

# THE *May 1, 2002* STANDARD BEARER

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# Nothing Desired Beside God

*Whom have I in heaven but Thee?  
And there is none upon earth that I  
desire beside Thee. My flesh and my  
heart faileth: but God is the strength  
of my heart, and my portion forever.*

Psalm 73: 25, 26

**T**he psalmist, a man by the name of Asaph, is very personal in this psalm. He opens his heart to us and lets us take a good look inside his soul. He allows us to see what it is that he most desires.

What is it that you most desire — more than anything else? To answer as Asaph answered, we may not simply say what we know we are supposed to say. We must take an honest look inside ourselves. What is it that you and I most desire?

It is God whom His people are to desire. We are to desire Him both for when we go to heaven and for now while we live on this earth.

And we are to desire Him more than anything else. We confess that we do not do that. In fact, most of the time we do not desire God. But we also confess that when we stop (or are made to stop) and think about it, then we find that by His grace there is within us a desire for God.

Let us pray that our desire for Him may grow, that it may be more today than yesterday, and more tomorrow than today.



Asaph speaks of his desire for God. But he shows us that he did not *always* desire God. He was busy desiring health and wealth. He was busy desiring the good things he did not have, but which the wicked had. But now Asaph desires God. His desire for God arose out of an experience. It was a most difficult experience for him.

Asaph, a believer in God, had been comparing the circumstances of his life with that of neighbors who were obviously unbelieving. First, the people he was watching were not a little wicked; they were extremely proud and arrogant (6a). They made no efforts politely to hide their sin. They spoke openly and plainly against God's people

(8). They were bold to use violence against those who professed God's name (6b). These wicked people even had the arrogance to speak against God, cursing and damning Him (9). Second, what made matters worse for Asaph was that these wicked seemed to be getting away with it. They had a life of ease, luxury, and prosperity. Their sins against believers and against God had no consequences. On the contrary, their life on earth seemed only to get better — they had great health (4) and they prospered, having more than their hearts could wish (7, 12). Third, what made matters still worse for Asaph was the fact that the circumstances of his life (as well as that of the others who believed in God) was just the opposite of that of the arrogant wicked. Asaph was striving to be righteous, but it seemed that his faith in God brought him nothing but trouble all day every day (5, 14). He saw the righteous as wet dishrags which were constantly being wrung out, their tears flowing from them (10). He felt that it was useless to be a believer in God (13). Fourth, the comparison brought him only pain (16), to the point of questioning God whether He knew

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what was happening on the earth (11). And Asaph was wondering if God even cared, if He cared about those who believed in Him. It did not seem so.

This experience drove Asaph to frustration, exasperation, and then to depression. He undoubtedly knew that he was sinning when he questioned God (2), but he was desperate for some explanation. He was ready to tell all his fellow-believers that it was foolish to believe in God (15).

Asaph's experience continued. He went to God (and His Word) and God showed him a couple of things which enabled Asaph to see everything in a completely different light. His eyes and his heart were opened. He saw two things. He saw the ultimate end for both the wicked and the righteous — where God would put both. And he saw that God did see and know what was happening, in fact, that God was directly involved. This changed Asaph's whole perspective.

First, Asaph was given to see the end (17) of the wicked. Though the wicked were blind to their end, they were going to hell. They were going to experience destruction, desolation, and eternal terrors (18, 19). Their brief life of ease would end in the eternal experience of being destroyed (with the destruction never ending). They were going to spend eternity knowing only horrible terrors. On the other hand, Asaph was made to see that the end of the righteous was glory (24). This glory is the glory of God. Believers in God will be given the wonderful privilege of sharing in God's glory. The radiation of God's infinite perfections will forever be shining on them and enveloping them. No more trouble, tears, sorrow, and death, but only ceaseless reason to praise God forever, from whom all blessings flow. Glory!

Second, and just as important, Asaph saw the way to these ends. He saw how foolish he was to think that God did not care about the troubles of the righteous. God

cared and cares with perfect love. Asaph's eyes were opened, and faith showed him the truth of Scripture that God never leaves nor forsakes His children. While believers may have times when they do not experience God's presence, He is continually with them. In fact, He is always holding their spiritual hand (23). As believers walk through this life, the heavenly Father is at their side, holding their hand, never letting them go (even though we may not think so at times). And nothing experienced by believers on earth is by chance or a mistake. Everything is according to God's counsel (24). His perfect plan is being implemented. Asaph had thought that something was wrong, that God did not know, that it was all a big mistake. Just the opposite was and is true. God knows exactly what is happening — He is doing it!

It is this experience which enables Asaph, with a renewed perspective of faith, to realize that he had the greatest and best when he had God. He may not have had prosperity and health. He may have had trouble and sorrow in this life. But because he had God (with the trouble and sorrow) he had everything he needed. Asaph discovered that there was nothing that could help or satisfy him but God. If he had everything this world could offer but did not have God, then he would be empty. When he saw that the wealth and health of the wicked ended in hell and all that can charm in this world is vanity (without God's love), then he realized he was foolish to envy the wicked. And then Asaph realized that there is much value in the suffering and sorrow that comes by the hand of a loving Father who will make it work together for spiritual and eternal good.

The object of Asaph's yearning

then became only God Himself. He realized that he had to look at God rather than at what God gives. It was when Asaph focused on the things God gives (rather than on God), that then he questioned God's love and wisdom. He and we must delight, not in God's gifts, but in the Giver of every good and perfect gift.

Have we learned that only God can satisfy? Often He sends afflictions to teach us that nothing can satisfy but God! Often difficult experiences in this life are hard but powerful teachers to lead us to love and to desire God more and more.

It is most interesting and striking to note that this passage is listed by the Reformed fathers of the Westminster Standards as the proof text for the latter portion of the first question and answer of the Shorter (and Larger) Catechism. "What is the chief end of man? To glorify and *enjoy* God forever." To desire God is to enjoy Him. And it is in the way of our striving to glorify God that we will enjoy and desire Him. We will enjoy and desire Him when we glorify Him!

*Often  
difficult experiences  
in this life  
are hard  
but powerful teachers  
to lead us  
to love and  
to desire  
God  
more and more.*



Asaph's desire and enjoyment of God is exclusive. His language is very plain. There is nothing in heaven and *nothing* on earth that He desires besides God! Not family. Not possessions. Not health. Not even heaven itself.

The meaning is that without God everything on earth and heaven is nothing to him. God is the beginning and the end of all his longings. Heaven and earth and all things in them are not the end nor the object of trust and love. He loves God and He trusts Him exclusively.

Asaph begins with heaven. "Whom have I in heaven but



Thee?" As you reflect on heaven, what is it that you are anticipating? What are you hoping for in heaven? Is it freedom from diseases? Or freedom from persecution? Or deliverance from troubles? Or to be without sin? Or is it to be given rest from all that makes life wearying? Or is it the possession of the peace, joy, and glory of heaven. Or is it to be able to see a loved one there? Let us praise the Lord that He will give us all this, but let us praise Him that these are not the main or primary things that make heaven to be so wonderful and desirable. The Bible constantly presents heaven as the place where God is, where His presence is experienced most highly. Paul said that for him to die is to be "with Christ." Jesus told the repentant malefactor that he would be "with me" that day. Scripture gives us very little description of heaven because God wants us to desire nothing there but Him. It is God's presence in heaven which gives to heaven its glory, and which makes heaven so joyous and peaceful. It is God Himself in the face of Jesus Christ which makes heaven to be heaven.

When we realize that there is nothing that we desire about heaven but God, then we can add, "and there is none upon earth that I desire beside Thee." The earth has much to offer us because it is so concrete and familiar to us. But Solomon discovered that while we can easily set our hearts on the things of this earth, nothing truly feeds man's soul. Family, friends, possessions, and prominence mean nothing without God's love. Without God's love they are all vanity. Asaph had previously wanted his satisfaction in these earthly things. He had thought that he would be happy if he could have what the wicked possessed. But now he sees these things as perishable and able to lead to destruction (when man sets his heart on them, he will perish with them). So Asaph learns that it is God alone who must be his all

in all. It is having God, being loved by Him, being held by His hand, that is everything to him. Paul said it this way, "For me to live is Christ." Then we with Paul can count all things but loss for the excellency of the knowledge of Christ Jesus as our Lord. O God, give us the grace to grow in our desire for Thee!




There are great implications which arise from our desiring and enjoying God.

The first is that we do not set our hearts on the things of the earth. In them we will find no lasting peace and fulfillment. Oh, they are able to provide us with some joy — that is why they are so deceptive. But it will always be only temporary, so we will move from one earthly thing to another.

Rather, let us see that God is the strength of our heart and our portion forever. He is the rock under our feet. He who changes never, provides stability in the midst of the storms of life and in the valley of tears. His hand holding our hand gives His strength to us. We stand in His strength! And He is our portion, that is, our supply, our satisfaction, the fullness of our joy. We can delight in Jehovah (Ps. 37:4) and rejoice in the Lord always (Phil. 4:4).

Therefore, "it is good for me to

draw near to God" (28). Literally Asaph says that, for him, nearness to God is good. His and our nearness to God stands over against being far from God. Asaph was aware that when he had problems earlier in the Psalm, it was because he had been drawn away from God. Sometimes afflictions and troubles show us that we can be a whole lot nearer to God. Asaph thought that his discontent and despair were because of his suffering. Now he sees that it was because he did not stay near to God. We draw near to God by looking to Him by faith, by keeping Him in our mind's eye. It means to live in the fear of God, conscious that He is near. Our nearness to God is possible because of His nearness to us. He already said that He holds us by our right hand. Like little toddlers we try to let go and slip away from Him. Instead let us get closer to Him. So, in love for Him, let us be near to Him.

Finally, with nearness to God comes trust in Him. We have confidence that He knows what He is doing. We may not be able to see it, but His Word assures us that He is working according to an all wise counsel. That is why "we know that all things work together for good to them that love God, to them who are the called according to His purpose." 

*O God, how good Thou art to all the pure of heart,  
Though life seems vain;  
Burdened with anxious care, I groped in dark despair,  
Till in Thy house of prayer all was made plain.*

*Ever, O Lord, with Thee, all shall be well with me,  
Held by Thy hand;  
And Thou wilt guide my feet by Thy own counsel sweet,  
Till I, for glory meet, in glory stand.*

*In earth or heaven above who is there that I love  
Compared with Thee?  
My heart may faint with fears, but God my strength appears,  
And will to endless years my portion be.*



## “He Shines in All That’s Fair” (and Curses All That’s Foul) (4)

**F**or Reformed and Presbyterian defenders of common grace, it has always been a huge embarrassment that the confessions do not teach common grace. The total absence from the Reformation creeds of a doctrine of common grace is especially a problem in view of the importance that these Reformed and Presbyterian theologians and churches attribute to common grace. With reference to the Old Testament temple, one Christian Reformed zealot called common grace one of the two pillars of the Reformed faith. Although contemporary defenders of common grace are not so picturesque in their praise of common grace, they too regard common grace as a prominent, even fundamental, doctrine of the Reformed, Christian faith.

Common grace largely accounts for the development of the human race and its culture. Common grace largely determines the relations of believers and unbelievers and of the church and the world. Common grace powers the Christian’s involvement in everyday, earthly life in society.

Such a gracious work of God in history, in the human race, and even in the lives of Christians is no inconsiderable matter.

Why are the Reformed and Presbyterian creeds perfectly silent about this important matter? Why do neither the “Three Forms of Unity” nor the Westminster Standards breathe a word about this pillar in the New Testament temple of God?

But it is not merely the case that the confessions are silent about a common grace of God. In certain of the doctrines that most dis-

tinguish the Reformed confessions, these confessions evidently reject and condemn the theory of common grace. Common grace teaches the partial depravity of the unregenerated; the confessions teach the total depravity of the unregenerated (Heid. Cat., Q. and A. 8). Common grace teaches that some works of the unregenerate are good; the confessions teach that all the works of the unregenerate are sinful (West. Conf., 16.7). Common grace teaches that God has a favor toward all men without exception; the confessions teach that “the wrath of God abideth upon those who believe not this gospel” (Canons, I/4). The very notion that grace is *common* contradicts the teaching that is central in the confessions: the particularity of grace (Canons, I; West. Conf., 3).

### The PRC Outside the Camp

It is exceedingly strange, therefore, that Reformed and Presbyterian churches and theologians put the Protestant Reformed Churches (PRC) outside the camp because of these Churches’ rejection of common grace. The Christian Reformed Church did this in actual fact by ecclesiastical discipline in 1924/1925. The Reformed and Presbyterian community is still doing this in effect today. This came home to me again as recently as March of this year. Reviewing a book by a Protestant Reformed author (never mind that it was mine), the minister of a reputedly conservative Presbyterian church in Scotland told his readers, “I do not feel that this book could be recommended.” Why not? “This book

is written by a minister of the Protestant Reformed Churches in America.... Two of the distinctives of this church are a denial of Common Grace [note the capital letters! The reviewer regards common grace with the reverence that I have for the Trinity of God – worthy of capitalization – DJE] and a high view of baptism [the sacrament of Baptism, though instituted by the Lord and taught openly and at length in the creeds is not, like ‘Common Grace,’ deserving of capitalization – DJE].”

One cannot imagine that a “high view of baptism” disqualifies a book from being recommended to Presbyterians in Scotland by a Presbyterian magazine. But the book’s rejection of “Common Grace” – with capital letters – is the reason. Regardless that the creeds, which after all determine what is Reformed and Presbyterian, say nary a word on behalf of common grace, much less “Common Grace,” denial of common grace puts the PRC, their writers, and their works beyond the pale.

This is puzzling.

To his credit, Dr. Richard J. Mouw calls into question this knee-jerk rejection of the PRC by the defenders of common grace: “The passion with which many of the defenders of common grace have rejected the views of Hoeksema and other critics of their position is on the face of it somewhat puzzling” (*He Shines in All That’s Fair*, Eerdmans, 2001, p. 20). Mouw endorses Reformed theologian Henry Van Til’s hesitancy to call common grace, which Van Til embraced and promoted in a big book, *grace*:

Henry Van Til raises the important question of whether common grace is indeed “grace” in any straightforward sense of the word. He decides that it is best “to place the term ‘common grace’ in quotation marks” [rather than to capitalize it — DJE], because it seems a little odd to equate what he considers to be the very real “beneficent goodness of God to the non-elect sinners” with the redemptive “blessings which God bestows upon elect sinners in and through Jesus Christ, the Mediator.” *Van Til is right to raise this caution (He Shines, p. 48; emphasis added).*

### Common Grace in the Canons

Nevertheless, Dr. Mouw thinks to find the teaching of common grace in two places in the Reformed confessions. These articles of the creeds are not the real reason for his belief of common grace, as I showed in an earlier editorial. But we who, like Dr. Mouw, take the confessions seriously as the authoritative definition of Reformed Christianity must consider his appeal to the confessions. His first reference is to the phrase “saving good,” in Article 3 of the third and fourth heads of the Canons of Dordt:

Therefore all men are conceived in sin, and are by nature children of wrath, incapable of any saving good, prone to evil, dead in sin, and in bondage thereto; and, without the regenerating grace of the Holy Spirit, they are neither able nor willing to return to God, to reform the depravity of their nature, nor to dispose themselves to reformation (Canons, III, IV/3, in P. Schaff, *Creeds of Christendom*, vol. 3, Baker, repr. 1966, p. 588).

Mouw supposes that the mention of “saving good” implies a non-saving good, which the natural man is able to perform by virtue of a common grace of God. Writes Mouw concerning his understanding of the phrase, “saving good,” in the Canons:

While the Heidelberg Catechism makes the unqualified judgment

that apart from the regenerating grace of God we are incapable of “any good,” the Canons of Dort introduce an appropriate nuance, telling us that we are all “by nature children of wrath, incapable of any saving good” — thus leaving open the possibility of deeds that are morally laudable without meriting salvation (*He Shines*, p. 38).

From the Canons’ denial that the unregenerated man can do *saving* good, Mouw infers that the Canons allow for an ability of the unregenerated man to do *non-saving* good. Even if this inference is sound, it proves absolutely nothing for a common grace of God. Neither this article of the Canons nor any other attributes this supposed ability of the natural man to do non-saving good to any grace of God in him. If the Canons do indeed imply that the natural man is still capable of doing non-saving good, the explanation must be simply that fallen man remains human, retaining “glimmerings of natural light,” as the next article will teach, by virtue of creation and providence. To introduce grace as the explanation is completely unwarranted both as regards the article itself and as regards the whole of the Canons. Creation and providence are one thing; grace is quite another.

But Dr. Mouw’s inference is mistaken. If the phrase in question were all that the Canons said about the ability for good of the unregenerated man, the inference might be allowed. But the Canons say more than only the phrase “incapable of any saving good.” And what they say more is an explicit denial of Dr. Mouw’s inference. His inference is that all men by nature are capable of performing deeds that, although not the fruit of the saving work of the Spirit of Christ and done outside the sphere of salvation, are yet good. These would be the works of the unbeliever that show regard for virtue, good order in society, and maintaining an orderly external deportment.

Exactly about these works of the

unregenerated, the immediately following article of the Canons states:

But so far is this light of nature from being sufficient to bring him [unregenerated man] to a saving knowledge of God, and to true conversion, that he is incapable of using it aright even in things natural and civil. Nay farther, this light, such as it is, man in various ways renders wholly polluted, and holds it [back] in unrighteousness; by doing which he becomes inexcusable before God (Canons, III, IV/4, in Schaff, *Creeds*, p. 588).

Those deeds of the natural man that impress the defenders of common grace—deeds that show regard for virtue, deeds that bring about good order in society, deeds of orderly external deportment — are not “non-saving good.” Even the life and deeds of the unregenerated man in the sphere of the “natural and civil,” supposedly the terrain of a common grace goodness, are unrighteous and “wholly polluted.” These deeds are not pleasing to God. They do not give evidence of a favor of God upon the natural man. Rather, “by doing which he becomes inexcusable before God.”

The reason why the natural man is incapable of “non-saving good,” as he is incapable of saving good, Article 3 of the Canons gives in the words that follow the phrase, “incapable of saving good”: “prone to evil, dead in sin, and in bondage thereto.” One who is dead in sin is incapable of any good, “non-saving” as well as saving. One who is a slave to sin — a *slave* — can do nothing, absolutely nothing, except sin.

### Common Grace in the Westminster Confession

The second reference by Dr. Mouw to the Reformed confessions on behalf of common grace is even less convincing than the appeal to the Canons. Dr. Mouw appeals to a passage in the Westminster Confession of Faith that speaks of the works done by unregenerate men:

Works done by unregenerate men, although for the matter of them they may be things which God commands, and of good use both to themselves and others; yet because they proceed not from a heart purified by faith, nor are done in a right manner, according to the Word, nor to a right end, the glory of God; they are therefore sinful, and can not please God, or make a man meet to receive grace from God. And yet their neglect of them is more sinful and displeasing unto God (West. Conf. of Faith, 16.7, in Schaff, *Creeds*, pp. 635, 636).

Mouw thinks that this implies that some works of the unregenerated are pleasing to God and thus good.

In spite of the decidedly negative tone of these comments, the Westminster divines are actually making room for a measure of divine approval regarding deeds performed by the unregenerate that nonetheless conform to God's revealed standards. Since the "neglect of [such deeds] is *more* sinful and displeasing to God," such good works at least are *less displeasing* to God. The implication here is that there is a category of moral acts performed by the unregenerate that are *more pleasing* to God than their non-performance would be (*He Shines*, p. 39; emphasis is Mouw's).

No such implication exists. No such implication is possible. The express testimony of the article rules out the implication that Dr. Mouw likes to see in the article. The article rules out this implication, decisively. Regarding those very works of the unregenerate that the defenders of common grace view as proof of common grace — works that as to their "matter" are commanded by God, works that are of "good use" to mankind — Westminster says that they are "sinful, and cannot please God." When Westminster goes on to say that the neglect of these works by the unregenerated is "more sinful and displeasing unto

God," it is by no means implying that the performance of these works by the unregenerated is a good work. Westminster has just said that the doing of these deeds is sinful and displeasing to God. But the failure to do them would be even worse sin on the part of the unregenerated. Performing these deeds displeases God; not performing these deeds displeases Him even more. The comparison in the creed is between sinful and more sinful, not between good and bad. It is between displeasing God and displeasing God even more, not between pleasing Him and displeasing Him. There are degrees of wickedness.

When an unregenerated husband lives faithfully with his wife and cares devotedly for his children, he sins. Westminster explains why: "because [his faithfulness and care] proceed not from a heart purified by faith, nor are done in a right manner, according to the Word, nor to a right end, the glory of God." If he commits adultery and abandons his children, he sins even more greatly.

### Common Grace in Arminian Theology

The confessions do not teach common grace. They do, however, mention that theory. It does not escape our attention that in their discussion of common grace defenders of that theory never refer to the one article in the confessions that mentions common grace by name. This is Article 5 in the "Rejection of Errors" section appended to Heads III and IV of the Canons of Dordt:

The true doctrine having been explained, the Synod rejects the errors of those who teach that the corrupt and natural man can so well use the common grace (by which they understand the light of nature), or the gifts still left him after the fall, that he can gradually gain by their good use a greater, namely, the evangelical or saving grace and salvation itself. And that in this way God on His


part shows Himself ready to reveal Christ unto all men, since He applies to all sufficiently and efficiently the means necessary to conversion (Canons, III, IV, Rejection of Errors/5, in "The Three Forms of Unity," Mission Committee of the PRC, repr. 1999, p. 64; Schaff does not include an English translation of the "Rejection of Errors" sections of the Canons).

The Arminians taught common grace. It is true that their purpose with it was not merely a restraint of sin in the unregenerated in order to produce a good culture. The Arminians were playing for higher stakes: man's achieving his own salvation by the use of his common grace ability for good. Nevertheless, common grace in the Arminian scheme was just what it is in the scheme of the Reformed defenders of common grace today: a weakening of total depravity; the ascription of real ability for good to the natural man; and the affirmation of a favor of God to all men without exception — a favor that then inevitably expresses itself in this, that "God on His part shows Himself ready to reveal Christ unto all men!"

The one time that the creed mentions common grace, it rejects it as an error opposed to the truth of the gospel.

There is no basis for common grace in the Reformed creeds. On the contrary, the Reformed creeds condemn the theory both by name and in all its main elements.

The Reformed and Presbyterian churches worldwide may take counsel together to banish the PRC from the camp of the Reformed for their rejection of common grace. The truth is that insofar as they embrace common grace, those churches place themselves outside the sphere of the Reformed faith. It is the PRC and other churches repudiating common grace that are Reformed on this issue, even though they be outside the camp.

— DJE 



## The Glory of a Covenant Home (2)

*... and the glory of children are their fathers.*

Proverbs 17:6b

**W**e have already considered in our last article the first part of this verse, which speaks of children's children being the crown of old men. When the family unit is preserved from one generation to the next, then fathers and mothers are able to see their children's children. Their grandchildren are about a father's feet as jewels which bedeck his royal crown. Families with legitimate children and legitimate grandchildren are of great joy and satisfaction to a man and his wife. Such children beautify the home!

But then, there is the other side of the picture — a side that is often overlooked. So much emphasis can be placed on the satisfaction that children bring to a home and family that often times forgotten is the truth that the "glory of children are their fathers." Fathers and mothers bring joy and gladness to a home too. The word for "glory" here in this verse speaks of shining forth in royal splendor. Children view their father and mother as royalty. These two people are the hub of their lives. God has placed them there to rule over them. Children see them as wielding that authority. And though because of sin they can at times chafe under the rule of father and mother in the home, nev-

ertheless, they are proud of their parents. They see in them what other people do not see. It does not matter to them if father is poor and has little to give them in the way of this life's possessions. It does not matter if father is not very intelligent. They admire him and stand before him in awe. There is very little that dad can do wrong. He is the glory of his children!

One of my earliest childhood memories is walking home from school and seeing my father standing on the scaffolding of a house laying brick. Every day I could not wait to get out of school so I could walk past the house where my father was working just so I could shout, "Hi ya, Pa!" He was no regal figure standing up there in his work clothes, but he sure was royalty to me. He was the greatest! One of my earliest childhood memories of my mother was when I went through a time that I could not fall asleep at night. She would come and sit for a time on the edge of my bed and run her fingers through my hair until I fell asleep. She may not have been a queen sitting on a high throne, but to me there could be no one finer in splendor. My father protected me. He was my strength. My mother comforted me with soft words and gentleness. Mothers and fathers are the pride of their children. That is my dad! That is my mom! Now that I am older there is only one regret: I did not tell them enough how much I loved them. There is no one quite so noble as father and mother.

Why is it that divorce so utterly ruins a child? When, after

years of being there with his children, father simply walks away from his family to pursue his own selfish desires, it utterly devastates a child. When mother neglects her children to look for her pleasure outside of the home, it hurts her children. Children's pride in and love for mother and father are shattered! A parent is the one sure thing in the life of children. Then suddenly the children are deserted by the one they thought to be the greatest person in the world. Their life is torn apart. The foundations of their lives are shaken. All this is true because fathers are the glory of their children.

That, then, is the other side of the picture.

But there is an underlying assumption that Solomon makes in this wise instruction concerning families. Solomon writes in verse 1 of this chapter, "Better is a dry morsel, and quietness therewith, than an house full of sacrifices with strife." It is better to sit somewhere all alone and eat a dried-up crust, than to sit in a house full of riches and have nothing but quarreling and strife. The Scriptures are filled with examples of parents who filled their homes and the hearts of their children with bitterness. I wonder what Jonathan thought of his father, Saul, when Saul spent his life pursuing after Jonathan's godly friend David? I wonder what the God-fearing Hezekiah thought of his father Ahaz, who sacrificed to idols and ripped apart the temple of God in Jerusalem? Were these fathers truly the glory of their children? The underlying assumption in this passage is this



first of all: *godly* and *pious* parents are the glory of their children. Solomon addresses the members of a covenant home in this verse. He is speaking here about mothers and fathers in whom God has worked by His grace and Spirit. These parents are a glory to their children. Why? Because God has beautified them with salvation! God has made such parents to see their sin and has therefore led them to the cross of Jesus Christ to find forgiveness. Father and mother have been made righteous in the blood of Christ, whom they believe was slain for them. They have been cleansed in the blood of the Lamb, so that they in their lives and in their families seek to bring glory to God. They fear God, they love God, they seek God because the life of our Lord Jesus Christ dwells in them.

Because of this work of salvation in their hearts, they have fellowship with the ever blessed God. They are His covenant friends, and that friendship becomes evident in their homes. They live in the midst of their families in communion with God. They view the children God has given them as a covenant blessing. It is but natural therefore that these children come to share in the same covenant fellowship with God. As a result, there is genuine joy and happiness in the home. The home becomes a place of peace, safety, and security. Outside of the home there may be all kinds of turmoil and strife, but in the home I can be with father and mother who love me. There all the troubles of life can pass me by.

Covenant parents are the glory of their children.

Covenant parents do not bring shame and bitterness upon their children. On the contrary, those children tossed to and fro between father and mother, bandied about like a tennis ball, end up hurting and ashamed. These often times grow up as bitter young people. Our society and much of the church world are filled with these bitter

children. These parents are not the glory of their children!

But again, that is only half the picture. There is also the assumption made by Solomon in this verse that *godly* children and *godly* grandchildren are the crown of old men. When children are rebellious, selfish, and vain, these are not a crown, but they bring shame on father and mother and grandfather and grandmother. Solomon reminds children of this constantly in Proverbs. Just read further in Proverbs 17. In verse 21 we read, "He that begetteth a fool does it to his sorrow, and the father of a fool hath no joy." Or again, we read in verse 25, "A foolish son is a grief to his father, and bitterness to her that bare him." Such foolish, ungodly children are not a crown to parents, and especially not to grandparents. When children walk in disobedience and rebellion they not only dishonor and grieve father and mother but their grandparents too. This is true because children are not merely the concern of godly parents but of godly grandparents as well.


Covenant children are a crown to old men!

God has worked by His Spirit and grace in the hearts of covenant children so that they too have come to know their sin and their need for the cross of Christ. They, knowing the joy and peace their parents have found at the cross, desire to share in that. Fellowship with God, therefore, is their desire too. There is no greater joy to parents and grandparents than to see their children and children's children stand with them in church singing praises to God. There is no greater joy than to see a son or daughter stand up in church and confess his or her faith. Or, to use the words of the apostle John in III John 4, "I have no greater joy than to hear that my children walk in truth."

When I am old — if the Lord chooses to spare me that long — I want to see my children and my children's children sitting around

me. I want all of us together (at the suggestion of my grandchildren) to open up the Psalter and sing the roof off my house! I want to see joyful children, sons and daughters, grandsons and granddaughters, all of whom see the value of a good, solid Christian home. I want to see them loving God, loving the truth, and loving the church! Is not that the crown of old men: children who love the Lord? If only we could be made to see the glory, the splendor, of that kind of home: homes where Christ dwells! That is the home and family of which this Word of God speaks to you and me. What saint does not desire that more than anything else?

But all of this means that there is work to do. Godly homes and families do not simply fall from the sky. I know that salvation is a gift of God. But parents must realize that our God is a God of means. God has chosen to work in the hearts of children by means of the godly labors of father and mother. And those labors are not easy! To establish the family of which this verse speaks takes daily labor — a labor that does not cease. We can become all sentimental over the picture that this passage draws for us, but there is much heartache and much hard labor that goes into establishing this godly home of which Solomon speaks. That labor is this: train up children of the covenant in the fear of the Lord! That is a difficult, arduous task which God places in the hands of fathers and mothers. It begins in the morning and goes on into the night, only to be taken up again in the morning.

Yet, it is this work that bears the richest of dividends in our lives. When we become grandfathers and grandmothers then these children and our grandchildren will indeed be our crown! Then we will be able to enjoy the fruit of our labors. May God give grace to covenant parents to train up their children! 



# The Preaching of the Gospel: A Serious Call or a Well-meant Offer

## Part I: A Summary and Brief Refutation of the Well-Meant Offer

**M**ost churches today that claim to be either Reformed or Presbyterian maintain that the preaching of the gospel is a well-meant offer of God to each person who hears it. We deny this, and maintain over against it that the preached Word is a serious call of God to all who hear it, but a gracious and efficacious call only to God's chosen people.

But what exactly is meant by a serious call to all and a gracious and efficacious call only to the elect? And how does this idea of the call of God differ from that which is taught by those who hold to the well-meant offer? I will endeavor to answer these questions in a few articles, contrasting the two positions, that the difference between them may be clearly seen. I will begin by breaking down the "well-meant offer of the gospel" into five basic points. Then I will show how these points are contrary both to Scripture and to the Reformed creeds.

### The Well-Meant Offer

The false teaching known as the well-meant offer can be summarized as follows:

**1. God is graciously inclined toward each one that hears the preaching.**

This is another way of saying that God desires to save everyone who hears the preaching of the gospel.

**2. God expresses this gracious desire in the preaching, and does so by offering salvation to each one that hears it.**

In other words, God makes known to all who hear the preaching of the gospel that He wants to save them, and that He is trying to save them. Here we see why the error is known as the well-meant offer. It is the teaching that God *offers* His grace to each one that hears the preaching, and that He *means well* when He does this, for He sincerely seeks the salvation and well-being of each one that hears this offer.

**3. God also gives all those who hear the preached gospel sufficient grace to accept His gracious offer.**

This means that God tries to save all who hear the preaching, and does so by doing the following:

**First:** By offering His grace to all who hear it, making known to them that He loves them and desires each one of them to accept His offer.

**Secondly:** By giving each one of them the sufficient grace they

need to accept the offer and be saved.

**4. This gracious offer of God is resistible grace.**

Man, it is said, can and often does resist this grace of God, so that God often fails to accomplish that which He desires.

**5. Accepting the gracious offer and believing in Christ is the condition that man must fulfill to be saved.**

God has done His part. But for a man to be saved he must not resist God's grace, but rather accept His offer. God will help him to fulfill this condition (as was set forth in number three above), but some of the work is left for the man himself to contribute.

### Brief Refutation of These Five Statements

Because many of those who hold to this false teaching claim that they are Reformed, it will be important to refute the above five statements not only from Scripture, but also from the Reformed creeds. If we and our children are going to grow stronger in the faith, it is very important that we learn to refute errors not only by expounding passages of Scripture, but also by referring to articles in our confessions.

#### 1. Regarding God's desire

The Reformed creeds clearly maintain that God is not graciously



inclined toward everyone who hears the preaching. Article 6 of the First Head of the Canons of Dordt states what those who are truly Reformed confess, namely:

That some receive the gift of faith from God and others do not receive it proceeds from God's eternal decree.... According to which decree He graciously softens the hearts of the elect, however obstinate, and inclines them to believe, while He leaves the non-elect in His just judgment to their own wickedness and obduracy.

Thus the Reformed position is that God does not desire the salvation of everyone who hears the preaching. A person can be saved only by God's act of giving to that person faith. But it pleases God not to give faith to many who hear the preaching of the gospel. Rather, God wills to glorify His name by executing His just judgment against those whom He has decreed to leave in their sins.

This is clearly the position of Scripture. I Peter 2:8 says that those who reject the Word and experience that Word to be a stone of stumbling do so by God's appointment.

Furthermore, Ephesians 1:11, which was quoted by our fathers in the article from the Canons that was just quoted, states that God "worketh all things after the counsel of His will." If God desires to save each person who hears the preaching, and yet fails to do this, then He does not work all things after the counsel of His will. Rather, this would mean that His will is normally frustrated.

## **2. Regarding an offer of salvation**

If God does not desire to save each one who hears the preaching, then He obviously does not express a gracious desire to the reprobate who hear it. But there is something else wrong with this second statement. According to this view, God in the preaching merely offers to

give people a gift, but does not actually give this gift to any of them.

This wrong view of what is meant by the gift of God can be seen clearly when we consider what is meant by God's act of giving some people faith. If you were trying to explain to an Arminian how we differ from Arminians on the doctrine of salvation by grace alone, and if you said that they teach that faith is man's work and we teach that faith is a gift of God, the Arminian would likely respond that he, too, maintains that faith is a gift of God. He may even quote Philippians 1:29 and other passages that clearly state this. But the Arminian has an unbiblical view of what it means for God to give someone a gift. He thinks of God as one who holds out a gift, pleading with people to accept it, whereas Scripture teaches that when God gives someone a gracious gift, He actually bestows that gift upon the person, causing him to come to life and believe.

We confess this in the Canons of Dordt:

And this is the regeneration so highly celebrated in Scripture and denominated a new creation: a resurrection from the dead, a making alive, which God works in us without our aid. But this is in no wise effected merely by the external preaching of the gospel, by moral suasion, or such a mode of operation that after God has performed His part it still remains in the power of man to be regenerated or not, to be converted or to continue unconverted; but it is evidently a supernatural work, most powerful, ... so that all in whose heart God works in this marvelous manner are certainly, infallibly, and effectually regenerated, and do actually believe ... (III & IV.12).

God does not merely offer grace to anyone. He gives grace, and does so only to the elect.

## **3. Regarding the giving of sufficient grace to accept an offer**

Many of those who hold to the

well-meant offer teach that God not only offers the gift of salvation to everyone who hears the preaching, but also helps each one by giving him sufficient grace to accept that which is offered. This means that God, through the preaching, improves each of those who hears the preaching. He takes those who are not able to accept the offer, and makes them able to accept the offer, but falls short of actually causing them to accept the offer.

This third statement involves a denial of total depravity. A totally depraved person is dead in sin. This means that there is absolutely nothing good in him, and that therefore he is completely unable to do anything that is the least bit good. Such a person cannot be improved. Only something that is at least somewhat good can be improved. That which is dead must be destroyed; it cannot be improved.

But, someone may say, we believers have sinful natures and yet can be improved. This is true, but it is not our sinful nature that is improved. After God regenerates us, our sinful nature is still totally depraved. Nor is it improved by the preaching of the gospel. It is only in the new man that we grow more to reflect the glory of God. As believers we long not for the improvement of our sinful nature, but for the complete destruction of our sinful nature (Rom. 6:6).

By teaching that an unregenerate person can be improved by the preaching of the gospel, those who hold to the well-meant offer really deny the fundamental truth of total depravity. They teach that there is some good, some life, in the natural man, and that God, through the preaching, helps him to make use of this good.

The Scriptures, however, teach that the preaching does the opposite of graciously helping the unregenerate. They are referred to in II Corinthians 2:15, 16 as "those who are perishing" while they are hearing the preaching. The



preached Word to them thrusts them deeper into corruption, just as the light of the sun causes an unburied corpse more to corrupt and putrefy.

#### 4. Regarding the resistible nature of this grace


*Irresistible grace* is the fourth of what are referred to as the five points of Calvinism. Those who hold to the well-meant offer invent a new kind of grace that is resistible, and is often resisted. But, as

has already been pointed out under number one above, this would mean that God does not always accomplish His will. Those who hold to this false teaching blatantly deny what is emphatically set forth in Isaiah 46:9b, 10:

For I am God, and there is none else; I am God, and there is none like me, Declaring the end from the beginning, and from ancient times the things that are not yet done, saying, My counsel shall stand, and I will do all my pleasure.

Note that this passage states not merely that God *can perform* everything He pleases, but that He *does perform* everything He pleases.

#### 5. Regarding the teaching that faith is a condition

This last statement is explicitly condemned in our creeds, such as in Article 14 of the Third and Fourth Heads of the Canons of Dordt. But this subject, Lord willing, will be taken up in another article. 

## All Around Us

Rev. Kenneth Koole

### The Beast Coming into Focus

What is taking place in the Western world in growing, open opposition towards Christianity is alarming, to say the least. It is not just the Far Eastern nations, influenced by their heathen backgrounds, that are expressing themselves in militant fashion against Christianity, it is now also nations of historical Christian background that are doing so more and more in openly hostile, aggressive fashion. An article by the Rev. Austin Miles (entitled *AG [Assemblies of God — KK] Missionaries Expelled from Belgium* and carried by ASSIST News Service, Feb. 21) makes plain just how quickly things are developing in apostate Europe. Read the following and tell me that words of the book of the Revelation do not simply jump out at one. The Beast out of the Sea with the seven heads and ten horns (Rev. 13, 17) begins to take shape before our wondering eyes.

The formal crackdown on Christian activity in Europe has officially begun. When the Belgium government deported several As-

semblies of God missionaries last week (Feb. 11) based on their having short-term visas and "few permanent ties to the country," it was obvious to more than a few observers that this was just the beginning.

Following that initial governmental action, a broader sweep has taken place, with fully appointed Assemblies of God missionaries who have been there for years and planned to be there for years to come being told to pack up and leave the country.

According to an e-mail report from Belgium AG Missionaries Alan and Tricia Baker, the Christian Center, which is the AG's International Church in Brussels — the one where a police sweep occurred last week — has had to immediately close its Christian School for at least the remainder of this school year.

There appears to be little chance of it ever reopening. Their Bible School, which has also been in Belgium for forty plus years, is also in a grave situation. Its president, Roland Dudley, has been given 8 days to permanently leave the country.

The legal status of all professors and staff is in serious question. Missionaries working with ministries such as International Media Ministries, International Correspondence Institute, Students for Christ, and others are all facing great uncertainty at best and possible deportation at worst.

For the moment it appears that only those missionaries working in pastoral ministry are not being challenged.

Missionaries are being challenged, however, on their right to stay, as the government has, without any warning of any kind, decided to clean the country of those who have been suddenly deemed "undesirables."

That this is true is clear from the press and media reports that continue to come out. On Feb. 14, one of Belgium's largest TV channels showed a special 30-minute program on the AG Missionaries. Psychologists were used to portray them as "a danger to the population, and are cultic in their doctrine and practice."

Citizens of Belgium readily believe their government and media, therefore the attacks on the missionaries are very effective. And what is curious about the cult label put on the Assemblies of God by them, the Belgium government itself ruled several years ago that the AG church is not a cult.

It is conceivable that Belgium will expel most if not all missionaries from its shores. And events are showing that this will become European policy as well, as the EC becomes more and more unified and its laws become more and more standardized across national borders.

The gradual shutting down of religious organizations had already begun in France and Ger-

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many. This of course marked the beginning of a strictly controlled, government-approved-only religious organization. Especially targeted were evangelical churches.

To add fuel to the fire, the Orthodox Church in other countries is playing a significant role in this religious cleansing operation, working with the various governments to declare them the only legally sanctioned church, and all the rest cultic.

Of special concern is the speculation of several groups that the seat of the eventual One World Government will be Belgium, where the expulsion of Christianity is now out in the open, cluing (sic) other countries to follow suit.

The Belgium Regional Director of the Assemblies of God, Greg Mundis, has flown to Brussels to attempt to deal with the situation. A meeting of all the missionaries was scheduled Sunday afternoon with him.

A number of things are worth noting. First, notice that the opposition of the state is aimed at missionaries. And there is reason to believe not just AG missionaries, but all missionaries. An official, state church that does nothing in the area of evangelism is viewed as no threat. It is those who seek to evangelize and to proselytize who are labeled as "dangerous" and "cultic."

Second, reference is made to the Orthodox Church (old, main-line denominations, filled with ritual, empty of truth) which, far from protesting this fist against religious liberty, apparently approve this cleansing of the land of other forms of Christianity, evidently so that they alone can stand as the official, state-approved representative of "Christianity." They will accept the state's sanctions and speak on the state's behalf. Who can read this without thinking of Revelation 13 and the second beast, the false church, and whose kingdom it will serve?

Third, the fear is very real that as the EC (European Common-

wealth) becomes a reality, what is happening in Belgium will become policy across the whole of Europe. Belgium is but taking the openly aggressive lead. Others simply wait to see if Belgium can get by with this heavy-handed (echoes of Nazi Germany) treatment of evangelical Christianity without too much of an international outcry. The lack of it will embolden others in Europe to do the same.

As a related article from the "pen" of Mike Creswell in the Baptist Press News Service makes clear, this above-mentioned fear is not without substance and basis. Mr. Creswell begins his article "Leaders Assess Impact of New French Religion Law" by indicating that Baptist and evangelical leaders are trying to convince themselves that "... a controversial new law on religion in France may not be the threat to religious liberty some critics feared." How shortsighted and filled with wishful thinking they are becomes evident from reading further on in the article.

The new law adopted last year by the French Senate in May and unanimously approved in June by France's National Assembly will attempt to restrict activities of religious cults deemed dangerous. The law specifies five-year jail terms and \$75,000 fines for those who use "manipulation" to encourage conversions (sic!—KK).

Groups are banned from activities aimed at creating or exploiting psychological dependence. Also outlawed is putting heavy and repeated pressure on a person, or using techniques likely to alter his judgment, so as to induce him to behave in a way prejudicial to his interests.

Under the lengthy 24-article law, French judges can dissolve a religious group whose members are convicted of a criminal offense. Suspect groups are forbidden to advertise and may not seek to enlist new members near schools, hospitals or retirement homes.

Supposedly this prohibition is aimed only at what are called "cult groups" (some 172 listed, including Mormons, Jehovah Witnesses, and Church of Scientology). It does not specifically list any main-line evangelical denominations. Such would like to conclude they must be safe. But who can miss the broad, wide-ranging language, such as "manipulation" that encourages conversion, and "exploiting psychological dependence," and "putting pressure on a person" to alter his way of thinking. The law obviously gives a judge great latitude and discretionary power in determining what he considers to be "undue psychological pressure" placed upon a person. Anyone who does not see how easily this can be turned against Christian mission work has his head in the clouds. Yet, astonishingly enough, such churchmen can be found.

Many people in the United States and France criticized the law for its potentially stifling effect on religion, especially for evangelicals committed to sharing their Christian faith with others.

But leaders of the French Protestant Federation and the French Baptist Evangelical Federation have said they do not yet fear the law will interfere with the church life or evangelism. They said they will have to wait until French courts begin applying the new law in actual cases to see what effects it will have.

"So far, nothing has changed for us. There are no differences for our churches," said Christian Seytre, general secretary of the Protestant Federation of France. "We sense there is a danger but we cannot say there is no religious liberty in France."

"Basically, I would say things are good and we are being vigilant," Seytre added. "If we feel the basic rights of human beings are not being respected, we will react very strongly. I'm sure our president would contact the government."

French Baptists share that position, said Etienne Lhermenault,




general secretary of the Baptist Evangelical Federation of France.

Amazing. One is reminded of the frog sitting in a pan of water slowly being brought to a boil. "We think it may be getting a little warm in here, but let's not get unduly alarmed. Should the water actually boil, then we will try to jump. Croak!"

Neville Chamberlain of appeasement fame and "If you cannot trust Hitler, who can you trust" had more insight into human nature and the seriousness of the situation than these pastors, it would seem. It reminds one for all the world of the established church in Germany as Hitler took power, refusing to speak out, all but spiritu-

ally dead, convincing themselves that Adolph's blandishments about his being no threat to religious liberty were true. They were his willing dupes.

What can one say? The Spirit of strong delusion is abroad. Has the Dragon been unchained? That conclusion is more and more forced upon one, it seems. 

Things Which Must Shortly Come To Pass

Prof. David Engelsma

## Introduction (4)

### The Reformed Confessions

**A**ny Reformed treatment of the doctrine of the last things must take the Reformed confessions into consideration. It must take these confessions into consideration from the outset. The reason is not only that these confessions, containing the wisdom of the church in the past, will be helpful, but also that the confessions are binding upon Reformed theologians. Although the confessions do not develop the truth of eschatology, they do draw the main biblical lines within which development must take place.

The Reformed confession which is more detailed than any other on the doctrine of the last things is the Second Helvetic [Swiss] Confession. It also speaks more directly to contemporary eschatological issues troubling some Reformed churches, particularly those regarding the millennium, than do the other creeds. This is the creed composed by the

Zurich Reformer Heinrich Bullinger in 1561 and published in 1566. Although it is not the official confession of most Reformed and Presbyterian churches in North America and Western Europe, in its day it was the most widely received of all the Reformed confessions. Philip Schaff says of it that it is "the most widely adopted, and hence the most authoritative of all the Continental Reformed symbols with the exception of the Heidelberg Catechism" (*Creeds of Christendom*, vol. 1, Harper & Brothers, 1877, p. 394). What the Second Helvetic Confession teaches about the last things was the consensus of all the Reformed churches in the sixteenth century.

There are two important sections on eschatology in the Second Helvetic Confession. Because of the importance of these doctrinal statements and because the confession is largely unknown by Reformed people, I quote these two sections in their entirety. The first statement concerning the last things occurs in connection with the Confession's teaching about the ascension of Christ into heaven. Having gone up into heaven, Jesus Christ will return.

And from heaven the same Christ will return in judgment, when wickedness will then be at its greatest in the world and when the Antichrist, having corrupted true religion, will fill up all things with superstition and impiety and will cruelly lay waste the Church with bloodshed and flames (Dan., ch. 11). But Christ will come again to claim his own, and by his coming to destroy the Antichrist, and to judge the living and the dead (Acts 17:31). For the dead will rise again (I Thess. 4:14ff.), and those who on that day (which is unknown to all creatures [Mark 13:32]) will be alive will be changed "in the twinkling of an eye," and all the faithful will be caught up to meet Christ in the air, so that then they may enter with him into the blessed dwelling-places to live forever (I Cor. 15:51f.). But the unbelievers and ungodly will descend with the devils into hell to burn forever and never to be redeemed from torments (Matt. 25:46). *The Sects*. We therefore condemn all who deny a real resurrection of the flesh (II Tim. 2:18), or who with John of Jerusalem, against whom Jerome wrote, do not have a correct view of the glorification of bodies. We also condemn those who thought that the devil and all the ungodly would at some time be saved, and that there would be

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an end to punishments. For the Lord has plainly declared: "Their fire is not quenched, and their worm does not die" (Mark 9:44). We further condemn Jewish dreams that there will be a golden age on earth before the Day of Judgment, and that the pious, having subdued all their godless enemies, will possess all the kingdoms of the earth. For evangelical truth in Matt., chs. 24 and 25, and Luke ch. 18, and apostolic teaching in II Thess., ch. 2, and II Tim., chs. 3 and 4, present something quite different (Chapter 11, in *Reformed Confessions of the 16<sup>th</sup> Century*, ed. Arthur C. Cochrane, Westminster Press, 1966, pp. 245, 246; a translation of the Second Helvetic Confession is included as an appendix in volume three of Baker Book House's 1983 reprint of Schaff's *Creeds of Christendom*).

In this section, the Confession affirms the fundamental truths of eschatology: the return of Christ in the body; the bodily resurrection of all the dead; the final judgment; and the everlasting life of the faithful, as well as the everlasting torment of unbelievers and ungodly. The creed is at pains to deny universal salvation extending even to the devil. It also reminds Reformed Christians that no creature knows, can know, or should try to know the exact time of the Day of Christ, something that is repeatedly ignored by foolish teachers and their equally foolish disciples.

Of special significance in view of millennial notions now making inroads into Reformed and Presbyterian churches is the Confession's description of the condition of the church and the state of the world when Christ returns. It will be the time of the greatest development of wickedness, the reign of Antichrist, and the great tribulation of the Church. When He comes, Christ will destroy the personal Antichrist in a dramatic confrontation. This consensus of Reformed thinking on the end expressly condemns every notion of a "golden

age on earth" for the saints before the final judgment. Such a notion is nothing but "Jewish dreams," the carnal conception of the kingdom of Christ that the Jews nourished in the days of Jesus' earthly ministry and because of which they stumbled at God's Messiah. The Second Helvetic Confession condemns millennialism in every form, whether that which has a Jewish kingdom ruling the world from Jerusalem or that which has the church "Christianizing" and exercising dominion over the world, before the final judgment.

The use that the Confession makes of the outstanding eschatological texts of Scripture must be noticed. The Reformed faith does not understand Daniel 11, Matthew 24 and 25, II Thessalonians 2, and II Timothy 3 and 4 as prophecies that were fulfilled in the destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70. Nor does it apply these passages to hard times for the Jews in the future after the church is raptured out of the world. Rather, these passages describe the present age, culminating in the great tribulation of the church shortly before the return of Christ in the body. "Evangelical truth ... and apostolic teaching ... present something quite different" from the false teachings that in one way or another delude the people of God with promises of earthly victory and escape from persecution under the Antichrist. For evangelical truth and apostolic teaching direct the hope of the church to the coming of Christ and to the glory that will be theirs at His coming.

In this rejection of a "golden age" for the church in an earthly kingdom of Christ, both branches of the Reformation, Reformed and Lutheran, were one. Article 17 of the Lutheran Augsburg Confession (1530) reads in part:

Rejected, too, are certain Jewish opinions which are even now making an appearance and which teach that, before the resurrection

of the dead, saints and godly men will possess a worldly kingdom and annihilate all the godless (Augsburg Confession, in *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*, tr. and ed. Theodore G. Tappert, Fortress Press, 1959, pp. 38, 39).

The second eschatological section of the Second Helvetic Confession is chapter 26. The heading is: "Of the Burial of the Faithful, and of the Care to be Shown for the Dead; of Purgatory, and the Appearing of Spirits." After an exhortation, that the bodies of believers who have died "be honorably and without superstition committed to the earth," accompanied by a condemnation of those who are "overly and absurdly attentive to the deceased," the Confession declares the Reformed understanding of "The State of the Soul departed from the Body" (the "intermediate state").

For we believe that the faithful, after bodily death, go directly to Christ, and, therefore, do not need the eulogies and prayers of the living for the dead and their services. Likewise we believe that unbelievers are immediately cast into hell from which no exit is opened for the wicked by any services of the living.

This leads immediately to a consideration of the Roman Catholic dogma of purgatory.


But what some teach concerning the fire of purgatory is opposed to the Christian faith, namely, "I believe in the forgiveness of sins, and the life everlasting," and to the perfect purification through Christ, and to these words of Christ our Lord: "Truly, truly, I say to you, he who hears my word and believes him who sent me, has eternal life; he shall not come into judgment, but has passed from death to life" (John 5:24). Again: "He who has bathed does not need to wash, except for his feet, but he is clean all over, and you are clean" (John 13:10). (*Reformed*



*Confessions of the 16<sup>th</sup> Century*, p. 295).

The Reformed faith holds the conscious existence of both believer and unbeliever after death in their soul. At death, the believer goes

at once to Christ in heaven; the unbeliever is immediately cast into hell. This is the repudiation of soul-sleep. Purgatory is assailed, not because it is destructive of the comfort of the believer (although it certainly is), but because it opposes the "Christian faith" at its

very heart: the believer has both the complete forgiveness of his sins and the perfect cleansing of them through Jesus Christ alone. Rome's doctrine of purgatory is a denial of Jesus Christ, the only deliverer and savior. 

Search the Scriptures

Rev. Martin VanderWal

# Righteous Oaths of the Kingdom

Matthew 5:33-37

*Again, ye have heard that it hath been said by them of old time, Thou shalt not forswear thyself, but shalt perform unto the Lord thine oaths: But I say unto you, Swear not at all; neither by heaven; for it is God's throne: Nor by the earth; for it is his footstool: neither by Jerusalem; for it is the city of the great King. Neither shalt thou swear by thy head, because thou canst not make one hair white or black. But let your communication be, Yea, yea; Nay, nay: for whatsoever is more than these cometh of evil.*

Matthew 5:33-37

**T**he righteousness of the kingdom of heaven would seem at first glance to exclude any use of the oath. Oaths are necessary because of sin. Men do not value the truth so as to speak it all the time. The promises of men are unreliable. However, God values the truth. God demands that men live up to their word, even punishing those who do not. Hence, the oath: calling upon God to bear witness to the truth of what a man says. The oath is necessary because men are unrighteous.

What has the oath, then, to do with the kingdom of heaven? Christ has spoken about the righteousness of that kingdom. He has identified Himself as the fulfillment of the law and the prophets. Should we not expect the oath to be forbidden a place in His kingdom? Are not the unrighteous so excluded from this kingdom, that its citizens can be expected to tell the truth without the oath? Might it not be demanded of the citizens that they speak the truth and perform their promises without the oath? That was the conviction of the early Anabaptists. They believed that the oath was not lawful for them to practice or honor. They were convinced that the oath was wholly unrighteous, of the devil.

Yet, the King of the kingdom here teaches that the righteousness of the kingdom of heaven does have something to do with the oath. The reason for the oath is not removed. There is still sin upon the earth. The citizens of the kingdom of heaven still have their feet upon that earth. Those citizens also must fight against sin, for they still mourn over their sin. The oath is still necessary.

Furthermore, the expectation is that the righteous children of the

kingdom will use the oath in righteousness. It is the present work of the King, in this passage, to teach them (and us) the proper use of the oath.

That proper, righteous use of the oath the Lord teaches in a certain way. He distinguishes it from the wicked use of the oath. Note carefully: the abuse of the oath does not by itself make the oath as such wicked. The abuse of the oath does not make every use of the oath wicked.



Scripture records many instances of the oath expressed by men toward other men. Scripture also gives certain laws regulating the use of the oath. Those regulations Jesus recalls saying, "It hath been said by them of old time." He then brings out of the Old Testament two different teachings.

The first is negative, "Thou shalt not forswear thyself." It is taken from Leviticus 19:12, "And ye shall not swear by my name falsely."

Forswearing does not refer to the mere fact of swearing, but swearing falsely. One places the oath in the service of the lie. Forswearing applies to intentions. A man who forswears himself intends

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not at all to perform the thing to which he has sworn. He swears by an oath to do something, but he has no intention to do it. He swears to tell the truth, fully intending to lie.

The second is positive, "But shall perform unto the Lord thine oaths." It is taken from Numbers 30:2. "If a man vow a vow unto the Lord, or swear an oath to bind his soul with a bond; he shall not break his word, he shall do according to all that proceedeth out of his mouth."

This positive commandment requires the performance of every promise made before God by way of swearing. "Thou shalt perform unto the Lord thine oaths."



This particular swearing of oaths was instituted in the Scriptures of the Old Testament. The Lord recalls that with the words, "It hath been said by them of old time." It applies very specifically to the name and the glory of God. Properly understood and used, the oath establishes the honor and glory of God far above the word of man. The oath placed a man before the glory and honor of God in his consciousness. When he swore, he declared himself liable to God's punishment, should he fail in his obligation either to tell the truth or to perform something promised. He expected God to vindicate His glory against him, should he be swearing falsely.



Jesus Christ does not merely recall these teachings of the Old Testament Scripture. In addition to what was said by them of old time, He speaks to the citizens of the kingdom an additional word. This additional word does not deny either of these things as true. He came not to destroy but to fulfill. In order to show His work of fulfilling, He brings that law to bear in a different direction.

This new direction is now nec-

essary because of a different abuse of the oath. Wickedness sought its entrance merely by following the letter of the law and rejecting its spirit. When men swore an oath using the name of God, the obligation was acknowledged. When God's name was taken upon the lips, the oath-taker must not forswear, but must perform his word. However, when God's name was *not* taken in that oath, one was free of his obligations. As a result, he might name all kinds of impressive things in his oath. The time came to fulfill the obligation. The word spoken under oath was discovered to be a lie. Yet, this false-swearer was free of obligation and punishment, for he had not sworn by the name of God.

Thus, the oath lost its force and power. An oath was used no longer to put one before the face of God, for the vindication of His glory. Oaths were no longer made in order to keep God in mind. In fact, the oath was made with another purpose in mind. That purpose was in opposition to the honor and glory of God. The oath was therefore used not to perform the thing promised. It was used in the service of a lie. It was used in the service of vanity. Promises were made in order to be broken! The *form* of the oath was maintained, in order to gain the trust of its beneficiary. But its *substance* was altered — heaven, earth, Jerusalem — to release the swearer from obligation. He had no intention of performing his word.

What an awful matter! The oath had been regulated by the law of God. By its proper use God's name and glory would be upheld when the vows sworn were performed. Now, just the opposite happened. God's glory was despised. Having a creature substituted for God in the oath brought honor and glory to that creature, and not to God. The breaking of even the oaths in which God was not named would have an effect upon the oaths in

which God was named. They, too, would be seen as vain. Men were to show the glory of God in their relationships with one another. They were to show the faithfulness of God. Breaking their word to one another, men also had something to say about the word of God.



Jesus' prohibition regarding these oaths must be understood with that despicable act of men in view. That prohibition is not so broad as to exclude every oath. It would be rather easy for us to draw that conclusion. After all, He said, "Swear not at all." He also said, at the end of this passage, "But let your communication be Yea, yea; Nay, nay." Further, "whatsoever is more than these cometh of evil." We could say that *any* and *every* oath cometh of evil.

There is another line of thinking, too. Since the oath was so greatly misused, so the thinking goes, it is better not to use it at all. And, if we are very careful, we might possibly avoid having ever to swear an oath.

Even so, there are difficulties with this view. So grave are these difficulties that they cannot allow such an interpretation. Though they cannot have any weight in a proper interpretation of this passage, we acknowledge several difficulties of a practical nature. An earthly judge must often require oaths of persons. Law-enforcement personnel and those occupying high office must formally swear an oath before entering into the authority and duties of that office. A soldier must swear an oath to defend the constitution of the United States before he is allowed to take his place in the armed services. The above interpretation of Jesus' words would bar any Christian from these positions. In the courts, he who refuses to swear an oath required by his magistrate risks contempt of court. Such was a reason why the Anabaptists



could not be trusted by their lawful magistrates; they refused to take oaths.

There are, more importantly, also theological difficulties. God Himself is revealed in Scripture to have sworn an oath, (Gen. 22:16, Heb. 6:13). The angel of Revelation 10, understood to be Christ, swears an oath "by him that liveth for ever and ever ..." (v. 6). The inspired language of II Corinthians 1:23 is in the form of an oath. Because of these Scriptures, and the unity of all Scripture, we must conclude that with His words our Lord does not prohibit any and all oaths.

Closer still is the word of our text. Jesus had drawn out of the Old Testament Scriptures the teaching He quoted. It is impossible that He should now contradict them. Should He do so, He would be in violation of the word that He had just spoken: "I came not to destroy but to fulfill." Were Christ here to prohibit all oaths and all swearing, we would have to conclude that He came in order to destroy the law:

Therefore, these words of Christ are a prohibition of a limited sort. The word "not at all" is further defined by the words that follow: heaven, earth, Jerusalem, one's head. Thus, "Swear not at all by these things." He forbids any and all swearing by heaven, earth, Jerusalem, or one's own head. The same thing is true of the words that end this text, verse 37. Where one would otherwise swear by these things, his communication must be simply yea or nay.

Yet, we must broaden out beyond merely this specific set of words. Of the same evil that has brought Christ to say, "But I say unto you," we must also beware. We must draw the conclusion that all oaths are forbidden that invoke the creature rather than the Creator.

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Christ also gives the reason for this specific prohibition: "Whatsoever is more than these cometh of evil." This swearing of these specific oaths, in distinction from oaths in general, comes out of evil. We have seen the evil of one's intentions. He has the intention of speaking falsehood. He has the intention of reneging on his promise to do something. He hypocritically hides that intention with an oath. Merely to avoid the judgment of God, he swears by another than God. His oath cometh of evil.

The main evil of such swearing is that it denies God the glory that is due to Him. Such is the truth that Christ speaks in this passage. Swearing by these created things promotes the lie that they are wholly separated from God. The men who forswear themselves by them depend on a lie to evade the judgment of God. Their evasion is false. They still fall under judgment.

That judgment remains because they still involve God with these oaths, though not by name. Those very creatures by which men swear bear a distinct relationship to God. They may not be substituted for God in the oath, for they are His creatures. That relationship Jesus makes clear in the words before us. As Christ mentions the specific things by which men swore their oaths, He places them in relationship to God. Heaven is God's throne. Earth is His footstool. Jerusalem is His city. He makes one hair white and another one black. His is the power and the glory, even by means of those things that men wrongfully swear by.

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This false, evil swearing we must see in relationship to the rest of these teachings by the King of the kingdom. He not only exercises His prerogative to rule and properly interpret the law of God. He also is the righteousness to which that law speaks. In Him,

therefore, is the end of the law for righteousness, even in such matters as the swearing of oaths.


The swearing of oaths has to do, most of all, with fidelity and truth. Where men are fickle, and where men are liars, God is true. What He has spoken and what He has sworn He will certainly perform. Whereas it is in the nature of men, by sin, to violate their oaths, it is in the nature of God to do exactly as He has promised. The same thing is true of the King of the kingdom. His Word He performs. Those whom He has come to save, He will save to the uttermost. Those whom He has *intended* to save He saves to the uttermost — every last one.

The proper use of the oath, within the definite limits described by Christ, serves this exalted purpose. It calls attention to God's faithfulness: He alone will and will *certainly* punish those who swear falsely. He does this because He vindicates His faithfulness against all infidelity. In this way, God's word is sure to all those that trust in Him. What He has sworn to them — to save them to the uttermost — He will certainly perform. Their proper use of the oath, by grace, is a reflection of God's sovereign grace.

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Christ also saves His people into that proper, righteous use of the oath. His righteousness completely covers the sins of His people, those given Him by the Father. Their lies, their broken oaths and hypocrisies, He covers with His blood. He pours into them His Holy Spirit, renewing them after His image. As a result, they love the truth and pursue it. They can be relied upon to speak it, even without an oath. Their promises they keep, even though they need not swear to perform it. In this, they show themselves to be citizens of the kingdom.

## Questions for Meditation and Further Study:

1. What was the significance of the form used to place one under oath, "Give God the glory," as found in Joshua 7:19 and John 9:24?
2. How can we understand better James 5:12 in the light of Matthew 5:33-37? What is the falling into condemnation spoken of there?
3. Why would the difference between the Reformed and the Anabaptist over the oath during the Protestant Reformation be so significant? Confer Article 36 of the Belgic Confession and Lord's Day 37 of the Heidelberg Catechism.
4. Why is the oath still used in a society that so diligently strives to be secular? 

*That They May Teach Them to Their Children*

*Miss Agatha Lubbers*

## The Antithesis and Teaching Literature (2)

**I**n the first article on this topic concerning the relation of the antithesis and literature we determined that God establishes an antithesis between the world and His people. We contended that God's people must live the antithesis, and the child of God must be opposed to everything that opposes God.

We argued that we cannot assume a "touch not, taste not" approach and asserted, therefore, that in the study of literature one should not be governed by a "world-flight" attitude. The teaching of the Word of God does not permit this attitude. Therefore one should not avoid secular literature but should use with discretion and discernment such literature, because only in this way can one teach the antithesis and teach an understanding of the antithesis.

The antithesis is more than a catchword or phrase used in speeches and articles. The antithesis is not only a term that describes and identifies a way of life or a basic worldview, but it comes to expression in all aspects of the Christian life. The antithesis describes, it defines and identifies, the battle in the life of a Christian — the battle between the kingdom of light and the kingdom of darkness.

In this article we wish to demonstrate that a Reformed Christian teacher can and should use both secular and Christian literature to teach the antithesis — i.e., to teach a basic worldview. The teacher can encourage and challenge students to show the difference between truth and error and demonstrate their understanding of the antithesis — i.e., to argue from a scriptural worldview.



The American Literature class I was teaching thirty years ago studied and discussed the poetry

of the nineteenth century American poet William Cullen Bryant (1794-1878). It is appropriate, when one studies the writings of the American authors, to study the poetry of Bryant because his poetry is some of the best that was produced by the early American authors. Two of Bryant's poems, "To a Waterfowl" and "Thanatopsis," stand out and prove the contention that the poetry produced by Bryant is formally excellent and noteworthy.

"To a Waterfowl" begins with the fetching lines,

Whither, midst falling dew,  
While glow the heavens with the  
last steps of day,  
Far, through their rosy depths,  
dost thou pursue  
Thy solitary way?

The poem ends with the memorable stanza,

He who, from zone to zone,  
Guides through the boundless sky  
thy certain flight

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In the long way that I must tread  
alone  
Will lead my steps aright.

"Thanatopsis" begins with the lines,

To him who in the love of Nature  
holds  
Communion with her visible  
forms, she speaks  
A various language.

The poem ends with the stanza,

So live, that when thy summons  
comes to join  
The innumerable caravan ...  
Thou go not like the quarry slave  
at night  
Scourged to his dungeon, but, sus-  
tained and soothed  
By an unfaltering trust, approach  
thy grave  
Like one who wraps the drapery  
of his couch  
About him, and lies down to  
pleasant dreams.

William Cullen Bryant, often called the "father of American poetry," gained a national audience with his poetic works and was the first American writer to produce a body of poetry that can be matched with the achievements of English poets. When Bryant's poem "Thanatopsis" was submitted to the *North American Review*, there were those who did not believe that anyone in America could write like this. One of the editors of the review protested to a fellow editor that "you have been imposed upon. No one on this side of the Atlantic is capable of writing such verse." Matthew Arnold, the famous English poet and the most respected critic of his time, stated that Bryant's poem "To a Waterfowl" was the "most perfect poem in the language."

It is fitting that students in American literature classes should read and become familiar with the poetry of William Cullen Bryant, the son of a country doctor, and a pronounced representative of a group of writers in America iden-

tified as "Early Men of Letters." Bryant began what is perhaps his best and most famous poem, "Thanatopsis," when he was only seventeen. As a young man earning a slender living as a lawyer and book reviewer, Bryant roamed the countryside and became a delighted observer of external nature. He extolled the splendors of the breaking of the day in winter, the glories of the autumnal woods, and the return of spring with its flowers.

"Thanatopsis," a meditation on death, is similar to all of Bryant's poems in that it is also a paean of praise to nature. The opening lines of the poem confirm what became obvious to my literature class, that Bryant, who in one of his poems speaks adoringly of "Nature with its everlasting smile," was a perceptive student of nature and also a lover of nature to the point of deifying it. This adoration of nature becomes evident in the opening lines of "Thanatopsis."

To him who in the love of Nature  
holds  
Communion with her visible  
forms, she speaks  
A various language.

A bit later he writes,

Go forth, under the open sky, and  
list  
To Nature's teachings, while from  
all around —  
Earth and her waters, and the  
depths of air —  
Comes a still voice — Yet a few  
days, and thee  
The all-beholding sun shall see no  
more.

The poem asserts that communion with nature has a purpose. Nature and thoughts of nature may serve as a soothing balm when the thoughts of the "last bitter hour come like a blight over the spirit" and when the "sad images of the stern agony, and shroud, and pall ... make thee to shudder and grow sick at heart."

The message of the poem concerning the power of nature provides the Christian teacher with an opportunity to evaluate and condemn the idolatrous lie of pantheism — i.e., the doctrine that God is everything and everything is God. The doctrine of the pantheist that equates God with nature and the forces of nature declares God to be creeping and four-footed beasts. Because men deny the instruction of the Word of God, they adopt pagan pantheism. Such pagan pantheism is natural to man, since all men by nature serve the creature rather than the Creator God (cf. Rom. 1:25).

The Christian teacher can demonstrate that the deification of nature is a denial of the teaching of Scripture that nature and the creation are not God, but that only the eternal Jehovah is God. The Christian teacher can show that because of man's sin the curse of God rests upon all creation, and that the whole creation groans to be delivered (cf. Rom. 8). The teacher can remind students concerning the instruction of Romans 1 that states that all things are clearly understood by the wicked but that they suppress the truth. They do not merely deny the truth but they suppress it; they hold it down in unrighteousness. They change the truth of God into a lie. The judgment of God is that they become fools because of the suppression of the truth.

Since "Thanatopsis" is a meditation on death, the poem ends with the following admonitory lines:

So live, that when thy summons  
comes to join  
The innumerable caravan, which  
moves  
To that mysterious realm where  
each shall take  
His chamber in the silent halls of  
death  
Thou go not like the quarry slave  
at night  
Scourged to his dungeon, but, sus-  
tained and soothed

By an unfaltering trust, approach  
thy grave  
Like one who wraps the drapery  
of his couch  
About him, and lies down to  
pleasant dreams.

The poem leaves no doubt that all men live in the fear of death. However, it asserts that no one needs to fear death if death is approached with the appropriate attitude — an attitude that death can provide a state of peace. The poem asserts that one can and should approach the grave as if he lies down to pleasant dreams.

The poem describes death as a state that is common to all men everywhere. The poet speaks of the commonality of death by asserting that “we do not retire to our eternal resting place alone, but with the patriarchs of the infant world and with kings, and with the powerful of the earth.”

The poem describes the fear-some thoughts of death, but the poem does not call death the last enemy — the enemy that shall be destroyed finally only through the powerful work of the Lord Jesus Christ (cf. I Cor. 15:26).

The Christian knows and confesses that the souls of all men, both reprobate and elect, according to their nature, do not approach the grave as those who will lie down to pleasant dreams. All men know that death is the last enemy spoken of in I Corinthians 15. Death is referred to as the Grim Reaper. In Ecclesiastes 8:8 Solomon says that everyone, kings and courtiers alike, is in a war with death. No one can keep the spirit contained in the body; no one is able to obtain a discharge from that ensuing battle. All will lose it.

For the reprobate wicked there is great trepidation and terror when they ponder death, because they know there is no continuing life for their souls. Although the poem calls men to think of death as a sleep with pleasant dreams, reprobate unbelievers cannot be-

lieve that they will lie down to pleasant dreams. The souls of unbelievers are spiritually depraved and dead during their life on earth, and when they die physically, their souls die immediately and eternally in the torments of hell. There is an everlasting existence for the unbelieving soul, but for the soul of the unbeliever the existence is not life eternal or immortality but it is everlasting death and dying.

Nor does the soul of the believer leave its habitation and connection with the body and fly away to heaven at the moment of death as if released now from the prison of an evil body. David Engelsma writes in *Christ's Spiritual Kingdom: A Defense of Reformed Amillennialism* (The Reformed Witness, Redlands, California, 2001) that

the soul of the believer strains to maintain its mysteriously close connection with the body right up to the instant of death. God created man a unity of soul and body. The violent wrenching apart of man is the aspect of death from which we all shrink.... No one likes death. “Sweet death” is a lie. To the soul of the Christian, the body is not a miserable prison to be escaped, but a dear, familiar house to be clung to. No, souls of saints do not naturally and easily fly away.



The discussion and study of the poem by the class caused the class to come to a decision that, among other things, the concluding lines of the poem left unanswered questions. Questions arose concerning the source of the “unfaltering trust” that would make one lie down in peace. How could Bryant assume that all men everywhere could approach death with a confidence that all is well? These sixteen-year old students were challenged to write their evaluation and compare the message of “Thanatopsis,” composed by the nineteen-year old William Cullen Bryant, with Psalm 16 and Psalm 49. Two students who

are now parents and have seen their sons and daughters pass through the Protestant Reformed Christian schools wrote the following brief evaluations of the poem.

William Cullen Bryant in his poem “Thanatopsis” speaks about his fear of death and the comfort he found in the hold of “Nature.” That comfort was the thought that he would share his destiny with all men in that one great sepulcher of “Nature,” the earth. After reading Psalm 49 I realize that the peace after death that Bryant sought was not eternal life as this is taught in the Bible. The Bible teaches that man by nature does not understand and is like the beasts that perish. If Bryant’s poem had expressed the confidence in the sure salvation of his body and soul through Christ, it would have expressed true peace.


“But God will redeem my soul from the power of the grave: for he shall receive me” (Ps. 49:15) is a great comfort to God’s children. In “Thanatopsis” Bryant gives no comfort. It is imaginary. He believes that every man dies since it is natural to die, but he describes it as a passage into the “silent halls of death.” As God’s children we say with David in the Psalms “Wherefore should I fear in the days of evil,” because we believe God is with us. Bryant says, “To mix forever with the elements.” This contradicts Psalm 16:10: “For thou wilt not leave my soul in hell (the grave).” Bryant’s attitude is wrong. We see the grave as a passage from death unto life while he sees it as a passage from life unto death — a death he calls “eternal sleep.”

Youthful Reformed Christians are called by Christ to be the salt of the earth. Therefore teachers must seize opportunities in the teaching of literature to assist students in their attempts to understand and to evaluate with discernment. The young Christian must be given the opportunity to demonstrate that he understands the antithesis.



The teachers of youthful Christians must not commit the sin of the lawyers who did not use the key of knowledge and for this were condemned by Jesus (Luke 11:52).

"Woe unto you, lawyers! For ye have taken away the key of knowledge: ye entered not in yourselves, and them that were entering in ye hindered." In Luke 17:2 Jesus em-

phatically states that "It were better for him that a millstone were hanged about his neck, and he cast into the sea, than that he should offend one of these little ones." 

## Book Reviews



*Calvin: A Biography*, by Bernard Cottret. Tr. M. Wallace McDonald. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000. Pp. xv + 376. \$28 (cloth). [Reviewed by the editor.]

From a French historian who is neither a theologian nor a Calvinist, we have a new biography of John Calvin that is outstanding. It gives insight into the man John Calvin without resorting to miserable psychologizing. "Thin as a lath," writes Cottret of Calvin, contrasting him with his fat foe, Perrin, "(he) said only what he knew, and detested bluster." It traces Calvin's life and development. It takes up all of Calvin's controversies with the heretics, as well as all of the important church-struggles in Geneva. The issues in these controversies and struggles are described fairly. The gifted writer does justice to the pressures and tensions for Calvin in these conflicts. And the third main section of the book, headed "Beliefs," consists of brilliant analysis of Calvin the polemicist, Calvin the preacher, Calvin's *Institutes*, and Calvin the French writer.

The book is the product of fresh study of the sources. The result is new light on aspects of Calvin's life and work. The French Reformed synod that met in Paris in 1559 to draw up a confession of faith replaced Calvin's proposed first article on "The Word of God" with five articles of their own. Calvin's proposed article concluded with the words, "it is God who speaks." Rightly, Cottret observes, "this is undoubtedly the most perfect summary of Calvin's theology: God

speaks, God chooses, God summons." Cottret adds: "But this message, by its audacity, escaped his contemporaries."


To the Reformed in France who were about to hold a conference with the Roman Catholics, Calvin sent advice instructing them that the main issues were, first, the regulative principle of worship and, second, justification by faith alone.

As regards the bitter struggles in Geneva, when Berthelier was rebuked by the authorities for disrupting Calvin's sermons by coughing violently, he responded, "Calvin doesn't want us to cough? We'll fart and belch." An opponent of Calvin's teaching on predestination, carrying on the opposition of Jerome Bolsec, blasphemed predestination with a shockingly foul adjective. Cottret's account of Calvin's encounter with the infamous Servetus is fascinating. The account of the Reformer's encounter with Idelette de Bure—Calvin's wife—is ironic: "connubial bliss."

Although Cottret himself is plainly no Calvinist, his analysis of Calvin's doctrine is correct, as the analysis by many who claim to be Calvinists is not. Cottret understands, though he does not agree, that "the Calvinist doctrine, in its implacable character (*sic*), promises salvation without conditions; it does not depend on any works, on any will, on any contrition, on any repentance." There is hardly a Calvinist theologian in the world today who shares this understanding of Calvinist doctrine.

Cottret also recognizes, though he doubts Calvin's wisdom for doing so, that Calvin himself "gave an increasing emphasis to predestination in his work," so that "it is right to ask whether Calvinism is not simply predestination." Today, the theologians hate or fear predestination with all the intensity of Calvin's anti-predestinarian enemies, all the while advertising themselves as Calvinists. Probably, they suppose that they are.

Besides all this, the style of the author, which the translator, M. Wallace McDonald, has managed to keep, is lively and vivid. An example, which will add to our knowledge of Calvin the man:

He hardly had a body. Sleeping little, eating similarly, prey to violent headaches, Calvin did not hesitate to dictate certain of his works while lying in bed at the end of a life of austere labor. The clarity of his style and the transparency of his thought found their origin in this asceticism, crowned by a proverbial chastity. Fasting was neither mortification nor weakness for Calvin; instead, it was the result of a disgust for food, or rather a way of protecting his sickly body. He was a meditator certainly, but nevertheless not a contemplative; a dreamer, and also an often inflexible man of action, sometimes even frantically so, from fear of yielding to weakness, to the secret "softness" and "mildness" that his adversaries hardly suspected. His slender, almost elegant body housed a will of iron.... 



### Minister Activities

**O**n Sunday evening, March 31, the congregation of the Lynden, WA PRC extended a call to Rev. R. Hanco to serve them as their next pastor. Rev. W. Bruinsma, pastor of the Kalamazoo, MI PRC, received the call from the Byron Center, MI PRC to become their next undershepherd. Rev. C. Terpstra, pastor of the First PRC in Holland, MI, declined the call he had been considering to serve as the first pastor of the Trinity PRC in Hudsonville, MI.

Rev. R. Cammenga, pastor of the Southwest PRC in Grandville, MI, participated in this year's annual Good Friday Service sponsored by Seventh Reformed Church and aired in the Grand Rapids area on radio station WFUR. This service consists of messages by seven different area ministers on the seven cross words. Rev. Cammenga spoke on "I Thirst," the fifth cross word.

### Congregation Activities

**W**hen the congregation of the Byron Center, MI PRC met on March 27, they did more than extend a call to Rev. Bruinsma. In addition to that important work they also approved two proposals from their council, one for a new sound system and another to proceed with a building expansion project. From information provided to me by a member of Byron Center, it appears that they will expand their narthex and nursery, and replace that lost space by adding on to the west side of their fellowship hall. This expansion will provide for seating for an additional 120 souls, plus allow for a bigger nursery.

At a recent congregational meeting in the Lynden, WA PRC a vote was taken to allow the Netherlands Reformed Church use of their church building for services and during the

week. This approval from Lynden also meant that she would have to change the times of her worship services to accommodate the NRC. So, for now anyway, Lynden is worshipping at 9:30 A.M. to allow the NRC to meet at 11:30 A.M., and their afternoon service is at 5:00 P.M. with the NRC meeting at 8:00 P.M. The NRC is in the process of building on their old property, which is just around the corner from Lynden. No one is sure how long this will all take, but the NRC will be using Lynden's facilities until the work is done.

Lynden was not the only congregation to change its time of worship recently. The Trinity PRC in Hudsonville, MI also changed the time of their second service from 3:00 to 6:00 P.M. starting on March 24. The reason for this change? Not because another congregation was now sharing their facilities, but rather because another congregation had moved out. You may remember that Trinity had purchased the building of the Hudsonville Reformed Church, and they were sharing it with HRC until their new building was complete. This project was completed in mid-March and HRC moved in on Sunday morning, March 24. So the first Sunday Trinity was able to hold both its services in their own church home was Easter Sunday, March 31.

### Mission Activities

**T**hrough the joint efforts of our mission contacts in Manila, the Reformed Witness Hour Committee in Grand Rapids, MI, and the FMC Philippine sub-committee in Edgerton, MN, the broadcast of the RWH began in Metro Manila on Saturday, March 16. The broadcasts of Rev. C. Haak's RWH radio sermons will continue weekly on Saturdays at 6:30 P.M. Also, a delegation of Rev. A. Spriensma, missionary to the Philippines, and Mr. Gene VanBemmel, an elder in the Doon, IA PRC, planned to go to the Philippines in late April. The purpose of this visit

is mainly to prepare for the move of the Spriensmas in June, the Lord willing.


Following a Good Friday worship service, the saints in our mission in Ghana met together to bid farewell to Arnie and Char Bleyenbergh, whose year of volunteer help for our missionaries, Rev. W. Bekkering and Rev. R. Moore, ended in March. We echo the thoughts of our missionaries when we add that we appreciate the many blessings God has given the saints in Ghana by having the Bleyenberghs there for this past year, and our prayer is that God will continue to bless them as they return home to Edgerton, MN. Mr. Doug Bekkering was scheduled to come in mid-April to take on the duties of a volunteer. He planned on staying in Ghana until a couple could be found to take the place of the Bleyenberghs.

### Evangelism Activities

**T**he Evangelism Committee of the First PRC in Grand Rapids, MI invited all interested members of our churches in the Grand Rapids area, as well as any interested friends and neighbors of First, to a timely lecture on March 21 at their church. Rev. A. Spriensma spoke on "For God and Country: A Christian Perspective on Patriotism."

### School Activities

**T**he Board of the Midwest Society for PR Secondary Education was happy to report that at a special society meeting held March 19, the society approved the Board's proposal to accept a 13 2/3 acre land donation from a society member for a future building site. This site is located on Hayes Ave. northwest of Hull.

The Northwest Iowa PR Christian School presented their annual all-school program on March 27. Their theme this year was "The Christian's Armor," based on Ephesians 6:10-17. 

*Mr. Wigger is an elder in the Protestant Reformed Church of Hudsonville, Michigan.*



## Announcements

### RESOLUTION OF SYMPATHY

On March 7, 2002 the Lord took unto Himself another dear saint, at the age of 100,

**MRS. ETHEL BOER,**

mother of our member, Mr. Henry Boer.

May Henry and his family find their comfort in the words of Psalm 73:23, 24: "Nevertheless I am continually with thee: thou hast holden me by my right hand. Thou shalt guide me with thy counsel, and afterward receive me to glory."

Erv Kortering, Sec.

### RESOLUTION OF SYMPATHY

The council and congregation of Southwest PRC extend their Christian sympathy to our fellow officebearers Rog and Todd Groenendyk and their families in the death of their mother-in-law and grandmother,

**MRS. MATTIE KOOIKER.**

"And whosoever liveth and believeth in me shall never die."

Rev. Ronald Cammenga, Pres.

Gary Boverhof, Clerk

### RESOLUTION OF SYMPATHY

The Senior Adult Bible Society of Peace PRC expresses its Christian sympathy to Katherine Poortinga, in the passing into glory of her mother,

**TENIE POORTINGA.**

May she find comfort in the words of John 5:24, "Verily, verily, I say unto you, He that heareth my word, and believeth on him that sent me, hath everlasting life, and shall not come into condemnation; but is passed from death unto life."

Rev. S. Houck, President  
Alice Dykshorn, Secretary

### WEDDING ANNIVERSARY

On April 28, 2002, our parents,  
**HARLOW and JUDY KUIPER,**

celebrated 35 years of marriage. We are thankful to God for the covenantal instruction they have given us and for their continuing guidance, example, and prayers.

We pray for God's blessing on them as they continue their lives together.

"Behold, that thus shall the man be blessed that feareth the Lord. The Lord shall bless thee out of Zion: and thou shalt see the good of Jerusalem all the days of thy life. Yea, thou shalt see thy children's children, and peace upon Israel" (Psalm 128:4-6).

- \* Tim and Robin Block  
Nolan, Nathan, Paige
- \* Joel and Kelly Dykstra  
Jacob, Curtis, Joey
- \* Terry and Pam Kaptein  
Emily
- \* Matthew

Caledonia, Michigan

### RESOLUTION OF SYMPATHY

The council of Hudsonville PRC expresses its Christian sympathy to our fellow officebearer, Mr. Henry Boer, in the loss of his mother,

**ETHEL BOER.**

"Blessed be God, even the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies, and the God of all comfort" (II Corinthians 1:3).

Rev. Barry Gritters, Pres.

Ralph VanderVeen, Clerk

### NOTICE

The South Holland Protestant Reformed Christian School is seeking a Teacher/Administrator beginning in the summer 2002. Qualified applicants are encouraged to call George DeJong (708) 895-4967 or Bruce Verburg (708) 474-9799.

### CALL TO SYNOD!!

Synod 2001 appointed Southwest Protestant Reformed Church, Grandville, MI the calling church for the 2002 synod.

The consistory hereby notifies our churches that the 2002 synod of the Protestant Reformed Churches in America will convene, the Lord willing, on Tuesday, June 11, 2002 at 9:00 A.M. in the Southwest Protestant Reformed Church, Grandville, Michigan.

The Pre-Synodical Service will be held on Monday evening, June 10, at 7:30 P.M. Rev. Terpstra, president of the 2001 synod, will preach the sermon. Synodical delegates are requested to meet with the consistory before the service.

Delegates in need of lodging should contact Mr. Gary Boverhof, 467 Quincy SW, Grandville, MI 49418. Phone: (616) 896-9561.

Consistory of  
Southwest PRC  
Gary Boverhof, Clerk.

## Reformed Witness Hour

### Topics for May

Date	Topic	Text
May 5	"A Greater Than Jonah Is Here"	Matthew 12:41
May 12	"Jerusalem Rebuilt"	Jeremiah 30:18, 19
May 19	"The Coming of the Comforter"	John 14:26
May 26	"A Believer's Confidence While Facing Death"	Psalm 31:5