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A MONTHLY REFORMED MAGAZINE

EDITOR'S NOTES

NEW VOLUME YEAR

We now enter volume year 102! To God be the glory for His preserving grace.

With this new volume year much remains the same, but there are some changes to note. We bid farewell to two retiring writers, Rev. M. DeVries and Rev. A. Spriensma, whose contributions began four decades ago. Thank you, brothers, for your diligent labors! We are happy to welcome back some experienced writers. Rev. W. Bruinsma is returning to write some meditations for us, his first is across the page. Rev. N. Decker is also returning to write for "Strength of Youth," and Mr. J. Lanting for "Church and State." Thanks, men! Some current writers are shifting rubrics: Rev. J. Maatman for "All Around Us," and Rev. J. Marcus for "All Thy Works Shall Praise Thee."

Each year it is amazing to see the dedication of all who labor in the production of this magazine, and especially our writers, without whom we would have

no magazine to send to you. We have heard expressions of thanks from readers who appreciate the diversity of writers and especially the wide range of topics that are featured, making the *Standard Bearer* relevant and edifying as it continues issuing forth a distinctively Reformed witness. Just scan the front cover of this magazine to see all the important topics our writers are addressing in a single issue!

Our witness is sometimes greater than we even anticipate as writers, for this past year the editor of *Faith in Focus*, the denominational magazine of the Reformed Churches of New Zealand, sought permission to reprint two of our articles (one by Rev. D. Holstege and another by Mrs. S. Mowery).

Please pray for us, and may the magazine continue to assist many believers near and far in declaring to others the wonderful works of our great God.

B. Huizinga



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MY GOD FROM THE WOMB

REV. WILBUR BRUINSMA

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But thou art he that took me out of the womb: thou didst make me hope when I was upon my mother's breasts. I was cast upon thee from the womb: thou art my God from my mother's belly—Psalm 22: 9, 10

Forsaken and alone, David probably sat in some cave or in a tent in Philistia while writing this psalm. He was pursued by Saul the king of Israel, fleeing for his life, alienated from family, friends and his fellow countrymen. In his anguish David pours out his lament to God, “My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?” Little did this lowly servant of God know that, being led by the Spirit, he recorded in several verses of this psalm in the most accurate of terms what took place in the sufferings of Christ on the cross. But David was burdened with his own fear and torment. His cry arose out of his own sorrows.

Years before David, Job also had been burdened with grievous afflictions. So much so that he cursed the day he was born: “Let the day perish in which I was born, and the night in which it was said, There is a man child conceived!” (Job 3:3) David’s reaction to his afflictions is the opposite of Job. “Thou art he that took me out of the womb; thou didst make me hope when I was on my mother’s breasts.”

“Thou art my God from my mother’s belly.” Quite the confession!

But, why confess this in the midst of troubles?

David reflects on a miraculous work of God in his life while an infant, the work of regeneration. David does not view himself as a convert in later years. He speaks of no conscious conversion that took place when he was older, as some insist they must experience before receiving any assurance from God that they are a believer. Implied is David’s place in God’s covenant

and fellowship as an infant who was yet on his mother’s breasts. David teaches us that he was regenerated while yet an infant.

He believed that! And in it he found his assurance that God was with him even now as he fled before the face of Saul.

David expresses at the outset of verse 9 an amazing truth that we assume, perhaps, but seldom recognize about childbirth: “Thou art he that took me out of the womb.” David recognizes, as do we, that *God* is in control of the birth of children. No doubt, the birth of a child comes about by natural causes. It is not miraculous from that point of view. The scientific community and medical profession have discovered well what is involved in the conception and birth of a baby. But unbelief views all of this in a strictly mechanical way. The unbelieving world depends on the expertise of doctors and nurses, but fails to acknowledge what David here confesses: “*God* took me out of the womb!”

We know that miracles are not everyday occurrences, but when we view that baby when it first pushes forth out of the womb of its mother, we would almost say it was a miracle! What keeps that baby from perishing in the womb of the mother before being brought forth? We sing with the psalmist in Psalm 139, “We are fearfully and wonderfully made!” The same hand of God that holds the waters of the earth within their bounds; the same hand that keeps the planets in their courses around the sun is the hand that forms each child in the womb. God may use the hands of the doctor to draw a child from the womb, but it is the powerful, all-glorious hand of God that takes hold of each child, delivering him, and placing him in the bosom of his mother.

But why would David recount this blessed truth

concerning his own birth in the context of the suffering he expresses in this psalm?

Because he now in faith, during his time of trouble in which he was overwhelmed with the fear of death, drew strength from his God who was with him even in his birth. God, already then, revealed to him His fatherly care in bringing him forth into this world. Even so now God was caring for him in his hour of need. Here was evidence to David of God's goodness toward him. How can a newborn baby continue to live if it were not for the nourishment and care God provides for him or her? Well, the same is true of us when we have grown to be adults. Our God continues to care for us now too as He does a little infant upon his mother's breasts. This is true when life is normal and all is going well. But it is also true when troubles beset us. God by His gracious care upholds us and sustains us in our weaknesses. Just as our substance was not hidden from God when He formed us in the womb, so also we are not hidden from God when undergoing trials in this life.

Ah, the faith of believing parents! "I was *cast* upon thee from the womb!"

In the knowledge that God has formed her baby in the womb, at birth the believing mother of that newborn casts her baby upon God. The word "cast" literally means "to send away." A believing mother sends her baby away to God who gave her that child. There is a natural bond that develops between a mother and her child. She carried her child for nine months. She felt life in her womb. She was conscious of taking care of her unborn baby while yet in her womb. She gives birth to that baby. God draws out, but she pushes out her baby. There is a blood and body bond between mother and child. For that reason, a believing mother casts her child upon God's grace from the moment of his birth.

Is this not true, believing parents? Is this not what we consciously do when our children are born? We not only desire the physical health of our baby, but we desire the *spiritual* health and growth of our baby. We are not only concerned that our baby is healthy, but the greatest concern of believing parents is that they see their little girl or boy grow up to love the Lord! David recognized this in his own mother and father. They were faithful to send him away to God, that is, to

commend him into the care of God. That he was cast upon God from infancy gave David great comfort in this hour of his need.

This act of faith on the part of his parents now gave David the greatest of comfort in the troubles and trials confronting him in life. Having been cast upon God, God chose to work in his heart as an infant. God saved him from sin. "I was given hope," David explains, "while I lay in the bosom of my mother." Actually, the term translated here as hope in the original is, "cause to lean" or "to trust." The idea then would be, "While an infant feeding on my mother's breasts, Thou, Lord, caused me to lean on or trust in Thee." David rejoices that while yet an infant God regenerated him. Not only does God grant us life in our first birth by our mothers, but God also gives spiritual rebirth to His children. God in His grace regenerated David while he was still on his mother's breasts.

Regeneration within the sphere of the church and covenant most often takes place in infancy. Not always, of course. Sometimes God does not regenerate a member of His church until later in life, such as the apostle Paul. Others God does not regenerate at all. We may not assume God chooses to save every child born into the church. But *normally*, in the generations of believers within the church, regeneration takes place in infancy.

Regeneration is that work of God through the Spirit of Christ by which He injects into the heart of a dead sinner the new life of Christ. It is the first step in our salvation. By the renewing of the Holy Spirit God grafts His children into Jesus Christ so that they draw their life from Him. David confesses that God implanted this new life into him while he was already an infant on his mother's breasts. He was made to hope (trust) in God while yet an infant. It is true, we cannot see this hope in an infant. Infants themselves are unaware of their salvation. But God plants it in their hearts. It becomes evident as our children grow and reveal that trust in God in their lives.

So, this is David's comfort in the evil days that were upon him. First, God took him out of his mothers' womb. Second, God gave him believing parents who cast him upon God from the moment he was born. Third, God was pleased by His grace to work in his heart while yet an infant. David was passive in all this!

He did nothing to be born. He did nothing when his parents immediately sent him to God. He did nothing in the work of his regeneration. All of this was out of God's care and love for him. Salvation is truly of the Lord.

There is the crux of the matter! This was true of David; this is true of you and me and our children because of the suffering and death of our Savior!

The prophetic nature of this psalm speaks to us of the source of our salvation. The hope that characterized the Old Testament saints centered in the coming of their Messiah. They trusted in God that He would fulfill the promise of His covenant with them, that He would send One who would deliver them from sin. David lived

in this faith. The hope that God worked in his heart as an infant grew and flourished in his life. He believed in the Messiah to come. This motivated him. David found strength in this though hunted by king Saul and hiding in caves.

The same is true of us as believers today. We trust in the living God who has saved us in the blood of Christ. We believe He was forsaken of God in order that we might never be forsaken. Through His death we are become the objects of God's favor and fellowship. God will never close His ear to His children who call on him. He hears our cries. Of course! He took us out of the womb and gave us hope.

This God is our God forever.



WHY THE NICENE CREED STILL MATTERS AFTER 1700 YEARS

REV. JOSHUA ENGELSMA

pastor of Crete PRC in Crete, Illinois

The year of our Lord 2025 is a year of significant anniversaries. As readers of the *Standard Bearer* are well aware, this year the Protestant Reformed Churches observed with thanksgiving to God our 100th anniversary as a separate denomination. But this year is also the celebration of 1700 years since the Council of Nicea met in 325 and drafted the Nicene Creed. This editorial is intended to familiarize readers with the history of the Council and Creed and then lay out why this still matters for the church of Christ 1700 years later.

THE HISTORY OF THE COUNCIL OF NICEA

The controversy that led to the convening of the Council of Nicaea had to do with two related doctrines that are foundational to the Christian faith: the doctrines of the Trinity and the person of Jesus Christ. The New Testament church confessed the truth that the one God is triune, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. She also confessed that Jesus, who became a real man and lived on the

earth, is God and must be worshiped. Yet, at this early stage, these core doctrines were not clearly formulated.

Problems arose in connection with these doctrines in the church in Alexandria, Egypt, in 318. The trouble centered on the teachings of Arius (c. 250-336), who held the office of presbyter in Alexandria. Arius did not believe that Jesus is God in the same way that the Father is God. He believed that the Father is the only unbegotten One and the only One who is truly eternal. This meant for the Son, according to Arius' famous line, "there was a time when he was not." The idea is that there was a "time" in eternity when the Father was without the Son, when the Son was not yet begotten. Arius is reported to have argued the following: "If the Father begat the Son, he that was begotten has a beginning of existence; hence it is clear that there was [a time] when the Son was not. It follows then of necessity that he had his existence from the non-existent." Arius rejected the idea of "God always" and "the Son always." He said that "before [the Son] was begotten or created

or appointed or established, he did not exist.” One of the few extant writings of Arius is a poem in which he sets forth his view of the Son this way:

The Unbegun made the Son
A beginning of things originated;
And advanced Him as a Son
To Himself by adoption.
He has nothing proper to God
In proper subsistence.
For He is not equal,
No, nor one in essence with Him.

The poem ends with this telling line: “Thus there is a Triad, not equal in glories.”¹

The teachings of Arius prompted strong opposition. Alexander (d. 328), the bishop of Alexandria and Arius’ superior there, condemned Arius’ teachings, called a local synod, and deposed Arius and a number of his followers.

This did not bring an end to the trouble. The whole eastern portion of the church was soon embroiled in the controversy. Finally, in an effort to bring peace to his empire, the Roman Emperor Constantine I (272-337) called the leaders of the church to attend a Council in the city of Nicea in northwestern Asia Minor (present day Iznik, Turkey). There were 318 bishops present, about a sixth of the total number of bishops in the church at that time. Only seven bishops came from the western church (France, Spain, Carthage, and Rome), while the rest came from the east.

The meeting of this Council indicates the radical change in the earthly prospects of Christianity in the Roman Empire. Just a few years earlier, the delegates to the Council were being persecuted for

their faith; in fact, some of them bore in their bodies the marks of their persecution. But earlier in his reign Constantine had given Christianity official recognition and put an end to the persecution, and now he called together this Council and paid all travel and lodging expenses for the bishops.

As the Council began its work, it was clear that the bishops were divided into three parties. One party was firmly opposed to the teachings of Arius. This group was led by Alexander. It is worth noting that present with Alexander was the deacon Athanasius (c. 293-373), who would later replace Alexander as bishop of Alexandria and would be the champion of the decisions of the Council. The second party was made up of bishops that were sympathetic to Arius and his teachings. Arius was present at the Council and given opportunity to explain his views, although he was not a voting delegate. The third party was the largest and was made up of all the remaining bishops who stood somewhere in the middle and were not sure whether to condemn Arius’ teachings or affirm them.

In the course of the deliberations, one delegate of the middle party proposed to resolve the conflict by adopting a creed that affirmed the deity of Jesus, but in general terms that the supporters of Arius could accept.

Even Arius was agreeable to this creed.

But the anti-Arians were opposed. They did not want to allow room for Arius to insert his views into the general wording of that creed. Eventually the anti-Arian position won out. A new creed was

drafted, one that included the key word *homoousios*. In the debate, various terms were used to convey the truth of the Son’s relationship to the Father. Some said the term *homoiousios* (of a *similar* essence) was sufficient. But the anti-Arians concluded that only the



1 All quotations in this paragraph are from Kevin De Young, *The Nicene Creed: What You Need to Know about the Most Important Creed Ever Written* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2025), 17-19.

word *homoousios* (of the *same* essence) would do. This was the word incorporated into the creed.

It is important to understand that what we know as the Nicene Creed is not exactly the same as what was adopted by the Council of Nicea. In the years following the Council, the debate over these issues continued to rage on. Another church council, the Council of Constantinople, met in 381 to settle the issues again. This Council affirmed the teaching of the Council of Nicea and made some changes to the Creed. The end product is technically the Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed, but is known more commonly as the Nicene Creed.

The Nicene Creed as it was adopted in 325 said this about the Person of Jesus Christ: “We believe...in one Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God, begotten from the Father, only begotten, that is, from the substance of the Father, God from God, light from light, true God from true God, begotten not made, of one substance [*homoousios*] with the Father, through whom all things came into being, things in heaven and things on earth.” It added this anathema: “But as for those who say, ‘There was when he was not,’ and, ‘Before being born he was not,’ and that ‘He came into existence out of nothing,’ or who assert that the Son of God is of a different hypostasis or substance, or is subject to alteration or change—these the catholic and apostolic church anathematizes.”²

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE NICENE CREED

The Nicene Creed is of immense significance for the church of Christ in 2025. One author has recently stated, “After the Bible, the Nicene Creed may be the most important Christian text ever written.”³

But the question is, “Why? Why is the Council of Nicea worth remembering and its Creed worth celebrating?” There are two main reasons.

First, the Council of Nicea and its Creed bind all Christians to the confession that Jesus Christ is truly God, of the same essence as the Father.

The Nicene Creed is creedally binding. To say that it is binding upon Christians is not to raise it to the level of the Scriptures; the Scriptures alone are the rule

for our faith and life. But the Nicene Creed, like the church’s other creeds, is a faithful summary and defense of what the Bible teaches. And it bears the stamp of the church’s careful thought and approval, rather than the opinion of one individual.

What adds to the weightiness of the Nicene Creed is that it is the fruit of an *ecumenical* council. The men who assembled at Nicea in 325 represented the church of Christ in the then-known world. The church as a whole met and formulated this creedal statement. And the Christian church throughout the world in the ages since has affirmed the teaching of the Creed as being that of the Word of God.

The creeds of the church, including the Nicene Creed, are a precious heritage. They are the fruit of the Spirit’s leading of the church into a deeper and fuller understanding, almost always through painful controversy. They set forth the truth of God’s Word in summary form, and serve as a defense against the errors that threaten the church. Therefore, they may not be disparaged or discarded, but treasured!

Second, the Council of Nicea and its Creed are worth celebrating because the truth they defended is essential for our salvation.

In the aftermath of the Council, as Athanasius stood *contra mundum* in his defense of Nicea, he insisted that the truth of Christ’s divinity is of the greatest importance. He did not engage in the controversy as a matter of mere academic discussion; this was a matter of life and death. Athanasius said that if Jesus is not God, then He cannot be our Savior. One author explains the connection between Christ’s divinity and our salvation this way: “Our lost condition makes salvation impossible for us to accomplish. Only God can save. And because salvation comes to us through Jesus Christ, Christ must himself be very God.”⁴ Our salvation is impossible if Jesus is not truly God!

What reason we have to thank God this year for the Council of Nicea and its Creed! The truth it sets forth is foundational to our faith! Our very salvation rests upon it!

² Quoted in De Young, *Nicene Creed*, 22.

³ De Young, *Nicene Creed*, 9.

⁴ Herman Hanko, *Contending for the Faith: The Rise of Heresy and the Development of the Truth* (Jenison, MI: Reformed Free Publishing Association, 2010), 42-43.



PRESIDENT TRUMP'S GOAL FOR AMERICA

REV. DANIEL HOLSTEGE

pastor of the Wingham PRC in Wingham, Ontario, Canada

On January 20, 2025, President Donald Trump began his inaugural address with remarks that must have annoyed the political left while giving the political right an excitement they had not felt in a long time: “The golden age of America,” he declared, “begins right now. From this day forward, our country will flourish and be respected again all over the world. We will be the envy of every nation, and we will not allow ourselves to be taken advantage of any longer. During every single day of the Trump administration, I will, very simply, put America first.... America will soon be greater, stronger, and far more exceptional than ever before.” Concerning the attempt to assassinate him during the campaign, he said, “I felt then and believe even more so now that my life was saved for a reason. I was saved by God to make America great again.”¹

Since January, the Trump administration has been doing things that have profoundly affected the United States and the world. My guess is that most who read this magazine are glad about what has been happening. I also venture the guess that many of our non-American readers are less thrilled with what has been happening, particularly if I should mention the word “tariff.” As Christians, we can all agree that “there is no power but of God: the powers that be are ordained of God” and that whoever “resisteth the power, resisteth the ordinance of God” (Rom. 13:1-2). We must honor and pray for those in authority over us “that we may lead a quiet and peaceable life in all godliness and honesty” (1 Pet. 2:13-17, 1 Tim. 2:2)

I think we can all agree that much of what the current administration is doing is commendable. We should be thankful that God is using this government to

take some wind out of the sails of the sexual revolution which has been pushing the whole world to affirm vile lifestyles and to obliterate the differences between men and women. We should respect the effort to deport illegal aliens from the United States and to secure the southern border, since we believe God ordains the existence of nations and gives rulers the authority to make laws and the power to enforce them.² We can be thankful too that this government is attempting to eliminate waste, fraud, and abuse of tax dollars, to uphold law and order, and to prevent enemy nations from developing nuclear weapons.

CHRISTIANITY TODAY AND THE TRUMP ADMINISTRATION

But even as I make these statements, there are Christians who disagree about aspects of all these things and who oppose almost everything the Trump administration does. Russell Moore, the editor-in-chief of *Christianity Today*, has shown himself to be a “never-Trumper.” He and his staff of writers did everything they could in the months leading up to the election to convince readers not to vote for him. He concluded one article with the statement that “we take marching orders from Mount Zion, not from Mar-a-Lago. The watching world should know the difference, and so should we.”³ I hope

1 <https://www.whitehouse.gov/remarks/2025/01/the-inaugural-address/>.

2 I have lived in two other countries than the United States (the Philippines and Canada) and have had to follow the immigration rules of those countries in order to live and work inside their borders. To live and work within the borders of another country than your own, you must fill out the required paper work, render to Caesar the fees that Caesar requires, and sometimes wait patiently for approval. How can a Christian support illegal immigration?

3 Russell Moore, “Mount Zion or Mar-a-Lago?,” *Christianity Today* (July/August 2024), 19-20.

we all agree that our spiritual marching orders come from Jesus and not from Trump!

But in article after article, Moore laid all the emphasis on the sinful character and behavior of Donald Trump and urged his readers to see that he was simply not fit to be president. Again, I hope we all agree that the moral character displayed by our president over his lifetime and even at present is not the model we should follow. But reading Moore left one wondering whether he considered the *liberal-progressive* candidate to be a better alternative. I never read whether he thought so or not. He was quite silent about her. Since the election last fall, Moore and his colleagues at CT have not ceased criticizing almost every decision of the president.

“CHRISTIAN NATIONALISTS” AND THE TRUMP ADMINISTRATION

On the other hand, “Christian nationalist” pastor Doug Wilson, whom many know as a promoter of Christian classical education, has risen to greater prominence in recent years as a vocal supporter of the president. At an event hosted by Charlie Kirk’s organization “Turning Point USA” in July of 2024, Wilson spoke eloquently on the sovereignty of God over all the evil forces in the world today, including the bullet that grazed the ear of President Trump at a Pennsylvania rally. But he concluded his speech by expressing hope for what he calls a “black swan reformation.” Just as people thought black swans did not exist until someone saw a black swan down in Australia, Wilson looks for a revival of Christianity in the western world that exceeds our thoughts of what is possible but that everyone will see as inevitable after it has happened.⁴ As a postmillennialist, Wilson expects a golden age of Christianity on earth before Christ returns (compare to Trump’s statement that “*the golden age of America begins right now*”). As a Christian nationalist, Wilson believes we must strive to transform the United States into a Christian nation and ultimately exercise dominion over the whole world.

Notably, his church in Moscow, Idaho, the mother church of the Communion of Reformed Evangelical Churches (CREC), planted a new congregation in Washington D.C. on July 13 of this year. Why would

they do that? “The first reason,” Wilson wrote on his blog, “is that we are reading providence in a particular way. With the change in administration, we believe that there will be many strategic opportunities with numerous evangelicals who will be present both in and around the Trump administration.”⁵ He and his followers look for opportunities to influence the world through the Trump administration in the hope of sparking a “black swan reformation.” One such opportunity is Trump’s defense secretary Pete Hegseth. He is a member of a CREC congregation in Nashville, Tennessee and was present at the first worship service of the new church plant in D.C. on July 13.

A BETTER VIEW?

Most of you who read the *Standard Bearer* are conservative, Reformed and Presbyterian believers. Most of you are amillennial in your eschatology, not expecting a golden age of Christianity on earth but an increase in wickedness leading to a worldwide antichristian kingdom. Thus, you do not share the vain hope of Doug Wilson for a golden age of Christianity on earth and do not think a golden age of America might be the way to get there. But most of you probably do not appreciate Russell Moore’s stream of negative criticism against the Trump administration either. In fact, if you are an avid follower of Fox News, the Daily Wire, the Tucker Carlson Network, or other conservative outlets, you might be positively giddy about some of the things you hear are happening today to “make America great again.”

With that in mind, we need to be exhorted to make sure that in our hearts and lives we are avid followers of *the Word of God*. Even if we disagree with the postmillennial dream, we can easily get caught up in the fervor of making our country great again, especially when we have felt for so long that it is plunging into the abyss of moral decadence. We can easily be drawn into the hope of a greater America in which we and our children enjoy a safer, healthier, wealthier, and more enjoyable life here on earth. We have a threefold enemy that ceases not to assault us with the temptation

4 Doug Wilson, “You Were Born for This Hour,” YouTube video, 15:30, posted by Canon Press (August 15, 2024), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WCQC6DEYLjc>.

5 Doug Wilson, “A Mission to Babylon,” in “Blog and Mablog: Theology That Bites Back,” (May 12, 2025), <https://dougwils.com/books-and-culture/s7-engaging-the-culture/a-mission-to-babylon.html>.

to love this world and the things of this world, and the temptation is real to think that the current president of the U.S. is going to secure health and wealth, peace and prosperity in America here and now.

But we should not be so excited about the prospect of a golden age of America or the promise that our country is going to become greater, stronger, and far more exceptional than ever before. We should not be eager to make *America* great again, unless our true motive for desiring that is the advancement of the kingdom of Christ. Because our one passion must always be to make *Christ* great and to advance His spiritual kingdom through the preaching of the gospel. “God forbid that I should glory, save in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by whom the world is crucified unto me, and I unto the world” (Gal. 6:14). We should not be glorying in America but in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ.

We must not be filled with hope for a wealthier and more glorious America. We must focus on our only sure hope of life, rest, and riches in the eternal kingdom of heaven. “Lay not up for yourselves treasures upon earth.... But lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven....

For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also” (Matt. 6:19-21). We must not hope for earthly greatness. But we must follow in the footsteps of our Lord: “If any man will come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow me. For whosoever will save his life shall lose it: and whosoever shall lose his life for my sake shall find it. For what is a man profited, if he shall gain the whole world, and lose his own soul?” (Matt. 16:24-26).

We ought to strive to be good Christian citizens who honor our rulers, vote in elections, pay our taxes, and obey the laws of the land. We may speak up against the evils of our day and promote what is good, right, and true. We may be thankful to God for the good things done by the current administration. But let us not follow in the way of the postmillennial nationalists who seek the establishment of the kingdom of God here on earth by transforming America into a Christian nation. In our hearts we are not to cherish the hope of a greater and more exceptional America, but we pray for the coming of Christ and His most exceptional of all kingdoms.

SEARCH THE SCRIPTURES



NAHUM (11) NINEVEH'S DESOLATION

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Woe to the bloody city! it is all full of lies and robbery; the prey departeth not; the noise of a whip, and the noise of the rattling of the wheels, and of the prancing horses, and of the jumping chariots. The horseman lifteth up both the bright sword and the glittering spear: and there is a multitude of slain, and a great number of carcases; and there is none end of their corpses; they stumble upon their corpses: Because of the multitude of

the whoredoms of the wellfavoured harlot, the mistress of witchcrafts, that selleth nations through her whoredoms, and families through her witchcrafts—Nahum 3:1-4

Nahum 3, as does chapter 2, begins with another graphic description of Nineveh's fall to the Babylonians on account of her great wickedness. But where chapter 2 begins with the coming of the Babylonian and Median

armies, Nineveh in chapter 3 is pictured as fallen to her enemies. Her wickedness is cited as the reason for her destruction but is described in plainer language and in even harsher condemnation.

The chapter also shows God's part in Nineveh's destruction more plainly than chapters 1 and 2. Nineveh's sins were sins against God, her cruelty and brutality an affront to Him. Her judgment was God's just judgment on her, and her fall, though executed through the coalition of Medes and Babylonians, was God's work. Chapter 3, then, is a further explication of God's word in Nahum 2:13, "Behold, I am against thee, saith the LORD of hosts," a statement He repeats in 3:5.

Now, too, God speaks against the wickedness of the city and not just her king as He did in chapter 1, where her king is addressed as a Belial Counselor. No doubt her king bore the first responsibility for Nineveh and Assyria's wickedness; but Nineveh's citizens approved of, shared in, and enjoyed the fruits of that wickedness and so God, in chapter 3, speaks against them as well. God had given the wicked citizens of Nineveh the king they deserved and the wicked king of Nineveh the citizens he deserved, just as He does today in the United States and Canada and other countries that more and more give themselves over to evil.

In chapter 1 God revealed Himself as a just and furious Judge of evil, only mentioning Nineveh. In chapter 2 He described Nineveh's judgment and downfall. Now, beginning with chapter 2:13, He plainly connects the two, indicting Nineveh for her crimes, condemning her, establishing the impossibility of Nineveh's escaping His judgment, ascribing Nineveh's fall to Himself, and establishing her punishment as eternal.

Nahum 3:1 and 4 are God's indictment of Nineveh and Assyria, an indictment summed up in one word: "Woe." Sometimes translated "alas" or "ah," it is always a word of doom and judgment in God's mouth (Hab. 2:6, 9, 12, 15, 19; Zeph. 2:5; 3:1). In men's mouths it may be a word of grief over calamities; but when God says, "Woe," He means that what has happened will surely and forever be a reason for shock, sorrow, and mourning. The idea, then, is not that God would mourn over Nineveh's fall, but that her fall would forever be a reason for mourning to those who hold with Nineveh.

The grief and sorrow expressed in the word "woe," include that of the queen's maidens (2:7) and of the citizens of Nineveh (2:10): "Her maids shall lead her as with the voice of doves, tabering upon their breasts.... The heart melteth, and the knees smite together, and much pain is in all loins, and the faces of them all gather blackness." The "woe" is Nineveh's, but it is sovereignly pronounced by God and is pronounced on all who share in Nineveh's wickedness.

In verse 1 of chapter 3 God speaks of lies and robbery. God refers to such lies as those of Rabshakeh in the days of king Hezekiah (Is. 36:1-10, 14-20), lies not only about the intentions of the king of Assyria, but lies about God Himself: "Who are they among all the gods of these lands, that have delivered their land out of my hand, that the LORD should deliver Jerusalem out of my hand?" (Is. 36:20).

The robbery is Assyria's plundering other nations. God did not view their plunder as the legitimate spoil of conquest, but as thievery and preying on the nations like a lion. God sovereignly wills to give all things to His people including the wealth of the nations and showed that to be His will in Israel's Old Testament battles; but He did not view Assyria's conquests in the same way. Her plundering of the nations was idolatry and witchcraft (v. 4) and sin against God.

Verse 4, then, indicts Nineveh for whoredoms and witchcrafts. No doubt God references sexual sin of every kind and actual sorcery. Nineveh's records are filled with references to the occult practices of the city and nation. When God gives men over to their own sinfulness, then these sins become prevalent. Nahum has in mind, however, Nineveh's spiritual whoredom and witchcraft in turning away from the true God, who had been preached among them by Jonah and in worshiping again their own idol gods, especially the god, Mammon. Verse 4b makes it clear that Nineveh had promoted her idolatry and false worship among the nations: She sold nations through her whoredoms and families through her witchcrafts.

Rabshakeh's promotion of the Assyrian gods during the siege of Jerusalem is a case in point:

Let not thy God, in whom thou trustest, deceive thee, saying, Jerusalem shall not be given into the hand of the king of Assyria. Behold, thou hast heard what the kings of Assyria have done to all lands by

destroying them utterly; and shalt thou be delivered? Have the gods of the nations delivered them which my fathers have destroyed, as Gozan, and Haran, and Rezeph, and the children of Eden which were in Telassar? Where is the king of Hamath, and the king of Arphad, and the king of the city of Sepharvaim, Hena, and Ivah?” (Is. 37:10-13).

Assyria’s whoredom and witchcraft was the spiritual whoredom of all who turn from the living God and her witchcraft that of king Saul, disobedience to and rebellion against God (1 Sam. 15:23).

Verses 2 and 3 are God’s pronouncing doom on Assyria’s empire. Those verses picture the Babylonians, their soldiers and cavalry victorious over Nineveh and the Ninevites all corpses—so many corpses that it was impossible to walk without stepping on them—a charnel house of corpses. So vivid are the words of the prophet that Nineveh’s end can almost be heard and seen and smelled: prancing horses, rattling chariots, the voices of the charioteers, the soldiers raising their spears and swords in triumph over the piles of corpses that once were the proud Ninevites. God would bring this to pass as Nineveh’s Judge and Executioner.

The account of great Babylon’s fall in Revelation echoes these words of Nahum:

And after these things I saw another angel come down from heaven, having great power; and the earth was lightened with his glory. And he cried mightily with a strong voice, saying, Babylon the great is fallen, is

fallen, and is become the habitation of devils, and the hold of every foul spirit, and a cage of every unclean and hateful bird. For all nations have drunk of the wine of the wrath of her fornication, and the kings of the earth have committed fornication with her, and the merchants of the earth are waxed rich through the abundance of her delicacies. And I heard another voice from heaven, saying, Come out of her, my people, that ye be not partakers of her sins, and that ye receive not of her plagues. For her sins have reached unto heaven, and God hath remembered her iniquities” (Rev. 18:1-6).

Nor is it our place to think of Revelation 18 in connection with Nahum’s prophecy. Babylon in Revelation 18 is not the old city on the banks of the Euphrates, but Scripture’s name for all the kingdoms of this world, including Nineveh, old Babylon, and earthly unbelieving Jerusalem. Always the kingdoms of this world, including our own society, are full of lies, robbery, whoredom and witchcraft, and as Nineveh fell, so shall they all.

Only one kingdom cannot be moved. That is the kingdom to which we belong when God establishes His throne and the throne of His Christ in our hearts. That is the kingdom against which the gates of hell cannot prevail. That is the kingdom whose glory will be fully revealed in the new heavens and the new earth. We must be sure, then, that our conversation (that is, citizenship) is in heaven, from whence also we look for the Savior, our Lord Jesus Christ (Phil. 3:20).

A WORD FITLY SPOKEN



HOPE

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Hope is a treasure beyond price. Without hope we cannot live, but having true hope, we can persevere through all things. Hope stands out as one of the three cardinal Christian graces the Holy Spirit works in the child of God (1 Cor. 13:13). Apart from God’s grace in Christ, we were lost in deepest misery—hopelessness—a state of alienation from God, which

the apostle describes as “having no hope, and without God in the world” (Eph. 2:12). But now, being saved by grace, through faith (Eph. 2:8), we “rejoice in hope of the glory of God” (Rom. 5:2).

What is hope? The Christian’s hope is not wishful thinking, a longing that lacks certainty of obtaining. Nor is it the vain hope of the man who forgets God,

“whose hope shall be cut off, and whose trust shall be a spider’s web” (Job 8:14). The Bible elevates the common word hope and infuses it with meaning deeper and richer than in everyday speech. Hope according to Scripture is the Christian’s grace-awakened, fervent longing and earnest expectation for the true good that God has in store for you in Christ, which, although yet unseen, nevertheless is surely coming to you (Phil. 1:20).

Distinctly Christian hope is *of* God and *in* God; it is hope that has its source in God alone and has God alone as its object. Our God reveals Himself in His Word as “the God of hope” (Rom. 15:13) and “the hope of Israel” (Jer. 17:13). The God of hope proclaims hope to His people in the gospel—the good tidings of Christ’s person and work—and imparts hope to us through the gospel (Col. 1:23). The Holy Spirit applies that gospel through the hearing ear of faith, so that we “through patience and comfort of the scriptures might have hope” (Rom. 15:4), and indeed, “abound in hope.” Hope springs from faith in Jesus Christ.

Christian hope consists of the activity of “hoping” and the object of hope, namely, the “things hoped for.” Peter exhorts believers: “hope to the end [activity] for the grace [object] that is to be brought unto you at the revelation of Jesus Christ” (1 Pet. 1:13). The activity of “hoping” is not only heartfelt longing for God and the good He has promised, but much more, it is confidently expecting that God will deliver that promised good in due time. Hope’s expectation is *sure*. The certainty of it rests upon the truthfulness and the trustworthiness of God. Believers live “in hope of eternal life, which God, that cannot lie, promised before the world began” (Tit. 1:2). The Christian hope is “hope firm unto the end” (Heb. 3:6), because God’s promise is grounded upon Christ and His merits, “which hope we have as an anchor of the soul, both sure and stedfast” (Heb. 6:19). It is certain, and it is sure!

How richly the Scriptures describe “the things hoped for” (Heb. 11:1), the good, which, while yet unseen, is certainly coming to us. It is “the hope which is laid up for you in heaven” (Col. 1:5), the imperishable inheritance of the saints in light (Col. 1:12). It is the hope of eternal life (Tit. 3:7), indeed, the hope of nothing less than participating in the very glory of God (Rom. 5:2). Our “blessed hope” is hope for “the glorious appearing

of the great God and our Saviour Jesus Christ” (Tit. 2:13). For upon His return, He shall bestow in its fullness “the adoption, to wit, the redemption of our body” (Rom. 8:23). Then, at last, what we do not see now, but have a beginning of now, we shall have in perfection: “we shall be like him; for we shall see him as he is” (1 John 3:2). The object of our hope is the covenant of grace made perfect, the kingdom of heaven fully established, God being all in all, Christ Head over all exalted, and we, as His fully restored imagebearers, sharing His glory and fellowship—glorified by Him, and giving Him glory, world without end.

Let us live, here and now, in this hope, waiting patiently for it. “But if we hope for that we see not, then do we with patience wait for it” (Rom. 8:25). The certainty of hope sustains through all the difficulties of waiting. In our daily battle with sin, we have the hope of salvation for our helmet (1 Thess. 5:8). When we stumble in sin, hope comforts the heart: “Let Israel hope in the LORD: for with the LORD there is mercy, and with him is plenteous redemption” (Ps. 130:7). In the face of death, we “sorrow not, even as others which have no hope” (1 Thess. 4:13). For the “the righteous hath hope in his death” (Prov. 14:32). Paul’s earnest expectation is ours too. To live is Christ, to die is gain (Phil. 1:21). “Happy,” indeed, “is the man whose hope is in the Lord” (Ps. 146:5). Past, present, future—this is the Christian’s confession: “my flesh also shall rest in hope” (Ps. 16:9).

But the reality is, sometimes we struggle to live in the awareness of hope. Sometimes “hope deferred” makes our “heart sick” (Prov. 13:12). Sometimes affliction makes us feel like hope is gone. We might even say with Job, “where is now my hope? as for my hope, who shall see it?” (Job 14:15). Let us turn our hearts and fix our minds on Christ, the anchor of our soul. Christ in us, our hope of glory (Col. 1:27)! “This I recall to my mind, therefore have I hope. It is of the LORD’s mercies that we are not consumed, because his compassions fail not. They are new every morning: great is thy faithfulness” (Lam. 3:21-23). We have been begotten again unto a lively hope (1 Pet. 1:3), a hope that cannot die, any more than the risen Christ can die. Even in the fiercest storms, we are anchored to the Rock, our Refuge in every storm. “The LORD is my portion, saith my soul; therefore will I hope in him. The LORD is good unto

them that wait for him, to the soul that seeketh him. It is good that a man should both hope and quietly wait for the salvation of the LORD” (Lam. 3:24-26). The Christian hope is the only hope that “maketh not ashamed” (Rom. 5:5). Though at times it be through

many tears, yet always, with confidence, we may say, “Why art thou cast down, O my soul? and why art thou disquieted within me? hope thou in God: for I shall yet praise him, who is the health of my countenance, and my God” (Ps. 42:11).

PILLAR AND GROUND OF THE TRUTH



THE PROPER METHOD OF BIBLE INTERPRETATION: THE GRAMMATICAL-HISTORICAL-SPIRITUAL METHOD (4)

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WHY IS THIS THE PROPER METHOD?

The last three articles have explained the Grammatical-Historical-Spiritual (GHS) method of Bible interpretation. This article explains why this method is the proper method.

Before proceeding, remember two things. First, my argument is not that the term “GHS” is the only proper *term*, but that the *method* to which it refers is the only proper *method*. Some use a similar name (Grammatical-Historical criticism) to refer to a wrong method, while others might use another term to refer to essentially the same method as I am promoting. The *method* is the issue.

Second, these articles are not suggesting that two people who use the GHS method will always agree on every question regarding a text’s meaning. Bible interpreters can make mistakes that result in misunderstanding the text. And no one individual will always see everything in a text. But the point of these articles is that those who do not use the GHS method will not understand the text properly.

THE PRESENCE OF MANY WRONG METHODS

Many scholars today would take issue with the statement that there is only one proper method of hermeneutics. They would find valuable contributions in a variety of methods. The reader can better

appreciate that there is one only correct method when he or she understands some of these other methods and why they are wrong.

Allegory

In the ancient and medieval eras of Christian history, the main interpretive method was allegory. Allegory dismisses a word’s literal meaning for an arbitrary spiritual meaning. For example, the church father Hippolytus (170-236) rightly understood Genesis 49:8-12 to be a Messianic prophecy. But this led him to make two mistakes: He did not do justice to the fulfillment of the prophecy for Judah and his tribe, and he allegorized some of the words. Here is his commentary on Genesis 49:10:

‘Binding his ass to a vine.’ That means that He unites His people of the circumcision to His own calling (vocation). For He was the vine. ‘And his ass’s colt to the vine-tendril.’ that denotes the people of the Gentiles, as He calls the circumcision and uncircumcision to one faith.¹

Hippolytus had a correct *doctrinal* understanding of the union of Christ with elect Jews and elect Gentiles. But he tried to find that doctrine in this text

1 Hippolytus, “Treatise on Christ and Antichrist” in *The Ante-Nicean Fathers*, vol. 5, *Hippolytus, Cyprian, Caius, Novatian, Appendix* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1925), 206.

by allegorizing the terms “vine” and “ass” and “ass’s colt.” The text does not in fact teach what he says it does.

Detecting allegory can be tricky. Scripture sometimes uses the word “vine” as a *symbol* of something else, such as Israel (Psalm 80); in this case, the word “vine” suggests more than simply a large fruit-bearing plant. Also, a proper understanding and application of *typology* leads one to find meaning in a text that is not merely “on the surface.” The difference between symbolism and typology on the one hand, and allegory on the other, is that Scripture itself justifies symbolic and typical understandings; it does not justify allegory in the sense in which the early church fathers used it.

So to say that the GHS method is the only proper method is to reject the allegorical method. This method’s main error is that it assigns the words of a text unusual meanings to drive home a gospel lesson or a point of application. It tries to do justice to the spiritual aspect of Bible interpretation, with the result that it misuses the grammatical and historical aspects. Allegorists were concerned to find Christ in a passage, which is laudable; but they often found Him where He was not—in a word or phrase whose meaning they twisted.

Higher critical methods

Since the Enlightenment of the 1700s, and even from the time of the rise of Socinianism in the 1500s, other methods of Bible interpretation have arisen. Most of them have the word “criticism” imbedded in their name: form criticism, redaction criticism, literary criticism, historical criticism, genre criticism, tradition criticism. Two other terms and methods that do not include the word “criticism” are “demythologizing” and the “New Hermeneutic.”

Other forms of criticism regard the hearer or reader: reader-response criticism, African-America criticism, cultural criticism, and feminist criticism. Still others read the Scriptures from a certain philosophical or sociological viewpoint: liberation theology criticism and Marxist criticism. Each has unique presuppositions regarding the Bible and methods of interpreting it.

Each of these terms represents a different interpretive method, so to give examples would fill several articles. At

bottom, these methods assume that the Bible is a human book, written by humans who recorded human ideas about God. The Bible is an anthology of religious views, not God’s inspired revelation of Himself to His people. Consequently, they deny the fundamental principle of interpretation: Scripture interprets Scripture. The Bible cannot interpret itself, when it is the words of different humans throughout many centuries, because it lacks a cohesive unity. Also, as a consequence, these methods do not permit the *spiritual* aspect of interpretation.

Some of them initially appear to interact with the Bible’s grammar and history, but they do not do justice to the grammatical and historical aspects of the GHS method. First—and speaking generally, evaluating various methods—they are not concerned with the Bible’s individual words and phrases, but with its larger sections and final form. How did the Bible come down to us in the form in which it did? Who edited the Bible into this final form? What sources did the editors use? (The answer to this question is usually a hypothesis, because it is agreed that we no longer have access to these sources.)

Sometimes these methods view the historical context of the Bible appropriately. Other times they do not, because they say that the Bible’s own testimony about its historical context cannot be assumed to be true. Take an example: the New Perspectives on Paul movement completely rewrites the historical and cultural situation in which Paul wrote his epistles, presenting the historical context and the issues that Paul addresses very differently.

Earlier I said that many scholars would take issue with the idea that there is only one proper method of interpretation. Yet many of these approaches exclude other such approaches; sometimes those who developed a new approach did so because they thought other existing methods of Bible interpretation were not satisfactory. Even some who reject the GHS method will argue that one interpretive method is preferred.

So by presenting the GHS method of interpretation as the only proper method, we are rejecting many other methods. But why is this the only proper method?

REASONS WHY THE GHS METHOD IS THE PROPER METHOD

First, this method views the Bible as the inspired

revelation of God to His people. Higher critical methods do not share this view of Scripture. Allegory often does (this depends on the allegorist, but the church fathers of the ancient era had a high view of Scripture), but as we noted, it deals differently with the words and grammar of the text—which brings us to the second reason.

The second reason is that Scripture is the revelation of God, by God, to His people in every age and culture—and only the GHS method does justice to this point, in each of its three aspects.

In this reason are embedded three points. First, Scripture is God's revelation of Himself. His revelation is one, unified, and clear. Using various methods and wrong methods will hinder or prevent us from knowing Him rightly.

Second, God's revelation is clear; it is a light (Ps. 119:105, 2 Pet. 1:19). This clarity is not apparent if Bible passages can mean any number of different things. Only when there is one method of Bible interpretation, bringing us to understand the main gospel point in a passage, does this clarity manifest itself.

Third, that His people are found in every age and culture makes necessary that there be one way of interpreting them. Today people suppose that the Bible means *one thing* for one culture or era, and *another thing* for another culture or era. (I specifically used the word “means” rather than “applies.” Applications of revealed truths and precepts might vary from culture to culture and age to age, but the meaning of those truths and precepts does not.) Only when people of any age and culture use the same sound method of Bible interpretation can the church everywhere and always understand God's Word. In sum, if the church of every age and place does not understand one proper way to interpret the Bible, she will go wrong in her understanding of the God who reveals Himself.

Now, only the GHS method presents Scripture as God's Word to humans *in each of its three aspects*. God spoke to us in human language at the level of grammar and vocabulary, accommodating Himself to us, so that humans can understand Him. If we twist the words or misunderstand the idioms of a human speaker, we will not understand them. So with God's Word. Second, the historical aspect indicates that God's Word comes to the church in specific historical contexts. And the spiritual aspect recognizes that the words, though penned by

humans, are those of the Holy Spirit Himself, and therefore the real meaning of a passage is that which the Holy Spirit intends.

The third reason is that only this method helps us find Christ in a passage in the proper sense. The Holy Spirit's meaning in a text regards the saving work of God in Christ. If one pays attention only to the grammatical and historical aspect of interpretation but ignores the spiritual, one will not come away with the unique revelation of God's grace in Christ that a particular passage provides. The *addition* of the spiritual aspect to the other two enables one to find the gospel.

Finally, only this method prepares the interpreter to apply the passage properly. Misunderstanding a text, either in regard to the meaning of its words or its historical context or the Spirit's meaning, will result in improperly applying the passage. God's command “thou shalt not kill” does not forbid killing enemies in war or capital punishment. This is clear from an observance of the vocabulary: The Hebrew word translated “kill” in the sixth commandment is not the only Hebrew word that refers to taking a person's life, but refers more particularly to a kind of killing that is premeditated, preventable, and inherently wrong. Most readers do not know Hebrew, but still they have a clue, using the historical aspect of interpretation as well as considering the literary context: the same God who gave the Ten Commandments at Sinai, also required Israel to kill her enemies and kill her own fellow Israelites who violated God's law. Properly using the method of interpretation that I advocate equips the reader to understand these points.

SCRIPTURAL WARRANT

The Bible itself sets forth some principles of interpretation and contains examples of interpretation. Both its instruction and its examples illustrate that the GHS method is sound.

Paul exhorted Timothy to divide the word of truth “rightly” (2 Tim. 2:15), in the context of warning against those who strive about words to no profit but to the subverting of the hearers, and who promote profane and vain babblings (2:14, 16). Scripture recognizes that there is a wrong way and a right way to expound Scripture.

When Joseph interpreted Pharaoh's dream, and

Daniel interpreted Nebuchadnezzar's, neither prophet suggested several possible ways to understand the dream; both clearly indicated that the dream had one meaning and used essentially the same method to determine that meaning. Of course, in those cases God Himself revealed the interpretation to His prophets.

When Jesus and the apostles quoted from or explained the Old Testament, they did not suggest five possible meanings, but used it specifically and clearly as teaching one clear word.

In other words, the inspired writers of the New Testament indicate that there is one right way to interpret the Bible by how they interpreted the Old.

Always they observed the words that the Spirit used, and understood those words in a proper sense. They did justice to the grammatical aspect. Always they understood those words in light of their historical background. And always they brought out the Spirit's meaning.

At times their observance of the Spirit's meaning led them to bring out startling insights that the Old Testament saints may not have seen. Matthew 2:6

declares that the small town of Bethlehem was "not the least" among the cities of Judah, while Micah 5:2 assigned it the place of "little among the thousands of Judah." Yet do you see that both statements express the Spirit's meaning? As regards population, the town was small, a mere village or hamlet. Yet in God's plan of salvation it was exalted: our Savior was born in it. Again, Matthew 2:15 quotes Hosea 11:1: "Out of Egypt have I called my son." Hosea referred to Israel, while Matthew referred to Jesus. Yet, although in different senses, both Israel and Jesus are God's son—Jesus, as regards both His divinity and human nature, and Israel as regards its special place in God's covenant.

The point is that when the New Testament writers seem not to quote the Old Testament accurately, they still are expressing the meaning of the Holy Spirit. And they do not allegorize.

This ends my explanation of the proper method of Bible interpretation. The next article will refer you to two books that have some value in helping you explore the matter more deeply, if you are interested.

TAKING HEED TO THE DOCTRINE



THE *ORDO SALUTIS* (8) PRESERVATION: KEPT BY THE POWER OF GOD

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Who are kept by the power of God through faith unto salvation ready to be revealed in the last time—1 Peter 1:5

INTRODUCTION

Salvation is God's work of delivering us from sin into the possession of everlasting life. Salvation is God's greatest work: a work that He planned in eternity, that He accomplished in the cross of His Son, and that He applies by His Spirit. We have seen the various steps by which the Holy Spirit in logical order applies the benefits of salvation in this life: regeneration, calling,

conversion, faith, justification, and sanctification. But everything would be in vain if, after the Spirit applied salvation, we lost it. Therefore, the next important step in our salvation is preservation. We must be preserved, or kept, in the salvation that God has given to us. We could easily lose it, but God by His grace keeps us. That is preservation.

THE MEANING

Preservation is God's work of keeping those whom He has saved in the path of holiness so that they never lose their salvation and perish. Notice three things about that

definition. First, preservation (like all the other steps in the *Ordo Salutis*) is God's work. Second, preservation is God's work of keeping us *in the path of holiness*. Third, preservation guarantees final salvation, for it ends in final glorification. We speak of "the *preservation* of the saints" and "the *perseverance* of the saints." The relation is this: God preserves His saints so that they persevere in holiness.

The apostle Peter writes to believers to assure them of their preservation. In 1 Peter 1:4 a rich inheritance is promised to them; it is even reserved in heaven for them. But one nagging question remains: Will we finally receive that inheritance? In anticipation of that question Peter writes, "[You] are kept...unto salvation" (v. 5). Not only is our inheritance reserved in heaven for us, but *we are kept* unto that salvation, so that we shall certainly receive it. The word "kept" means "to guard, to watch over." If we might imagine a soldier (a sentry) standing by us to keep us, he prevents our destruction; he prevents our wandering away into danger; and if we wander away, he restores us. He never falls asleep on the job; he never neglects his calling; and he is always watching and protecting us. That is the power of preservation.

The fortress in which we are kept is "the power of God." Literally, "The ones kept *in* the power of God." "In" sometimes indicates an instrument, so the KJV renders it, "Kept *by* the power of God." In the Greek language "in" also means the sphere in which something happens, so that we can translate it, "in the power of God." The idea is that we are guarded on every side by the almighty, omnipresent power of God. We are safe in the fortress of divine omnipotence.

That word "kept" has certain implications.

First, our preservation is necessary. If something is not vulnerable to attack or danger, you do not put forth much effort to protect it. If something is strong, you do not need to guard it. But if something is weak and vulnerable, it must be guarded. Almighty power is necessary for our preservation; otherwise, we could never be saved. The Canons of Dordt in the Fifth Head emphasize this repeatedly:

By reason of these remains of indwelling sin and the temptations of sin and of the world those who are converted could not persevere in a state of grace *if left to their own strength*, but God is faithful, who,

having conferred grace, mercifully confirms and powerfully preserves them therein even to the end (5.3).

Thus it is not in consequence of their own merits or strength, but of God's free mercy, that they do not totally fall from faith and grace, nor continue and perish finally in their backslidings, which with respect to themselves is not only possible, *but would undoubtedly happen* (5.8).

That is humbling: As sheep we are the weakest, the most wayward, the most foolish, and the most self-destructive of all God's creatures. God must watch over us constantly day and night.

Second, we are precious and dear to God who keeps us. If something is not very valuable, or even worthless, you make little to no effort to protect it. If something is dear to your heart, you keep it, you pay for security to protect it, and you make every effort to guard it. God exerts the power of His omnipotence to preserve us in the salvation that He has given to us. God moves heaven and earth, and all creatures, in the service of our salvation. Clearly, we must be important to Him: He loves us, He cherishes us, and He will never let us go. Will God set His love upon us in election; will the Son of God suffer so much for us; will He shed His precious blood on the cross for us; and will the Holy Spirit begin to give us the benefits of salvation, only for the whole work of salvation to be ruined because God did not keep us?

Third, the implication is that the way to heaven is difficult and dangerous. You do not need an almighty guardian for a tranquil stroll in the park. You do not need an almighty guardian for a pleasant cruise on the tranquil sea. But do you need an almighty guardian if the world through which you pass is filled with devils hell-bent on your destruction? You require an almighty guardian if you are passing through a vehement storm. You need an almighty guardian if life is a battlefield. The Christian life is full of dangers, temptations, trials, hardships, and sufferings, and full of falls and stumblings. It is a miracle of God's grace that we arrive in heaven kept by God's power. "A just man falleth seven times, and riseth up again: but the wicked shall fall into mischief" (Prov. 24:16).

Fourth, there is a purpose in God's keeping of us: it is to preserve us *in salvation*. Salvation is salvation

from sin; therefore, preservation is to be kept in that salvation from sin. It is not to be kept *in sin*, but it is to be kept *in holiness*. The Canons emphasize this:

He hath chosen us from eternity, both to grace and glory, to salvation and the way of salvation, which He hath ordained that we should walk therein (1.8).

Having faithfully preserved them even to the end [He] should at last bring them free from every spot and blemish to the enjoyment of glory in His own presence forever (2.8).

God is faithful, who, having conferred grace, mercifully confirms and powerfully preserves them therein [in grace] even to the end (5.3).

[God] does not permit them to be totally deserted and to plunge themselves into everlasting destruction (5.6).

They do not totally fall from faith and grace, nor continue and perish finally in their backslidings (5.8).

They arrive at the certain persuasion that they will ever continue true and living members of the church, and that they experience forgiveness of sins; and will at last inherit eternal life (5.9).

Notice that we are preserved as members of the church, not of the ungodly world, and that we are preserved in holiness, not in sin. “Kept by the power of God through faith unto salvation ready to be revealed in the last time” (1 Pet. 1:5).

Salvation is not in sin, but *from* sin.

THE MANNER

Our preservation does not depend upon us, that is, it is not a conditional preservation. Conditional preservation is the teaching that God makes final salvation possible, but the believer must be willing to cooperate with the offered grace. That, of course, overthrows the doctrine of salvation: the beginning of salvation is God’s work, and the continuation and the perfection of salvation are also God’s work. It is not that God begins the work of salvation and then expects us to finish what He started. It is not that God gives us the powers to persevere and that final salvation depends upon us. Salvation is by *grace alone*, not by grace and our good works, efforts, and exertions.

Those who deny the preservation of the saints often appeal to the apostasy passages in Hebrews that seem to

teach that some true believers can fall away and perish. One such passage is Hebrews 6:4-6: “For it is impossible for those who were once enlightened, and have tasted of the heavenly gift, and were made partakers of the Holy Ghost, and have tasted the good word of God, and the powers of the world to come, if they shall fall away, to renew them again unto repentance, seeing they crucify to themselves the Son of God afresh, and put him to an open shame.” That seems to teach a falling away from Christ; but the correct interpretation of such passages is that such people who fell away were not true believers. Outwardly, they appeared to be true believers, but their apostasy proves that they were not truly saved. In Hebrews 6:9 we read, “But, beloved, we are persuaded better things of you, and things that accompany salvation, though we thus speak.” John explains in 1 John 2:19: “They went out from us, but they were not of us: for if they had been of us, they would no doubt have continued with us: but they went out, that it might be made manifest that they were not all of us.” It is not possible for a true believer to fall away and perish; it is possible for a hypocrite to manifest himself as such and to depart from the truth of the gospel which he never truly believed.

We are preserved, kept, or guarded by (or in) the power of God and through faith. The power of God we have already considered: it is the almighty strength of God according to which He rules over, governs, and controls all creatures, so that all creatures serve our salvation, so that no creature can thwart His will, and so that no creature can separate us from His love which is ours in Christ Jesus. With God’s power is His perfect wisdom. He is able to arrange all things to reach the goal that He has determined for all things. He is able to do that with respect to our salvation too, so that every circumstance serves our everlasting blessedness. The Heidelberg Catechism teaches in Lord’s Day 1, “He so preserves me that without the will of my heavenly Father not a hair can fall from my head, yea, that all things must be subservient to my salvation.” Canons 5.8 explains why our preservation in the power of God is certain and why our falling away is impossible: “With respect to God it [our perishing in our backslidings] is impossible, since His counsel cannot be changed, nor His promise fail neither can the call according to His purpose be revoked, nor the merit, intercession, and

preservation of Christ be rendered ineffectual, nor the sealing of the Holy Spirit be frustrated or obliterated.” In other words, for an elect child of God to perish the triune God would have to fail, which is not only impossible, but the very idea is blasphemous. Our faith has a solid foundation: “Ye are kept by the power of God.”

Furthermore, God does not preserve us *without our activity*. God preserves us so that we persevere, so that we fight against sin, and so that we exert ourselves to live in obedience and in good works. God does not bring us to heaven while we sleep, so that one day, after no effort, we wake up in heavenly glory. God could do that, but that is not how He is pleased to work. Our Father’s purpose is that we experience our salvation, that we experience the battle, and that we enjoy and are thankful for our salvation.

That is why Peter adds, “through faith” (v. 5). Faith is not a contribution that we make to salvation, and it is not a condition that we fulfill for our salvation. Faith is part of salvation: it is the gift of God that He works in our hearts by the Holy Spirit through the preaching of the gospel. By faith we are made partakers of Christ’s benefits as we embrace Him from the heart.

Faith is also our activity: it is our activity of knowing God in Jesus Christ; it is our activity of trusting God in Jesus Christ; it is our activity of embracing, appropriating, and receiving Jesus Christ and all His benefits. God does not promise to preserve us *without faith*. God does not promise to preserve us whether we believe or do not believe. God keeps us by (or in) His power *through faith*. Therefore, God promises to preserve our faith, to maintain our faith, and to strengthen our faith.

Therefore, the grace of preservation makes us active. It makes us active to work out our own salvation with fear and trembling. It makes us active to live in holiness and in all good works. It makes us active in repenting when we fall into sin. It makes us active in seeking God’s grace in prayer in order to fight against sin and the devil. “For whatsoever is born of God overcometh the world: and this is the victory that overcometh the world, even our faith. Who is he that overcometh the world, but he that believeth that Jesus is the Son of God?” (1 John 5:4-5).

In addition, God uses the means of the admonitions, warnings, and threatenings of Scripture to keep us

on the pathway that leads to life. You might wonder, if final salvation is guaranteed to all the elect, and if final backsliding is impossible, why are there so many warnings in the Bible against backsliding? Do those warnings not imply that it is, indeed, possible to fall away? Canons 5.14 explains: “As it hath pleased God by the preaching of the gospel to begin this work of grace in us, so He preserves, continues, and perfects it by the hearing of His Word, by meditation thereon, and by the exhortations, threatenings, and promises thereof, as well as by the use of the sacraments.” God uses the warnings of His Word to preserve us in the faith.

Besides that, such warnings serve a twofold purpose: they preserve God’s people in the way of righteousness for, by God’s grace, we take heed to such warnings. When God cries, “Watch out!” we watch out. If God did not cry, “Watch out,” we would walk heedlessly into danger. When the reprobate hear such warnings, however, they scoff, go on in their sins, and perish, because they do not have faith by which to lay hold of God’s Word. In addition, when we do not take heed to the warnings of God’s Word, our Father follows us with the rod of discipline in order to bring us to repentance. That discipline is described at length in the Fifth Head of the Canons of Dordt. God is never at a loss what to do, for our Father has many rods at His disposal and He will never allow us to go on in our sins and perish.

THE GOAL

We are kept “unto salvation ready to be revealed in the last time.” This is one of many places in the Bible where the word “salvation” is a reference to final salvation. It is not a reference to election, regeneration, calling, saving faith, justification, or sanctification. It is a reference to the final, full, perfect salvation that we shall enjoy in the new creation. This salvation is “ready:” it has been prepared and it will soon be our possession. This salvation was planned in eternity in election, it was purchased on the cross of Christ, and it is applied by the Holy Spirit, but in this life we have it only in principle, as a beginning, a foretaste of the full salvation. One day it shall be revealed: It is now hidden, covered with a veil, reserved in heaven, but on the last day it shall be displayed in its full glory. In the meantime, God is keeping it for us, and God is keeping us for it.

In that connection, Peter describes our inheritance in verse 4. First, God has reserved or kept an inheritance in heaven for us; and second, God is keeping us, guarding us, or watching over us, so that we receive that inheritance. An inheritance is the gift that a father gives to his children whom he loves. A child does not earn his inheritance, but it is allotted to him by the will of his father. We are the sons and daughters of God, begotten again unto a lively hope (v. 3). An inheritance requires the death of the testator: the testator, the one who writes the Last Will and Testament, as it were, is God. But God cannot die: therefore, Jesus, who is God, dies in order to secure for us the inheritance. “And for this cause he [Jesus Christ] is the mediator of the new testament, that by means of death, for the redemption of the transgressions that were under the first testament, they which are called might receive the promise of eternal inheritance” (Heb. 9:15).

That inheritance is glorious, so much so that the apostle can describe it *only in negative terms* by saying

what it is *not*. It is incorruptible, it is undefiled, and it fadeth not away (v. 4). Everything in this world is corruptible, marred by sin and death, but our inheritance is incorruptible, for it never decays; it never perishes, but it is the everlasting glory of body and soul. “Undefiled” refers to that which is free from all stain, all pollution, and all sin. There is nothing ugly or deformed, but everything pristine, beautiful, and holy in the inheritance above. If something does not fade away, its brightness and glory shall never lose their luster. Our inheritance is not like a rose, which for a moment looks beautiful, but withers and dies. Our inheritance will be beautiful and glorious forever. It is reserved, kept, preserved in heaven. No thief will break in to steal it, no moth or rust will corrupt it, and it is kept for us forever. We are kept by the power of God through faith to an incorruptible, undefiled, and unfading inheritance that we can never lose.

And that inheritance we will consider further next time in the final step of our salvation, glorification.

BELIEVING AND CONFESSING



OF THE LAW OF GOD

(SECOND HELVETIC CONFESSION, CHAPTER 12B)

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The Law Is Complete and Perfect

We believe that the whole will of God and all necessary precepts for every sphere of life are taught in this law. For otherwise the Lord would not have forbidden us to add or take away anything from this law; neither would He have commanded us to walk in a straight path before this law, and not to turn aside from it by turning to the right or to the left (Deut. 4:2; 12:32).

In this third paragraph of chapter 12 of the Second Helvetic Confession, Heinrich Bullinger affirms one of

the most important truths regarding the law of God. That truth is that God’s law is complete. “Perfect” in the title of this paragraph does not mean morally perfect but “complete.” Obviously, God’s law is perfect in the sense of faultless. But perfect also has the sense of complete. A newborn baby is perfect not in the sense that it is free of original sin; it is perfect because it has ten fingers and ten toes. It has everything a baby ought to have. Similarly, God’s law is complete. The fact that there are *ten* commandments underscores the completeness of the law.

God’s law is complete inasmuch as it contains “the whole will of God” for human beings. It is complete

also because it includes “all necessary precepts for every sphere of life.” The law expresses God’s will for our relationship to Him as well as our relationship to the neighbor. The law addresses our relationships in the church and it expresses the will of God for our life in the world. The law addresses our outward behavior but it also concerns the inner attitude of our hearts. Though predominantly negative, the law also teaches us our positive calling. The law addresses itself to us at every stage of life, whether we are young or old, whether we are single, married, or widowed, whether we are poor or rich. The law comes to us whether we live in an advanced civilization or a third-world country, whether we live in the United States or India, Singapore, or Myanmar. In every respect, the law is complete.

Bullinger cites two passages of Scripture to prove the law’s completeness. Both passages forbid adding to or taking away from the law. The first is Deuteronomy 4:2, “Ye shall not add unto the word which I command you, neither shall ye diminish ought from it, that ye may keep the commandments of the LORD your God which I command you.” This passage applies specifically to the Ten Commandments, as is indicated in verse 13 of the chapter, “And he declared unto you his covenant, which he commanded you to perform, even ten commandments; and he wrote them upon two tables of stone.” It is noteworthy that this is one of those Old Testament passages that connects God’s covenant with the keeping of the Ten Commandments.

The second passage cited to prove the completeness of the law is Deuteronomy 12:32, “What thing soever I command you, observe to do it: thou shalt not add thereto, nor diminish from it.” This passage is not directly connected to the Ten Commandments but to various Old Testament ceremonial laws. Nevertheless, because the ceremonial laws were specific applications of the moral law, the injunction applies to the moral law as well. Nothing may be added to nor taken away from the law of God. Anyone who foolishly attempts to do so, invites the judgment of God. Immediately following the injunction of Deuteronomy 4:2, Moses says, “Your eyes have seen what the LORD did because of Baal-peor: for all the men that followed Baal-peor, the LORD thy God hath destroyed them from among you” (Deut. 4:3).

Bullinger adds to the passages from Deuteronomy,

“neither would he [God] have commanded us to walk in a straight path before this law, and not to turn aside from it by turning to the right or to the left.” Although he does not cite a particular passage, there are many that he could have. Verse upon verse from Psalm 119 comes to mind: “Make me to go in the path of thy commandments; for therein do I delight” (Ps. 119:35). Or, “Many are my persecutors and mine enemies; yet do I not decline from thy testimonies” (Ps. 119:157).

As in the opening paragraph of this chapter, Bullinger takes for granted that God’s law applied not only to Old Testament believers, but also applies with all its force to New Testament Christians. That comes out when he cites the two passages from the book of Deuteronomy and says that God has “forbidden *us* to add or take away anything from this law.” When Moses spoke these passages, he was not only addressing the Israelites who stood before him. He was also addressing saints in the new covenant as well. The proof of this is the fact that what he said has been incorporated into the holy Scriptures.

He makes the same point when he goes on to say, “neither would he have commanded *us* to walk in a straight path before this law.” No less than the Old Testament people of God, we New Testament saints have been admonished not to depart from God’s law “by turning to the right or to the left.” God’s law is of enduring force. It applies to His people in every age.

Besides taking for granted the application of the law to believers of our day, “*us*” in this paragraph underscores that, strictly speaking, the law applies to the people of God and not to the world. Do not misunderstand. It is certainly true that the law has universal application, to all men everywhere. In light of the law, all men will one day be judged. Nevertheless, in a unique sense, the law especially addresses God’s redeemed people.

The giving of the law makes this plain. Not only was the law given to Israel and to no other nation, but the law was given after God had delivered them from the bondage of Egypt. In a unique sense of the word, Israel was God’s people. No other people had a saving relationship with God in the Old Testament. The prologue to the Ten Commandments emphasizes that: “I am the LORD thy God, which have brought thee out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage”

(Ex. 20:2). Additionally, the expression found in the prologue, “the LORD *thy* God,” is repeated several times throughout the Ten Commandments, as well as in Jesus’ summary of the law in Matthew 22:37-40, “Thou shalt love the Lord *thy* God....”

The law is addressed particularly to the child of God because only the Christian can keep the law out of gratitude. Ultimately, there is no keeping of the law except out of love and gratitude to God. No unbeliever can keep the law of God because no unbeliever loves and is filled with gratitude to God. He may obey the law outwardly for selfish reasons: to avoid punishment, to save face, or to please others. But he never obeys the law as an expression of his thankfulness to God. That is the reason on account of which it is impossible for the reprobate wicked to keep God’s law. They hate God and love themselves. They despise God’s law and are a law unto themselves.

Why the Law Was Given

We teach that this law was not given to men that they might be justified by keeping it, but that rather from what it teaches we may know (our) weakness, sin and condemnation, and, despairing of our strength, might be converted to Christ in faith. For the apostle openly declares: “The law brings wrath,” and, “Through the law comes knowledge of sin” (Rom. 4:15; 3:20), and, “If a law had been given which could justify or make alive, then righteousness would indeed be by the law. But the Scripture (that is, the law) has concluded all under sin, that the promise which was of the faith of Jesus might be given those who believe.... Therefore, the law was our schoolmaster unto Christ, that we might be justified by faith” (Gal. 3:21 ff.).

Continuing his treatment of God’s law, Bullinger devotes a paragraph to the purpose of the law. Why has God given us His law?

In reality, the paragraph covers only one main purpose of the law. It is the law’s first purpose in the life of the Christian. The first purpose of the law is to teach us our sin. It is not the exclusive purpose of God in giving the law, but it is His first purpose.

Bullinger begins with the negative, identifying the reason on account of which the law has *not* been given.

That follows from the fact that the law convicts us that we have not kept God’s commandments. When we hear the law, we know that we have not loved God or the neighbor as we ought to love them. We have not shown our gratitude to God as is our calling. Over and over again, we have sought ourselves and been a law unto ourselves. Rather than to serve the neighbor, we have sought how the neighbor might serve us.

That the purpose of the law is to confront us with our sin is the teaching of Scripture. Bullinger appeals to two Scripture passages, both in Paul’s epistle to the Romans. First, he cites Romans 4:15, “Because the law worketh wrath.” If the law incites God’s wrath, that is because the law convicts of sin. The other passage that he cites is Romans 3:20, “For by the law is the knowledge of sin.” This belongs to the first purpose of the reading of the law in the church on the Lord’s Day, that by the law we may be convicted anew of our sins.

But not only does the law convict us of our sin. It also convicts us of our sinfulness, that is, the sinfulness of our nature. If the law only convicted us of our sins, that would leave open the possibility that we might yet in the future be able to keep the law. That possibility, however, is removed by the law itself. For the law drives home the depravity of our natures. Sin is not only what we do; sin is also what we *are*. We do not only commit sins; we *are* sinners. Evil is rooted in our natures.

The first and great commandment is, “Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind.” We must not only obey God, but we must obey Him out of love. And love is always a matter of the heart. Further, Jesus calls us to love God with all our heart, soul, and mind. Heart, soul, and mind are the main aspects of our natures. Clearly, God’s law concerns much more than merely our deeds. This, too, belongs to the purpose of the reading of the law in the weekly worship services, that by the law we may be convicted anew of the sinfulness of our fallen natures.

Since the first purpose of the law is the knowledge of sin, it cannot be God’s purpose with the law to justify us, that is, to save us from our sins. That necessarily follows. Not only is this the logical implication from the first purpose of the law, but it is also the express teaching of God’s Word. This is the teaching of the apostle Paul in both passages that Bullinger has already

referenced. The last part of Romans 3:20 is, “for by the law is the knowledge of sin.” But the first part of the verse is, “Therefore by the deeds of the law there shall no flesh be justified in the sight of God.” Romans 4:15 teaches that “the law worketh wrath.” But in the verse that immediately precedes, the apostle says, “For if they which are of the law be heirs, faith is made void, and the promise made of none effect” (Rom. 4:14). There will be more development of this truth in connection with chapter 15 of the SHC, which deals directly with justification by faith alone.

Bullinger concludes this paragraph by appealing to Galatians 3:21-24. In this passage, Paul begins by reiterating that the law convicts of sin and cannot, therefore, justify. “[F]or if there had been a law given which could have given life, verily righteousness should

have been by the law. But the scripture hath concluded all under sin, that the promise by faith of Jesus Christ might be given to them that believe” (vv. 21-22). But building on this purpose of the law, the apostle goes on to teach, “Wherefore the law was our schoolmaster to bring us unto Christ, that we might be justified by faith” (v. 24). The law causes us to look away from ourselves, sinners that we are, and turns us to look upon Jesus Christ. The law “brings us to Christ” in order that we might be justified, not on account of our works, but on account of the work of Christ imputed to us by faith.

This was and this is the outstanding purpose of the law.

Not the law our righteousness, but Christ our righteousness! Not our obedience, but His perfect obedience!

GO YE INTO ALL THE WORLD



RE-ENTRY: LEAVING THE MISSION FIELD AND GOING BACK (4)

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RENEWAL

As we continue a consideration of the main parts of re-entry from a field of mission labor and move now into the phase of *renewal*, it becomes evident that the phases of the re-entry process can be divided into two main groups.

The first group of phases in the re-entry process involves looking back. For example, when the apostle Paul was released from his labors in Ephesus and needed to bid the elders farewell (Acts 20), the perspective was clearly on what was being left behind in the Lord’s hands. Then, the stage of *return* to Antioch and Judah was filled with concern and contemplation of those left behind, and even with the desire to return to them, the Lord willing, in order to resume ministering to the saints that he had previously left. The stage of *refreshment* was rearward looking as Paul recovered from being spent for

the sake of the gospel among those whom he labored. The stage of *rehearsal* was a rearview perspective as Paul gave detailed reports of what the Lord had done through him until the time of departure from his field of labor.

The second group of phases in the re-entry process involves looking and moving forward. Instead of contemplating what has been done and what has been left behind, the second group of phases have a forward-looking perspective. This shift in perspective is even evident from the labors of the apostle Paul upon his return from his first missionary journey and re-entry into the churches in Palestine and Syria for a brief period. After finishing the work of rehearsing to the churches all that was done by the Lord through the labors of Barnabas and himself, his thoughts eventually shifted forward. Accordingly, he said to Barnabas, “Let

us go again and visit our brethren in every city where we have preached the word of the Lord, and see how they do” (Acts 15:36). The focus of his thoughts and concern were no longer upon the past and a recounting of the labors that he had done. Instead, his focus turned to what still needed to be done among the newly established churches and beyond. The bridge between the perspective of looking back upon the completed mission labor and the perspective of looking forward to what needs to be done in the Lord’s kingdom and church is provided by the Lord in the next re-entry stages, including renewal.

Renewal for a missionary is needed in several areas, just as it was necessary for the apostle Paul. First, he needs to be renewed in mind, body, and soul. This need for renewal becomes clear when considering the various perils that Paul experienced in his missionary work. We have seen previously from 2 Corinthians 11:22-28 the perils and troubles that he faced:

in labors more abundant, in stripes above measure, in prisons more frequent, in deaths oft. Of the Jews five times received I forty stripes save one. Thrice was I beaten with rods, once was I stoned, thrice I suffered shipwreck, a night and a day I have been in the deep; in journeyings often, in perils of waters, in perils of robbers, in perils by mine own countrymen, in perils by the heathen, in perils in the city, in perils in the wilderness, in perils in the sea, in perils among false brethren; in weariness and painfulness, in watchings often, in hunger and thirst, in fastings often, in cold and nakedness. Beside those things that are without, that which cometh upon me daily, the care of all the churches.

Not only did Paul need to be refreshed from past demands upon him physically, mentally, and spiritually during his brief re-entry to his calling churches, but he also needed to be renewed in the same for more of such demands and perils that awaited in his coming labors. As Paul needed this during his brief furloughs, so a missionary may need the same upon his re-entry for a long-term furlough or for a permanent departure from a field of mission work.

When looking forward to the prospect of returning to his mission labors and its great challenges, especially the tribulations and reproach by wicked men, the apostle needed to be renewed in his commitment to serve faithfully. For faithfulness to that commitment in the past he was commended by the church at Jerusalem after his first missionary journey in the church’s letter to the newly established Gentile churches. The church declared that he and Barnabas had “hazarded their lives” for the sake of the work and the name of our Lord Jesus Christ (Acts 15:26). “Hazarded” means that the apostle had given over his life trustfully to the Lord’s sovereign work and will, especially concerning how that

work would go. Having done that in his first missionary journey, he needed renewed zeal for that same commitment again with submission to whatever way the Lord would lead him.

In whatever way the Lord would lead the apostle, he needed to be renewed in contentment as well. This contentment was something the Lord granted Paul and to which he testified from house arrest in Rome to the Philippian church. As he said, “... for I have learned, in whatsoever

state I am, therewith to be content. I know both how to be abased, and I know how to abound: every where and in all things, I am instructed both to be full and to be hungry, both to abound and to suffer need” (Phil. 4:11b-12). Being renewed in this precious virtue, he could take up the labors of his mission work, content with the Lord’s fruit upon his labors and content with his gifts, abilities, and even the limitation God had place upon him by his “thorn” (2 Cor. 12:7-10). For a missionary upon re-entry, renewal in this virtue of contentment in the Lord’s will and way is vital for him in the way forward.

Paul also needed renewal in the Lord’s strength for the work of the gospel ministry. That he needed the Lord’s strength for the work the apostle learned well through the thorn that the Lord gave him. In his weakness, he learned that he was strong in his work only through the Lord’s all-sufficient strength and grace (2 Cor. 12:9-10). Placing his confidence in the Lord that He would provide

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the spiritual and physical strength for faithful service, the apostle rejoiced that he could do all the things of his apostolic labors through Christ only. Similarly, the missionary in the renewal process learns more and more to place his confidence in the all-sufficient grace of God and to make what the apostle confessed his own personal confession, “I can do all things through Christ which strengtheneth me” (Phil. 4:13).

The apostle Paul exemplifies well the renewal that the foreign missionary needs for continued faithfulness as a servant in the gospel to the Lord Jesus Christ in whatever way forward the Lord is pleased to lead him. This need is echoed by a Presbyterian foreign missionary who labored in China in the nineteenth century. Although his comments referred specifically to the need for and benefits of extended furloughs, the same applies well to a period of renewal during the re-entry process. The missionary Philip Pritcher observed that “missionaries, like all other busy workers, get run down, worn out, and on account of the unvarying daily routine, become more or less rusty. Physically, mentally, and spiritually the whole life is apt to, and very often does, become sluggish.”¹ Hence, whether it be a return to his field of mission labor from an extended furlough, a reassignment to a new field of foreign mission labor, or a permanent re-entry into his calling churches and a new charge of labor, the missionary needs some period of time, not only to be refreshed from what he was released, but also to be renewed for his new charge into which he might be sent by the Lord.

There are several means for that renewal of the missionary in his re-entry into life and labor wherever the Lord may so direct him. Chiefly, the means of grace themselves in the preaching of the gospel serve that spiritual renewal. In the case of the apostle Paul, he remained in the church of Antioch for some time after his first and second missionary journeys preaching and teaching. “Paul and also Barnabas continued in Antioch, teaching and preaching the word of the Lord, with many others also” (Acts 15:35; cf. Acts 18:32a). Thereby he not only served his calling church with faithful preaching to their edification, but he himself was also fed and renewed for his subsequent ongoing

labors. The foreign missionary also needs to be fed and spiritually filled up again for future service in the demands of his ongoing labors.

Moreover, being busy in the ministry of the Word and preaching is of great benefit. It allows the missionary to develop new preaching material. It provides supportive fellowship from the saints (Acts 14:28). In some cases with a long-term furlough or when a returning missionary is between mission work and a pastoral charge, a missionary may benefit from additional study and coursework for his future labors, if the Lord provides the time and opportunity.

The renewal and its means in a permanent re-entry of a missionary has a specific goal. Its purpose is to help relieve him of the daily burdens and concerns of the mission labors from which he has been released. He needs to adjust to the removal of the responsibilities and cares of his former mission work and adjust to a new mantle of another charge or field of labor that the Lord might place upon him. Just as it takes some adjustment for a tree when transplanted from a field to a customer’s landscaping around his house, so the transplanting of a missionary, from his home on a mission field and to a new place of labor, involves letting go of former routines, concerns, burdens, and challenges. All of that takes some time and patience, which will be different for each missionary family that passes through this adjustment. Moreover, its purpose is to prepare, as much as is possible, the missionary and his family for the work of what might be next for him and his family within the calling and supporting churches or in another field of mission labor.

Although Scripture does not reveal the details about the length of time Paul received for renewal between his first and second missionary journeys among the churches in Judea and Antioch, yet he was given sufficient time in his case according to his need. Similarly, the re-entering missionary should not overlook the need for some time and attention to renewal in preparation for his new place of life and labor, especially if it might involve a transition through a cross-cultural, or even a counter cross-cultural, adjustment.

1 Gerald F. DeJong, *The Reformed Church in China 1842-1951* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1992), 80.



HOW TO LISTEN TO A SERMON

REV. JONATHAN MAHTANI

pastor of the Pittsburgh PRC in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania

*The hearing ear, the willing heart, Thou givest unto me—
Psalter 40B*

How discouraging this is for a pastor: After spending hours of his week crafting a sermon, he notices that many in his congregation look distracted, bored, or sleepy as he preaches. That which is supposed to be “the power of God unto salvation” floats like carbon monoxide upon young Eutychus, nodding not in agreement but in slumber. That which is called “good news” seems stale to those who stare ahead like zombies. That which we confess to be “the wisdom of God” does not seem to stimulate the mind nearly as much as a digital device.

On the other hand, how encouraging for a pastor when he can see, as he preaches, the body language and facial expressions of God’s people indicating hearts seriously engaged in worshipful communion with God in His house.

What kind of listener are you? Your pastor notices. More importantly, God is truly present to see both the outward demeanor and the inward reception of His Word.

Dear reader, let us repent. Let there be a genuine sorrow of heart for the sin of poor listening. Before you proceed through this article, seeking to improve in your listening to sermons, let there be first within your soul an acknowledgment of sin. It is a first commandment issue: Identify the idols of your heart that distract you in church or keep you from getting enough sleep the weekend before. It is a second commandment issue: Think about the stimulating images of entertainment that your heart would prefer over the reading and explanation of God’s Word. It is a third commandment issue: Vainly or emptily, you take God’s name upon your ears, minds, and mouth so that worship becomes

a mere formality. Consider how it is also a fourth commandment issue.

Additionally, it is the sin of unbelief. We come to church without consciously believing that God is actually present to meet with us, and we doubt that Christ is actually speaking with the preaching of His Word. Repent! Instead of giving excuses, blaming the preacher, or self-righteously pointing out the times we *have* listened well, let us repent and trust in Jesus Christ alone for full and free forgiveness. Only after repenting and finding forgiveness in the cross alone may we seek to grow by grace in our listening.

Good listening does not only begin on Sunday at 10 A.M. when the sermon begins. It begins with good preparation. By preparation, I not only refer to what you do the *night* before but rather what you do the whole *week* before. There is an intimate link between your personal devotions and your public worship. If you are not regularly listening to God’s Word in your closet, it will be very difficult to jumpstart any listening in the pew. The young person who actually wants to enjoy fellowship with God during the worship service does not desire it only on Sundays, but he craves it all the days of his life. Learn how to meditate on God’s Word, searching the Scriptures daily, as those noble Bereans (Acts 17:11). Pray for the mind of Christ to receive that Word, just as Eli taught Samuel to pray: “Speak, Lord, for thy servant heareth” (1 Sam. 3:10). In addition, get the 6-8 hours of sleep you need, more than just on Saturday night, “for so He giveth his beloved sleep” (Ps. 127:2b). A good listener is one who has properly prepared his mind, heart, and body.

On Sunday itself, there are many practical methods I could suggest to help with listening, but one of the most important points to remember is that *all* of worship is

a holy dialogue with God. In other words, the elements of worship that take place prior to the sermon are not merely “preliminaries.” They are, rather, parts of a real conversation between God and His people—all of which are meant to prepare our hearts for the sermon. Have you noticed the back-and-forth movement of worship? God speaks in the call to worship, and we respond in silent prayer. God addresses us as “Beloved,” and we confess, “Our help is in the name of the LORD....” Jesus blesses us (when the minister gives the benediction with upraised hands), and we respond in song. He thunders the law from Sinai, and we sing and pray again, confessing our sin and clinging to Christ for forgiveness.

This back-and-forth movement of conversation between God and us is designed to prepare us for the reading and preaching of the Scriptures wherein God speaks to us at length. Are you engaged in the conversation prior to the sermon? Or are you ignoring this reality and attempting to tune in only when the text is read? At each service, throughout every part, God meets with us! The holy God, who is a consuming fire burning in wrath against His enemies, embraces us and talks with us as His friends for Jesus’ sake! Improvement in your listening to sermons will come only with a greater consciousness of this holy conversation in the presence of the Almighty.

Excited unto reverence and awe through the first thirty minutes of worship, we are made ready to listen to a logical explanation of Scripture. Yes, there *is* a logical order to follow. Some preachers distribute an outline to help you follow along. Others prefer that the listeners figure out for themselves the orderly progression of the sermon. With or without a printed outline, a good listener knows where the preacher is in his explanation of a text. He knows not only whether the preacher is in the first, second, or third main point, but he also knows where the preacher is in his subpoints. Within each subpoint, try to identify whether the preacher is *stating* a point, *proving* a point, *explaining* a point, or *applying* that point. Do not merely listen for snippets of information or catchy ideas, but use the rational abilities of your God-given mind to follow the logic of the whole sermon. At the end of this article, I have provided an empty outline that most pastors in our denomination use to organize their sermons. To practice following the

logic of the sermon, I suggest bringing to church a copy of that empty outline and filling it in either with a pen or in your mind.

As you consider implementing the practice of following the logical order of the sermon more closely, be aware that this is extremely counter-cultural. In our technologically advanced society, we want what is fast, fun, sensational, brief, and easy. Amusement and entertainment are our idols. Rather than logical development of truth to make us think, people crave snippets, shorts, or reels—something that will stimulate feelings with as little thought as possible. Brains and souls that marinate in this culture without limiting their intake of media on screens will soon find it almost impossible to listen to sermons. Although we have become more aware of the negative effects of digital devices, I believe we are still grossly underestimating how detrimental their overuse is to our brains and souls, severely inhibiting our ability to listen (and even preach) logically.

Along with following the logic should come activity as you listen. A common misconception is that a listener remains utterly passive during the sermon. But a good listener is an *active* listener, and while this includes a logical understanding of the sermon, there is more. It includes turning to the referred Bible passages to find where the preacher is getting his point (the Scripture is inspired, after all...not the preacher). It may mean jotting down a thought you want to remember. It may involve whispering “amen” in agreement with a point. It often affects your facial expressions. It will consist of real sorrow of heart when God’s Word convicts you of sin. It will result in an overflow of quiet prayers of praise even as you hear the gospel. Are you a lazy listener or an active listener?

Part of being an active listener is asking yourself this question throughout the sermon: “How does this apply to my heart and life?” The preacher is called to make such applications, showing how the doctrine affects the life, but sometimes he does not apply it in a way that seems relevant. Perhaps he seems even to neglect to preach the application. But the listener is not without the Holy Spirit, and he must by God’s grace meditate on how it applies.

Be aware that application is not always about how we must make outward changes to our lives in response

to God's Word. That is certainly one way to apply God's Word. But the application may be about how the truth comforts us, or about how we need to repent of our failures, or about how we must trust in Christ alone for forgiveness. The application may be a warning not to believe certain errors in this world. Further, the application may be as simple but profound as this: "Marvel! Stand in awe! Worship this great God." Good listeners know how to apply—personally apply—God's Word to heart and life. They are "doers of the word, and not hearers only" (Jam. 1:22).

With application follows confession of the Word. Someone who truly receives the Word by faith will inevitably echo the same (1 Thess. 1:8). Not only is listening a lost art; so also is godly expression of those words to others. When was the last time you talked about a sermon after church—not to criticize the preacher but to bubble over with the Word that has so filled you? Additionally, do you think it optional to witness to others outside your church about what you heard on Sunday? A genuine Christian does not listen to keep it inside his heart; he listens with a goal of remembering important points that he can discuss with his family and friends and witness to the world. He will not and cannot be silent after hearing the Word.

How encouraging it is for a minister when God's people show that they have been listening, not only with their attentive faces but with their conversation afterward. Pastors hear a lot of comments like, "Great sermon!" or "Thanks for the Word," and those are encouraging. But more so is it when a young person approaches the preacher with something like, "I was really convicted when you made the point of..." or "You know what point led me to marvel most today?" or "Would you expand on the point you made about..." It is when young people want to talk about the Word that has been preached that thrills a minister's soul. Then we exclaim: "For this cause also thank we God without ceasing, because, when ye received the word of God, which ye heard of us, ye received it not as the word of men, but as it is in truth, the word of God, which effectually worketh also in you that believe" (1 Thess. 2:13).

SAMPLE OUTLINE

Introduction:

- A.
 - 1.
 - 2.
- B.
 - 1.
 - 2.

Theme: _____

- I.
 - A.
 - 1.
 - 2.
 - B.
 - 1.
 - 2.
- II.
 - A.
 - 1.
 - 2.
 - B.
 - 1.
 - 2.
- III.
 - A.
 - 1.
 - 2.
 - B.
 - 1.
 - 2.

Notes:

The first point of the sermon (I.) is usually the main point of the text being expounded, so it will normally be longer. The second and third points are subpoints derived from the text.

Each main point has two or three sections (A., B., and sometimes C.). Within these sections are important subpoints (1., 2., and sometimes 3.), developing the ideas of the text. Often, these are the points that the minister will state with a "First..." and "Second..." and "Third..."

The logical pattern within each subpoint follows this aim: State, prove, explain, and apply.



WE ARE BUSY—BUT IT'S A BIT QUIET UP HERE!

PROF. DOUGLAS KUIPER

professor of Church History and New Testament in the Protestant Reformed Theological Seminary, and member of Trinity PRC in Hudsonville, Michigan

FRIDAY, AUGUST 22, 2025: THE END OF A QUIET SUMMER

Today professors were busy with last-minute preparations for the start of school next week. Every time I retrieved papers from the faculty printer/copier, another colleague was either coming toward the printer or just leaving it with papers in his hand. And when I asked Bethany, our secretary, if she noticed a different feel in the air, she readily agreed. After all, she had just sent out the revised class schedule and was attending to other details that indicated that classes would soon start.

Summers are always quiet at seminary—busy, but quiet. All faculty and staff usually come into the building when not on vacation. Charles Terpstra, our registrar/librarian/archivist/building manager, is usually the first to arrive and last to leave every day. Bethany Engelsma, our secretary, works slightly fewer hours than during the school year, but still finds plenty to do for seven hours a day. And Kevin Rau still bikes eight miles to seminary and eight miles home, twice a week, to help in the library and archives.

The professors had a busy summer. Each attended and served in some way at the denomination's 100th anniversary celebration. Each served as advisor to synod. All four were seen at the PR Young People's Convention this summer—two for the full week, and two for a day. Profs. Griess and Huizinga still have not taught every course in their rotation, so course development was one of their priorities. Prof. Gritters was preparing a special church polity course for churches in Mexico, which he will teach remotely. Profs. Kuiper and Gritters kept busy with denominational committee work, which involved Prof. Kuiper traveling to the Philippines to preach in Provident PRCP for two Sundays. Profs. Griess and Huizinga kept busy as editors of the *Standard Bearer*. And all the professors were busy with two of the three “Rs”—reading and writing. Arithmetic is not our specialty.

Even though the faculty and staff kept busy this summer, it was quiet up on the hill this summer. The classrooms were quiet. The students were rarely present. Our senior, Bruce Feenstra, moved in late June to Doon, IA, to serve his internship under the mentorship of Rev. Daniel Kleyn in Doon PRC. Our junior, Isaac VanBaren, finished his first summer of bringing a word of edification. This kept him busy in West Michigan in June, after which he visited Pittsburgh, PA (where he did a three-week mini-internship), Calvary (Hull, IA), Peace (Dyer, IN), and Loveland, CO. No doubt his wife and three children are ready to be home again.



The exception to the students being absent this summer is our sophomore, Joe Ophoff. He helped Mr. Terpstra clean out and organize the seminary basement in preparation for the 100th anniversary, clean out Prof. Cammenga's old office, and sort through Prof. Cammenga's books. By Friday, August 22, the former office had new ceiling tiles and carpet, had been freshly painted, and featured a new conference table. The room is no longer one professor's office, but a room where faculty members can have meetings with a small group of people. Joe, thanks for your work! And for doing it quietly while the professors studied!

The summer was busy. It always is. And it went by quickly. But it certainly is quieter on seminary hill during the summer than during the school year.

FRIDAY, AUGUST 29, 2025: THE BEGINNING OF A QUIET SEMESTER

Seminary began its 101st year of instruction on Tuesday,

August 26. At 6:50 A.M., two students showed up for preseminary Greek grammar. Prof. Gritters is teaching that course, probably for the last time—this is his final year of teaching before his retirement. Students Van Baren and Ophoff arrived a little later in the morning. Seven classes were taught that first morning.



Chapel is held on Wednesdays. The rector customarily leads the first two chapel exercises of a new school year. Prof. Kuiper addressed the faculty and students from 2 Timothy 2:6, explaining that “hardness” is an inherent and inseparable part of the work of the ministry. The God who calls us to ministry also commands us to endure that hardness, in the way of which endurance He blesses our toil with what fruit He has determined it to bring forth.

But only six were in that audience—the three other professors, the two full-time students who are in West Michigan, and one Greek student.

Some who live in the area audit (attend the lectures of) some classes. Prof. Kuiper’s Reformation church history class (last hour of the morning on Tuesday and Thursday) has five auditors, and Prof. Huizinga’s Ecclesiology class (last hour of the morning on Wednesday and Friday) has two. We appreciate the opportunity to teach others, not only prospective ministers.

The professors have a slightly lighter teaching load because God has given no freshman this year. However, there is still plenty to do. In addition to developing new courses, we read and write for the *Standard Bearer* and *Protestant Reformed Theological Journal*. We also review and develop classes that we have taught in the past. Prof. Kuiper is developing his first interim course

on PRCA church history, to be taught in January 2026, God willing. In addition to the work in seminary, the professors seek to help the churches as much as possible by preaching, including consistent preaching of the Heidelberg Catechism in area vacant churches, teaching catechism classes, leading Bible studies, giving lectures, and occasionally doing various types of pastoral work. This means that the professors will keep plenty busy.

But it is a bit quiet up here.

The semester, if all goes according to plan with God’s blessing, holds the prospect of a few special opportunities for the faculty and students to receive an education outside the classroom. By the time you read this article, God willing, Classis West will have met in Crete, IL, and the pre-classical Officebearers’ Conference will be held on the topic of justification and forgiveness. The faculty and students expect to attend, as we usually do when the conference is held in the Chicagoland area.

What is not usual is that we attend two conferences in the same semester. But it is the 400th anniversary of a notable book informally called the *Leiden Synopsis*; its fuller name is *Synopsis of a Purer Theology*. You see, both Jacob Arminius and Simon Episcopius, the leader of the Arminians after Arminius died, were theological professors in Leiden. This means that Leiden University gained an unhappy claim to fame—seedbed of Arminianism. Not all of its professors appreciated this notoriety. After the Synod of Dordt concluded in 1619 and the Remonstrants were condemned, the theological faculty of Leiden made a concerted effort to show themselves fully committed to orthodox Reformed teaching. One result is the publication of this document in 1625. A conference to commemorate this post-Dordt defense of orthodoxy is scheduled for October 16-17 in the Grand Rapids area. Both faculty and students plan to attend, with the permission of the Theological School Committee.

Those few days of conferences will not be so quiet. It will be a good busy.

Although it is quieter up here, one still hears the sound of a good noise: the praise of God and the declaration of His glory. We gather daily for devotions and weekly for chapel. On these occasions we join all believers in making a joyful noise, praising God in song, prayer, and reading His Word (Ps. 66:1; 81:1; 95:1; 98:4; 100:1).

THE STANDARD BEARER

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In addition, the professors set forth in our teaching the glory of God, the sovereignty of His grace, the marvel of His love and mercy, the infiniteness of His wisdom, and the solemnness of His justice. On Golgatha, for three hours beginning at noon, it was *very* quiet. And on the basis of what Christ did there, we have plenty of good news to proclaim. We do it with zeal! We make *noise*!

Make noise with us!

Will you make noise with us and for us?

Will you pray? Will you pray for God's blessing on another year of instruction, pray that professors and students alike be faithful and devoted, and pray that soon we will have more students?

You knew that last prayer request was coming. It is a bit quiet up here. What we need, humanly speaking, is more students.

God knows our need. He is not failing to provide that need; He has sent us three students, and gives prospects of more. But pray that some of *your* sons and grandsons, and other young men in *your* congregations, will sense the call to proclaim God's glory, and will come to the seminary to prepare for the ministry.

The need is urgent, not only because of the great number of vacancies that we have, but also because of the evil of the days in which we live, and the nearness of our Lord's return. If our churches will remain faithful, and if God will use us to proclaim His Word to the four corners of the earth, we need men to preach the gospel.

So lift up your voices in prayer, that God give us students.

Enough to meet the need of the denomination, filling open pulpits and doing mission work.

Enough to fill every open seat in the classrooms.

Enough so that there is some noise up here!

ANNOUNCEMENTS

SB FOR BINDING

The September issue of the *Standard Bearer* completed volume 101. If you would like your own issues of volume 101 bound, please send/bring them to the RFPA office before the December 1, 2025. For additional orders, call the RFPA at (616) 457-5970.

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