beset with sin and who often stumble because of the operations of sin that are still in their members. It is for them that have a strong and heartfelt desire to be delivered from all iniquity and to be pleasing to Him.

May we look forward in hope to the everlasting inheritance, in which forever we shall perfectly serve the LORD our God in Jesus Christ our Savior. May we fear the LORD and thus experience His everlasting mercy.

Thus, when the Old Year goes out and we wish one another a blessed New Year, it is for us the same as the prayer for you and for me that we may fear the LORD and experience His everlasting mercy. 

The Coming of Jesus Christ in 2005...and in 2006

With steadfast hope, the Reformed believer confesses that the exalted Lord Jesus is coming, and is coming quickly. The Lord *is* coming, contrary to the claims of the preterists that Christ came in A.D. 70 in the destruction of Jerusalem. According to their interpretation, the prophecies of Christ's return are fulfilled already. That, all by itself, indicates the preposterousness of their claims. For, were they correct, one could only conclude that the whole book of Revelation, most of I and II Thessalonians, Matthew 24, and Mark 13, not to mention all the instruction on the resurrection as in I Corinthians 15, have virtually no significance for the New Testament church.

The year 2005 clearly manifested the reality that Jesus is coming, as He personally promised. Christ's certain coming is the import of His reply to wicked Caiaphas, the high priest, who demanded of Jesus, "I adjure thee by the living God, that thou tell us whether thou be the Christ, the Son of God." Although Jesus had been silent to that point in His trial, now put under oath, He could not maintain His silence and thereby leave even a hint of denial. "Thou hast said," Jesus answered. Then He added, "Nevertheless I say unto you, Hereafter shall ye see the Son of man sitting on the right hand of power, and coming in the clouds of heaven" (Matt. 26: 63, 64).

Jesus' striking answer teaches much about His activity after His death and resurrection. First, He

teaches that, although the Jewish rulers would condemn Him to death, He would subsequently be exalted to the throne of power at God's right hand. Secondly, He would return in glory (in the clouds) as judge of all men, including those who would condemn him. Thirdly, Jesus teaches that His ruling and His coming would be a continuous activity. That is indicated by the word "hereafter," which means literally, "from now." That is to say, after His death, men would see the Son of man sitting on the throne and coming. Jesus' coming is not an event finished in the past.

Jesus' answer indicates that His arrival will not be connected with an earthly kingdom over which He is waiting to rule. He rules already now. On the contrary, His Parousia, His visible and bodily appearance on the earthly scene, will coincide with the destruction of this world. Because the disciples of Jesus understood that, they had asked Him, "And what shall be the sign of *thy coming*, and of *the end of the world*" (Matt. 24:3).

Finally, since men will see Him coming, it must be that there will be indications, signs of His coming. Jesus' coming will not be a totally unforeseen event, in which He raptures believers from the earth one fine day, leaving all the world bewildered about what happened. Jesus gave His church signs — attention getting, notable occurrences, that fittingly indicate that He is coming, just as buds on a tree fittingly indicate that summer is

coming. For in and through the signs, Jesus is coming.

Thus, the coming of Jesus Christ "from now" is a sovereign activity, for He is enthroned in power. With that divine power, the Lord Jesus controls everything — the creation itself, the nations, every person, and every event. That the coming of Jesus is "from now" indicates that He is coming from the moment of His glorious ascension into heaven, throughout the nearly two thousand years since. With this right understanding of Jesus' coming, believers confess that their Lord was coming all through 2005, and that He will be coming in 2006.

The events of 2005 unmistakably and unambiguously demonstrated Jesus' coming. His coming was evident in the fulfillment of the signs that Jesus gave His church (see especially Matt. 24 and Mark 13). The purpose of this editorial is to encourage believers by recounting some of the signs fulfilled in the year 2005.

One of the first signs Jesus provided was "wars and rumors of wars" (Matt. 24:6). It would be impossible for a citizen of the US to miss the reality of war in 2005. Interesting to consider, the news media that by and large oppose Christ and scoff at His coming, daily reminded us that He was coming by reporting on the war in Iraq. In addition, we were regularly reminded of the conflicts between Israel and her neighbors. That was a small part of the real picture. In fact, there are scores of conflicts — wars

between countries as well as internal fighting — that are rarely reported in the news in America. A little searching reveals that fighting in Sudan has taken the lives of some 180,000 in one recent eighteen-month period. Another conflict in the Democratic Republic of Congo has taken some 50,000 lives since 1999. The sound of warfare is heard in countries around the world, including Columbia, Somalia, Indonesia, Uzbekistan, Nepal, and Russia. In addition, the newest and dirtiest form of fighting — terrorism — raised its head around the world in deadly bombings in Lebanon, England, Pakistan, Jordan, the Philippines, India, Bangladesh, and more.

Wars and rumors of wars. The Lord comes.

Jesus told His church to look for signs of His coming also in the creation — “famines, and pestilences, and earthquakes, in divers places” (Matt. 24:7). In the news media, famines in faraway places are good for a couple days of shocking photographs for well-fed citizens of industrial nations, and then they drop off the page. Nonetheless, untold millions suffered from famine in 2005 in such countries as North Korea, Uganda, Sudan, Niger, Chad, Malawi, and Pakistan, and many starved to death.

In 2005, several devastating earthquakes resulted in thousands of deaths — in central Iran on February 22 (at least 612 killed, 1411 injured), in Indonesia on March 28 (over 1300 killed), and on October 8 in Pakistan, where more than 79,000 perished, almost as many were injured, and an estimated four million found themselves homeless facing the snow and ice of winter. Those probably caught our attention, but there were nearly *eighty* other major earthquakes in the world in 2005! Of all the signs of Jesus’ coming, Scripture most directly connects earthquakes with His coming in judgment. Over eighty major earthquakes in one

year! (You are encouraged to view the documentation for yourself on the Internet — www.neic.usgs.gov/neis/eq_depot/2005/) Besides all these signs, the destruction of the hurricanes in the US has been well documented and speaks for itself. Even the secular world commented on the staggering amount of destruction from “mother nature.” Taken together, the evidence in the creation of Jesus’ coming in 2005 was unmistakable and powerful, rousing the church from slumber with the trumpet’s call: The Lord is coming!

“And wickedness shall abound.”

Jesus instructed His people to watch in the society for an increase in wickedness. If 2005 manifested nothing else to the spiritual sensitivities of the believer, it did exhibit a startling growth in iniquity. Sin develops all through history as man subdues the powers of the creation. For while every creature of God is good (including man’s inventions), yet the depraved natures of man find ways to press the inventions into the service of sin. This was evident even to the secular press in the explosion of pornography on the Internet, as men could access it in the privacy of their own homes or offices. Every conceivable perversion is readily available — a powerful temptation for many Christians as well. These perversions corrupted minds, fed depraved souls, and destroyed marriages and families.

Besides, the scourge of the legal murder of unborn babies continued unabated throughout the entire world. Sometimes it seemed that child abuse and kidnapping were being reported daily. And the world’s entertainment continued its downward spiral to feed the basest lusts.

Above all else, evil trumpeted itself in the vile perversion of homosexuality, the one sin that Scripture specifically labels contrary to nature, and God’s judgment upon a rebellious people (Rom. 1). The

abounding wickedness is plain from the fact that this shameful immorality was not only boldly practiced, it was increasingly sanctioned by the civil magistrates ... and the false church.

Just as Jesus testified, the world abounds in iniquity. The self-proclaimed “optimists,” the postmillennialist and the Christian Reconstructionist, looking for the development of righteousness and peace in the land, wring their hands and cling to a false hope — a “good” family movie with only a little swearing, or one court case among a hundred that was decided in favor of a Christian. And in spite of all the overwhelming evidence that Jesus’ word is being fulfilled, still, amazingly, insist that the cause of Christ will triumph sometime before the Lord returns, only pushing that return off farther and farther. They are totally wrong. The cause of Christ will indeed triumph, no, *is triumphing* — *as He returns*.

The signs of the Lord’s return in 2005 are so numerous that we must severely limit the discussion of them. We could discuss the uniting of the nations — economically and politically, as that developed in 2005. We could speak of the great apostasy, the falling away manifest in the decline in membership of, as well as in the rejection of the truth by, so many churches that once defended it.

That, in turn, brings the additional sign of the apostate churches uniting into what will become the whore of the beast, the political power of the Antichrist (Rev. 13 and 17). Churches are mad in pursuit of ecumenical relationships. The false church has long demonstrated her willingness to unite even with false religions in the name of harmony. The year 2005 indicated that this spirit is affecting Reformed and Presbyterian churches. So the 39 member churches of the Reformed Ecumenical Synod want to dialog with the more liberal World Alliance of

Churches (which officially thanked God for the impact and ministry of the late Pope John Paul II). And the two long-standing Reformed denominations in the Netherlands celebrated their union with the Lutherans.

And all roads lead to Rome.

Doctrinally the way is paved to Rome. Evangelicals and Catholics Together published their fourth statement of agreement, this time on the doctrine of the communion of the saints (The Call to Holiness). Closer to home, the Catholic bishops have convinced the Christian Reformed Church that the Romish mass is not “an accursed idolatry” as the Heidelberg Catechism teaches (Q. & A. 80). And the Presbyterian and Reformed churches that have long tolerated the unbiblical doctrine of a conditional covenant (taught by Rome’s theologians already 700 years ago) now find it impossible to stamp out the Romish error — in their own churches! — of justification by faith and works.

But if a picture is worth a thousand words, the picture of the unity in grief captured in Pope John Paul’s funeral indicated where virtually the whole church world, indeed, where all religions, are headed. The secular press fell all over itself to report with astonishment that Protestants, Jews, Muslims, Buddhists, Hindus, and Sikhs joined the Roman Catholics in church services and prayers! It seemed that the mourners came from every nation under heaven, and of so many diverse religions,

to honor this false Christ (another sign), who preached the gospel of salvation by works, and that through the mediating work of Mary.

The Lord returns. Quickly.

As the false church united, persecution of God’s people rose in 2005. In lands openly hostile to Christianity, God’s people suffer grievously — are imprisoned, beaten, killed. Moreover, the media’s power to focus the hatred of the world on Christians, even Reformed Christians, is increasingly experienced in the “Christian West.”

The Lord comes.

He comes victoriously.

Jesus the Lord comes chiefly through the sign of the preaching of the gospel to all nations — the true gospel of salvation by sovereign grace, through faith in Christ alone. The white horse ran in 2005. Through a faithful preacher in a hamlet or in a metropolis, who preaches to hundreds or to a handful, the Lord comes powerfully gathering His church unto Himself. This is the chief sign. This governs all the signs. For when this work of Christ is finished and the last elect is gathered, He will not tarry.


Behold the signs, fellow believers. Do not be deceived by the false prophets preaching an earthly kingdom. Reject the false teachers who minimize or deny outright the certain coming of Christ and who would convince you that the coming of the kingdom of righteousness and peace depends on your labors.

Rather, behold the signs. Jesus comes through them. And the daughters of Zion, the church, rejoice to see the judgments of God in the earth (Ps. 97:8). That joy of the Christian is not that he delights in human suffering. On the contrary, he is moved to pity fellow human beings suffering in the wake of disaster. The signs, many of them fearful judgments of Christ on an increasingly wicked world, are dreadful to behold. Moreover, God’s people surely suffer alongside of the ungodly.

Yet believers rejoice in these judgments. They need these signs. Believers correctly see the judgments as chastisements from Christ upon His own, to deliver them from sin and temptation. In addition, these events encourage all believers who recognize that they are signs of their Lord’s return. Consider that, if all the signs would cease — if in 2006 there would be not one earthquake, not one hurricane, no push for unity among the nations, no apostasy, etc. — the believer would lose hope. All the evidence in 2005 pointed to the coming of Christ. Now it ceases. The most devout believer would wonder, is the Lord coming?

He is. His actual Parousia we may not and cannot predict. Nevertheless, He comes — the signs of 2005 clearly manifested it.

And we confidently declare that the year of our Lord 2006 will do the same.

Lord, give us spiritual eyes to behold it. And come, yea, come quickly. 

All Around Us

Rev. Rodney Kleyn

The e-world and our Teenagers

The e-world is all around us. Many of us do not know about it. Probably, some do not even

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know what the “e” in e-mail stands for (it means “electronic”). But its wires crisscross our lands, its ports of entry are found on every street, its wireless waves bounce around in airports, libraries, shopping malls, and in our homes, and unwittingly we come into contact with its secret tourists daily.

It is in many ways a secret world — something like the underground movements of the occupied countries of World War II. It is a world of passwords, aliases, secret communication, code language (I still don’t know what “lol” means), discreet relationships, etc. An unknown world to many.

Yet, whether we like it or not, the e-world is there, and it is real.

Many of the older generation (above 30) are familiar with it, but actually quite naive as to its real potential. The e-world can be quite frustrating to sporadic and elderly (above 30 or so) visitors. For example, we have almost all heard of e-mail, and probably most know how to use it, but our electronic skills stop there — “Forward an e-mail? Save an address? Open an attachment? How do you do those things?” And how the younger generation can click from one thing to another, and find so much in such a short time, is beyond our comprehension. “Find what on the web? Where? How do you do that?”

This e-world can be very useful. For example, within an hour, from a laptop computer, running on a battery, with a wireless connection (something you can sit on the rooftop of your house with, or on the back patio if you prefer) you can,

- 1) reserve a book at the local library after searching for it in all the libraries within 200 miles — this takes about 3 minutes;

- 2) check your bank balances and make a transfer from one account to another — this takes about 3 more minutes;

- 3) go to the local weather page and make sure there are no storms coming to drive you indoors — this takes about 2 minutes;

- 4) start typing an e-mail to a relative on the other side of the country or world, and then notice that that person has popped up as on-line on your instant messenger, and so, instead, chat for a few minutes there — this will take up 5 to 10 minutes, but you did get to say hello, find out what they were doing that day, and arrange a Christmas get-together on their side of the world;

- 5) then you can go to a travel site and check prices on airline tickets for this Christmas getaway, and book and pay for them too if you like, as well as reserve a rental car

at 50 % off and check out local hotels and tourist hot-spots — another 10 minutes or so;

- 6) then, you might be reminded that your utility bills are due, and so go to the phone and electric and gas company web-sites and pay those bills — which may take 15 minutes — so instead, you can go to your bankers page and ask them to pay those bills for you monthly right out of your account.

And so on.

Banking, e-mailing, instant messaging, news, weather, travel, up-to-date sports scores and radio from around the world, shopping (that’s big in the e-world), filing income taxes, online live college courses, and much more are all at your fingertips from your back patio with an un-wired 2-3 pound laptop.

Why am I writing all this? Because, whether you like it or not, the e-world is there and its going to affect your life somehow, and those effects may not all be good.

There are two things that are especially true about this e-world. The first, it is a dangerous world. The second, the experts and common visitors to this world are the young (teenagers).

These two things taken together mean that even if you want to ignore this world, or just use it to send e-mails (“How do you send attachments again?”), still it is likely to have a negative impact on you and your family through your children, and it may even be a tool that destroys the children, morally, spiritually, emotionally, and even physically. The older generation, the parents of teenagers, cannot be naive as regards this world.

The e-world is a growing world that is transforming the lives of people. Numbers of Internet users have risen sharply over the last five to ten years. According to Steve Almasy (in an on-line CNN report entitled, “The Internet Transforms Modern Life”), in the mid-1990s the top three web sites, AOL, Net-scape, and Webcrawler, had audi-

ences of 4 million to 6 million people per month. Today, those numbers have risen beyond one billion and are still growing. The ones who are growing with it, learning it, and staying in touch with its technology are the young, “the internet generation.”

These very young are also the very young in our covenant homes and Christian schools. Parents need to be aware. The e-world is the evil-world getting into our homes and lives. It breaks down the antithesis, it undermines parental supervision and instruction, it brings young people into unhealthy acquaintance with the ungodly, it becomes a tool for communication and rebellion between young people, it exposes them to the filth of the “sex-crazy” world, as well as exposing their identity to pedophiles and predators. These things are real. Our teenagers know it. And every parent needs to be aware of it.

On my desk I have an array of articles about children and Internet use and safety. I hardly know where to start with them. They all make a point, and the point is this, parents cannot be naive about this e-world.

It used to be that parents worried about the influence of television on their children’s souls. This should still be a major concern, but the concern with the Internet should be greater. The computer is not just an e-mail port, but a gateway to corruption and vicious enemies of soul and life.

One web site I ran across — safeonline.com — lists some facts about the Internet porn industry (back in March 2000, mind you). First, some facts about the industry are listed,

1. Over ten billion dollars spent on porn annually.

2. Larger than the NFL, NBA, Major League Baseball combined.

3. Over two million known porn site URL’s.

4. More than 2,500 new sites coming online every week.

5. Pornography is obscenity, not "free speech," and has never been protected by our Supreme Court.

6. Most of it is temporary and hard to find, to punish legally.

7. Most of it originates offshore, not covered by US law.

8. Unimaginable things that most people would not even remotely consider sexy are routinely available on the Internet.

Then, a few results of surveys that show the scale of the problem are listed.

1. Nine out of ten children aged between 8 and 16 have viewed pornography on the Internet. In most cases, the sex sites were accessed unintentionally when a child, often in the process of doing homework, used a seemingly innocent sounding word to search for information or pictures (London School of Economics, January 2002).

2. 25 million Americans visit cyber-sex sites 1-10 hours per week. Another 4.7 million in excess of 11 hours per week (MSNBC/Stanford/Duquesne Study, *Washington Times* 1/26/00).

3. Even 51% of pastors say cyber porn is a possible temptation. 37% say it is a current struggle (*Christianity Today*, Leadership Survey, December 2001).

4. 63% of men attending "Men, Romance & Integrity Seminars" admit to struggling with porn in the past year. Two-thirds are in church leadership and 10% are pastors (*Pastor's Family Bulletin*, Focus on the Family, March 2000).

5. 1 in 7 calls to Focus' Pastoral Care Line is about Internet pornography (*Pastor's Family Bulletin*, Focus on the Family, March 2000).

I say, an enemy to the soul. What is pornography, but that? It is a strong appeal to base sinful sexual desires. It destroys minds, homes, marriages, children, and more. And it is at the fingertips of those who happen to have an internet connection, at the fingertips of our children.

Probably one of the greatest threats to teenagers is the latest method of e-communication called blogging. "Blog" is short for "web log," which is an online personal diary page. Blogs have combined the technology of e-mail, live chat, and personal web pages all into one. A person sets up his own web page with whatever personal information he wishes to reveal on it, then begins an on-line journal. Whenever that person posts a blog, it enters the public domain. Others (buddies) may subscribe to receive notification of new blog entries, but anyone may browse and read. These personal blog journals expose a person and all his/her peers (buddy-list subscribers), completely, to whoever wants to see them; their names, thoughts, activities, address, age, and more all become public information. The main blog sites are Xanga.com, livejournal.com, and myspace.com.

There are really two main dangers with blogs.

The first is the exposure of vulnerable teenagers to predators. This is a real danger. I have on my desk four different true stories of sexual predators tracking down and assaulting teenage bloggers. The most recent is the story of Taylor Behl, a seventeen-year-old who vanished from Richmond, Virginia in September of this year and whose remains were found a month later at an abandoned farmhouse. According to this *Washington Post* story of October 25, this teen met her killer online and exchanged messages regularly on two popular social networking sites, myspace.com and livejournal.com, prior to meeting in person. Her family was not aware of her blogging, nor her relationship with the 38 year-old, unemployed, amateur pornographic photographer with a criminal history.

What happens with these blogs? This. The lurkers are there, the teenagers post with aliases like "sexyteen05," "hotchic4U," etc., they tell of their address, weekend activi-

ties, etc., and invite comment from lurkers, they arrange for meetings, and the rest is often sad history.

This is only one danger. It is less widespread, but real nonetheless. Especially when the teenagers put themselves out there as looking and desperate, using language and aliases with sexual innuendos.

The other danger is more widespread. On each blog page is a list of buddies. Each time a buddy is clicked on, it takes you to his page and his list of buddies. Soon, very soon, teenagers can be reading about and making acquaintance with other teenagers (local) who are involved in pornography, drugs, drinking parties, fornication, Sabbath desecration, cursing and bad language, movie attendance, etc. Every blogger is exposed to this. And it is all so real and so close to home, and sadly, many parents are oblivious to it.

It goes something like this. A teenager sits down on a Friday afternoon to write a blog entry after a stressful day at school. Mom and Dad are not home for the evening and there is nothing to do. He notices someone has posted a comment in response to one of his blogs in which he indicated he had nothing up Friday night. It is an invitation to join them at a party promising chicks and beer. It is really that easy. And it can go in so many directions and lead to so many unhealthy relationships, web sites, parties, etc.

Another danger is blogs of rebellion. Teenagers feeding on each other on their sites, to stir up rebellion against teachers, parents, pastors, and others in authority. An article entitled "Bloggers Learn the Price of Telling too much" (CNN.com, July 11, 2005) makes reference to this.

(At) times the ease of posting unedited thoughts on the web can be ugl(y), in part because of the speed with which the postings spread and multiply.

This is what happened at a middle school in Michigan last fall, when principals started receiving complaints from parents about some students' blog postings on Xanga. School officials couldn't do much about it. But when the students found out they were being monitored, a few posted threatening comments aimed at an assistant principal — and that led to some student suspensions.

"It was a spiraling of downward emotions," says the schools principal.... "Kids just feed into that and then more kids see it and so on," she says. "It's a negative power, but still a power."

These are stories not hard to imagine and identify with, even in our own circles. To think otherwise is to be naive.

All this brings home the importance of parental guidance and supervision in the home and in the lives of their teenagers in the area of internet usage. Parents need to

warn them, to lead them, to monitor them, to talk with them about these things.

I finish this article with five Internet safety tips from software4parents.com.

1. Tell your child to NEVER reveal their name, address, phone number or any other personal information to ANYONE online. Once you give out this information, it is impossible to retract.

2. Communicate regularly (not just once) with your child about WHAT they do online and WHO they talk to online. If you have actually met the friends they are talking to in person, you'll know it is OK for them to chat with them online.


3. Take computers out of kids' rooms and put them into public areas such as the family room. Many parents think they are helping with homework by giving the kids a computer, but it

also opens certain dangers that you may be unaware of.

4. Choose your child's screen name, email address or instant message name wisely — don't reveal ages, sex, hobbies, and CERTAINLY NOT suggestive or sexy names. Predators are more likely to pursue a child with the screen name "sexyteen5" than "happy-girl15."

5. Use technology to help you protect your child. Monitoring software gives you the ability to review your child's Internet usage. Even if you don't look at each and every email or instant message they send, you'll have a good idea if they are making smart choices online.

The Internet can open many doors and provide useful information for children. An aware and informed parent can help keep children safe.

It is another aspect of our battle with sin and the world. May God help us in it. 

Search the Scriptures

Prof. Herman Hanko

The Charter of Christian Liberty (4)

An Exposition of the Book of Galatians

Paul's Defense of His

Apostolic Credentials (1:1-2:14)

The Apostolic Blessing

Grace be to you and peace from God the Father, and from our Lord Jesus Christ.

Galatians 1:3

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Previous article in this series: November 15, 2005, p. 85.

All of Paul's letters begin with a blessing that he pronounces on the church or churches to which he writes. In fact, not only does every letter begin with a blessing, but in every letter the blessing is identical, even when Paul writes to an individual such as Timothy and Titus. However, the word "mercy" is added to these private letters: "Grace, mercy, and peace...." Paul's letter

to Philemon uses the same formula as the one used for the churches.

This blessing is sometimes called the "apostolic blessing," and it is used, following the example of the apostle, in the worship services of many congregations. It is proper that this be so. The worship services ought to begin with the use of the apostolic blessing, although many times congregations fail to recognize the importance of this blessing.

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The same blessing that is found in the epistles of Paul is also found, with some modification, in Peter's two epistles, John's second epistle, Jude's epistle, and the book of Revelation. It is not found in Hebrews, or in I and III John. Given the fact that the apostles were divinely inspired and that they spoke authoritatively in the name of God, these blessings mean that God Himself pronounces His blessing upon His church. In every case in which this blessing is found, the meaning is: Jehovah God says to His church, "I give to you my grace, my mercy, my peace, because you are my church."

When this apostolic blessing is pronounced in the worship services of the church of Christ throughout the new dispensation, the same truth concerning this blessing applies. The minister speaks in the name of God and on God's behalf. So much is that true that the voice of God in Christ is heard in and through the voice of the preacher. God is saying to the congregation assembled: My grace and peace are on you.

That blessing is a profound wonder. So often the congregation, accustomed to the cadences of the liturgy, pays almost no attention to the blessing and simply hears it said. Or, if they are inclined to superstition in the worship, they might find some magical power in the formula or in the upraised arms of the minister — as if special power flows from his fingertips. But this is abominable worship. If the saints who are assembled together in the name of Christ worship from the heart, they must receive this Word of God, which comes to them through the benediction, by faith and appropriate it as their own. They must respond in their hearts to the benediction by saying: We receive as our very own God's word of grace and mercy and peace. We believe that we are the objects of His grace and mercy and the recipients of His peace.

The word "mercy" in the benedictions in Paul's private correspondence is omitted in his letters to churches. This is no essential omission, for mercy is included in grace.

Grace has especially two meanings in Scripture. Its first and primary meaning is "unmerited favor." In this sense the apostle uses it in Romans 11:5, 6: "Even so then at this present time also there is a remnant according to the election of grace. And if by grace, then is it no more of works: otherwise grace is no more grace. But if it be of works, then is it no more grace: otherwise work is no more work." Grace is God's favor. God looks with favor on His church and people. He smiles when He sees them. He is filled with delight when He contemplates them. He has pleasure in their company and fellowship.

Such favor as is implied in grace includes, quite obviously, love, mercy, longsuffering, and compassion. At the same time it is clear that such favor as God has towards His people can only be unmerited. It is the height of a towering pride that makes man think that he receives God's favor because he deserves it. The favor of God is wholly unmerited. It is never of works, always undeserved.

The reason is obvious — as Paul himself makes clear in verse 4. We are, in ourselves, totally unworthy of God's favor and deserve only His raging fury against us, for we are sinful, enemies of God, blasphemers, and despisers of all that is holy. God is a holy God, who cannot abide sin in any way, for to do so would foul His own infinite holiness. When He looks upon us in His favor, therefore, He looks upon us, not as we are in ourselves, but as we are in Christ! That is why grace is "from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ."

Second, grace, while remaining unmerited favor, is also the power that God exercises in saving us.

Such a meaning is on the foreground in Ephesians 2:8: "For by grace are ye saved through faith; and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God." As the power that saves us fills us and makes us strong in salvation, grace is the power to walk as God's people in the world. In fact, in a very striking passage, grace is defined by God Himself as the power that would enable Paul to continue his work as a missionary of the gospel in spite of the thorn in his flesh, which he thought had to be removed. God assured him, "My grace is sufficient for thee: for my strength is made perfect in weakness" (II Cor. 12:9).

Peace is an equally to be treasured gift of God.

Let it be emphasized first of all that peace is indeed a gift of God. No individual in the church can establish peace and import into the fellowship of the saints this treasured gift. Peace can come only from God because the opposites of peace (strife, envy, warfare, bickering, hatred, selfishness, and quarreling) are all integral and inescapable consequences of sin. Sin is opposition to God. Man is at war with God. He fights against God with every ounce of his strength. In his war with God, wicked man is proud and haughty, selfish and self-seeking, taking the attitude continuously, "Me first, and the devil take the hindmost." To advance himself he will resort to every cruelty as he climbs the ladder of success on the rungs of the people whom he has betrayed, crushed, thrown aside, and brutally used for his own selfish purposes. And so life is characterized by war, and violence fills the whole earth. As long as man is a sinner, nation fights against nation, race against race, husband against wife, parents against children and children against parents, labor against management and citizens against their government. In spite of man's loud boasts, there is no peace, saith the Lord, to the wicked (Is. 48:22).

But what is worse, God fights against man. After all, in all his raging against God, man can do God no harm. God is infinitely beyond the reach of puny man. But when God fights against man, it is terribly different, for God in His fury destroys man for his sin and finally drives him forever into hell.

Peace comes, therefore, only when sin is removed. And sin is removed through the cross of Christ: "And having made peace through the blood of his (Christ's) cross, by him (Christ) to reconcile all things unto himself" (Col. 1:20). Thus peace is a gift of God to the church through the Lord Jesus Christ, given by means of the forgiveness and removal of sin. God says, in the benediction, "I bring you peace in the power of the sacrifice of my Son."

How great a blessing is peace in the church: peace between saint and saint, between husband and wife, between parents and children, between officebearers and members, between ministers and sheep — all flowing as a river of peace from the peace between God and His people. A church torn by controversy, characterized by bickering and jealousy, constantly plagued by division and anger, is a church unable to perform the great task of manifesting in the world the cause of Christ. It is the laughingstock of neighbors and the object of ridicule and scorn by those who know what goes on among the members. But a church where peace is a living reality is a church in which there is joy and happiness, love and unity. No wonder we are called to strive earnestly for the unity of the Spirit (Eph. 4:1-3) and to pray for the peace of Jerusalem (Ps. 122:6-9).

When a church possesses God's grace and peace, that church is blessed beyond description. When the minister pronounces this benediction of Paul in the worship services and the people of God ap-

propriate that Word of God by faith, that congregation is blessed!

This official and spiritually efficacious blessing pronounced upon the church is "from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ."

The same is true here as was true in verse 1: the apostle does not mean to define two sources of blessing independent of each other: God the Father and Jesus Christ. The point is rather that God is the Author and divine source of the blessings of grace and peace; but these blessings come to us and can come to us only because of Jesus Christ. He performed the great work of paying for our sins and guilt. He is now ascended on high as the Head of the church. He sends His Spirit into the church to make the church the heir of the blessings He merited for His people. God's eternal Son, in our flesh, now glorified, is the One through whom the blessings of grace and peace come to us.


God is called, in the apostolic blessing, "Father." He is the Father of Christ. He is the eternal Father within the Trinity, for the first person of the holy Trinity is the Father of the second person. That inter-trinitarian relationship is revealed in the relation between the triune God and the Lord Jesus Christ. The triune God is Christ's Father. When Christ prayed to His Father, He prayed to the triune God, not to the first person, ignoring the third person.

The triune God is the Father of Christ in the incarnation, for the Holy Spirit came upon Mary, the power of the Highest overshadowed her, and the holy thing born of her was the Son of God (Lu. 1:35). But Christ is also the Son of God through His resurrection from the dead. He is the Son of God through the resurrection because of His total abandonment in hell when He suffered for the sins of His people. He is "declared to be

the Son of God with power, according to the spirit of holiness, by the resurrection from the dead" (Rom. 1:4). Paul tells the people in Antioch of Pisidia, "God hath fulfilled the same (promise) unto us their children, in that he hath raised up Jesus again; as it is also written in the second psalm, Thou art my Son, this day have I begotten thee" (Acts 13:33).

But God is also *our* Father, as Paul confidently affirms. God is our Father for Christ's sake. He begets us and adopts us as His children. He cares for us in all the weary years of our pilgrimage. He leads us by His counsel. He prepares for us a house of many mansions. He brings us into the full enjoyment of His own covenant family.

What a marvelous thing it is when the apostolic benediction is pronounced in the worship at the beginning of the service. It was marvelous for the Galatians who heard this. Paul was angry with them and his anger comes out in his letter. They had it coming, for they were foolish and are following the wicked notions of some among them that would lead them away from God and into death. But they are God's church. And in their sin and foolishness they are still God's beloved upon whom He sends His grace. If now the controversy with the Judaizers has sowed dissension among them, God comes to His children with the blessings of grace and peace and assures them that they are His children for Christ's sake. They must repent of their sins, put away the evil heresies that are contrary to the gospel, and receive this Word of God by faith. And believers, with heads bowed in humble joy at God's goodness, ready to join in worship of praise to Him, receive this Word of God at the lips of their minister: "Grace to you and peace from God our father and the Lord Jesus Christ."

This too must be in the consciousness of the people of God as they join in worship under God's blessing. 

When a church possesses God's grace and peace, that church is blessed beyond description.

Silent Censure

“Such as obstinately reject the admonition of the consistory, and likewise those who have committed a public or otherwise gross sin, shall be suspended from the Lord’s Supper. And if he, having been suspended, after repeated admonitions, shows no signs of repentance, the consistory shall at last proceed to the extreme remedy, namely, excommunication, agreeably to the form adopted for that purpose according to the Word of God. But no one shall be excommunicated except with advice of the classis.”

Church Order, Article 76.

History and Background

The previous articles in the Church Order have dealt with the reconciliation both of secret sins and public sins. Beginning with Article 76 the Church Order turns to the proper procedure in case the sinner does not repent, and thus is not reconciled to the church. These articles deal with the steps of Christian discipline, beginning in Article 76 with what is commonly referred to as “silent censure.” This is the first stage of official church discipline. The second stage of formal discipline, characterized by the three public announcements to the congregation and ending in excommunication, is covered in Article 77.

From the beginning of their history the Reformed churches conceived of suspension from the Lord’s Table as a part of formal church discipline. Under Calvin’s influence, this practice was introduced in Geneva, as is indicated in the *Ecclesiastical Ordinances of 1541*.

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Furthermore, those who mock at the specific admonitions of their neighbour shall be admonished afresh by the Church, and if they are willing neither to see reason nor to acknowledge their fault once they have been convicted of it, they shall be made to abstain from the supper until such time as they return to a better disposition.

As for those notorious and public vices which the Church cannot condone, if they are faults which deserve admonishment only, it shall be the duty of the elders or delegates (*commis*) to summon those who have offended, to remonstrate with them amicably to the end that they may mend their ways, and if amendment is apparent to trouble them no further. If they persist in their evil ways they shall be admonished anew. But if at length they fail to profit they shall be denounced as despisers of God and be made to abstain from the supper until such time as a change becomes apparent in their lives. (*The Register of the Company of Pastors of Geneva in the Time of Calvin*, pp. 48 and 49.)

The Dutch Reformed utilized this method of discipline early on. The Convent of Wesel, 1568, decided:

Furthermore as far as horrible crimes and misbehavior are concerned, those who are guilty shall, even if they will have given ear to the admonitions, be suspended from the communion for some specific period of time until they will have given clear evidence and proof of repentance.

Our present Article 76 is basically a combination of the regulations found in the Church Order of the Synod of Emden, 1571.

Article 30. Those who stubbornly reject the admonitions of the consistory shall be kept from the fellowship of the Lord’s Supper, and, having once been barred, should he after many admonitions show no sign of penitence, steps shall be taken leading to excommunication.

Article 32. Those who have committed grievous sins and sins that are slanderous to God’s congregation, or such deeds that should be punished by the authority and power of the government, even though they verbally express penitence, shall nevertheless be barred from the Lord’s Supper. However, just how long this shall last shall be left to the judgment of the consistory.

From the time of Emden forward, the various Dutch Reformed church orders invariably included an article dealing with silent censure.

Silent Censure

The first stage of formal church discipline is silent censure. It is called silent censure inasmuch as no public announcement is made to the congregation. Ordinarily, only the sinner himself and the elders are privy to the decision to bar the sinner from the Lord's Supper. Silent censure is a *temporary* suspension from the sacrament, whereas the second stage of Christian discipline (Article 77) culminates in a *permanent* suspension from the sacrament. For this reason, silent censure is sometimes referred to as *excommunicatio minor*, in distinction from *excommunicatio major*.

Although this stage of Christian discipline is marked by suspension from the Lord's Supper, silent censure includes more. Silent censure is really the temporary suspension of all the rights and privileges of church membership. Besides suspension from the sacrament, the member's right to baptism for his children, the right to hold office, the right to participate in the congregational meetings, the right of protest and appeal (other than the cause of his own silent censure) are also suspended.

Besides the consistory's barring from the Lord's Supper, it is also possible that a member voluntarily abstain from partaking of the sacrament. There may be legitimate reasons for this. The elders ought to notice this. It belongs to their supervision over the sacrament that they monitor participation in the sacrament by the members of the congregation. If they notice that someone abstains, they ought to approach that member in order to discover, at least in a general sort of way, the reason for his not participating. At the very least, they ought to be assured that his abstaining is not a kind of protest

against the consistory or the minister, as sometimes happens. Such an act would be neglect of the means of grace and itself worthy of admonition or even discipline.

Reasons for Silent Censure

Article 76 mentions two instances that call for silent censure. The first instance concerns those who have rejected the admonition of the consistory after a matter has been reported to the consistory according to the rule of Matthew 18. In this case, the consistory has thoroughly investigated the report of the sin of the member and has determined that the member is indeed guilty of the sin that has been alleged. Based on that determination, the elders have brought "repeated admonitions." But those admonitions have fallen on deaf ears and the sinner has remained obstinate in his sin. When that obstinacy persists, the elders are duty bound to proceed to formal discipline, the first stage of which is placing the member under silent censure. This must take place by way of a formal motion that is adopted, with its grounds, and properly recorded in the minute book of the consistory. Of such a decision, the erring member ought to be informed personally and in writing, through a committee of the consistory.

A second instance that calls for silent censure involves those "who have committed a public or otherwise gross sin." Those who have committed a public or gross sin ought to be immediately barred from the Lord's Supper and placed under silent censure. If they repent, the silent censure ought to be lifted with an appropriate announcement of confession of sin made to the congregation. In certain cases, depending on the sin, even though confession is made to the consistory and publicly announced in the congregation, the consistory may still bar the repentant sinner from participation in the Lord's Supper. This is excep-

tional, but it may happen. It may be because the sinner has fallen into the same sin in the past. Or it may be the gravity of the sin committed. Article 76 makes a distinction between "public" sin and "gross" sin. All sin is sin. But there are gross sins, sins extraordinarily grievous in their very nature. Such a sin, even though the sinner is repentant, warrants temporary suspension from the Lord's Supper in order that the genuineness of the sinner's repentance may be demonstrated. The Synod of Dordt, 1578 responded to a question relating to this matter as follows.

Whether rapists, murderers, traitors, and those who have committed similar gross deeds, although they repent, nevertheless should be excommunicated because of the grossness of the deeds. Answer: No penitent shall be excommunicated but shall for a time be barred from the Lord's Supper to indicate the grossness of the sin, remove the offense, bring fear to others, and test his penitence.

Although these are the two instances referred to in Article 76 in which silent censure is in order, there may be other times when a consistory bars members from partaking of the Lord's Supper. It may happen, for example, that a consistory receives a report of sin or the report of a serious disagreement between members of the church shortly before the celebration of the Lord's Supper. The consistory simply does not have the time carefully to investigate the matter before the administration of the sacrament. In this case, the consistory may bar the member(s) from the Lord's Supper until it has sufficient time to conduct a thorough investigation. The principle here is that the elders must not merely keep unworthy partakers away from the table, but must do all in their power to insure that those who come to the table are worthy partakers. The concern of

the consistory is to prevent the possibility of the desecration of the sacrament.

The question is sometimes raised whether a consistory has the right to postpone the administration of the Lord's Supper because of turmoil or disunity in the congregation. This has been done by Reformed churches in the past, and has been done in a few instances in the history of our own churches. Again, the concern of the consistory would be the possibility that under the present circumstances the Lord's Table might be desecrated. But this is rare and ought to be a measure undertaken by a consistory with extreme reluctance, and for as short a time as possible. The comments of Van Dellen and Monsma in *The Church Order Commentary* are worth quoting:

Sometimes Consistories find it advisable to postpone the celebration of the Lord's Supper because of disturbed relationship (sic) in the Congregation. Trouble may arise which involves several members in transgressions. No Consistory should determine to postpone the celebration of the Lord's Supper except for weighty reasons. But if conditions are much disturbed it is permissible and wise to do so. Such a postponement is not a disciplinary measure but simply a means to prevent desecration of the Lord's Supper and the slandering of God's name (p. 313).

The Extreme Remedy

Although the main subject of Article 76 is silent censure, the article does make reference to excommunication. Article 77 will deal more fully with this matter and will outline the proper procedure for excommunication. Nevertheless, already in Article 76 several noteworthy matters relating to excommunication are raised.

It is noteworthy, to begin with, that the article dealing with silent censure makes mention of excommunication. It does so because apart from the intervening grace of

God, silent censure ends in excommunication. Silent censure is the beginning of the process. Excommunication is the end of the process. The sinner who is placed under silent censure must be warned of this. The consistory who places the sinner under silent censure must realize this. Ordinarily, a consistory ought not to place someone under silent censure if is not already at that point willing to proceed all the way to excommunication for impenitence in the sin for which it is placing the sinner under silent censure.

In this part of Article 76 it is already made plain that *the sin for which the sinner is excommunicated from the church is the sin of impenitence*. It is only "after repeated admonitions" and when the sinner "shows no signs of repentance" that the consistory proceeds to the last remedy, excommunication. No sin all by itself, but impenitence in any sin makes one worthy of excommunication from the church of Christ.


Such excommunication is to take place "agreeably to the form adopted for that purpose according to the Word of God." The adopted form must be used, the "Form Of Excommunication" that is found in the back of the *Psalter*. This form has its origin in the form that was adopted by the Synod of Middelburg, 1581. More about this form in connection with Article 77. In anticipation of our treatment of that article, it would be worthwhile to familiarize yourself with that form, as well as the "Form of Readmitting Excommunicated Persons."

Article 76 states that excommunication is not to take place "except with the advice of the classis." The "Preface" to *The Church Order*

of the Protestant Reformed Churches notes that one of the changes to the Church Order adopted by the Synod of 1946 was the change of the word "consent" to "advice" in Articles 76 and 77. The ground for this change is that in the judgment of the synod the word "consent" reveals a hierarchical church polity. Additionally, it is pointed out that the original Dutch word is

advies, which is properly translated "advice." Whether or not "consent" actually reveals a hierarchical church polity as opposed to the use of the word "advice," the fact is that the advice of the classis in cases of excommunication is binding advice. This is plain from the use of the same term in other of the articles of the Church Or-

der. (Cf. its use in Articles 5, 14, 38, 47, 75, and 79.) What Article 76 stipulates is that no church may proceed to the excommunication of a member until the case has been heard by the broader assembly and a decision has been taken by the classis authorizing the consistory to proceed.

Significantly, Article 76 refers to excommunication as "the extreme remedy." That is the viewpoint that a consistory must have in proceeding with discipline and ultimately in excommunicating an impenitent sinner. The purpose is not that the sinner be punished. The purpose is certainly not to get rid of the unruly church member. But the purpose, and that for which the consistory and the congregation must earnestly pray, is that the discipline and excommunication will be a remedy, albeit the extreme remedy, by means of which the sinner will see the error of his way, repent, and be restored to his place in the church of Christ. 

The purpose, and that for which the consistory and the congregation must earnestly pray, is that the discipline and excommunication will be a remedy, albeit the extreme remedy, by means of which the sinner will see the error of his way, repent, and be restored to his place in the church of Christ.

The Tree


We might be tempted to disparage them after the leafy mess they make each fall, but the tree is a wonder to behold. It is prominent in the history of salvation. They are among the first living things created (Gen. 1:11-12). Paradise the first featured two trees; eating from one sustained human life, and eating from the other took it (Gen. 2:9-17). The guilty in Eden tried to hide their shame with trees (Gen. 3:7-8). Christ redeemed mankind from a tree (1 Pet. 2:24) and is "an apple tree among the trees of the wood," where we find "great delight" and "sweet" blessings (Song 2:3). The new creation is pictured as the radical transformation of desert into an oasis of trees (Is. 41:19). And those entering this Paradise the second will eat from a new tree of life with therapeutic leaves and twelve kinds of fruit (Rev. 2:14ff.).

Trees are the first living thing said to produce seed after its kind (Gen. 1:11). Scripture mentions over 20 such kind: fruit-bearers such as almond, chestnut, and pomegranate (apple); evergreens such as cypress (gopher), myrtle, and thyme; and deciduous such as oak, shittim (acacia), and willow. God obviously intended individual characteristics of each species to represent different spiritual realities in the kingdom. And I suppose this explains why Solomon studied and "spake of trees" (1 Kings 4:33). Covenant children are "olive plants in strength and beauty, full of hope and promise sweet" (Psalter 360). The righteous flourish like the palm, live long like the massive cedars (Ps. 92:12), and are cultivated as olives in God's house (Ps. 52:8). The righteous are "like a tree planted by the rivers of water" (Ps. 1:3). The ungodly are not so. They are like the fruitless and invasive green bay tree (Ps. 37:35).

In general, trees represent God's providential provision of the basic necessities of life. They are a symbol of vitality, rest, strength, and permanence. The tree provides shelter for man (Gen. 18:4) and beast (Ezek. 17:23). Firs and cedars provided homes for kings and God (1 Kings 7:1ff.). Deborah judged from under a palm (Jud. 4:5). Saul tarried under a pomegranate during battle (1 Sam. 14:2), and lived under a tree while David hid in a

forest (1 Sam. 22:5). Saul and Jonathan were buried under a tree (1 Sam. 31:13), as was Deborah, Rebekah's nurse (Gen. 35:8). Elijah prayed for death while under a juniper (1 Kings 19:4). Jesus called a disciple from under a fig (John 1:48). To see Christ, Zacchaeus climbed into a sycamore (Luke 19:4). And during Solomon's reign, every man dwelt safely under his own fig tree (1 Kings 4:25), a figure of the prosperous life God's people will enjoy in the new creation (Zech. 3:10).

God intended the tree to provide life (Gen. 1:19). Israel was forbidden to cut down trees while laying siege to an enemy because they were "man's life" (Deut. 20:19). They link man to the creation by transforming the non-living into food. This explains why the ungodly often serve trees more than the Creator (Rom. 1:25; Is. 44:14) and why Israel took to worshiping idols under every green tree (1 Kings 14:23). But trees of themselves are not grace. The wicked "shall be broken as a tree" (Job 24:20). The King of Ai, Pharaoh's baker, Absalom, and traitors Bigthan, Teresh, and Judas were all hanged on trees, a harbinger of the wicked's doom and a sign of how cursed Christ really was when nailed to His own tree (Gal. 3:13).

This life-giving purpose explains the prominence of fruit-bearing trees in Scripture. Fruit represents the good works the elect produce by the life of Christ through the Holy Spirit. Good trees do not bring forth corrupt fruit, nor corrupt trees good fruit (Luke 6:43). Unfruitful trees in God's orchard are cursed (Mark 22:21), cut down, and burned (Luke 13:7-9). Olives especially represent us because their fruit is "fatness wherewith God and man are honored" (Jud. 9:9), and they must be loved to produce fruit, but beaten to release it for the life of others (Deut. 24:20). The fruit of trees represents the fact that good works in turn bring life to the people of God by grace. This is why "the fruit of the righteous is a tree of life" (Prov. 11:30). A wholesome tongue is "a tree of life" (Prov. 15:4). Wisdom is "a tree of life" (Prov. 3:18). And certain hope "is a tree of life" (Prov. 13:12). Behold the tree and praise God. 

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“Ye Grace Life...Saints!” (2)

Grace Life believer...*you are a saint!*

This is true because God in heaven and in His Word, the Bible, says so. He says in the Bible that *all* believers are saints. In fact, God says it a lot there.

I wonder why we seem loath to say it here, on earth? Here, as in, *in the halls of Covenant Christian High School? As you gather for the Faith singles Bible Study? Or as we talk around a cup of tea in my kitchen?* Why don't I call myself saint? Why don't we call each other saint?

Seems to me this would be for quite a blessing. For the declaration about our sainthood among ourselves is a declaration of truth, and is not truth always for the blessing of us?

Now, you might not want to go around introducing yourself as Saint Mitch or Saint Sally. Might seem a bit proud. But then again it might keep you from temptation and folks from inviting you to the local beer-bash or brothel if right from the start you declared your sainthood. Might just be an encouragement for your friend John when you write him now Dear Saint John, or Dear brother John, Holy One in Jesus Christ. Might be a godly goad to holiness for ministers to include “saints” in their call to worship, like “Beloved saints in our Lord Jesus Christ.”

Certainly the greater publication of our sainthood would be for

the praise of God and His Word. For you would be confessing your faith in the *astounding* God, and your trust and conviction that He has done *an astounding work* and called you and many out of darkness into His marvelous light to be...*saints*. Thus confessed, the God who makes saints, whose redemption *includes* sanctification (just a different spelling of *saintification*), and whose Christ is made *unto us sanctification* (I Cor. 1:30), would get the praise. Good and emboldening grace would be compelling you freely to confess who you are, *saint of God*, and, in the same breath to confess *who God is*: the living, holy, saving, saint-making God!

Whatever Doctrine Unsaints You...

Now the devil is all out for cursing and blasphemy and unsaintliness.

The devil wants, therefore, that you deny the truth of your sainthood—whether it is your future sinless glorious sainthood, or your present sainthood. And this, the devil's desire that you deny your sainthood, is so that you will *be* very unsaintly now, and forever unsaintly in hell.

One peculiar way he does this is to try to persuade you to believe that you, a believing child of God, are totally depraved. If he can do that, and perhaps even by some strange twist of Scripture or of Catechism, he will have begun to *unsaint* you for sure. For there is a certain principle of principles that is undying. That is this: *principles work through*. And if you are principled, even adamant about your

being totally depraved, then this will work through in your life, and you indeed will act upon and like your convictions. Evolutionists teach that grandma was an ape and that all of the grandchildren have her original apishness. That is why the evolution-believing grandchildren *act* like apes. Similarly, those who are convinced they are totally depraved will act the part and be anything but saints—even, perhaps, all the while confessing that they are saints!

Because you are a saint, *let it be known!* you are not, *decidedly not*, totally depraved. Totally depraved people are Adamites, dead in their trespasses and sins (Eph. 2:1). They have a carnal mind that is enmity against God (Rom. 8:7), a hateful heart that is the source of the enmity (Jer. 17:9), and a body made wretched in the willing service of the enmity (Rom. 3:10-18). But since we are made saints we are sanctified in Christ Jesus (I Cor. 1:2), made alive in Christ who lives in us (Gal. 2:20), and dead *to* sin and willing servants of righteousness because of the wonderful grace-union with Christ's own death and resurrection (Rom. 6).

From the death and bondage of sin (the condition of the natural man, total depravity) we elect sinners are delivered unto sainthood. This deliverance occurs by the Holy Spirit's regeneration of us. This regeneration is a veritable resurrection from the dead for the child of God, and is therefore *highly celebrated* in Scripture as the principal fruit of Christ's own resurrection, and the preliminary glory of the believers' bodily resurrection and renewal in the Day of days. It

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is also highly celebrated in the Reformed creeds. Celebrated, therefore, by Reformed believers, is the truth of the Word, the truth of the doctrines of the church, and the truth in our lives that according to unfathomable love Christ has by His blood bought *and* by His Spirit *regenerated*, He has redeemed *and renewed*, saved *and delivered* from sin's guilt and also sin's power to make the sons of Adam its own totally depraved, corrupt bondservants (cf. Lord's Days 3, 11; The Belgic Confession, art. 24, Canons of Dordt, III and IV, 3, 12).

Whatever Sin Unsaints You...

The celebration of our being born again saints, and of our being delivered from the guilt and the bondage of sin, manifests itself precisely in our being and desiring to be and to show we are the very saints we have been made. Saints celebrate their deliverance and renewal with holy and glad thankful living and consecration unto God. That is our celebration.

Not to say it always works out that way. Not to say you do not ever act rather unsaintly, even foolishly, and drive, maybe, like Jehu, or are not ever driven more by passions than by principles. You do. You are. Not to say I never write or speak or kick like one totally depraved. I do. There we go, even sometimes (too often!) enjoying the pleasures of sin for a season, and driving off into the dark past or into a dark alley and away from the celebration of our new life in Christ, and from singing the songs and living according to the godliness to which we have been born again.

Why, of course, we know. We have, even as saints, just a small beginning of sainthood, and of the new obedience. There is still the flesh—just as depraved as ever! We have an “old man”—just as Adamic as ever! And we are still possessed of great inherent abilities (disabilities!) and a willingness (vile!) to do all kinds of things that

are unbecoming of the child and saint of God.

It is when we yield to this flesh and begin acting according as our old man insists, that is, when we *act* totally depraved, and especially when we act and act and act that way, that the devil tries a trick. It is especially when we act totally depraved *and go on in this base activity* (and let us admit: *we are good at being bad!*) that the devil and we enter into conversation. The devil whispers to us that this sinning we are doing is actually not so bad, and that this saint business is for the birds or for puritans or for other fun-killing characters. Maybe for a while he argues this way: that we professing Christians need *both*—the pleasures of sin, *and* the salvation of the gospel, to be happy, fulfilled, and free. Maybe later he even tries to convince us that we are actually not a saint at all. And that God Himself has disowned us, or perhaps never did own us....

All the while, of course, this Christless conversation is a mischief and for misery. Devil-talk always is. Lending our ear to Lucifer cannot profit. We will hurt. We become all confused. And restless. Sainthood temporarily, even for a long *tempus*, loses its meaning for us, and its power is checked. For the Spirit is being grieved (Eph. 4:30) by us. We are out of sorts. Saints sinning is senseless. And we are, in the midst of our conversation with and showing sympathy for the devil, senseless sinning saints. On this course, guided by the ghoul of ghouls, we will surely go forward further into sin and self-justification and sin and self-justification and sin. Our friends will show concern about our drinking, but we will not listen. Parents will agonize as they try to reach out to us, and to reason with us, when we resist and when our rights and our feelings are all that matter. We will not care.

The Mark of the Saints...

Thanks be to God *He does!*

With divine care He enters where friends could not. He speaks and is heard when parents were not. With His Word. With His grace. And to deliver and preserve us from Satan's *unsainting* powers!

Ever experience that, beloved reader?!

Oh, sweet grace!

Oh, sweet, sin-checking sanctifying grace!

Grace “checks” us when we sin by winning us back to the conversation that becomes us, and is lovely to us. That conversation is Christ. That conversation to which grace irresistibly bends our ear is the conversation to which we are called as saints. It is our privileged *calling upon the name of Jesus Christ our Lord* (I Cor. 1:2). This is the conversation of the saints. This is the prayer of the saints. This is their devotion. This is their way, their truth, their life, and that, precisely and entirely because of the Name upon which they call. And this means we simply cannot stand it and ourselves when we sin, and when we, in so doing, slither around by any and every word that proceeds from the mouth of Satan. We would call upon the name Jesus! We would *hear* God speak His Word Jesus! And by grace we do! In the hour of the power of sin—*Lord, save me! Lord, deliver me from the mess I have made!* In the hour of the grace received: *Thanks Lord! Thanks for remembering me for Jesus' sake! I resolve now to be, without compromise, and even though it will mean a cross to bear...saint!*

Calling upon Jesus is, in biblical fact, *the mark* of our sainthood, and of God's grace at work, almightily, in us. To call upon the name of Jesus is to trust in Him, to worship God by Him, and to declare that He alone, and His righteousness, is the ground of our salvation. It is to enter into the presence and fellowship of God by Him. It is to glory in Him and His cross. It is the mark of our private devotion. It is the boast of our public confession. Christ Jesus our

all! I call upon His name! I glory in that name given to save...*me!* I adore Jehovah God through Him and for His sake.

This "calling upon the name of Jesus" *makes*, as only grace itself can make, for the life of a true saint. God answers such calls. He sanctifies our education. He works for our godly working. He purifies our play. He hears our calls, and heads our relationships. He is our felt comfort in our trouble, His name our refuge. He becomes our joy above joys, His name our salvation....



Grace Life believer! Be not deceived—either by doctrines that will unsaint you, or the sin that surely can.

Be not deceived either by "forms" of saintliness that are the glittering garb of ghouls.

For many are the world's "saints." These have a form of godliness, but deny the power thereof, even the name Jesus. Their godliness is, therefore, altogether human godliness (!), which is precisely *ungodliness*, and their (pretended) righteousness is of the filthy-rag variety. Theirs is a godliness and an unrighteousness of those, in fact, in the church or not, who *do not* call upon the name of the Lord and take hold on Him (Is. 64:6, 7).

That for which such "saints" are canonized and lauded is therefore utterly detestable to the holy God. Look at them: Moslem, Jew, Christian (in name), secular humanist, champion of the poor, green peace activist, nobel prize winner, first to swim the Atlantic underwater...all written in Man's

hall of shame, but none, if there be never grace to them, and that, flowing from the eternal fount (*election, that is!* cf. Canons 1.6, 9), written in the Lamb's book of life.... And these all, in the name of Man, despise the Son, the Lamb, and the Savior, and refuse to kiss Him, to adore, and to trust (Ps. 2:12).

Shameful satanic sainthood!

But *your* sainthood.

True sainthood.

Lovely most precious thing, dear reader!

Because of the lovely most precious One, the Savior Saint Jesus.


He is the Holy One of God *your Savior!*

Believe that?

Then be saint.

And keep calling upon His name.

With grace in your hearts.

Ah...the *grace...saint...life!* 

Church and State

Mr. Brian VanEngen

The Ten Commandments on Public Display

Although the issue of the separation of church and state has long been debated in American society, recent years have seen a noticeable increase in legal challenges to previously accepted practices. For instance, the constitutionality of the Pledge of Allegiance has been under attack because of the inclusion of the phrase "under God," although that phrase has been in the Pledge for over 50 years. Similarly, many public buildings and court-houses have displayed the Ten

Commandments for decades, but in recent years groups such as the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) have mounted efforts to have them removed. After many years of silence on the issue of public display of the Ten Commandments, the United States Supreme Court issued two rulings on the issue this past summer. This article will examine the background behind those cases, the rulings themselves, and their implications.

Legal Precedent and Factual History of the Cases

Both of the recently decided cases, *Van Orden v. Perry*¹ and *McCreary County v. American Civil Liberties Union of Kentucky*,² involve

the sole issue of whether a display of the Ten Commandments on public property violates the Establishment Clause of the First Amendment to the Constitution. Groups on both sides of the issue waited anxiously for the Court's guidance on whether such monuments can remain. The last time the Court had ruled specifically on a display of the Ten Commandments was twenty-five years ago in the case of *Stone v. Graham*.³ In that case, the Court ruled that a display of the Ten Commandments located in a public school in Kentucky violated the Establishment Clause because the display had a religious rather than secular purpose, when the test defined in *Lemon v.*

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Kurtzman was applied.⁴ The *Lemon* test, established ten years earlier, had delineated a three-prong approach to evaluating state-sponsored actions involving religion: 1) the action must have a secular legislative purpose, 2) its primary effect must not be either to advance or to inhibit religion, and 3) it must not foster excessive government entanglement in religion. Although one would expect that this would mean that such displays would be frowned upon in any government-sponsored setting, that does not always hold true. Although the Supreme Court has found prayer in public schools to be a violation, legislatures including the United States Congress are able to open with prayer. The question in the recent cases was whether the prohibition on display of the Ten Commandments applied to public facilities such as courthouses and state-capitol grounds. The Supreme Court had declined to address the question of Ten Commandment displays since the *Stone* case, even in the face of major media coverage in the case of Chief Justice Roy Moore of the Alabama Supreme Court. Judge Moore was ousted from office for refusing to remove a monument of the Ten Commandments from his courthouse.⁵

In the *McCreary* case, two counties in Kentucky had set up displays of the Ten Commandments in the hallway of the county courthouse. The displays explicitly identified the text as coming from the King James Version, and referred to Exodus 20:3-17. After suits were filed, the counties passed resolutions explaining, among other things, that the Ten Commandments are Kentucky's "precedent legal code," that the Ten Commandments were codified in Kentucky's civil and criminal codes, and that the county judges agreed with Alabama Chief Justice Roy Moore. Under the resolution, the displays were changed to add other historic documents such as

the "endowed by their Creator" passage from the Declaration of Independence, and the national motto of "In God We Trust." After an injunction issued, the display was changed again to include the Ten Commandments and eight other documents of equal size. This time the display also included items with no religious references, such as the Star Spangled Banner and a picture of Lady Justice.

When the ACLU supplemented its pleadings to enjoin the third display, the counties responded by explaining that the purpose of the new version was "to demonstrate that the Ten Commandments were part of the foundation of American Law and Government," and to "educate the citizens of the county regarding some of the documents that played a significant role in the foundation of our system of law and government." The District Court found that proclaiming the foundational value of the Ten Commandments had a religious, rather than a secular purpose, and therefore ruled that the display should be removed. The ruling was upheld by the Court of Appeals for the Sixth Circuit, and was again appealed to the Supreme Court.

The *Van Orden* case, on the other hand, was quite simple. The case involved a stone monument of the Ten Commandments, which was placed on the Texas statehouse grounds by the Eagles Club in 1961. The monument stood in that location, along with 17 other monuments and 21 historical markers. Van Orden, a former attorney, passed the monument on a daily basis for six years on his way to do research, and eventually sued to have the monument removed. The district court found no Constitutional violations in the display, and the Court of Appeals for the Fifth Circuit agreed. Van Orden then appealed to the Supreme Court.

The Court's Ruling

The Supreme Court found that

the displays in the *McCreary* case violated the Establishment Clause because they had a religious purpose, but that the display in *Van Orden* was allowable. Reconciling these cases is somewhat difficult, since they reach opposite conclusions although they contain the same basic set of facts — a monument to the Ten Commandments placed on state property. The key to distinguishing the cases seems to lie in the history of the placement of the displays and their contextual surroundings, not in the actual Ten Commandments themselves. Justice Souter points out in the majority opinion in the *McCreary* case that although the counties argued that the displays were to show the foundation of state laws, they were put up and displayed in such a way as to point directly to Christianity as a religion. When the original display was put up in one county, the county judge invited his minister to speak, and the displays referred specifically to the Bible, rather than just the Ten Commandments, by referencing the King James Version and citing Exodus 20:3-17. Subsequent modifications of the displays included other historical patriotic documents, but highlighted references to God and the Bible in those documents. The Ten Commandments were not incorporated into a broader, secular display as had been suggested in the *Stone* case.

The Court found that by the time the other secular documents were incorporated into the third display, the religious objective in

1. *Van Orden v. Perry*, 125 S.Ct. 346 (2005).

2. *McCreary County v. American Civil Liberties Union of Ky*, 125 S.Ct. 310 (2005).

3. *Stone v. Graham*, 449 U.S. 39 (1980).

4. *Lemon v. Kurtzman*, 403 U.S. 602 (1970).

5. Jeffrey Gettleman, Alabama Panel Ousts Judge Over Ten Commandments, New York Times, November 14, 2003 §A, at 16.

erecting the display was already obvious, and the Ten Commandments in the third display quoted Scripture even more directly. Although the counties had argued that “purpose” was unknowable and should be disregarded as a consideration, the Court found that the circumstances clearly indicated a government purpose to endorse Christianity, in violation of the first prong of the *Lemon* test.

In the *Van Orden* case, the majority noted that the state had simply accepted the donation of the monument, and the factual legislative history does not seem to exhibit a desire to promote religion. The state had a valid secular purpose in recognizing the Eagles for their efforts to reduce juvenile delinquency. The majority also noted that the Court had been inconsistent in applying the *Lemon* test to past cases.

However, the deciding factor for Justice Breyer, who cast the deciding vote, was the length of time the display had remained unchallenged. He stated “Those 40 years suggest more strongly than can any set of formulaic tests that few individuals, whatever their system of beliefs, are likely to have understood the monument as amounting in any significantly detrimental way, to a government effort to favor a particular religious sect.” Breyer also noted that a photograph of the statehouse grounds as a whole suggested nothing of the sacred.

Current Status of the Law under *Van Orden* and *McCreary*

Because of the Supreme Court’s divided rulings on these two cases, it is difficult to discern exactly what the status of the law is regarding displays of the Ten Commandments or other displays of religion on public property. Rather than a “bright line rule” that will allow easy determination of the constitutionality of a display, the Court’s decisions will require a careful, case-by-case examination

of the context and facts of each case. Where there is disagreement, the courts will need to be called in to do this analysis. To some extent, the future direction of the law in this area will be determined by the makeup of the Court, rather than prevailing precedents.

Often one can gain some understanding of how a future case will be decided by examining how the justices voted and why, but such analysis is difficult in this case. The majority in each case was a slim five to four margin, with the deciding vote in each case cast by Justice Steven Breyer, and the other eight justices voting for the same outcome in each case. In both cases, Justice Sandra Day O’Connor voted to remove the displays. Justice O’Connor has since resigned from the Supreme Court, and her replacement has not been determined at the time of this writing. Justice William Rehnquist, who wrote the majority opinion in *Van Orden* and voted to retain the displays in both cases, has since passed away and has been replaced by Chief Justice John Roberts. Although Roberts is generally somewhat “conservative” and therefore possibly tolerant of religious displays, it remains to be seen what his position will be.

Further complicating the analysis is the fact that the Justices did not reach the same conclusion by the same means. Some used different reasoning and filed concurring opinions rather than simply joining in the majority opinion or dissent. For instance, in the *Van Orden* case, the decision to retain the display was made up of a majority opinion and three separate concurring opinions by Justices Scalia, Thomas, and Breyer. As can be seen from this discussion, the balance of viewpoints is very delicate, making the selection of Justice O’Connor’s replacement and future justices very important.

The four Justices finding a violation of the Establishment Clause seem to wish to construe any ac-

tion involving religion in the public arena very narrowly, and the four favoring retention of the monuments seem to wish to allow relatively broad exercise. The majority in *McCreary*, in finding the displays unconstitutional, accused the dissenters of holding the view that “government should be free to approve of the core beliefs of a favored religion over the tenets of others, a view that should trouble anyone who prizes religious liberty.”

The Justice who appears to be least firmly entrenched at this point is Justice Breyer, who seems to base his vote mostly on context and on the length of time a practice has been allowed to continue. The emphasis on length of time provides little assurance for one trying to gage the legality of an action before it is taken. The best measure of legality of action after *McCreary* and *Van Orden*, then, seems to be an indepth analysis of the motives of those involved and whether they made any mention of religion, either in general or as a particular belief, as well as whether the action or its result “points” to religion, such as the highlighted passages of documents in the *McCreary* case.

Evaluation and Conclusion

While it is sad that people are so disturbed by the very sight of the Ten Commandments, the rulings in these cases really do believers no direct harm. To the extent that the underlying cases demonstrate hostility towards Christianity, they are cause for watchfulness on the part of believers. But the prohibition, if any, applies only to the use of the government or public property for religious purposes. The role of government is not to further the cause of the gospel — that is solely the role of the church. Reformed believers have long held to the strict separation of the church and state so that the gospel is untainted as it goes forth. Any religious message conveyed by the

government is not likely to be the pure, unadulterated truth.

Many religious leaders across the country have voiced concern that these decisions, especially the *McCreary* decision, are losses for churches and for the free exercise of our religion. But without strict separation between church and state, a large, nominally-Christian denomination or other religion could gain a majority vote in society, and use the government to force their religious views, not only on atheists, but also on small denominations such as the Protestant Reformed Churches. Although a clear rule would be convenient, the line between Free Exercise of Religion and Establishment of Religion is very fine. Incorporation of religion into government function would also necessitate government regulation of religion. If nothing else, the Court's majority opinion in *Van Orden* assures us that, for the present time at least, the Court is concerned about impinging on the ability of citizens to express freely their faith.


What is more disturbing is the aspect of these cases, and of virtually all other cases dealing with the Establishment Clause, that the Court did not address. In nearly all such cases, the Court looks at traditional religious beliefs or practices, but fails to recognize that many "secular" institutions are either idolatrous or blatantly anti-Christian. For instance, in the long standing debate over the teaching

of creation in public schools, no one seems to question whether evolution is part of a "religion" in the legal sense. The theory is antithetically opposed to what God reveals concerning Himself in Scripture, and yet it is deemed a neutral, secular teaching. The same is true for the many expressions of humanistic, man-centered philosophy that are freely expressed in public school curricula, courthouses, parks, and other public forums.

Finally, an additional area of concern is the attempt to "secularize" Christianity to the extent that it passes legal muster. Such an attempt can only ultimately lead to state-endorsed, nominally-Christian institutions, such as the Reformed fathers struggled against in Europe and elsewhere. Although those who fought for the retention of the Ten Commandment displays may have been well intentioned, their defense that the Ten Commandments merely teach the foundations of civic law strips those Commandments of their true significance. Even the ACLU recognized this in their press release after the decisions were rendered, when it stated, "Ultimately, we show more respect for the Ten Commandments when we do not deny their inherently religious message."⁶

The Ten Commandments are not a historic religious relic and should not be portrayed as such just so they can be publicly displayed. As the Heidelberg Cat-

echism tells us, God demands the strict preaching of those commandments so that we can know our sinful nature and seek remission of sins, and so that we can pray to God for the grace of the Holy Spirit, to be renewed more and more after the image of God.⁷ No display of the Ten Commandments alone can convey this truth, and to deny this inherent truth of the Ten Commandments so that their bare text can be displayed in public places does a disservice to the cause of the gospel and Christ's church. Rather than deny the religious nature of our actions when others challenge our free exercise of faith in the public realm, it is better to argue as Justice Scalia did in his dissent in *McCreary*, by noting that many of those who wrote the Constitution publicly exercised their faith, not hesitating to refer to God in speeches, such as George Washington's first Thanksgiving Proclamation.

In conclusion, our focus should be on maintaining our ability to worship in the purest form possible, without trying to use the government to promote an empty symbolism of religion or, worse yet, allowing the creation of a state-sponsored religion. 

6. Press Release, American Civil Liberties Union, High Court Upholds Religious Liberty (June 27, 2005).

7. Heidelberg Catechism, Question and Answer 115.

Book Reviews



Reformed Dogmatics. Herman Hoeksema. Second Edition. Grand Rapids, MI: Reformed Free Publishing Association. Volume I, 2004. xxi + 621 pages. Volume II, 2005. xv + 719 pages. Each \$55.00 (Cloth). [Reviewed by Russell J. Dykstra.]

In Reformed circles, Herman Hoeksema is well known as a clear, exegetical, Reformed theologian. His *Reformed Dogmatics* is the most concise expression of his theology. The original work was published in 1966, a year after Hoeksema died. The original preface, written by the author's son Homer C. Hoeksema, points out that the *Dogmatics* is the fruit of

more than thirty years of teaching and writing in the area of dogmatics.

Reprinted several times, the first edition has been out of print for some years. This newest printing is a second edition, having gone through no little revision. The publishers divided the lengthy work into two volumes, the second of which came out early in 2005.

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The publishers explain some of the changes made in this second edition.

In this second edition, a concerted effort has been expended to improve the readability without changing the meaning and substance of Hoeksema's work.... Editorial changes and improvements have been made only to the form of the book, leaving its essence and unique perspective identical with that of the first edition.


Specific changes include: the addition of many Scripture references; movement of all Scripture references from footnotes into the body of the text; more complete footnoting of works cited; and English translations of all the words and paragraphs in foreign languages (not only Greek and Hebrew terms, but the lengthy quotations from Dutch, German, and Latin writings).

Not everyone will agree that it was necessary to make *Reformed Dogmatics* more readable. Nonetheless, the majority of readers will find some of the changes most welcome, especially the excellent translations of the quotations of the Dutch, Greek, and Latin, to say nothing of the Hebrew and Greek terms.

The second volume contains thoroughly reworked and expanded indexes. The index of subjects is a fine improvement over the index of the previous edition. It is extensive (57 pages) and useful, containing references to doctrines, words, and people. The index of Scripture has been expanded and corrected. A new index, of creeds, adds to the value of the work. It lists references to at least 21 creeds from various traditions.

Herman Hoeksema's *Reformed Dogmatics* is a solid work of theology. This theologian's strengths are evident especially in three ar-

eas. First, Herman Hoeksema is exegetical in his development of the doctrine. In this work, Hoeksema is at pains to demonstrate that the doctrine is squarely based on exegesis of Scripture. Secondly, Hoeksema is faithful to the Reformed confessions. Consciously and deliberately he takes his stance within the bounds of the Reformed confessions with which he agrees, and seeks to lift these Reformed doctrines to a higher state of development and clarity. Thirdly, Herman Hoeksema is nothing if not clear. He has a gift for making plain for the reader the difficult doctrines. These three qualities make *Reformed Dogmatics* a tremendously valuable work both for theologians and for all Reformed believers.

The republication of Hoeksema's *Reformed Dogmatics* is long overdue. It is good that this significant work is once again readily available. 

News From Our Churches

Mr. Benjamin Wigger

Minister Activities

Rev. R. Miersma accepted the call he received from the vacant Loveland, CO PRC. By accepting that call he also declined the call extended to him from the Edgerton, MN PRC to serve as their next pastor.

Rev. W. Bruinsma accepted the call extended to him from the Southwest PRC in Grandville, MI to serve as our denomination's Eastern Home Missionary. Consequently, his acceptance of that call also led him to decline the call extended to him to serve as the next pastor of the Faith PRC in Jenison, MI.

Rev. M. Dick, pastor of the Grace PRC in Standale, MI, re-

ceived the call to serve as the next pastor of the Covenant PRC in Wyckoff, NJ.

Evangelism Activities

We take note of three more lectures sponsored by our churches and missions to celebrate the Reformation.

November 3 the Evangelism Committee of the Hope PRC in Walker, MI sponsored a lecture entitled "The Reformation and Reforming in the Reformed Tradition." Prof. H. Hanko was this year's featured speaker.

First PRC in Edmonton, AB, Canada hosted a Reformation Lecture on October 31 at their church. Rev. M. VanderWal, pastor of the Hope PRC in Redlands, CA, who was in Edmonton for a classical appointment, was this year's speaker. Rev. VanderWal spoke on the theme, "Is Faith Enough? — Faith

Alone As a Reformed Doctrine."

The Covenant of Grace PR Fellowship in Spokane, WA, sponsored a commemoration of the Protestant Reformation on October 31. Rev. T. Miersma, missionary pastor in Spokane, spoke on "The Gospel of Christ Crucified: The Heart of the Reformation."

School Activities

Rev. G. Eriks, pastor of the Hudsonville, MI PRC, was the keynote speaker Friday evening, November 18, at the annual Heritage Fundraising Dinner for Heritage Christian High School in South Holland, IL. Rev. Eriks centered his remarks on the theme, "The Blueprint of Heritage Christian High School." Rev. Eriks tied his message in with the proposed and now approved building project of Heritage. The content of the speech was a reminder of why we

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

are convicted of Protestant Reformed Christian education.

The Board of the Midwest Society for PR Secondary Education hosted a Promotional Supper/Information Night on Monday, November 14. Plans called for a supper in a formal setting at the Hull, IA PRC. After dinner the Board gave an interesting presentation about its work. There was also a freewill offering taken in support of the high school movement.

The Ladies Aid of Covenant Christian School in Lynden, WA served as host for a Baked Potato Dinner on November 11 at their school. The evening included a delicious dinner, and was followed by games and fellowship.

Heritage Christian School in Hudsonville, MI held their annual All-School Program entitled, "The Banners of the Reformation," on November 17.

Hope PR Christian School's All-School Program was held the following evening, November 18, at the auditorium of Grandville High School in Grandville, MI. The theme this year was, "The Christian's Faith."

ters driven. The street instructions included in the rally were all number clues from the Bible, so that was one item that was required before a team could even start. The rally was followed by a delicious soup supper, with fellowship afterward. It was really and "Amazing" day!

The congregation in Edmonton is also busy making plans for the arrival of their new pastor, John Marcus, and his family. They give thanks to our God and Father that they can look forward to the arrival of the Marcus family. Current plans are that Mr. G. Barendregt and Mr. F. Tolsma, members at Edmonton, leave for Grand Rapids, MI on Friday, December 2 to assist the Marcus family with their move to Edmonton, arriving on December 7, with the ordination and installation of their pastor elect taking place on December 12, with Rev. R. Smit officiating, D.V.

The Choral Society of the Grace PRC in Standale, MI presented a short Christmas program after their service Sunday morning, Novem-

ber 27. Their congregation was encouraged to stay and together begin the Christmas season by lifting up voices in praise for Immanuel, God with us!

We pass along our congratulations to Rev. A. and Crysta Brummel on the occasion of the birth of a daughter, Alyce Kaye, born November 5. She is the Brummels' eighth child and their second girl.

The congregation of the Byron Center, MI PRC was invited to a farewell for Pastor-elect John Marcus and family on Sunday evening, November 27.

The Women's Choir and the Trinity Men Singers of the Trinity PRC in Hudsonville, MI presented a concert following their evening service Sunday, November 27. What a joy to usher in this Christmas season with the song and message of the angels.

The Annual Fall Outing of First PRC in Grand Rapids, MI was held November 18 and 19 at the Maranatha Conference Center on Lake Michigan in Muskegon, MI.



Congregation Activities

Our congregation at First PRC in Edmonton, AB, Canada held its annual Car Rally on November 11 and a great time was had by all. The rally this year took on an "Amazing Race" theme (complete with a detour), in which teams had to drive around west Edmonton gathering information and items, and doing tasks. Points were awarded for correct answers and items collected, as well as for the team having the shortest time and least kilome-

Announcements

2006 WINTER CONFERENCE

Justification: The Heart of the Gospel

A series of lectures defending the basic doctrine of the Holy Scriptures at First Protestant Reformed Church of Holland, Michigan

January 13 — **Justification by Faith Alone**
speaker: Rev. Ronald VanOverloop

January 20 — **Justification and Good Works**
speaker: Prof. David Engelsma

January 27 — **Justification and the Believer**
speaker: Rev. William Langerak

Sponsored by:

The Evangelism Committee
First Protestant Reformed Church of Holland, Michigan
3641 104th Avenue
Zeeland, Michigan 49464

All three speeches are on

Friday evenings at 7:30 P.M.

Tapes of the conference will be available upon request.

P.O. Box 603
Grandville, MI 49468-0603

THE STANDARD BEARER

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Michigan

WEDDING ANNIVERSARY

With thankfulness to our heavenly Father, we were privileged to celebrate on December 6 the 55th wedding anniversary of our dear parents, grandparents, and great-grandparents:

UILKE and JOANNE TOLSMA.

We are grateful to our God and Father for the years He has given them together and pray that the Lord may continue to bless them in His grace. We are very thankful for the godly covenant instruction, example, and love they have given to us over the years.

"The Lord is thy keeper: the Lord is thy shade upon thy right hand" (Psalm 121:5).

- * Art & Helen Tolsma
 - * Fred & Netty Tolsma
 - * Richard & Sharon Tolsma
 - * Brian & Carolyn Tolsma
 - * Irwin & Yvonne Tolsma
 - 35 Grandchildren
 - 7 Great-Grandchildren
 - 1 Grandchild in glory
- Edmonton, Alberta, Canada

NOTICE

The Board of the Reformed Heritage Christian School Association of Kalamazoo, Michigan, is inviting applications for a full-time 7th-8th grade teacher/administrator beginning in the fall of 2006. Successful applicants must be committed to the Reformed faith, biblical inerrancy, 6-day creation, male headship, the antithesis between Christianity and the world, and covenantal theology. Applicants should send a letter of application and résumé to:

Steve DeVries
School Board President
Reformed Heritage Christian School
700 N. Fletcher Ave.
Kalamazoo, MI 49006.
For more information, phone (269) 375-8455.

WEDDING ANNIVERSARY

With gratitude to God, we would like to announce that on December 12, 2005, our parents,

ED and MARY LOTTERMAN,

celebrated their 35th wedding anniversary. We are thankful for God's covenant keeping of them throughout these years, through the joys and trials. They have remained an example to us, and taught us to walk in the ways of the Lord. We wish them the Lord's continued blessing 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).

- * Larry and Amy Rypstra
Alaina, Jesse, Lydia, Corina, Jeremy
- * Cornelis and Rebecca Kleyn
Rachel, Abigail, Kelsie, Justin, Jared
- * Andy and Rebecca Lotterman
Jacob, Zachary, Nathan, Micah
- * Mike and Heidi Haveman
Ethan, Darcie
- * Herman and Lindy Hanco
- * Russ and Karisa Lotterman
Brady
- * Ryan and Katie Kooienga
- * Holly Lotterman
- * Emily Lotterman
- * Bethany Lotterman

Byron Center, Michigan

WEDDING ANNIVERSARY

With gratitude to God, on January 9, 2006, we celebrate 50 years of marriage of our parents and grandparents, **MR. and MRS. HENRY HOEKSTRA.**

We rejoice that our father and mother have been preserved and used by God to show us His mighty works and judgments. We pray that God will continue to bless them in the years He may give them. "For this God is our God for ever and ever: he will be our guide even unto death" (Psalm 48:14).

- * James and Gladys Koole
Stephanie, Sarah, Peter, Michael and Rachel Cnossen, Leah, Rebecca, David, Monica, Lydia, Tyler
- * Brian and Pauline Kroese
Brad and Cinda VanDerZwaag, Lora, Brandon, Kara, Ryan
- * Henry and Linda Kamps
Paula, Teresa, Roseann, Anna Mae, Rachel, James
- * Harlan and Lenora Hoekstra
Charles, Emma, Tess, Henry, Stella
- * Vernon and Kari Hoekstra
Andrew, Dylan, Tayler, Lanae, Karli
- * Mark and LaBeth Hoekstra
Samuel
- * Jeffrey and Mary Kalsbeek
Michael, David, Bethany, Elizabeth, Hannah, Sarah
- * Jeffrey and Rosalynn Andringa
Thomas, Marcus, Courtney, Zachary, Hilary, Jonathon, Daniel, Joseph, James, and one in glory
- * Barry and Patricia Pollema
Jesse, Jacob, Ashley, Jason

Hull, Iowa

Reformed Witness Hour

Topics for January

Date	Topic	Text
January 1	"Lights for Our Pathway in 2006"	Psalm 119:105
January 8	"Remember Our Persecuted Brethren"	Hebrews 13:3
January 15	"I Am Black, but Beautiful"	Song 1:5, 6
January 22	"Fearfully and Wonderfully Made"	Psalm 139:14
January 29	"Jesus Christ, the Apple Tree"	Song 2:3