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Devoted to the Exposition and Defense of the Reformed Faith

In Praise of Praise

“Now I praise you because you remember me in everything, and hold firmly to the traditions, just as I delivered them unto you. (1 Corinthians 11:2)”

The new year has become a time of reflection and resolutions. Proposed here is a bit of encouragement to see new life and continued sanctification in the context of the church. To remain faithful must not be viewed as what one resolves to do “in the strength of his own might”. Rather, it is by God’s supply and with His appointed means in the church community.

As those outside the church are busy turning over new leaves and pulling themselves up with boot straps, Christians ought to be using

God’s means and the gifts and resources of the church to continue toward greater Christ likeness. One such powerful tool, though often overlooked, is the praise of the good. It is the work of encouragement.

Behind the absence of praise lurks many troubles such as frustration, depression, fatigue and all the named and unnamed that make up ‘Legion’ who delights in saints growing weary in well doing. Praise and encouragement toward one another are great tools in the fight

to remain faithful.

Paul stops to praise the church at Corinth between words of rebuke and correction. He offers praise where it can be offered not as vain entrapment but as a tool of encouragement to those struggling. Praise for that which is right in the lives of our bothers and sisters in Christ is both necessary and required. Notice how our Lord in His letters to the seven churches takes time to offer praise and encouragement.

Follow Paul as he travels the mission field with his letters and hear him continue to offer praise and encouragement to saints. He gives thanks to the Romans for their faith which is spoken of through the whole world. The Corinthians are also objects of God’s grace coming



Volume 54, No. 1 (ISSN 8750-5754) (USPS 633-980) “And the three companies blew the trumpets...and held THE TORCHES in their left hands, and THE TRUMPETS in their right hands. . .and they cried, ‘The sword of Jehovah and of Gideon’ (Judges 7:20).

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behind in no spiritual gifts. The Philippians were praised for their fellowship in the gospel and the Thessalonians were remembered for their work and faithfulness. It was not enough for Paul to notice their faithfulness. His love for them compelled him to communicate praise for their encouragement.

Is this then a call to the ministry of flattery and the work of encouraging pride? Not at all! Flattery is the use of lies to get something from a vain person; it is the praise of men that Scripture warns the righteous to avoid. As to the 'praise of the good' encouraging pride, God has not called anyone to the ministry of keeping others humble. Waiting for perfection before we offer praise is a rejection of the Biblical pattern and the withholding of help from those who seek to press forward in faithfulness. Withholding encouragement and praise is inexcusable. Any who has sought to live godly in an ungodly world has faced enough discouragements, rejections, personal attacks, sorrows and hardships to be assured of the need of encouragement for all who likewise travel through such difficulties— young and old.

The children in our homes ought to hear praise for their works and faithfulness and the praise ought to follow their good works. We do not expect a mature and perfect faithfulness, but, like the apostle, we praise what is good and growing. This goal is not to develop a Christian version of the world's 'good self-esteem', but to encourage fellow heirs of the kingdom. That which is good and right is to be rewarded and praised while that which is sinful is to be rebuked,

corrected and punished - this is the pattern of covenant life.

The Christian wife is also to be the recipient of praise. The fruits of her hands are to be praised in the gates (see Proverbs 31). Those who labor with less visibility are, Paul says, worthy of more honor. It is not enough that a husband be thankful in his heart or even in the home. The city gates should know of the faithfulness of the faithful.

The world around us makes little of the labor of a wife and mother. Our anti-God culture sings the praise of she who gives little regard to husband and home. Husbands must

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counter these assaults and not wait until they think encouragement is needed nor ought the wife be required to "hint" him into a bit of praise and encouragement. It is his calling to encourage and praise that which is good and right. However, if the occasions to praise seem to be too many, be assured that your withholding of proper and needed praise will bring the occasions down to a number that you can manage with little effort. You can not over encourage one another.

Shall we then praise those who ought to be humble? Again, someone else's humility is not anyone's ministry. Those whom God has

called to service as officers in the church are too often ignored and by all appearance appreciated little. It is no wonder that Elders and Deacons long for a break. Too often they have grown weary in doing right and have had little help from those they serve. It is not flowers and cards that Ministers, Elders and Deacons long to have, but rather, knowledge that their labors are not in vain and that their ministry is appreciated by those that love God's Word.

All churches have their grumblers and complainers and though their numbers are often few, their impact on Minister, Officers and ministry is great when the righteous will not stand in praise of the right. Insults that would not be tolerated of a favorite hockey team are tolerated of those who serve in office and ministers who handle the Word of God. It is far from uncommon for a church to loose a good minister because some have worked too hard to keep an unrepentant gossip and grumbler. How we treat God's servants is how we treat Him. The church is not a gathering of consumers and her officers are not merchants selling the solutions to all the felt needs of the day. The church is a body; one lending help and ministry to another and all finding encouragement to continue.

And to all others as well..... Having touched on a few occasions for praise it ought to be remarked that such help is not limited to just a few relationships. The Saint's pattern is to look for that which is good and praiseworthy and then give praise and encouragement. To withhold praise, shun openness and retreat to self is to live anti-church. To

praise others requires that we turn from pride, selfishness, willful ignorance and take the risk of encouraging one another. To be quiet is to perpetuate a lean, cold and selfish association and that is a poor substitute for Christian fellowship.

The Church is the setting in which sanctification normally happens. Resolving to do better in a new year can not solve all our problems. We need the gifts, helps, encouragements and praise of the body. Resolve does not reach down into the secret sorrows and struggles that we all face. God has made life in such a way that we are in need of that which is outside of ourselves: the encouragement and help of others. Life in Christ's body is a life of helping, encouraging, and serving one another. Part of what must happen if fellowship is to grow sweeter and closer is the encouragement that comes from the praise of the good and right. With our new resolutions let us then repent of our closed mouths and hearts and extend ourselves to the help and encouragement of others. May God give us grace that we may, more and more, praise the praiseworthy, that together we may all the more bring Praise to His Name.

Rev. Steve Simmons is the pastor of the Immanuel Fellowship Church, an independent, reformed church in Kalamazoo, Michigan.

Heresy [I]

Heresy "Hunting" in Our Postmodern Culture

"It is easy to be a madman: it is easy to be a heretic. It is always easy to let the age have its head; the difficult thing is to keep one's own. It is always easy to be a modernist; as it is easy to be a snob."

(G.K. Chesterton. *Orthodoxy*)

In our age of interfaith and ecumenical dialogue, it has become increasingly difficult to find agreement on the fundamental doctrines of the Christian faith, let alone to mention the word "heresy." Even to think about heresy revives images of the inquisition and burning heretics at the stake. As soon as one talks about the possibility of heresy in the church, he is told: "This is the 21st century. We now live in an age of pluralism, diversity and tolerance." And the Christian who advocates the Biblical position on premarital sex, marriage structure, homosexuality, or religion, for example, is typically viewed as narrow-minded or bigoted.

What I find most disconcerting is the mood of impatience with doctrinal questions. Many Christians seem uncertain about their own beliefs. They may not understand clearly what is an orthodox theology and what it is not. And this lack of understanding does not even seem to them very important. Others avoid doctrinal questions out of fear of creating unnecessary controversy and becoming an obstacle to the mission work of the church.

Controversy

Although controversy is deemed distasteful, and more so religious controversy, controversy is inescapable out of concern for Biblical

truth. The question about doctrinal faithfulness automatically leads to the question of apostasy and heresy. Who likes controversy? I don't. I rather write about missions at home and abroad or the glorious hope of the Gospel in a dangerous world than confronting a variety of non-Christian worldviews, and the defense of an orthodox theology against its detractors.

To shrink from controversy may be a characteristic of our ecumenical age, but no one can claim that controversy is a stranger to the Gospel. Jesus Christ and His apostles contended for what they believed to be the truth. Jesus Himself was a controversialist. He fought for minds and hearts. Dr. John Stott, who has written in the defense of the faith, comments, "It is not conducive to the health of the Church to sweep our differences under the carpet or to pretend that all is sweetness and light when it is not."

Why is there such a reluctance to discuss heresy? Our Western culture, which is neither Christian nor religiously neutral, has become pagan. Instead of opposing this culture, many Christians have compromised the claims of the Gospel. They have even unwittingly bought into the spirit of our times.



Postmodernism

Our pagan-postmodern culture exalts individuals and their viewpoints. Many regard truth as a personal preference. They believe different views and opinions should have equal weight. They say, “Your truth is your truth and my truth is my truth.” They are quite ready to tolerate religion, but only if all religion is strictly relegated to the private or communal spheres. They are highly selective consumers of religion. They pick and choose beliefs, practices, programs, and professional services from an increasingly diversified religious smorgasbord. Numerous churches are “big enough” to include a wide range of services, programs and theological orientation. Decreasing importance is placed on creeds and confessions. One major religious group’s truth claim seems to be as acceptable and accurate as another’s. Only the claims of cults and sects are regarded as suspect.

One may offer a host of different opinions about doctrines as long as he doesn’t step on the toes of other individuals and groups. A denomination or local church or individual Christian can offer ideas, as long as they refrain from asserting that they have *the* truth. Our culture permits Jesus to be one way to God, but it gasps at any suggestion that He is the only way. In mainline denominations theology is for most a secondary issue. What annoys mainliners is “unenlightened” piety and strict adherence to “simplistic views of faith and morals.” In the name of tolerance they are intolerant of a theology based on revealed truth. Objective truth is disappearing over

the horizon. All viewpoints are considered equally valid and all pursuits equally noble.

Relativism

Such diverse choice has been legitimized by the widespread of relativism. It asserts that viewpoints reflect the social and intellectual settings from which people come. In the last half of the 20th century, the idea that truth is relative has come to be widely accepted. Our world is one where relativism reigns. Philosophy professor Allen Bloom writes in *The Closing of the American Mind* that almost every student entering a univer-

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sity believes that truth is relative and that openness is therefore a moral virtue. He comments that today, “The true believer is the real danger. The study of history and culture teaches that all the world was mad in the past; men always thought they were right, and that led to wars, persecutions, slavery, xenophobia, racism, and chauvinism. The point is not to correct the mistakes and really be right, rather it is not to think you are right at all.”

But relativism undermines society and church. It has slain moral consensus, leaving us without authoritative and moral guidelines. Its implicit message is that, in matters of lifestyle and beliefs and attitudes, no views are

better or worse than others. “Everything’s relative.” But relativists can never be consistent. They believe in things they profess not to believe. A radical relativist may say there is no absolute truth but travels calmly at 30,000 feet on a plane whose safe flight depends on the unchangeable truths of aerodynamics and structural mechanics.

Not all religions are the same. Christians are tolerated provided they do not talk about the Gospel as universally valid truth. Such talk is viewed as disrespectful, intolerant and fundamentally untenable. For example, Walter Brueggemann, an author and theologian based in Atlanta, believes that sending Christian missionaries to Iraq smacks of Western imperialism. “I think it is exactly the wrong time and the wrong place,” he told the *Baptist Press News*. “I don’t care what they say, what they’re after is to impose their faith on that culture. In the best of times, that’s insensitive, and in the worst of times it’s just absurd.” Nowadays, the ecumenical movement appears to have transformed missions into an “interfaith dialogue.”

All major religions are treated as equals. Some theologians talk about the “insights” of Islam and Hinduism and Confucianism. The present world situation, they say, is not the time to be dividing on these differences of belief in the pursuit of peace and justice for all mankind. Furthermore, other theologians think that Christians must become open to learning from people of other religions instead of trying to convert them.

Consequently, instead of Jesus Christ as the only way to the Father

If a theologian believes God is dead, or that revelation is a myth, or that Jesus of Nazareth was the son of a Roman soldier then his theology has nothing to say.

(John 14: 6), He is one of the many ways. But this unorthodox position has its roots in the controversies of the early church. Its advocates are following in the steps of famous “earlier” heretics. “Interfaith dialogue cannot lead to agreement in a single faith. That is not the objective.” says G.R. Evans in her book *A Brief History of Heresy*. “Yet it can encourage Christians engaged in it into a form of Arianism as they try to accept that perhaps Christ is not the only Messiah, the sole Savior of humankind.”

Not all religions can be equally true. For example, Islam dictates terms upon which men and women are to live out their existence; it speaks to its followers of exclusive demands and religious observances of daily life. The faith claims and practices of Hinduism, Satanism, Islam and Christianity are in direct conflict with one another.

Modern Theology

In many respects we seem to have become numb to the threat heresy poses for the church. Today almost anything seems acceptable. The twentieth century saw fundamental challenges from academic theologians, which continue into the twenty-first. Mid-twentieth-century “Process” theology explored the idea that God is not the changeless being of the early Christian world but a dynamic force, Himself subject to change. Other theologians have interpreted

the death of Christ as a message to the world that God Himself is vulnerable. Others still have spoken of the “death of God” and the “post-Christian world.”

One may hear openly the notion that the doctrine of the Trinity is unscriptural and breaches the unity of God. Liberation theologians, influenced by Marxist ideology, tried to bring about in society a “real-life” and “this-worldly” version of the Biblical promise of freedom and salvation. Celebrated theologians and New Testament scholars commonly profess beliefs that once provoked not only silencing of dissent but execution of dissenters.

Truth Matters

Does truth matter? Does it really make a difference what we believe? Can one call himself a Christian if he denies the fundamentals of the Gospel? It does matter what one believes. Dr. Martyn Lloyd-Jones noted, “Nothing matters in the spiritual realm except truth, the truth given by the Holy Spirit, the truth that can be honored by the Holy Spirit.” In other words, if a theologian thinks he can be a Christian though he believes God is dead, or that revelation is a myth, or that Jesus of Nazareth was the son of a Roman soldier then his theology has nothing to say. Whatever his theology may be, it has little if anything to do with truth.

Many ecumenists believe that di-

versity enriches the Christian community and witness. But we may well ask: “Can we accept all Christian confessions and doctrines as equally true and valid? The evangelical theologian Dr. Carl F. Henry observed, “But one wonders how the Westminster Confession’s assertion that the Pope is the Antichrist is to be balanced with the Roman Catholic claim that he is Christ’s specially appointed viceroy without losing the validity of either view? Or what validity has the Baptist doctrine of believer’s baptism by immersion along the Lutheran doctrine of non-immersion? When the meaning of confessions is relaxed in order to preserve ‘ecumenical validity’ - whatever that is - is not the gospel itself likewise transformed into a mere shadow of its New Testament substance?”

It would be nice if we could avoid controversy and forget about “heresy hunting.” But we don’t live in a perfect world. We must ask, “What is the content of the unchanging Gospel? How do we recognize and preserve it amidst the rapid changes in our world and the challenges of heresy? How do we deal with new forms of theology: black theology, liberation theology, feminist theology? How do we deal with those who claim to have made new discoveries in Scripture? How do we account for the development of theology over the centuries?” Over the centuries the church had to “correct,” or perhaps “expressly revoke” teachings which were held to be true for a long period of time.

Until the Lord returns, the church is involved in the battle for the Truth of the Gospel. The truth must be pro-



tected from the deadly embrace of the lie. This will take strenuous effort and continued watchfulness. The church may not achieve cheap victories. Her doctrine struggle for doctrinal faithfulness may cost blood and tears. She must be steeled in the struggle. This struggle to remain faithful to the Gospel was difficult in the past and it will continue to create tensions in the future. No wonder that it makes the history of the church look so troubled and strained.

Rev. Johan Tangelder is a retired minister in the Christian Reformed Church. He lives in London, Ontario.

The First Christian Reformed Church of South Holland, Illinois, is seeking a new pastor who prizes the preaching of the Word of God and is willing to lead our congregation in meeting the challenge to be a witness in our community. Our congregation is whole-heartedly committed to a Reformed approach to worship and life. If interested, please send your inquiry or profile to:

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Jesus Christ is the Fulfillment of Scriptures

“Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I did not come to abolish, but to fulfill.”

(Matthew 5:17)

At the end of Lord’s Day Six, the Heidelberg Catechism asks a very imposing question: “How do you know all this?” How do you know Jesus is the One to whom we must turn for salvation? The answer seems as simple as the childhood song, “The Bible tells me so!”

The Law and The Sacrifice

In ancient Israel, the law and the sacrifices went hand in hand. When the Law was given to Moses, the lamb was given also. When Moses was chosen as the Lawgiver, Aaron was also chosen to be the High Priest. God had arranged it that way so that when man sinned, he had a means of atonement by which his guilt could be cancelled. That was through the sacrifice.

As the catechism points out, the innocent sacrifice pointed forward to the full and perfect sacrifice of the innocent Christ. The sacrifices and ceremonies of the Old Testament were not ends in and of themselves. They did not remove any sin. If they did we would still be making bloody sacrifices today instead of celebrating the Sacrament of the Lord’s Supper. Instead, the bloody sacrifices were signposts pointing to the bloody sacrifice that the Son of God would one day make upon the cross.

God demanded that these sacrifices take place in the Old Testament in

order to teach the people over and over again that sin means death. Either the death of the one who had sinned or the death of an innocent substitute.

In Paradise

We see this already happening in Genesis 3. Adam and Eve had sinned against God. God came into the garden, confronted our first parents, and pronounced his judgment upon them and the serpent. Then what did God do? In Genesis 3:21 God makes garments of skin for Adam and his wife.

Why would God do that? They already had nice, handmade outfits from fig leaves. What we see taking place in Genesis 3:21 is the sacrifice of an innocent substitute. An innocent creature had to die. Death had to take place to cover the shame of Adam and Eve. The fig leaves were not enough. Death had to take place.

Adam and Eve had to see the horror of death in order to understand the horror of their sin. And then they had to actually wear the skin of the dead animal. They had to literally attach that death to their own bodies. In a very real way, they had to apply the death of an innocent animal to themselves in order to understand how the principle of substitution worked.

Through the centuries God went to

great lengths to teach this spiritual truth to His people: SIN MEANS DEATH. God taught His people this truth so that we would understand the purpose of Christ's death on the cross.

Jesus fulfilled the Law to prove that He was innocent. He was without sin. Jesus Christ had to be innocent so that He could shed His blood for us; so that His body could be pierced for us; so that He could die for you and me.

Christ not only fulfilled the Law and all the ceremonial sacrifices of the Old Testament, He also fulfilled the prophets. But Christ did this in a different way.

When we speak of prophesy, we refer to direct statements made in the Old Testament about the One who was going to deliver the children of God and redeem them from their oppression to Satan. Statements in the Old Testament told us who the Messiah would be; where He would be born; what He would do; and how He would suffer. They would also tell us what the ultimate purpose of His suffering would be.

Beginning already at Paradise, God began to reveal the good news of the Mediator. Genesis 3:15 is the first prophesy in the Bible concerning Jesus Christ. It is interesting to notice that the first prophesy of a Savior was not given to Adam and Eve, nor was it given to any of the

Patriarchs. In fact, it wasn't even given to a human being. It is given to the serpent. The first prophesy declares that One born of a woman would be victorious over him: "And I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your seed and her seed; He shall bruise you on the head, and you will bruise Him on the heel."

That first prophesy made by God was fulfilled at the cross of Christ where Satan succeeded in bringing about the death of Jesus, the Son of Man. Certainly Satan had bruised the heel of the woman's seed. At the same time, Jesus, the Son of God decisively defeats Satan and all his power, thereby crushing his head.

Prophesy Through Abraham

Another prophesy appears in Genesis 22. Abraham was obedient to God in his willingness to sacrifice his promised son, Isaac, at Mount Moriah. This event is a portrayal of what God would one day do with His promised Son.

Abraham was called upon to offer his son. We read that when the actual time came for the sacrifice, God stopped Abraham. When the time came for God to offer His Son, no one stopped Him. The Son of God

really died. He tasted death for all those who call upon His name and trust in Him for their salvation.

God gave to Abraham the same answer that Abraham gave his son when Isaac asked what they would sacrifice. Isaac had asked his father, "Behold, the fire and the wood, but where is the lamb for the burnt offering?" Abraham answered his son, "God will provide for Himself the lamb for the burnt offering. (Genesis 22:7, 8). For Abraham and Isaac, it was a ram in the thicket; for us the Lord provided a sacrifice in His only Son, Jesus Christ. Over and over again on the pages of the Old Testament and in the history of Israel we hear the words, "The Lord will provide" as they are echoed in Jehovah's promises of a Messiah.

The Prophecies

In the Old Testament there are over three hundred prophecies made over a period of fifteen hundred years that are all fulfilled in Jesus of Nazareth. Three hundred prophecies - think about that for a moment! We might be able to find one or two that we could claim are fulfilled in us. "Born of a woman" comes immediately to mind. Maybe followers of Mohammed can come up with twenty or thirty prophecies that are fulfilled in him. Maybe somewhere there lived a person who could claim a hundred prophecies were fulfilled in him. But three hundred? Josh McDowell writes that the likelihood of three hundred different prophecies being fulfilled in one person are like throwing three hundred half dollars up in the air and expecting them to all land face up.

Q *How do you know this?*
A *From the holy Gospel.*



This is important because, as you recall, in the beginning of the Heidelberg Catechism we were told of how lost we are in our sin and misery. The Catechism went on to explain that the only escape from that sin and misery was to make peace with God. That can only be done if your sins are paid for through the perfect sacrifice made on your behalf.

The blood of a perfect sacrifice has to be shed for you. Death has to take place. Like Adam and Eve, we must apply that death to ourselves. Adam and Eve had to do more than just watch the animal die; they had to take upon themselves his bloody skin. So also, we cannot just read about the death of Christ, we have to take His sacrifice upon ourselves. We must clothe ourselves with His righteousness.

Lord's Day Six explains what kind of death must take place. It tells us that only one who is truly human, truly righteous, and truly God can pay for our sins by giving up His life for us. But it goes a step beyond that, as well. Lord's Day six tells us that there has been such a sacrifice made! There was One who, years ago, died on the cross of Calvary who is a Savior, a Mediator. There is One who fulfills the demands set by God already in Genesis 3 and already promised in Genesis 3, and that One is Jesus Christ.

The Scriptures

It was for our sake that the Holy Scriptures were written. So that we might know that the innocent Lamb of God poured out His blood for us, permitted His body to be pierced, in order to redeem us from eternal death through the forgive-

ness of our sins. The whole Bible is the rescue mission of God. It begins by showing our roots in Paradise and how, after the Fall, God immediately offered His grace to our fallen parents.

The Bible is not God's announced judgment of condemnation upon the world, it is God's electing some out of their reprobate state. The good news of the Bible is that it tells us about God rescuing an already fallen people. The whole Bible points to the once for all sacrifice of Christ upon the cross. He is the key to understanding the Bible. He is also the key to understanding life.

Rev. Wybren Oord is the pastor of the Covenant United Reformed Church in Kalamazoo, Michigan and editor of *The Outlook*.

Looking Out and About

- A new church plant was started in Springfield, Missouri on November 23, 2003 under the supervision of the Covenant Reformed Church (URC) of Kansas City, Missouri. There are now eighty-three established congregations and seven church plants in the federation of the United Reformed Churches.
- Classis Eastern United States of the United Reformed Churches in North America meeting at Pantego, North Carolina sponsored a public meeting on the evening before their recent fall session. Rev. Paul Murphy, who is presently

serving as a church planter in Lower Manhattan, New York spoke. Rev. Murphy addressed the subject of evangelism at this meeting as well as in his speech to the delegates at Classis the next day. Included in both addresses was an emphasis upon the need for greater cooperative efforts among the churches of the federation as they seek to fulfil the mandate given by their Lord.

- Dr Cornel Venema, President of Mid America Reformed Seminary in Dyer, Indiana recently presented four lectures at the annual confer-

ence sponsored by the Bethel United Reformed Church of Calgary, Alberta. The general theme of the conference was "The Grace of Our Covenant Mediator."

- The third Thanksgiving Concert rendered by a combined choir of members of the United Reformed Churches in the greater Grand Rapids, Michigan area was given on the evenings of November 28 and 29. The choir sang before capacity attendance on both evenings. An offering was received designated for Bibles for China and for the support of needy congregations within the federation of United Reformed Churches.

(continued on page 24)

Wisdom and Biblical Theology

When you consider the topic of wisdom, do you think of intellect or philosophy? Perhaps Solomon or the book of Proverbs comes to mind. Maybe it is time we dust off our old definitions of wisdom, evaluate them, and adjust them as we walk through Scripture and attempt to grasp the essence of wisdom. The wisdom found in Scripture is not like the wisdom of Socrates or Plato. The wisdom found in Scripture does not end with Solomon or the book of Proverbs.

Wisdom in the Old Testament

Beginning even before creation, God possessed wisdom *“before His works of old”* (Proverbs 8:22). Wisdom was established from everlasting (8:23). Wisdom worked beside Jehovah at creation as a master craftsman (8:30); with wisdom, God made all His works (Psalm 104:24). *“The Lord by wisdom founded the earth; by understanding He established the heavens”* (Proverbs 3:19). With wisdom, God made a place where He could dwell with His people (Adam and Eve). Creation was God’s holy habitation (Psalm 104).

The Garden of Eden was an earthly version of the heavenly temple—heaven was the reality, the garden was a shadow of that reality. In wisdom, God created a place so that He could be with His people.

Moving on to the next two major accounts of wisdom, we find wisdom working in the construction of

both the tabernacle and the temple. Concerning the tabernacle: *“And I have put wisdom in the hearts of all the gifted artisans, that they may make all that I have commanded you”* (See Exodus 35:10, 36:1). God gave wisdom to His artisans so they could construct a place where He could reside among His people. The tabernacle was built with wisdom as a place where Jehovah could dwell with His people on earth. It was an earthly copy (shadow) of the heavenly reality.

Solomon’s temple was constructed with wisdom. God gave Solomon wisdom to construct the temple. Solomon built the temple with God-given wisdom, so that God could dwell among His people on earth. The earthly temple was an earthly copy (shadow) of the heavenly reality.

Did you note the themes that follow the three examples of wisdom? These three displays of wisdom in the Old Testament are the brightest three: wisdom shines at creation, at the tabernacle construction and at the temple construction. But also note the theme of wisdom connected to God dwelling with His people. When God dwells among His people, He does so as a manifestation of His glorious wisdom.

Wisdom in the New Testament

These three Old Testament ex-

amples of wisdom are not the end of wisdom. The Garden of Eden was not intended to be permanent; nor were the tabernacle or the temple. The wisdom of God is not temporary, nor is His dwelling with His people. God’s wisdom would not have us remain in the garden, but has her sights set on eternity, on heaven itself. The manifestation of God’s wisdom is like a flower growing from seed to full bloom. God’s wisdom was not shining in her brightest form in the Garden of Eden, the tabernacle or the temple—these things were passing earthly displays of His heavenly wisdom.

The brightest and clearest manifestation of God’s wisdom is found in One greater than Solomon—Jesus Christ (Luke 11:31). The seed of wisdom that was growing from creation to tabernacle to temple finds its full bloom in the person and work of Jesus Christ. Jesus coming to earth, in history, is the most vivid display of God’s wisdom—the display to which creation, the tabernacle and the temple pointed forward. Jesus on earth is heaven come down, supernatural wisdom most clearly displayed—in *history*! This is nothing less than an intrusion below from above!

Luke tells us that Jesus “increased in wisdom and in stature” and “grew and became strong in spirit, filled with wisdom” (2:40,52 cf. Isaiah 11:1-4). Jesus is wisdom in the flesh. In Him “are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge” (Colossians 2:3). Christ Jesus “became for us wisdom from God” (1 Corinthians 1:30). In John 1:14 and 2:19, 21 Jesus is said to



have tabernacled among men. He is the true temple. Jesus is God dwelling among men. In wisdom, God sent Jesus to earth to dwell among His people. The Belgic Confession notes, “The Son is the wisdom of the Father.” The wisdom of God is not an inner quality, it is not a philosophical concept, or even primarily intellectual prowess—it is Jesus Christ, coming to earth, living and dying to save His people from their sins.

The first two chapters of I Corinthians clearly point out the distinct difference between the world’s conception of wisdom and the wisdom of God. In the cross, God has made the wisdom of this world foolishness. Christ crucified—the message of the cross—is both a stumbling block and foolishness to the world, but to those who are called it is the power and wisdom of God. Calvin comments, “For all the wisdom of believers is comprehended in the cross of Christ—and what is more contemptible than a cross?” Paul in I Corinthians also notes that the preaching of Christ crucified is foolishness to those who are perishing. The preaching of One hanging on the cross as a sacrifice will always be foolishness to this dark world.

How beautiful is this display of wisdom found in Christ. From creation, to the tabernacle, to the temple, to Jesus Christ, we see God’s wisdom progress and finally come to full bloom. Jesus on the cross is glorious wisdom for those who believe. But it does not end here!

God would not have His people sit in the stands looking into this arena of redemption. God takes His chil-

dren from the darkness of the stands into the glorious light of the drama itself. In Christ, God’s children are a new creation and temples of the Holy Spirit. Do you see the concept of wisdom come together in those united to Christ? His people are a new creation in Christ, a new creation in wisdom, as it were. With wisdom, God created His own that He might dwell with them—in *them* by His Spirit. Wisdom, God dwelling among His people and creation/tabernacle/temple construction come together in believers (II Corinthians 5:17, II Peter 2:4-5)! And it is all because of Christ!

Do you believe this wisdom? Is Jesus on the cross heavenly wis-

dom for you? To use the words of James, do you have wisdom from above which is pure, peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy and good fruits, without partiality and without hypocrisy? Or do you have wisdom from below, which is earthly, sensual and demonic? Look to God’s wisdom. Look to Jesus Christ, who has been made wisdom for believers. In Him, your life will display the fruits of wisdom which is from above.

Mr. Shane Lems is a member of the Trinity United Reformed Church of Caledonia, Michigan.

Daniel Hyde

We Confess

An Exposition & Application of the Belgic Confession

Article 8: Of the Holy Trinity of Persons in One Divine Essence

The Reformed Faith is catholic in the truest sense of the word. This was one of the purposes of the Belgic Confession, namely, to express that the Reformed Faith was nothing less than the Faith of the ancient Christian Church. This catholicity is expressed in no better way than in the doctrine of the Trinity.

Article 8 of our Confession explains for us that most mysterious and central doctrine of the Christian Faith, the Trinity. Let us take a historical look at this doctrine before

delving into the meaning of this doctrine.

The Struggle of the Ancient Church

The great question in the early church up to the Council of Nicea was “how do we explain the nature of God?” The Latin Church Father Tertullian first used the term “Trinity” (Latin, *trinitas*) around the year 200. The word itself did not solve all controversy, as the problem of reconciling seemingly contradictory Biblical data was still there:

“How can there be One, yet Three?” Several answers were given to resolve this question:

- *Adoptionism*, which claimed that the man Jesus was “adopted” by God to be His Son at His baptism. This was the view of Paul of Samosata.
- *Docetism* said that the eternal Logos only appeared (Greek, *dokein*) to be the man Jesus.
- *Tritheism*, stated that there are three gods.
- *Modalism* believed that there is only one God, but that He has revealed Himself in different modes: in the Old Testament He was the Father, in the New Testament He was the Son, and after Pentecost He is the Holy Spirit. This was the view of Sabellius, and is sometimes called Sabellianism. It is also called Patripassionism, because if the one God simply reveals Himself in three ways or modes, the One who died on the cross was the Father (Greek, *patros*).
- *Subordinationism* claimed that the Son is somehow an inferior “god” to the Father, subordinated below. This was the view of Arius.

Arius (250-336)

Arius was a tall, powerful preacher, who attracted a large following. He was trained for the ministry in Antioch, but ministered in Alexandria, Egypt.

The Bishop of Alexandria, Alexander, heard that Arius was undermining the teaching that Jesus Christ was truly God. One of the popular slogans of Arius’ followers was, “There was when he was not.” Jesus had a beginning, was the conclusion. Those whom we

The Council of Nicea and the events leading up to it were nothing short of a modern day soap opera.

would consider orthodox in doctrine responded to this refrain with one of their own: “There was not when he was not.” Jesus was eternal God.

To the Council of Nicea (325)

The controversy that swirled around Arius and his followers was only exacerbated by the fact that there were differing theological tendencies in the Church of his day. The Antiochene churches were Eastern and tended to emphasize the uniqueness of God the Father, the humanity of Jesus, and a more practical approach to Christian living. The Alexandrian churches were Western and emphasized the mystic unity of the Father and the Son, the pre-existence of the Word, and thus stressed the connectedness of the Trinity.

But on an even more basic level was the problem of personality. Former schoolmates of Arius were shocked when Arius was excommunicated from the church at Alexandria. Eusebius of Nicomedia, one such friend of Arius, declared that Arius was orthodox and urged Bishop Alexander to reinstate him. Alexander was furious and rejected the appeal, leading to riots in the streets. This led to Constantine’s calling of an ecumenical (“universal”) council to discuss this controversy and agree on the truth.

In May of A.D. 325, about 220 bishops gathered in Nicaea. Not

only did the Emperor invite them to use the great hall, but he also dazzled the humble bishops with his presence and gave a speech calling for orthodoxy and harmony. In the course of the debate, someone suggested that the key might be founded in the word *homoousios*, “same being,” “same substance.” This meant that the relationship between Father and the Son is that they shared in the same substance, they are co-equal and co-eternal; they are the same. This appealed greatly to the Western delegates and also to Alexander’s young deacon Athanasius.

It was Athanasius who advised Alexander that *homoousios* was a good solution to the problem. Yet some Eastern bishops were concerned that using that term would be giving in to the Western idea, since the word was already used by some in the West. But the word made its way into the Creed of Nicea. But, as a few of the bishops were signing the Creed, some added an *iota*, to make the word *homoiousios*, “of similar substance.”

The council of Nicaea adjourned and there were three factions in the Empire:

- *Homoousians*, who said that Christ was of the same substance of the Father;
- *Heteroousians* (*Arians*), who said Christ was of a different



(Greek, *hetero*) substance than the Father;

- *Homoiousians*, who said that Christ had a similar substance with the Father.

Thus, the Council of Nicea and the events leading up to it were nothing short of a modern day soap opera – only it was guided by the hand of Providence in the formation of the Nicene Creed.

The Nicene Faith

The Belgic Confession expresses nothing more, nothing less in Article 8 than the ancient Church confessed in the Nicene Creed. The Confession gives a beautiful definition of Nicene Trinitarianism when it says, “We believe in one only God, who is the one single essence, in which are three persons.” So what exactly does this mean?

God is One Essence

First, we believe and confess that there is one spiritual essence called God. This is the essence of the faith of the Old Covenant people of God. In Deuteronomy 6:4, the *Shema*, it was confessed, “Hear, O Israel, the LORD our God, the LORD is one.”

Because there is only one divine essence, the three Persons, according to the Confession, are “equal in eternity,” “there is neither first nor last,” and “they are one in truth, power, goodness, and mercy.”

Therefore, because there is one divine essence, there is one God, quantitatively speaking, and one God, qualitatively speaking; He is one numerically and one uniquely. As well, this means that there is one will of God for our salvation, one

way of salvation, and one means of salvation.

God is Three Persons

Secondly, we believe that this one essence exists as three distinct Persons. The Confession masterfully recognizes the eternal distinctions between the Persons of the Godhead. We read of the “incommunicable properties” of each Person in the Godhead. “Incommunicable,” means not communicated. So what is not communicated? Their “properties,” their distinct Persons. Herein lies the profound mystery: although they are one in essence, they are utterly distinct as Persons, not communicating their distinct Persons to each other. This is why we sometimes speak of the Persons as having their own Subsistence, meaning that they have their own existence. The Confession goes on to say that although there are three Persons, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit each has “His personality, distinguished by Their properties.”

This is illustrated for us in the second section of this article, where we read, “Hence, then, it is evident that the Father is not the Son, nor the Son the Father, and likewise the Holy Spirit is neither the Father nor the Son. Nevertheless, these persons thus distinguished are not divided, nor intermixed; for the Father has not assumed the flesh, nor has the Holy Spirit, but the Son only.”

Examples abound in Scripture where the three Persons of the Trinity are revealed. One example is Matthew 3:17, where the voice of the Father is heard, the Son is seen Incarnated in the water, and the Holy Spirit descends “like a dove.” It was not the Son that spoke, but the Father; it was not the Father that descended, but the Holy Spirit; it was not the Holy Spirit that arose out of the water, but the Son.

God the Father

According to His incommunicable property of being the Father, God the Father is the cause, origin, and

Questions for Further Study/Discussion

1. What does the history of the ancient Church tell us about the value of the doctrine of the Trinity?
2. Does the doctrine of the Trinity matter so much to you that you are willing to die or divide over the single letter “i”, as at Nicea?
3. In what types of situations could you use the teaching of the Nicene Creed to defend your faith?
4. How does the doctrine that God is one essence comfort us in the area of our salvation?
5. How does the doctrine that God exists as three Persons comfort us in the area of our salvation?

beginning of all things visible and invisible. As a distinct Person He has a distinct role in the history of redemption: to be our Creator by His power.

God the Son

As well, according to His incommunicable property of being the Son, God the Son is the Word, the wisdom, and the image of the Father. As a distinct Person His role is to be our Savior and Redeemer by His blood.

God the Holy Spirit

Finally, God the Holy Spirit is the eternal power and might who proceeds from the Father and the Son, whose role is to be our Sanctifier by His dwelling in our hearts.

Sadly, though, the personality of the Holy Spirit is not understood nor even confessed in our day. Many

evangelical Christians are unwittingly anti-Trinitarian. For example, George Barna has reported that while 70% of Americans believe Jesus will come again someday, 55% of “born again Christians” reject the existence of the Holy Spirit! As well, 61% of Americans believe the “Holy Spirit is a symbol of God’s presence or power, but is not a living entity.” How sad this truly is, for without a person Holy Spirit there is no hope for us ever to be holy, ever to have a personal communion with our Savior, since it is by the Spirit that we commune with Christ.

For this reason, the Confession says in a seemingly meaningless statement: “the Father has never been without His Son or without His Holy Spirit.” Do you see what

this means? Not only are the Persons of the Trinity God, but that God is personal, existing as three Persons. A personal God, who exists as three Persons, saves persons to live in a personal relationship with Him! That’s why Nicea was so important, and that’s why the Confession is so theologically precise, but personally edifying.

Rev. Daniel R. Hyde is the Pastor of the Oceanside United Reformed Church in Oceanside, California.

Sound Bites

The Outlook - 1980

February 1980

“Students should be taught how to preach, but we all should be taught how to listen. Maybe good preaching is one of the lost arts, but it is to be feared that good listening may have disappeared.”

How Do We Hear
Fred Van Houten

April 1980

“The majority of the members of our church still want to hear a good sermon above anything else, and

when that is present, liturgy becomes secondary. Whereas, if the first is missing, no amount of toying with the later is going to remedy the situation.”

*Reservations About
This Trend*
Jelle Tuininga

May 1980

“No reformation will take place in the church if we have office bearers who are so involved with other things that they cannot

properly shepherd the church of Jesus Christ.”

What Must We Do?
Fred Gunnink

June 1980

“The in-crowd obviously is now straining to get just as close as possible to the edge or to a godless world while at the same time professing to be Christian. By their charade they may be fooling the church and even themselves, all the while forgetting that our all-knowing God cannot be fooled and will not be mocked.”

* * * * *

“Woe to us and no less to our children if we obliterate or blur the very real distinction between com-



mon grace and common garbage.”

*Whatsoever Things
are Pure*

John Vander Ploeg

July 1980

“All too often, both in terms of the quality of the music and the doctrinal content of the words, special music is an embarrassment to any congregation that identifies herself with the Reformed heritage.”

* * * * *

“Churches that are otherwise very conservative are often very liberal and permissive as far as music is concerned.”

*Sell Our Heritage
for a Song?*

John R. Jackson

November 1980

“History proves that the less Christian life there is in the hearts of people, the more forms they may have, the more organizations, memorials and externalities to ‘push’ the ‘thing’ along.”

Thanksgiving Zealots
John Blankespoor

“When is faith saving? Time was when the intellectual requirements were too high. Today they are too low. Both extremes have hindered people from entering the Kingdom. The true preaching of the Gospel adds no requirements beyond the necessary truths. But it is also insistent that the standard shall not be less than Scripture requires. We must not make the gate narrower or wider than the Lord has made it.”

The Doctrine of Salvation
Lubbertus Oostendorp

NAPARC Visit

Eight members of the URCNA Committee For Ecumenical Relations and Church Unity (CERCU) met in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania from November 11-13 in order to conduct committee business and to bring greetings on behalf of the URCNA to the North American Presbyterian and Reformed Council (NAPARC). Present at the meeting from the URC were Rev. Peter Vellenga, Rev. Richard Stienstra, Rev. Ralph Pontier, Rev. John Bouwers, Rev. Harry Zekveld, Rev. Todd Joling, Mr. Chuck Dykstra and Mr. Robert Clausing.

Tuesday noon until Wednesday noon was taken up by observing NAPARC and evaluating its purpose and functioning. NAPARC is a group of conservative, confessionally Reformed and Presbyterian churches in North America whose stated purpose is to promote communication and cooperation between member denominations in promoting the Reformed faith and to “hold before one another the desirability and need for organic union of churches that are of like faith and practice.” Several member churches of NAPARC are among those which CERCU has been mandated to contact and being present at NAPARC allowed the committee to have both formal and informal meetings with them.

Current member churches are the Associate Reformed Presbyterian Church (ARP), the Eglise Reformee du Quebec (ERQ), the Korean American Presbyterian Church (KAPC), the Orthodox

Presbyterian Church (OPC), the Presbyterian Church of America (PCA), the Reformed Church of the United States (RCUS), and the Reformed Presbyterian Church of North America (RPCNA). The RPCNA served as host for this year’s meeting. In addition to the member churches, observers were present from the Canadian Reformed Churches, the Free Reformed Churches and the URCNA.

Up until a few years ago the Christian Reformed Church had also been a member denomination. They were one of the charter members who helped organize NAPARC in 1975. However their membership was first suspended and then terminated because of their endorsement of women elders and ministers on the basis that the Biblical prohibitions against women rulers no longer apply.

Our committee came to observe the meeting and evaluate the organization. In our committee’s address to the body, we respectfully challenged NAPARC to seek to be more active in the pursuit of its original purpose to promote organic union. Our remarks prompted a good discussion revealing a growing realization among the members that they must do more to make every effort toward a more thorough demonstration of the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace (Ephesians 4:3).

At a subsequent meeting of our own committee **we decided to recommend to Synod Calgary 2004 that our churches apply for mem-**

bership in NAPARC (a two year process for NAPARC requiring approval at one of their annual meetings followed by approval of the major assemblies of the member churches). Although we were disappointed to see what little progress NAPARC had made in its 28 year history (only two member denominations have merged and most of its efforts during the last ten years have focused on disciplining the CRC), nevertheless we believe the organization provides opportunity for good communication and cooperation between denominations and does motivate member churches to work harder at ecumenical relations. We also feel that, if accepted into membership, we can represent the continental Reformed tradition better than is now being done in an organization that is made up primarily of Presbyterians.

During the first evening of our time at NAPARC all the delegates and observers were treated to dinner at nearby Geneva College in Beaver Falls by the RPCNA delegation. (Geneva is owned by the RPCNA.) Following the dinner we had an inspirational evening listening to and joining in a cantata on the life of Christ that made use of Gospel readings and corresponding Psalter selections that were sung by a choir from the college community.

NAPARC adjourned at noon on Wednesday after which our committee had a luncheon meeting with the two delegates from the ERQ. Later that afternoon, meeting among ourselves, **we decided to recommend to Synod Calgary 2004 that we enter into Phase 1 (Corresponding Relations) with the ERQ and the RPCNA.** The

ERQ is a small group of churches in Quebec with about 300 members in seven churches. The ERQ is a French speaking denomination. The RPCNA, or “Covenanters” as they are called, is a group of churches that sing only Psalms and without musical accompaniment. Their roots are in Scottish Presbyterianism and they have a long history in North America dating back to the 1700s. They have about 6,500 members in 75 churches. We have sent a number

***We decided to
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NAPARC.***

of observers to the RPCNA General Assemblies over the past several years and felt it was time to begin formal conversations with them.

We also decided to recommend to our synod that we enter into Phase 2 (Ecclesiastical Fellowship) with the RCUS. This is a group of about 40 churches that subscribe to the Three Forms of Unity, as we do, and are of German background. Most of their churches are found in the Dakotas and California with a few others scattered about the Midwest. If approved by synod and ratified by the churches, this will place the RCUS in the same phase of rela-

tions as we now have with the Canadian Reformed Churches. Although it may be premature to set up unity committees with the RCUS, it might prove helpful to invite them to send official observers (non-voting) to interact with our unity committees with the Canadian Reformed Churches.

Wednesday evening we met for the first time with a delegation of the Associate Reformed Presbyterian Church. This is also a group with a long and distinguished history in North America and are of Scottish Presbyterian heritage. Their churches are mostly found in North and South Carolina. However, in the past fifteen years they have established a presence in Canada and in other parts of the USA. There are currently nine of their churches in Canada. We are just beginning to get to know this group of churches and trust that we will have more contact in the future. We are not yet in any formal phase of relations with them.

Finally, for most of Thursday, we met with a large delegation from the OPC’s Committee for Inter-church Relations. We have had several meetings with this committee in the past and have been making good progress. As was reported to Synod Escondido 2001 by a special study committee, there is a strong amount of agreement doctrinally and confessionally between us and the OPC even though, as Presbyterians, they hold to the Westminster Confession and Catechisms instead of our Three Forms of Unity. Our differences are more in the area of church government, and that, for the most part, was the focus of our discussions again on



Thursday. It was a great privilege that we could speak openly and candidly about these differences with an underlying confidence that, by the grace of God, we stand on the same solid confessional foundation. We look forward to continued and profitable contact with this group of churches. We are currently in Phase 1 (*Corresponding Relations*) with the OPC.

All the meetings were a productive and encouraging time of work and fellowship. The reason for such work is the command of our Lord to “make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace” (Eph. 4:3) and who prayed that the unity of the church would be visible in order to bear witness to the world of the Father’s saving love (John 17:23). We confess that God’s church is one church (see BC Art. 27). The Spirit makes us one. And it is our duty to manifest that unity by working at reconciliation—seeking to remove all differences and divisions caused by sin. May God give us grace to “make every effort.”

Rev. John A. Bouwers is the pastor of the Immanuel Orthodox Reformed Church of Niagra [URC] in Jordan, Ontario.

Rev. Ralph A. Pontier is the minister of the Redeemer United Reformed Church of Orange City, Iowa.

Looking Above

A Series on The Revelation of Jesus Christ

“In the Spirit on the Lord’s Day”

Revelation 1:10

“So the evening and the morning were the first day” (Genesis 1:5).

“So the evening and the morning were the second day” (Genesis 1:8).

“So the evening and the morning were the third day” (Genesis 1:13).

“So the evening and the morning were the fourth day” (Genesis 1:19).

“So the evening and the morning were the fifth day” (Genesis 1:23).

“So the evening and the morning were the sixth day” (Genesis 1:31).

The pattern of the first six days of creation is clear: there was evening and there was morning each of the first six days.

But on the seventh day the pattern is broken. “Thus the heavens and the earth, and all the host of them, were finished. And on the seventh day God ended His work which He had done, and He rested on the seventh day from all His work which He had done. Then God blessed the seventh day and sanctified it, because in it He rested from all His work which God had created and made” (Genesis 2:1-3).” On the seventh day no evening, no morning. The seventh day is the day of rest; it is the day in which God entered into His eternal rest, sitting enthroned as the King over all creation.

It is that eternal day of rest for which man was created. Man was created to dwell with God in eternal glory. Man was created to enter into that eternal rest of the seventh day - that rest without evening and without morning. Had Adam obeyed God and kept the covenant of works, he would have merited the blessing of confirmation in righteousness and would have enjoyed the eternal Sabbath with God, the King of all creation.

But Adam disobeyed God and broke the covenant of works, thereby earning for himself and all his posterity cursing and death. Thus, he was banished from the garden, and instead of entering into the eternal Sabbath rest of God, he was simply commanded to “remember the Sabbath day to keep it holy” (Exodus 20:8ff.).

It would take the work of the last Adam, Jesus Christ, who obeyed God perfectly, keeping the covenant of works, to earn for Himself and all those in Him the blessings of confirmation in righteousness and the right to enter the eternal Sabbath rest of God. This is where John directs us in the rather cryptic statement, “I was in the Spirit on the Lord’s Day” (Revelation 1:10).

Four times in the book of Revelation we find John using the phrase “in the Spirit.” We find it here in 1:10, where John stands in the presence of the glory of the Son of Man. We find the phrase again in

4:2, where we read, "Immediately I was in the Spirit; and behold, a throne set in heaven, and One sat on the throne." Here the Spirit ushers John up into heaven to behold the glorious throne-room of God. We find the phrase again in 17:3, where we read, "So he carried me away in the Spirit into the wilderness. And I saw a woman sitting on a scarlet beast which was full of names of blasphemy, having seven heads and ten horns." Here John sees a vision of the great harlot, Babylon. The final occurrence of the phrase, which serves as the counterpart to 17:3, is found in 21:10, where we read, "And he carried me away in the Spirit to a great and high mountain, and showed me the great city, the holy Jerusalem, descending out of heaven from God."

These four instances of the phrase "in the Spirit" tell us, then, that John is ushered up into the throne room of God, into the council-chambers of God. There he not only sees the glory of God, but he hears the divine deliberations of God. He is in the Spirit, and as he is in the Spirit, he is transformed into a new creation. That same Spirit who raised up Christ from the dead, and who is, and ever remains, the source of His exalted and glorified life is the same Spirit that now apprehends John, ushers him into the glory of heaven, and make him a new creation.

And note that all of this takes place "on the Lord's Day." For John, of course, the Lord's Day was no longer the Jewish Sabbath, Saturday. For John, the Lord's Day was the Christian Sabbath, Sunday. The Jewish Sabbath had been replaced with the Christian Sabbath, Saturday with Sunday, the last day of the

week with the first day of the week. Why the change? Remember John 20! Where was the body of Jesus on Saturday, the Jewish Sabbath? His body was in the grave! Where was the body of Jesus on Sunday, the Christian Sabbath? He was raised from the dead! The Christian, then, does not gather with the saints for the festive day of rest on the day in which Jesus' body was still in the tomb. The Christian gathers with the saints for the festive day of rest on the day in which Jesus left us with an empty tomb! The Christian Sabbath - Sunday -

***At the cross Christ
is treated as a
covenant-breaker
in our place.***

the Lord's Day - is the day of resurrection! Christians gather for worship on the day in which Christ was raised from the dead!

It is significant that John receives the visions of Revelation while he is "in the Spirit on the Lord's Day." John receives The Revelation of Jesus Christ on Sunday. Why is that significant? It is significant because the book of Revelation describes for us, with horrific imagery, the judgment and wrath of God, leading up to and including the final judgment and wrath of God. How is it that Jesus can have John record such horrific things with such vivid detail? Because, as one preacher has put it, "behind the Apocalypse

lies an experienced Golgotha." In other words, Jesus can have John record such horrific judgment and wrath because Jesus Himself has endured it!

The book of Revelation directs us to the cross of Jesus Christ, and teaches us to view the scene at Golgotha not only in terms of Jesus experiencing the torments and agonies of hell, but also to see at Golgotha heaven itself coming down in final judgment and wrath upon Jesus! It is as though the seven seals were being opened against Him! It is as though the seven trumpets were being sounded against Him! It is as though the seven bowls were being poured out upon Him! There at the cross the final judgment entered in to time and history upon Jesus Christ, judging Him guilty!

At the cross Christ is treated as a covenant-breaker in our place. At the cross Christ suffers the curses of the covenant in our place. But in the resurrection Christ secures the blessings of the covenant for us. Is that not the point of Him meeting with Mary in the morning hours of the first resurrection day and meeting with the disciples in the evening hours of the first resurrection day?! He meets with Mary - in the morning hours of the first resurrection day - as the Risen Savior, the One who has endured final judgment in her place and has secured for her eternal life! He meets with the disciples - in the evening hours of the first resurrection day - as the Risen Savior, the One who has endured final judgment in their place and secured for them eternal life!

Herein lies the pattern for the Church. What does the Church do



on each subsequent resurrection day - each Christian Sabbath - each Lord's Day - each Sunday? She meets with the Risen Christ in the morning hours of the day (even as the Risen Christ met with Mary in the morning hours of the day), and again in the evening hours of the day (even as the Risen Christ met with the disciples in the evening hours of the day).

What is the message proclaimed to the Church as she meets with her Risen Savior on each subsequent resurrection day? The message is this: you belong to a Savior who has already stood trial in your place before God and so has removed from you the whole curse, and has secured for you the eternal Sabbath rest of God! Even as John was in the Spirit on the Lord's Day, thereby made a new creation, so each Lord's Day, as the Spirit works in and through the proclamation of the Word - proclaiming the glorious gospel of Jesus Christ - we are made a new creation in Him.

Thus, we go from strength to strength, as each Lord's Day, morning and evening, we gather to meet our Risen Christ and are made new. This is our privilege and this is our delight, Lord's Day after Lord's Day after Lord's Day, until we meet with the Risen Christ in the eternal Sabbath of the new creation, where there is no evening and there is no morning.

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Evaluating the New Perspective on Paul (7)

“The ‘Righteousness of God’ and the Believer’s ‘Justification’” (Part One)

Now that we have considered the new perspective's understanding of Paul's use of the language of “works” and “works of the law,” we are in a position to take up directly the important question of Paul's understanding of the “righteousness of God” and the “justification” of believers. Corresponding to its claims regarding Paul's use of the language of “works” or “works of the law,” the new perspective argues that Paul uses the language of the “righteousness of God” and “justification” in a different way than was supposed by the traditional, Reformation view.

The Reformation's View of this Language

In order to appreciate the new perspective's view of the language of God's righteousness and the justification of believers, we need to recall briefly the Reformation's understanding of this language. In the reformational reading of the apostle Paul, the “righteousness of God” was understood primarily to be a gift from God in Christ, which was granted and imputed to believers. When the Reformers set forth their understanding of Paul's doctrine of justification by faith, they claimed to have discovered something that was missing in the traditional teaching of the medieval Roman Catholic church. In the medieval Catholic understanding, the righteousness of God was primarily expressed in the *demand* that sinners obey the law in order to be justified. If sinners are to be justified and received into

God's favor, they must keep the law and thereby satisfy the obligations of God's righteousness. Salvation, in this medieval view, required that believers cooperate with God's grace and, by obeying the law, maintain their favor with God.

For Luther and the Reformers, however, the chief point of emphasis was upon the “righteousness of God” as a *gift* of a righteous status, which is freely granted and imputed to believers on account of Christ's saving work. The righteousness of God is freely given to believers for the sake of the work of Christ, and this righteousness restores believers to favor with God. Rather than stressing the believer's own righteousness, which is evident in obedience to the righteous requirements of the law, the Reformers taught that the righteousness whereby sinners are justified is not their own, but an “alien” or “imputed” righteousness, which is from God and received through faith alone.¹

Medieval and reformation theology, it should be noted, commonly assumed that the righteousness of God ordinarily refers to God's moral character as One who is righteous and requires righteousness on the part of His image-bearers. Because God is righteous, any failure to live in accord with the moral demands of His law is culpable demerit that requires punishment. The righteousness of God, therefore, refers both to God's moral

character, which demands righteous conduct from His creatures, and to His moral government, which metes out punishment upon those whose conduct is unrighteous.

In the traditional language of theology, the righteousness of God was understood to be an essential attribute of God, which is expressed rectorally in God's moral government of all things and distributively in His just reward and punishment, respectively, of saints and sinners. Within the context of this understanding of God's righteousness, the question of justification in the sixteenth century became: how can God, who must act in accord with His own righteousness, accept or justify sinners who have disobeyed His law and deserve condemnation and death? What made this question so compelling in the period of the Reformation was the common assumption of Protestant and Roman Catholic alike, that God could not justify sinners at the expense of His own righteousness. The righteousness of God had to be satisfied in order for sinners to find favor with God.

Though medieval and Reformation theology assumed this understanding of the righteousness of God, the great divergence between Roman Catholic and Protestant understandings of justification came to focus upon the question whether the righteousness that justifies the believer is *wholly God's gift* in Christ or consists *partly in the believer's good works*.

In the Reformation view of justification, the perfect obedience and sacrifice of Christ upon the cross fully satisfied the righteousness of God. Believers, who receive by faith alone the free gift of God's righteousness in Christ, are justified. The righteousness that justifies believers is, accord-

ingly, an alien or external righteousness. In the Roman Catholic view, by contrast, the righteousness of God requires that forgiven sinners maintain and increase their justification by good works that merit further grace. The righteousness of God is not merely given and imputed to believers, but is also required of believers in order for them to be justified. In the language of the debates of the sixteenth century, the Reformers' insisted that believers are justified by an "alien" or "imputed" righteousness, whereas the Roman Catholic Church insisted that believers are justified in part by an "inherent" righteousness. For our purpose, the principal point is that the reformational understanding of justification maintained that the "righteousness of God" is something freely given to believers in Christ, and not something that continues to demand obedience as a basis for justification.

Furthermore, as is evident from this debate regarding the righteousness of God, the Reformers understood the language of "justification" to refer to a judicial act of God, whereby guilty sinners were declared or pronounced righteous or innocent. Upon the basis of the righteousness of God in Christ, freely granted and imputed to believers, God declares sinners forgiven and acceptable to Him. Because Christ satisfied the obligations and demands of God's righteousness for His people, God can simultaneously be just and the One who justifies the

guilty (Romans 3:26).

The language of "justification," therefore, does not refer to an on-going process of moral renewal in righteousness (sanctification), but to a definitive, judicial (forensic) act that anticipates the final judgment. When God justifies the ungodly, He declares their innocence before His tribunal. The question of justification, according to the Reformers, was the paramount religious question, because it addresses the great issue of where sinners, whether Jews or Gentiles, stand with God. Are they acceptable to Him? Or are they under condemnation that brings death? According to this Reformation view, the gospel, especially as it was expressed in the writings of the apostle Paul, announces the good news that believers, on account of the work of Christ in His life, death, and resurrection, are constituted righteous and heirs of eternal life. Though not the whole of the gospel, this gracious act of free justification was understood to be at the heart of the gospel's announcement of freedom from the curse and burden of the law of God.

The New Perspective's View of this Language

In the writings of authors of the new perspective, quite a different account is often given of Paul's understanding of the "righteousness of God" and the believer's "justification." In the new perspective, it is argued that this language must be approached from the

The great divergence came to focus upon the question whether the righteousness that justifies the believer is wholly God's gift in Christ or consists partly in the believer's good works.



standpoint of its background in the Old Testament's usage and in Judaism. Unlike the rather abstract and general way in which the Reformation spoke of "the righteousness of God" and "justification," the new perspective aims to place this language in the context of the history of redemption, and particularly in the setting of the realization of God's covenant promise to Abraham. Though there are a variety of viewpoints, I will cite N. T. Wright's explanation of this language as somewhat representative of the consensus among advocates of the new perspective.²

In Wright's discussion of the language of "the righteousness of God," he begins by noting that this expression would have been readily understood by readers of the Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Old Testament. In the Septuagint, the "righteousness of God" refers commonly to "God's own faithfulness to His promises, to the covenant."³

God's 'righteousness', especially in Isaiah 40-55, is that aspect of God's character because of which he saves Israel, despite Israel's perversity and lostness. God has made promises; Israel can trust those promises. God's righteousness is thus cognate with his trustworthiness on the one hand, and Israel's salvation on the other. And at the heart of that picture in Isaiah there stands, of course, the strange figure of the suffering servant through whom God's righteous purpose is finally accomplished.⁴

The righteousness of God does not refer to God's moral character, on account of which He punishes the

unrighteous and rewards the righteous. This common medieval idea of God's "distributive justice" is little more than a "Latin irrelevance."⁵ Rather, the righteousness of God is *His covenantal faithfulness in action*. When God acts to fulfill his promises to Israel, He demonstrates or reveals His faithfulness and reliability as One who will accomplish His saving purposes on her behalf. This covenant faithfulness refers both to a "moral quality" in God (God is righteous, that is, faithful) and to an "active power which goes out, in expression of that faithfulness, to do

In the writings of authors of the new perspective, quite a different account is often given of Paul's understanding of the "righteousness of God".

what the covenant always promised."⁶

Though the righteousness of God is primarily to be identified with God's covenantal faithfulness in action, Wright also argues that this language, in its Old Testament and Jewish context, makes use of a legal or forensic (court-room) metaphor. The language of the righteousness of God derives from the Jewish idea of the law court in which three parties are present: the judge, the plaintiff and the defendant. In the law court, each of these parties has a distinct role to play: the judge is called upon to decide the

issue and to do so in a proper manner, that is, justly and impartially; the plaintiff is obliged to prosecute the case and bring an accusation against the defendant; and the defendant is required to answer the accusation and seek to be acquitted. In the functioning of this law court, what matters finally is not the moral uprightness or virtue of the plaintiff or the defendant, but the *verdict of the judge*.

When the judge decides "for" or "against" either the plaintiff or the defendant, we may say that they have a *status of being righteous* so far as the court's judgment is concerned. The language of "righteous," when used within the framework of the court's pronouncements, means that the court has decided in the plaintiff or the defendant's favor. The "righteous" person, therefore, is not the person who is morally upright, but the person in whose favor the court has decided. So far as the judgment of the court goes, "the righteous" are those whom the court vindicates or acquits, "the unrighteous" are those whom the court finds against or condemns. In these respects, the language of the "righteousness of God" and of "justification" is thoroughly legal or forensic in nature.

Even though Wright affirms the forensic nature of this language in a way that is reminiscent of the reformational view of justification, he maintains that the Reformation's idea of the imputing or imparting of God's righteousness to believers makes no sense in this context.

If we use the language of the law court, it makes no sense whatever to say that the judge imputes, imparts, bequeaths, conveys or otherwise transfers his righteousness to either

the plaintiff or the defendant. Righteousness is not an object, a substance or a gas which can be passed across the courtroom.⁷

Rather than being something that God can impute to others, the righteousness of God refers to God's faithfulness in acting on behalf of His covenant people, vindicating or acquitting them so that they are in a state of favor with Him. When God acts in the person of Jesus Christ, He acts to realize His covenant purposes for Israel. The death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, which reveal God's righteousness or covenant faithfulness, are the means whereby God deals with sin and vindicates His people through Christ, their "representative."⁸

The promise of God, that in the future (eschatological) day of salvation and judgment His people will be vindicated, has been accomplished through the representative death and resurrection of Christ. Thus, in the death and resurrection of Christ, God has acted to secure the promise of covenant favor and blessing for all, Jews and Gentiles, who believe in Christ. The righteousness of God, in this understanding, cannot be imparted to believers, since it is identified with God's covenant faithfulness in action.

Within the context of this understanding of God's righteousness as His covenant faithfulness in action, we can properly understand the idea of "justification." Justification is not principally about how guilty sinners, who are incapable of finding favor with God by their works of obedience to the law, can be made acceptable to God, but about *who belongs to the number of God's covenant people.*

The primary location of Paul's doctrine of justification, Wright insists, is not soteriology (how are sinners saved?) but ecclesiology (who belongs to the covenant family?). When Paul's treatment of justification is read within the context of the Judaism's historic understanding of the covenant, we discover that "[j]ustification in this setting ... is not a matter of *how someone enters the community of the true people of God*, but of *how you tell who belongs to that community*." ⁹ In a comprehensive statement of his view, Wright main-

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tains that justification language functions to describe who belongs to the covenant people:

"Justification" in the first century was not about how someone might establish a relationship with God. It was about God's eschatological definition, both future and present, of who was, in fact, a member of his people. In Sanders' terms, it was not so much about "getting in," or indeed about "staying in," as about "how you could tell who was in." In standard Christian theological language, it wasn't so much about soteriology as about ecclesiology; not so much about salvation as about the church.¹⁰

When God reveals His righteousness in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, He demonstrates His covenant faithfulness by securing the inclusion of all members of the covenant community, namely, those who are baptized into Christ and are marked by the "badge" of covenant membership, which is faith. Justification, therefore, refers to the inclusion of all believers in the covenant community, whether Jews or Gentiles, who believe in Jesus Christ.

This approach to the language of justification explains the significance of Paul's insistence that it is by "faith" and not by "works of the law." As we have noted previously, Wright and other new perspective authors regard the language of "works of the law" as a reference to "boundary marker" requirements in the (Mosaic) law, which served to exclude Gentiles from the promise of inclusion within the covenant family of God. Justification is "by faith," and not by obedience to the "works of the law," because it announces that God, in His covenant faithfulness, now intends to include Gentiles, as well as Jews, in the number of His covenant people. Commenting on Romans 3:21-31, Wright offers an explanation that is consistent with what we have seen in our consideration of the issue of Paul's use of the language of the "works of the law":

The passage is all about the covenant, membership in which is now thrown open to Jew and Gentile alike; *therefore* it is all about God's dealing with sin in the cross and resurrection of Jesus, because that was what the covenant was intended to do in the first place. ...



Through faith in Jesus Christ, Jews and Gentiles alike enjoy the privilege of “present justification.”

“Where then is boasting?” asks Paul in 3:27. “It is excluded!” This “boasting” which is excluded is not the boasting of the successful moralist [as in the Reformation view, CPV]; it is the racial boast of the Jew, as in 2:17-24. If this is not so, 3:29 (“Or is God the God of Jews only? Is He not of Gentiles also?”) is a *non sequitur*. Paul has not thought in this passage of warding off a proto-Pelagianism, of which in any case contemporaries were not guilty. He is here, as in Galatians and Philippians, declaring that there is no road into covenant membership on the ground of Jewish racial privilege.¹¹

Faith alone is the “badge” of covenant membership, because it excludes any boasting in covenant privilege on the part of the Jews. Through faith in Jesus Christ, Jews and Gentiles alike enjoy the privilege of “present justification,” that is, inclusion among the covenant people of God. This present justification “declares . . . what future justification will affirm publicly (according to Romans 2:14-16 and 8:9-11) on the basis of the entire life.”¹²

Endnotes

¹ Expressed grammatically, this means that the Reformers took the genitive in the expression, “the righteousness of God,” as a genitive of origin, that is, the righteousness that is *from* God.

² For a critical assessment of the way the

language of the “righteousness of God” has been interpreted by authors of the new perspective, see Mark A. Seifrid, “Righteousness Language in the Hebrew Scriptures and Early Judaism,” in *Justification and Variegated Nomism*, ed. D. A. Carson et al., vol. 1 (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2000), pp. 415-42. Contrary to the claim that this language refers primarily to God’s saving action as an expression of his covenantal faithfulness, Seifrid demonstrates that it especially refers to God’s retributive righteousness in punishing the disobedient and vindicating the righteous.

³ Wright, *What Saint Paul Really Said*, p. 96.

⁴ Wright, *What Saint Paul Really Said*, p. 96.

⁵ This language is Wright’s (*What Saint Paul Really Said*, p. 103).

⁶ Wright, *What Saint Paul Really Said*, p. 103. For this reason, Wright regards the traditional grammatical debate whether the genitive in “righteousness of God” is “possessive” or “subjective” to be beside the point. The righteousness of God is both God’s being righteous (possessive) and God’s acts of righteousness (subjective). God’s covenant faithfulness expresses itself in deeds performed to fulfill his covenant promises.

⁷ Wright, *What Saint Paul Really Said*, p. 99. One of the most striking omissions in Wright’s discussion of the law-court imagery is his neglect to note the distinctively *Christian* use of this imagery in Paul’s writings. Wright does not adequately represent the way Christ enters the court on behalf of his people (as their advocate, substitute, and representative), having obeyed the law and suffered its curse in their place. As we shall see, the imputation of Christ’s righteousness to believers is only a way of express-

ing the believer’s participation in Christ and his saving work. Wright’s caricature of imputation does not represent the reformation view.

⁸ Wright, *What Saint Paul Really Said*, pp. 106-7.

⁹ Wright, *What Saint Paul Really Said*, p. 119.

¹⁰ Wright, *What Saint Paul Really Said*, p. 120. Wright offers a similar comment on Paul’s argument in Galatians: “Despite a long tradition to the contrary, the problem Paul addresses in Galatians is not the question of how precisely someone becomes a Christian, or attains to a relationship with God On anyone’s reading, but especially within its first-century context, it has to do quite obviously with the question of how you define the people of God: are they to be defined by the badges of Jewish race, or in some other way?” (*What Saint Paul Really Said*, p. 122).

¹¹ Wright, *What Saint Paul Really Said*, pp. 128-29.

¹² Wright, *What Saint Paul Really Said*, p. 129. As we noted in our introductory presentation of the new perspective, justification occurs in three “steps” or “phases”, which correspond to the past event of Christ’s resurrection, the present event of incorporation into Christ through faith, and the future event of the final judgment. In this statement of Wright’s, an important question is raised regarding the role of the final judgment in the justification of believers: is the final phase of justification based, at least in part, on works or, as Wright puts it, the “whole life” of the believer? We will take this subject up in a forthcoming article.

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