

The Standard Bearer

A Reformed Semi-Monthly Magazine • April 1, 2024

CONTENTS

<i>Meditation</i>	A Prayer to Be Delivered from the Dust REV. JOHN MARCUS	315
<i>Editorial</i>	God is God: Application PROF. BRIAN HUIZINGA	317
<i>Search the Scriptures</i>	Matthew: Jesus Christ Fulfilling Old Testament Prophecy REV. DANIEL KLEYN	319
<i>Believing and Confessing</i>	Of Jesus Christ, True God and Man (11g) PROF. RONALD CAMMENG	322
<i>Go Ye into All the World</i>	The Three-self Formula and PRCA Foreign Missions (11) REV. RICHARD SMIT	324
<i>When Thou Sittest in Thine House</i>	Bless the LORD, O My Soul MRS. MARGARET LANING	327
<i>Translated Treasures</i>	Reconciliation, Article 75 REV. JOSHUA ENGELSMA	

A Reformed semi-monthly magazine
April 1, 2024 • Volume 100 • No. 13



This cover was used from March 2010 to September 2017. It marked the first incorporation of the Dutch tulip into the Standard Bearer design. The table of contents through these years also featured a retitled book review rubric, “Bring the Books”: “Read! (Especially Reformed Books!)”, (Vol 86 No 6), in which many RFPA books have been reviewed. The SB staff in this cover’s time included Prof. Barry Gritters, who will retire from editorship of the SB this year (2024). Prof. Gritters, who initially joined the staff in October 1985 to co-write the rubric In His Fear, has been writing and editing for the SB for 38 years! The staff and the RFPA thank Prof. Gritters for his many years of faithful service to the publication.

The *Standard Bearer* (ISSN 0362-4692 [print], 2372-9813 [online]) is a semi-monthly periodical, except monthly during June, July, and August, published by the Reformed Free Publishing Association: 1894 Georgetown Center Dr, Jenison, MI 49428-7137.

Postmaster

Send address changes to the *Standard Bearer*, 1894 Georgetown Center Dr, Jenison, MI 49428-7137.

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All communications relative to the contents should be sent to the editorial office.

Subscription price

\$37.00 per year in the US, \$52.00 elsewhere
esubscription: \$22.00
esubscription free to current hard copy subscribers.

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. Announcements should be sent, with the \$10.00 fee, to: RFPA, Attn: SB Announcements, 1894 Georgetown Center Dr, Jenison, MI 49428-7137 (email: mail@rfpa.org). Deadline for announcements is one month prior to publication date.

Website for RFPA: www.rfpa.org

Website for PRCA: www.prca.org

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Editorial office

Prof. Barry Gritters
4949 Ivanrest Ave SW
Wyoming, MI 49418
gritters@prca.org

Business office

Mr. Dwight Quenga
1894 Georgetown Center Dr
Jenison, MI 49428-7137
616-457-5970
dwight@rfpa.org

United Kingdom office

c/o Mrs. Alison Graham
27 Woodside Road
Ballymena, BT42 4HX
Northern Ireland
alisongraham2006@hotmail.co.uk

Contents

Meditation

- 315 A prayer to be delivered from the dust (Psalm 119:25-32)
Rev. John Marcus

Editorial

- 317 God is God:
Application
Prof. Brian Huizinga

Search the Scriptures

- 319 Matthew: Jesus Christ fulfilling Old Testament prophecy
Rev. Daniel Kleyn

Believing and confessing

- 322 Of Jesus Christ, true God and man,
the only Savior of the world
(Second Helvetic Confession, 11g)
Prof. Ronald Cammenga

Go ye into all the world

- 324 The three-self formula and PRCA foreign missions (11)
Rev. Richard Smit

When thou sittest in thine house

- 327 Bless the LORD, O my soul
Mrs. Margaret Laning

Translated treasures

- 329 Reconciliation, Article 75
From *A Brief Explanation of the Church Order*
by Johannes Jansen
Rev. Joshua Engelsma, translator

Our rich heritage

- 331 The antithesis in paradise
Herman Hoeksema

Bring the books...

- 334 *Critical Dilemma: The Rise of Critical Theories
and Social Justice Ideology—
Implications for the Church and Society*
Rev. Joseph Holstege



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Meditation

Rev. John Marcus, pastor of Peace PRC in Dyer, Indiana

A prayer to be delivered from the dust

My soul cleaveth unto the dust: quicken thou me according to thy word. I have declared my ways, and thou heardest me: teach me thy statutes. Make me to understand the way of thy precepts: so shall I talk of thy wondrous works. My soul melteth for heaviness: strengthen thou me according unto thy word. Remove from me the way of lying: and grant me thy law graciously. I have chosen the way of truth: thy judgments have I laid before me. I have stuck unto thy testimonies: O LORD, put me not to shame. I will run the way of thy commandments, when thou shalt enlarge my heart.

Psalms 119:25-32

Psalms 119 is a thankful prayer to God made by a pilgrim servant, who owes his life to the suffering and risen Lord. Everything about the psalmist's status as a pilgrim and the quickening for which he prayed was earned by Jesus Christ, whose soul was brought unto the dust, who was quickened again on the third day, and who now lives and reigns for us in heaven.

As Jesus approached the cross, the heaviness of His grief was so great—even before He reached the cross—that great drops of blood trickled down from His face in Gethsemane. In His agony Jesus says, “My soul is exceeding sorrowful, even unto death: tarry ye here, and watch with me” (Matt. 26:38). Of course, His heaviness did not start there; He experienced sorrow from the time He was born until His very last breath on the cross. Truly, “He is despised and rejected of men; a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief” (Is. 53:3).

Jesus suffered all that because He took our guilt upon Himself. The guilt of our sins is what made His own soul cleave to the dust. Psalm 22 speaks of that suffering as it begins with the familiar words, “My God, My God, why hast thou forsaken me?” (Ps. 22:1). Later in the psalm, He says, “My strength is dried up like a potsherd; and my tongue cleaveth to my jaws; and thou has brought me into the dust of death” (Ps. 22:15). God brought His soul into the dust of death especially when He tasted the wrath of God as He hung on the cross. In His body and soul, Jesus bore the eternal punishment that we ourselves deserved.

By that cleaving of His own soul to the dust, Jesus earned for us spiritual life and all the blessings of salvation. By His resurrection and ascension into glory, Jesus now gives to us the life He purchased for us.

The death and resurrection of Jesus Christ is fundamental to the whole of our lives. Exactly because God has graciously given life to us, we recognize our misery, pray to be delivered from our misery, and seek to show our thankfulness to God. That is what we see in this section of Psalm 119: a confession of our misery, a request for grace, and an expression of gratitude.

A significant aspect of the Christian life is that our sense of need for Christ does not go away when we know we belong to Christ. In fact, the closer God brings us to Himself, the more we understand our misery and our need of Him.

That is what the psalmist experienced. He knows he is a servant of God saved by grace; but he also understands his misery. So, when we understand our misery, we confess with the psalmist, “My soul cleaveth unto the dust” (v. 25).

Our souls have to do with our inner life. Our souls have to do with our wills, desires, inclinations, and emotional states. Our souls worship God or they too often pursue the things of this world. So we confess that our souls cleave unto the dust. They are stuck to the dust so that we cannot separate ourselves from it. We are but frail creatures of the dust. More than that, we experience the misery that comes from the Fall. That includes everyday suffering that comes from sin. But, especially, we experience misery from the guilt and corruption of sin.

Cleaving to the dust speaks of the lowliest of conditions. That can be the result of affliction from the outside. Or, it might be from besetting sins that plague us on the inside. The psalmist is especially concerned with sin and the desire to cleanse his way and walk in God's holy law. So when he says, “My soul cleaveth to the dust,” he is confessing that his soul is stuck in the dust of spiritual death. Though we are children of God,

we still sin in a multitude of ways so that our souls are grieved and we confess, “My soul melteth for heaviness” (v. 28).

When God grants us grace to recognize our misery, we will pray for grace to deliver us. That is what the psalmist does. Immediately after confessing that his soul cleaves to the dust, he calls upon God for grace: “Quicken thou me according to thy word” (v. 25). We see the same request in verse 28: immediately after confessing that his “soul melteth for heaviness,” he calls upon God for grace: “Strengthen thou me according to thy word.”

Apart from God’s grace, we cannot stand for a moment. Without grace, we cannot walk in His ways, but rather wander in paths of death. Without grace, we are weak and helpless creatures of the dust. So we pray with the psalmist, “Quicken thou me” and “Strengthen thou me” (vv. 25 and 28). “Cause me to live or else I die. Strengthen me, or else I can do nothing.” That is the humble confession that our request for grace implies.

Significantly, the Spirit quickens as He applies the Word of God to our souls. That is why the psalmist adds the phrase, “according to thy word.” God uses His Word to quicken and strengthen us, especially as that Word is preached.

The psalmist points to that Word throughout the psalm. God’s Word is a lamp unto our feet and a light unto our path (v. 105). His Word gives us understanding concerning our misery and salvation (v. 169). His Word teaches us concerning our hope of mercy (v. 76). How valuable is that Word of God to lead us in the right way!

The psalmist refers to the Word of God also as God’s “statutes” (v. 26), His “precepts” (v. 27), and His “law” (v. 29). He understands, however, that the written Word of God all by itself is not sufficient to lead and guide us in the right way. That is why we ought to pray with the psalmist that God would graciously *apply* His Word to our hearts. We pray, “*Teach me* the way of thy statutes” (v. 26); “*Make me* to understand the way of thy precepts” (v. 27); and “*Grant me* thy law graciously” (v. 29). We need God’s grace to *teach us* to walk in the right way of His statutes. We need grace to *make us* understand the way of God’s precepts. We need grace to “*Remove* from [us] the way of lying; and *grant* [us] thy law graciously” (v. 29). Without grace, we would never go in the right way.

Knowing that salvation is God’s work and seeing our misery, we will pray for God to quicken and strengthen us in the way.

Why does the psalmist express a desire to be quickened and strengthened? Why do we have that desire? Because we want to express our thankfulness to the God of our salvation. We want Him to receive all the glory.

One way we seek to honor God is by confessing our own unworthiness. We, whose souls cleave to the dust and who are rebels by nature, are unworthy of God’s favor. How amazing is our God, who shows us His favor anyway! How amazing is our God to give His only begotten Son to die for us! How amazing is our God who raised Him from the dead!

Thankfulness is the reason why the psalmist wants God to remove from him “the way of lying” and grant God’s “law graciously” (v. 29). Asking for the grace of sanctification is a fruit of thankfulness because it aims at the glory of God. We can see how our prayers are expressions of gratitude when we understand that the things we ask for have the glory of God as their goal. The psalmist’s great desire and our great desire, that which makes us pray for sanctification, is the glory of God.

Not only does thankfulness lead us to pray for sanctification, it also gives us the desire to speak of God’s wonderful works. “Make me to understand the way of thy precepts: so shall I talk of thy wondrous works” (v. 27). God’s wondrous works are His extraordinary works that reveal His glorious attributes like His faithfulness, His righteousness, His truth, and His wisdom. The central wonder of Scripture is Jesus Christ, His incarnation, substitutionary death, resurrection, ascension, rule at the right hand of God, and coming again for us.

Not only does the psalmist pray for grace so that he might talk of God’s wondrous works, he also prays for grace to walk in the right way. Thankfulness does not stay in our hearts; nor does it end with the words of our mouths. Thankfulness is also expressed in our day-to-day walk. That is why the psalmist says, “I will run the way of thy commandments, when thou shalt enlarge my heart” (v. 32). When God gives us life, we will not desire to cleave any more to the dust. Rather, we will desire to run in the way of faithful and cheerful obedience.

Is that our desire? To glorify God in thought, word, and deed? Is it our desire to live the life of thankful pilgrims?

We cannot walk in our own strength. Are we praying for God’s grace to deliver us from the dust? Jesus Christ’s soul cleaved to the dust; but He rose again from the dead to make our thankful walk a reality.



Editorial

Prof. Brian Huizinga, professor of Dogmatics and Old Testament in the Protestant Reformed Theological Seminary and member of Grandville PRC in Grandville, Michigan

God is God: Application

Last time I introduced and explained the doctrinal principle with which the *Standard Bearer* began in 1924, “God is God.” First, God is not a finite, weak, fallible, and sinful creature, but the sovereign and majestic God. God is *God*! Second, no creature, whether man or angel is the sovereign and majestic God. *God* is God! Now I will apply this principle that is our heritage.

Our worship

This coming Sunday morning as we believers prepare to travel to God’s house for the public worship of His name, it would be good for all of us to call this principle to mind. Who is this God who summons me to worship and upon whose name I call? God is not a man that He should be viewed, treated, and addressed as one, even a great one. God is *God*, the Almighty Maker of heaven and earth who has revealed Himself in Christ Jesus, and who is so bright that the angels of heaven must shield their eyes or they will be blinded. Before *Him* all of us taken together, including wisemen, mighty kings, and noble lords, are less than the dust of the balance. *He* is worthy of worship.

Because God is *God*, we want our worship services to be characterized by the reverence, order, solemnity, and simplicity that is fitting for this most excellent and noble King who sits upon the circle of the earth. God is not a man that we should worship Him in disorder, outward pageantry, and entertaining performances that threaten to direct attention to the puny worshiper instead of to Him, His Word, His gospel, His Son, and His salvation.

Because God is *God*, we want to convey our honor for Him even in our attire. No thread or cut of fabric is of inherent moral superiority to another, but we and our children want to wear the best clothing that God has given to us to express by our outward apparel the deep respect of our hearts. Ordinarily, when a man comes home from a day’s work at the office and he stays home for the evening, he dresses *down*, while the traditional expectation was that if a man were going to a job interview, a ball or gala, or to visit an important person like

the President of the United States at the White House, he would dress *up*. The most High God to whom none can be compared is worthy of our best.

Because God is *God*, He looks at what no man can see: the heart. Most important in worship is the worshiper’s *heart*. God is not a man that He is impressed with outward stature or dress, lips that speak beautiful words and make lovely sounds, or tithes, alms, bullocks, and rams in abundance (I Sam. 16:7; Is. 29:13, Matt. 6:1-4). We want to come to God’s house in the Spirit and with a profound sense of awe and praise. Then through the entire service, may the Spirit stir our hearts to be consciously blessing God’s name, believing in God’s Son, repenting of our sins, and confiding in God’s love.

Contemporary worship trends gravitate toward what is man-centered and man-exalting. May God give us the grace to let Him be God so that our worship reflects that of heaven where the sinless inhabitants fall down before Him and, in worshiping the God who lives forever, cast their crowns before His throne saying, “Thou art worthy, O Lord, to receive glory and honor and power...” (Rev. 4:11)!

Say this on your way to church Sunday morning, especially if children or grandchildren can hear you, “God is God!”

Our life

What an important and foundational principle this is for the Christian life in all spheres, at all times, and in all circumstances. Consider two applications.

First, if God is *God*, then He has unchallengeable authority over us. His will for our lives, as expressed in His Word, must be obeyed.

Take marriage, for example. We men, through Supreme Court decisions, public opinion polls, or our own personal desires and feelings, do not determine the rules for marriage. Marriage is not our institution, but God’s, which He established in the beginning. God teaches us in His Word that marriage is between one man and one woman, not two homosexuals (Gen. 2:18-25; Matt.

19:4-5). In marriage the husband must cherish his wife in the tender bonds of love, and not ignore or mistreat her (Eph. 5:25, 28, 29; I Pet. 3:7). The wife must honor and be a help unto her husband in all good and lawful things, without contesting his headship or grieving him with bitter wrangling (Eph. 5:22, 33; Prov. 21:19). Why? Because God is God and commands this of us in His authoritative Word.

Furthermore, marriage is a *lifelong* bond forged by God. Although man can grievously spoil that bond through sinful treachery or divorce and create great separation, man as man cannot dissolve what God has established. Only God can break the marital bond, which He does in the death of one's spouse. Therefore, God prohibits all remarriage while one's spouse yet lives (Rom. 7:2-3; I Cor. 7:39). The disciples' response to Jesus' teaching on the indissolubility of marriage makes plain that apart from God's grace we men would quickly modify the rules of marriage to make things more accommodating for us and to make a way of escape from our spouse if we are not happy. Or, we will simply forget marriage altogether, saying, "If the case of the man be so with his wife, it is not good to marry" (Matt. 19:10).

There is a reason we turn to the Bible to learn of marriage, and more broadly, to answer every hard ethical question of life, and to discern the path we should tread in every situation whether pleasant or dreadful. God is God so that *His* Word determines what is right and wrong.

Secondly, if God is *God*, then we ought to live confidently and contentedly, even in great adversity. Amid seemingly unbearable suffering, in the body and in the soul, and as caused by wicked men, we remain hopeful because we know God is God. In His sovereignty He (not chance) brings this suffering, and in His lovingkindness (not hatred) in Jesus Christ He will use all tribulation to strengthen our faith and conform us more and more to Christ's image.

Here in the USA we are gearing up for another strongly emotional and contentious national election with plenty of inflammatory rhetoric along the way. In our polarizing political climate, strong disagreement with the opponent's *position* has descended into disdain for the opponent's *person* (a devastating evil the church must vigorously resist, especially in our dealings with each other, for we are not even opponents but brothers). The election will once again have significant implications for every citizen and for Christ's church.

But who shall fear? God is *God*. He controls every ballot that is cast from Maine to Hawaii, and the heart of every human who casts a ballot, counts the ballots, or is on the ballot. And if you live in a country where

there are no ballots but merciless and tyrannical lords who through bloodshed ruthlessly seize power and maintain it by force and fear, God is still God. In that country also, not one hair can fall from one head except it be according to God's will and for the advantage of His church.

Although God, in all His matchless power, can destroy our bodies and souls in hell, and we have given Him every reason to do so by all our terrible sins, He is God. As God, He is faithful to His promise and not a man who goes back on His Word. His promise in Jesus Christ, which we believe by the faith He gives to us, is: "Fear not, I am thy shield and thy exceeding great reward" (Gen. 15:1), and, "I will be a God unto thee and to thy seed after thee in their generations" (Gen. 17:7). Happy is that people whose God is *God*.

Our salvation

Because God is *God*, He must have all the glory in salvation. The work of salvation, like the work of creation, is first a matter of glory. If a being can perform the astonishing miracle of *creation* by calling those things that be not as though they were, then that being is worthy of endless praise. If a being can perform the astonishing miracle of *salvation* by making a dead sinner alive so that he actually believes and repents, then that being is worthy of eternal adoration. If there is any being in the heavens above or the earth beneath who can contribute *anything* toward the deliverance of a sinner from the demands of God's justice, the tyranny of Satan, and the power of corruption, and bring that sinner into the blessedness of life with God now and eternally in heaven, then that being has earned for itself the right to be worshiped.

God is God. God is jealous for His glory and will not share it with anyone. He always commands universal praise from all creatures. Because God will have *all* the glory, *He* saves. He *alone* saves. He saves *sovereignly*. He saves *graciously*. He saves *completely*. Not one aspect of salvation depends upon the sinner lest any man should boast (Eph. 2:9).

Think of the words that king Jehoram of Israel spoke when receiving a letter from the king of Syria with the petition to heal his captain, Naaman the leper. Whether the idolatrous Jehoram's rending of his garments and verbal outburst indicated some sincerity or was nothing more than hypocritical horror, what he spoke was true: "Am I God, to kill and to make alive, that this man doth send unto me to recover a man of his leprosy?" (II Kings 5:7). Am I *God*, that I should heal the leper?

That is the exclamation of every believer concerning his own salvation. Am I God, that I should have quick-

ened myself from the dead? Am I God, that I should have possessed an effectual voice whereby I could call myself out of the darkness of my unbelief and into the light of heavenly glory? Am I God, that I should present myself faultless before the just tribunal of the Judge of heaven? Am I God, that I should find within me the natural will and power to consecrate my heart and all my powers unto God in love? Am I God, that I should keep my feet from falling and hold my own soul steadfast in life all the way to glory? Am I God, that I should be preparing for myself a place in heaven so that at my death I can take my soul there to be with Christ? Am I God, that I should have realized this grand salvation by causing a virgin to conceive and bring forth a perfectly righteous Mediator who is in one person both God and man, willing to obey, suffer, and die for ungodly sinners? I am not God; *God* is God! To God be the glory for my salvation, now and forever!

This is also the exclamation of every believer concerning the salvation of others. Am I God, that I should cause my children to be born from above? Am I God, that I should prevent my son's heart from being turned

aside unto vanity? Am I God, that I should recover my daughter from the snare of the Devil and transform her rebellious heart? Am I God, that I should cause the children of the church to love the Lord God, hearken unto His voice, and walk in His precepts? Am I God, that by my wisdom and power I should persuade a sinner on the mission field to renounce his old ways and turn to the One who is the way, the truth and the life? Am I God that I should create peace in the troubled heart, unity in the divided congregation, reconciliation between the estranged friends, a broken spirit in the impenitent, contentment in the bitter heart, kindness in the cruel, chastity in the prostitute or pornography addict, stewardship in the profligate, and humility in the boaster? I want to be faithful and used by God that by my godly conversation others may be gained to Christ. But, I am not God. *God* is God! Only God can save, and to God be the glory for salvation!

In 1924 we said it, "God is God." In 2024 we say it, "God is God." Let's keep saying it because we believe it from the heart.

May God make it so in our hearts.



Search the Scriptures

Rev. Daniel Kleyn, pastor of Doon PRC in Doon, Iowa

Matthew: Jesus Christ fulfilling Old Testament prophecy

Previous article in this series: December 1, 2023, p. 128.

In our previous article, in which we explained the subject of Isagogics, we pointed out that what ought especially to interest us in our study of a certain book of the Bible is the *canonical significance* of that book. This is because a book's canonical significance speaks to the unique place that book occupies in the canon of Scripture. The vital question is, What does this particular book tell or teach us in distinction from the other books of the Bible?

This does not mean that other information about each book is unimportant, such as who wrote the book, the occasion, the purpose, and so on. But these items are not the main thing and are of interest only insofar as they shed light on a book's canonical significance.

We intend now to consider each book of the New Testament in turn. We trust that the information about each book will help in the study of God's Word (wheth-

er privately, as families, or with fellow believers) with a view to searching out the truth concerning Jesus Christ in each part of Scripture.

The writer

The Holy Spirit used and inspired one of Christ's own disciples to write the first book of the New Testament. Scripture most often refers to him as Matthew, but a few times as Levi. The Bible also mentions he was the son of Alphaeus.

Matthew was a publican, a tax collector. In carrying out this work, the tax collectors were required to give a specific amount to the Roman government, and whatever they could collect beyond this they kept for themselves. As a result, they were often guilty of stealing from the Jews in order to make themselves rich. The

Jews therefore hated the tax collectors and viewed them both as traitors (because they worked for Rome) and as thieves. Matthew would have been hated by the Jews. And the fact that Christ called him to be one of His disciples no doubt added to the hatred the Jews had for Christ Himself, for He was associating with a hated publican.

Little more is mentioned in Scripture about Matthew. In the four gospel accounts, reference is made to his being called as a disciple, and in that connection to his holding a great feast in his house for Jesus (Luke 5). Beyond that, his name is simply included in the lists that Scripture gives of the disciples, including the list in Acts 1. Nothing is said, however, about his work as a disciple and apostle, nor about his involvement in the spread of the gospel after Pentecost.

One other thing we can say about Matthew is that he was obviously a Jew who knew the Old Testament Scriptures well. It is clear from his writing that he knew and understood the Jewish religion and Jewish laws. He was also well acquainted with the Jewish way of thinking and with Jewish life.

The occasion

The early New Testament church, as we know, grew very rapidly. This growth initially consisted of Jewish converts numbering in the thousands (Acts 2:41; 4:4). Soon after this, however, these converts were forced, on account of persecution, to flee from Jerusalem. As a result, Jewish Christians were now living throughout the then-known world, busy witnessing there, particularly to fellow Jews, of the truths of the gospel of Christ.

It was under those circumstances that the Spirit directed Matthew to write this book, and to write it as a defense of the Christian faith. Matthew wrote with a Jewish audience in mind and with the purpose of demonstrating to unbelieving Jews that Christianity was not, as those unbelieving Jews claimed, a corruption of the Old Testament and of the Jewish religion. Under the inspiration of the Spirit, Matthew showed that this charge was false. He demonstrated that Christian believers were simply confessing that Jesus Christ was the fulfillment of the Old Testament. He did not come to destroy the law and the prophets, but to fulfill them (Matt. 5:17).

We can understand, therefore, that the book of Matthew served well to confirm and encourage the Jewish converts in their faith in Christ, especially when they were being questioned and opposed by unbelieving Jews. Matthew's account also served these new Christians well as they witnessed to fellow Jews of what they

believed concerning Christ and His work of fulfilling Scripture.

It is generally understood that the book of Matthew was written quite early in the New Testament period. One of the main indications of this is that while Matthew wrote extensively concerning Christ's prophecy of the destruction of Jerusalem, he did not actually record anything about the event itself, which took place in AD 70. The book had to have been written, therefore, prior to that date.

This is significant because the early church concentrated on preaching the gospel first to the Jews, and only afterwards to the Gentiles (Rom. 1:16). The apostles always sought out the Jewish synagogues and preached the Word there. It was fitting and helpful, therefore, that an account of the life and ministry of Christ be written with a view especially to Jews, and that it be written soon after the outpouring of the Spirit.

Canonical significance

The unique place that Matthew has in the canon of Scripture is directly related to the fact that it was written chiefly for the benefit of Jews. Its canonical significance is that it shows that Jesus was the Messiah, the fulfillment of the Old Testament Scriptures, and that specifically as the Son of David, the King who sat on David's throne and established the heavenly and everlasting kingdom of God.

This is demonstrated first of all by the opening chapter of Matthew, which records Christ's genealogy as the Son of David. It is also confirmed by the many quotes from or references to the Old Testament throughout the book (some 55 of them, compared to a much lower number in Mark, Luke, and John). One also discovers that reference is made to the kingdom of heaven and the kingdom of God more than 45 times. And 10 times Christ is called the "Son of David" (compared to 3 times in Mark, 3 times in Luke, and none in John). Clearly, the emphasis falls on Christ being the fulfillment of the Old Testament as the King who sits on David's throne.

Even more striking is that Matthew shows that Christ Himself was very conscious of His calling to fulfill the Old Testament. This is indicated by the oft-repeated statement that Christ did something or said something so that "it might be fulfilled which was spoken of the Lord by the prophets" (Matt. 4:14; 8:17; 12:17; 13:35; 21:4, 26:56). The Old Testament sets forth the divine program and will of God concerning the redemptive work of Christ. And Matthew presents Christ as intentionally fulfilling that divine program in all its details. He came to do and to fulfill the will of God who sent

Him (Ps. 40:7-8). At times He even went out of His way (by His preaching, miracles, and pursuit of the way of suffering) to make sure the Scriptures were fulfilled. Thereby He fully accomplished the redemption of God's people and established God's eternal and heavenly kingdom.

A question one might ask is how Matthew differs from Mark, Luke, and John. That question is answered by the summaries that Herman Hoeksema gave of these books.¹ He stated: "Matthew emphasizes that Jesus is the promised Messiah according to prophecy, the Son of David." "Mark emphasizes the power of the Lion of Judah's tribe." "In Luke you have the emphasis especially on the human side of Jesus, Jesus as the Son of Man." And John "emphasizes throughout the essential divinity of Christ."

We do well to remember, however, that the above-mentioned differences actually contribute to the fact that these four books constitute a unit. They belong together as books that present a complete account and picture of the earthly life and ministry of Christ. In doing so they complement each other. They thereby form the background and foundation for what is recorded in the remainder of the New Testament.

Since the book of Hebrews was also written for a Jewish audience and with the purpose of demonstrating that Christ had fulfilled the Old Testament, how can Matthew and Hebrews be distinguished as regards their unique contributions to the canon of Scripture?

The solution lies in the fact that each book looks at Christ's work of fulfilling the Old Testament from a slightly different perspective. The book of Matthew looks at it from a *historical* perspective, thus focusing on how Christ fulfilled the Scriptures by His life, works, and teachings. The book of Hebrews, however, considers the *doctrinal* aspect of the fulfillment of the Old Testament, demonstrating how Christ was the fulfillment of all the Old Testament types and shadows and that He brought them to their heavenly realities.

The explanation for this difference is that Hebrews was written with a view to Jewish converts who had backslidden under the pressure of persecution and had returned to their Judaistic ideas. They needed to be told (as Hebrews does) that Christ was the "better" Mediator of a better covenant, with better promises and a better sacrifice, and thus far superior to the Old Testament types and shadows that pointed to Him.

Having in mind the canonical significance of Mat-

thew as stated above, we can certainly understand why the church placed Matthew as the first book in the New Testament canon of Scripture. Louis Berkhof comments on this as follows:

This book is properly placed at the very beginning of the New Testament. It forms part of the foundation on which the New Testament structure was to be reared. And among the Gospels, which together constitute this foundation, it is rightly put in the first place. It is, as it were, a connecting link between the Old Testament and the New.²

Outline of content

Unlike the other accounts of Christ's life and ministry, the book of Matthew is mostly chronological. Here follows a brief and, I trust, helpful outline of the book.³

- Matthew 1:1-17—The genealogy of Jesus Christ.
- Matthew 1:18 to 2:23—The birth and infancy of Jesus.
- Matthew 3:1 to 4:11—Jesus' preparation for His public ministry.
- Matthew 4:12 to 18:35—Jesus' lengthy Galilean ministry.
- Matthew 19:1 to 20:34—Christ's journey to Jerusalem.
- Matthew 21:1 to 25:56—Christ in and near Jerusalem toward the end of His life.
- Matthew 26:1 to 27:36—The end of Jesus Christ's earthly life.
- Matthew 18:1-20—Christ's resurrection and the great commission to the disciples.

1 Herman Hoeksema, *New Testament Introduction* (syllabus published by the Protestant Reformed Theological Seminary), 5, 7, 8 10.

2 Louis Berkhof, *New Testament Introduction* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1915), 74.

3 Hoeksema, *New Testament Introduction*, 3-5.



Believing and confessing

Prof. Ronald Cammenga, rector and professor of Dogmatics and Old Testament in the Protestant Reformed Theological Seminary and member of Southwest PRC in Wyoming, Michigan

Of Jesus Christ, true God and man, the only Savior of the world (Second Helvetic Confession, 11g)

Previous article in this series: December 15, 2023, p. 157.

The Sects.

We therefore condemn all who deny a real resurrection of the flesh (II Tim. 2:18), or who with John of Jerusalem, against whom Jerome wrote, do not have a correct view of the glorification of bodies. We also condemn those who thought that the devil and all the ungodly would at some time be saved, and that there would be an end to punishments. For the Lord has plainly declared: “Their fire is not quenched, and their worm does not die” (Mark 9:44). We further condemn Jewish dreams that there will be a golden age on earth before the Day of Judgment, and that the pious, having subdued all their godless enemies, will possess all the kingdoms of the earth. For evangelical truth in Matthew, chapters 24 and 25, and Luke, chapter 18, and apostolic teaching in II Thessalonians, chapter 2, and II Timothy, chapters 3 and 4, present something quite different.

Once again, the Second Helvetic Confession (SHC) demonstrates its well-deserved reputation for being polemical. Gospel teaching is never only positive; it is also antithetical. It is never only the setting forth of the truth; it also identifies the lie—the error that those who confess the truth must reject. Bullinger takes for granted the biblical injunction to “try the spirits whether they are of God” (I John 4:1).

In the preceding paragraphs, the SHC has set forth the biblical truth of Jesus’ bodily resurrection and ascension into heaven. In this paragraph, the confession highlights some of the “sects” and heretics who deny the first two steps in Christ’s state of exaltation. Bullinger’s condemnation of them is sharp. He names the heretics and minces no words in his assessment of their errors: “We...condemn all who deny a real resurrection of the flesh” of Jesus.

The first to be condemned is John, Bishop of Jeru-

salem (c. 356-417). John taught several unbiblical doctrines. He taught that the inherently good soul of man was imprisoned in the evil earthly body, until death when it was released from its prison. He defended the possibility that in the end the Devil might be saved. He was a defender of the allegorical interpretation of Scripture: the two trees in the Garden of Eden represented good and bad angels; the rivers mentioned in Genesis 2 that flowed out of Eden represented four heavenly virtues; the waters above and below the firmament symbolize good angels and devils. Among his other errors, John denied the bodily resurrection of Jesus. This is consistent with the view that the body is inherently evil. If the body is evil, Jesus could not have been raised in the body. If nothing else, at least John was consistent—consistently wrong, of course.

Jerome was the chief opponent of John of Jerusalem. Although known for his work of Bible translation, the Latin Vulgate Bible, Jerome was also a defender of the faith. He publicly challenged John for his false teachings, which included his denial of Jesus’ bodily resurrection and his sympathy with Pelagius.

In connection with Christ’s ascension into heaven, Bullinger takes the opportunity to engage in polemic against those who teach wrongly about heaven and hell. The SHC condemns universalism, the teaching that in the end all the wicked, even the Devil and his angels, will be saved and “that there would be an end to punishments.” This is today the teaching of the religious liberals and the cults. They argue that a just God would never punish eternally sins that are committed in time. What they forget is that the God who is sinned against in time is the infinitely holy God. The confession appeals to Jesus’ word in Mark 9:44, “Where their worm dieth not, and the fire is not quenched.”

In line with its teaching in the previous paragraph that immediately before the second coming of Christ “wickedness will then be at its greatest in the world

and...the Antichrist having corrupted true religion, will fill up all things with superstition and impiety and will cruelly lay waste the Church with bloodshed and flames,” Bullinger condemns all “Jewish dreams.” This is the teaching “that there will be a golden age on earth before the Day of Judgment, and that the pious, having subdued all their godless enemies, will possess all the kingdoms of the earth.”

This is a dream, a foolish and unbiblical pipedream. It is a fantasy of those who are not grounded in biblical amillennial eschatology. It is a “Jewish” dream because it was the Jews of Jesus’ day who rejected His teaching concerning the kingdom of heaven and taught instead that Rome being overthrown the Messiah would usher in a kingdom of earthly peace and prosperity. The Jews would once again be God’s favored people, the throne of David raised up, and the worship of the temple restored fully. A dream does not accord with reality. The reality of the church’s present experience, as well as the church’s future as prophesied in Scripture, contradict “Jewish dreams.”

This “Jewish dream” of a future “golden age on earth before the Day of Judgment,” is shared by contemporary postmillennialists. Some contend that this “golden age” will be brought about by the preaching of the gospel. Other, more radical postmillennialists, teach that the “golden age” will be brought about by military and political means. In the final analysis, how the golden age is brought about is irrelevant. No matter the mechanism, such a teaching is a dream, a dream that does not accord with reality. Every “Reformed” postmillennialist bumps his nose against the teaching of the SHC, which expresses the consensus teaching of the sixteenth-century Reformers. Besides which, Scripture “present[s] something quite different.”

The Fruit of Christ’s Death and Resurrection.

Further by His passion and death and everything which He did and endured for our sake by His coming in the flesh, our Lord reconciled all the faithful to the heavenly Father, made expiation for sins, disarmed death, overcame damnation and hell, and by His resurrection from the dead brought again and restored life and immortality. For He is our righteousness, life, and resurrection, in a word, the fulness and perfection of all the faithful, salvation and all sufficiency. For the apostle says: “In him all the fulness of God was pleased to dwell,” and, “You have come to fulness of life in him” (Colossians, chapters 1 and 2).

The fundamental truth that this paragraph of the SHC defends is the efficacy of Christ’s suffering and death. His saving work was efficacious, that is, it accomplished all that God intended His Son’s death to accomplish. Christ’s death had the effect that God determined it should have. God’s eternal decree was realized perfectly in time in Christ’s doing and dying.

It is heresy to teach that Christ’s death was ineffectual for many for whom He died, as is the teaching of Arminianism. The Arminian teaches that Christ died for every human being, even though not every human being is saved by the death of Christ. In fact, many for whom He died end up in hell, spending an eternity in anguish even though Christ purportedly died for them. Such a teaching contradicts the teaching of Scripture, as set forth in the SHC.

Since Christ’s death was efficacious, there is fruit that *we* enjoy because of that death. If His death was not efficacious, there could be no saving benefit for the child of God in that death and no assurance that His death is of value for us. If His death was ineffectual, all our comfort for life and in death vanishes as quickly as the early morning dew on a warm summer’s day. If His death failed to accomplish that which God intended, we are deprived of all assurance. That Christ died for me is of no consolation since many for whom He died perish despite His death for them. How can I be assured that I am not included in their number?

But Christ’s death *was* effectual. And because it was effectual, there is fruit—good fruit, saving fruit, enduring fruit—connected to His death.

That Christ’s death was effectual *for us* demands that Christ’s death was vicarious or substitutionary. He did not die for Himself, but He stood in the place of others, as their substitute before the bar of God’s justice. The SHC refers to the vicarious nature of Christ’s death when it says that “everything which he did and endured,” He did and endured “*for our sake.*” The confession further states that He “reconciled *all the faithful* to the heavenly Father.” And it speaks of Christ as “*our* righteousness, life, and resurrection.”

Because Christ’s death was efficacious and because He died a substitutionary death, there is good fruit *for us* as a result of His death. The fruit of Christ’s death is manifold. Like the petals on a brilliant sunflower or the blossoms on an apple tree in spring, the fruit of Christ’s death is abundant. The SHC identifies a number of these fruits.

By His death, “our Lord reconciled all the faithful to the heavenly Father.” By His death, He “made expiation for sins.” By His death, He “disarmed death.” By His death, He “overcame damnation and hell.” And by His

resurrection, He “brought again and restored life and immortality” to us.

The benefits of Christ’s death begin with God. By His death, Christ has reconciled us to God. Reconciliation is appeasement, the restoration of harmony and friendship. It is an inherently covenantal concept. Husbands and wives who are at odds with each other are reconciled. Brothers in the church who are at enmity are reconciled. The covenantal relationship that we transgressed in paradise is restored by the death of the Mediator of the covenant, our Lord Jesus Christ. Take note that God is not reconciled to us, but we are reconciled to God. “And you, that were sometime alienated and enemies in your mind by wicked works, yet now hath he reconciled” (Col. 1:21). Bullinger reflects the language of Scripture.

Further, by His atoning death, Christ has “made expiation for sins.” This is the basis of everything. Christ’s death was satisfaction, the complete satisfaction of the demands of God’s justice with respect to our sins. Something happened when Jesus died—really happened. His death did not merely make something possible, the reality depending on the sinner’s exercise of his free will. No, a thousand times no! Then it was altogether possible that Christ’s death would have been in vain, that not one human being would have been saved by His cross. Rather, Christ accomplished something on the cross. He accomplished the expiation of the sins for all for whom He died. Their sins being expiated, they are no longer held against them. Their sins being expiated, they have in Christ a complete and perfect satisfaction to God for their sins. The apostle expresses it this way in Colossians 2:14, “Blotting out the handwriting of or-

dinances that was against us, which was contrary to us, and took it out of the way, nailing it to his cross.”

By His death, Christ has “disarmed death.” What a beautiful figure! As a murderer who threatens to kill us, pointing a loaded gun at us with his finger on the trigger, is wrestled to the ground and disarmed by a passerby who beholds our plight, so the Lord has disarmed death. Death is still there, but it has no power to destroy us. It has been disarmed. As the old Puritan once said, “The death of Christ was the death of death for all for whom He died” (John Owen).

Christ disarmed death by taking away the cause of death: the guilt of our sin. He disarmed death for Himself, rising from the dead on the third day. But He also disarmed death for us. If Christ had not satisfied for even one sin of one child of God, He would still be in the grave of Joseph of Arimathea and death would still be armed with killing power.

In Christ’s victory over death, we of whom He is the head are also victorious over death. That is the apostle’s teaching in Romans 4:25, “Who was delivered for our offences, and was raised again for our justification.” Through Him “death is swallowed up in victory” also for us (I Cor. 15:54). “We are more than conquerors through him that loved us” (Romans 8:37). Because of Him, one day “death and hell [will be] cast into the lake of fire” (Rev. 20:14).

Thus, we “have come to fulness of life in him.” *Fullness* of life. Life now under His blessing. Life that cannot be touched by the power of death. And the promise of life hereafter in His presence.

Fullness of life and fullness of joy!



Go ye into all the world

Rev. Richard Smit, pastor of Randolph PRC in Randolph, Wisconsin

The three-self formula and PRCA foreign missions (11)

Previous article in this series: April 15, 2023, p. 327.

It is important and encouraging to know that there are examples of the three-self formula in the early New Testament church according to the book of Acts. There is evidence that the church did manifest aspects of the three-self formula in its early, developing institutional life. This is true not just in the later years

of the history of Acts, but even in the early history soon after Pentecost. Already then, the church manifested the threefold Christian character of being self-propagating, self-supporting, and self-governing.

First of all, according to the end of Acts 2, it is evident that the early New Testament church, under the initial

leadership of the apostles, was a self-governing, autonomous institute. Just prior to Pentecost, the apostles discussed, approved two candidates, chose Matthias, and then had Matthias numbered with the apostles as an ordained minister of the Word. Although the apostles did not have the authority to ordain another apostle in the strict sense of an apostle, whom Christ ordained personally, the apostles did have the authority to select and ordain those who served with and were numbered with the apostles as fellow ministers of the Word.

Moreover, according to Acts 2:41-47, many were added to the church, that is, the local church institute in Jerusalem, through the work of the apostles. These daily additions to the church were the work of the Lord by the means of, not only the apostles' preaching, but also their administering household baptism to those whom they judged eligible for baptism according to their confession of faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. The additions of believers and their seed to the church involved an exercise of the church's authority towards those who were received gladly into the Jerusalem congregation.

Furthermore, the reference in Acts 2:42 to the "breaking of the bread" is a reference to the administration of the Lord's Supper by the apostles. Also, in regard to the administration of that sacrament, the apostles and the church needed to oversee, with their authority, the administration of the elements unto only those who, according to their confession of faith, were approved to partake. Thus, already immediately after Pentecost, the church exercised its spiritual government, which did not originate from the Roman government, from the Jewish Sanhedrin, from the apostles, nor from individual members of the church, but from Christ, the Chief Shepherd and Bishop.

Secondly, the church in Jerusalem was noticeably self-proclaiming and self-propagating. According to their ordination and sending by Christ, the apostles preached His Word (Acts 2:41-42), administered the sacraments of baptism (Acts 2:41) and the Lord's Supper (Acts 2:42), and by the power of the Spirit performed many signs and wonders that corroborated their preaching as the authentic and true doctrine of Jesus Christ Himself (Acts 2:43). The positive fruit of the preaching of the gospel was the gathering of 3,000 souls into the congregation as well as a church that prospered spiritually. The membership adhered to the doctrine of the apostles and were one together in the faith (Acts 2:42). They helped one another in their need (Acts 2:45). Their believing households were characterized by joyfulness in the Lord and single devotion to the kingdom of heaven and Jesus Christ (Acts 2:46). Even unbelievers in Jerusalem noticed,

and even respected outwardly for a time the godly behavior, worship, and devotion of the people of God (Acts 2:47). All of these characteristics were nurtured and strengthened graciously by the Spirit of the Lord through the administration of the Word and sacraments by the apostles and other ministers of the Word that the church had approved and ordained.

Thirdly, the church showed that it was self-sacrificing and, thus, self-supporting regarding the needs of the church. Implied in Acts 2 is the self-support of the church towards the apostles and their needs while they devoted themselves to the work of the ministry of the Word. The apostles and the church had been instructed by the Lord that the apostles would receive their ministerial support through these households among whom the apostles labored (Mark 6:7-10). The church members had the duty to feed, clothe, house, and provide any other earthly necessary means for the faithful labor of the apostles among the households and members of the church within and among unbelieving households and individuals without. Thus, for example, while the members of the church, from household to household, ate their food with gladness and singleness of heart (Acts 2:46), they would have included the apostles at their meals, or at the very least provided them the means for daily bread so that they might continue their service in the ministry of the Word.

However, the more prominent evidence of self-support in the church was the self-sacrifice and care that the members of the church exercised for benevolence work. The members "sold their possessions and goods, and parted them to all men, as every man had need" (Acts 2:45). Although for a little while the administration of benevolence was handled by the apostles, yet from the outset the source of that benevolence remained the same. Believing households and individuals sold their possessions and goods, and the proceeds of those sales served the legitimate needs of the poor. As godly stewards, the saints sacrificed themselves and the firstfruits of their earthly goods liberally in thanksgiving to God for the support of the poor according to their proper need.

Since the time of the record of the early church in Jerusalem at the end of Acts 2, churches in Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and other areas in Palestine, Asia Minor, Macedonia, and Achaia, continued to reflect the three fundamental aspects of autonomous, local congregations. There is evidence that the churches continued to be self-governing.

First, the apostles and the churches ordained elders and other ministers of the Word in the churches that were established through their labors. They did not

need to get permission from the Jewish Sanhedrin for the appointment of elders and deacons in the churches. With the authority of Christ given to them through the church, Paul and Barnabas ordained elders in every church in Asia Minor on their first missionary journey (Acts 14:23). This practice would not have been something novel for the establishing of churches at that time, but a practice that followed the precedent of the establishing of churches by the apostles in earlier years in other areas, such as Samaria (Acts 8:14-17) and Antioch (Acts 11:22-26).

Second, the apostles wrestled with a benevolence problem in the church, and they addressed it, by the direction of the Holy Spirit, with the recognition of and the need for the office of deacon in the Christian church in accordance with the threefold office of Christ (Acts 6:1-8). Upon this exercise of self-government, the Lord granted the good fruit of the increase of the Word of God, the multiplication of disciples in the Jerusalem church, and a conversion of a large group of levitical priests to the church (Acts 6:7).

Third, the church exercised its spiritual government in the resolution of disputes that arose regarding the work of the apostles with the Gentiles. One dispute arose when Peter visited and had a meal with Cornelius and his household and friends, who were uncircumcised Gentiles. Peter was accused by those of the circumcision of gross misconduct (Acts 11:2-3). Another dispute arose in connection with the work of Paul and Barnabas. A group in the church insisted that “except ye be circumcised after the manner of Moses, ye cannot be saved” (Acts 15:1). This group insisted that circumcision was essential to membership in the church, and new Gentile converts needed to be not only baptized but also circumcised for full membership in the churches. As a result, this group accused Paul and Barnabas of error in their mission work among the Gentiles.

In regards to both disputes, the apostles and elders of the churches came together to resolve them with an ecclesiastical decision in harmony with the revealed will and Word of God. As a result, Peter was exonerated, and the church declared that “God hath also to the Gentiles granted repentance unto life” (Acts 11:18). Similarly, Paul and Barnabas were cleared of any wrongdoing or doctrinal error, and the assembly declared that the Gentiles did not need to be circumcised in order to be saved

or to become members of the churches. The church even communicated its decision through an official letter to the Gentile churches.

Finally, the apostles themselves recognized and submitted to the Christ-given authority of the church for the management and government of its ecclesiastical work. The apostles did not regard themselves as supreme rulers in the church, above the elders and deacons. Although the apostles had received from the Lord a prominent role in the early New Testament church, they were, nevertheless, submissive to the overseeing authority of the church. This was evident, for example, when men were called and sent by the church in Antioch for the mission work in Asia Minor. When considering candidates for that mission work, the church presented five candidates, not just the two that were chosen (Acts 13:1). Both Barnabas and Paul did not presume to have the authority to decide who would

be sent, even though they were experienced in mission work in Antioch (Acts 11:22-26) and even though Paul had been told by Christ that he was ordained to be an apostle to the Gentiles (Acts 9:15). As prominent as they may have been on the list of five candidates, they are mentioned last. From the subsequent evidence of the character and

In regards to both disputes, the apostles and elders of the churches came together to resolve them with an ecclesiastical decision in harmony with the revealed will and Word of God. As a result, Peter was exonerated, and the church declared that “God hath also to the Gentiles granted repentance unto life” (Acts 11:18).

behavior of Barnabas and Paul, they did not complain about their placement on the list of candidates, nor did they campaign in the church in Antioch to be chosen. They were humble and patient men, who submitted to the authority of the church and the process of election, examination, approbation, and ordination.

Furthermore, even after Paul and Barnabas were ordained and sent by the church in Antioch, they still recognized their subordinate relationship to their calling church. Upon their return from their missionary work in Asia Minor, they returned to the calling church and “rehearsed all that God had done with them, and how he had opened the door of faith unto the Gentiles” (Acts 14:27). This practice of a report regarding their work showed their humble and respectful recognition of the oversight and role of the church in the mission work in the field of Asia Minor.

In our next article, we will finish our observations regarding the evidence in Scripture that the newly established churches throughout the early New Testament were also self-propagating and self-supporting.



When thou sittest in thine house

Mrs. Margaret Laning, wife, mother, and grandmother in the Protestant Reformed Churches

Bless the LORD, O my soul

Do you speak aloud to yourself? Perhaps those closest to you can answer that. I remember times when my grandmother single-handedly carried on a solo conversation. She swept her patio as I played nearby; her quiet instruction, admonitions, and chuckles were intriguing. I was somewhat accustomed to this with my mother because the apple does not fall far from the tree. Sure enough, my sisters and I chattered while alone, too, often in front of the bathroom mirror. Not until marriage did I realize that not everyone does this on a regular basis. Nevertheless, some of our children and grandchildren have inherited this rather amusing trait.

If we ask others what they say aloud to themselves, we will likely receive countless answers. Some might say they try to memorize something useful or to reinforce a memory worth remembering. Some might focus on negative experiences, rehearsing previous conversations, even creating future ones that counter or help solve the previous ones. Some might tell themselves they cannot do anything right, while others give themselves a pep talk. Though talking to ourselves is not wrong in itself, we must admit that it can sometimes arise from our sinful nature. We are prone to taking our eyes off Christ and focusing on self. When we go the route of self-seeking our sins of pride, self-pity, discontent rise up against us, sometimes succumbing to such a negative, accusatory state that we are not in the right spiritual frame of mind when caring for our family.

On any given morning, for instance, a young Christian mother might wake up remembering an unkind remark from a previous conversation with someone. As the morning proceeds she begins a vengeful dialogue in her mind. All the while her twins are tugging at her, fighting and crying over a toy. The oldest does not have kindergarten this particular day and is lying on his back kicking at the couch moaning, “I’m so bored!” The toddler has a messy diaper and is walking from room to room depositing memorabilia which will require a full-out deep clean. Then a new thought comes to this mother’s mind: What if Mrs. VanSnoopsma stops by for a visit without calling again? She glances at the clock

and it is 11:00 A.M. She is still in her bathrobe; there are toys everywhere and dishes unwashed. She looks at her crying, moaning children and mutters under her breath, “You know, I think I would be a really good mother if it weren’t for all of you!” Up pops her son straight as an arrow, eyes fixed on her. The mother is startled, then takes a few slow, deep breaths. Her face begins to soften as she says, “I’m so sorry, I think I need to give myself a good talking to.”

Why talk to ourselves?

Let’s face it, we do not need to ponder things that are not worth hanging onto. Rather, we need to prepare our hearts and minds by talking to our soul about the things of God! Think of it as a prelude to prayer, praise, devotions, worship and having the right frame of mind in leading our children to Jesus. Exhorting our soul is a biblical practice and Psalm 103 is an uplifting example. By the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, King David wrote, “Bless the LORD, O my soul: and all that is within me, bless his holy name” (Ps. 103:1). In this psalm David is talking to himself. There is nothing strange about it. John Calvin in his commentary on Psalm 103:22 says that the purpose is “to animate the soul all the more to the exercise of praise.”

Psalm 103 is a psalm to read over and over, even memorize with your children. It contains life principles that will be dipped into again and again. The focus is on our praise-worthy God, His perfections, and on His gracious benefits to all His people. Keeping this focus is important. The more we know God and His works, the more thankful we will be to stir up our soul to praise our Savior. In other words, our reaction to knowing all this elicits praise. Spend some time reading this Psalm thinking about that.

Meditating on Psalm 103 gives opportunity for self-examination, too. For all those times we look into the mirror as we get ready for the day, it might be good to ask, “What would it take for me to bless the Lord from ‘all that is within me’ all the time?” Could it be we are waiting for something better to happen first? Are

we waiting for a larger paycheck, better health, more friends, to conceive a child, to see a wayward child repent, have less trials...what is missing? We cannot place our hope in our circumstances but in the God of our circumstances. Trust Him and He will turn them into blessed opportunities to grow in Christ.

History repeats itself

Psalm 103 brings up some church history to ponder which helps us put our praises into perspective. “He made known his ways unto Moses, his acts unto the children of Israel” (Ps. 103:7). According to the book of Exodus, God wrought a great deliverance for His people, Israel. He brought them out of bondage in Egypt, parted the Red Sea as they fled on dry ground, and chose Moses to lead them to the promised land. He directed Moses to Mt. Sinai to receive the Ten Commandments. While Moses was away, Israel fell into idolatry by making a golden calf for worship. God was very displeased with Israel. Moses interceded for them, praying for God’s mercy. Israel was not wiped out. Had they forgotten God’s word? Had they forgotten their identity as the church?

We can sing praises all day with our children, but if we are not stirred within our soul with the wonder of Christ, how He delivered us out of sin’s bondage, and how we belong to Him personally, then our praises fall flat with destructive consequences. For example, Satan is involved in identity theft on a grand scale, confusing children also in confessing Christian homes about who they are. A legion of churches are bowing to the LGBTQ+ golden calf. Though they may yawn at the thought of studying doctrine and prattle that truth is relative, they are busy covering up God’s glory by changing who He is and what He says to suit their sinful desires. Scripture exposes their idolatry and ever-changing ways.

God never changes. The truths of Genesis chapters one and two, highlighted in Ephesians 5:30-32, are timeless and clear on how God created male and female and instituted marriage between one man and one woman. Heidelberg Catechism Lord’s Day 1 demonstrates that it is not merely *who* we are, but *whose* we are. This is an important point. “That I with body and soul, both in life and death, am not my own, but belong unto my faithful Savior Jesus Christ....” Losing the knowledge of one’s God-given identity brings unfathomable distress. Our children need to be reminded whose they are often.

Reasons to praise and rejoice in Him

Psalm 103:6-19 focus on God’s holy character. Remember when Moses asked the Lord, “Show me thy glory” (Exodus 33:18)? Moses was interested in growing to

know God in greater depth. So the holy God proclaimed who He really is, not how sinful man views Him, in a way as if to say, “These are my attributes and this is what I do.” God said, “The Lord God, merciful and gracious, long-suffering, and abundant in goodness and truth, keeping mercy for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, and that will by no means clear the guilty” (Ex. 34:6, 7). Psalm 103:6-19 is very similar. The more we and our believing children see who He is, the more we humbly realize that life is not all about me. Praise God for that. “Not unto us, O LORD, not unto us, but unto thy name give glory” (Ps. 115:1).

In our children’s beginners catechism (book one, revised edition) it teaches, “Were Adam and Eve happy in paradise? Yes, they saw the glory of God in everything round about them.” Seeing God’s perfections fills our soul with joy, does it not? When our children join in singing His praises with us, those times are precious. Sometime while working in the kitchen have your little ones pour some vinegar onto baking soda and watch it bubble over. Does our soul always bubble over? To our shame we do not consistently feel like giving our all, but a half-hearted effort at best. The apostle Paul was in prison when he wrote Philippians. Undoubtedly, he had to fight sinful thoughts, too. Yet Philippians is one of the most joyful books of the Bible. Paul wrote, “...if there be any praise, think on these things” (Phil. 4:8). Surely, we all need to do that more. Despite Paul’s hardship in bonds he rejoiced in praising the Lord Jesus. “Rejoice in the Lord alway: and again I say, Rejoice” (Phil. 4:4).

Does it not border on insanity how we sinners saved by grace have a tendency to remember things not worth remembering, yet forget the precious benefits and treasures we have in Christ? Such is the depravity of our sinful nature! Psalm 103:2 says, “Bless the LORD, O my soul, and forget not all His benefits....” Thinking on His benefits produces a long list that can only keep growing. We can help each other out in this. For instance some families have marker boards to help remember important things. Why not start a list titled, “Forget Not All His Benefits” or “Thankful Blessings”? The children can suggest what they are thankful for, such as their family, church, Christian school, friends, and so on. In Psalm 103:3-5 the psalmist lists these benefits: He forgives, He heals, He redeems, He crowns, and He satisfies. There is a lot there to talk about. Without a doubt God’s forgiveness is our great benefit from our Savior’s work on the cross. “As far as the east is from the west, so far hath he removed our transgressions from us” (v. 12). If your children wake up early enough, watch the sun rise in the east together and then watch it set in the

west come evening. Ask if they can guess how far away the east is from the west. What an impossible question! Of course, the distance is immeasurable—just like the vast, completeness of God’s forgiveness of all His people’s sins.

My husband and I were in Fort Worth, Texas and Budapest, Hungary recently where we met with a number of believers, some of them new Christians. One of them came to faith just two years ago when her Christian friend gave her the Gospel of John to read. She, as

well as the others, rejoice that their names are written in heaven (Luke 10:20).

God will keep gathering His church until He returns. Praising God in our conversations is infectious. May we encourage others to praise Him by our own praising.

“...for consider how great things he hath done for you” (I Sam. 12:24). By His grace, may we shake away spiritual dullness and stir up our soul to lively, passionate praise. This is glorifying to God. Bless the LORD, O my soul!



Translated treasures

Rev. Joshua Engelsma, translator, pastor of Crete PRC in Crete, Illinois

Reconciliation

*From A Brief Explanation of the Church Order by Johannes Jansen**

Article 75: The reconciliation of all such sins as are of their nature of a public character, or have become public because the admonition of the church was despised, shall take place (upon sufficient evidence of repentance) in such a manner as the consistory shall deem conducive to the edification of each church. Whether in particular cases this shall take place in public shall be considered, when there is a difference of opinion about it in the consistory, in churches where there is only one minister, with the advice of two neighboring churches.¹

This article deals with the reconciliation of public sins, of which the sinner repents, as long as he is not yet cut off. Even after excommunication (cutting off, the ban) reconciliation is still possible, but it must then take place in the manner of the Form of Reinstatement. This [article] is about the ecclesiastical reconciliation of public sins before the cutting off has taken place. The main questions are these:

1. *In which cases ecclesiastical reconciliation must take place.* Only in the case of public sins, that is to

say, that they are “of their nature of a public character, or have become public because the admonition of the church was despised.” The church order, therefore, strictly adheres to the rule that secret sins must be reconciled by private or brotherly admonition. Jesus Himself explicitly demands this in Matthew 5:23-24 and 18:15. But the matter is different when we have to do with sins in public, which are either public by their very nature, or have become public through contempt of ecclesiastical admonition. Now when such a sinner, who has first rejected the private admonition or committed a public sin, is admonished by the consistory, and accepts that admonition and repents, then reconciliation must take place and church discipline must not continue. In civil punishment it is so, and rightly so, that a sinner, if he confesses his crime, is condemned, for the law demands that the transgression, once proven or acknowledged, be punished. After all, punishment is the reparation for a violated right. It is the other way around with discipline; there sin is forgiven when it is confessed. Grace pardons after humble confession, for it reconciles the violated right. This provision applied from the outset. The Synod of Emden (1571) already included it in the Church Order as Article 29, and it has stayed since.²

* The following is a translation of Johannes Jansen, *Korte Verklaring van de Kerkenordening* [A Brief Explanation of the Church Order]. Amsterdam: J. H. Kok, 1923.

1 The wording of this article as it was in Jansen’s church order differs from the present reading of this article in the PRCA. The last part of the article in our present church order reads: “Whether in particular cases this shall take place in public shall, when there is a difference of opinion about it in the consistory, be considered with the advice of two neighboring churches or of the classis.”

2 Article 29 from the Synod of Emden reads: “Sins which by their nature are public or which have been revealed to the congregation (because of rejection of admonitions) shall be openly reconciled, not according to the judgment of one or two persons but according to the opinion of the whole consistory, in such a way and form which is considered to be most fitting for the edification of each congregation.” Cf. Richard De Ridder, ed., *The*

2. *On what requirement the reconciliation must be made.* The Synod of Middelburg (1581) deliberately inserted this requirement in the article, namely “when certain signs of repentance are seen”³ (Latin: *ubi de verae poenitentiae signis constiterit*, that is, where there is agreement on the marks of true penitence). The same was of course also meant earlier. So there is no reconciliation without “true repentance” (*vera poenitentia*). The marks (*signa*) of that true repentance, or as the Convent at Wesel (1568) in Chapter VIII:10 already expressed it, “clear evidence and proof of repentance”⁴ (Latin: *resipiscentiae specimen ac testimonium*), must be present. With serious sins, which were shameful to the church or ought to be punished by the government, men were not always satisfied with an oral confession of guilt, but they were still kept away from the Lord’s Supper once or several times in order to remove the offense and to give a probationary period for the authenticity of penitence (Acts of Dordrecht, 1578, Art. 99).⁵ The consistory must conclude from the confession and walk of the fallen one whether true penitence is present. When doubt arises as to whether the confession is sincere, reconciliation must be postponed. In some cases, for instance of drunkenness, in which the sinner relapses so easily even after repentance, a probationary period before admission to the Lord’s Supper is highly advisable. Reconciliation must not be imposed upon him, but must be desired by the man himself.

3. *Whether reconciliation is to be made publicly before the congregation or only before the consistory.* In the original wording of this article from the Synod of Emden (1571, Art. 29), it read: “shall be openly reconciled, not according to the judgment of one or two persons but according to the opinion of the whole consistory.”⁶ First it says: “[they] shall be openly reconciled.” This gives the appearance that the reconciliation must be made publicly before the congregation. But there is

still more that has been drawn out of these words. It further says that the reconciliation will be made openly, not at the discretion of a few consistory members, but of the entire consistory. The purpose of this article is therefore: whether reconciliation will be made public may not be decided by a minister or elder, but by the entire consistory (Latin: *sed totius consistorie arbitrio*, that is, but according to the judgment of the entire consistory). Although it may have been the custom at first to publicly reconcile public sins, each case must be preceded by an arbitration, that is, a judgment of the consistory. The consistory had to decide in each case whether reconciliation would be public, yes or no.

In the same line, the following synods have also decided and even sharpened the determination of Emden. The Synod of Middelburg (1581) even added the advice of the classis: “reconciliation...shall take place in public by judgment of the consistory and advice of classis,”⁷ that is, if the consistory, after having obtained the advice of the class, judged it necessary. The Synod of The Hague (1586) amended this provision so that the reconciliation “shall take place publicly by judgment of the consistory (in the country or in smaller cities where there is only one minister with the advice of two neighboring consistories).”⁸ That is, in larger cities with more ministers the consistory could decide, but in congregations with only one minister the advice of two nearby churches was asked because it could take too long for the classis to meet and it was much easier to convene two churches than a full classis.

The Synod of Utrecht (1905) has expressed the intention so clearly that all misunderstanding is excluded. It now determined: “Whether in particular cases this shall take place in public shall be considered, when there is a difference of opinion about it in the consistory, in churches where there is only one minister, with the advice of two neighboring churches.”⁹ The consistory decides in each case whether it will take place publicly before the congregation or only before the consistory. If there is a difference, then in large cities with more than one minister the consistory may rule by majority vote, but in churches with only one minister the advice of two neighboring churches must be sought before the decision is made. The words “with the advice” do not mean “with permission,” for then the decision would lie

Church Orders of the Sixteenth Century Reformed Churches of the Netherlands Together with Their Social, Political, and Ecclesiastical Context (Grand Rapids: Calvin Theological Seminary, 1987), 118.

3 The reference is to Article 63 of this meeting. Cf. De Ridder, *Church Orders*, 282.

4 Cf. De Ridder, *Church Orders*, 94.

5 Article 99 of this synod reads: “Those who have committed grievous sins which are a disgrace to the church or which should also be punished by the government, even though they show penitence verbally, shall nevertheless be barred from the Lord’s Supper to remove the offense and to test their penitence. But how often or how long this shall take place shall be left to the discretion of the consistory.” Cf. De Ridder, *Church Orders*, 223.

6 Cf. De Ridder, *Church Orders*, 118.

7 The reference is to Article 63 from this synod. Cf. De Ridder, *Church Orders*, 282.

8 The reference is to Article 68 from this synod. Cf. De Ridder, *Church Orders*, 152.

9 The Church Order of 1905, in its original Dutch, can be found online here: <http://www.kerkrecht.nl/node/177>.

with the neighboring churches; also not “after advice” so that it is up to the consistory whether they want to be bothered by it, yes or no. But “in accordance with the advice or judgment” of the two churches. The intention is that the two neighboring churches meet with the consistory, and that they reach a common judgment together.

What is now the *standard* for judging whether reconciliation should be publicly before the congregation or only before the consistory? The article does not speak of it. Much less does it enumerate all conceivable cases that must be publicly or secretly reconciled. The church order is not a criminal code that lists and sets the penalty for sins. There is also no fixed rule. Each case must be judged on its own. The consistory can then apply as a *standard*:

- a. What is most honoring to God;
- b. what is most useful for the edifying of the church; and
- c. what is most conducive to the salvation of the sinner.

When in a church many unbelievers and mockers come to church and public reconciliation would give rise to blasphemy against God’s name and public reproach of the church of Christ; or when a spirit of Pharisaism reigns in a congregation and public reconciliation would further strengthen its self-righteousness; or if the public reconciliation should make known the sin to many who

did not yet know it and the name of the sinner should be more harmed, reconciliation must be made only before the consistory. Public reconciliation, on the other hand, is desirable if it serves more for God’s honor and more for the edification of the church and the rehabilitation of the repentant sinner.

4. *The form and manner of reconciliation.* It states that it will be done in such a form and manner as will be judged by the consistory to be for the edification of every church. We do not have a fixed form for this. If the reconciliation takes place only before the consistory, some questions may be asked, and the reconciliation made must be reported to the congregation from the pulpit. The latter is necessary to completely remove the offense given. This was also the case in the past. The confession and reconciliation then took place before the consistory, but a brief announcement was made from the pulpit. And the best thing is that only his misdeed and penitence are communicated to the church, without mentioning his name. However, when the reconciliation is publicly in front of the congregation, the consistory may prepare a short form describing the character of the sin and further emphasizing the repentance and the reconciliation. The intention is not to give the sinner one last public punishment, but to reconcile him to the congregation, that in lowliness of mind each may esteem the other better than himself (Phil. 2:3).



Our rich heritage

Herman Hoeksema (1886-1965) was the first editor of the *Standard Bearer* and pastor of First PRC, Grand Rapids, Michigan for 40 years

The antithesis in paradise

This is a reprint from volume 1, no. 1 of the *Standard Bearer*.

Here you will find a reprint of an article by Herman Hoeksema from the first issue of the Standard Bearer, October 1924. (The editors printed one issue per month for the first year.) HH began treating what he considered to be some of the most fundamental Reformed doctrines as taught in Bible history. The subject in the November issue was “The Lie and Its Father.” In December, “God and Sin.” The present reprint is “The Antithesis in Paradise.” The subject is not surprising, but the depth

to which HH goes, and the wideness of the doctrinal foundation he lays, may be.

In 1984, in the SB’s 60th anniversary year, then editor Homer C. Hoeksema reprinted some early articles under the heading “Our Rich Heritage.” We use that title here, in our 100th anniversary year. Out of SB’s “storehouses” we bring some “old treasures” (see Matt. 13:52).

Light and darkness, good and evil, holiness and corruption, righteousness and iniquity, life and

death—these are, according to the Word of God, not to be conceived and explained in a dualistic sense and manner.

Dualism, in whatever form it may appear, deals with the problem of God's relation to the world and of the origin of evil. And the foundation of all dualistic systems of theology is the doctrine of two primal causes in continual conflict with each other. Thus among the Persians a dualistic system was either originated or modified from older forms of Zoroaster. According to him there are two principles, Ormuzd and Ahriman. The former is pure and infinite Light, Perfection, Wisdom, and the Creator of every good thing. The latter is the principle and originator of darkness and evil. The history of the world is chiefly the record of the antagonism between these two primal principles of good and evil. This dualistic conception and mode of thinking sometimes insinuated itself to a certain extent into the thinking of the primitive church, as for instance in the Docetic phase of Gnosticism and in Manicheism, though the latter utterly disclaimed being denominated Christian. And one cannot escape the impression that even today many conceive of the antithesis between God and the Devil, good and evil, light and darkness in this dualistic way.

This, however, is a mistake. Scripture teaches no dualism, but an antithesis. There are no two primal causes and eternal principles, constantly warring with each other, but God is One. He alone is eternal and the Primal Cause and there is no other eternal principle or primal cause next to Him. Neither is He both good and evil, nor are the principles of good and evil to be traced to His Being, for He is a Light and there is no darkness in Him. But this good and glorious God, according to His eternal and sovereign good pleasure, wills to reveal His praises, His eternally adorable virtue antithetically, that is, in opposition to darkness. Darkness, evil, sin are not primal principles, eternally coordinate with Light, Goodness, Righteousness, but the former are subservient to the latter, darkness must serve to bring out the glory of the light, the Devil serves to enhance the unsearchable riches of God's Being and virtues and works.

In the light of this idea of an antithesis, we can understand the placing of "the tree of the knowledge of good and evil" in paradise. By means of it, God carries the antithesis into the life and before the consciousness of man, made after His image.

Adam was God's covenant friend. He stood in covenant relation to his God. This covenant relation is not to be conceived as a sort of contract or alliance be-

tween God and Adam, mechanically established. We do not read of a compact between them according to which each agreed to live and not in relation to the other. On the contrary, the covenant relation is rooted in man's very creation, and is established the moment Adam stands as image-bearer of God in the garden of Eden.

For a true understanding of the covenant relation we must have our attention focused upon God Himself. He is a covenant God, apart from any relation to His creature, in and by Himself, as the triune God, and lives from eternity to eternity the perfect covenant life. He is triune. Essentially God is one. There are no three Gods. There are no three divine Essences, Natures, Wills, Minds, Hearts, Lives. On the contrary, the divine Essence and Nature, with all the glorious attributes thereof, is absolutely a unity. But subsisting in this one divine Being, Nature, Mind, Will, Heart, and living this one divine Life, there are three Persons, Father, Son, and Holy Ghost. They are personally distinct and yet essentially one. In essence and nature they are absolutely equal. And this equality of the three Persons of the Holy Trinity is not to be conceived as if each possessed a part of the divine Nature, but thus that all Three are subsisting in one and the same Being and Nature. They are of one mind, of one will, of one heart, of one life in the most absolute sense of the word. There is the most absolute equality of essence and nature by personal distinction. And thus there exists the most perfect union and the most intimate communion between Father, Son, and Holy Ghost. The three Persons of the Holy Trinity live the perfect life of divine friendship from eternity to eternity in absolute communion. God is a covenant God and lives the perfect covenant life.

A reflection of this covenant life of God there is in the relation God establishes between Himself and the creature made after His own image. In His own image and after His own likeness God made man. He does not make man God; He does not make him share in the divine essence. This is the error of Pantheism. But He does create for him a nature, essentially different from His own, but nevertheless endowed with a likeness of His own nature. He makes him to look like Himself. The creaturely nature of man he endows with such attributes and clothes with such glory that he reflected God's nature in his own and that on the basis of this he was adapted to live in most intimate communion with his God. Even as the essential One-ness in God is the divine basis for the covenant life between the three Persons of the Holy Trinity, so the likeness of God in man

constitutes the basis as far as man is concerned for the covenant life between God and man. He is a being so created that he may know God as He is known, love God as He is loved, live the life of God in a creaturely way and according to the capacity of the creature, walk with God and talk with God, dwell with Him under one roof, commune with Him as a friend with his friend. And not only was Adam created a being adapted to this communion of friendship, but he was actually placed in that communion in paradise. Standing in his original, unmarred knowledge, righteousness, and holiness, he lived as God's covenant friend.

Only, it should never be forgotten, that man was also servant. He was not God but creature. God remained his Sovereign even though He was also his friend. And man remained God's servant even though he might walk with God and talk with Him and call Him his friend. Hence, man's calling was to serve God in that relation of covenant friendship, with all his heart and mind and soul and strength. As God's prophet, he was to know Him and speak for Him in loving adoration, declaring His praises. As God's priest, he was to love Him and consecrate himself and all things to Him. As God's king, he was to bow in love before God's sovereignty and reign with Him and for Him and under Him over the works of His hands. Man was God's friend-servant.

In all this, however, there was no antithesis. Unless another element were introduced into Adam's life, his calling was purely positive. His entire nature was adapted to this positive covenant life of friendly service. All his thoughts and desires and aspirations were directed solely toward God. He loved God, but without another element this love of God would not reveal itself as hatred of all that is anti-God. He willed God's will, but as it was he would not be called to reject that which was in opposition to this Will. He walked in the light but this light would not present itself to his consciousness in its antithetical relation to darkness, unless another element was carried into his life. The one Master He served, but not with rejection of the other.

Yet, it was God's will over man that he should choose Him, His friendship, His service in distinction from, in contrast with, with rejection of all that was opposed to Him. God Himself is a light and there is no darkness in Him. Man, His image-bearer, His covenant friend must also reveal that he loves the light and hates the darkness. He must be of God's party. And for this purpose the antithesis is placed before him in the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. There is antithesis in the very name of the tree. For the name "tree of the knowledge of good and evil" does not designate as the Devil interpreted it, that by eating of it he would attain to a divine knowledge of good and evil. Neither does it signify that by eating thereof man would acquire an experimental knowledge of good and evil. But in the way of obedience, by refusing to eat of the tree, for God his friend's sake, man would know the good in opposition

Only, it should never be forgotten, that man was also servant. He was not God but creature. God remained his Sovereign even though He was also his friend. And man remained God's servant even though he might walk with God and talk with Him and call Him his friend. Hence, man's calling was to serve God in that relation of covenant friendship, with all his heart and mind and soul and strength.

to evil, light in opposition to darkness, life in opposition to death, God in opposition to the Devil. Hence, God's prohibitive will is connected with that particular tree, thus creating an antithesis in Adam's life. This antithesis is presently made more distinct when the Devil enters into the conflict. He is the prince of darkness and carries his darkness to the tree. He is Satan, the Adversary of

God and presents his opposition to God to man's mind in connection with the tree. He is the Devil, the Liar, the Slanderer of God and offers his slanderous presentation of God in his interpretation of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.

The antithesis was introduced into man's life. His calling as God's covenant friend now was not only to serve the one Master, but also to reject the other, to love the light and hate darkness, to choose the Good and reject Evil.

And by so doing he would show himself to be of God's party, God's friend, indeed. And in that relation he would be blessed by his Sovereign-friend and live.

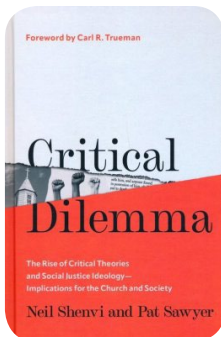


Bring the books...

Mr. Charles Terpstra, member of Faith PRC in Jenison, Michigan and full-time librarian/registrar/archivist at the Protestant Reformed Theological Seminary and SB book review editor

The following book is reviewed by Rev. Joseph Holstege, pastor of First Protestant Reformed Church in Grand Rapids, Michigan.

Critical Dilemma: The Rise of Critical Theories and Social Justice Ideology—Implications for the Church and Society by Neil Shenvi and Pat Sawyer. Eugene, Oregon: Harvest House Publishers, 2023. 501 pages, hardcover. \$34.99.



Writing on the topic of critical theory in the modern context is fraught with challenges. There is the challenge of terminology and definitions. What is critical theory? Is it the same as “woke”? Is it a branch of feminism, an arm of the LGBTQ movement, a racial justice idea?

Then there is the challenge arising from the academic roots of critical theory. What has burst onto the scene through cultural phenomena such as “Black Lives Matter” and “drag queen story hour” has been developing in the cocoon of academia for decades. That can make conversations about critical theory feel remote and abstract to the regular church member who sees these offensive cultural phenomena as far removed from everyday concerns. What the same church member may not realize, however, is that these cultural phenomena are but the tip of the iceberg. Beneath them is a network of ideas aiming to change society by redefining basic concepts, upsetting relationships, and breaking down institutions (including the church). It can be challenging to be clear about the power and prevalence of these ideas both in the world and the church without sounding like a paranoid whistleblower. But prevalent and powerful they certainly are!

Furthermore, there is the challenge arising from the apparent compatibility of some of the ideas of critical theory with Christian assumptions. The power of every lie is that it contains some of the truth. Critical theory presents itself as a way to stand up for the oppressed and pursue justice. Many Christians buy into the ideas of critical theory, thinking this is simply a tool enabling them to “do justly,” to “love mercy,” and to “walk humbly” with God (Mic. 6:8). What they do not realize is that terms like *oppression* and *justice*

are being redefined and repackaged in ways that work against the core tenets of the gospel. Of course, it is not as though everyone teaching these ideas holds up a sign saying, “We aim to redefine core concepts in order to revolutionize society and the church.” Many pass these ideas along not even knowing their roots in critical theory. Thus, the challenge of identifying critical theory for what it is, and rooting its influence out of the church.

The reality of these and other challenges is what makes Shenvi and Sawyer’s book, *Critical Dilemma: The Rise of Critical Theories and Social Justice Ideology*, both helpful and important. Though the book is 501 pages long, and somewhat academic, it is worth the effort of reading. I recommend this book to Christians who want to understand why the “foundations” seem to be shaking around us in a way not seen before. I especially recommend the book to pastors and elders, to Christian school teachers, who were almost certainly exposed to the “critical pedagogy” of Paulo Freire in their college training (pp. 75-79), and to those members of our churches who are deeply involved working with abuse victims, either as advocates or in another capacity. It is important that as the church seeks to disciple her members, train her youth, and relieve the oppressed, she steers clear of the methods and the madness of critical theory.

What I find especially helpful is the authors’ breakdown of critical theory, which can feel overwhelming to the uninitiated, into four main categories of ideas: 1) the social binary, 2) hegemonic power, 3) lived experience, and 4) social justice. Because even these basic categories are somewhat obscure, it is worth defining them briefly for the sake of clarity.

The *social binary* refers to the division of all of society into “oppressed groups and oppressor groups along the lines of race, class, gender, sexuality, physical ability, age, and a growing list of other identity markers” (p. 93).

Hegemonic power refers to the way ideas and systems are used by those in power such that these ideas

are accepted by everyone else as “natural and common sense, thereby blinding oppressed people to their real condition” (p. 105). Hegemonic power is not necessarily “the product of conscious animus on the part of any person or group of people,” but is “structural and systemic” (p. 110).

Lived experience gets at the epistemology (how we know what is true) of critical theory. “Lived experience gives oppressed people special access to truths about their oppression. Therefore, they have the innate authority to speak to these truths, and people from oppressor groups should defer to their knowledge” (p. 118).

Social justice can be understood as the practical outworking of the ideas of critical theory. Social justice assumes all the baggage of critical theory, including the redefinition of terms like “oppression” and “justice.” It then puts these ideas into practice. “[S]ocial justice exists to challenge authority and subvert what it deems to be unjust systems and institutions” (p. 132).

After extensively unpacking the core ideas of critical theory in part one, the authors critique these ideas by showing their incompatibility with Christianity. Over against critical theory’s drawing into suspicion of all “hegemonic” power structures, the authors state that “the Bible itself functions as a hegemonic discourse” that serves to justify “God’s complete sovereignty and authority over us” (p. 290).

Over against critical theory’s assertion that the lived experience of the oppressed is not to be challenged, the authors point out that this ends up usurping “the place of Scripture...as the final arbiter of truth” (p. 295). One supporter of critical theory argues that the “battle over inerrancy” in the church is “in part a proxy fight over gender,” making the primary importance of inerrancy “to bolster patriarchal authority.” As the authors point out, however, reducing biblical authority to a mere power play leaves the church with no ultimate ground on which to stand. “If *sola scriptura* is replaced by *sola lived experience*, we’ll be left with the twenty-first century American version of the book of Judges, in which ‘everyone did what was right in his own eyes’ (Judges 17:6)” (p. 297).

Regarding the social binary, the authors argue that this is “of first importance to...critical theory,” because where you fall in one of these groups “determines your degree of privilege, your blindness to various forms of oppression, your inherent authority to speak on matters of social justice, and your primary role in social justice advocacy.” However, the authors show how the Bible undermines this social binary by teaching four ways in which human beings are united “across lines

of race, class, gender, sexuality, physical ability, etc.” (p. 305). These include the original creation of human beings in God’s image, the common fall into sin, the common need for redemption in Christ and, for Christians at least, the “radical equality in Christ,” which results in the breaking down of “the middle wall of partition” between Jews and Gentiles (p. 306; see also Eph. 2:14).

All of these issues would be serious by themselves, but what makes them a threat that cannot be ignored is how they function as a worldview. Critical theory, as the authors point out, provides different answers than Christianity to the big questions of life:

According to contemporary critical theory, our primary identity is horizontal. We are part of various oppressed and oppressor groups locked in a struggle for dominance. Our primary problem is not sin, but oppression.... The solution is not redemption, but activism... Our primary moral duty is to dismantle the systems and structures that perpetuate oppression. The end goal (and ‘the right side’) of history is the attainment of social justice, a state in which power is fully shared between groups (p. 283).

Because of this, you cannot play with one aspect of critical theory without getting pulled in by the rest of it. “By their very nature, these ideas are totalizing. They will always seek to occupy more and more space in our conceptual imagination until they subsume every other aspect of our thinking” (p. 285).

What strengthens the author’s argument is an aim for balance and an acknowledgment of what it is that draws people to the ideas of critical theory in the first place. There is such a thing as oppression and abuse. There is such a thing as systemic corruption. There have been times when Christians have been blind to real injustice in society or in the church. However, critical theory, which is a powerful force running rampant in the current cultural zeitgeist, is not the answer. These ideas will lead the church off track, away from the gospel, away from the Christ of Scripture, and away from peaceful relationships in the church. These ideas are not only incompatible with Christianity, but they are truly antichristian. Like the mythical serpent that eats its own tail and ends up swallowing itself, the church that plays with these ideas—unwittingly, perhaps, but no less really—hits the self-destruct button.

Announcements

Resolution of Sympathy

The Council and congregation of Doon PRC express our Christian sympathies to Alan and Vi DeBoer in the death of Vi's brother, **Marv VanDenTop**. "For I am persuaded, that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor powers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor height, nor depth, nor any other creature, shall be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord (Romans 8: 38, 39).

Rev. Daniel Kleyn, President
Perry Van Egdom, Clerk

Wedding anniversary

With gratitude to our faithful heavenly Father for His many blessings, we rejoice with our father and mother, **Roger and Florence Key** as they celebrate 70 years of marriage on April 20, 2024 God willing. "For the LORD is good; his mercy is everlasting; and his truth endureth to all generations" (Psalm 100:5).

Their sons:

Rev. Steven (Nancy) Key

Dan (Judy) Key

Tom Key

8 grandchildren

24 great-grandchildren (one in glory)

Hudsonville, Michigan

Classis East

Classis East will meet in regular session on Wednesday, May 5, 2024 at 8:00 A.M., in the Byron Center Protestant Reformed Church, Byron Center, MI.

Rev. Clayton Spronk,
Stated Clerk

Reformed Witness Hour

reformedwitnesshour.org

Prof. Douglas Kuiper

April 7—The Right Use of Our Tongues (9)
John 8:12-47

April 14—The Righteousness that God Requires (10)
Matthew 5:20

Rev. Wilbur Bruinsma

April 21—The Woman Eve
Genesis 2:23, 24

April 28—The Faith of Sarah
Hebrews 11:11, 12

PRC Synod 2024

All standing and special committees of the synod of the Protestant Reformed Churches, as well as individuals who wish to address Synod 2024, are hereby notified that all material for this year's synod should be in the hands of the stated clerk no later than April 15. A signed hard copy as well as a Word/PDF version is appreciated. Please send material to:

Doug Mingerink, Sr., Stated Clerk

(dougi@mingerink.com)

4949 Ivanrest SW

Wyoming, MI 49418