

THE *February 1, 2004* STANDARD BEARER

A REFORMED SEMI-MONTHLY MAGAZINE

In This Issue:

- ♦ A Necessary Baptism 194
- ♦ Assurance for All the Children 196
- ♦ Letters 199
- ♦ All Around Us 202
- ♦ The Marrow Men (1) 204
- ♦ Haggai: Rebuilding the Church (4) 206
- ♦ Nitrogen Cycle 208
- ♦ The Intermediate State 210
- ♦ Book Reviews 213
- ♦ News From Our Churches 214

Volume 80 ♦ Number 9

A Necessary Baptism

"Then cometh Jesus from Galilee to Jordan unto John to be baptized of him. But John forbad him, saying, I have need to be baptized of thee, and comest thou to me? And Jesus answering said unto him, Suffer it to be so now: for thus it becometh us to fulfill all righteousness. Then he suffered him. And Jesus, when he was baptized, went up straightway out of the water: and lo, the heavens were opened unto him, and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove, and lighting upon him: and lo a voice from heaven saying, This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased."

Matthew 3:13-17

It was necessary for Jesus to be born humbly. This was the way to the cross. It was necessary that Jesus be baptized. This also was the way to the cross.

John had labored in the wilderness near the Jordan river for about six months before Jesus came to

him. John preached the theme, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand" (v. 2). Those who repented, confessing their sins, were baptized by John with the baptism of repentance for the remission of sins (Mark 1:4). Upon evidence of sincere repentance ("fruits meet for repentance," v. 8), John gave them the sign that they were forgiven, washed of all their sin.

While John was busy preaching and baptizing many, Jesus came to him (Luke 3:21). The reason Jesus came to John was "to be baptized of him." This caught John by surprise. Why "comest thou to me?" Upon first consideration we are as surprised as John. So we are not surprised that John would refuse to baptize Jesus.

John had two good reasons for refusing to baptize Jesus. First, John's baptism was one of repentance and of the remission of sin. Those who sought John's baptism did so because they were conscious of their sins and sinfulness. Their repentance indicated their desire to be delivered from their sin. Now Jesus came to be baptized with that same baptism. But how can that be, since Jesus had no sin. John had learned from his parents and

from his study of the Old Testament Scriptures that Jesus was holy and good, the Lamb without blemish and spot, the Messiah. John saw that there was nothing for which Jesus needed forgiveness. We see Jesus even more clearly than John did. We know Jesus to be the person of God the Son who is always perfect. And according to His human nature, Jesus was without the guilt and corruption of sin. Jesus never knew, by experience, what repentance was. Yet He came to John to be baptized of him. Why did Jesus need to be baptized?

John's second reason for refusing to baptize Jesus was the fact that he believed that Jesus should be baptizing him. John knew that, unlike the perfect Jesus, he was a sinner and needed the baptism of repentance and forgiveness. Also, Jesus should baptize him because, while John baptized with water, Jesus baptized with the Holy Spirit and with fire (v. 11). John wanted the reality of which water baptism was the sign.

So John believes it wrong for him to baptize Jesus. Jesus should be baptizing him.

As insistent as John was to refuse Jesus' request to baptize

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

The Standard Bearer (ISSN 0362-4692) is a semi-monthly, except monthly during June, July, and August, published by the Reformed Free Publishing Association, Inc., 4949 Ivanrest Ave., Grandville, MI 49418.

Postmaster: Send address changes to the Standard Bearer, P.O. Box 603, Grandville, MI 49468-0603.

REPRINT POLICY

Permission is hereby granted for the reprinting of articles in our magazine by other publications, provided: a) that such reprinted articles are reproduced in full; b) that proper acknowledgment is made; c) that a copy of the periodical in which such reprint appears is sent to our editorial office.

EDITORIAL POLICY

Every editor is solely responsible for the contents of his own articles. Contributions of general interest from our readers and questions for The Reader Asks department are welcome. Contributions will be limited to approximately 300 words and must be signed.

EDITORIAL OFFICE

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

BUSINESS OFFICE

The Standard Bearer
Don Doezeema
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@cprfbkstore.fsnet.co.uk)

SUBSCRIPTION PRICE

\$17.00 per year in the U.S., US\$20.00 elsewhere.

ADVERTISING POLICY

The Standard Bearer does not accept commercial advertising of any kind. Announcements of church and school events, anniversaries, obituaries, and sympathy resolutions will be placed for a \$10.00 fee. These should be sent to the Business Office and should be accompanied by the \$10.00 fee. Deadline for announcements is at least one month prior to publication date.

16mm microfilm, 35mm microfilm and 105mm microfiche, and article copies are available through University Microfilms International.

Website for RFP: www.rfpa.org
Website for PRC: www.prca.org

Him, so insistent was Jesus that He be baptized by John. Jesus had two things in mind.

First, Jesus knew that He stood before John, not as an individual, but as intimately united with His people. When the Father, in eternity, gave to Him a people, they and He were united in such a way that Jesus became their legal and organic Head. This union with His people means that the guilt of all of their sins and sinfulness was imputed to Him. The curse of our sin was laid on Him. As He stood before John the Baptist, Jesus sees Himself to be made sin. He must be baptized, for His baptism is to be submerged into death as the punishment of His people's sin. Therefore, from the perspective of His union with His people, Jesus needed to be baptized, to be cleansed, to receive the baptism of the remission of sin.

Second, Jesus knew that He needed to be baptized now — at this point in His life and ministry. This is the way that Jesus enters into His public ministry. Until now He was preparing Himself. But now He is ready to take on the task of being the Good Shepherd. In order to be the Good Shepherd, Jesus must enter the sheepfold by the door, not by climbing in some other way (John 10:2, 3). You see, Jesus, by being baptized, is accepting the responsibility of being the Head of His people, even though it meant that He would have to bear the punishment for their sin. The path that follows from His baptism leads directly to the cross. From this perspective, too, Jesus must be baptized.

This was hard for Jesus. It was difficult to accept the responsibility of being one with His people and of representing them, because it meant bearing the result of all their sins. That is why we read that Jesus prayed when He was baptized (Luke 3:21). In this prayer He consecrated Himself to God and to doing God's will. In prayer He gave Himself up to being obedient

to God. Second, in this prayer Jesus was expressing His need for God's blessing. He needed God's blessing to do what He had to do. He knew experientially His need for the Spirit to equip Him for the great task that lay ahead of Him. Jesus knew He had to be baptized, and everything this meant. So He prayed!



That which finally convinced John to baptize Jesus is Jesus' statement, "Thus it becometh us to fulfill all righteousness." Jesus was telling John that it was only by His being baptized by John that they would fulfill righteousness.

John had preached the necessity of repentance. With that he also preached the promise of the forgiveness of sin and of entrance into the kingdom of heaven. And to show that there is forgiveness, John gave the sign of baptism — the washing away of sin. It is right to have the promise of forgiveness accompany the demand to repent and believe. Forgiveness is promised us in the way of our repentance.

But why is this so? Why should one who repents be forgiven?

Is it the case that repentance makes one worthy of forgiveness? Absolutely not! That would make repentance a work of man that earns forgiveness. That would deny grace.

John preached remission of sin to the repenting ones on the basis of the promise of God. This promise was proclaimed throughout the old dispensation and was portrayed most graphically in the sacrifices. But there was yet no completed basis for that which John (and all the other Old Testament prophets) preached. God's promise was sufficient reason for this to be preached by John and the prophets. God swore that His promise would be completed and fulfilled. But as yet the promise was not fulfilled. Jesus' real bap-

tism would complete God's promise.

John preached that the kingdom of heaven was at hand. That meant that God would soon send His Son into the world to establish the basis for the promise of forgiveness. Jesus came to realize the basis for the truth of John's preaching: repentance unto salvation.

It is to the need for this basis that Jesus spoke when He said, "it becometh us to fulfill all righteousness." God's attribute of righteousness or integrity must be fulfilled, i.e., completed, in the sense of performed. God cannot promise forgiveness without His righteousness demanding a solid basis. Forgiveness is rightly granted only because the punishment of each and every sin of His people has been met. God's righteousness requires that Jesus die (exactly what His baptism symbolized) for there to be forgiveness.

That which convinced John to yield to Jesus' insistence that He be baptized was submission to God's righteousness. Jesus' death (baptism) would make it righteous for God to forgive.



John's baptizing of Jesus received God's approval. And Jesus' willingness to be baptized received God's approval.

We are told that Jesus "went up straightway out of the water." It is difficult to determine whether these words signify something special or something that was the ordinary. What we may know for sure is that God would not leave His Son in Jordan (which word means "death"). Jesus immediately came out.


And then, "the heavens were opened." The text in Luke 3:21 implies that the opening of the heavens was an answer to the baptism and to the prayer of Jesus. First, out of the heavens came the Spirit of God in the form of a dove. In Scripture the Holy Spirit is symbolized by oil, by fire, and here by

a “dove.” The dove in Scripture is a symbol of meekness. That God gave to Jesus the Spirit, in the form of a dove, means that God was answering Jesus’ prayer to be equipped for the task of representing His people and of suffering the punishment for all their sins. For this task Jesus was best equipped with meekness. For this work Jesus would need a meekness greater than that of Moses. When the Lord would lay on Him the iniquity of all His people, then Jesus would need the meekness of allowing

Himself to be led as a lamb to the slaughter, not opening His mouth (Is. 53:7).

Second, out of the opened heavens came the voice of God. This voice was meant first for Jesus, “Thou art my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased” (Luke 3:21). God spoke these words out of heaven at critical moments in Christ’s life, at times when Jesus needed encouragement from His Father. Now God declares to Jesus that His willing obedience to bear the sins of the people given to Him

— even unto death — was pleasing to God.

And God spoke these words for John and for us: “This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased” (v. 17). John learned that God’s approval was given to Jesus. John learned from this declaration of God that all righteousness is fulfilled in Christ. We too must hear God’s declaration about His Son and His willingness to be baptized for us. We learn that in Jesus’ real baptism there is forgiveness. What a gospel! 

Editorial

Assurance for All the Children

God wills the salvation of all His elect children. He also wills that all His children have the assurance of their salvation. He wills that they have the assurance of their salvation as soon as they are saved and that they continue to have this certainty to their dying breath. The assurance of salvation is an integral part of salvation itself.

The will of God that all His children enjoy the assurance of their salvation is an aspect of His Fatherly love in Christ for all of them.

This will of God is not absolute and unqualified, so as never to allow for the interruption of this assurance, for example, when the children of God suffer what the Canons of Dordt call “melancholy falls” into sin (Canons, 5/6). Neither does this will of God rule out times when the experience of assurance is weaker. Nor does this will of God prevent the devil from afflicting God’s children with the fiery darts of doubt, even on their deathbed. To these struggles of the believer with

doubt, we return later in this series on assurance.

But these instances of uncertainty are the exceptions, not the rule. They are abnormalities in the spiritual life of the saints, not the normal experience. They are grievous injuries inflicted by the enemies of faith—sin and Satan—not faith’s own way of life.

God wills that, amidst all the uncertainties of earthly life, we are certain of our salvation. He wills this certainty for all His children, not only for a select, favored few. He wills assurance for the newly saved, as well as for the veterans in the Christian life. He wills assurance for the weak Christian, as well as for the strong. He wills assurance for those of little faith, as well as for those of great faith. He wills assurance for the one who is least sanctified, as well as for the holiest of the saints. He wills assurance for the covenant child in her childhood and youth, at the very beginning of the pilgrimage, as well as for her old grandparents, who see the heavenly fatherland only a little way off.

“Only His Best and Dearest Friends”

The truth that God desires all His children to have assurance of salvation condemns the teaching about assurance that prevails in Reformed churches heavily influenced by Puritanism and pietism. This is the teaching, referred to in the previous editorials, that only a few of God’s children ever arrive at “full assurance,” that is, certainty, of their salvation. In addition, this teaching holds that even the few who do arrive at certainty must struggle with doubt for many years until finally they achieve certainty.

According to this doctrine, many Reformed people believe the gospel and by their faith are assured that the Bible is the Word of God and that Christ is the Savior. They even trust in Him for salvation. Nevertheless, they lack assurance. They doubt. They doubt their salvation. They doubt Christ’s death for them. They doubt that God loves them. They doubt that they will go to heaven when they die. The explanation,

according to their churches, is that assurance is only for a few Christians. And even these favored few acquire assurance only by working for it for a long time.

Describing the Puritan view, which Packer himself embraces and which has influenced Calvinistic ministers and churches in the Netherlands, Great Britain, and North America, J. I. Packer has written:

"Full assurance" is a rare blessing, even among [believing] adults it is a great and precious privilege, not indiscriminately bestowed. "Assurance is a mercy too good for most men's hearts ... God will only give it to his best and dearest friends."

After faith and conversion, according to these Puritans and their modern disciples, the convert does not have assurance. He ought not expect to have assurance. The Spirit has to give assurance, and "till the Spirit does so ... [the believer] lacks assurance; which, said the Puritans, *seems to be the case of most Christian people* (J. I. Packer, "The Witness of the Spirit: The Puritan Teaching," in *Puritan Papers*, vol. 1 [P&R, 2000], pp. 20, 21; emphasis added).

This conception of the Christian life and experience passes for great spirituality in some quarters.

On the basis of the gospel and the Reformed confessions, I judge this conception of assurance to be pernicious error. It is dishonoring to God, who is a tender Father to all His children, not only to a favored few. It is destructive of the comfort of many of God's people, who languish in black doubt on account of this teaching. It creates Reformed and Presbyterian churches that differ not a whit from the Roman Catholic Church and the Arminian assemblies, for all alike are full of members who profess to believe the Bible and to trust in Christ, but who cannot be sure of their salvation.

The teaching that only a few believers have assurance divides

the congregation as effectively and disastrously as does the doctrine of two baptisms. Here, close to God—at the table of the Lord—are the spiritual elite, God's "best and dearest friends." Over there, far from God, are the rest—the majority—not merely less dear friends, but for all they know His enemies.

This doctrine of assurance sends many to hell, for the doubt of God's promise that the doctrine instills, nourishes, and encourages is unbelief. And unbelief damns.

However this doctrine of assurance may have found entrance into Reformed churches, it is an alien element in the body of Reformed truth. It may be a Puritan doctrine. It is not Reformed doctrine. The Reformed faith does not tolerate—for years, lifetimes, and generations!—much less promote, doubt. The Reformed faith gives comfort, certainty, assurance. A Reformed church is not a congregation of doubters. It is a congregation of believers and their covenant children, who by virtue of the Spirit of Jesus Christ—no sceptic! no doubter!—can confess that they possess the comfort of belonging to Jesus Christ (Heid. Cat., Q. & A. 1).

Assurance as Fatherly Will

According to the Puritan doctrine of assurance, God wants most of His children to live much, if not all, of their life in doubt of their salvation. That is, He desires that they live in doubt of His Fatherly love for them. This is a dreadful spiritual condition, for it is the terror of God's hatred.

This doctrine casts aspersions on the Fatherhood of God.

It is the will of God, as the good heavenly Father, that all His children know His love for them. From the Fatherhood of God in Jesus Christ come not only the blessing of the children's salvation, but also the benefit of the children's assurance of salvation.

Is there an earthly father, especially a Christian father, who likes to have most of his children go through much of their life doubting whether he is a father to them? Are there Christian parents who want most of their children to live their life long in fear that their parents hate them and are bent on their destruction? Are there Reformed parents whose pleasure is that most of their children are so paralyzed by fear that they dare not even take supper with their parents?

Is it not rather the case that more than anything else we earthly fathers want all our children to be perfectly sure that they are our children, loved by us with a father's love and welcomed into our fellowship? Do we not work at this from their very birth?

Is God less a Father than we?

Are we really to suppose that the heavenly Father demonstrates such extreme partiality as to give to only a few of His favorite children the fundamental blessing of knowing His love for them? Are we really to suppose that He leaves the rest to tremble in doubt, whether He hates them and likely will damn them?

How senseless of God to accomplish the work of salvation for all His children, but then to leave many, or even most, of us in constant doubt of this, our salvation! God does not simply will our salvation. He wills also that we be assured of our salvation, so that our salvation does us some good

and so that, knowing our salvation, we will love Him, thank Him, serve Him, and glorify Him.

God has made known in Scripture that assurance of His love, and therefore certainty of their salvation, is His Fatherly will for all His children. He puts on the lips of every one of His children, that is, every one who by His grace believes on Him in Jesus Christ, a prayer that begins, "Our Father which art in

A Reformed church is not a congregation of doubters.

heaven" (Matt. 6:9). Implied by this address of God is that the one who prays knows God as his Father for the sake of Jesus Christ. This is assurance of one's sonship and salvation. One cannot know God as his Father without knowing himself as God's child.

If someone is doubtful about his salvation, he doubts that God is his heavenly Father. And if he doubts that God is his Father, he cannot pray. For him to go through the motions of prayer would be hypocrisy. Confidence that God is our Father in Christ, that is, assurance that we are saved, is the very foundation of prayer (Heid. Cat., Q. & A. 120). Only that prayer is acceptable to God, and heard by Him, in which the one who prays has the firm confidence (German: "*festen grund*") that, notwithstanding his own unworthiness, God will certainly hear his prayer (Heid. Cat., Q. & A. 117).

To every one who fears Him—weak and strong, young and old, child and graybeard—God gives Psalm 23 as his or her own confession: "The LORD is my shepherd." To say this, from the heart of course, is to have certainty of salvation.

Concerning all the elect, quickened, believing members of the church, at any stage of their spiritual development, the apostle says in Ephesians 3:12: "In [Christ Jesus our Lord] we have boldness and access with confidence by the faith of him." The apostle includes the covenant children and young people, whom he will recognize as members of the church in chapter 6:1-3, as well as their parents.

It was by no means the least serious aspect of the grievous error of the Puritans regarding assurance, as it is not the least serious aspect of the teaching of their modern disciples, that, as the rule,

they reserved, and reserve, assurance for old people. Assurance comes only with age, usually old age. The children and young people of the church are taught to live in doubt of their salvation. As a result they do live in doubt, terrifying doubt.

What a daring assault on God's Fatherhood and contradiction of His covenant Word!

The covenant Father says, in the gospel and in the baptism of the children, "I am the God in Jesus Christ of believers and of their children." The Puritan ministers said to the children, "God is not your God, at least while you are children, and very likely not until you become old men and old women. If He is your God, you cannot know Him as your God. You must therefore live in terror of Him."

This was not only false doctrine about assurance. It was also sin against the covenant. Denying assurance to the children of believers is connected with the false doctrine of the covenant that views the baptized, covenant children of believers as unsaved until such a time as they receive a "conversion experience."

According to Hebrews 10:19, every man, woman, and child who trusts alone in the one sacrifice of Christ, renouncing the Old Testament ceremonies and every human work, has boldness to enter the holiest. This is some boldness, for the holiest is where the holy God dwells. Every one who trusts alone in Jesus Christ is exhorted, not to have full assurance of faith, but to draw near to God in the full assurance that every one of them has. Every one of them has this boldness and assurance by virtue of his faith in Jesus Christ and by virtue of this faith alone: "in full assurance of faith."

Are we really to suppose that the heavenly Father demonstrates such extreme partiality as to give to only a few of His favorite children the fundamental blessing of knowing His love for them?

In Hebrews 10:19ff., the apostle is not speaking to a select few in the congregation, perhaps some of the old men and old women who have struggled with doubt for fifty or sixty years and worked hard all that time to attain to certainty. But he speaks to all who profess Christ and the Christian faith with a true heart.

There is no need to belabor what is perfectly plain in the entire Bible: God's will for all His children is that they enjoy assurance of their salvation. The very purpose of I John is that all who believe on Jesus Christ may know their salvation. "These things have I written unto you that believe on the name of the Son of God; that ye may know that ye have eternal life, and that ye may believe on the name of the Son of God" (I John 5:13).

God wills that we know that we are saved, that we have eternal life.

Who may and must know this? Only God's "best and dearest friends"? Only a favored few of God's elect, redeemed, and regenerated sons and daughters?

The God of I John is far more Fatherly and gracious than the Puritan preachers and their modern disciples.

"You that believe on the name of the Son of God"! Every one who believes on the name of the Son of God!

Do you believe on Jesus Christ as He is presented in the gospel of the Scriptures? You have eternal life! Know it! Be assured of it! Be absolutely certain of it!

Do not let anyone rob you of this knowledge. Let them steal your possessions, your freedom, your reputation, anything and everything earthly, if need be! But not the knowledge that God is your Father for Christ's sake and that you are His beloved, saved son or daughter!

Do not let Satan rob you of assurance.

Nor your Reformed minister.

And not the theology of the Puritans.

— DJE 

The Sunday Evening "Gospel" Service

Rev. Kortering's series on "Mission Preaching in the Established Church" (*Standard Bearer*, March 1, 2003; April 1, 2003; June 2003; August 2003; Nov. 1, 2003) raises the issue of evangelistic worship services. I thought that *SB* readers would be interested in some observations on this subject by a PRC missionary laboring in the British Isles. In many churches in the United Kingdom generally and in Northern Ireland in particular, it is customary that the Lord's Day evening service contain a "gospel" sermon. Moreover, sometimes even the morning speech is largely, or even especially, addressed to the unbeliever. There are, however, many serious problems with this practice, especially in the areas of exegesis, the nature of the gospel, doctrinal preaching, worship, Arminianism, hawking Jesus, and the nature of the church.

1. The Scriptures are written for the church and simply do not contain enough texts to preach exegetical sermons for unbelievers 52 times or more a year, year in and year out. This results in the "gospel" preacher engaging in forced, and thus flawed, exegesis. As a former lay preacher entrenched in this system, and as one who has heard many such sermons, I know whereof I speak. Since often the text does not lead where the preacher wants it to go, it must be compelled to yield the desired evangelistic sermon. As well as grieving the Holy Spirit who inspired the Word of God (and the child of God who understands what is going on), this practice fails to teach the congregation to interpret the Scriptures rightly.

2. This forced exegesis results in the "potted gospel," which al-

ways contains what the minister considers the bare essentials of the gospel (and not much else) and frequently finishes with an appeal of various lengths tacked on at the end. After a little exegesis at the start of the sermon, the message often consists of something little more than an expansion of the "five spiritual laws," with a concluding exhortation very like that of the week or month or year before. Many listeners confess to being bored with such sermons. Christians are tempted to a certain smugness: "We're forever hearing that people need to be saved, but we're already converted. In at least half of the sermons we hear, the holy God of heaven and earth has little or nothing to say to us by way of doctrine, reproof, correction, and instruction in righteousness (cf. II Tim. 3:16)."

3. It is evident from all this that the congregation is not properly fed through such a system. With at least half of the church's services devoted to preaching the potted gospel, there is simply no way in which the minister can proclaim "all the counsel of God" (Acts 20:27) — something necessary for the great work of "edifying ... the body of Christ" (Eph. 4:12). The Holy Spirit has led the church into the truth over the last 2,000 years, but where over 50% of the church's worship services are given over to "gospel" services, the congregation will never grasp the riches of the Reformed faith. Thus true confessional Christianity and doctrinal preaching is ruled out. Especially the doctrine of God — His Being, Persons, attributes, and decrees — and the doctrine of the church — her nature, attributes, marks, sacraments, worship, and discipline — are corrupted or rarely treated. This results in seri-

ous ignorance of God's truth and weakness in the church's members, which leaves them susceptible to further errors. In the Brethren assemblies, this problem is particularly acute because they not only have an evening gospel service, but they have no ordained and few able speakers. Thus they need special weekday "ministry" services, through which some of their more capable men provide a supplementary diet.

4. This all-absorbing focus on evangelism — what John Kennedy of Dingwall would call "Hyper-Evangelism" — shapes the whole evening service. Uninspired poems (called "hymns" in popular parlance) are sung instead of the God-breathed Psalms, in part because the Psalms simply do not serve the purpose of the "gospel" service, for they do not create the right "atmosphere." Besides, they are filled with imprecations on the wicked! Enter, too, the "ministry in song," whereby one or more singers and/or musicians, male or female, entertain the audience while seeking to sing the sinner into the kingdom of heaven. Thus the ethos of the "gospel" service moulds the church's worship and hence the members' ideas of the church.

5. The whole approach proceeds from — and thus reinforces — Arminianism, revivalism, baptistic individualism, and fundamentalism. In his *Paisley: The Man and his Message*, Ian Paisley, Northern Ireland's greatest exponent of the Sunday evening "gospel" service, includes amongst those who "primed [his] pulpit pump" noted Arminians John Wesley and R.A. Torrey. The evening "gospel" approach and the Arminian hymnbooks mean that even where outright Arminianism is not preached, it must certainly be tolerated so

that Arminians in pulpit and pew will not be disciplined. Thus confessional Christianity and sound doctrinal preaching enforced by church discipline are ruled out. Revivalism hereby excludes biblical reformation. Hyper-evangelism readily leads to lay preaching — a great scourge in the United Kingdom that is condemned by the Westminster Larger Catechism (Q & A 158). Those who forthrightly oppose Arminianism, and the Sabbath evening “gospel” meeting which it foments, are then dismissed as hyper-calvinists! Never mind that Calvin and all the Reformed fathers taught antithetically sovereign and particular grace and would have had no time for the modern innovation of the Sunday night “gospel” service with all its trappings!

6. Arminian terminology such as “accepting Christ,” “commitments,” and “letting Jesus into your heart” find ready acceptance in Sunday night “gospel” services. In his *Jesus Savior and the Evil of Hawking Him*, Herman Hoeksema speaks of “hawking Jesus” as “one of the most sinister” of “the evil tendencies of our age” (p. 1). He explains,

By hawking Jesus I mean all such preaching as leaves the impression, directly or by implication, that He is impotent to save unless the sinner first wills and gives his consent. This is done directly by the denial of predestination, by the preaching of a Jesus for all, and by the teaching of the free-will of man by which the latter is able to accept or to reject the proffered salvation. But it is also done indirectly, when preachers change the grace of God into an offer of God to all and present Jesus as a poor beggar, standing outside the door of man’s heart, begging him to let Him in and give Him a chance to save the sinner. It is done in various forms and degrees. But all such preaching as finally leaves the impression that it is at all up to man, to the sinner, whether Jesus will save him or not, is hawking Jesus, or rather,

it is an attempt to hawk Him (p. 17).

Another referred to this as “making a begging bowl out of the Son of God.” This is rife in Northern Ireland, especially where the Sunday evening “gospel” service has gotten a hold.

7. The Sunday evening “gospel” service proceeds from a total misunderstanding of the nature of the church, which is “the house of God” and “the pillar and ground of the truth” (I Tim. 3:15) and “an assembly of those who are saved” (Belgic Confession 28). The true gospel minister must address the Lord’s congregation: “Beloved in our Lord Jesus Christ, called to be saints.” This, of course, does not rule out direct addresses in a sermon to those outside of Christ, especially where the text itself leads this way. But true Reformed churches do not want to go the way of the Sunday evening “gospel” service. Few Reformed churches have become apostate overnight. Normally, the way of apostasy runs like this: a Reformed church becomes an evangelical church, which, through further departure, slides into a fundamentalist church, and eventually its Arminianism takes it into full-blown modernism. True Reformed churches must not even start on that track.

(Rev.) Angus Stewart,
Covenant Protestant Reformed
Fellowship in Northern Ireland

RESPONSE:

We appreciate very much the contribution that Rev. Stewart gives to us regarding the abuse of “gospel services” in the British Isles. It helps us to understand the thinking of those who abandon or replace the rightful preaching of the gospel with wrongful substitutes. We do well to heed such warnings. We continue to pray for him as he does missionary work among many of those who have abandoned “the old paths.”

I like to spend a little time ad-

ressing his comment, “But true Reformed churches do not want to go the way of the Sunday evening gospel service.”

First, I do appreciate the brother’s care in not accusing me of advocating the evils which he enumerates regarding such abuse in the British Isles. As our readers can testify, the article dealing with “gospel services” is the last in a series of five articles. They were written at one time and constitute a unit. Throughout these articles I tried to identify what the local church’s role is in doing mission work. I stand convinced that mission outreach is not done by the church only in some “mission station” in a distant place, but the local church has the duty to obey the injunction given throughout Scripture to “make disciples of all nations.” The established church must concern herself with outreach ministry. I suggested that part of that outreach ministry includes the membership of the church sharing the gospel with family, friends, neighbors, and all who cross their paths. In connection with an organized effort to do this, we can include an evening service geared to receive such people whom God is pleased to bring under the gospel. This obviously is once or at most twice a year and a special event.

I appreciate that Rev. Stewart also acknowledges that the fact that the focus of the preaching is always upon the congregation “does not rule out direct addresses in a sermon to those outside of Christ, especially where the text itself leads this way.”

The difficulty, I see, is the use of a term that is loaded with heresy and misuse, as the brother so capably illustrates. Certainly, I do not use “gospel service” in the way he describes as wrongful use. Thus we face the question, may we use a term that can be misunderstood because of its abuse? That is an issue that warrants consideration, though we have to be careful to remember that misuse and abuse do

not themselves warrant *non-use*. A writer must always be given the right to define his terminology carefully and the reader must be cautioned about reading into it what the writer does not intend. Whether it is wise to use the word in the first place is a different issue. Maybe we can produce a better word to describe what I have in mind.

Second, when we discuss the possibility of going in a wrong way, we have to deal with two related issues. The first is how we deal with change, and the second is how we deal with change which has been abused by others, but we have no intention of going in that direction. Let's say a word about each.

The Christian church in obedience to Christ stresses the "old paths" according to Jeremiah 6:16 and "to hold to the traditions" (II Thess. 2:15). This refers to the instruction that our Lord has given to us, both as it relates to our faith (belief or doctrine) and practice (life). In response to such obedience, the people of God often reason, "we have always done it this way" or "we have not done that before." This is our way of expressing concern for wrongful change.

Let's face it, there are times when change is necessary. I see certain aspects of mission outreach, both in the mission field and in the established church, that require some change. Let me illustrate. A key aspect of our obedience to Christ in outreach is our personal witnessing to those who cross our path. Some of us do not do this, and have never done it. When this is pointed out to them, they may say, we never did that before, why do you say we need to do this now? We even hear some comment that preaching is the work of the pastor, and the believer does not have to speak of the gospel to others. That is wrongful thinking, and some people may reject instruction regarding personal witnessing sim-

ply because they never did it and the "old paths" forbid it. The point I make is that some change is good and necessary. I view a restricted use of "gospel service" in this light. It may be change, it may not be change. Some of our congregations have already held such services in connection with reaching out to their community. They advertise a special message and invite others to join them in worship. My suggestion for a special "gospel service" can be viewed in this same light.

The other aspect of the issue concerns the danger of going too far. Perhaps I can accept a certain suggested change, but it can so easily be abused, and often is abused, by others, even other churches. This has to be addressed. If we continue our illustration of personal witnessing, we all know that it too is taken to wrongful extremes by believers advocating that they can preach the gospel, just as well as pastors can preach. Then you get some of the errors Rev. Stewart mentions — non-ordained people conducting worship services, and all the rest. But, we may not deny the biblical mandate given to every Christian to make use of his prophetic office in speaking of the gospel to others. The Heidelberg Catechism aptly says that this is necessary so that "others may be gained to Christ." Abuse must not stop us from advocating proper use.

The practice of mission work seems to raise many of these issues. Is it, for example, alright for a seeking soul who has difficulty praying with "thee and thou" to use "you and your," as long as he is reverent? Can we make use of the New King James Bible (or another suitable translation) as a personal help for those who have difficulty reading the King James Version of the Bible? It seems that when these issues arise, a plethora of emotions bursts forth with warnings of going down the wrong road. Introducing some of these changes can

lead to error, to be sure. Introducing "you" and "your" in prayer can lead (as it has in many instances here in the USA) to "pop prayers" and horrible sacrilegious practices. Regarding translation of the Bible — on the one hand, we do not want to go to the extreme and hold that the KJV is our inspired Bible because the translators were inspired as were the original writers, as is done in some Christian circles. On the other hand, we do not want to accept dynamic equivalency translation in place of word translation. The Christian church has always advocated that the Bible must be in the common language of the people. The translation must not hinder understanding but help it. Limited use of another suitable translation in mission work (much like a commentary) does not mean that the church herself has to abandon the KJV and replace it with another. If that should take place, it must be the decision of the entire denomination working together. Also, we must be careful that we not fall into the trap of "accommodation evangelism," where the church makes changes in her worship just to accommodate outsiders who come to worship. That is dangerous and must not be the basis for any change. New converts and worshipers must be trained to worship with us as we worship God in a proper and biblical manner. It seems to me that in this same sense, we can make proper use of "gospel service" without fear of abuse.

With these illustrations, I do not want to throw gasoline on the fire of controversy. I only want to illustrate that even though some changes can go too far, we must not forbid proper change just because we fear abuse. Yes, the danger is there, but here too, we must not be wiser than God. Sometimes I hear our people reason this way, that we must be careful with missions, because many heresies and wrongful practices were introduced into the church by the door

of missions. This is historically factual and ought to give us pause before we get so carried away with missions that we lose our spiritual footings. There is, however, another side to this. I observe that of the seven churches in Asia Minor addressed in Revelation chapters two and three, there were only two churches that did not receive admonitions because of errors prevalent in that congregation. The one was Smyrna, the church that stood faithful and endured tribulations,

and the other was Philadelphia, the church that was faithful in her mission calling as God gave that church an open door. The church that is faithful in her outreach ministry receives blessings from God, but a church that neglects it may not have them. There is spiritual life, great rejoicing, earnest praying, mutual upbuilding, when the leaders and members of the church are enthusiastically engaged in her mission calling. We can focus on the fear of change, doing something different, risking abuse — or we

can focus on God's promise to be with us in our mission work and to bless us in it as he said, "Lo, I am with you always, even unto the end of the world" (Matt. 28:20). Our safety and security is staying close to our Lord.

I trust God will give us the grace of His Holy Spirit to be obedient in missions and to stay free from extremes and error and to enjoy the blessings of obedience. Let us all pray for this.

(Rev.) J. Kortering 

All Around Us

Rev. Gise VanBaren

■ "Burger King" Religion – "Have It Your Way!"

It is a sad fact that one finds a multiplicity of churches and denominations in the land. There are many confessions extant in these bodies—often expressing what we are convinced is contrary to the Word of God. Within the churches and denominations there is a trend to provide the kind of services that attract the differing age groups. Contemporary services are more suited to the young—and traditional services to those older.

A number of years ago there was the rise of mega-churches—with a large staff of ministers and other assistants. These appeared to attract people of all sorts and with all sorts of spiritual problems. Not infrequently the mega-church continued only under the strong and domineering leadership of one man. If he died, or was ousted, the large church often withered.

But many were not content with this diversity. They wanted

something more, something different. Each should be able to decide for himself or herself how God should be worshiped. One's own preferences should be the guide.

The *Denver Post*, Dec. 21, 2003, presented a feature article on these emerging "churches" in that area. The article stated:

Defining a church as emerging can be difficult because such groups take so many forms. That elusiveness, in fact, is part of the character of a movement that shuns structure and hates being put in a box.

"There is no formula," said Sally Morgenthaler, a Denver author and consultant who works with emerging churches nationwide. "If you're going to become a model, then you become a franchise."

Some emerging churches want to stay small, believing that's the only way to maintain real relationships. Others hope to grow and touch as many people as they can.

Many use candles, incense and crosses — elements of Catholicism, Orthodoxy and mainline Protestantism that seeker churches reject — to forge a connection to Christianity's rich history. Others say that's not who they are.

Some emphasize shared leadership over the pastor-as-CEO approach typical of the seeker movement. Others have senior pastors (though they may be only 25).

The article continues by describing other of the differences that abound in the movement:

Mike Shepherd, 39, started Connected Life Church in August. He calls it "the church of the bar." It meets at the D-Note in Old Town Arvada on the last Tuesday of each month because the unchurched crowd "wants to play on the weekend — they want to ski or hike."

Shepherd fills the club with incense and flashes ancient religious art onto projection screens before launching into programs such as "Spirituality and 'The Matrix,'" or "Microbrews in the Bible."

"One of our big phrases is to make this a safe place to engage at the level where you feel comfortable," he said. "It's safe to explore...."

The article concludes by describing some of the people and things that can be seen in these "churches."

Rev. VanBaren is a minister emeritus in the Protestant Reformed Churches.

At 6:30 P.M. on a recent Sunday, Scum of the Earth church (I Cor. 4:11-13—GVB) began its weekly gathering with pizza.

A deejay spun Bjort and Cake, alternative rock favorites.

Many in the crowd of 200 looked ready for a punk show.

Black clothes. Chains. Blue hair. Pierced lips and noses.

The walls were covered in art produced by Scum regulars, including a wall-sized mural of Bible scenes and surrealist interpretations of Christ's Resurrection.

"We are a church for the left out and the right-brained," said Mike Sares, 49, the pastor....

...Sares sees different priorities in the Scum crowd. They want to sing, they don't want to be sung to. They don't want to go to church to listen to a sermon, watch a drama skit and go home without talking to anyone. They want to offer a spare bedroom to a stranger who got kicked out of the house.

Most of all, they come to Scum of the Earth Church to connect with kindred souls.

"You can come in here and not have everyone stare at you," said Steve Warren, 21, who until recently wore dread locks and still stands out with nine body piercings....

It's sad to what extent some will go to "worship." I was about to write: "worship God." But they do not appear to be doing that. One would think that Satan surely encourages this kind of "worship." It is man-centered and designed to please man. It reminds of the days of the Judges when everyone did what was right in his own eyes.

In all humility we ought to give God thanks that our forefathers did write creeds that bind the Reformed churches to the truths of the Word of God. We can give God thanks that we gather in the churches to hear sermons that present Christ and Him crucified. We can praise God for the dignity and piety of the ser-

vices. One can appreciate it, too, that those who assemble to worship come dressed in a manner that indicates reverence as well (though perhaps we are "slipping" a bit in this regard). We see in dress and attitude the desire of covenant families to fellowship with God in Jesus Christ. But the number of those who appear to desire this seems to grow smaller and smaller as the end of time approaches.

■ "What Think Ye of the Christ? Whose Son is He?"

It is not unusual at Christmas time to read articles concerning Jesus. Many of these articles, of course, come with conclusions not based on Scripture but the theories of man. In a feature article, *U.S. News and World Report*, December 22, 2003, writes of this. The article treats especially a recently published book, *The Da Vinci Code*, by Dan Brown. The article says the book is "a gripping thriller suggesting that some of the fundamental beliefs held dear by millions of Christians are not only wrong but were deviously foisted upon believers by the Roman Catholic hierarchy...."

The article does present some interesting information:

Way back in February of 1804 President Thomas Jefferson, ever the enlightened rationalist, sat down in the White House with two identical copies of the New Testament, a straight-edge razor, and a sheaf of octavo-size paper. Over the course of a few nights, he made quick work of cutting and pasting his own bible, a slim volume he called "The Philosophy of Jesus of Nazareth." After slicing away every passage that suggested Jesus's divine nature, Jefferson had a Jesus who was no more and no less than a good, ethical guide.


The third U.S. president is credited with being among the

first wave of Americans to tinker with the traditional image of Jesus. But that wave was far from the last. As two new scholarly studies show, for more than two centuries Americans have been busy recasting the image of Jesus to suit contemporary sensibilities and to advance personal or political agendas. From the revivalist sermons of the 19th century's Second Great Awakening to the '70s rock opera *Jesus Christ Superstar* to Mel Gibson's forthcoming film depicting Christ's Passion, those engaged in representing Jesus always claim to be returning to the real Galilean....

...Though other revisionists may not have been so bold as to cut and paste the New Testament, Jefferson was not alone in his revisionary thinking. Old-line Calvinists, anti-Calvinist liberal Protestants, deists, and evangelical revivalists all gave different hues and tints to their pictures of Jesus.

It is true that there are many different presentations of Jesus. Who is correct? Which presentation is the most accurate? Satan himself is pleased to have man present Jesus as a morally good man, but not the divine Son in the flesh. He would gladly agree with Thomas Jefferson that all the references in the Bible to the second person in our flesh should be cut from the Bible.

It becomes, then, not only a matter of who Jesus really is—but on what basis the conclusions are drawn. Only by denying the infallibility and inerrancy of the Bible can man come with all kinds of different conclusions.

Let the words of the apostle Paul resound loudly and clearly, "I determined to know nothing among you save Jesus Christ and him crucified" (I Cor. 2:2). Then we must interpret that truth without cutting out the references to His divinity. Otherwise, there is no hope but only despair. 

The Marrow Men (1)

Introduction

A controversy arose in the Scottish Presbyterian Churches of Scotland in the early part of the eighteenth century. It has been called the Marrow Controversy. It gets its name from a book, first published in 1645, called *The Marrow of Modern Divinity*. Although this book, written by a man named Edward Fisher, was republished in 1648 and 1649, it never had a great deal of influence until, under rather peculiar circumstances, it became a subject of bitter debate that had to be settled by the broadest judicatories of the church.

The teachings at issue were many and complicated, and often framed in ways that are foreign to us and difficult to understand. But at bottom these debated questions concerned the nature of the preaching of the gospel, particularly the question whether the preaching of the gospel may be construed as a well-meant offer by God to all who hear it. Because this was the central issue, the controversy had great influence on Presbyterian thought in subsequent years and is of interest to us.

Because of the close contacts between the Scottish Presbyterian Church and the Reformed Churches in the Netherlands, the Marrow Controversy also had an

impact on Dutch thinking. In fact, it is likely that the idea of the gospel as a well-meant offer first entered Dutch thinking under the influence of the Marrow Men. If this is true, and there is reason to believe that it is, then this Marrow Controversy cast a long dark shadow also over Dutch Reformed thinking and is chiefly responsible for the introduction into Reformed theology of the heresy of the gospel as a well-meant offer.

It is worth our while to take a look at this controversy.

Background

The evil heresy of Arminianism appeared early in England's Anglican Church, the church that emerged from the Reformation in that country. Arminianism was first taught in 1595 by Peter Baro, Margaret professor of divinity in Cambridge University. In fact, the Lambeth Articles were written as supplements to the Thirty-Nine Articles of the Church of England, because these articles, while Calvinistic, were not strong on the doctrine of predestination and sovereign grace. Attempts were made to add officially the Lambeth Articles to the creed of the Anglican Church, but this was never, in fact, accomplished. Nevertheless, Peter Baro was forced to resign from his teaching position in 1596. The Anglican Church was sufficiently strong to combat this deadly heresy.

Arminianism had, however, taken root. And along with Arminianism, Amyraldianism had also taken hold in England. We noted this in our articles on Amyraldianism and we need not repeat what

we said, other than to remind the readers that Davenant was an Amyraldian and represented the Amyraldian position on the Synod of Dordt as one of the English delegates.

From that time on, the struggle of the English Church, along with the church in Scotland and Ireland, was a constant battle to resist the teachings of Arminianism and its blood brother, Amyraldianism. Especially the Stuart kings, deeply committed to Episcopal Church government, and always attempting to nudge the Anglican Church closer to Rome, were ardent supporters of Arminianism — something not surprising, for Arminianism is, in turn, a blood brother of Pelagianism, the official doctrine of the Roman Catholic Church.

Of greater concern was the fact that Richard Baxter, author of the popular book *The Reformed Preacher*, taught an Amyraldian doctrine of the atonement of Christ and of the preaching of the gospel. He claimed that it was necessary to hold to such a doctrine because of creeping antinomianism in the church; but, in fact, Baxter became a neonomist with his doctrine of justification by faith and works. And his doctrine of a certain universality in the atonement of Christ opened the door to later heresies. He was even reluctant to sign the Westminster Confession of Faith, although he finally did this — without any alteration in his views.

The chief defender of Calvinism was John Owen, known primarily for his magnum opus, *The Death of Death in the Death of Christ*.

Prof. Hanko is professor emeritus of Church History and New Testament in the Protestant Reformed Seminary.

Owen fought against Arminianism and Amyraldianism and defended vigorously the doctrine of the particular redemption of Christ. It is probably true that at the time John Owen wrote his masterful defense of the particularity of the atonement and the sovereignty of God's grace, neither Davenant, Baxter, nor Bishop Ussher (the author of Ussher's chronology of the Bible, but also, at best, a modified Amyraldian) had come out publicly for their views. Nevertheless, Owen's defense of this truth over against Arminian and Amyraldian errors clearly indicated how widespread these heresies were in the English churches.

Because the nature of the preaching was closely connected to the whole controversy over Christ's atonement, Owen paid close attention also to this latter doctrine. He taught that the preaching proclaimed that Christ died for sinners, and that all who confess sin and believe in Christ will be received by Christ. At the same time, he insisted that those who believe in Christ are also the elect.

Owen did not shirk the command of the gospel and insisted that in the gospel all men were confronted with the command to forsake sin and believe in Christ. This was their duty before God, and those who refused brought upon themselves God's dreadful judgments.

Thus, Owen taught, Christ is offered in the gospel. He repeatedly used the word *offere*, which is the Latin word from which the English word offer is taken. But he did not use the word in the sense of a well-meant offer of God to all who hear the gospel, but as a presentation of Christ crucified and as the One who accomplished satisfaction for sin.

In pressing home the commands of the gospel, Owen spoke of the fact that God's commands are given in utter seriousness: God means what He says when He commands men to repent of sin and

believe in Christ. To press home to men the seriousness of God's commands, and to bring forcibly to the consciousness of sinners that Christ has accomplished salvation for all who believe, Owen did not hesitate to speak of an invitation by which Christ urges upon sinners the calling to believe in Him. Owen maintained that the minister of the gospel should do this with the tenderest of entreaties and most urgent pleas; in this way the minister would be conveying properly Christ's demands.

I make a rather detailed point of all this, because these very issues were to be the chief bones of contention in the Marrow Controversy. One can readily see how closely these are related to the whole idea of a well-meant offer of the gospel. It is not, after all, a big jump, in the minds of people, between Christ's earnest pleas and tenderest entreaties to sinners to come to Him, and Christ's desire to save all who hear the gospel preached to them.

The Marrow

In 1648 or 1649, shortly after the Westminster Assembly had completed its work, Edward Fisher published his *The Marrow of Modern Divinity*. The first part of the book, the part of immediate concern to us, is a conversation between Neophytus, a new convert to the faith; Nomista, who represents the position of antinomianism; and Evangelista, a pastor, who speaks the views of the author and what he considered to be the truth of Scripture. The book was purported to be a discussion of the relation of the gospel to the law, but, in fact, it was a vendetta against what the author perceived to be a characteristic of the church at this time, a dangerous and deadly antinomianism.

The book did not attract any significant attention until over a half-century later, although the question of whether antinomianism was truly a weakness in the church

is another question. It would be well worth while to consider the matter briefly.

We must remember that the Marrow Controversy took place in Scotland and that we are dealing, from now on, not with the Anglican Church, but with the Presbyterian Church of Scotland. After Cromwell defeated the royalist forces under Charles I, and after the Westminster Assembly had met, the Presbyterian Church became the national church. It remained such in Scotland, although its existence as the national church in England was brief. This Presbyterian Church of Scotland was the church of the covenants, the church that had fought fiercely against the Stuart kings and their doctrine of prelacy, the church that had endured persecution when thousands were martyred for the sake of the gospel, and the church that struggled to remain faithful to the Westminster Confessions. Its credentials were solid.


Faithful to the Westminster Confessions, the church maintained strongly the doctrine of justification by faith alone. This important truth was fundamental to its doctrine of salvation, and it was the pivot on which turned the whole truth of sovereign and particular grace. I mention this because enemies of the doctrine of justification by faith alone always accuse those who hold to this truth of being antinomian. They claim the doctrine makes careless and profane Christians. They maintain that it is detrimental to preaching the gospel and makes it impossible to bring the gospel to sinners with passion and a sense of urgency and love for the lost.

Though the Presbyterian Church of Scotland was accused of antinomianism, one ought not to accept that accusation without some strong proof.

It was equally true, however, that the Presbyterian Church of Scotland was a national church. As such it had to harbor in its fellow-

ship and retain on its rolls wicked men who infrequently came to church, lived worldly lives, and scorned things spiritual. Such a state of affairs opened the church to the charge of antinomianism; and undoubtedly, at least in some respects, the charge was true. It is doubtful whether antinomianism was an officially held position

within the church. I know of no one who taught, in so many words, antinomianism's teaching that good works are not necessary for the Christian. But there was a sort of "practical antinomianism" in the church because, being a national church, ungodly men had to be harbored, and discipline was very difficult to exercise.

The Marrow Men offered a solution to the problem of a perceived antinomianism. Was the proposed solution of the Marrow Men the biblical solution? Or was it treating a case of food poisoning with a dose of tainted meat? This question must wait till our next article. 

Haggai: Rebuilding the Church (4)

The First Prophecy (cont.)

3. *Then came the word of the Lord by Haggai the prophet, saying,*

4. *Is it time for you, O ye, to dwell in your cieled houses, and this house lie waste?*

That the Israelites to whom Haggai preached showed more concern for their own homes than for the house of God is not just an old problem. All too often God's people seem to be concerned only for their own homes and families in their finances, in the use of their time, in their goals, and in their efforts. They have time for everything but the work of the church, so much so sometimes that it is difficult to find men to serve in the offices of the church and to take the lead in building up the church. They can afford everything but the church budget. Recreations and holidays take priority over worship. Work and other responsibilities keep members from the Bible studies and other meetings of the church. Membership is considered of very little importance, and

even where Christians are members of a church, their membership involves very little commitment to God, to His Word, or to the work of the church. We, too, live in ceiled houses while God's house lies waste.

T.V. Moore puts it well:

Men are always prone to put religion off with scraps and leavings, and serve God with what costs them nothing. In the outward things of religion they are much more disposed to work for themselves than for God; and if they have time that cannot be otherwise used, or funds that are not very current, to give them to the treasury of the lord, and if any larger expenditure of either is urged, to plead that "the time has not come" to do this work. In the inward things of religion the same spirit is shown. The young, the middle aged and the old, all alike procrastinate the great work, on the plea that "the time has not come," the convenient season that, like the horizon, recedes as we advance.¹

The result is that the church institute is broken down and ruined as the temple was in Haggai's times. Preaching, sacraments, and discipline are all but vanished.

Worship is seldom carried on in obedience to God's Word. The members, instead of being built up, have their faith undermined and weakened. The church finally is hardly recognizable as the church that was instituted by Christ and, if not entirely ruined, resembles more an entertainment facility of some sort, a club, or a social services agency.

The lament of Psalm 74 is as true today as in the Old Testament:

Remember Thy inheritance, Thy church redeemed by grace;
Remember Zion's mount profaned, Thy ancient dwelling place.

In ruin long Thy temple lies;
Arise, O God of grace,
And see the ruin foes have wrought within Thy holy place.
Amid Thy courts are lifted high the standards of the foe,
And impious hands with axe and fire have laid Thy temple low.
They have profaned the holy place where Thou hast set Thy Name,
The sanctuaries of our God are given to the flame.

We see no signs of power divine,
no prophet speaks for Thee,
And none can tell, and none can know, how long these woes shall be.

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

(Preceding article in this series: January 15, 2004, p. 188.)

All this does not mean we should have no concern for our own houses, whether the building or the lives that are lived there, but God insists that His house is more important than ours and that we can be blessed in ours only when our first concern is for His. That may appear to be very selfish of God and show a lack of love for us, but it really is not so. God's own glory and honor are the most important things and ought to be most important to us, not the least because we cannot be blessed apart from Him. Knowing His own glory and our need for Him, He insists that His house must be built and must be more important to us than our own houses.

5. *Now therefore thus saith the Lord of hosts; Consider your ways.*

6. *Ye have sown much, and bring in little; ye eat, but ye have not enough; ye drink, but ye are not filled with drink; ye clothe you, but there is none warm; and he that earneth wages earneth wages to put it into a bag with holes.*

Having pointed out and rebuked the sins of Judah, God now calls them to self-examination and repentance. He wishes them to see that their ways are sinful and displeasing to Him and to do that by acknowledging their sin and turning from it. It should be clear that though God does not explicitly call for repentance, that is what He has in mind. There is no value in considering our ways if that does not lead us to turn to ways that are pleasing to God. It is much the same with God as with an earthly father, who says to his child, "Look what you've done." He means, "Do you not see that you have done wrong and that you must acknowledge and turn from your wrong-doing?"

We should note, too, that dealing with our sins always involves a consideration of our ways and a turning from the old ways of sin into the ways of life and peace.

The person who only says he is sorry for sin and does not consider his ways, but goes on in them, has not truly repented of his sins. This becomes abundantly clear from verses 6 and 7, where God does call Judah to new ways of obedience.

But this call for repentance and conversion is addressed not only to Judah but to us. If we have neglected the house of God, the church, or have shown the same lack of care for the church as the place of God's covenant, we, too, must consider our ways and turn from whatever evil we have done. We must consider our ways also so that we see that Judah's sins are ours and that God is speaking to us as well as to them. If we do not, we are as blind and ignorant as they were before this Word of God came to them.

God enforces that call to self-examination and repentance by telling Judah that He had been punishing them for their sins, though they had not been aware of it. Among the troubles they had suffered were famine, crop-failure, bad weather, drought, and disease (cf. also 1:10, 11 and 2:17). These troubles had come from God as chastisement for their sin. Not all their problems, therefore, could be blamed on their enemies or on the decree of Artaxerxes. God is making sure that they recognize these judgments, not as an excuse for not continuing with the work of rebuilding, but as punishment for their failure to rebuild.

God speaks of the fact that their crops had been small, so that no one had enough to eat and drink or even sufficient for clothing. All these things had been threatened in Deuteronomy as punishment for disobedience — poor crops in Deuteronomy 28:38, lack of food in Deuteronomy 8:10, and insufficient clothing in Deuteronomy 10:18. Under these judgments it had been as though everything they earned was put in a bag full of holes. And so it is always. Those who will not

obey God cannot be and are not blessed and do not prosper.

All this raises the question, however, concerning the relationship between obedience and material prosperity. Especially in the New Testament, is it true that those who live in obedience to God can expect material prosperity, or receive it when it comes as a sign of God's favor and blessing? That is the question that needs answering.

We believe that in the Old Testament this was far more true than in the New Testament. God made it clear to Israel that prosperity in the land of Canaan was an evidence of His good-pleasure, and that drought and enemies were signs of His displeasure. Even in the Old Testament, however, this was not true absolutely. The book of Job is a lengthy lesson otherwise. In the Old Testament, therefore, prosperity was a sign of God's blessing nationally, but not individually. Nor in times of prosperity did that prosperity mean that everyone in the nation was blessed by God. There were even times when God sent enemies and other troubles for reasons of His own and not because the nation as a whole was living wickedly. The people of God, therefore, needed the prophets and the Word of God to interpret their circumstances and to tell them that God was pleased or displeased with them.

What was true individually in the Old Testament continues to be true in the New. Prosperity or the lack of it cannot be interpreted as signs of God's favorable or unfavorable attitude. God can, as Psalm 73 so clearly teaches, send prosperity as a curse, or send evil things for our good, so that all things work together for good to those who love God (Rom. 8:28). There is no common grace or favor

1. Thomas V. Moore, *A Commentary on Haggai and Malachi*, (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1974), pp. 65, 66.

or mercy of God in things, and those who think so have no explanation for the fact that God gives prosperity and earthly gifts to the ungodly whom He will send to hell, nor any explanation for the fact that He sends cancer and other ills to those He loves.

It should be added, however, that we often *feel* that God is displeased with us when we are not living in obedience to God and when He, in those circumstances, sends trouble and grief into our lives. It is equally possible, however, that, walking in sinful ways, we have all we want and prosper in our wickedness. That is not proof of God's blessing but that God is setting us in slippery places (Ps. 73:18) or filling our mouths while He sends leanness in our souls (Ps. 106:15).


As far as the nation is concerned, the only nation of God that now exists is a spiritual nation, the church. No earthly nation, not the USA, not Scotland, not the Netherlands, can

claim to stand in the favored position that Israel had in the Old Testament, and even Israel in its favored position was a type and foreshadowing of the church, as we have seen. That the church is that favored nation is taught in I Peter 2:9:

But ye are a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, an holy nation, a peculiar people; that ye should show forth the praises of him who hath called you out of darkness into his marvellous light.

The prosperity that God gives His church when she is faithful and obedient is not crops and good weather and freedom from hunger and disease, but spiritual prosperity. The wealthiest church is not necessarily the church that is being blessed by God, but the church in which the members are enjoying all the riches of God's grace and salvation. When the church is not prospering spiritually, when the people of God go spiritually hungry and thirsty, and when they are

like the church of Laodicea, spiritually poor and blind and naked, then they may certainly conclude that there is something desperately wrong and that they must consider their ways.

Let us then, as members of the church, be busy always considering our ways in the light of the spiritual condition of the church and not be blind to the fact that God may very well be sending His judgments on the church for her unfaithfulness. Certainly we must not think that because the members of the church are prosperous in material things and because the church has many members and enough in offerings to pay for all sorts of programs, that these things are necessarily evidence of God's blessing. That is proved when the members of the church are clothed in the spotless robes of Christ's righteousness and when they have the bread of life as the food of their souls and the water of life as their refreshment. 

All Thy Works Shall Praise Thee

Mr. Joel Minderhoud

The Nitrogen Cycle: Upheld and Governed by God

Article 12 of the Belgic Confession of Faith states that all creatures were created to serve the Creator. Each creature has its own place in the creation but only as it is organically connected in the one purpose of God — the glory of God in and through the salvation of His

people. Therefore, to accomplish this purpose, as Article 12 also teaches, all creatures are upheld and governed by God's eternal providence, so that we, His people, might be served in order to serve our God. In order for us properly to serve our God, we ought to recognize His providential care over us. Scripture speaks of God providing for the lily of the field, and it teaches us that if He cares for these creatures, will He not care for us? A beautiful physical example of this is seen in the nitrogen cycle

and how God provides all creatures (the lily, the sparrow, and us included) with what they need to exist and function in this life. By such a physical example we clearly see God's providence, our organic relationship to all creatures, and the comforting truth of God's faithful provision for all that we need in both body and soul. To these truths we now turn our attention.

The Nitrogen Cycle — An Interdependent Relationship

We need nitrogen in its vari-

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

ous forms in order to live. In fact, animals need nitrogen in similar ways, as do plants, for their proper existence and functions. By God's design we cannot use the nitrogen as it is found in the air in order to form the protein molecules we need. In the counsel of God a "cycle" was ordained in which plants would transfer the nitrogen as found in the air into forms that they as well as the animals and man can use, and upon the death of the organism the nitrogen would then be returned to the form as it is found in the air. We call this the nitrogen cycle — a simple, yet amazingly complex relationship of interdependence where we see the handiwork of an all-wise God.

What mechanism did God create so that the nitrogen in the sky could be turned into the forms that plants could use? God placed and controls within the creation two main mechanisms, referred to as nitrogen fixation, to convert nitrogen gas as found in the sky into nitrate ions or ammonium ions that plants can use. The first mechanism involves lightning and rain. Nitrogen gas molecules have one of the strongest internal chemical bonds known to man. It is an extremely stable molecule and does not react easily with other molecules. However, during an electrical storm, lightning will flash, giving off tremendous amounts of energy — energy enough to cause the chemical bond in the nitrogen gas molecules to break, allowing its individual nitrogen atoms to combine with other atoms. During such a storm, these nitrogen atoms combine with oxygen atoms to form nitrate ions. These water-soluble molecules (capable of dissolving in water) fall to the earth in the raindrops. Thereby God nourishes the earth, not only with vital rain, but with "enriched-rain" — rain that contains a source of nitrogen for the plants. The plants take up the rain via their root systems and in the meantime also take up the dissolved nitrate ions. In

this way nitrogen gas molecules in the air are converted to nitrate ions that plants can use directly.

The second mechanism God uses to convert nitrogen gas molecules in the air into forms plants can use is through bacteria that are found in little nodes on the roots of some plants. Crop farmers deal with this mechanism in a concrete way as a part of their labors. They recognize that some fields require more fertilizer than others and they know the wisdom of rotating crops in a particular field from year to year. What must they know about the creation that helps them recognize these things? The answer, in part, lies in understanding how some plants can convert nitrogen gas molecules into forms they need and how other plants need additional help in this regard. Plants of the legume family (peas, beans, clover, and alfalfa, for example) have tiny growths on their roots that contain nitrogen-fixing bacteria. God created and in His providence maintains and governs these bacteria for the purpose of converting nitrogen gas molecules from the air into ammonium ions. The ammonium ions are a form of nitrogen that the plant can use and are absorbed by the plant and then converted into the protein molecules that the plant needs for growth. Thus, these plants have built-in mechanisms for getting the nitrogen they need. In fact, more ammonium ions are produced by the plant than it can actually use.

Other plants, such as corn, wheat, rice, and potatoes, to name a few, do not have a built-in mechanism to convert nitrogen gas into forms they can use. They receive their nitrate ions from the nitrate ions that fall from the sky in the rain. However, this does not provide enough nitrate ions for all the plants that require them. Therefore, God provided a second kind of bacteria, found in the soil, that convert ammonium ions into nitrate ions. The excess ammonium ions left in the soil by the legume

plants (beans, alfalfa, and so on) are converted by this second type of bacteria (nitrifying bacteria) into the nitrate ions. Yet, in many cases, the corn, wheat, rice, potatoes, and other plants could benefit from a supplementary source of nitrate ions. Thus, farmers will often add some form of fertilizer (usually in the form of ammonium ions) to the soil. The nitrifying bacteria convert these ammonium ions into the nitrate ions that the plant can absorb and convert into the protein molecules it needs. Farmers rotate crops — one year soybeans in a field, another year corn — because the beans will add a significant amount of ammonium ions to the soil, which the corn will use the following year. This minimizes the amount of additional fertilizer a farmer may need to add to a field and maintains a good balance of nutrients in the soil.

Thus, the nitrogen storehouse in the air is converted by lightning or bacteria into forms that plants can use. Plants use the nitrogen to make proteins. Animals and humans eat plants and when their bodies digest these proteins the nitrogen atoms are available for the animal or human to use as needed. We also eat animals and get the nitrogen they have. And so, the nitrogen atoms are passed along from plant to animal to human or directly from plant to human.

When the plant, animal, or human dies, the organisms are decomposed by bacteria and the component parts of the organisms are returned to the soil. In the soil there is another type of special bacteria, de-nitrifying bacteria, that break protein molecules down so that the nitrogen atoms are freed from their molecular bonds. As the nitrogen atoms are freed from their bonds, they join together again and return to the atmospheric air as nitrogen gas — the original storehouse of nitrogen. Thus, a cycle exists, created and maintained by God, so that all living organisms, mankind included, might receive

from the very hand of God, the very substances they need to have physical life.

God's Eternal Providence and Infinite Power

We, as Reformed believers, confess God's providence. But, do we really *understand* that God directs, governs, and sustains *all* things? My hope is that through this complex science "lesson" we can much more clearly see God's hand caring for us. How much more clearly can we see God's hand providing for our physical needs, than to consider that the very molecules that nourish us are sewn together by God? Look at how many different creatures work together and are dependent on each other, such as, the lightning, rain, bacteria, plants, roots, soil, animals, people, and so on! Look at how nitrogen atoms must be changed to so many different forms before it is in the "shape" and "form" that man can use to live! In sharing all this science and factual information about the nitrogen cycle, it is my hope that you be-

come as amazed as I am at how God, in His eternal counsel and wisdom, ordained such an amazing and complex system in order, literally, to provide us our daily bread and very existence from His hand. Do we appreciate this? Are we thankful to God for this? Truly to confess the eternal providence of God requires that we see and acknowledge that God's hand is providing for us! We must recognize that we are of the earth, earthy and are completely dependent upon Him. Yet, how blind we are by nature! The unbeliever sees nothing of God in all of this! He goes about his daily tasks unthankful to God! He suppresses all that the creation clearly reveals and serves the creature rather than the Creator. And, to our shame, our sinful natures prevent us from seeing God's hand as we ought! May God give us spiritual eyes to see and appreciate His work in creation!

And, people of God, if God so clearly, so faithfully, so powerfully provides us what we need for body, will He not all the more

faithfully, all the more powerfully, provide us with what we need spiritually? Absolutely! God's providence is that doctrine of Scripture that brings us "unspeakable consolation, since we are taught thereby that nothing can befall us by chance, but by the direction of our most gracious and heavenly Father, who watches over us with a paternal care, keeping all creatures so under His power that not a hair of our head (for they are all numbered), nor a sparrow, can fall to the ground without the will of our Father, in whom we do entirely trust; being persuaded that He so restrains the devil and all our enemies that, without His will and permission, they cannot hurt us" (Belgic Confession, Article 13). May we worship God for all His works that clearly remind us of His fatherly care over us! Our Father is truly good to us, in not only providing us what we need, but in such an intimate and fatherly way, teaching us that He is our Father and will provide for us, in both body and soul, what we truly need!



Things Which Must Shortly Come To Pass

Prof. David Engelsma

Chapter Two

The Intermediate State

By the "intermediate state," Reformed theology refers to the state and place of people upon their death. It is the

state intermediate between earthly life and the eternal destiny of every person entered into as the outcome of the final judgment. The intermediate state is the biblical answer to the question, "What happens to people when they die?" Implied is that physical death does not annihilate men and women, who were originally created in the image of God. People do not cease to exist when they die. Rather, they pass into another form of existence in another place.

Individual Eschatology

This subject properly belongs to eschatology. Eschatology concerns the end, or goal, of all things. At death, every man reaches the goal that God has appointed for him personally. His earthly life has served its purpose in God's great plan for history. He has reached his own everlasting destiny, according to God's predestination of him. And at the moment of death he enters into the full enjoyment or suffering of his destiny, imper-

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

The five articles of the "Introduction" in this series appeared in the February 15, 2002 - June 2002 issues of the SB. The three articles comprising chapter one ran in the November 1, 2002, January 15, 2003, and March 15, 2003 issues.

fectly (for his body does not yet share in the enjoyment or suffering), but decisively.

Because the intermediate state is one's personal end, theology refers to it as "individual eschatology," in distinction from the end of the entire world, which is "general" or "cosmic" eschatology.

In the nature of the case, the intermediate state, or "individual eschatology," is an aspect of the truth of the last things that is of immediate concern and great importance to everyone. All humans must, and *do*, seriously consider the question, "What will happen to me at the moment of death?" The intermediate state is the one eschatological end that can come for a man "at any moment." In addition, all of us are busy burying those we love, family and church members. At their death-bed and in the graveyard, we ask, "What of them?"

Consideration of the intermediate state as an important aspect of biblical eschatology is necessary. Although the intermediate state is admittedly not a prominent truth in Scripture, Scripture does teach it, especially the New Testament. The state of the believer at death belongs to Christ's salvation of him. The certain prospect of the intermediate state is a precious aspect of the Christian's comfort in life and especially in dying.

Popular Errors

A clear and firm grasp of the truth of the intermediate state is made necessary by errors on the subject. The most grievous error is the Roman Catholic doctrine of purgatory. Purgatory is not a minor matter, but an error of monstrous proportions both theologically and practically.

There is also the error of soul-sleep. This error was prevalent at the time of the Reformation among the Anabaptists. In the 1960s, the preaching of soul-sleep, in a sermon on Question 57 of the Heidelberg Catechism, occasioned a split

in the Reformed Churches in the Netherlands ("liberated").

Somewhat related to the theory of soul-sleep is the teaching of some contemporary theologians that the entire person dies. Nothing of a man survives death. Everything goes down into the grave. This teaching denies the soul as a spiritual substance that can exist apart from the body. Life in the soul after death is dismissed as Greek philosophy.

Another reason for including the intermediate state in a study of the last things is that it is desirable that Reformed theology give account of its faith over against philosophy's vague teaching of the "immortality of the soul." The only genuine, sure hope of life after death is the hope of the believer for the intermediate state. This hope is grounded, not in the empty speculations of men's minds, nor in the wild fantasies of men's feelings, but in the solid revelation of Scripture. And the life of the Christian after death is radically different from the lifeless, boring existence of philosophy's immortal soul.

Creedal Statements

In addition, the doctrine of the intermediate state is creedal. Answer 42 of the Heidelberg Catechism states, "Our death is . . . only a dying to sins and entering into eternal life." In Answer 57, the Catechism declares that the believer's "soul, after this life, shall be immediately taken up to Christ its Head." In Chapter 32, on "the state of men after death," the Westminster Confession of Faith teaches:

The bodies of men, after death, return to dust, and see corruption; but their souls (which neither die nor sleep), having an immortal subsistence, immediately return to God who gave them. The souls of the righteous, being then made perfect in holiness, are received into the highest heavens, where they behold the face of God in

light and glory, waiting for the full redemption of their bodies: and the souls of the wicked are cast into hell, where they remain in torments and utter darkness, reserved to the judgment of the great day. Besides these two places for souls separated from their bodies, the Scripture acknowledgeth none.

"Body-Sleep"

Scripture ascribes an intermediate state to both the believer and the unbeliever. At death, the godly beggar is carried by the angels into Abraham's bosom; the rich man, who had despised Moses and the prophets, finds himself in hell, "being in torments" (Luke 16:22, 23). The emphasis of Scripture is the intermediate state of the believer. His state upon death is twofold. First, in the body he is dead, in the grave, decaying, and returning to the dust whence he came. Second, in the soul, he is alive with Christ in heaven.

Strangely, that aspect of the intermediate state consisting of the believer's death in the body is sometimes overlooked by Reformed theologians. They concentrate exclusively on the state of the believer in his soul. But the reality of the believer's death in the body and of his being in the grave in his body may not be overlooked. This is the aspect of the intermediate state that is obvious. We see the dead body in the coffin. We take the body to the cemetery. Even though, incorrectly, we say about the body that it is not mother, or dad, or brother or sister so-and-so, because they are now in heaven, the fact remains that, correctly, we treat the body as though it still has very strong connections with mother, or dad, or brother or sister so-and-so. We do not discard it like non-human rubbish, but bury it with solemn ceremony.

The Word of God concerning death must be honored for the believer as well as for the unbeliever: "Dust thou art, and unto dust shalt thou return," so that "thou return

unto the ground" (Gen. 3:19). According to this Word of God, it is not merely a body that returns to the ground. "*Thou*"—the *man himself*—returns to the ground. Biblically, a human is both body and soul. Scripture rejects the pagan notion that a human is a soul, which happens to be encumbered for awhile with a body.

By explaining the intermediate state as first of all the death and burial of the body we do justice to the biblical description of the intermediate state that some misunderstand as teaching soul-sleep. Scripture teaches that dead believers sleep. Three times in I Thessalonians 4:13-18 the apostle speaks of the sleeping of the dead saints: "concerning them which are asleep" (v. 13); "even so them also which sleep in Jesus will God bring with him" (v. 14); "we which are alive and remain unto the coming of the Lord shall not prevent them which are asleep" (v. 15). Verse 16 makes plain that those who sleep are "the dead in Christ." Thus, the apostle describes the intermediate state of believers as sleep. It is not soul-sleep, but it is sleep.

Inasmuch as the dead saints sleep, their resurrection at Jesus' coming will be the awakening of them: "And many of them that sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, some to everlasting life" (Dan. 12:2). According to the apostle in I Thessalonians 4:13ff., that which wakens believers from their sleep is resurrection: "the dead in Christ shall rise first" (v. 16). Since resurrection here pertains to the body, it is evident that the sleeping of dead believers refers to their sleeping in the body. The teaching of the Bible is not soul-sleep, but "body-sleep."

One important aspect of the intermediate state of the believer is his sleeping in the body. As regards the body's sharing in and contributing to the enjoyment of Christ, the believer who has died is unconscious. In his body, the

place of the believer who has died is the grave.

Only the conception of the intermediate state that includes and emphasizes the believer's death and burial in the body harmonizes with the truth of the resurrection of the dead. In the resurrection, Jesus will raise the dead, that is, the dead saints. He will not merely raise our dead bodies, but us ourselves, who are dead and in the grave as to our bodies.

Nothing less than this is the biblical view of the coming resurrection. In I Thessalonians 4:14, the comfort for those who mourn the death of loved ones is, "even so *them* also which sleep in Jesus will God bring with him." *They* slept in their dead body, and *they* are awakened in the resurrection of their body. I Thessalonians 4:16 promises the resurrection, not merely of dead bodies, but of "the dead in Christ," that is, of the dead people themselves.

The death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus Christ forbid that we understand the intermediate state exclusively of life with God in the soul. During the three days prior to His bodily resurrection, Jesus lay in the grave. It was not merely His body that lay there. Jesus Himself was in the grave. "For as Jonas was three days and three nights in the whale's belly; so shall the Son of man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth" (Matt. 12:40). He lay sleeping in Joseph's tomb. Article 19 of the Belgic Confession correctly uses personal language in describing Christ's burial: "*He* lay in the grave." On Easter Sunday, *He* arose. He arose in the body, to be sure, for at death He committed His spirit into His Father's hands and earlier He had assured the penitent robber that that robber would be with Him in Paradise that very day (Luke 23:46; 23:39-43). Nevertheless, in the body Jesus Himself arose, even as He Himself was dead and buried.

Solemn Burial

The truth that the believer is as much his body as his soul, so that the intermediate state of the believer is his sleeping in his own, dead body, has practical implications for our proper respect for the dead body of the Christian and for our solemn burial of his body. The notion that the dead body may be handled carelessly and even contemptuously, because the soul has been taken up to Christ, is profane, not Christian. The Second Helvetic Confession gives the Christian view of the dead body of the "faithful."

The Burial of Bodies. As the bodies of the faithful are the temples of the Holy Spirit which we truly believe will rise again at the Last Day, Scriptures command that they be honorably and without superstition committed to the earth, and also that honorable mention be made of those saints who have fallen asleep in the Lord, and that all duties of familial piety be shown to those left behind, their widows and orphans. We do not teach that any other care be taken for the dead. Therefore, we greatly disapprove of the Cynics, who neglected the bodies of the dead or most carelessly and disdainfully cast them into the earth, never saying a good word about the deceased, or caring a bit about those whom they left behind them (Art. 26, *Reformed Confessions of the 16th Century*, ed. Arthur C. Cochrane, The Westminster Press, 1966, pp. 294, 295).


Cremation is not an option for Christians. The reason is not only the pagan origins of the burning of dead bodies, or that those who practice cremation lack the hope of the resurrection of the body and in some cases dread the possibility of the resurrection of the body and foolishly think to avoid resurrection (and judgment) by means of cremation. Nor is the reason only that burial accords with and expresses the Christian hope of the sowing of the body in the expecta-

tion of the harvest of the resurrection (I Cor. 15:35-44). But the reason for burial is also that in that body the believer has fallen asleep. It is fitting that the sleeping believer be put to bed in the earth. Burial is distinctively Christian culture. It is the only honorable treatment of the body of the God-fearing man or woman that the Bible knows, Old Testament as well as New Testament. Modern environmental concerns must give way to Christian culture.

Exactly because the intermediate state consists in part of the believer's death in the body, the in-

termediate state, blessed aspect of eschatology though it is for the Christian, is not and cannot be the main hope of the child of God. In the body, the child of God who has died is still subject to the power of death and the grave. In the body, he lacks the enjoyment of the salvation in Christ. In the body, he is not actively praising and serving God. "Wilt thou shew wonders to the dead? shall the dead arise and praise thee? Shall thy lovingkindness be declared in the grave? or thy faithfulness in destruction? Shall thy wonders be known in the dark? and thy righteousness in the

land of forgetfulness?" (Psalm 88:10-12). Scripture does teach the intermediate state, but this teaching is relatively subdued.

The believer's death in the body, however, is not the whole story about the intermediate state. Indeed, it is not the main part of the story. The main part of the story is life, joy, and glory. According to this other aspect of the intermediate state, the believer is not subject to the power of death, but enjoys deliverance from death. His place is not the grave, but heaven. He does not sleep, but is conscious and active. 

Book Reviews



Postmillennialism: An Eschatology of Hope, by Keith A. Mathison. Phillipsburg, New Jersey: P&R Publishing, 1999. Pp. xii + 287. \$14.99 (paper). [Reviewed by the editor.]

In no way does this volume on eschatology establish postmillennialism as a doctrine of hope. What it does establish is that the doctrine of the last things condemned by the Second Helvetic Confession as "Jewish dreams" is alive and well among reputedly conservative Presbyterian publishers and theologians. The publisher is P&R. The author is a recent graduate of Reformed Theological Seminary.

In the main, the book is a cursory explanation of carefully selected texts of Scripture that are susceptible to a postmillennial interpretation and the consignment of all contrary passages to A.D. 70.

The handling of Scripture leaves much to be desired. Against the objection to postmillennialism that Romans 8:17ff. teaches the persecution of the church throughout the present age, and thus exposes

the postmillennial "hope" of earthly victory as false, Mathison replies that the passage refers only to the Christian's struggle with sin (p. 184). In fact, Romans 8:35 ("tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword") clearly teaches the persecution of the New Testament church, just as the Old Testament text quoted in verse 36 taught the persecution of the saints in the time of the old covenant.

Mathison is cavalier in his dismissal of the certainty of persecution: "Suffering by persecution is not a *sine qua non* of the church. If it is, there are few if any true churches in North America today" (p. 185). He ignores II Timothy 3:12: "Yea, and all that will live godly in Christ Jesus shall suffer persecution." He ought to take seriously his own standard of judging true churches. The number of true churches in North America may very well be far fewer than comfortable Reformed and Presbyterian church members suppose. If Mathison will investigate, he will discover that there are Reformed churches in North American that

are hated, slandered, and mocked for their confession of the truth and for their walk of holiness.

Instead of dismissing persecution, Mathison should be warning the churches in North America of overt persecution that is about to break out against them.

But this author of a work on biblical eschatology is blind to the impending great persecution. The reason is his dream of an earthly victory of the kingdom of Christ in history. To preserve this dream, he explains all the New Testament prophecies of apostasy, tribulation, and Antichrist as having been fulfilled in A.D. 70 in the destruction of Jerusalem. Matthew 24, I Thessalonians 5, II Thessalonians, II Timothy 3, and all of Revelation up to chapter 20, among many other passages, refer exclusively to the events of A.D. 70. "The vast majority of [passages that teach a gradual worsening of conditions on earth prior to the Second Coming] refer specifically to first-century conditions at the time of Christ's coming in judgment upon Jerusalem" (p. 183).

Basic to Mathison's eschatology

is the preterism of J. Marcellus Kik and of Christian Reconstruction. It is no surprise that the book comes highly recommended by Kenneth L. Gentry, Jr. and R.C. Sproul. With good reason, Mathison finds it necessary to distinguish his own very nearly full preterism from "full preterism" in an appendix.

There is candid acknowledgment of the purpose of the preterist interpretation of all the New Testament warnings of apostasy and persecution.

If these things [foretold by Christ in Matthew 24] have already occurred in connection with the coming of Christ in judgment on Jerusalem in A.D. 70, then they have no bearing on the repeated promises of victory for the gospel in this age (p. 115).

What Presbyterian defenders of Christian Reconstruction's theology of carnal dominion must do is demonstrate from Scripture and the Reformed confessions that the Messianic kingdom is earthly in nature and that its victory in history is physical and political. To no purpose do Mathison and his colleagues exert themselves to show, with a great display of accomplishment, that the Bible teaches that Christ has established His kingdom in this world and that His kingdom

progressively triumphs. Reformed amillennialism has always confessed this. Christian Reconstruction postmillennialism, incidentally, teaches that Christ and His kingdom have been defeated up to the present. But Reformed amillennialism holds that the kingdom is a heavenly kingdom in this world and that its victory in history is spiritual. The issue is Christ's spiritual kingdom.

Although most of the book is a restatement of Christian Reconstruction teachings on the golden age and dominion, Mathison adds a new ground for the expectation of a future conversion of a majority of mankind: God's common grace (pp. 164, 165).


If common grace is understood as Abraham Kuyper intended, Mathison is guilty of a gross logical fallacy. Common grace is to be distinguished from saving grace. Common grace is merely favor in this life. It gives rain and sunshine. From a common grace of God, nothing follows for the salvation of men.

But if common grace is understood as a loving will of God for the salvation of all men without exception, as Mathison and most Reformed and Presbyterian theologians today indeed understand it, the argument from common grace

proves too much. Common grace does not merely prove that a majority of humans will be saved in the future. It proves that *all without exception* will be saved in the future. Indeed, it proves that all who have ever lived will be saved in the future. Does not God love and sincerely desire to save *all*?

At least one leading Christian Reconstruction postmillennialist has proposed that in the coming millennium every single human will be converted and saved, although his reason for thinking so is not common grace, but the victory of Christ.

What is going on in the most conservative Presbyterian churches and seminaries as regards eschatology? What is going on in the face of the clear, forceful, urgent, abundant warnings of Scripture that in the last days the church of Christ must contend with rampant lawlessness, wholesale apostasy, and fierce persecution? What is going on in the face of the rapid development in North America and the world of these very realities?

The postmillennialism of Christian Reconstruction and Keith Mathison is not an eschatology of hope. It is an eschatology of delusion, of "Jewish dreams." And it is a grievous threat to the welfare of the church and the saints. 

News From Our Churches

Mr. Benjamin Wigger

Evangelism Activities

The Covenant PRC in Wyckoff, NJ has been busy the past several months with evangelism efforts in their surrounding neighborhood. The congregation celebrated their annual Christmas dinner on Saturday evening, Decem-

ber 13. Covenant was delighted to be joined by quite a few of their contacts from the area. Those who attended enjoyed plenty of good food, singing, fellowship, and games and gifts for the children. Covenant's Evangelism Society also sponsored an evening of caroling in their church neighborhood after the evening service on Sunday, December 21. While singing carols, members passed out pamphlets and information about their church

at each of the homes and invited their neighbors to join them in worship in the future. There were eleven members making a joyful noise to the Lord that evening. They were well received and all enjoyed the evening.

Congregation Activities

Having just returned from Romania in mid-December, three couples, members of the Georgetown PRC in Hudsonville,

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

MI, reported to their congregation that they were able to deliver the mercies of the Lord in food and Word to eleven extremely needy families. The 54 children from Valuszut Christian School were visited and given gifts of toys and candy. They also visited Emmaus Orphanage in Bogata to deliver clothing and a monetary gift. A new orphanage in Cauasna was investigated and given a contribution, and future contact was discussed. Many homeless were visited and food was distributed. Another Christian school in the process of being built in Felar was visited and given a monetary gift, with future association encouraged.

Saturday, December 13, members of our congregations in and around Grand Rapids, MI were invited to an evening of sacred Christmas music at First PRC in Grand Rapids. The program, under the title "O Come Let Us Adore Him," featured much audience participation through song, hand bells, cello, piano, organ, and vocal solos.

January marked the beginning of an extensive renovation project at the Southwest PRC in Grandville, MI. Plans approved last year included adding seating to their church balcony, increasing the size of their narthex, and removing the platform area in their fellowship room, plus updates to bathroom facilities and other miscellaneous improvements. During this renovation at Southwest, worship services were planned for the gymnasium of Covenant Christian High School for 4-6 weeks starting Sunday, January 11. Starting Monday, January 5, all catechism classes and societies were to meet at Adams Christian School.

The council of the Hudsonville, MI PRC informed their congregation that, starting January 1, 2004, a smoking ban would extend to the entire church property, not just to the inside of this building. Among the reasons listed for this change was the ground that allowing

smoking on the property sets an unhealthy example to the congregation's children and young people.

Young People's Activities

In their on-going efforts to raise funds for this summer's young people's convention, the Young People's Society of the Southwest PRC in Grandville, MI enjoyed a successful fund-raiser, gift wrapping Christmas gifts at the Barnes and Nobles bookstore in nearby Rivertown Crossing Mall the week before Christmas.

The young people of Grace PRC in Standale, MI also got into the fund-raising mood by offering to perform different odd jobs for anyone in their congregation willing to make a donation towards the upcoming convention. These jobs could include babysitting, housecleaning, yard work, or any other related activity.

On a recent Sunday evening the young people of the First PRC in Holland, MI were invited to one of their special meetings. The special topic considered that night was "Entertainment in the Christian's Life," based on an article from *World* magazine.

The Young People's Society of First PRC in Edgerton, MN invited members from their own congregation, plus members from the Doon and Hull, Iowa PRCs, to join them for the annual Christmas/New Year's Singspiration held Sunday evening, December 28 at Edgerton. Besides several special numbers and audience participation, a collection was taken for this year's convention. Refreshments were served after the hour of singing.

Like many other of our young people, the young people of Grace PRC in Standale, MI spent an evening in December caroling to widows, widowers, and shut-ins in their congregation. A recent bulletin from Grace contained a thank-you from their council. It seems the young people made a surprise


visit to the council meeting before leaving for the homes of members. The unexpected visit was much appreciated.

School Activities

Each Christmas season Hope Christian School in Redlands, CA encourages their students to contribute to a worthy cause to impress upon them the true spiritual meaning of the season. This year donations were made to our churches' five seminary students and their families.

The students of Heritage Christian School in Hudsonville, MI were also given the opportunity to give donations to a Christmas collection this past December. Money was collected for the Young People's fund in Ghana.

Minister Activities

Rev. W. Bruinsma has received a call from the Immanuel PRC in Lacombe, Alberta, Canada to serve as their next pastor. The Byron Center, MI PRC has extended a call to Rev. G. Eriks to come over and help them as their next pastor. From a trio of the Revs. W. Bruinsma, A. Brummel, and C. Haak, the congregation of Faith PRC in Jenison, MI has extended a call to Rev. C. Haak to become their next pastor. At a congregational meeting Sunday evening, January 4, the Hudsonville, MI PRC extended a call to Rev. Cammenga to serve as their next pastor. 

NOTICE!

Classis West of the Protestant Reformed Churches will be hosted by Hope PRC in Redlands, California on Wednesday, March 3, 2004 at 8:30 A.M. All material for the agenda should be in the hands of the stated clerk by Monday, February 2, 2004. An officebearers' conference is planned for Tuesday, March 2. Delegates or visitors in need of lodging or transportation should notify Mr. Michael Gritters (909-439-4156) or Rev. M. VanderWal (mlvdw@cs.com).

Rev. Daniel Kleyn
Stated Clerk, Classis West

THE STANDARD BEARER

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

*****AUTO**SCH 5-DIGIT 49417
81
Dorothy Kamps
3315 CALVIN CT SW
GRANDVILLE MI 49418-2469
USA

PERIODICAL
Postage Paid at
Grandville,
Michigan

Announcements

LECTURE

"The Christian, Politics, and the Anti-Christ"

Byron Center PRC is sponsoring a lecture by Rev. Ron Cammenga (pastor of the Southwest PRC) on our calling and proper attitude towards politics and the church.

As we live in the twenty-first century, how do we view the Christian politicians of our day?

What is the proper relationship between the church and the government?

What characteristics will the Anti-Christian kingdom have?

Are we maintaining a watch for the coming of Christ as we are called to do?

Come to our church at 1845 Byron Center Avenue on Thursday, February 12 at 8 P.M. to hear Rev. Cammenga speak on this very important subject.

RESOLUTION OF SYMPATHY

The council of Hudsonville PRC expresses Christian sympathy to Elder Ed Hoekstra and Deacon Rich Hoekstra, in the recent passing of their father,

MR. GEORGE HOEKSTRA, SR.

We pray the Lord comfort and give them assurance with the words of Psalm 73:24, "Thou shalt guide me with thy counsel, and afterward receive me to glory."

Nort Brower, Vice-President
Ralph VanderVeen, Clerk

NOTICE!!

All students enrolled in the Protestant Reformed Seminary who will be in need of financial assistance for the coming school year are asked to contact the Student Aid Committee secretary, Mr. Jeff Kalsbeek (phone: 616-453-6455). This contact should be made before the next scheduled meeting, February 23, 2004, D.V., at Southwest PRC at 7:30 P.M.

Student Aid Committee
Jeff Kalsbeek, Secretary

RESOLUTION OF SYMPATHY

The council of Southeast PRC extends sincere Christian sympathy to elder Bill Pipe and his family in the death of his father-in-law,

MR. GEORGE HOEKSTRA, SR.

May the instruction of Psalm 31:24 guide and uphold you. "Be of good courage, and he shall strengthen your heart, all ye that hope in the Lord."

Rev. William Langerak, President
Doug Mingerink, Clerk

NOTICE!!!

Lord willing, the Evangelism Committee of the First PRC of Holland, MI will be hosting its annual Winter Conference in February 2004.

The topic is "God's Covenant with His People." The dates, speakers, and speeches are as follows:

1) Thursday, February 12 -

"God's Sovereign Covenant with His People"

— Prof. D. Engelsma

2) Wednesday, February 18 -

"Sovereign Election and the Particular Promise"

— Rev. G. VanBaren

3) Thursday, February 26 -

"The Practical Implications of the Covenant of Grace"

— Rev. C. Terpstra

All speeches will begin at 7:30 P.M. with fellowship and refreshments following the speeches.

Tapes will be available at that time.

RESOLUTION OF SYMPATHY

The council and congregation of Cornerstone PRC express their Christian sympathy to Dave and Brenda Dekker and family in the death of Dave's father,

ARNOLD DEKKER.

May they find their comfort in the Word of the Lord. Gracious is the Lord and righteous, yes, our God is merciful. "Precious in the sight of the Lord is the death of his saints" (Psalm 116:5, 15).

Rev. Nathan Brummel, Pres.
Don Bruinsma, Clerk

RESOLUTION OF SYMPATHY

The Adult Bible Society of Southeast PRC expresses heartfelt, Christian sympathy to Bill and Karen Pipe and their family in the passing of Karen's father,

MR. GEORGE HOEKSTRA, SR.

May the truth of Revelation 21:4 be their comfort. "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."

Ed Ophoff, Sr., President
Judy Kuiper, Secretary

Reformed Witness Hour

Topics for February

Date	Topic	Text
February 1	"The Faithful Witness: Our Calling"	Acts 1:8
February 8	"The Faithful Witness: Our Motivation"	Isaiah 43:12
February 15	"The Faithful Witness: Our Limitations"	Ephesians 4:17, 18
February 22	"The Faithful Witness: Our Witnessing"	Romans 10:1
February 29	"Jesus' Trial Before Pilate"	Mark 15:1-5