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Volume 80 ◆ Number 5

# Casting Our Burdens on the Lord

*"Cast thy burden upon the LORD, and he shall sustain thee: he shall never suffer the righteous to be moved."*

Psalm 55:22

**D**avid wrote this psalm because he experienced a great difficulty. He calls it a burden. The weight of this difficult problem was extremely heavy.

Every child of God knows the heaviness of trials and problems. In addition, the burden of sin can be very heavy. Every sheep of the Shepherd walks through the valley of the shadow of death. Every disciple of Jesus Christ is required to take up a cross.

But the question is not whether the child of God will have a burden; it is what does he do with the burden. The natural instinct is to try to deal with our burden by ourselves. Some try to carry it as quietly as possible, and others groan loudly under the weight of their burden. And when the burden

seems to become too great for us to carry, then we all wish that the burden would just go away — or that we had wings, for then we would fly away and find rest. David wished just that (v. 6). But such efforts never succeed. Avoiding the difficulty or problem never solves it.

Rather, we are taught by God through David's experience to cast our burden on the Lord. To cast one's burden on the Lord is to pray. Not only is the whole psalm a prayer, but our text is a command to pray. This is not merely advice. Not even as the best of advice. It comes to us in the imperative, as a command: "Cast thy burden upon the Lord."



David had a burden that he was bearing. He was going through one of the most difficult times in his life. His beloved son Absalom had seized his throne from him. It is a most horrible thing to be removed from your position by a stranger. But when the treason is committed by your own son, to whom you have given only love, then the sword thrust into one's soul is deep indeed.

Added to David's grievous burden was the fact that Ahithophel, a wise counselor and close friend of David, turned his back on David to go with Absalom. The relationship between David and Ahithophel must have been very close. David speaks of him as "a man mine equal, my guide, and mine acquaintance. We took sweet counsel together and walked unto the house of God in company" (vv. 13, 14). If David was severely wounded by Absalom's treason, then the turncoat actions of Ahithophel poured salt into those deep wounds.

The burden of David was heavier still. What greatly aggravated these wounds was David's knowledge that they stemmed from his own terrible sins. When David confessed the sins of adultery with Bathsheba and murder of Uriah and was told that God had forgiven him, then God used Nathan the prophet to inform David that his deeds would bear dreadful consequences in his own family. Yes, he was forgiven, but "the sword shall never depart from thine house"; and God would "raise up evil against thee out of thine own house" (cf. II Sam. 12:10-14). It was the knowledge of his sin, and

*Rev. VanOverloop is pastor of Georgetown Protestant Reformed Church in Hudsonville, Michigan.*

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#### EDITORIAL OFFICE

Prof. David J. Engelsma  
4949 Ivanrest  
Grandville, MI 49418  
(e-mail: engelsma@prca.org)

#### BUSINESS OFFICE

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

#### CHURCH NEWS EDITOR

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

#### NEW ZEALAND OFFICE

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

#### UNITED KINGDOM OFFICE

c/o Mr. Sean Courtney  
78 Millfield, Grove Rd.  
Ballymena, Co. Antrim  
BT43 6PD Northern Ireland  
(e-mail: sean67@cprfbookstore.fsnet.co.uk)

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that it was committed against the Most Holy and Most High Majesty of God who had only done good to David, that made David's burden so heavy.

Every follower of Jesus Christ has a burden. To be a disciple of Jesus requires not only self-denial but also the willingness to take up one's cross (Matt. 16:24).

A part of our burden can be physical difficulties. Some of us come into this sin-cursed world with bodies and/or minds that are deformed. All others learn quickly that their apparently healthy bodies have innate weaknesses — even great frailty. When a flu bug strikes or we bend or lift wrongly, then an upset stomach, a severe headache, or a pulled muscle shows us how weak we are. We live in earthly bodies that are made out of the dust, and they evidence this fact in many ways as old age steadily creeps up on us. The body can quickly or gradually break down with illnesses, cancers, strokes, etc.

Another part of our burden is mental and emotional struggles. Anxiety and cares raise our blood pressure. Fears, doubts, and questionings can plague us. Worries about our job and the economy, along with a pile of bills and school tuition, can become a very heavy load for our minds. Also we have burdens that arise out of relationships: marital strife, difficult children, poor parenting, the refusal of someone to forgive. All of these and many more define "burdens."

The heaviest part of the burden of God's children is the consciousness of his sin. The spiritually sensitive child of God is always aware of the fact that if he were not a sinner he would not have a burden. In fact, as the child of God matures in the faith, this realization grows. The knowledge, not of others' sins against us, but of our own sins and sinfulness makes us realize that we justly deserve eternal condemnation. This is a truly heavy burden!

What is most striking is the fact that David is inspired to use the word "burden" to describe his difficulty. As we have noted, this word emphasizes that we are carrying a load whose weight is extremely heavy and we feel ourselves being crushed beneath it. But less obvious and more important is the fact that the Hebrew word translated "burden" is rooted in the word "gift." David is inspired by the Holy Spirit to speak of our burden as a gift! In two senses is it a gift (according to this particular Hebrew word). First, our burden is something that is given to us by God. It is God's gift, the lot He has chosen to give us, His appointment for us. Whatever the burden may be (physical, mental, or spiritual) and whatever its weight, it is measured out to us by the all-wise, infinitely loving, and gracious God. And secondly, our burden is something that we are to ascribe or give to God. When we receive our burden as a gift from God, then we are to return it to Him.



"Cast thy burden upon the LORD." David is inspired to command us to cast our burden upon Jehovah.

We have to be commanded to do that. Our nature is to try to take care of our burden by ourselves. Some of us try to avoid problems and trials by flying away. We try to make ourselves believe that they do not exist, either permanently or temporarily. There are many ways we do this. Some get high on drugs or alcohol, and for a while their burdens seem to have been taken away. Sometimes we try to forget our burden by seeking pleasures that can distract us, so we don't think about the problem. Or we try to avoid even thinking about the burden, hoping that it will then just go away. Sometimes we are unable to admit the existence of emotional or mental burdens or addictions to pleasures.

Or we try to deny that the burden is ours by excusing ourselves and blaming others. We can become very adept at accusing and excusing, justifying ourselves, never wanting to acknowledge what we have contributed to making the burden, or to making it heavier. We can easily become so busy blaming others that we never admit and confess our sinfulness and sins that lie at the bottom of the problem.

Or we try to solve the problem by finding a way out by ourselves. This is trying to carry the burden ourselves — in our own strength. We think that no burden is too heavy for us. We convince ourselves that we can tough it out. By sheer will power we will take care of it. But whenever we try our own strength we only make the burden heavier and more complicated. Also, we set ourselves up to be sifted by Satan. Very often it happens that the Lord patiently shows us, in time, that the burden will crush us whenever we try to carry it in our own strength.

Instead we are commanded to cast our burden upon Jehovah.

The removal of our burden as a burden requires that we acknowledge the presence of a power that transcends our power. This greater power cannot be found in drugs and alcohol, nor in mystic religions or astrology. This power is Jehovah. It is only Jehovah.

The name "Jehovah" emphasizes to us that He is the sovereign I am. The Self-existent and Self-sufficient I am is the all-wise and almighty Lord of all. He created all. And He controls all — also (even) our burdens. And His control of all things is unto His own great and glorious ends, namely the glory of His name and the spiritual well-being (the good) of His children.

We are called to look up to the one who has gifted us with our burden. The presence of a burden in our life is not a mistake. It is not something given to us by the humans around us. It is not some-

thing the devil has planned to give to us. Each and every burden of each and every child of Jehovah is given by the all-wise and infinitely loving Jehovah. This God, who has established and who alone maintains a relationship of friendship and fellowship with His chosen children, is able to save to the uttermost. He wisely distributes burdens to His children so that each one of His children, upon experiencing the burden, will run to his heavenly Father, the Giver, the Helper, the Savior. By means of the burden each child is called to come experientially closer to his Father, to look nowhere else but up to his Father.

To cast our burden upon the Lord is literally to throw it. This is a most striking word to describe prayer. This whole psalm emphasizes prayer. The very first verses are a prayer about prayer. "Give ear to my prayer, O God; and hide not thyself from my supplication. Attend unto me, and hear me: I mourn in my complaint, and make a noise."

The command of the Spirit in our text is to go to God in prayer, to enter His presence, and to come before His throne of grace. Prayer is the burdened believer unburdening himself onto his God. Remember that the activity of praying (or even wanting to pray) is an act of faith. It implies that we believe that He is and that He is the rewarder of those who seek Him. I added the words "or even wanting to pray" because there are times when the burdened and weary child of God does not know what or how to pray or has concluded that he cannot pray. Scripture encourages us to call then for the elders so that they can pray with and for us. The point is that prayer is the God-given (another gift from our Father!) means by which His children find relief.

We are to cast our burden upon the Lord. This is especially the case when the burden is the experience of our sin and sinfulness. Then our

casting upon the Lord is our admitting and confessing that we have sinned, our expressing sorrow for offending Him, and our asking Him to forgive us for Jesus' sake.

Casting our burden upon the Lord, when it consists of grievously heavy circumstances, means that we realize that He is Lord, that He is the Giver of the burden, that He is the God of all grace and comfort, and that He has promised to give grace that is always sufficient unto each day and for each burden. When we cast our burden upon the Lord, then He enables our faith to see that He is able to do exceeding abundantly above all that we ask or think, and that He is able to do exceedingly abundant good with every trouble and trial. Then we see that He not only is able to make all things work together for good to them who love Him, to them who are the called according to His purpose, but He actually does so!



The promises God gives to those who cast their burden upon Him are truly wonderful. They are burden-lifting and burden-bearing.

First, the promise is "and He shall sustain thee." To sustain someone is to support him, to hold or bear him up. It also has the idea of being provided for or nourished. As God uses food to sustain or nourish us physically, so here God promises to nourish us spiritually.


The heart of God's promise to sustain is Jesus Christ. He and all the blessings of salvation that He merited in His life and death are the nourishment. We are sustained when we are forgiven and are assured that we are forgiven. We are sustained when we realize that we are not only forgiven but also are made to be righteous. We are sustained when we believe that God chose us in Christ precisely to be conformed to His image, and that our Almighty God and faithful Father uses all things (our burden too) to work unto the end of con-

forming us to the image of Christ, so we spiritually look more and more like Him. We are sustained with the gift of stronger faith in the wisdom of our Father, whose ways are higher than our ways. We are sustained when we lean not on our own arm of understanding but trust in Him to do all things right and to keep us in perfect peace.

The second promise is "He shall never suffer the righteous to be moved." In this, God promises that nothing will happen in the future that will take away His support and nourishment. The reason this promise is so sure is that those who cast their burden upon the Lord are "the righteous," that is, those who are given righteousness by God. Of them God has made a declaration that their sins are completely removed and that they are perfect, as if they had never done anything wrong, but only that which is right in God's sight.

Those who are thus righteous will never be moved. They will never be moved from election. They will never stop being justified. They will never fall from grace. Oh, yes, the righteous, while on earth, still sin. And because of their sinfulness they will be surrounded by problems, and as disciples of Christ they will always be bearing a cross. But while the righteous are troubled on every side, they are not distressed; they may be perplexed, but not in despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; cast down, but not destroyed!

The result is that the burden is removed as a burden — it is no longer seen to be a burden. This is because the righteous are given to see, by faith, that they are given the ability to bear the burden. So, instead of being crushed by it, we find ourselves strengthened to carry or endure it.

On this side of the grave we will always have a burden. Cast your burden upon Jehovah. Give the gift to the Giver, and in doing so taste and see His goodness to sustain you. 

## Remembering the Schism of 1953 The Doctrinal Issue

**B**efore the fiftieth anniversary year of the great schism in the Protestant Reformed Churches (PRC) passes, reflection on the doctrinal issue that occasioned the split is in order.

Earlier editorials called for a denomination-wide remembrance of the schism, informed readers of a fine, new resource for study of the schism, and demonstrated that the dividing of the PRC was indeed schism on the part of the faction that left the PRC (*Standard Bearer*, April 15, May 1, and May 15, 2003).

The controversy that rocked the PRC in the late 1940s and early 1950s culminating in the schism of 1953 was doctrinal. Personality conflicts may have intruded, but the schism was not about personalities. The dark underbelly of the church may have surfaced in struggles for ecclesiastical power, but the schism was not political.

At issue was a doctrine. That doctrine was a fundamental truth of Scripture. It was the truth of the covenant of grace.

In the controversy leading up to 1953, it was not the case that two parties were struggling for control of the PRC. Rather, two teachings were contending for the soul of a denomination of true churches of Jesus Christ. One was the teaching that God establishes His covenant by promise with all the children of godly parents alike, indeed with all who hear the gospel, on condition that the children and those who hear the gospel will believe. The other was the teaching that God establishes His cov-

enant by promise with the elect children of believing parents, as with those hearers of the gospel whom God calls (Acts 2:39).

The doctrinal issue in the schism of 1953 was the unconditionality of God's covenant in Jesus Christ. The covenant with its blessings and salvation depends solely upon the sovereign grace of the promising God. It depends upon nothing in the sinner. Specifically, the faith of the covenant friend of God is not the condition upon which the covenant depends, whether for its establishment, its maintenance, or its perfection.

Opposed to this doctrine in the late 1940s and early 1950s, within the PRC, was the teaching of the conditionality of God's covenant. The covenant depends, finally, not on God's promise (which He is supposed to make to all alike), nor on God's grace (which He is supposed to show and extend to all alike in making the promise to all), but on the child's act of believing.

That the schism of 1953 was at its heart doctrinal and that the doctrine at issue was the unconditional covenant are beyond question. For several years before the schism in 1953, the two periodicals in the PRC, the *Standard Bearer* and *Concordia*, were full of writings about the conditionality or unconditionality of the covenant. In those days, as I myself remember, sermon after sermon dealt with the covenant. The covenant was the subject of discussion and often heated, passionate debate among the members of the PRC.

The division in the PRC crys-

tallized in the contention over the adoption of the "Declaration of Principles" in the early 1950s. The "Declaration" explained the "Three Forms of Unity" as teaching an unconditional covenant promise to the elect children of believers. Half the ministers and churches in the PRC strenuously opposed adopting the "Declaration." In their opposition to the "Declaration," these churches expressed their own commitment to a conditional promise and a conditional covenant. The overture of the Sioux Center, Iowa PRC to Classis West, March 1951 and to Synod, June 1951 against adopting the "Declaration" is representative. The Sioux Center consistory asserted that it is not objectionable to speak of a "conditional offer" of the gospel. The consistory stated that "we cannot agree that the promise of the Gospel is not conditional. The covenant promise is indeed an oath of God unto the elect. But the promise of the Gospel is confrontation of all the hearers; the promise of the Gospel is preached to all promiscuously and consists herein, that whosoever believeth shall not perish, but have everlasting life.... Considering faith as condition *only* in the Reformed sense, it may therefore be said that from this aspect the promise of the Gospel is conditional. It promises life: the conditions is (*sic*) repentance and faith."

Shortly before the schism took place, a Protestant Reformed church in Canada, whose consistory embraced the doctrine of a conditional covenant, summarily

dismissed its minister for teaching the unconditional covenant.

When the split occurred, the immediate cause was a minister's deposition for teaching the conditionality of the covenant. God, he taught, promises salvation to everyone on the condition of faith. This faith, he added, with the conversion it accomplishes, is a "pre-requisite" to one's entering the kingdom, or covenant, of God.

From the very beginning of their history, the PRC had rejected the doctrine of a conditional covenant, which was (and still is) the prevailing doctrine of the Christian Reformed Church (CRC), whence they had been expelled. The PRC did not come to the conviction of the unconditional covenant in 1953. They had always confessed the unconditional covenant. As early as 1927, Herman Hoeksema had written the work on the covenant that would later be published as *Believers and Their Seed*. In this foundational work, he demonstrated that the truth of the unconditional covenant is more basic to the existence and nature of the PRC than is rejection of common grace.

Indeed, in an open letter to the Dutch Reformed theologian Klaas Schilder at the time of the controversy over the covenant in the PRC but before the adoption of the "Declaration of Principles" in 1951, Hoeksema contended that the PRC had already *officially* rejected the conditional covenant and adopted the unconditional covenant. Hoeksema's argument was that the Churches' rejection of the well-meant offer of the gospel, certainly an official position of the Churches, implied rejection of the conditional covenant. It is worth listening to Hoeksema on this point.

That conception [of the unconditional covenant] is binding in the PRC, not because it is the theological conception of one man, but rather because the conception of the Rev. Hoeksema is the official conception of the PRC, and the

conception of the latter [the PRC], in distinction, at least, from the liberated view, has been adopted in their rejection of the first point [of common grace adopted by the CRC in 1924]. That first point maintained that there is a favorable attitude of God toward the reprobate. . . . They [the CRC] virtually declared that the preaching of the gospel is grace for all including the reprobate. And this "puntje van het eerste punt" ["real point of the first point"] was rejected by our churches even more emphatically than the rest of the first point. . . . Your [Schilder's] churches still maintain "het puntje van het eerste punt" with application to the covenant. For what else is the conception that the promise is for all the children that are born in the historical line of the covenant than that of grace for all, elect and reprobate alike? Certainly, the liberated, however they may wish to separate election, and especially reprobation, and the covenant, cannot deny that there are reprobate in the historical line of the covenant. And if they maintain that the promise is for all, head for head, they at the same time maintain that God is gracious to the reprobate. *And the rejection of the first point of 1924 makes it binding upon all our churches to reject this view of the Liberated (Standard Bearer, Sept. 15, 1949, p. 510; emphasis, Hoeksema's).*

Hoeksema was right. The rejection of universal, conditional grace in the preaching of the gospel—the well-meant offer—implies rejection of universal, conditional grace in the covenant. The "Declaration of Principles" then only made explicit what was already implicit in the PRC, namely, that the doctrine of the unconditional covenant is the official position of the PRC.

The astute Christian Reformed theologian James Daane saw the relation between the doctrine of a conditional covenant embraced by the faction that broke with the PRC and the Christian Reformed doctrine of common grace. Writing soon after the schism of 1953 in the *Reformed*

*Journal*, Daane, no friend of Protestant Reformed theology, told the faction that had left the PRC that their embrace of a conditional covenant implied acceptance of the theology of common grace, particularly the doctrine of the well-meant offer. Daane accurately predicted their return to the CRC. Theologically, they were one with the CRC.

The doctrine of a conditional covenant that threatened to take possession of the soul of the PRC in the late 1940s and early 1950s is at loggerheads with the Reformed faith. The Reformed faith, as the message of the biblical gospel, teaches salvation by sovereign, particular grace, having its source in divine election. The conditional covenant extends the grace of God to many more than the elect by its teaching that God, in His covenant grace, promises the covenant and its salvation to all the children of believers alike at their baptism.

Because the covenant and its blessings are rooted in the cross of Christ, which, as the Canons of Dordt teach, "confirmed the new covenant" (Canons, II/8), the conditional covenant necessarily implies a death of Christ for others than the elect.

According to the conditional covenant, the cross fails to accomplish the redemption of all for whom it confirmed the new covenant. Likewise, the grace of God in the covenant promise fails to effect the salvation of all the children to whom God promises the covenant and its blessings.

The gospel of a conditional covenant is essentially the same as the doctrine of conditional salvation.

The Reformed faith is the sworn foe of conditionality in salvation, whether mission-field salvation or covenant salvation. Once and for all at Dordt, the Reformed faith condemned conditionality, specifically the doctrine that faith is a condition and that God, the promise, and salvation hang on this condition. Faith is neither "a condition of salvation," nor a condi-

tion of election (Canons, I/9, 10).

The hallmark of the false gospel of salvation by man's works and by man's will, Roman Catholic works-righteousness, and Arminian free-willism, is conditionality.

The Reformed faith, gospel of salvation by God's mercy, says "no" to conditionality in all the saving work of God in Jesus Christ. The covenant is certainly the saving work of God.

Nothing less or other than this was the victorious struggle of the PRC in 1953. The churches were not merely struggling for their existence. They were struggling that the truth of the gospel of grace might continue among them.

Far more belongs to the truth of the unconditional covenant as held by the PRC than only that God establishes, keeps, and will one day perfect the covenant by grace alone. Christ Jesus is the head of the covenant. To Him is the covenant promise made, and with Him is the covenant established, as Romans 5:12ff. and Galatians 3:16, 29 teach. This honors Christ. To strip Him of His headship in the covenant is gross dishonor of the Son of God.

In addition, the unconditional-ity of the covenant permits the covenant to be a living bond of fellowship between God and His people and between God and each one of us whom He has called as friend and adopted as child personally. Basic to the doctrine of conditionality is the notion that the covenant is a business-like "bargain" between God and the sinner. This makes covenant life the dreary business of keeping one's end of the bargain, with the terrifying possibility of coming up short always in the back of one's mind. Covenant life is as little like a contract as the joyous, exuberant life of the Christian family is like the cold, formal, suspicious goings-on at the negotiation-table of the AFL-CIO and General Motors.

It is not the least of the glories

of the unconditional covenant that it exalts and rests in divine election. The establishing of the covenant with us by gracious promise, the bestowal upon us of the blessings of the covenant, the saving of us in the covenant, and the privileging of us to believe the promise and obey the demands of the covenant are due to God's election of us in grace, as the apostle teaches in Romans 9. Against this confession of election, the enemies of the unconditional covenant object in a surly statement that has become a mantra in Reformed circles, "The covenant is not the same as election." What they mean, of course, is that reception of the covenant promise, the making of the covenant with someone, the enjoyment of the covenant blessings, and salvation in the covenant are not determined by God's election.

To which the response is: "Whose will then *does* control the covenant? Whose will do you *want* to determine the covenant?"

The PRC did not arrive at the doctrine of the unconditional covenant in 1953. The unconditional covenant was their doctrine from the beginning of their history. In 1953, their covenant doctrine was preserved for them in the face of

opposition. And 1953 put the truth of the unconditional covenant more deeply into the heart of the PRC, as only struggle—life-and-death struggle—for the truth can do.

That was a good thing.

The members of the PRC live the life of the gracious covenant, however imperfectly.

The PRC confess the gracious covenant in a church-world given over to conditions.

The doctrinal struggle for the unconditional covenant has equipped the PRC to withstand and expose the grievous, contemporary threat to the gospel of grace in virtually all the conservative Reformed and Presbyterian churches. This is the false doctrine of justification by faith and works *on the basis of a conditional covenant*. About this I have written recently in this magazine.

Whether God will use the PRC for the help of others, where the heresy of Shepherd, Schlissel, Barach, and many others is taught and tolerated, remains to be seen.

In any case, in the goodness of God, that false doctrine will get no foothold in the PRC.

As fire needs oxygen, that error needs conditions.

— DJE 

### A Word Fitly Spoken

God's covenant love to us in Christ is another stream, flowing from the fountain of unmingled grace. And here, as in the preceding instance, every truly awakened person disclaims all title to praise.... How is it possible that either God's purposes, or that his covenant concerning us, can be in any respect whatsoever suspended on the will or the works of men; seeing both his purposes and his covenant were framed, and fixed, and agreed upon, by the persons in the Trinity, not only before men existed, but before angels themselves were created, or time itself was born? All was vast eternity, when grace was federally given us in Christ ere the world began.... Repentance and faith, new obedience and perseverance, are not conditions of interest in the covenant of grace (for then it would be a covenant of works); but consequences and tokens of covenant interest.

Augustus M. Toplady,  
"Free-Will and Merit Fairly Examined"

### Still More on Lying

In the April 15, 2003 issue of the *Standard Bearer* Rev. Garrett Eriks' article, "God's Hatred of Lying," raises some interesting questions.

For example, Eriks says, "... a murderer may be caught with a smoking gun at the crime scene with a motive for the murder. He knows he committed the crime. But when he is asked in court what he pleads, he responds 'not guilty.'" Eriks calls this lying.

But had the defendant pleaded guilty, he would have forfeited any right to counsel, and to a trial by a jury of his peers, rights that are guaranteed by our laws. A trial might have uncovered any number of extenuating circumstances, and he might have been exonerated completely, or perhaps found guilty only of second or third degree rather than first degree murder.

Had the defendant been threatened by his victim? Did he have a history of mental illness? Was the victim armed? Could it have been self-defense? These factors would be brought out at trial, and could establish the extent of culpability, hence the appropriate level of punishment.

Our laws provide for degrees of both guilt and punishment, just as Old Testament laws did (e.g., Deut. 22:23-28).

If Rev. Eriks considers a plea of "not guilty" to be lying in his hypothetical case, that is his prerogative. But a guilty plea would not allow any extenuating circumstances to be considered, and would be very unwise given our system of jurisprudence.

"The authorities that exist have been established by God," we are told, and they in turn have established our system of jurisprudence.

Even Old Testament Israel had judges to hear matters brought before them.

Eriks also says that "When men teach that God loves all men and desires to save all men, they lie." And again, "The teaching that the Son and the Holy Spirit are not co-equal and co-eternal with God the Father is a lie."

Now while I agree with his theology, I am reluctant to call these statements "lies." They are expressions of a wrong-headed understanding of the Bible; they are hermeneutical error, but if we begin calling all men liars who disagree with our theology, on reasoned grounds, we are being far more strident than is called for. We must remember that those who disagree with us are not necessarily idiots, and are deserving of a certain measure of respect.

Eriks reminds us that we are to "speak the truth in love," but there is not a great deal of "love" apparent in these pronouncements.

Ralph W. Hahn  
Glenns Ferry, ID

### Response:

I appreciate very much the questions and comments the reader raises about lying. But I do not agree that the two statements called into question are in error. Allow me to explain.

I can appreciate the comments and questions of the reader concerning my example of a murderer who lies. However, my example was not meant to include all men who might be on trial for murder and plead "not guilty." The example is specific. If a man knows he has killed another man for whatever reason and he pleads "not guilty" and denies any involvement in the murder, this is lying. It could be a man pleads not guilty

to a certain charge of murder (first degree or second degree) because he thinks he has not broken that particular law, but then he should not deny killing that man. To do so is to lie. Or maybe there is a man who pleads "not guilty" to murder because he was defending himself. If the man does not acknowledge what he has done, then he lies. The reader is correct that entering a plea of "not guilty" under these circumstances is not necessarily lying. But a man ought not to attempt to free himself from the punishment he deserves for a crime by lying. This was my point. There may be extenuating circumstances, but very often men abuse our legal system by lying in an attempt to dodge the punishment they know they deserve. This I call sin because Scripture calls it sin.

Secondly, I stand by the statements, "When men teach that God loves all men and desires to save all men, they lie," and "The teaching that the Son and the Holy Spirit are not co-equal and co-eternal with God the Father is a lie." These teachings are lies because they are not in harmony with God's Word, which is the word of truth (John 17:17). A teaching that is opposed to the Word of God is a falsehood or a lie. There is room for some differences of opinion on those things that are not clearly revealed in God's Word. But it is clear that the above statements are lies.

Those who teach such things lie. This is not my conclusion but the conclusion of God's Word. In II Thessalonians 2:11, 12 the truth and the lie are contrasted in connection with the coming of the Antichrist. This same contrast is found in Ephesians 4:14, 15: "That we henceforth be no more children tossed to and fro, and carried about with every wind of doctrine, by the




sleight of men, and cunning craftiness, whereby they lie in wait to deceive; but speaking the truth in love, may grow up into him in all things, which is the head, even Christ." Before stating the calling of the Christian to speak the truth in love, Paul warns the church against those who teach false doctrine. This is what he means by "every wind of doctrine." These winds of false doctrine come "by the sleight of men, and cunning craftiness, whereby they lie in wait to deceive." Those who teach false doctrine are tricky and desire to deceive. They lie. Now I am not calling into question the salvation of those who might teach such lies.

But Scripture clearly shows that those who teach false doctrine are especially responsible for teaching the lie. They are responsible because of what the reader said: they are "not necessarily idiots." This is exactly right. They have the clear testimony of Scripture before them. They don't just have a "wrong-headed understanding of the Bible," or a "hermeneutical error," but they promote the lie. We must call false doctrine what it is according to Scripture.

But understand also, I do not call all men who disagree with my theology a liar. In this connection, we should know that it is not about my theology or "our theology," but the doctrine of God's Word. Those

who teach what is opposed to the Word of God are responsible no matter how they came to understand that false doctrine. The truth is before them in the Word of God.

The reader is right when he says that false teachers "are deserving of a certain measure of respect." In fact, we must love even those who teach these doctrines. We don't love them by tolerating their errors, but we speak the truth in love by pointing out those errors. We speak the truth in love by pointing out to the church the false doctrines being promoted in the church world.

May God preserve His truth!  
— Rev. Garry Eriks 

## Feature Articles

# The Covenant Concept (1)\*

Herman Hoeksema

\* Recently, I discovered this article in my files as an old, yellowed manuscript. How and where I got it, I do not know. The manuscript bears the title under which we publish the article, "The Covenant Concept." In addition, the manuscript states that the article was "dictated by Herman Hoeksema in 1943." The date is important. In 1943, the Reformed Churches in the Netherlands were debating the doctrine of the covenant. By this article, which undoubtedly circulated among the ministers in the Protestant Reformed Churches, if not also among the people, Hoeksema carefully and clearly laid out the Protestant Reformed covenant conception. A few years later, the Protestant Reformed ministers who introduced the doctrine of a conditional covenant into the Protestant Reformed Churches opposed the "covenant concept" that had prevailed in the Protestant Reformed Churches at every point. To my knowledge, this article has not previously been published.

— Ed.

**A**ll of the views of the doctrine of the covenant (in fact, all views possible in this connection) can be comprehended under two heads: a) those that consider the covenant as a means to an end, and b) those that consider it an end in itself.

According to the first conception it is termed a "way to salvation," an "agreement," a "promise," or, perhaps, an "alliance" (cf. A. Kuyper, *Dictaten Dogmatiek*).

According to the second conception, the covenant is essential and an end therefore in itself. It is that living relationship of most intimate fellowship of friendship that is a reflection of God's own triune life, according to which He makes Himself known to and blesses His people and they know Him and find their delight in His fellowship and service. This idea of the covenant

is founded upon Scripture. Allow us to point out the following:

1. The covenant with Adam (which certainly was not any agreement at all, nor an alliance between God and Adam, an agreement made after his creation) was a relationship that was given with Adam's creation after the image of God. God reveals Himself to Adam and speaks to him, while Adam knows God as he speaks to Him in the garden "in the cool of the day."

2. We find support in what we read of the covenant people in their relation to God: "they walked with God" (Gen. 5:22; 6:8) — to walk with someone is an act of friendship and fellowship. We read that they talked with Him, and God revealed thereby His counsel to them and hid nothing from them (Gen. 6:13; 9:9; 18:17ff.).

Moses knew and saw God face to face (Deut. 30:10), and Abraham was called the "friend of God" (Is. 41:8; James 2:23).

3. It is this idea of friendship and fellowship that is symbolized in the tabernacle and temple.

4. This idea is literally expressed in many texts: Psalm 25:11; Isaiah 55:3; 61:8; Jeremiah 32:40 (the "everlasting covenant" cannot be a means to an end); Ezekiel 37:26; John 17:23 (intimate communion of life); II Corinthians 6:16 (the tabernacle and God's dwelling with us); Revelation 21:3 (the final realization — the tabernacle is with men).

In connection with the *establishment* of the covenant, it is a much discussed question whether the covenant is unilateral or bilateral (*monopleurisch* or *dupleurisch*). Is the covenant established by God alone, or by an act of God and man? This question is closely related to the other, which was a bone of contention in the Netherlands not so long ago, viz., whether we may speak of "parties" in the covenant, or only of "parts." Of course, if the idea of the covenant is that of an agreement or alliance, it would seem to follow that 1) the covenant is established by the agreement or alliance, and, 2) that there must be at least two agreeing or contracting parties. However, the general answer of Reformed theologians is that the covenant is unilateral. In the establishment of the covenant, at least, God alone acts, not God and man. This is certainly the view of the Reformed confessions in as far as they speak of the covenant. How could the Heidelberg Catechism speak of the baptism of infants on the ground that they as well as the parents are in the covenant, if God alone had not established His covenant with them? The unilateral conception is also very strongly emphasized in our Form for Baptism. According to this form, God the Father makes an eternal covenant of grace with us, God the Son

washes us in His blood from all our sins, and God the Holy Spirit sanctifies us and dwells in us. And this is quite well maintained by Reformed theological leaders in recent years (cf. Kuyper, Bavinck, Berkhof, etc.).

Yet, this was not always clearly maintained in the development of the idea of the covenant in Reformed theology, and still less in Reformed preaching. Professor W. Heyns, in his *Gereformeerde Geloofsleer*, strongly emphasized that the covenant is unilateral, but you discover that by this nothing else is meant than that God alone establishes the promise, and that now it depends upon the acceptance of that promise on our part whether the covenant is to be realized. Those who favor the view that the covenant is a pact or agreement often present it as conditional. God alone establishes all the conditions and obligations as well as the benefits of the covenant, but the realization of the covenant requires acceptance and consent on our part.

We must, however, maintain the fundamentally Reformed view: God *alone*, and unconditionally, establishes His covenant. It is *strictly unilateral* throughout. This ought to be evident from the following:

1. From the very idea of the covenant, especially if we conceive of it as the living relationship of friendship. How could man, either as creature or as sinner, secure for himself any right, or have any power to enter into that relation, or make himself the friend of God? It is evident that the relation, as well as his being taken into that relation, must be of God only.

2. From the covenant as God established it with Adam. There is no reciprocal action recorded in the first chapter of Genesis, or in the immediately subsequent chapters, on the part of God and Adam to establish or to realize any covenant relationship. God simply created him a covenant creature after His image, and He placed him in the proper re-

lation of such a creature to Himself. Adam functions on the basis of that which God has made him as the friend-servant of his Creator.

3. From God's dealings with Adam after the Fall, especially from Genesis 3:15. God offers nothing, and makes no conditions to fallen man, but simply declares that in spite of the work of Satan and of Adam He will maintain His covenant and will put enmity between man and the devil in their generations, an enmity the positive notion of which is friendship with God.

4. From the teaching throughout Scripture: "I will establish my covenant..." (Gen. 6:18 — Noah; Gen. 17:7ff. — Abraham); "I will make an everlasting covenant of peace with you" (Is. 55:3; Ezek. 37:26); "I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel..." (Jer. 31:31; Heb. 8:8-10).

5. From the vision of Genesis 15 especially. Abraham is commanded to take sacrificial animals: heifer, she-goat, ram, turtle-dove, young pigeon, "and he divided them into halves and laid the two halves of each animal over against each other in two rows," and the Lord under the symbols of smoking furnace and burning lamp passed between the pieces. The meaning of the vision is plain. The passing between the halves of the slaughtered animals signified or symbolized the ratification of the covenant. It was a testimony on the part of the parties of a covenant, that they would be faithful in the covenant even unto and, if need be, through death. Naturally, in the case of a man's covenant, both parties would pass between the halves of the slaughtered animals. But in this case Abraham is a witness, *God passes through alone*. The covenant is His and He establishes it. It is based upon His faithfulness, and He will maintain and realize it even through the death of His Son.

As to the *realization* of this covenant, we can speak of its *objective*

and *subjective* realization. To the objective realization belongs:

1. The eternal ordination of Christ as the Head of the covenant (*institutio mediatoris*) and the election of His people in Him, so that they are one body with Him legally and organically in their election.

2. It is centrally realized in the Incarnation, which can be viewed as the ideal realization of the covenant. There we see the union of God and man in most intimate fellowship. In Christ, God dwells with us.

3. Through the cross and the resurrection, by which is established the necessary basis of righteousness for this relation of friendship.

4. It is centrally perfected in Christ's exaltation, by which the covenant-fellowship is raised to the heavenly level.

5. This central perfection of God's heavenly tabernacle will ultimately be realized at the coming of Christ and the public adoption unto children.

The subjective realization of the covenant takes place through the Spirit of Christ. We are by nature not friends but enemies of God, dead in sin, not only unworthy to be received into the relationship of God's friendship, but also wholly unfit for and spiritually unable to

fellowship with the living God. If the covenant were an agreement, we could not possibly agree; if it were an offer, we could not possibly accept; if it were conditional, we would be wholly incapable of assuming any obligation or of fulfilling any condition. It cannot be, therefore, that God realizes the covenant objectively in the death and resurrection of Christ, while the subjective realization of that covenant depends in any way upon us. On the contrary, *it is all of God*, who makes us His friends and receives us into His own party. This He does through His Spirit and Word, whereby He regenerates us, calls us, gives us the true faith whereby He justifies us, delivers us from sin and its dominion, preserves us in the midst of the world, and finally makes us completely like Christ, receiving us into His everlasting tabernacle.

Now, Reformed theologians have usually said that, although the covenant is *unilateral in origin*, it becomes *bilateral in operation and manifestation*. In the true sense, this is also expressed in our Baptism Form, for after it has developed the truth that the triune God establishes His covenant with us, it continues to teach that "in all covenants there are contained two parts," our part consisting in this: "that we love the Lord our God

with all our heart and mind and soul and strength, forsake the world, crucify our old nature, and walk in a new and holy life." These, then, constitute our "covenant obligations," yet we hasten to add that we must be very careful when we speak of these "covenant obligations," lest we should turn in the direction of synergism. These obligations are not conditions either to enter or to remain in the covenant relation, but they constitute our calling, resulting from our having been received into God's covenant. This calling we can fulfill only because God has realized His covenant within our hearts. The relation is as it is expressed in Philippians 2:12, 13: we work out what God works within us. God's sovereign covenant of grace does not destroy us as rational, moral beings, changing us into "stocks and blocks," but rather makes us His co-workers, or imitators, "that we may be followers of God as dear children" (Eph. 5:1). These obligations must not be understood, therefore, in the sense of another law imposed upon us from without as a burden, but rather as the expression of a law that God has written in our hearts, the fulfilling of which becomes our greatest delight.

... to be concluded 

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## Committing the Truth to Faithful Men (2)

Prof. Robert Decker

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Prof. Decker is professor of Practical Theology in the Protestant Reformed Seminary.

\* The text of the sermon preached at the combined seminary convocation/installation service (for Prof. Barrett L. Gritters) on September 4, 2003.

\* In the previous installment of this sermon (Nov. 15, 2003) we answered the question, "To whom must the truth be committed?" In this installment we answer two questions. The first is, "What must be committed to these men?" The second is, "How is it possible to commit the truth to these men?"

### Committing what

**T**o these faithful men who are able to teach others, the truth must be committed. The text says, "the things that thou hast heard of me among many witnesses ... commit thou to faithful men."

What Timothy heard from the

apostle was, of course, the Word of God. Paul taught Timothy Christ from the Scriptures — Christ crucified and raised, Christ the revelation of the God of our salvation. The apostle instructed him in the truth of the inspired, infallible Scriptures.

And Timothy heard that truth not just with his ears, that is, not merely in the sense that he was able to receive that truth intellectually. That, too. But there is more. He heard it in the sense that he learned the truth, he had a spiritual knowledge of the truth. It was the knowledge and assured confidence of a true and living faith that he heard. Timothy knew the truth of the gospel of Christ and he was convinced that that gospel of Christ was for him also.

He learned these things among many witnesses. That is powerful language. Literally, these witnesses were martyrs. This means that they were not merely spectators or observers, but witnesses who testified to the truth of what Paul taught Timothy. These martyrs were many. Timothy's grandmother, Lois; his mother, Eunice; and the apostle's co-workers. But above all, there was the witness of the Holy Spirit of Jesus Christ who testified with Timothy's spirit, by means of what he was taught, that he was a child of God. So it was that from childhood Timothy learned the holy Scriptures, which were able to make him wise unto salvation.

That same is true of you, professor-elect Gritters. You learned the truth of the gospel of Jesus Christ. You learned the truth in and by the church, by means of the preaching of the Word in the pulpit and in the catechism classes. You learned that truth in the seminary. There it was committed to you. And we are convinced that this truth is both the knowledge of faith and the assured confidence of faith in this sense, that it lives not only in your

mind but in your heart as well. You learned that truth among many witnesses, many martyrs — from your godly parents, when you were but a babe on mother's lap and a young boy on father's knee. They, in turn, learned from godly grandparents. You learned that truth in a Protestant Reformed Christian school. You, too, from a child have known the holy Scriptures, which are able to make you wise unto salvation. That is what we, too, have learned among many martyrs.

We have so much more than Timothy. God, the Holy Spirit, has given us the entire canon of the infallibly inspired Scriptures. We have learned that truth of Scripture. The Holy Spirit witnesses with our spirit that we are the children of God. And we have learned these things among many martyrs — witnesses.

There is the testimony of the souls of the martyrs under the altar, who cry out, "How long, O Lord, holy and true, dost thou not judge and avenge our blood on them that dwell on the earth?" They are given white robes and are told to wait awhile until their fellow saints have suffered. They have testified to the truth of the gospel and they have died the martyr's death for doing so.

There is the witness of the fathers of the church. They expounded the truth of Scripture over against all the various heresies that plagued the church in its New Testament era. And, under the guidance of the Spirit of truth whom Jesus poured out, they formulated the great ecumenical creeds of the church.

There is the witness of the Reformation fathers: Martin Luther, John Calvin, John Knox, and others. There is the witness of our Dutch fathers and English and Scottish fathers. Out of that witness came our precious three forms of unity, as well as the Westminster standards and other great confessions of the truth.

And, yes, make no mistake about it, we learned that truth at the feet of our own Protestant Reformed fathers.

Thank God every day for George C. Ophoff and Herman Hoeksema. Where would we be had they not been given the grace and courage to stand up for sovereign and particular grace in 1924? And that first generation of faithful ministers who again had to struggle for the truth against an erroneous and heretical view of the covenant and maintained an unconditional covenant (the C. Hankos, the Gerrit Vosses, and the rest of that generation).

Through these men and their students we have been given by God a rich, profound, brilliant, even unique insight into the truth. Think of it! God's unilateral, unconditional covenant of friendship with the elect in Christ Jesus. God's sovereign and particular and saving grace, by which grace alone the elect are saved in Christ. Our doctrine of preaching as the chief means of grace through which we hear the very voice of Christ and by which power the elect in Christ are brought to repentance and faith in Jesus and the reprobate are hardened and condemned in the way of their own sin and rebellion. What a rich and wonderful heritage of the knowledge of the truth of the gospel God has given us. The absolute antithesis, the truth over against the lie, God and Satan, faith and unbelief, Christ and Belial, the church vs. the world, good and evil. Now is no time for compromise, either in doctrine or in practice. Now is no time for bickering and fighting over non-essentials. That sacred trust of truth needs to be taught to others, to as many as the Lord our God shall call, in the churches and without shame. That truth of the gospel needs to be preached promiscuously to the nations wherever God in His good pleasure sends us in missions.

If that is to happen, that truth

must be committed to faithful men. That, too, is powerful language. The verb "commit" means to "place down," to "deposit," to "entrust to one's charge." Note, this is an imperative. This is not something we may or may not do. We have no choice. It is God's command to entrust that truth to faithful men. That has serious implications for professor-elect Gritters, for us soon-to-be his colleagues on the faculty of the seminary, and for the students whom God graciously gives to us.

For us who are called upon to teach, this determines our method of teaching. What we have heard, learned, is a discernible body of truth from the holy Scriptures as articulated and summed by the Reformed confessions, and as taught and maintained, by God's grace, in our churches for over seventy-five years. That truth is not subject to various interpretations or applications. It is not given us merely to be discussed or debated. It is not up for grabs. Much less is it to be contradicted or denied in any way. It must be faithfully entrusted to the charge of faithful men who shall, in this way, be able to teach others also.

That is utterly crucial. For there are at least two fundamental principles restored by the Lord through the Reformation of the sixteenth century involved in all of this. The formal principle: *sola scriptura*. The infallible Scriptures are the sole authority for the faith and life of the believer. And closely related is the principle of the perspicuity of Scripture, which means that holy Scripture is not an enigma, it is not hidden, it is not obscure, it is not able to be understood only by highly educated doctors of theology and experts. Scripture is uncomplicated, simple, clear, unambiguous, easy to understand. We must be as little children and believe it. One either

wrests the Scriptures to his own destruction in unbelief, or he believes it with childlike faith. Then he says, "My only comfort is that I am not my own but I belong to my faithful Savior Jesus Christ, who saved me from sin and death by His death on the cross, as sealed in His resurrection, and that, by God's grace alone."

Students, yes, of course, you may question what you hear. You may debate and discuss it. You may probe into the things of Scripture and the confessions. You must

feel perfectly free to do that. But remember what Rev. Hoeksema told us in our days in seminary: You must do that only within the bounds of Scripture as interpreted by the con-

fessions. What is committed to you must be learned and understood. But your learning is under the ministry of the Word and must be mixed with faith — that precious Reformed faith given to our churches.

That must become the burning conviction of your hearts by the grace of the Holy Spirit of Jesus. When it becomes that, you will become faithful men, able to teach others.


#### **Committing ... how possible**

Be strong in the grace that is

in Christ Jesus. That is how it is possible. None is worthy, it means, to commit the truth to faithful men. None is able to do that. None is worthy or able to teach others also. All of our strength must come from the grace of God. Rev. Gritters, God has called you to this sacred task. In a few moments you will be installed into that special work of the office of the ministry of the Word called professor of theology. Be strong in the grace that is in Christ Jesus. Be a man of prayer. And be assured you will be strong in the grace of Christ Jesus. He is faithful to those whom He calls.

And that same applies to all of us who teach and all of us who are preparing for the ministry.

Finally, beloved saints in our Lord Jesus Christ, we need in the seminary your love and your concern and your support. Not just dollars. We need your prayers — not just petitions in the congregational prayer (that, too, of course), but the prayers of your family devotions and your personal time with the Lord. In this way God will give us grace, His grace in Christ Jesus, to do the work of committing the truth to faithful men who shall be able to teach others also.

And all of this will be to the glory of His ever blessed name. Pray for us. 

*That truth is not subject to various interpretations or applications.*

### *A Word Fitly Spoken*

Whosoever then would be owned as a good pastor in the Church must visit those who have been cut off, seek the young, strive to heal the wounded, and feed well the sound and the vigorous; and he must also abstain from every kind of cruelty, and he must not be given to the indulgence of his appetite, nor regard gain, nor exercise any tyranny. Whosoever will thus conduct himself will prove that he is really a true pastor.

— John Calvin,  
commentary on Zechariah

# Aging

*"Now also when I am old and greyheaded, O God, forsake me not..."*

Psalm 71:18

One thing about life is certain: we all must die. Every single day brings each of us one step closer to the grave. None is immortal, although the great ones of Greece sought by epic and philosophy to cross the River Styx and achieve immortality, and Ponce de Leon scoured the New World for that elusive Fountain of Youth. Today, as well, scientists hunch over their lab dishes in the hope of prolonging life and isolating the gene that will stave off death. As some humorist put it: "Everyone wants to live a long time, but nobody wants to get old." But, alas, man is vulnerable. The elixir of life has not yet been distilled. Though they live to be a hundred years old, the grave stands ready to receive all men. Every person, believer and unbeliever, knows and must reckon with this inescapable reality. Scripture speaks true: "It is appointed unto men once to die..." (Heb. 9:27).

By their tasting of the fruit of the forbidden tree, our first parents have plunged the daughters of Eve, the sons of Adam, and all creation into certain death. "Since by man came death..." (I Cor. 15:21). Although sometimes God greatly abbreviates life by taking to Himself a young child or teenager, the usual way of dying is through the aging process.

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*Mrs. Lubbers is a wife and mother in the Protestant Reformed Church of Grandville, Michigan.*

Before the flood and during its close subsequent years, there must have been some retarding of the aging process. (There are those who attribute man's pre-diluvial longevity to the fact that the earth was not yet tilted on its axis and the sun's rays were less direct, which is a thought worth thinking about for those who bask too long under its therapeutic rays.) Nevertheless, men remained vigorous and women fertile and beautiful for hundreds of years. One has only to read the genealogies in Genesis 5 to discover the strength and productivity of man prior to the flood. And, although we often refer to the beauty of Jacob's wife Rachel (Gen. 29:17), what an exquisite woman Abraham's wife Sarah must have been! She was nearly seventy years old when Egypt's pharaoh entreated Abram for her (Gen. 12:16) and over ninety years old when Abimelech of Gerar desired her (Gen. 20:2). Caleb, one of the twelve spies, was as strong at eighty-five years of age as he was at forty (Josh. 14: 10, 11). Moses, at a robust one hundred and twenty years, was singled out with "...his eye was not dim nor his natural force abated" (Deut. 34:7). We notice, however, the gradual shortening of man's days, until Moses in Psalm 90 speaks of our expected life span as threescore years and ten; fourscore years if strength be great. He is quick to add that even if we achieve eighty years, our strength is labor and sorrow and is soon cut off in death.

Just as man expends funds and energies in his attempt scientifically to circumvent dying, so he is energetic in his pursuits to ward

off and disguise aging. Walk into any popular department store and one's senses are assailed with the creams, salves, balms, unguents, perfumes, and cosmetic helps available. Spas, once identified with the profligate Romans, flourish. Health and beauty clinics proliferate. Cosmetic surgery is routine. Nor are these luxuries limited to the rich and famous.

America is a youth-driven culture. Who, for instance, is setting the standards which dictate that a mature adult woman should look remarkably like an eleven-year old boy? In his commentary on the Psalms, Psalm 71, James M. Boice writes about being old in America: "At other times and in other cultures old age had advantages to offset its disadvantages. Elderly persons were honored and respected. Their wisdom was valued. That is no longer true in America or in the West generally. Here we value youth, and the culture is so oriented to youthful interests that many old people even try to dress and act like teenagers."

There seem to be no hard and fast rules in Scripture governing the extent to which one may go to delay or disguise aging. May one dye his/her hair? Are lifts and tucks permissible? Is trowelling on heavier makeup the answer? May one indulge oneself in facials, manicures, pedicures, or Botox treatments? Should one exercise and run five miles each day to stay taut and firm? Will an all-organic diet extend my life? Should I "accentuate the positive, eliminate the negative," as an old song has it? The Bible simply does not give commandment here. Scripture

does make reference to the scurrilous behavior of Ahab's wife, Jezebel, that she painted her face—although it certainly didn't help her any in the end (II Kings 9:30), and my own dad never tired of quoting that text to us teenage girls. Two other Old Testament references to painting one's face (Jer. 4:30 and Ezek. 23:40) are clearly characteristic of harlots.

Again, as with most adiphora, motive and one's personal calling enter the equation. One's purpose in this life, his *raison d'être*, is to glorify God and praise Him forever. Intent on that high calling, along with loving the neighbor as himself, one will have little occasion for "painting one's face." Indulging self will not be the consuming passion of my life. Short shrift will be given to "outward adorning" (I Pet. 3:3). The preoccupation of our culture with one's outward appearance will assume its proper place. And what's wrong with siding with C.S. Lewis when it comes to aging gracefully? He writes in a letter: "As for wrinkles—pshaw! Why shouldn't we have wrinkles? Honorable insignia of long service in this warfare."

Growing old is sobering. One cannot brush it aside lightly. Problems do not go away in old age, they intensify. In addition to serious ailments such as cancer and heart problems, there is that extra creak in one's bones in the morning, the sagging jowls, the drooping eyelids, that fleshy torso, the thinning hair, the wrinkles (honorable insignia or no), the capped and false teeth, the thickened veins on hand and legs, those rumbling inner organs. If we have never understood the principle of gravity before, take a look in the mirror—gravity is inexorably pulling us down. There is no stemming its controlling force. And, although it is true that some people weather the vicissitudes of life better than others, for those over fifty who respond to that mirror image by

imagining that they do not look a day over thirty, perhaps more is at stake than their eyesight.

Carefully read Ecclesiastes 12 to learn of the complete decay and dissolution of the body and its functions in aging. Eyes dimmed by cataracts; arms and hands trembling; knees unable to support the frame; teeth nearly gone; senses dulled; fear of heights; hair as white as the almond blossoms; faculties of soul, mind, will, and affection impaired; difficulty of speech; appetite lost; pleasure constricted; desire failed; body and soul disunited (the silver cord be loosed); the brain shattered (the golden bowl be broken); the heart, at last, stopped (the pitcher broken at the fountain). The wise man of Ecclesiastes does not exaggerate the pain of aging.

Ecclesiastes 12 does justice, too, in referring to the days of old age as "evil days." Not evil days with respect to sin, but evil days of trouble and affliction. Days of gradual sapping of one's productivity, desire, and interest in life. Days in which it becomes easy to be critical and peevish. Often a husband or wife has died, and an old person must shoulder the burden of life alone. Undoubtedly, the days are "evil days" to the citizens of nursing homes because we their fellow saints so often neglect them. Since the elderly seemingly contribute so little to the culture and society in which we live, they are not important anymore. The late Charles Westra wrote a poem (based on Psalm 71) about this subject in the March, 1962, issue of *Beacon Lights*:

Prayer of Mid-Life

Dear Lord,  
I see old people;  
Wrinkled,  
Gray,  
Forgotten people.

When I am old  
May I be  
Wrinkled,  
And gray,  
But not forgotten.

It is to be hoped that along with the hoary head depicted both in this passage and in Proverbs 16 comes wisdom. Like Caleb and Moses, may our determination to see and possess our promised inheritance be age defying. If anything in the latter years of aging keeps our step brisk, our interest piqued, and our focus sharp, may it be the causes of Jesus Christ and His kingdom. We must pattern David's approach to old age: opportunity yet given to testify to the generations yet to come that God is righteous and faithful and His Word to be trusted. The psalmist puts it this way in Psalm 92:14, "They [the righteous] shall bring forth fruit in old age; they shall be fat and flourishing."

Aging, however, is not primarily about weakened bodily processes; it is not even about being, regrettably, forgotten by friends and relatives. It is all about subjecting my will to my Father's will. This is the real difficulty in aging—"not my will, but thine be done." Disease may ravage the body, eyesight may fail, joints stiffen, the important question remains, "Am I, by God's grace, more and more sacrificing my desire and will to His will?" Subduing my will by His Word and Spirit takes a lifetime. I never win the battle of the dying of my will in my own strength. Even small, Pyrrhic victories are nearly impossible. Man's will stays vigorous right to his last breath. "For the good that I would I do not: but the evil which I would not, that I do. O wretched man that I am! who shall deliver me from the body of this death?" (Rom. 7:19 and 24).

A new body. A restored life with Christ forever and ever. My will harmonized with His, at last. Old and gray, but never forsaken by God.

Beauty fades. Strength wanes. We age. So, remember now thy Creator in the days of thy youth.



### ■ Signs of the Times

We read, somewhat casually, the book of Revelation. The events mentioned there seem remote from our present time and our current experience. There is presented the opening of the seals (Rev. 6), the sounding of the trumpets (Rev. 8), and the pouring out of the vials (Rev. 16). The seals present the average destructive forces that affect the earth (1/4 of the earth is touched). The trumpets represent an increase over that average to 1/3. The vials portray the final destruction of all things on this present earth.

One wonders whether the increase from the "average" to the above average destructions will be readily observable. Reports, therefore, in the news media can present some interesting facts that seem to point to such an increase of destruction. In *U.S. News & World Report*, October 20, 2003, there is a business article titled "Home-owners Taken for a Hike" — subtitled, "Storms and investment losses force insurers to raise premiums." The article explains:

When stacked up against disasters of the past, the nearly \$1 billion in damages Hurricane Isabel caused as it swept the East Coast last month will register as a relative blip on the balance sheet of the insurance industry. It will pale beside Hurricane Andrew and its \$26.5 billion of destruction in 1992. Nor will it match the Northridge, Calif., earthquakes of 1994 or tropical storm Allison, which dumped as much as 37 inches of rain near Houston in June 2001.

But Isabel came at a bad time for the industry, which has

been suffering from low yields on its bond investments, a recovering bear market, and a record decade of disasters. So, after raising homeowners' premiums 7 percent last year on average, insurers are set to ask their customers to pony up again, to the tune of an additional 8 percent on average next year, according to the Insurance Information Institute, an industry-funded data center.

**Deadly decade.** Nine of the 10 costliest disasters—the World Trade Center attacks excluded—have occurred since 1989, and total losses have exceeded \$110 billion. But it's not just ill winds that have produced pricey claims. Costly litigation awards for mold damage in states such as Texas, for example, are also raising the tab for insurers. "This has been far and away worse than any other decade on record, by several orders of magnitude," says Robert Hartwig, a vice president and economist at the institute.

All of the above is before the terrible raging fires that have devastated southern California. As of this writing, more than 2,000 homes have burned. Some 17 lives have been lost. Though at this point no one knows what the final total will be, it is already labeled as the worst fire disaster in California's history.

The past decade is labeled as the most disastrous decade "by several orders of magnitude." Are the trumpets of Revelation 8 sounding? Are we listening?

### ■ Freedom of Religion—Within Limits

There has been considerable stir about remarks made by General William Boykin, who has recently been appointed to a senior Defense Department post. Many are calling for his resignation (or that he be "pink-slipped") because of them. Fareed Zakaria in

*Newsweek* magazine, October 27, 2003, wrote:

President Bush's commission on public diplomacy recently noted that in nine Muslim and Arab nations only 12 percent of respondents surveyed believed that "Americans respect Arab/Islamic values." Such attitudes, the commission argued, create a toxic atmosphere of anti-Americanism that cripples U.S. foreign policy and helps terrorists. To address the problem the commission suggested a major reorganization of the American government, hundreds of millions of dollars of funding and creation of a new cabinet position. I have a simpler, more urgent suggestion: fire William Boykin.

What is it that has so incensed not only Zakaria but also many other editors and commentators of the media? What has offended Zakaria and others with him?

...Over the last two years the general has given dozens of addresses to evangelical Christian groups in which, describing his battle with a Somali (Muslim) warlord, he has said: "I knew that my God was bigger than his God. I knew that my God was a real God and his was an idol." He has also repeatedly explained that America's enemy was "a spiritual enemy...called Satan." The enemy will only be defeated, he added, "if we come against them in the name of Jesus." A few more of these and Osama bin Laden won't need to make videos anymore. He can just put together the greatest hits of Boykin, Franklin Graham, Pat Robertson and Jerry Falwell and they will make his point nicely—that Americans see all Muslims as enemies. Oh, and here is a quick refresher course for the Pentagon intelligence chiefs: Islam was founded, in part, as a reaction against idol worship and rig-



ously prohibits any graven images. When have you seen a statue of Muhammad?

When confronted last week, General Boykin claimed, of course, that his remarks had been taken out of context. When referring to the Somali warlords' God, he explained, he meant money and power. Untrue. In Boykin's original tale, he explained that the Somali warlord had bragged that the Americans would not capture him because his God, Allah, would protect him. "Well," General Boykin continued, "my God was bigger than his God...."

His dissembling gets almost comic over another one of his comments. Boykin routinely told audiences that God elevated George W. Bush to the presidency. "Why is this man in the White House? The majority of Americans did not vote for him," he would say. "I tell you this morning that he's in the White House because God put him there." Boykin now explains that he believes God routinely decides American elections and has done the same thing for "Bill Clinton and other presidents." This is surely the first time a conservative evangelical has argued that Clinton's election was caused by divine intervention.

Zakaria concludes with his own proposal:

Perhaps the most troubling aspect of Boykin's remark was its utter ignorance. Compare Boykin's crude machismo about "my God" being bigger than "his God" to Sen. Joseph Lieberman's eloquent—and historically accurate—remarks last Friday to an Arab-American group. "We meet here today not as Muslims or Christians or Jews," Lieberman said, "not as people of Arab or European descent or African or Asian descent.... We are children of the same God and of the same father, Abraham. We are quite literally brothers and sisters." That is the message America should send to the world. And it will cost us nothing.

Indeed—would it "cost us nothing"? It would cost us our faith and our hope of salvation.

There are, however, other troubling things about the harsh attack against this General in charge of the war against terrorism. He is quoted as having said, while appearing in dress uniform before a religious group in Oregon in June, that Islamic extremists hate the United States "because we're a Christian nation, because our foundation and our roots are Judeo-Christian. And the enemy is a guy named Satan." The General is mistaken, of course, in believing that Satan opposes this nation because it is "Christian." Certainly the nation is not Christian. This is a nation that kills its unborn infants; it gambles; it revels in godlessness when it curses and swears; it wallows in the filth of adultery, fornication, and violence of every sort. This is a "Christian" nation? Rather it becomes increasingly clear that Satan appears in control of the nation. Rather, Satan uses the "Islamic extremists," together with a multitude of editorialists and church leaders, to undermine and destroy the faithful church within the nation. Satan would silence her witness and testimony. Satan would have all to believe that Jew, Muslim, Christian, and others all serve essentially the same god. Satan would have us to believe that every religion has equal validity. Satan would also seek to silence any reference to Jesus, the Son of God—second person of the Trinity. Humanly speaking, it appears that Satan has made vast advances in accomplishing his purpose.

It is deplorable that so many denounce a general who acknowledges that ultimately Satan is the enemy who can be defeated only through the work of Jesus. It is deplorable when a general is denounced harshly for claiming that, ultimately, God placed a George W. Bush or a Bill Clinton and other presidents in the White House. It is deplorable when a general is de-

nounced when he says, "...my God was bigger than his God...." If he did not believe that, or was ashamed to confess it, why would he call himself a Christian? And has Zakaria never heard of the "providence of God" as taught in Scripture and held by all proper "evangelical Christians"?

Zakaria reveals his own ignorance of the Christian's confession while he berates the "ignorance" of the general who insists that the god of the Muslim was an idol. He stated, "Oh, and here is a quick refresher course for the Pentagon intelligence chiefs: Islam was founded, in part, as a reaction against idol worship and rigorously prohibits any graven images. When have you seen a statue of Muhammad?" Has Zakaria never heard of idols of one's imagination?

The sad conclusion would appear to be that the "evangelical Christian" cannot serve in political positions anymore in the land. Either he must not speak of his religious convictions, or many will urge that he be "pink slipped." Better still, such a one ought never to occupy a position of power and authority.

Before long, the same standards will be applied to the church. It could well be made illegal to denounce or condemn other religions or other "gods." Violations could result in fines or imprisonment. Are we ready to face that?

#### ■ "Build your own theology"

An interesting article by Andree A. Seu, senior writer in *World* magazine (Oct. 11, 2003), points out the dangerous trends in "theology" in the churches today. She presents this as a very slippery slope leading ultimately to hell. She writes:


I betook myself to see the end of the road of the Christian church's trolling for love. I circled three Unitarian Universalist churches in the phone book and drove to one on a Sunday. Unitarian churches once purported to

preach Christ, but with a scruple about the Trinitarian formulation of God; if there were no Christ, there would be no Unitarian churches. The architecture of the building I now pulled up in front of bespoke an older, fustier doctrine reminding me of the saying that when liberal winds blew through the parishes of New England 200 years ago, "the Congregationalists kept the faith, but the Unitarians kept the buildings."

The sign said "Unitarian Universalist Church of the Resto-

ration," but it was unclear what tradition was being "restored." The preacher was a young lesbian, the sermon an enthusiastic report on the feminist "Omega conference" she'd attended. Its highlights seemed to be the invoking of the Nigerian goddess Oya and a wave across the room from Jane Fonda. Buddha and Alice Walker were given an appreciative nod, but the name "Jesus" (I was paying attention) was absent. Indeed, it is no mean feat, to my reckoning, that in the entire Unitarian hymnbook, *Singing the Living Tra-*

*dition*, any hint of Him is airbrushed out. On the bulletin was an advert for a "Build your own theology" seminar....

So the world and the "church" unite to oppose the sovereign God of heaven and earth and His Son, third person of the Trinity, who alone can save and bring to the Father. But Jesus said, "No man cometh to the Father but by me." Surely, the night is far spent, the day is at hand. 

# Haggai: Rebuilding the Church

## Introduction

**T**he prophecy of Haggai, though little known, is a book of enormous value, not only as a record of God's dealings with His people in the Old Testament, but also as a reminder of God's regard for and faithful care of His church in the New Testament. The book of Haggai is a book about the church, about the calling that every member of the church has within the church, and about God's faithfulness to His church. It is, therefore, a book that very much needs to be read and understood in times such as these, times in which the church is despised and neglected and fallen into spiritual ruin.

The prophecy concerns the rebuilding of the temple following Judah's return from captivity in Babylon. Though that might seem to have little bearing on our life and calling in the New Testament, it is in fact a vivid and unforgettable reminder of the truth of the

Reformation slogan concerning the true church of Christ, that it is "reformed and always reforming." The calling that Judah had to rebuild God's house is ours also — a calling that continues until the Desire of all nations comes again as He has promised.

## The Author

Haggai is the first of the three prophets of the return. He began his prophecies about two months before Zechariah, and the two of them prophesied about thirty years before Malachi. There can be no doubt that he is the author of these prophecies, since he is named nine times in the book and twice in Ezra. His work as a prophet in Judah who brought the Word of God concerning the rebuilding of the temple is confirmed in Ezra 5:1, 2, where we read:

Then the prophets, Haggai the prophet, and Zechariah the son of Iddo, prophesied unto the Jews that were in Judah and Jerusalem in the name of the God of Israel, even unto them. Then rose up Zerubbabel the son of Shealtiel, and Jeshua (also called

Joshua) the son of Jozadak, and began to build the house of God which is at Jerusalem: and with them were the prophets of God helping them.

Haggai is also mentioned in Ezra 6:14:

And the elders of the Jews builded, and they prospered through the prophesying of Haggai the prophet and Zechariah the son of Iddo. And they builded and finished it, according to the commandment of the God of Israel, and according to the commandment of Cyrus, and Darius, and Artaxerxes king of Persia.

Some suggest that although Haggai is the author of the prophecies, this does not necessarily mean that he actually wrote the book, since he is referred to in the third person throughout. Three times, however, we read literally that the Word of the Lord came "by the hand of Haggai" (1:1, 3; 2:1; cf. also Acts 7:35; Gal. 3:19), which would indicate that he is also the one who wrote the prophecies down, so that the book and the prophecies are contemporary.

That the prophecies of the book are the Word of the Lord by the hand of Haggai reminds us of the inspiration of the Scriptures. In this book, too, God used a man to preserve his Word in writing for all ages, while insuring that what was written remained "the Word of the Lord," infallible and perfect.

We know nothing about Haggai, except that he prophesied about twenty years after the return from Babylon, as a contemporary of the prophet Zechariah, when Zerubbabel was governor of Judah and Darius king of the Persians. He is not mentioned elsewhere in Scripture, except in Ezra, and neither his prophecy nor the book of Ezra give us any information about him. There is not even any clear evidence that his name has any significance.

As far as we know, he delivered only four prophecies, each of which is marked in the book of Haggai by a date. Those four prophecies were given over a period of just under four months (fifteen weeks). Whether Haggai's career as a prophet lasted longer, and whether there were other prophecies besides these four we do not know.

All this is of some significance. That we know so little of Haggai is a needed reminder that what he says is the Word of God. The man himself matters very little in light of that important fact. That his prophecies are the Word of God and not the words of a man is important, for the message is a message that must be heard by God's people in every age. It is a Word of God the relevance of which has not changed though many hundreds of years have passed and though the circumstances of the church are ever so different.

That Haggai apparently prophesied for only a very short time speaks of the Lord's sovereignty in His dealings with His people. The men He uses to bring His Word are merely instruments of His sovereignty and grace, to be used as He

sees fit, even if it is only for a few months and to speak a few words.

### **The Date**

The book dates itself to the second year of Darius, king of Persia. This is confirmed in Ezra 4:24:

Then ceased the work of the house of God which is at Jerusalem. So it ceased unto the second year of the reign of Darius king of Persia.

This Darius is not the same man as Darius the Mede, the conqueror of Babylon, mentioned in Daniel 5:28. He had died eighteen years earlier and had been followed by Cyrus the Great, who sent the Jews back to Judah, and by several other kings. The Darius of Haggai's days is almost certainly Darius I Hystaspes, also known as Darius the Great, who ruled Persia from 520-485 B.C. This Darius is also very likely the same man as the Artaxerxes of Ezra 7:1-21 and of Nehemiah 2:1, 5:14 and 13:6, and the Ahasuerus who married Esther and is referred to in that book. Haggai, then, prophesied around 520 B.C., twenty-two years after the return from captivity during the early years of Darius' rule.

In secular history Darius is the Persian king who first tried to conquer Greece and whose armies were defeated at the battle of Marathon. It is striking that, great king though he was, none of his exploits are mentioned in Scripture, except very briefly in the book of Esther (1:1), where he is remembered as the king who ruled from India to Ethiopia. Scripture's bare mention of him is a reminder that God judges greatness by a different standard than men do. Those who are great in the world are usually of little account in the kingdom of God, and those who are unnoticed and who die unremembered in the world, like Haggai, are often of great account in that kingdom.

In the book of Haggai, Darius is important only insofar as the re-

building of the temple is dated to his reign. The important event on God's calendar in those days, that which in His eyes was worthy of note and was one of the great events of history, was the rebuilding of the temple, not the accession and power of this great king.

### **The History**

In the context of that history the book of Haggai shows that the rebuilding of God's house was the main reason for the return from captivity. God was concerned above everything else with His house and the glory of His own name in that house. Even the return of His people from captivity and their reestablishment in the promised land is only a means to that end. The Jews should have been and we must be equally concerned for the house of God.

That the rebuilding of the temple takes place many years after the return is the reason why Haggai had to bring the Word of God to God's people in Judah. It was eighteen years after the return, and the temple was not yet completed. The work on the temple had started almost as soon as the Jews had first returned to Judah. Seven months after the decree of Cyrus they were back in Canaan, and the next year they were already busy with the rebuilding of the temple and had laid its foundations (Ezra 3:8-13).

In the years that followed, however, very little more was done, so that at the time of Haggai's prophecies twenty years later, the temple was still unfinished. Originally the work had stopped because of the interference of Judah's enemies. These enemies, especially the Samaritans, had themselves interfered with the work and had hired counselors (something on the order of lawyers) who also did all they could to stop the work (Ezra 4:4, 5). Those efforts had been unsuccessful while Cyrus and his successor Ahasuerus (not the husband of

Esther but a man known in secular history as Cambyses) were still living, but when Artaxerxes (known in history as Pseudo-smerdis) became king, they were able to have the work stopped (Ezra 4:7-24). Artaxerxes listened to the charges of these enemies that the rebuilding of the temple would be an occasion for rebellion and ordered the work stopped.

Nevertheless, as God pointed out through Haggai, the interference of these enemies was not the only reason the temple remained unbuilt. The work God had given Judah to do had been neglected, and it is that neglect that God admonishes through Haggai's prophecies, urging the Jews to finish their work on the temple and promising them His blessings when they obeyed.

The Jews did obey, and the work on the temple was finished five years later in the last month of the sixth year of the reign of Darius (Ezra 6:15). We do not know if Haggai was still living or prophesying when the work was

finished. He says nothing of it. His concern was getting the work underway and encouraging the people to continue. Once that was accomplished, he fades from the scene of biblical history. God's Word through him, however, remains and continues to be of value to the church.


#### The Divisions

These prophecies of Haggai are four, each identified by the date on which it was brought, all of them in the second year of Darius. The

first is dated to the first day of the sixth month and is found in Haggai 1:1-15. The second came less than a month later on the twenty-first day of the seventh month and is found in Haggai 2:1-9. The third and fourth were about two months later, on the twenty-fourth day of the ninth month, and include Haggai 2:11-19 and 2:20-23.

Most scholars agree that these dates can be determined with quite a degree of accuracy from Babylonian records as follows:

Reference	Darius' Year	Month	Day	Calendar Date
1:1	2	6	1	29 August 520 B.C.
1:15	2	6	24	21 September 520 B.C.
2:1	2	7	21	17 October 520 B.C.
2:10	2	9	24	18 December 520 B.C.*

That the dates can be worked out so accurately is further testimony to the importance of the temple in this period of Israel's history. 

\* Cf. J. Alec Motyer, *Haggai*; in *The Minor Prophets: An Exegetical and Expository Commentary*, ed. Thomas Edward McComiskey (Baker Book House: Grand Rapids, 1992), vol. III, p. 967.

## The Fundamental Work of the Deacons (1) An Overview

**D**eacons in Reformed churches are often expected to perform various duties. The most obvious to the members of the church is that they take all the collections and they care for the financial affairs of the church. As a result, one of the deacons is often made the book-

keeper of the church, and it falls to the deacons to prepare a budget for the coming year. Perhaps they are asked to perform other duties as well, for example, organizing events such as church picnics or serving as the building committee of the church. In small churches, necessity may require them to assist the elders in their work; in larger churches in which the elders and deacons meet separately, the deacons still meet with the elders as a council, to oversee matters that

pertain to the earthly affairs of their church.

None of these is their fundamental work, however. Some of the activities mentioned above, such as being bookkeepers or members of the building committee, could be profitably assigned to other members of the church, especially in a larger congregation. Other activities, such as assisting the elders, are permitted by the Church Order adopted by Reformed churches at the Synod of Dordt, 1618-1619. And

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

still other activities, such as overseeing the general finances of the church, falls rather naturally to the deacons, because these men (if they are the kind of men God's Word requires deacons to be, I Timothy 3) are respected men, who can be trusted with the monies of the congregation.

But what is the fundamental work which God gave deacons to do in the church of Jesus Christ? With which members of the church particularly must this work be concerned? And how should this work be carried out?

With this article we begin an answer to these questions by setting forth the main principles that govern this work, and by quoting the main articles or sections of the Reformed standards that govern the work of the diaconate. The answer to the last question, the *how* of the work, will be given in succeeding articles, which will explain in more detail what the various fundamental duties of the diaconate are.



The pertinent articles or sections from Reformed standards include Articles 25 and 26 of the Church Order. Article 25 of the Church Order of the Protestant Reformed Churches reads: "The office peculiar to the deacons is diligently to collect alms and other contributions of charity and, after mutual counsel, faithfully and diligently to distribute the same to the poor as their needs may require it; to visit and comfort the distressed and to exercise care that the alms are not misused; of which they shall render an account in consistory, and also (if anyone desires to be present) to the congregation, at such a time as the consistory may see fit." This article speaks of the fundamental duties of the diaconate in the congregation. Article 26 speaks of the cooperation of the deacons with other agencies or diaconates in doing their work: "In places where

others are devoting themselves to the care of the poor, the deacons shall seek a mutual understanding with them, to the end that the alms may all the better be distributed among those who have the greatest need. Moreover, they shall make it possible for the poor to make use of institutions of mercy, and to that end they shall request the board of directors of such institutions to keep in close touch with them. It is also desirable that the diaconates assist and consult one another, especially in caring for the poor in such institutions."

Two questions asked every year in every church at the time of church visitation underscore the fundamental duties of the office of deacons. In the absence of the deacons, the church visitors must put these questions to the minister and elders: "2. Are they diligent in the collecting of the alms, and do they faithfully realize their calling in the care and comfort of the poor and the oppressed?... 4. Do they administer the finances wisely, in consultation with the minister and the consistory?" (The Church Order of the Protestant Reformed Churches, pp. 113-114).

Article 30 of the Belgic Confession speaks "Concerning the Government of, and Offices in the Church." Among the listed duties of officebearers in this article is this, "that the poor and distressed may be relieved and comforted, according to their necessities." While the article does not expressly state that this is the duty of the deacons in particular, Reformed churches have always understood the article to mean that.

And the Form of Ordination of Elders and Deacons speaks in two places of the work of the deacons. In the first part of the form, in which elders and deacons are instructed as to the nature, origin, and work of their office, we read: "From which passage (the article has just referred to Acts 6, Romans 12:8, and I Corinthians 12:28, DJK) we may easily gather what the dea-

cons' office is, namely, that they in the *first* place collect and preserve with the greatest fidelity and diligence the alms and goods which are given to the poor; yea, to do their utmost endeavors that many good means be procured for the relief of the poor. The *second* part of their office consists in distribution, wherein are not only required discretion and prudence to bestow the alms only on objects of charity, but also cheerfulness and simplicity to assist the poor with compassion and hearty affection; as the apostle requires (Rom. 12, and 2 Cor. 9). For which end it is very beneficial that they do not only administer relief to the poor and indigent with external gifts, but also with comfortable words from Scripture."

Then, after the vows are made, the minister exhorts the officebearers to diligence in their work. To the deacons he says, "And, ye deacons, be diligent in collecting the alms, prudent and cheerful in the distribution of the same; assist the oppressed, provide for the true widows and orphans, show liberality unto all men, but especially to the household of faith."



That these statements regarding the work of the deacons are based on Scripture, the passages themselves have made clear.

Acts 6, the passage that speaks of the institution of the office of deacon, makes clear that the duty of these first deacons was the care of the widows in the daily ministration. The church supplied food to its poor widows every day, in order that they might eat. This work the apostles had been doing, for they knew it was important to care for the poor widows. Yet it became apparent that the apostles were not able to do justice to this work, as well as their own fundamental task of prayer and the ministry of the Word. So deacons were appointed to care for the widows in their need.

Romans 12:6-8 speaks of the work of pastors, elders, and deacons in the church. This work is spoken of from the viewpoint of the officebearers being members of the body of Christ, serving the body as a whole. We read: "Having then gifts differing according to the grace that is given to us, whether prophecy, let us prophesy according to the proportion of faith; or ministry, let us wait on our ministering; or he that teacheth, on teaching; or he that exhorteth, on exhortation; he that giveth, let him do it with simplicity; he that ruleth, with diligence; he that sheweth mercy, with cheerfulness." Especially the references to giving and shewing mercy apply to the work of the deacons.

I Corinthians 12:28 reads: "And God hath set some in the church, first apostles, secondarily prophets, thirdly teachers, after that miracles, then gifts of healings, helps, governments, diversities of tongues." The Form of Ordination of Elders and Deacons speaks of the word "helps" as applying to the office, and even work, of the deacons: "And I Corinthians 12:28, speaking of helps, he means those who are appointed in the church to help and assist the poor and indigent in time of need." While this connection between the word "helps" and the work of the deacons might not seem obvious to the English-speaking person, the fact is that the word "helps" does have the idea particularly of aid or assistance given to one in need. To understand this, bear in mind that Paul, in his farewell speech to the elders of Ephesus, says in Acts 20:35: "I have shewed you all things, how that so labouring ye ought to support the weak, and to remember the words of the Lord Jesus, how he said, It is more blessed to give than to receive." Notice now that the noun "helps" in I Corinthians 12:28 is translated in its verb form "support" in Acts 20:35. In other words, the help of

I Corinthians 12:28 is that of assistance to those in need — and that brings to mind the work of the deacons.

The Form of Ordination also referred to 2 Corinthians 9:7: "Every man according as he purposeth in his heart, so let him give; not grudgingly, or of necessity: for God loveth a cheerful giver." This passage speaks not so much to the deacons in particular, as to the members of the church as a whole. But it is true that the cheerfulness required of every child of God as he gives for the relief of the poor and other causes of the kingdom must also characterize the deacons as they distribute the mercies of Christ.



On the basis of these passages from the Reformed confessions and Scripture, we can make the following observations, to introduce our examination of the fundamental duties of the deacons.

First of all we must remember that the proper work of the diaconate is limited.


It is limited in its objects — the work of the diaconate seeks the benefit of the poor, sick, widows, and those in the church with other particular needs. Remember that the office of deacon in the New Testament church was instituted because of the need of the poor Grecian widows, Acts 6. The mercy shown to the poor in their need can also be shown to the sick or to others with needs. In other words, the work of the diaconate is limited to those in need of mercy. So Paul in Romans 12:8 speaks of those in the church who show mercy.

Because the fundamental work of deacons is limited with respect to its objects, it is also limited in its scope. It is limited to showing mercy upon those in need, and therefore also to doing whatever is necessary to obtain the earthly means (money or otherwise) for helping those in need.

Second, we remember that although the work of the deacons is limited, it is not minor or relatively unimportant. This work is important, not only because love for God and fellow saints requires us to have compassion on the poor and needy, but also because in this work the deacons function as officebearers of Christ — that is, they picture the work He does in showing mercy on His people, and through them He actually does bestow mercy.

Third, the work of the diaconate is primarily spiritual. Inasmuch as the deacons are instruments of Christ to show mercy to His people, the Holy Spirit works spiritual blessings through them. Accordingly, the gifts that they distribute, while certainly including the material gifts of money or food, must also include the spiritual gift of comfortable words from Scripture.

Fourth, because the fundamental work of the diaconate, though limited, is important, the deacons must give themselves to that work with diligence. This is the general point of Romans 12:6-8, in which specific application is made to the deacons: "... he that giveth, let him do it with simplicity; ... he that sheweth mercy, with cheerfulness" (v. 8). The point is that those whom God has placed in positions of service in the church, and to whom God has given gifts to carry out that work, must be diligent in carrying out their work.

As we begin our examination of the work of deacons, therefore, our prayer is this: God grant us deacons who are diligent in their care of the poor and needy, and who are ready to bring to those poor and needy not only material gifts, but also words of comfort from the Scriptures. Having such deacons, the church may know that she is blessed! 

### Mission Activities

Our denomination's missionary in Pittsburgh, PA, Rev. J. Mahtani, reported recently to the members of the fellowship there of his and Rev. D. Overway's labors in Allentown this fall. There continues to be good progress made in that work. They had ten at a recent Friday evening Bible study, twelve at the first worship service the following Lord's Day, and eight at the second service. These numbers are small, but Rev. Mahtani reminded the mission in Pittsburgh how few they themselves had had when they started. On this trip the two pastors traveled many miles to visit with saints in four different locations: Schneckville, PA; Hazelton, PA; Haddington, NJ; and Norristown, PA. Because these saints are so scattered, the two men are trying to encourage them to come to a meeting of the minds and decide on one central location, but this is easier said than done. Pittsburgh and Wyckoff are also planning a get-together in the spring or summer of 2004 so that these two groups can come together to get to know the work that is being done in the area.

Our mission in Pittsburgh also celebrated their 6<sup>th</sup> Annual Reformation Celebration at the end of October. The theme for this year's celebration focused on marriage and the family. Prof. D. Engelsma spoke Friday evening, October 31, on "The Reformation's Influence on the Family — Blessing and Bane."

The delegation of Rev. D. Kleyn, representing our churches' Foreign Mission Committee, and

Mr. Jim Regnerus, representing the congregation of Doon, IA PRC, the calling church, left for a two-week visit to the Philippines in mid-October. The delegation's work was to include visiting with and giving encouragement to our missionary, Rev. A. Spriensma and his family, as well as the group in Manila, visiting a new group of contacts south of Manila, visiting the group in Bacolod City, and giving speeches at a conference on various subjects for BCGR members and new contacts in the Manila area. The delegation planned to return home on Monday, November 3.

Rev. R. VanOverloop and Mr. Gord Terpstra, as representatives of our churches' Domestic Mission Committee, along with a delegation from the Loveland, CO PRC, the calling church for Spokane, WA, were there to visit the mission station where Rev. T. Miersma is missionary. Rev. VanOverloop gave a Reformation Day lecture on October 31 under the theme, "Luther's 95 Theses 486 Years Later." The delegates visited with the missionary and his family and with the saints of Covenant of Grace PR Fellowship on Saturday, and worshiped with them on Sunday, before returning home on Monday, November 3.

Rev. A. Stewart, our denomination's missionary to Northern Ireland, and the members of the Covenant PR Fellowship in Ballymena, NI gave two Reformation Day Lectures entitled, "Does God Desire to Save the Reprobate? - Calvin versus Pighuis." The first was on October 30 in the Omagh Community House, and the second on October 31 at the Ballymena Protestant Hall.

Our missionary to Ghana, West Africa, Rev. W. Bekkering, was also privileged to present two Reformation Day Lectures to the group at

Ashaley Botwe. The first was on Friday evening, October 31, from 7:00 - 9:00 P.M. and the second, November 1, from 10-12 noon.

In news from Singapore we see that Mr. Paul Goh, who recently graduated from our seminary, continues to help out in each of the congregations there. This gives the congregations opportunity to become better acquainted with him. And Paulraj has become the first graduate of the Asian Reformed Theological School. He has returned to his native India, where he will be mentored by Rev. A. denHartog for six months.

### Evangelism Activities

Prof. H. Hanko and his wife made a tour of our churches in the west and north this fall. At each stop, Prof. Hanko gave a lecture on the topic of the split of 1953. Their first stop was at our church in Loveland, CO in late September. This was followed by Hope PRC in Redlands, CA on October 3; Lynden, WA PRC on October 17; Immanuel PRC in Lacombe, AB, Canada on October 24; and finally at Faith PRC in Jenison, MI on October 31. At each church he spoke on various aspects of the split of 1953 in our churches and doctrinal issues dealing with sovereign grace. His final lecture, at Faith, was entitled, "Conditional Theology and the Road Back to Rome."

Prof. R. Dykstra was about as busy as Prof. Hanko this October. By our count he gave three lectures over a three-week period. First he spoke at Dordt College in Iowa, October 24, then at Faith PRC in Jenison, MI on October 30, and finally at South Holland, IL on October 31. At each stop he spoke on the theme, "Tried by Fire: Why the PRC Had to Endure the Split of 1953."

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

The Evangelism Society of Covenant PRC in Wyckoff, NJ sponsored a Reformation Lecture on October 24 in their church. Their pastor, Rev. D. Overway, spoke on "What Churches Need Today."

On Thursday, October 30, the Evangelism Committee of the Randolph, WI PRC hosted a Fall Lecture given by Rev. Dale Kuiper entitled, "Walking in the Old Reformational Ways."

### Congregational Activities

This year's combined meeting of the Edgerton, MN, and Hull


and Doon, IA Martha/Ladies Bible Societies was hosted by the ladies of the Doon society. It was scheduled for October 30, and Rev. R. Smit, pastor at Doon, spoke on the topic, "Handmaidens of Jehovah."

### Minister Activities

The congregation of the Hudsonville, MI PRC voted on November 9 to extend a call to Rev. C. Terpstra to serve as their next pastor. He was elected from a trio that included also Rev. R. Cammenga and Rev. R. Van Overloop.

From a trio of the Revs. C. Haak, S. Houck, and D. Kleyn, the congregation of the Immanuel PRC in Lacombe, Alberta, Canada extended a call to Rev. D. Kleyn to become their next pastor.

Rev. M. Dick received the call to serve as the next pastor of the Byron Center, MI PRC. With Rev. Dick on that trio were Rev. G. Eriks and Rev. S. Key.

At a congregational meeting Sunday, November 2, the members of Faith PRC in Jenison, MI extended a call to Rev. S. Key to be their next pastor. 

## Announcements

### RESOLUTION OF SYMPATHY

The Men's Bible Study of Byron Center PRC expresses Christian sympathy to Sid and Lisa Miedema in the death of Lisa's grandfather,

#### MR. LOUIS LAFEBRE.

"And God shall wipe away all tears from their eyes; and there shall be no more death, neither sorrow, nor crying, neither shall there be any more pain: for the former things are passed away" (Revelation 21:4).

John Chesebro, Leader  
Aric Bleyenbergh, Secretary

### NOTICE!!

Classis East will meet in regular session on Wednesday, January 4, 2004, at the Grandville Protestant Reformed Church. Material for this session must be in the hands of the stated clerk by December 4, 2003.

Jon J. Huisken, Stated Clerk

### RESOLUTION OF SYMPATHY

The council of Loveland PRC expresses Christian sympathy to Mrs. Florence Schwarz in the death of her husband,

#### ART SCHWARZ.

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

Rev. Garrett Eriks, Pres.  
Victor Solanyk, Clerk

### RESOLUTION OF SYMPATHY

The council and congregation of Grandville PRC express their Christian sympathy to Dave and Julie VanOverloop and family in the death of Dave's mother,

#### MRS. JUNE VAN OVERLOOP.

May they be comforted by God's Word, "My flesh and my heart faileth: but God is the strength of my heart, and my portion for ever" (Psalm 73:26).

Rev. Kenneth Koole, President  
Dan Key, Assistant Clerk

### Yearbook changes:

The phone number and e-mail address of Rev. Spriensma (in the Philippines) should be:

011-63-2-660-7825;

[spriens@edsamail.com.ph](mailto:spriens@edsamail.com.ph).

Please make that change in your 2003 Yearbook.

### REMINDER:

Heritage Christian High School in South Holland, IL is now in its 3<sup>rd</sup> year of operation, teaching a full course load as a four-year high school. As we plan for the 2004-2005 school year, we ask qualified Protestant Reformed teachers to consider our need of one additional staff member. Interested individuals, please contact our Administrator, Ralph Medema, at (708) 339-1733 [[Ralph.medema@heritagechs.org](mailto:Ralph.medema@heritagechs.org)] or Education Committee Chairman, Andy Birkett, at (708) 895-8214 [[andy@preferredwindowanddoor.com](mailto:andy@preferredwindowanddoor.com)]."

### INTRODUCTORY ISSUE

Have you received your introductory issue of the *SB*? Have you given it to a friend? Please do.

## Reformed Witness Hour

### Topics for December

Date	Topic	Text
December 7	"The Appearance of God's Kindness and Love"	Titus 3:3, 4
December 14	"The Appearance of Grace Bringing Immortality"	II Timothy 1:9, 10
December 21	"Why Jesus Came"	I Timothy 1:15
December 28	"Mene, Mene, Tekel, Upharsin"	Daniel 5