

THE BANNER

OF SOVEREIGN GRACE TRUTH

SPECIAL THEME: What Is the Church
The Diversity of the Church
The Church and the World
Becoming Part of the Church

Back to School—My Way or God's Way
Failure and Dissapointment in Scripture
Ten Lasting Fruits of the Reformation



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THE CHURCH

"The church is taken out of dying Jesus's side, as Eve taken out of sleeping Adam's side. The church is nothing but Christ displayed."

—WILLIAM GURNALL

BACK TO SCHOOL—*My Way or God's Way?*

Turn away mine eyes from beholding vanity; and quicken thou me in thy way

—PSALM 119:37

Each fall marks a “back to school” teaching season in our schools, homes, and churches. After some time of rest and vacation, we hopefully have some new energy and zeal to pick up where we left off or to start something entirely new. One thing remains, which is not subject to time off, and that is our ongoing learning as students in the school of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

Regardless, whether we’re an excited child entering first grade, an anxious teenager beginning high school, an adult starting a new career, a mother nurturing at home, or a father employed in the work place, there are always new things to learn and challenges to overcome. There also are so many distractions to draw us away from following Christ. How shall we find our way through this sometimes bewildering maze of cross-roads, which may be better called cross-providences?

There is nothing wrong with the word cross-roads, but the word cross-providences expresses the fact that our entire life is directed by God’s hand of providence. The root of the word providence is from the Latin *pro-videre* or “before-seen.” It tells us that God not only saw the details of our life before the world was made, but that He also made sure to make them happen—for His glory and for our good. “We know that all things work together for good to them that love God, to them who are the called according to his purpose. For whom he did foreknow, he also did predestinate to be conformed to the image of his Son” (Rom. 8:28–29).

In other words, while we seek to accomplish our own goals in our daily challenges and the choices we make, God in His sovereign and mysterious ways accomplishes His own purpose. When we sin, we do so not only by God’s decree but also, at the same time, because we choose to do it and will therefore be condemned forever unless we repent and believe the gospel. When we do what is right, we choose to do so by grace through faith (Eph. 2:8). This is really the question of this meditation: Which way is yours? Is it your daily prayer, “Turn away mine eyes from beholding vanity; and quicken thou me in thy way” (Ps. 119:37)?

If the psalmist felt the need to pray this, how much more should we today? It is clear that we live in a world filled with vanities. Satan and the world, together with our own flesh, conspire to distract and prevent us from either *getting* on God’s way or *walking* in it! Maybe you can identify with me that sin not only cleaves to me but also that, “My soul cleaveth unto the dust: quicken thou me according to thy word” (Ps. 119:25). And with the words of 1 John 2:16, “For all that is in the world, the lust of the flesh, and the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life, is not of the Father, but is of the world.”

So we’re not just going “back to school” every fall, but every day. We’re faced with many distractions, which truly are vanities, if they keep us from the one thing needful. Many distractions are not sinful in and of themselves, but they become sin for us if they prevent us from receiving life in Jesus Christ or if they prevent us from growing in His grace and knowledge (2 Peter 3:18).

Remember the history of the Rechabites (Jeremiah 35) who obeyed their forefather Jonadab in not drinking wine, building houses, or having farms. Though there is no scriptural warrant for such a command, his descendants for several generations obeyed because they honored their father. Why did they do this? There are at least two reasons found in verse 7: “Neither shall ye build house, nor sow seed, nor plant vineyard, nor have any: but all your days ye shall dwell in tents; that ye may live many days in the land where ye be strangers.” First, the father’s wise reminder was that they, and we too, are “strangers” in this world. We are citizens of God’s kingdom, regardless of our earthly citizenship, ethnicity, and language. The second reason is the promise of “living many days in the land” where God brought them. Jonadab then already realized how the attractions of this world distract from the far greater and more glorious attractions of the world to come. They obeyed, not because they *had* to, but because they *wanted* to. So, we obey the fifth commandment not only “because it is right” but also, as Ephesians 6 states, that we may also “live long on the earth” (v. 3). This is not limited to this earth, but it includes the new earth when the new heaven and the new earth will be God’s perfect Paradise.

Jesus said to His disciples, “Let us go into the next towns, that I may preach there also: for therefore came I forth” (Mark 1:38). He said this after a prolonged early morning prayer in the wilderness. Preaching the gospel of the kingdom of God was His focus and purpose of His ministry, without neglecting to care for the physical needs of the people. Sadly, most people were more interested in healing than in repenting. In a very real sense, the devils had a better understanding who Jesus was and why He came. The people were distracted by what meets the eye, pursuing happiness and satisfaction in the gifts instead of the Giver, and so, they had their minds and hearts closed to their eternal as well as their true present well-being.

Do you really want to walk in God’s way and so help the world around us see that we as Christians truly have the best of both worlds? In this present evil world, to live by faith, trusting God, works all evil for our good and for His glory. Then, the best—to live by sight in the world to come, without sin and without distractions, for ever in the presence of our Savior and Lord Jesus Christ—will become eternal reality.

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Ten Lasting Fruits of the Reformation (1)

There is a mysterious power hidden in the Word of God, like a great oak is hidden in a small acorn or bushels of apples hidden in a tiny apple seed. When God unleashes that power, He transforms people, families, communities, and even entire nations. Yet, it happens in ways we cannot fully understand or trace, but only receive with joy. Christ said, “So is the kingdom of God, as if a man should cast seed into the ground; and should sleep, and rise night and day, and the seed should spring and grow up, he knoweth not how” (Mark 4:26–27).

God sent forth the power of His Word in the Reformation of the sixteenth century, and even the Reformers marveled at it. The Reformation, which we commemorate on October 31 again, served as a dynamic motivation and catalyst for change and progress wherever its influence reached. Many would credit Martin Luther as the driving engine that propelled the Reformation, but Luther said, “I did nothing; the Word did everything.” John Knox said, “God did so multiply our number that it appeared as if men had rained from the clouds.”

How did the Reformation change the church and the world? What are its lasting fruits or results? Here are ten of the fruits which the Reformation produced.

1. THE WORD OF GOD

The Reformers recognized the Bible as God’s written Word and the supreme rule of faith and life for both the individual believer and the life of the church—indeed, for all of life. Here is the great starting point for understanding the aims, dynamism, and achievements of the Protestant Reformation. As part of the revival of learning connected with the Renaissance, the Western church recovered the knowledge of the original languages of the Bible (chiefly Hebrew and Greek). For the first time in many centuries, her scholars and teachers were able to read the Hebrew Old Testament and the Greek New Testament as well as examine the extant Latin translations of the Bible in the light of the original.

The Reformers emphasized Scripture in five important ways:

- *Authority.* Scripture is the very Word of God and the voice of God (*verbum Dei*), and is therefore supremely authoritative. All other kinds of authority—civil, creedal, papal, ecclesiastical, etc.—must be subordinate to Scripture. Contrary to Roman Catholicism, the Reformers believed that Scripture’s authority is absolute, not derivative. The church does not declare Scripture authoritative but only recognizes its inherent authority.

- *Infallibility and inerrancy.* The Reformers taught that the Bible’s infallibility is exhaustive, for every word of every sentence, as 2 Timothy 3:16–17 says, is the breath of the living God. Nor can Scripture err. “I have learned to hold only the Holy Scripture inerrant,” Martin Luther said, quoting Augustine’s letter to Jerome.

- *Self-interpretation and self-authentication.* Reformed theologians also stress the harmony between Scripture and the Holy Spirit. They taught that the Holy Spirit is the true expositor of the Bible, which enables the church to recognize that Scripture interprets and validates Scripture. While tradition may aid interpretation, the true meaning of Scripture is its natural, literal sense, not an allegorical one—unless the particular Scripture passage being studied is allegorical in nature. Scripture’s self-authentication means that the Bible’s witness is confirmed, as Calvin said, by the internal testimony of the Spirit in the believer’s heart (*Institutes*, 1.7.2–4; cf. Westminster Confession, 1.5).

- *Liberation.* The Reformers liberated the Bible from the Roman Catholic hierarchy in at least three ways. (1) By vernacular translation, such as Luther’s German Bible. As a matter of first importance, the Reformers saw that the Bible had to be translated into the languages of those lands into which it comes, because “the people of God...have a right unto, and interest in the Scriptures, and are commanded, in the fear of God, to read and search them” (WCF 1.8). (2) By expository preaching, as recommenced by Zwingli. The Reformers insisted that the pulpit must be given pride of place in the church, since “faith cometh by hearing, and hearing by the word of God” (Rom. 10:17). (3) By straightforward grammatical-historical exegesis, best exemplified by Calvin’s commentaries. Through Scripture read, preached, and expounded in Bible-based books, God speaks to us as a father speaks to his children, Calvin said—and what can be more liberating than that!

- *Power.* The Reformers taught that God gave us Scripture as His word of power that transforms and renews our minds by His Spirit. That power must be manifested in our lives, our homes, our churches, and our communities. While other books may inform or even reform us, only one book can transform us and conform us to the image of Christ.

So the light of Scripture began to dispel all darkness, and men like Luther were compelled to examine the very foundations of their faith and practice as Christians. What

Luther found in the Greek New Testament shook him to his core, and soon he lifted up his protest against the accumulated errors of the preceding ages. Pointing to the Scriptures, Luther said, “Here I stand, I cannot do otherwise.”

From that time onward, it has been the glory of the Reformed faith to be faithful to Scripture in all that it teaches, concerning what we are to believe concerning God or what duty God requires of us. The value of the Reformed creeds and confessions lies chiefly in their faithfulness as summaries and expositions of the system of doctrine taught in God’s Word. Reformed Christians cherish the Bible as the living and active “sword of the Spirit” (Eph. 6:17) by which God speaks to us today and works in our hearts and lives, imparting faith, leading us to Christ, sealing us for salvation, and leading us onward to the city of God.

If you want to call yourself an heir of the Reformation, then you must be a student of the Bible. Read the Word of God and meditate on it daily. Cultivate a systematic understanding of the Bible’s teachings. Compare Scripture with Scripture. Use cross-references like those found in John Brown’s *Systematic Theology*. Take advantage of study resources like the *Reformation Heritage Study Bible*. Never walk away from private devotions, family worship, or a sermon without taking hold of some particular truth and applying it to your soul. When you lack wisdom, pray for it and search the Scriptures, for in them is eternal life and the knowledge of Christ.

2. THE GOSPEL OF GRACE

The Reformers recovered the authentic gospel of salvation by grace alone through faith in Christ alone to the glory of God alone, and proclaimed it to the ends of the earth through zealous evangelism. What Luther and the other Reformers discovered in the light of the New Testament was that Roman Catholicism had exchanged the true gospel for a false one. According to Roman Catholicism, salvation was achieved by slow degrees and hard work—by receiving the sacraments and by doing such good works as the church required or directed. The Roman Catholic church taught that sinners must atone for their sins by doing penance in this life, suffering the fires of purgatory in the next, calling on saints and angels for help, and cherishing the hope of full salvation only in the far distant future.

Some degree of comfort was afforded to the faithful by the sale of “indulgences,” promissory notes issued by the church forgiving or “indulging” some part of the debt of sin owed to God. This “gospel according to Rome” was a message that inspired fear of wrath, not faith in Christ; encouraged dependence upon our own works, not the grace of God; and deepened human misery, while affording little comfort. Christ was crucified afresh and sacrificed daily in the Mass, His mother was entreated perpetually, and prayers

were constantly offered for the dead in the hope that, by the joint effort of all concerned, some might be saved at long last.

Discovering from Scripture that this false Roman Catholic road to salvation was a poor substitute for the authentic gospel of Christ and the apostles, the Reformers abandoned it. They taught that sinners are saved as Christ graciously works in them by His Word and Holy Spirit, convincing them of their sin and misery and leading them to faith in the sacrifice of Christ on the cross, offered once for all, as the only ground of their salvation. Justification from the guilt of sin is not the distant goal, but the beginning of life in Christ. Good works are fruits that accompany justification, and only serve to confirm it. Justification is by faith alone through Christ alone. Salvation is the gracious, free gift of God, “not of works, lest any man should boast” (Eph. 2:9).

The Reformers understood that God’s gospel grace is and does everything for a sinner who deserves nothing but hell. Our entire salvation is grounded and marinated in grace. Grace calls us (Gal. 1:15), regenerates us (Titus 3:5), justifies us (Rom. 3:24), sanctifies us (Heb. 13:20–21), and preserves us (1 Peter 1:3–5). We need grace to apply God’s forgiveness to us, to return us to God, to heal our broken hearts, and to strengthen us in times of trouble and spiritual warfare.

With the drama of conversion and justification by faith alone in the foreground, we must not miss the backdrop: the eternal will and decrees of the sovereign God electing sinners to salvation and eternal life through the merits and redemptive work of the incarnate Son of God applied by the Holy Spirit to their minds and hearts. This great God is to be sought, called upon, trusted, loved, and gratefully served by His redeemed people.

This biblical gospel truly is good news for sinners and worthy to be preached in all the world, indeed, to be shouted from the housetops! The Reformation not only revived the church in Europe, but effected its extension into the new world from the old, and inspired centuries of missionary work, evangelism, and church planting throughout the world. This mission is an extension of Pentecost, as Reformed Christians have gone everywhere, preaching the gospel to all nations.

Are you depending on your good works to make you righteous before God? Self-righteousness is subtle; we can turn even our misery and grief over sin into a kind of righteousness such as when we think we cannot be accepted by God until we feel bad enough. What do you think you deserve from God? If God is a righteous Judge who must punish sin, then why would He let you into heaven? Any answer except *Christ alone* is a false gospel. If we could be saved by our good works, then Christ died for nothing.

God’s sovereign gospel grace crushes our pride. It shames and humbles us. We want to be the subjects, not the objects of salvation. By nature, we rebel against gospel grace, but God knows how to break our rebellion and make us friends

of this grand doctrine. When God teaches us that our very core is depraved, sovereign grace becomes the most encouraging doctrine possible.

How precious is gospel grace to you? When visiting an elderly friend in a nursing home some years ago, I noticed that she had nothing on her walls except a small index card, upon which she had typed:

God's
Riches
At
Christ's
Expense

"That means everything to me, because I live only by grace," she said.

Is that true of us as well? Are we genuine sons and daughters of the Reformation?

3. EXPERIENTIAL PIETY

The Reformers enlivened the church worldwide with a deep conviction of the fatherly sovereignty of God through Christ, which results in a deep, warm, sanctifying, experiential piety or godliness that moves believers to commit their entire lives to His praise.

One of the most compelling proofs of this assertion is the Heidelberg Catechism of 1563, renowned for its personal way of summarizing and applying the truths of the Christian faith. Nothing is stated in an abstract or purely theoretical way. The very first question is intensely personal and experiential: "What is thy only comfort in life and in death?" Time and again the practical use or personal benefit is pressed: "What doth it profit thee now that thou believest all this?" (Q. 59). This pressure persists to the last sentence of the Catechism: "Amen"—that is, the "Amen" of the Lord's Prayer—"signifies that it shall truly and certainly be, for my prayer is more assuredly heard of God than I feel in my heart that I desire these things of Him" (Q. 129).

The Heidelberg Catechism reflects an approach to doctrine that was present in the Reformation from earliest times, in Luther and Calvin, and many of their peers. Intellectually brilliant, Calvin manifested an equally profound piety in his writings, commentaries, and sermons. Famously, Calvin described the Book of Psalms as "an anatomy of all parts of the soul," that is, addressing all aspects of Christian faith and experience.

Subsequent generations of Reformed pastors and teachers took up this concern and developed it into the experiential theology of English Puritanism, Scottish Presbyterianism, and the Dutch Further Reformation as Christian experience and the strengths and weaknesses connected with it received close scrutiny, careful analysis, and thorough exposition. To the Reformers and their successors we owe much still today in learning how to apply God's Word to the mind,

the conscience, and the will as well as how to discriminate between believers and unbelievers. They have also taught how to preach to different kinds of hearers among the saved and the unsaved.

Make sure that your faith engages your head, heart, and hands. It starts in the head, for you must know the truth in order for it to set you free. However, the truth must penetrate your heart like a seed in good soil where it can send down deep roots. It is not enough to know about the Lord; you must know the Lord personally and experientially—that is, in the experience of your heart and life in a meaningful, relational way, for to know God and Jesus Christ is to know eternal life (John 17:3). The proof that the seed has roots in good soil is the fruit it produces, and true heart-knowledge of the Lord produces the practical fruit of love, holiness, and good works.

4. OLD PATHS

The Reformers preserved, explicated, and defended the ancient Christian faith through preaching and sound literature as the system of doctrine taught in God's Word. Their orthodox Christian belief that salvation in the Trinity manifests itself in what would later be called the five points of Calvinism: total depravity, unconditional election, definite atonement, irresistible grace, and perseverance of the saints.

The Reformers found support for their formulations of the Christian faith in the writings of the ancient church fathers. They saw themselves as the true heirs of historic Christianity. The Roman Catholic church had added to the biblical faith and obscured the gospel of justification, but there remained many essential truths of true Christianity as summarized in the Ecumenical Creeds. Though mired in layers of corruption, the gold of apostolic Christianity had not been utterly lost. The Reformed faith was given to the world not as something new, but only a return of the faith, worship, and order of the apostolic church.

As such, the Reformers valued sound exegesis of Scripture over all speculations and innovations of the academic world of their day. When that exegesis was called in question or opposed in subsequent times, the heirs of the Reformers returned to the sources once more and redoubled their commitment to the biblical gospel of faith in the electing love of a sovereign God who freely justifies sinners that believe in Christ as the only Savior and who, having begun His good work in them, continues to perform it until the day of Christ's appearing. Without God's grace, mankind is utterly lost, corrupt, enslaved, and helpless—doomed to perish because of sin. The great task of the Synod of Dort was to reexamine the exegesis of the Reformers, to vindicate it over against the errors of Arminianism, and to reaffirm the Reformed faith as holding forth the authentic gospel of Christ and His apostles.

It is popular today to cast off all tradition, confessions of faith, and history in order to cultivate a religion based on “me and my Bible.” Much contemporary Christianity is thus superficial and without deep foundations, and so, it is very unstable. This view of just “me and my Bible” is not the Reformation principle of Scripture alone (*sola Scriptura*), but a corruption of it. We do not reject tradition in itself, but we do reject tradition that is not subordinate to the Bible. I encourage you to seek the old paths (Jer. 6:16). Read old books, especially the books of the Reformers, the Puritans, and the Dutch Further Reformation. Be a Christian grounded in historic, orthodox, Reformed Christianity.

5. THE HEAD OF THE CHURCH

The Reformers reasserted the crown rights of Christ as King over the nations and the only Head of the church, which is His body. This resulted in reforming the church in her worship and preaching so that all is done in subjection to God’s Word and in relation to the triune God rather than in subjection to man’s desires.

The Reformers soon found themselves at odds with the hierarchy of the church and, in particular, with the Pope or Bishop of Rome. Over the centuries, the Papacy had advanced its claim to dominion over the worldwide church and, likewise, over the kings and princes of Christian Europe. In a similar way, these kings and princes often claimed dominion over the church within their realms. Not infrequently, these divergent views led to fierce and bloody conflicts between the armed forces of the Pope and the armies of the kings.

The Reformers found themselves fighting a two-front war as the Pope used all his power to suppress the Reformation and as hostile kings and princes resisted and punished attempts to reform the church in their territories. Against both, the Reformers exalted Christ as the only Head of the church in heaven and on earth. Where they prevailed, the church was delivered from the twofold tyranny of the Papacy and the state. In matters of doctrine, liturgy, and church order, the Reformers sought to bring the witness, worship, and life of the church into subjection to Holy Scripture as the expression of Christ’s will for His church.

We need to walk the tightrope of truth regarding leaders and authority. We must not fall off to the right by rejecting all human authority and embracing total anarchy and individualism. God calls us to honor authority in the home (Ex. 20:12), the church (Heb. 13:17), and the civil government (Rom. 13:1). We must cultivate a heart of submissiveness. However, we must also not fall off to the left by elevating human authority as if man had God’s absolute authority. Human leaders are subject to God, and when they oppose God, we must obey God, not men. Civil magistrates in the political sphere cannot dictate what the church teaches or practices. Pastors and elders in the ecclesiastical sphere may

not use physical force to punish sin like the civil government, they may not take dictatorial control of family life, nor may they bind the individual conscience apart from the Word of God. Let us each exercise our authority, respond to other authorities as people who fear the Lord, and subject ourselves to God’s Son.

6. CHRISTIAN FREEDOM

The Reformers established the freedom of the Christian from tyranny in the church and the rights of citizens under the rule of law, curbing the powers of kings and nobles and enabling the rise of representative democracy in the form of constitutional monarchies and republics.

Upholding the supreme authority of Scripture, the Reformed faith dealt the death blow to the medieval theory of the divine right of kings. All estates of the nation, including the king, are subject to the law of God and the laws of the state. Each citizen lives under the law’s protection, enjoying the liberty secured by subjection to God and to Christ. No one but God has power over the conscience, and the calling of magistrates is to “do justice for the helpless, the orphan’s cause maintain; defend the poor and needy, oppressed and wronged for gain.” Unjust, corrupt, and uncaring magistrates are warned, “The Most High God has called you and set you up on high, but ye to Him must answer, for ye like men must die” (Psalm 82, *Psalter* 223:2, 3).

This idea of kingship is as old as the Old Testament, but it broke upon sixteenth century Europe as a revolutionary thunderbolt. A long struggle ensued to curb the excesses and abuses of kings, free the church from interference by the state, and establish the rule of law in Protestant Europe. Representative democracy flourished best in lands and nations where the Reformed faith was most deeply rooted. The habits of democratic self-government were acquired by many citizens in meetings of congregations, consistories, classes, sessions, presbyteries, and synods. The modern deliberative assembly is the brainchild of Presbyterianism.

We should cherish our political freedoms and use all lawful means to preserve them. The rule of law, rights of all human beings, and covenantal accountability of leaders to God and the people are precious biblical principles. However, we should also remember that no political freedom has a stable foundation unless the church remains grounded in its freedom in Christ. Christians are the salt of the earth, preserving it from its natural decay. Unless Christians walk in our blood-bought freedom from the dominion of sin, we cannot expect society around us to preserve civil liberty. Moral degeneration corrupts political freedom into a mask for any tyranny that promises to gratify a people’s passions.

(to be concluded)

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THE PSALMS

A Paradigm for Worship (1)

Imperatives, instructions, and illustrations concerning worship occur throughout the Scripture, but nowhere are the theme and theology of worship more noticeable, central, and pervasive than in the Book of Psalms. The Hebrew title for this book that we call “Psalms”—thanks to the Septuagint—is “Praises.” That hints at the book’s prime purpose. The Psalms were written by multiple inspired poets over a span of centuries. Although many Psalms are anonymous, the superscriptions specify the names of David (73 times), Asaph (12 times), the sons of Korah (11 times), Jeduthun (4 times), Solomon (2 times), Moses (1 time), Heman (1 time), and Ethan (1 time) as being either authors or dedicatees of particular Psalms. Interestingly, the same preposition governing the names can indicate either “by” or “for,” so we are not always certain how to understand the status of the person named. For instance, the superscription of Psalm 72 could be translated either “by Solomon” or “for Solomon.” At any rate, the inclusion of Moses in the list shows the composition of the Psalms started long before David, and Psalms 126 and 137 with their exilic or post-exilic themes indicate that inspired Psalms were being composed long after David as well.

Since the Psalms were written by so many poets over so many years, there had to be a process of collecting and collating all of the individual songs that was independent from the compositions. The Scripture does not reveal the process, but there is evidence that at least two collections—one associated with David and one with Asaph—were in place during the days of Hezekiah (2 Chron. 29:30). Since some of the inspired Psalms were not yet written, and since the canonical order does not place all of David’s Psalms together, it is obvious that Hezekiah’s collection neither substantially nor sequentially would have matched our current collection. My guess is that the canonical form took shape in the post-exilic period, most likely under the direction of Ezra. That Paul identifies the statement “Thou art my Son, this day have I begotten thee” as coming from the second Psalm suggests that by the New Testament era the order of the Psalms corresponded to what we know in our Bibles today (Acts 13:33).

Interestingly, the canonical order framed by doxologies sets the collection in five units—according to both Jewish and Christian traditions a miniature Pentateuch. A frequently quoted Jewish *midrash* or commentary on Psalm 1:1 says, “Moses gave the Israelites the five books of the Law, and to correspond to these David gave them the Book

of Psalms containing five books.” This dates around the tenth century A.D., but reflects what seems to be an earlier tradition. Similar statements from Ambrose, Hippolytus, and Jerome reveal that the same tradition existed in the early church. Here are the divisions with the doxologies that mark them:

Book 1 (Psalms 1–41): “Blessed be the LORD God of Israel from everlasting, and to everlasting. Amen, and Amen” (41:13).

Book 2 (Psalms 42–72): “Blessed be the LORD God, the God of Israel, who only doeth wondrous things. And blessed be his glorious name for ever: and let the whole earth be filled with his glory; Amen, and Amen” (72:18–19).

Book 3 (Psalms 73–89): “Blessed be the LORD for evermore. Amen, and Amen” (89:52).

Book 4 (Psalms 90–106): “Blessed be the LORD God of Israel from everlasting to everlasting: and let all the people say, Amen. Praise ye the LORD” (106:48).

Book 5 (Psalms 107–150): A series of doxologies beginning with Psalm 146 and ending with 150 that is a climactic finale not only to the section but to the entire Psalter.

I hesitate, however, to draw forced lines between the five books of Psalms and the five books of Moses since there is no strict correspondence in the order of themes as they appear in the Pentateuch and the Psalms. To me, it is artificial to identify Books 1 to 5 with Genesis to Deuteronomy specifically or respectively since the “books” were not written in that order and since the authority of inspiration rests in the composition, not the collection procedure. Nonetheless, I think the penta-division is an intentional canonical marker to suggest that this worship manual does in fact mirror the Mosaic corpus that reveals the essence and foundation of God’s covenant purpose and the inception of God’s redemptive program. There is hardly a covenant theme introduced in the Pentateuch that does not find poetic and worshipful expression in the Psalms. “Let the redeemed of the LORD say so” (Ps. 107:2) could well sum up the function of the Psalter in its totality and in each of its constituent parts.

This book of praises is a divinely inspired handbook of worship—God’s “how to” book of worship. Only the supernatural operation of inspiration can explain the book’s

remarkable unity in spite of the inevitable diversity caused by its multiple authorship. Since the writers of Scripture did not originate what they said but rather were moved by the Holy Spirit to say what they said (2 Peter 1:20–21), the only legitimately logical conclusion is that the personal and sundry ways that each expressed his feelings, fears, doubts, joys, sorrows, and desires are paradigms or patterns illustrating how God expects worshippers to express themselves. The Psalms give patterns for both individual and corporate worship, guiding worshippers in how best to communicate to God in response to His gracious communication. Worship entails meeting with God with ears attentive to His Word, and, while the worshipper is to stand more ready to hear than to speak (Eccl. 5:1–2), he is not to stand silent. The Psalms teach us how to give voice to praise and to prayer, the suitable expressions of worship.

I love the Psalms. I love to read them, pray them, teach them, preach them, and sing them. I love the elegant yet simple beauty of the poetry with all of its rich imagery, the essence of which is transferable and retainable in translation—most unusual for poetry. Whereas so much of English poetry depends on the rhyme or cadence, Hebrew poetry tends to rhyme meaning. One line in some way or another relates to the other—either synonymously, antithetically, climactically, emblematically, or complementally. Sounds between languages typically do not correspond and thus

translating poetry from one language to another inevitably loses something, but because Hebrew poetry is more oriented on meaning rather than sound, the essence of its beauty can be experienced in translation.

The Book of Psalms is an inspired hymnbook. Although the ancient melodies were neither inspired nor preserved, the inspired words of the Psalter transcend any tune and serve a vital function for both public and private meditation and prayer, even if not sung at all. The Psalms constitute a blueprint for worship. They identify the themes for worship as well as address the obstacles and hindrances to spiritual praise. They teach us to pray, whether in confessing our sins, praying our way out of trouble or depression, or praising the Lord for all His perfections and works. Although they deal with the issues of personal experience and testimony, they predominantly set forth essential objective truths of doctrine and the gospel. If there is any surface lesson from the Psalms, it is that worship is all about God and not about man. The Psalms reveal a theology of worship.

In the next few articles, I want to consider the focus, formula, and function of the Psalms. It is my prayer that this will be a means of providing instruction regarding how and why to worship the Lord in the beauty of holiness.

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The Multitude that No One Can Number

In the majestic vision shown to the apostle John and passed on to us in the book of Revelation, God lifts the veil on many things past, present, and especially future. One of the most precious pictures is of the great throng in Revelation 7. John saw an innumerable multitude, clothed in white and waving palm branches in their hands. What a spectacular sight this must have been! The elder who is speaking to John as John looks at this multitude asks John this question, “What are these which are arrayed in white robes? and whence came they?” (Rev. 7:13–17).

This is more than just a factual question. This is a question that gets at the character of these people, at their inner life, at the source of their strength. Sometimes, we meet people whose Christian character breathes the air of a different world. Maybe you’ve had a friend like that, or maybe it was a mother, a father, or someone whose path you crossed. You wonder what the secret to their life and witness is.

The answer John received from the elder to this question helps us understand what marks every true child of God, and we can highlight three things.

CONTEST

As he begins to explain who these people are, the first thing the elder says is this: “These are they which came out of great tribulation” (v. 14). Literally, in the original the verb suggests the picture of people *continually coming* out of the great tribulation. They are not all coming at once, but continually people are coming from the seen world into the unseen world. The world they are leaving behind is described as a place of one thing: tribulation.

These people were not born in this contest. By nature, they were all lost children of Adam’s race. They were born into a world where there is indeed much sin, misery, and struggle because of our sin. However, by nature, they were very much at home in our world; for them, there was no spiritual struggle, until by the work of the Spirit, their eyes were opened to their lost condition, and they were made to look and yearn for a Mediator. So, a struggle was born in their life: a struggle to seek God and His kingdom and righteousness, a struggle to know God, and a struggle to pray and fight.

When God calls us to His Son, He calls us to die, to die to ourselves and our own righteousness. He calls us to a warfare against the devil, against our world, and against our own flesh. Someone said to me recently: “I struggle with the fact that I feel so little struggle sometimes.” That’s certainly part of the struggle.

Christ said: “In the world ye shall have tribulation” (John 16:33). And Paul echoed it when he said: “We must through much tribulation enter into the kingdom of God” (Acts 14:22).

We miss old warriors when they exchange our world for the next, but they are there out of the great tribulation. That’s how John sees it: they come *out* of great tribulation. For them, there is no more struggle, no more sin, and no more sorrow, but eternal rest in the crucified Lord. Are you someone who has learned to fight against sin, unbelief, and indwelling sin? Are you in a hand-to-hand combat against your old nature? Perhaps you say, “If only I knew how *great* the conflict is.” Indeed, you’re right, for our text says: “They came out of *great* tribulation.” Thanks be to God that the Captain of our salvation, Jesus Christ, is far greater than the greatest tribulation.

*Are you someone who has learned to fight against sin, unbelief, and indwelling sin?
Are you in a hand-to-hand combat against your old nature?*

CLEANSING

Our text reads further: “And have washed their robes, and made them white in the blood of the Lamb” (v. 14). You see, though we will not get to heaven without struggle, we do not arrive in heaven because of the struggle, but because of Him who cleanses us with His own precious blood.

Adam's children could all be said to be wearing filthy clothing. They could never stand in the New Jerusalem as they were born. Isaiah says that we are all like an unclean thing, and all our righteousnesses are as filthy rags (Isa. 64:6)! This is true even after we've received grace. Joshua the high priest was clothed in filthy garments (Zech 3:1–4). As the Christian life goes on, and especially at times when the struggle heats up, we are faced more and more with our sin and sinful nature, and we are confronted more and more with our need for cleansing. In tribulation, we get to know ourselves better, and our sense of sin grows and deepens. But in the gospel we read: "Come, now, let us reason together, saith the LORD: though your sins be as scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they be red like crimson, they shall be as wool" (Isa. 1:18).

In God alone we find the only detergent powerful and effective enough to wash away our sin and depravity. We need, however, to wash spiritually. We cannot be content to simply hear or think about washing! We read: "They *made them white* in the blood of the Lamb." This is a picture of faith, resting in Christ's finished work. It pictures the work of confessing our sins and finding that the Lamb of God does take away the sin of the world. What a glorious picture this is!

COMFORT

This passage contains seven (the number of perfection) elements of comfort for God's people:

1. "They are before the throne of God" (v. 15). In life, they were often before sin and trial, danger and death, conflict and Satan, and many impossibilities from their side. But now they are before the throne. How bright and glorious!
2. "They serve him" (v. 15) This is their heart's desire, to serve the worthy Lord forever without sin.
3. "He that sitteth on the throne shall dwell among them" (v. 15). On earth, God was with them through His Word and Spirit, and there were times when they felt alone. In glory, He will dwell with them, and they with Him.
4. "They shall hunger no more, neither thirst any more" (v. 16). All the longing and desires they knew will forever be met and satisfied.
5. "Neither shall the sun light on them, nor any heat" (v. 16). Painful trials, sharp attacks of Satan, and dry wilderness days will not sap their strength and make them lie down weary and worn.
6. "The Lamb...shall feed them, and shall lead them." They will have all their desire—they will have no lack. For the Lamb of Calvary, their Surety and Mediator, will feed and lead them—that's the heaven of heaven.
7. "God shall wipe away all tears from their eyes." Believers shed tears of sadness, pain, sympathy, repentance, and more. We are not saved by our tears, but we are never saved without them. But in glory God takes away the tears of His people. Sometimes they experience that in this life, when God comes down and comforts them as a mother comforts her child. He says as it were: Give them to me.

This perfection of comfort belongs to the people of God—those who by grace know of the contest, and the cleansing, and are in need of comfort. The perfection of comfort comes through the perfect Savior to the glory of the triune God.

QUESTIONS

1. Trace the contest mentioned in this verse through the Bible. Where does it begin and what does it involve? Does it include all trials, or just spiritual trials?
2. Can you think of some Christian warrior that helped you along your journey? How did they do this? How can we help others?
3. Why is cleansing mentioned second, not first? The verb means that these people were constantly washing themselves. How does this washing relate to justification and sanctification?
4. Look up some verses about tears in the Bible. What does it mean that God will wipe away tears?

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JESUS'S BLESSED HANDS BOUND

“And bound him.” —John 18:12b

In Gethsemane, Jesus was formally arrested. John tells us that they “took Jesus and bound him.” Having just asserted His royal authority in the garden of Gethsemane, Jesus here displays a remarkable degree of submission to His captors’ will (and to His Father’s will) in allowing Himself to be bound.

Jesus’s hands are chained like those of a murderer or a criminal. Tradition claims that when people were arrested to be brought to a Roman judge, the accusers bound the hands of the accused so tightly that blood came out of the ends of their fingers. The goal was to prejudice the judge against the accused and so incline him to find the accused guilty as charged. This is probably what the soldiers do to Jesus. The soldiers bind the hands of One who would gladly have gone with them unfettered. They bind the blessed hands of One who never sinned, healed the eyes of the blind and the lame, and blessed little children. They bind the hands of One who washed His disciples’ feet and broke bread for them in the Upper Room. They bind the hands that have dripped with bloody sweat in prayer to the Father. Yet, Jesus offers His hands to be bound in meekness and humility.

Jesus’s bound hands are symbolic of much more. Let me mention four ways.

BOUND TO SET US FREE

First, dear believers, Jesus is bound to set us free from the bands of sin. Proverbs 5:22 says that by nature we are “holden with the cords of [our] sin.” By grace, Jesus became sin for us (2 Cor. 5:21). Fettered with our sins, He let Himself be arrested and be held captive to free us from the captivity of sin and Satan, and from the bondage of being prisoners of hell.

As Robert Rollock observed, Christ’s bondage corresponds to and counteracts our being bound as captives to sin, the devil, and death. He is a fit Redeemer for sinners because He was bound as we were.¹ Therefore, when He arose and ascended on high, He led captivity captive—bound by the cords of love—to capture His people in the net of His substitutionary gospel. By His Spirit, He is still drawing sinners with those bands of love today.

BOUND TO BIND US

Second, Jesus is bound so that His people might be bound to Him by obedience and love to serve Him all their days. When they see Him voluntarily bound for their sake, they become willing to be His servants forever. When they see Him bound for their sake, no persecution becomes too

much. When they view His bonds, their afflictions and trials are sweetened and sanctified.

True believers may even rejoice in suffering under His banner of love like Paul and Silas, who sang in prison and counted it joy that they were reckoned worthy to suffer for Christ’s sake (Acts 16:25). When the early church father Ignatius was bound and chained for confessing Christ, he regarded his hands as spiritual pearls.

Do you know the joy of being bound for Christ’s sake as His willing servant? Do you ever feel the sweetness of His bonds in pastoral ministry when you are persecuted for Christ’s sake?

BOUND AS SECOND ADAM

Third, Jesus is bound as the Second Adam to restore in the Garden of Gethsemane what was lost by the first Adam in the Garden of Eden. Here are ten ways that the Second Adam undid what the first Adam had undone: (1) The first Adam sinned in the Garden of Eden; the Second Adam bore sin in the Garden of Gethsemane. (2) The first Adam was surrounded with glory, beauty, and harmony in Eden and refused to obey; the Second Adam was surrounded with bitterness and sorrow in Gethsemane and was obedient unto death. (3) The first Adam was tempted by Satan and fell; the Second Adam was tempted by all the forces of hell and did not fall. (4) The first Adam’s hands reached out to grasp sin; the Second Adam’s hands were bound to pay for sin. (5) The first Adam was guilty and arrested by God during the cool of the day; the Second Adam was innocent and arrested by men in the middle of the night. (6) The first Adam hid himself after fleeing; the Second Adam revealed Himself after walking into the moonlight. (7) The first Adam took fruit from Eve’s hand; the Second Adam took the cup from His Father’s hand. (8) The first Adam was conquered by the devil; the Second Adam conquered the devil. (9) The first Adam forfeited and lost grace in Eden; the Second Adam merited and applied grace in Gethsemane. (10) The first Adam was driven out of Eden; the Second Adam was willingly led out of Gethsemane so that room might be made in the heavenly garden of paradise for sinners who trust in Him.

Praise be to God! Christ regained all that was lost in Adam, and more—in Eden, the sword was drawn and the conflict of the ages began; and in Gethsemane the sword was sheathed, and the eternal gospel was displayed.

BOUND BY HIS FATHER’S WILL

Finally, Jesus is bound above all by the will of the Father. He spared not His own Son that His people might be

spared. His being bound is one of the ingredients of the cup that He had to swallow in paying for the sins of His people. He was bound to Himself and to His own work which He had undertaken from eternity. He was bound to fulfill the eternal covenant of redemption. God bound to God—how wondrous our God of salvation is!

In the Garden of Gethsemane, Christ is the lowly Servant of the Lord. He did not come to earth to do His own will but to do the will of Him who sent Him. As Isaiah 42:1–2 tells us, Jesus was the obedient Servant of the Lord whom God chose, in whom God delights, and upon whom God puts His Spirit. Likewise, as the Suffering Servant, it pleases the Lord to bruise Him, to put Him to grief, and to make His soul an offering for sin (Isa. 53:10). Jesus thus moves ahead with quiet determination to do God’s will. As He says in John 10:17–18, “Therefore doth my Father love me, because I lay down my life, that I might take it again. No man taketh it from me, but I lay it down of myself. I

have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it again. This commandment have I received of my Father.”

CONCLUDING APPLICATION

“And bound him”—so much is symbolized in so few words. In these simple words of our substitutionary Savior, who gave Himself willingly for your sake, dear believer, your entire salvation is bound up.

So, what about you? Are you willing to be bound to live for Him who was willing to be bound to suffer and die for you? Are you willing to surrender your all to Him who died the death you should have died and who lived the life you should have lived?

1. Robert Rollock, *Select Works*, 2:39.

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EXPERIENTIAL CHRISTIANITY | REBECCA VANDOOEWAARD

SCARS OF SANCTIFICATION

Scars are strange things. A spill off your bike at age six can still be with you at sixty in the shape of some knobbly skin.

Scars are beautiful things. God made our bodies to heal, so scars are a triumph of health over injury. They serve as reminders that we mastered riding a bike, healed from an accident, recovered from surgery, or had a safe childbirth. Though the ugliness is a result of the fall, scars are a reminder of healing: the new skill brought joy, the injury healed, or the surgery was successful. Stretch marks are a record of the cost that a mother is willing to pay in order to bring forth new life. In a Genesis 3 world, many scars are happy endings.

But scars can be painful things, too. They are visual—even tactile—reminders of suffering. Some will always hurt. Some bring more discouragement than thankfulness. These scars make you wish that you were free from a mortal, marred body. They are paths to walk, not past triumphs.

But for the Christian, any scar, regardless of the circumstance and level of pain or healing, will be a reminder of God’s providence and grace. Providence and grace are inseparable for the Christian. We can have redeemed scars that work for our good. Pain or no pain, there is incredible beauty in that. Even when scars are not happy endings, they remind us of the preciousness of life, which is sometimes preserved through scarring providences: an amputation or C-section scar reminds us of the cost that we sometimes pay for life, and thus, the incredibly high value of that life.

Whether it’s the preservation of life and healing or hard lessons learned through suffering, our scars are truly for our sanctification and good. That doesn’t mean that we can always jump right to seeing beauty in them. Lessons of patience, self-denial, and contentment might come later. Those strengths start to clarify with time.

While we don’t need to pretend that scars are beautiful in themselves, we can treasure the lessons that they give us. They remind us to be humble. We live in mortal bodies that are perishing: “In the midst of life, we are in death.” Scars also remind us that life in any form comes at a cost, and none more costly than our eternal life.

In heaven, our scars will be gone (Eph. 5:27). Glorified bodies won’t bear the record of earthly pain—or even the gift of healing. The only scars in heaven are Christ’s. Those five marks on His resurrected body are a record of His willingness to pay the cost of our salvation. They are a picture of life bought at high, high cost. They are a picture of full redemption—healing at a deeper level than we can now fathom. Our bodies are included in redemption because the Lamb who was slain, the One on the throne, is the Lord and giver of life. Scars are reasons for praise.

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The Church in the Old Testament

The church is not easy to trace across the pages of the Old Testament. Even if we follow Reformed confessional documents in distinguishing between the visible and the invisible church, which consists only of “true believers” (Belgic Confession, Article 27; similarly, Heidelberg Catechism, Q. 54; Westminster Confession, chapter 25), it is often difficult to identify exactly which people in the history presented in the Old Testament “professed the true religion.” There are several reasons for this, and many are related to the fact that God’s work of salvation moves forward in distinct steps. This means that the people of God in one era may be organized differently, participate in different covenants, and may be more or less numerous or visible than at other times. Another reason is that far more clearly than in the New Testament, the people of God in the Old Testament are always part of a larger group that to some degree obscures their identity: first a family, then a line of descendants, later a nation, and finally various communities of exiles or those returned from exile who are still ethnically and socially distinct. These points will help us trace the church in the Old Testament across three distinct periods: from creation to Sinai, from Sinai to the exile, and from the exile until the end of the Old Testament.

In the beginning, there was neither nation nor institution to give a social, visible form to God’s people. That people begins with Adam and Eve, whose faith in God’s covenantal promise of redemption is evident from Eve’s response to Seth’s birth as “another seed” (Gen. 4:25) in the place of Abel—a clear echo of Genesis 3:15. Interestingly, it was during Seth’s lifetime that corporate worship is first mentioned (Gen. 4:26). God’s line of promise continues down through the centuries, and the faithful lived and died trusting in those promises (Heb. 11).

However, not all those who are in or closely related to the line of promise have faith in those promises. The behavior of Cain makes a clear suggestion that he lacks the faith of his parents, and the genealogies in Genesis separate his line (Gen. 4:16–22) from the line of promise through Seth, with Cain’s line ending in the flood. Seth’s line continues through the flood (Gen. 5:3–32), with Enoch as the seventh and Noah as the tenth from Adam. Noah’s blessing in Genesis 9:26 narrows the focus of this line further to Shem and his descendants, and then focus falls on Abraham in Genesis 12:1–3.

The accounts of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, through whose line the covenant promises run, are similarly sparse when it comes to information that would let us determine

who professed true faith. Abraham’s faith (Gen. 15:6) and growing obedience (Gen. 26:5) are evident. Isaac and Jacob also profess and manifest trust in God as their Savior. Throughout this period, however, there were few means by which to identify those who held to God’s promises in faith and obedience. The family and clan contexts in which the faithful lived make a clear-cut identification of the visible church impossible.

The people of God come into clear view after God frees the descendants of Jacob from slavery in Egypt and forms the new nation by drawing it into covenant with Himself at Sinai. This second epoch involves two changes that clarify the nature of God’s people: God’s promise to be present in their midst in the tabernacle and the associated sacrificial system (Ex. 25:22, 29:43), and His revealed will, along with accountability to it under His designated leaders. These changes mean that there are clearer grounds for identifying those whose lives reflect the image of their Creator and covenant Lord. Still, there can be no question of identifying the church with the nation of Israel. This is clear from the outset, when Israel commits idolatry with the golden calf and even Aaron participates (Exodus 32). The divinely mandated execution of several thousand rebellious Israelites demonstrates that many stubbornly refused to submit to and trust the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob for their material and spiritual needs. This sad situation worsens when the vast majority of the nation refuses to enter Canaan (Numbers 14), and God Himself eliminates an entire generation of faithless Israelites. Even after receiving Canaan, the nation slides into a lifestyle of increasing conformity to the culture and norms of the Canaanites around them. The tabernacle similarly fades from view, appearing only sporadically (1 Sam. 4–6) until the time of David. The closing chapters of the Book of Judges depict in terrible detail how deeply Israel had fallen, and give the impression that those who professed faith in the LORD would have been a small minority.

The selective nature of the Old Testament’s historical record makes a few figures stand out as representative of “true” Israel. These include Joshua and Caleb (Num. 14:30), Rahab (Josh. 2:9–11, notably an ethnic non-Israelite), and David. While such notable figures seem to have been rare, God protected and preserved His people even during periods of decline and persecution. In the mid-ninth century, Elijah and others who worshiped the LORD in the northern kingdom of Israel encountered vehement oppression at the hands of Jezebel, an ardent worshiper of Baal. Even then, God affirmed that there were still seven thousand who

had not abandoned Him for Baal (1 Kings 19:18; see also Rom. 11:4). The idea of a “remnant” in Israel, preserved by God, will eventually become the clearest way to distinguish between the nation of Israel and those Israelites who truly followed God.

When the writing prophets began their ministries roughly a century later, the remnant was prominent in their prophecies of Israel’s future. Amos, like Hosea, announced that Israel’s lack of repentance, despite repeated corrections and punishments designed to bring her back to God (Amos 4:6–11), would entail her destruction (Amos 4:12–13). But this did not mean the end of God’s promises or His rejection of those who trust in Him. God promised to sift the northern kingdom with perfect precision, bringing death to all sinners but not letting even one Israelite who does not live in rebellion against Him perish.

Shortly after Israel was destroyed by Assyria in 722 A.D. and much of its population exiled, Isaiah brought a similar message against the southern kingdom of Judah, introducing the third period in the development of the theme of God’s people in the Old Testament. The opening chapter of his book announces the radical purification of God’s national people in the future, followed by His restoration of them to a new condition. Justice and righteousness (Isa. 1:27) will take the place of murder and corruption (1:21). While the unrepentant will be destroyed (1:27), those who repent will become citizens of a renewed Zion (1:28), and their faithful lifestyle (cf. Deut 4:6) and proclamation of the LORD’s law (Isa. 2:3) will bring many non-Israelites into fellowship with God. In God’s wisdom, the judgment of Israel and Judah included both the preservation of its remnant and its inclusion of non-Israelites, who until that point were rarely incited to join God’s people (cf. Rom. 11:11–12).

These prophecies remained at least partially unfulfilled for many years. The fall of Israel to Assyria, like the fall of Judah to Babylon some 140 years later, did not bring about the purification that God had promised. Israel lost the blessings of God’s presence in the temple and the possession of the land, although God was present among His people in exile (Ezek. 11:16). The last book of the Old Testament,

Malachi, is most likely the latest prophetic book and makes clear that even after the return from exile that began around 538 B.C., God’s covenant promises were not fully accomplished in this period either. Indeed, the state of heart of most of the Israelites who returned from exile to their homeland, now a Persian province, seems to have been as bad as ever. The returned exiles rejected many of the divine rebukes that Malachi transmits with disbelief: “How have we...?” (see Mal. 1:2, 7 [twice]; 3:7, 8). They had so little interest in fitting worship (1:12) that God uttered the terrible wish that the temple doors would be shut and sacrifices come to an end (1:10). Even the priests, who were to teach the people God’s will (2:6–7), failed in their duties, and led themselves and the people astray (2:8). The Old Testament closes by reminding the faithful that their identity is known to God, who would preserve, protect, and radically renew them in ways that transcend the Sinai covenant (3:16–18). Until then, their faith is directed to God’s promise to eliminate sinners and to deliver the righteous who trust in Him in the Day of the LORD (4:1–6).

The ministry of John the Baptist picks up at precisely this point (Luke 1:16–17), anticipating the absolutely central role of Jesus Christ as the cornerstone of His church (Eph. 2:20). From the point of view of the Old Testament, only judgment and radical purification will reveal the church of God in all its glory. The visible church in the New Testament is easier to identify because it is not tied to a nation, but it too remains imperfect. Its purification has begun but is not yet accomplished. In the Book of Acts, for example, the church is defined by the repentance and faith of its members in Jesus Christ (Acts 2:37–41), but even with the experience of persecution, the early church had to be purged of those whose lives revealed their unbelief (Acts 5:1–11). Now, as then, God calls the church to continue in faith, love, repentance, and obedience (Revelation 2–3) until He brings her, free of every spot and blemish, into the marriage supper of the Lamb (Rev. 19:6–9).

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The Church in the New Testament

The church of Christ in the New Testament is a rich theme in the New Testament. The teaching of the New Testament about the church reaches far beyond the smaller or larger gatherings of people at riverbanks, in upper rooms, in city squares, in homes, and in other buildings. We might think that most of the information on the church in the New Testament is in the book of Acts; however, there is not a book of the New Testament that doesn't show some glorious aspect of the church of Jesus Christ. Let's survey some of the main elements of the New Testament's teaching on the church.

CALLED OUT

The main word in the New Testament is *ecclesia*, literally "gathering." It is at one level the gathering of people, whom God has called out of darkness into His marvelous light. The church has been there "from the beginning of the world, and will be to the end thereof" (Belgic Confession Art. 27). Since the mother promise in Paradise (Gen. 3:15), God has gathered His church around His Word and promise, guiding it according to His counsel. The essential truths about the church continue in every age. It is "a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a peculiar people" (1 Peter 2:9). God rules them through His Word and Spirit, and calls His people, all of them, to live as prophets, priests, and kings in our world.

As Israel was called to do in the Old Testament, so Scripture speaks of the church as a chosen, a *priestly nation* who are called to "shew forth the praises of him who hath called you" (1 Peter 2:9). They worship God, not just in stated assemblies of Christian worship, but in their hearts and lives, in their walk and witness.

SALT AND LIGHT

Among the gospels, it is especially Matthew that mentions the church (for example, Matt. 16:18; 18:17). In the Sermon on the Mount, Christ calls His precious people a city on a hill (Matt. 5:14). They are a community that shines as light and functions as salt in our world (Matt. 5:13–14). As light, they reflect the light of the Lord Jesus Christ. As salt, they act as a preservative so that the world doesn't rapidly disintegrate and decay as it otherwise would. They have this identity from being united to Christ, and this identity is bound up with their being "poor in spirit,"

"meek," etc. (Matt. 5:3–10). They will be persecuted for Christ's name, for lifting up His name, and associating themselves with His name. However, they have cause to rejoice and be exceedingly glad, for persecuted by the world, they share in the portion of the prophets that were before them—agents of hope and proclaimers of God's glory among the nations. Christ is in the midst of them, even if there are only two or three gathered in His name (Matt. 18:20). The gates of hell will not prevail against them (Matt. 16:18), for in them the kingdom of heaven manifests itself and spreads its message of God's reign and righteousness (Matt. 28:18–20).

FLOCK AND BRANCHES

The gospel of John never mentions the word "church," but the community of those united to Christ is in every chapter of His gospel. John especially likes to portray the church through pictures. Believers are those who drink of Him and become springs of water (John 7:37–38). Believers are those who follow the light and won't walk in darkness (John 8:12). Christ's church is the flock of the good Shepherd, who lays down His life for His flock (John 10:11). They are branches of Christ, the vine, and as they abide in Him, they bear much fruit (John 15:5).

As His flock, Christ leads and protects His church. He is the reason that it is a flock. For them, He has laid down His life. He also has other sheep that He will bring into His fold, and together these sheep will be safe under His shepherding (John 10:16). Though hated by the world, God's people are harbingers of a new creation. Whatever tribulation they may suffer, they should realize that Christ has overcome the world and will give them His peace (John 16:32–33).

BUILDING OR TEMPLE

Another picture of the church in the New Testament, especially in the epistles, is that of a building or temple (see 1 Cor. 3:16–17; Eph. 2:19–20). The foundation of this building or temple is Jesus Christ (1 Cor. 3:11). He is also called the cornerstone (1 Peter 2:6–8). The church is essentially the dwelling of God through His Spirit (Eph. 2:22; see also 1 Tim. 3:15). It is the Holy Spirit that grows this building in faith and love. Every member has his or her part as a living stone (1 Peter 4:4–10).

The people of God themselves have no home in this world. They are strangers and sojourners, called to holiness as the Lord Himself is holy (1 Peter 1:13–21). They undergo trials, even fiery trials (1 Peter 2:11; 4:12–13), but this is the refining work of God to fit them to be His dwelling (1 Peter 4:17–19).

BODY AND OLIVE TREE

Another picture of the church in the New Testament is that of a body and its members (Rom. 12:4 and following; 1 Corinthians 12). Christ is the head of the body (Col. 1:18), and because He is in heaven, the church is, because of Him, seated in heavenly places. “We are members of his body, of his flesh, and of his bones” (Eph. 5:30). The significance of the church being the body of Christ is that each member has a different function, though each member is also united together and governed by the head (Romans 12; 1 Corinthians 12). This unity gives fellowship, spiritual fellowship in Christ, as well as real fellowship in worship and in helping each other.

A similar picture for the church is that of the olive tree (Rom. 11:13–24). The idea is that both Jewish and Gentile believers are united. God did not have in mind two separate entities, but rather a united whole. At one time, we Gentiles who believed were part of a wild stock, but we were grafted on to the olive tree, now sharing the life-giving sap of the olive root. Others were cut off because

of unbelief; however, rather than look down on them, we should not be high-minded but realize that we stand only by grace. God is able to graft those who were broken off again, if it pleases Him, and for that we pray.

LAMPSTAND

A picture of the church that we meet with in the last book of the New Testament is that of the lampstand (Rev. 1:12–13). The lampstand that John sees in his vision has seven parts, symbolizing the seven churches (Rev. 1:20) and therein the whole church of God. They are to give light in our world. As Christ makes clear, not all these churches shine like they should. There are many threats and dangers such as dead orthodoxy, lovelessness, compromise, and lukewarmness, (see Revelation 2–3). However, Christ walks among the seven golden lampstands. He is the great Immanuel, God-with-us. Without Him, there is no church. Even when His church is lukewarm, He stands at the door and knocks (Rev. 3:20). He is ready to commune with any repenting sinner.

Because of His presence with His church, we can fight and triumph over every foe. Beasts, dragons, and serpents cannot prevail against Christ and His blood-bought victory for His people (Revelation 17–19). Should we not then shine with this knowledge and comfort, that the church would increase and grow up to the glory of the worthy Christ?



The Defining Distinctions of the Church

One of my sisters-in-law has taught kindergarten in the Netherlands. One day, she observed a boy and girl playing mother and father in a corner. The girl was bustling around the toy kitchen preparing a meal. The boy was sitting in a chair with his feet on the table, turning the pages of a magazine pretending it was his monthly church bulletin. Every once in a while he would shake his head and mutter, “It is all going wrong with the church!” What do our children pick up from us when we speak of the church of Christ?

Too often, they pick up from us a focus on what we see or think, rather than on what God sees and thinks. One way in which to remember God’s presence and work as the controlling category of thought for all our words and actions in His body, the church, is to consider its defining distinctions. This article will zero in on three of them.

GOD’S CHURCH: VISIBLE AND INVISIBLE

This distinction has become somewhat controversial since John Murray argued that it be abandoned.¹ His point was that people draw too sharp a distinction between the two and become satisfied with invisible or spiritual unity rather than seeking the visible displays of this unity. R. B. Kuypers argues for the distinction, as long as it is properly understood and used.² This is a confessional distinction and, more importantly, a biblical one.

How is it biblical? Only God knows who the elect and regenerate are. He alone knows the human heart infallibly (1 Cor. 4:5). The fruits of God’s redemption applied can be observed (1 Thess. 1:4), but the acts by which God changes hearts to produce such fruit are hidden from us. God alone sees those who are made perfect in heaven. We are told that on the day of judgment among the “virgins” making up Christ’s visible church, Christ alone identifies who His real people are (Matthew 25). A Judas was in the circle of the twelve, unnoticed by anyone except Christ. Even in the apostolic church with the fresh glow of Pentecost upon her, the apostles could not detect the presence of pious frauds like Ananias and Saphira (Acts 5:1–11) or like Simon Magus (Acts 8:1–25).

So what are the right uses of this distinction? First, it calls for discriminating experiential preaching. Jesus Christ Himself exemplifies this in His parables and sermons, but also in His seven letters to the churches of Asia Minor (Rev. 1–3). The apostle Paul also made use of judicious,

timely calls to repentance (2 Cor. 13:5) aimed at bringing people to faith in Christ. If we think we can purify the church on earth beyond such distinctions so that we only need to edify the believing, church history shows how futile such delusions are. Loving, warm, biblical searching of the heart must take place so that people might be drawn to Christ before it is too late. Our confessions model this beautifully. Think here not only of the seminal Canons of Dort, but also of the Belgic Confession’s careful distinction between hypocrites and true believers in article 29.

Second, this distinction calls for realism. No matter how vigilant we are to seek to allow only true professions of faith in Christ, we simply are not qualified to be infallible on this point. Sound biblical preaching must grapple with this painful fact—neither by ignoring it nor by pretending that it is not a big deal, but by warmly and urgently directing people to Christ. Presumption and despair are both deep ditches that destroy souls. Both must be avoided by preaching the gospel and the law in their biblical proportions as Hebrews makes clear repeatedly. Let us not despair when sin and hypocrisy rear their ugly head in church life. Let us not get puffed up with pride or complacency when church life seems to have a golden season of rest and progress.

Third, the distinction between the invisible and the visible church points out the hope of the church in such a way as to humble the pride of men. Our best efforts cannot secure the presence of a perfect, pure church on earth, but we must not allow love of ease to make us lazy in seeking the purity of the church. We must do all we can and yet humbly acknowledge the brokenness of this present world. We must, therefore, trust in the King of the church to gather, defend, and preserve His people for Himself.

This distinction can also be misused. It is misused when churches become content with the strange anomaly known as “confession of truth”—what Hugh Martin once called “that wicked monstrosity that is worse than professed unbelief.” It has also been known as the half-way covenant in Presbyterian history. Where this idea takes hold, a growing segment of a local church includes in its membership people, who by their own profession, are unconverted. Such people are allowed to participate in the spiritual exercises of electing office bearers and even being office bearers. It also displays itself when indifference to biblical church discipline is shrugged off and

numbers become more important than godliness in the life of a church. “We can’t know the heart,” “the Reformers didn’t really see discipline as one of the marks of a true church,” or “don’t chase people away” become half-truths abused in the service of the lie. It can also be abused when hypocrisy becomes such a preoccupation in preaching and congregational life that the saints of God are driven to the point that they doubt, despair, fear, and waver. Christ said of such spiritual abuse, it would be better to have a millstone hung around your neck and be cast into the sea (Matt. 18:6).

GOD’S CHURCH: MILITANT AND TRIUMPHANT

The church militant is the church on the battlefield, in the warzone, fighting the good fight of faith and reaching eagerly forward toward eternal life. Satan’s head is crushed, but the great serpent thrashes around in his death throes seeking to devour and destroy the church. Where the Lord builds His church, Satan seeks to build his too. Satan sows tares among the wheat, and divisions among the pure. He plants errors and misunderstandings. The world rushes in like a flood, especially in our western world where the church is slow to realize that we are no longer speaking to our culture from a position of moral authority but as a despised minority. The church on earth is persecuted, harassed, hated, and hounded. It seems, at times, like battles are being lost. It can become challenging to remember that the war is already won and cannot be lost in Christ.

In addition, the church sometimes wounds itself with squabbles, pride, and worldliness. An old rhyme puts it like this: “To live above with the saints we love, that will be glory. To live below with the saints we know, that is a different story.” How important then to remember the saints in heaven calling out, “Unto Him that loved us be glory forever!” How important to remember the King and Head of the church who said, “I will never leave you, I will be with you always even unto the end of the world” (See Matt. 28:20; Heb. 13:5). The church militant is already the church triumphant in this sense—as long as we keep our eyes on the King. Every Lord’s Day, the victory song of heaven drifts through the battlefield weariness to encourage saints bloodied by another week of battle: the victory is won, Hallelujah!

It can be a great encouragement to the church on earth to realize that the church triumphant is also incomplete. Yes, the spirits of just men made perfect before the throne of Christ call out concerning the saints battling on earth, “How long?” (Rev. 6:10). The Savior ever lives to make intercession for His battling saints. He prays for His Peters

by name and secures His own so that nothing and no one can separate them from the love of God (Romans 8, especially vv. 35–39).

Let us not be surprised or ashamed to fight the real spiritual battles of our times: against our own sins; against errors in doctrine, worship, and practice in the church on earth; and to seek the purification and encouragement of the church militant. It is a battle worth fighting for it is the winning side of history. The church is a battleship, not a luxury cruise. But it is a battleship going into a fight that has been won, is being won, and will be finally and totally won.

GOD’S CHURCH: AN ORGANISM AND AN ORGANIZATION

This is probably the least known of the three distinctions covered in this article; however, it is important. The term “organism” focuses on the living entity that makes up Christ’s body (Rom. 12:5, 1 Cor. 12:13). The word “organization” refers to the running of the church (Matt. 16:18). Both are in view in 1 Peter 2:5 when the Spirit speaks of living stones built into a spiritual house.

It is possible to go wrong here by despising the visible local church—“just me ’n Jesus, that is all there is to Christianity.” I recently saw a sign in Calgary advertising for the Quakers: “less religion, more spirituality.” “We don’t need office bearers; we are all the Lord’s people,” comes the cry. R. B. Kuiper says it well: “The truth that the church is an organization as well as an organism demands its organizational unity.” It is also possible to emphasize the organization of the church so highly that one is thought to be saved by “the church” rather than by faith in Christ.

It is clear from this meditation that all three distinctions touch on the same dynamics of the body of Christ on earth although from different points of view. Like any two-edged sword, they can be used to cut apart the church or to fight the good fight of faith. Let us cherish them, guard them, and fortify our hearts with them to the glory of God! Then, instead of shaking our heads with the kindergarten boy, we will lift up our heads and say that it is going all right in the church of Christ for the battling, struggling church belongs to Christ!

1. *Works*, vol. 1, 231–36.

2. R. B. Kuiper, *The Glorious Body of Christ*, 26–30.

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Helping Each Other Become What We Are: The Unity of the Church in John 17

The Christian life is mostly a matter of the Lord helping us realize who and what we are. Just as an acorn becomes an oak tree and a child becomes an adult, so a Christian becomes increasingly like Christ. Yet the Christian life is not a solitary endeavor. As individuals, we are being renewed in God's image in Christ. As a church, we are growing up as one as though we were one "perfect man" in Christ (Eph. 4:13). We are holy in the Lord and to the Lord (Deut. 7:6, 14:2; 1 Peter 2:9), and we must be holy as the Lord our God is holy (Lev. 19:2; 1 Peter 1:16). So, the church is one (Eph. 2:14) and must become one (1 Cor. 1:10) through sound doctrine, which fosters her living faith, her steadfast faith, and her fervent love by the Spirit.

Jesus's prayer in John 17:21–26 secured the oneness of His church in both respects. After praying for Himself (vv. 1–5) and for His Apostles (vv. 6–20), He concluded by praying for the church in every age. It is significant that His prayer for the church in every age focused on the oneness of the church. The oneness of the church for which Jesus prayed is visible, objective, and rooted in intra-Trinitarian oneness and love. This prayer is important because it shows us how we should be one as a church because we are one as a church in communion with the triune God.

The oneness for which Christ prayed is visible: "That they all may be one; as thou, Father, art in me, and I in thee, that they also may be one in us: that the world may believe that thou hast sent me" (v. 21). It is easy to mitigate the importance of pursuing church unity in favor of the objective nature of the church. If some have stressed external unity at the expense of sound doctrine and a common faith in Christ, then have not others run to the opposite extreme? A family may be one by blood, but they do not function like a family when they dwell in separate houses and don't speak to one another. Christ prayed that we would be one so that the world would believe that the Father sent the Son. Few will see a broken home and say, "I want my family to be like that family." While our objective oneness with Christ and with His people is the only reason why our oneness can become visible to others, it must become visible nonetheless. This does not mean that we should pursue unity at the expense of truth. Doing so has been the great sin uniting so much of the church in the past century. It means that we should pursue unity through the truth. This may not mean melding Christians into a single mega-denomination. Our consciences differ and we are subject to Christ rather than to men. Yet as Ryle put it, we should "keep the walls of separation as low

as possible, and shake hands over them as often as you can."¹ A great example of this is the fact that the London Baptist Confession of 1689 was modeled after the Westminster Confession of Faith of 1646. Practices like these promote unity in a way that anti-confessional churches cannot compete with, let alone ecumenical movements that jettison truth for the sake of institutional oneness. Because our oneness resides in one God and Father, one Lord Jesus Christ, and one Spirit, we must pursue oneness in the truth that unites us to the triune God. Only then can we endeavor to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace (Eph. 4:3).

The oneness for which Christ prayed is objective: "And the glory which thou gavest me I have given them; that they may be one, even as we are one" (John 17:22). Christ says that the glory that the Father gave Him, He gave to His church already. Glorification is the capstone of our redemption, including our resurrection and final perfection. However, as one hymn put it, glory has begun in the saints now. Paul could even refer to glorification as an accomplished fact for believers (Rom. 8:30). The Westminster Larger Catechism for this reason reminds us that we have communion with Christ in glory even in this life (WLC, 83). The blessings that we will receive in Christ in the future are of the same kind as those we experience now, though differing in degree. Building on the Apostles' Creed, the church is one because it is holy in Christ, because it is catholic (universal) in its extent throughout the world, and because it is built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ being the chief corner stone (Eph. 2:20). There is one church and the church is one because of apostolic succession. Yet her apostolic succession lies in the fact that she is the heir of the gospel that the apostles preached. Her objective oneness, or unity, is based not on her communion with the bishop of Rome, but on her communion with God in Christ by the Holy Spirit. This is why Jesus prayed, "Sanctify them through thy truth: thy word is truth" (John 17:17). The church, consisting of the families of the earth from every tribe, tongue, people, and nation (Rev. 7:9) who call on the name of the Lord, are the true catholic church (Joel 2:32; Acts 2:21; Rom. 10:13). She is catholic because she is one, holy, and apostolic. Our primary duty flowing from the oneness of the church is that we must learn to speak the same thing and be of one mind in the Lord (1 Cor. 1:10). Our objective unity in the truth is the only way to promote and produce our subjective unity in friendship, fellowship, and worship.

The oneness for which Christ prayed is rooted in intra-Trinitarian oneness and love (John 17:23–26). The reference to “being made perfect in one” in verse 23 is undoubtedly the backdrop of Paul’s teaching about the role of teaching officers in Ephesians 4:11–16. The Father’s love for His people is rooted in His love for His Son, with the result that the Father will bring His people to see the Son’s glory when they are with Him in glory (John 17:24). Verse 25 highlights what Scripture says elsewhere, giving it wings in prayer: the Father gives people to the Son, the world cannot know the Father apart from the Son, and the Son reveals the Father to whom He wills (Matt. 11:27). Christ’s people, however, know Him and experience God’s love, which is shed abroad in their hearts (Rom. 5:5). Jesus’s prayer reflects the fact that the Father chose His people and the Son reveals the Father to them with the result that they know the right God in the right way (John 17:3). It is by the Holy Spirit that they are “taught of God” (John 6:45). The Spirit leads God’s elect to the Father by glorifying Christ to them and in them (John 16:8–11, 14). Just as Christ receives all things from the Father (16:15), the Spirit receives all things from Christ (16:14) in order to guide believers to the Father through Christ by means of the truth (16:13). Christ has declared the Father’s name to us now, and He “will declare it” in the future (17:26). The church’s highest privilege is to know the Father, through the Son, by the Spirit. The persons of the Godhead are one in essence, will, purpose, and action. As Manton once noted, while individual Christians are renewed in God’s image, they can imitate the Trinity only as a church.²

The bottom line is that it is literally impossible to live the Christian life alone. Those who say that they have no time for the church are unintentionally saying that they have no

time for Christ. Those who reject the bride insult the bridegroom. We must be one in the Lord because we are one in the Lord. How can we pray for holiness if we fight against Christ’s prayer for it? Christ prays for Christians, but He also prays for the Christian church. Do we pray for her because Christ does? Do we love her in the Spirit because the Spirit is her life? Do we long to be with the Father’s family on earth because we look forward to being with His family in heaven? The church is one through the truth, and the church must pursue unity in the truth. The church is these things, and she does these things because it is her highest honor to know the triune God and to reflect His oneness as the family of God, the body of Christ, and the temple of the Holy Spirit. The oneness of the church is ultimately a matter of identity and of sanctification. Every Christian is part of the one body of Christ. That is who we are, whether or not we act like it. Being a Christian creates a three-way relationship between God, the believer, and the church. Cutting any part out of this picture results in a mutilated quasi-Christian. Being part of the one church of Christ is our honor, and it should be our joy as well. The church is one, and she should become one. Let us aim to see Christ’s prayer come to fruition by growing up in the spiritual nursery of the church and learning to become who we are and who we were meant to be, together with the entire church.

1. As cited in Iain H. Murray, *Evangelicalism Divided: A Record of Crucial Change in the Years 1950 to 2000* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 2001), 311.

2. Thomas Manton, *Sermons on John 17, The Complete Works* (London: Nisbet, 1870), 10:333.

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The Diversity of the Church

It happened in Jakarta, capital city of Indonesia and one of the most densely populated areas in the world. Before my trip, I had read about the overpopulation, poverty, slums, traffic congestion, and pollution. Now, I was witnessing it firsthand. After taking it all in for hours on end, it left me feeling helpless and overwhelmed. I simply could not get away from it. In the car, safely behind tinted windows, all I could do was watch the incessant flow of people all around me. Then a reality struck me. I am white. I realized that for the first time in my life I was in a place where I was an extreme minority. Surrounded by millions of people, I figured not one of them looked like me, talked like me, or was living a lifestyle that resembled that of my own. I had thought myself to be a pretty experienced traveler. Now it dawned on me that up until now I had only visited places where it was possible for me to blend into the crowd. Not so in Asia. The moment I got out of that car I would stick out like a sore thumb. In all honesty, that truth was a little unsettling.

GOD INTENTIONALLY CREATED DIVERSITY

Today the word diversity may leave a bad taste in our mouths. The liberal left has hijacked this beautiful phenomenon and has used it to celebrate sin. This, however, does not take away from the fact that God created this universe so diverse that the scope of it extends far beyond our human comprehension. In Job 38:22 God asks Job: “Hast thou entered in to the treasures of the snow?” Snow looks quite uniform to us; it is white and cold. And yet, though with the naked eye we cannot see it, we know that every single snow crystal is unique.

If God bothered to make the snow so diverse, what about humanity? We marvel that every human is unique, but the diversity does not end there. Humans, when separated by place and/or time, differ greatly from one another. As a rule of thumb, the further we travel from the *place* where we were born and raised, the more people will look, act, and think differently than we do. My experience in Jakarta served as a reminder of this. Anyone who has had the opportunity to travel to places outside the western world has been confronted with the reality that “white” people only make up about one-tenth of the entire world population.

The same principle also applies to *time*. Our grandparents grew up in an era that was so different from ours that they might as well have come from a different country. Think of how different the technology was that was available to them, or the world events that shaped their lives. The book, *The Travels of Marco Polo*, will give you a good idea of how time and place make people to differ. Marco Polo describes his journeys through places like western China (some 6,000 miles away) in the later part of the Middle Ages (about 700 years ago). The story includes minute accounts of the startling customs and

beliefs of some of the tribes he met on the way. If somehow, we had the opportunity to meet some of these people, their habits would probably leave us completely speechless—and vice versa. But here is the reality: the community we live in, namely, the people that we consider to be “like us,” or “normal,” is but a miniscule portion of all the billions of people that have ever lived on earth from creation until now. That can only mean one thing: God intentionally designed the human race to be enormously diverse, and He did it for His own purpose.

THE PROBLEM WITH DIVERSITY

If God intentionally created humanity to be so diverse, what could possibly have been the reason? In this fallen world, diversity has caused a lot of trouble. People just don’t seem to get along. Throughout history, we see nothing but strife and war. Humanity has gone to extreme lengths to either abuse diversity for its own purposes or try to do away with it. Particularly damaging has been Charles Darwin’s evolution theory, which allowed for the abominable idea that there are multiple human races and that some races are more developed than others. This idea ended up serving as one of the most prominent excuses for slavery, sterilization programs, and ultimately, the genocide of Jews and other “sub humans” in Nazi extermination camps. Unfortunately, we must conclude that today the world still has not learned from these horrific events.

Wars and genocide based on race, religion, or political ideals still occur around the world. So, what could have been God’s purpose of all this misery? In a negative sense, we could say that God instituted diversity precisely to keep people from living out extreme sinfulness and pride. When people are not fighting each other over conflicting interests, they tend to collaborate. The problem is that synergy generated by sinful people is always directed to the pursuit of sin rather than God’s glory. That may sound extreme, but this is the very reason why God caused the division of tongues at the building of the Tower of Babel (Gen. 11:1–9). In the words of Geerhardus Vos: “Unity was to afford the possibility for founding a gigantic empire, glorifying man in his independence of God.” Ever since, the rise and fall of large empires has been a testimony to the futility of man’s effort to unite the world under one banner. God will not allow it, and diversity has stopped vain and proud men from accomplishing it.

GOD’S MANIFOLD WISDOM REVEALED IN DIVERSITY

We can read about the positive purpose for diversity in Ephesians 3:8–11. In verses 8–9 the Apostle Paul explains that he was called to preach Christ among all nations and to reveal to them what is the fellowship of the “mystery.” The mystery Paul talks about is the gospel of grace: that through Christ we can

have fellowship with God again. But it does not stop there. The meaning of the word “fellowship” is to be in a community of friends that have a shared interest. A shared interest is what binds people together. People often become friends when they find that they have a shared interest, whatever it may be. It gives them something to talk about, something to share and enjoy together. However, because of diversity and limited resources, interests are much more often contested rather than shared, pitching people against one another.

But now we see the manifold wisdom of God. By giving us Jesus Christ, God gave to the entire human race an overarching common interest that all of us can share in abundance without fear of ever running out. Christ is the secret formula, the mystery, that creates the most unlikely friendships. It has been said that, during the days of the early church, outsiders would marvel at Christian communities because this motley group of Jews, Gentiles, Greeks, Romans, rich, poor, freemen, and slaves, all got along. These people normally despised each other. However, Aristides, after having spied on those strange Christians, concluded his report to Roman Emperor Hadrian with these words: “Behold, how they love one another!” Why? Because this diverse group of Christians was so filled with love for their Savior Jesus Christ that they could not help but share it with one another. This miracle is so great that it not only amazes the Gentiles; even the angels in heaven are witnessing God’s Spirit at work in the church, and they marvel at His manifold wisdom (Eph. 3:10–11).

DIVERSITY AS GOD’S GIFT TO THE CHURCH

Diversity can make us uncomfortable, also as believers. It compels us to come out of our comfort zones. However, for people to come together, their shared interest must be greater than their differences. So too in the church, Christ must be

the Christian’s greatest interest. If we are denying our love and devotion to other Christians because we cannot get past the differences—their opinions, the way they dress, their skin color, or strange manners—what does that say about our greatest interest? Embracing diversity was the hallmark of the early church; it ought to be ours as well. The world embraces diversity in the pursuit of sin. Let the church embrace diversity in the pursuit of holiness. Diversity is a God-given means for sanctification. How? Diversity gives us different experiences, perspectives, strengths, and weaknesses. This allows us to support, comfort, and correct each other, but accepting this takes humility. It would be much easier for us if we could just proselytize strangers to our Reformed standards. However, it is much more beneficial for us when we look beyond our church walls and recognize and rejoice in what God is doing in other churches, in other countries, and in the hearts of other people that are very unlike us. Because when you, like the angels, allow yourself to be a witness of God’s work in others, it will give you a foretaste of heaven.

If this is not enough, it might be added that the Bible tells us in Revelation 7:9 that one day we will be gathered with saints from all tongues and nations, a crowd so large that no one can number it. Many of these saints will be coming from places far away and times long gone or yet to come. They will have lived their lives with different skin colors, different tastes, different political ideas, and different technology from the most primitive to the most sophisticated. From our earthly lives we will have nothing in common with these saints except one thing: our love for our Savior Jesus Christ. What a worship service that will be! Should not our worship here below reflect this?

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The Church and the World

“Church” and “world” are massive realities. What a mass of people constitutes the world that is passing away! What an innumerable multitude will one day form the church in eternal glory! This vastness makes the theme “church and world” so broad and yet so personal, for we are somewhere among these masses. How do we stand in relation to the church and the world?

THE CHURCH SAVED FROM THE WORLD

This article is not focused on the world as God’s beautiful creation, but as the realm of life lived without God. Scripture describes the world as:

- In the darkness of ignorance. The Word “was in the world...and the world knew him not” (John 1:10). The world cannot receive the Spirit of truth, but listens to false prophets (John 14:17; 1 John 4:1–5).
- Under the dominion of Satan. Satan is called “the prince of this world” (John 12:31) and the “god of this world,” who “deceiveth the whole world” (2 Cor. 4:4; Rev. 12:9).
- Filled with sin. “The whole world lieth in wickedness” (1 John 5:19). Paul calls it “this present evil world” (Gal. 1:4). Peter speaks of the “pollutions of the world” (2 Peter 2:20).
- Loving sin and hating Christ. John 3:19–20 records that “light is come into the world, and men loved darkness rather than light...every one that doeth evil hateth the light.” Jesus told the Jews the world hated Him (John 7:7).
- Under judgment. Paul warns of being “condemned with the world” (1 Cor. 11:32). God gives His law “that every mouth may be stopped, and all the world may become guilty before God” (Rom. 3:19).

Let us not define the world by the smiling faces around us, but by the Word of the all-knowing God. Stop and reflect on how the world is the system of life in bondage to sin and heading for damnation. Will that not stir your soul?

The gripping reality is that we all naturally belong to this realm because the world is fallen humanity void of saving grace. Ephesians 2 is clear that not only Gentile Christians once “walked according to the course of this

world” (v. 2), but “we all had our conversation in times past in the lusts of our flesh...and were by nature the children of wrath, even as others” (v. 3). Even Paul, a covenant child and church member, found himself no different from the world.

The wonder of the gospel is that God sent His Son “who gave himself for our sins, that he might deliver us from this present evil world, according to the will of God” (Gal. 1:4). The only-begotten Son was born in this evil world. The pure Christ walked in this defiled world. Yet, the spotless Surety died as a substitute under the condemnation hanging over the world. The Prince of Life then rose to now call sinners out of the kingdom of darkness, cleanse them with His blood, cover them with His righteousness, break Satan’s chains, bring them into His kingdom, and make them belong to His redeemed church.

The sign, seal, and promise of this redemption is given to us in baptism, so that we would find all our deliverance from the world in Christ. If He has delivered us, then let us marvel at His sovereign grace that made a difference between us and the world, where there was no difference by nature.

THE CHURCH SANCTIFIED IN THE WORLD

We confess in the Apostles’ Creed, “I believe a holy, catholic Church.” In His covenant, God sanctifies or sets the church apart from the world to belong to Him. By His saving grace, the church is holy because it belongs to Christ who is her sanctification in God’s sight and her source of sanctifying grace through His Spirit.

The church is a colony of the heavenly city. When Paul writes to the church in Philippi, a Roman colony in Greece, he says “our conversation is in heaven” (Phil. 3:20). The word “conversation” here is *politeuma* or citizenship. Isn’t that amazing? God’s people are already citizens of the glorious heavenly city (Heb. 12:22). The contrast between the heavenly city and the world is a contrast between light and darkness, sin and holiness, death and life, misery and bliss, dishonor and glory, and curse and blessing. One is under Satan’s dominion; the other has a perfect, loving, and glorious King. Oh, let us seek to live to the honor of this blessed King!

As an earthly colony, the church is to display the blessedness of God’s city, the loveliness of His laws, the wonder of His grace, the richness of His provision, and the holiness of His Word. Jesus declares, “Ye are the light of the world. A city that is set on an hill cannot be hid”

(Matt. 5:14). His presence as the light makes those described in the beatitudes light. This light of grace cannot be confined within church walls but will show in believers' lives in a dark world. The purpose is "that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father which is in heaven" (Matt. 5:16). The word "good" has the sense of being winsome and beautifully good. Let our lives be a winsome appeal for the gospel to God's glory.

The more godless a society becomes, the more opportunity the church has to show the beauty of God's grace. R. B. Kuiper writes, "The stronger the contrast of the church and the world, the greater is the glory of the church. White never seems quite so white as when it is seen against a black background." Let us never think we need to try to be like the world to reach the world. If we live like the world, the world will see no reason to add a veneer of Christianity to their lives. Let us seek grace to be and live as true citizens of the church as a sanctified, heavenly colony in the world.

THE CHURCH STRUGGLING WITH THE WORLD

The church colony is on enemy territory. Though the world does not always show hatred, the words of Christ remain true: "If ye were of the world, the world would love his own: but because ye are not of the world, but I have chosen you out of the world, therefore the world hateth you" (John 15:19). No wonder "all that will live godly in Christ Jesus shall suffer persecution" (2 Tim. 3:12). The self-righteous are offended by the cross, darkness-lovers are irritated by the light, sin-lovers feel accused by holy living, and the strong-willed oppose the summons to bow for King Jesus. R. B. Kuiper writes, "If the church loved God less, the world would persecute it less violently and it would oppose the world less vigorously." Could it be we do not suffer such hatred because we do not shine with such light?

The church's calling is to resist these sinful manifestations of hatred against God. James 4:4 is black and white: "Ye adulterers and adulteresses, know ye not that the friendship of the world is enmity with God? whosoever therefore will be a friend of the world is the enemy of God" (cf. 1 John 2:15–16). Romans 12:2 is also clear: "Be not conformed to this world: but be ye transformed by the renewing of your mind" (cf. James 1:27). God calls the church not to love but to oppose the sinfulness of the world.

The problem is that the sin of the world is in our hearts. The only way to live in opposition to the world is by the grace that made Paul confess: "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). Paul knew he was as hell-worthy as the worst worldly and could only be saved by Christ crucified. His cross revealed God's reconciling, gracious love and exposed the world's condemned, Christ-rejecting corruption. When we see these two realities, we find the cross planted between us and the world, crucifying the world in our heart. All other barriers we build to prevent worldliness will prove deficient on their own. The church militant is the church under the cross. Are you under the cross or does the world come between you and the cross?

THE CHURCH SENT INTO THE WORLD

The church militant is not a colony surrounded by a high, defensive wall with only a harbor to allow supply ships from the mother country and for the rest having no contact with its local enemies. Paul's confession "I am crucified to the world" didn't make him head for a desert monastery, but constrained him to go into the world with the gospel of the cross. The church saved from the world is sent into the world.

Only the church has what the world needs. Shall we then not proclaim that gospel to the world in organized ways and in daily life, "holding forth the word of life, in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation" (Phil. 2:15–16)? Shall this proclamation not be joined with a desire to heed the call, "As we have therefore opportunity, let us do good unto all men, especially unto them who are of the household of faith" (Gal. 6:10)? Shall we not pray, "Thy kingdom come!" until we see "the kingdoms of this world are become the kingdoms of our Lord, and of his Christ" (Rev. 11:15)?

As His little band of disciples gathered round him prior to His ascension, the Lord Jesus said, "All power is given unto me in heaven and in earth. Go ye therefore, and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost: teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you: and, lo, I am with you alway, even unto the end of the world. Amen" (Matt. 28:18–20). How could these fishermen bring philosophers, Pharisees, adulterers, and idolaters into Christ's church? Impossible! But Christ has all authority and might. He will use them as His messengers and use His message to save more sinners from the world, sanctify them in the world, set them in battle against the world, and send them with the gospel into the world so that His church would extend to the ends of the earth.

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The Government of the Church— Her Offices and Order

Take heed therefore unto yourselves, and to all the flock, over the which the Holy Ghost hath made you overseers, to feed the church of God, which he hath purchased with his own blood.

—ACTS 20:28

In his moving farewell message to the Ephesian elders, the apostle Paul reminds them that, by divine appointment, they are entrusted with the government of the congregation. Strikingly, he reminds them that their appointment as overseers of the congregation—that is, those who are in charge of the congregation—is not the result of human activity, but rather the result of the Holy Spirit’s activity.

The recognition of that fact is significant as we consider the government of the church of Jesus Christ. In other words, the exalted Christ sent His Spirit into the world not only to render His redemptive work fruitful in the hearts of sinners, resulting in the formation of local bodies of believers, but, by His Spirit, He is also directly involved in their government.

What a remarkable affirmation of Christ’s loving and all-encompassing commitment to the well-being of His church—and specifically of local congregations! Thus, the proper, efficient, effective government of the church is not the expression of human ingenuity, but rather it is the engagement of the exalted King of the church. By His Spirit, He calls and equips redeemed sinners to be His human agents to accomplish His work until the building of His spiritual temple has been completed (Eph. 2:20–22).

However, Paul not only reminds the elders of their divine appointment, he also instructs them what they must do on Christ’s behalf: they must feed the church of God. The word “feed” in our text refers to the all-encompassing work of a shepherd who in order to feed his flock must also direct, protect, and discipline his flock. The overseers of the church of God must care for their charge in the manner described for us in Psalm 23. This messianic Psalm points us to the great “Shepherd and Bishop of our souls” (1 Peter 2:25). Thus, it is the great Shepherd of the flock, our blessed Lord Jesus Christ, who calls the overseers of the church to shepherd the flock on His behalf.

Paul also gives the elders a compelling motive for being engaged diligently and faithfully in the work for which the Holy Spirit has consecrated them. He tells them that the local church they serve belongs to the universal church of God that He has purchased with His own blood. This is obviously an explicit apostolic affirmation of the divinity of the Lord Jesus Christ, who as God manifest in the flesh, shed His precious blood to purchase His flock.

To be charged with the oversight of the flock of the Lord Jesus Christ is, therefore, not a small matter. The health, spiritual prosperity, and protection of His flock hinges on the manner in which we engage ourselves in that task. As we do so, we need to recognize that we are called to care for a flock that lives and functions in a very hostile environment. A powerful, three-headed enemy—Satan, the world, and our sinful flesh—is relentlessly pursuing the destruction of the flock of Christ, engaging in every conceivable means to achieve this objective.

That very concern prompted Paul to exhort the Ephesian elders (both teaching and ruling elders) to be diligent and faithful in their oversight. Following our text, he writes, “For I know this, that after my departing shall grievous wolves enter in among you, not sparing the flock. Also of your own selves shall men arise, speaking perverse things, to draw away disciples after them” (vv. 29–30). That vulnerability was one of the reasons that compelled Paul to promptly appoint overseers or elders wherever he, as the Holy Spirit’s instrument, planted churches.

The exercise of that divinely appointed oversight Christ has used, and continues to use, for the well-being and preservation of His blood-bought church. We should marvel that, in spite of the fact that the history of the New Testament church is littered with human failure and heretical departures from the gospel, the church of the Lord Jesus Christ is alive and well in the twenty-first century. The uninterrupted existence of His church can only be attributed to His uninterrupted engagement as our exalted King and Intercessor at the Father’s right hand.

It was Christ’s direct engagement as King of His church that precipitated the great Protestant Reformation of the sixteenth century. Moved and taught by His Spirit, the Reformers not only recovered and freshly articulated the foundational truths of the gospel, but they also reformed the government of the church. When the Reformation dawned, the government of the church had become utterly corrupt and blatantly challenged the supremacy of the Lord Jesus Christ.

The Reformation became profoundly visible in a thoroughgoing reformation of church government. Especially John Calvin, the great Swiss Reformer, did groundbreaking work in recovering, formulating, and implementing the biblical principles and precepts that pertain to the spiritual oversight of the flock of Jesus Christ. The *Ecclesiastical*

Ordinances of Geneva became the foundation for the formulation of Reformed church polity.

Via a chronological and sequential progression of Reformed Synods, the biblical principles embedded in Calvin's *Ecclesiastical Ordinances* were incorporated in the definitive church polity of the Reformed Churches of the Netherlands, namely, the venerated Church Order adopted by the 1618–1619 Synod of Dort. This church order is the ripe fruit of Calvin's full recovery of the spiritual oversight articulated in our text. Therefore, most churches that have emerged from the historic Reformed Church of the Netherlands are governed by the foundational structure of the 1618–1619 Church Order of Dort.

One of the foundational truths codified in this church order is that the exalted Christ is the sovereign King of His church. As the great Office-bearer of His church, He executes His three offices as her Prophet, Priest, and King by raising up redeemed sinners to engage in these offices on His behalf. The Reformed Church therefore recognizes that this three-fold ministry of Christ must be reflected in the Spirit-initiated oversight of the church.

Thus Christ engages in His prophetic ministry through the proclamation of His Word by His called servants, in His priestly ministry through the deacon's office, and in His kingly ministry through the elder's office. The men called and set apart to engage in these respective offices are charged by Christ to shepherd the flock He has purchased with His blood. By way of their labor, the three offices of Christ must function in His church. Through the preaching of His Word, Christ (as Prophet) instructs and feeds His flock, through the ministry of the deacons, Christ (as Priest) cares and provides for His flock, and through the ministry of the elders, Christ (as King) governs, protects, and disciplines His flock.

To safeguard and stimulate the proper functioning of the three offices of Christ, the Reformed church has adopted a church order that seeks to implement all the stated and implied biblical principles that define the execution of these offices. Even though the Church Order as such is not an inspired document, it is a careful and practical application of all that Scripture teaches regarding the shepherding of the flock of Jesus Christ.

The biblical principles embedded in the Church Order of Dort are the following:

1. Christ alone is the King of the church—a church purchased with His blood.
2. Scripture alone—*sola Scriptura*—has authority in the church.
3. Each local church is autonomous (i.e., self-governing).
4. Each local church is a unique and complete manifestation of the body of Christ.

5. Each local church, regardless of size, is an equally valid manifestation of the body of Christ.
6. Christ's official ministry in the church functions by way of the office-bearers of the local church.
7. Christ's authority is vested in the local church and its office-bearers.
8. The office-bearers of the local church have no authority beyond her boundaries.
9. A local body of believers only becomes a legitimate manifestation of the body of Christ when the offices of Christ are instituted by the ordination of office-bearers.
10. The members of the local church are all office-bearers in the sense that they bear the office of all believers.
11. The local church must federate with other local churches of like confession to give expression to Christ's mandate that His body be one.
12. The authority of the major assemblies of a federation of churches (denomination) is derived from the local churches and only functions when these assemblies are convened.
13. The authority to do these works of the church is vested exclusively with the local church:
 - a. The preaching of the gospel
 - b. The administration of the sacraments
 - c. The election and ordination of office-bearers
 - d. The exercise of Christian discipline
14. Major (broader) assemblies (for example, Synod and/or Classis) exist for the benefit of the local churches—not vice versa.

In seeking to adhere to the church order, we are not merely perpetuating a desirable and profitable tradition. Rather, we recognize the Church Order of Dort as being part of the rich heritage of the Protestant Reformation. That reformation restored in the church the supremacy of Christ and His Word. The recognition of, and submission to, that supremacy is the over-arching theme of the Church Order.

May our faithful adherence to the biblical principles embedded in the Church Order thus equip us to take heed to all the flock, over which the Holy Ghost has made us overseers so that we, by God's grace, may be Christ's instruments to feed the church of God, which he hath purchased with his own blood.

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Becoming Part of the Church

Let us begin by considering a few thoughts about what “church” means and then get into a few practical applications you might find more interesting. After all, we should first know what we’re talking about before we talk about it.

WHAT IS THE CHURCH?

Who can forget Christ’s famous promise in Matthew 16:18, “I will build my church”? Jesus spoke of one church. Article 27 of the Belgic Confession defines the church similarly by saying, “We believe and profess one catholic or universal Church, which is a holy congregation of true Christian believers, all expecting their salvation in Jesus Christ, being washed by His blood, sanctified and sealed by the Holy Spirit.” This means all believers everywhere make up the one true, world-wide church. The only way to become part of that church is through the new birth and true faith in Jesus Christ. But that’s not the end of the discussion.

In the very next article in the Confession, persons are admonished to become and remain part of the true church, boldly stating that “outside of it there is no salvation.” Such a claim only stands to reason since, if the true church is all believers, to live *apart* from that church means I am, by definition, not a believer. Add to this the fact that in the days the Confessions were adopted, there were only the Roman church, the Reformed church, and a few sects. So, to not belong to the Reformed church would have been the equivalent of joining a false church or being part of no church at all—a radical concept in the years immediately following the Reformation. Things have changed, of course. There are myriads of churches today all believing to be correct and true. How can I tell them apart? To which church should I join myself?

WHERE IS THE CHURCH?

In years gone by, the typical Christian man would remain in the church in which he grew up. The typical married Christian woman would become a member in her husband’s church after marriage. Today, with increasing mobility and increasing connectivity, settling in the church of one’s birth has become increasingly uncommon. Sadly, people sometimes accept job offers, purchase homes, and resettle their families before searching for a sound church in the area—if there even is one.

WHY CHURCH?

Complicating matters further is the consumer-like attitude many adopt toward church. “If I don’t like what’s offered

locally, I can listen to services online.” “I’m not into institutional religion.” “It wasn’t a good fit for us.” The explanations (and excuses) are many and varied, but they often reflect a common though unspoken sentiment—churches are meant to meet my needs. The result is membership transfers across town, across county, or even across country, sometimes serially or, worse yet, a checking out of church life altogether and its inevitable slide toward secularism. Do you have a “what’s-in-it-for-me” attitude toward church?

WHICH CHURCH?

Returning to the Belgic Confession for a moment, Article 29 should be dusted off for use more often than perhaps it is. This Article teaches us to discern what a true (sound) church is, affirming three essential qualities or marks derived from Scripture:

If the pure doctrine of the gospel is preached therein; if it maintains the pure administration of the sacraments as instituted by Christ; if church discipline is exercised in punishing of sin; in short, if all things are managed according to the pure Word of God, all things contrary thereto rejected.

How many people actually change churches for reasons having to do with one or more of these marks? How many will make the effort to pray for and labor over and communicate with their church first before leaving? What if everyone left a church for lesser reasons? What would remain? If there are serious problems with one or more of these marks in your church, who will take up the challenge of reformation if it is indeed needed? It’s easy to walk away from an ailing church, just like it’s easy to walk away from a person destined for hell. John Flavel once famously wrote, “Be not quick to bury the church before she be dead.”

BODY PARTS

The church, as mentioned earlier, is quite splintered now. There are many local manifestations of the true church geographically and culturally dispersed throughout the world. Is this a cause for lament or despair?

The human body was one of the metaphors the apostle Paul was inspired to use when describing the church. Each part is uniquely situated, uniquely fitted for the function and purpose God gave it (1 Cor. 12), and each part is to contribute to the whole (Eph. 4). This is true of members with respect to their local congregation, and it’s also true

of Christ's worldwide church where so many believers and their churches together make up His body here on earth.

ABIDE

In 1 Corinthians 7:17 Paul gives us another principle to weigh when it comes to belonging to a church. How so? Perhaps you were born into a church that exhibited a healthy measure of the three marks. The Lord typically would have you abide in it, contributing your gifts and abilities to her welfare. Employment might lead you away. Marriage might. But don't just wander off because the grass appears greener elsewhere. Picture your hands and eyes leaving your body because they espied a more handsome or beautiful or stronger physique elsewhere. Labor and pray for the health of your church. Providence placed you there. Mercy blessed you there. God used one man to initiate a worldwide reformation. Who knows what He might do with you!

I'M HERE TO SERVE

I remember many years ago hearing second-hand a complaint about the church I pastored. "They make everybody *do* something there!" While that wasn't even close to being accurate, I was thankful to hear it. Hands don't do what feet do. Eyes don't do what ears do. Each has its place and function. What can *you* do? What gifts, in however small or great a measure, has God given you? How can you use those to bless someone in your church? Outside of church? Can you repair an old widow's shed or faucet? Can you periodically provide childcare for a needy couple? All service doesn't happen in a pulpit or on a mission field. Bezaleel and Aholiab were wise-hearted men "in whom the LORD put wisdom and understanding," tradesmen who built the tabernacle (Exod. 36:1). What part of the church body can *you* help? Who outside your church can God use you to bless?

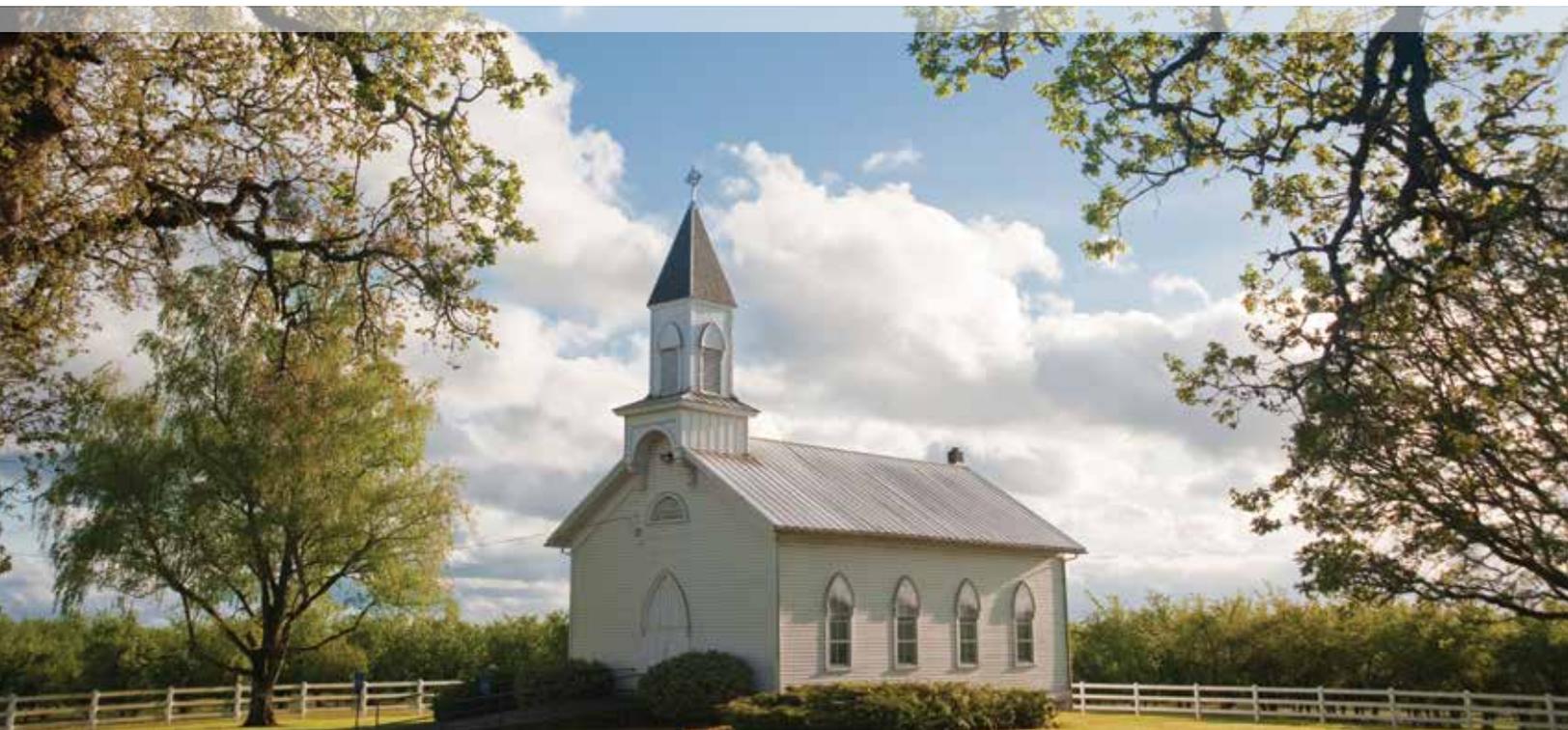
When we enter the sanctuary on the Lord's Day, we ought to go there to *give* to the Lord, not just receive—to give worship, attentiveness, obedience, and an eagerness to be equipped and motivated to give whatever service we can to further His kingdom and bless His people, also during the other six days of the week. Let's pray that way before church each Lord's Day morning. If one would study the many, many passages both in the Old and New Testaments about how and whom God would have us serve, we might never think of service in quite the same way again.

Not sure how to contribute? Ask! Ask the deacons, the elders, the pastor, the youth group leader, the elderly, the busy mom with children, etc. Someone will surely know how and where you fit in. Be observant. You'll be sure to spot *someone* who is lonely, who has trouble fitting in, or who is in need of help and/or encouragement. We live in a selfish era. Resist such an attitude. Pray for great grace.

I'M HERE TO STAY

One of the most touching remarks I ever heard as a minister, made when I was at a farewell gathering after accepting a call to another church, was, "Can't our ministers grow old with us?" There's something beautiful about a church that grows old together and that is nurtured by successive generations growing to maturity. If you *must* leave a church, make sure you can't help but do so. Remember the marks. Try to be a help, not a hindrance. Be patient, not rash. Be praying, not complaining. Plead Scripture, not preference. Try to be a blessing wherever you go, not when. And remember, if you find a perfect church elsewhere, don't join it; you'll spoil it.

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Failure *and* Disappointment *in* Scripture

If we organized a conference on “Failure and Disappointment,” do you think anyone would come? If you wrote a book on that subject, do you think anyone would buy it? Failure and disappointment are not popular topics. They don’t sell tickets or books. They don’t generate clicks, as Internet marketers assure us. We don’t want to think about our own failures and disappointments, never mind hear about those of others. We live in a “success culture” that idolizes victory and fulfillment. But it’s all so unreal.

When we turn to the Bible, we’re given a deep dose of reality. Failure and disappointment are on just about every page. Whether we like it or not, that’s much truer to life than the success narratives that we aspire to and are trying to write for ourselves. By all means, aim high, but recognize that no one escapes failure and disappointment. So, we might as well plan on it and prepare for it with a view to profiting from it.

“Profiting from failure and disappointment? Are you serious?” Yes, like many of God’s people, I’ve found seasons of failure and disappointment to be some of the most spiritually productive times of my life.

Before we turn to the Bible to help us plan on, prepare for, and profit from failure and disappointment, we first need some definitions. Failure is a lack of success in doing something. It’s coming short of a performance standard that we have set for ourselves or that others have set for us. It may be something that we are accountable for and blamed for (e.g. we fail an exam because we did not study enough), or someone else may be to blame (e.g. our marriage may fail because our wife or husband committed adultery). And sometimes we can have a sense of failure when we have not

actually failed (e.g. we lose our job because of a merger or reorganization). Disappointment is the sense of sadness and frustration that results from failure, either from our own failure, the failure of others, or both. So, with these definitions in hand, what does the Bible teach us about failure and disappointment?

FAILURE IS INEVITABLE

If our schools really wanted to prepare our children for life, they would offer classes in failure and disappointment. Our kids may never need to know algebra or chemistry in their adult lives, but they will definitely need to know how to handle failure and disappointment. No matter where we open our Bibles, we find failure and disappointment: Adam and Eve (Genesis 3), Cain and Abel (Genesis 4), Noah and his sons (Genesis 9), Abraham and Sarah (Genesis 16), Lot and his daughters (Genesis 19), Jacob and Esau (Genesis 27), Joseph and his brothers (Genesis 37), Nadab and Abihu (Leviticus 10), Aaron and Miriam (Numbers 12), Israel and Canaan (Numbers 14), Moses and the rock (Numbers 20), Samson and Delilah (Judges 16), Samuel and his sons (1 Samuel 8), David and Bathsheba (2 Samuel 11), Solomon and his harem (1 Kings 11). And on and on it goes, right into the New Testament, where we find disciple after disciple and church after church marked by failure and disappointment. The Bible’s uniform message is that failure and disappointment are an inevitable part of the human experience. Imagine a graduation or commencement address that reflected this biblical emphasis. How much better it would prepare our children for life, especially in the area of managing their expectations.



FAILURE IS VARIED

As we survey the biblical record, we are struck by the variety and diversity of failure. If it doesn't get us one way, it will get us another. Spiritual and moral failures are the most common, with multiple examples of failure to obey God's ten straightforward commands. For example, Israel failed to worship God alone (Isa. 2:8); Aaron failed by making a carved image to worship (Ex. 32:4); Uzziah failed to reverence God (2 Sam. 6:7); Israel failed to keep the Sabbath holy (Ex. 16:27–30); Eli failed to discipline his sons and his sons failed to honor their father (1 Sam. 2:22–25); David failed to respect the sanctity of life and of marriage (2 Sam. 11:1–21); Achan failed by stealing gold (Josh. 7:1); Ananias and Sapphira failed by lying to the Holy Spirit (Acts 5:3); and Demas failed by coveting this world's riches (2 Tim. 4:10). Ten Commandments, ten failures.

Family failures are demonstrated in Abraham and Sarah's treatment of Hagar (Gen. 16:21) and in Jacob and Esau's jealous rivalry (Gen. 25:29–34). Friendship failures are seen in the deceitful greeting and kiss of Jesus's betrayer (Matt. 26:49) and in the fallout between the Apostle Paul and Barnabas over Mark's usefulness (Acts 15:36–41). Leadership failures are evident in every king of Israel and Judah (e.g. 2 Chron. 12:14; 22:9–10). Ecclesiastical failures are found in almost every New Testament church, as evidenced in the disappointed tone found in many of Paul's letters to them (e.g., 1 Cor. 1:11–13; Gal. 1:6) and in five of Christ's letters to the seven churches (Revelation 2–3). Financial failures play out in the lives of Gehazi (2 Kings 5:22–27), the one-talent man (Matt. 25:24–30), and the ambitious barn-builder (Luke 12:16–21). National and political failures are especially vivid in Israel's history of repeated rebellion against God. The Bible even supplies us with a social failure in the underdressed wedding guest (Matt. 22:11–13). Failure wears so many different outfits.

FAILURE CAN FOLLOW GREAT SUCCESS

One of the lessons these varied experiences of failure and disappointment teach us is that we are most vulnerable when we are most successful. Success breeds confidence, which often mutates into overconfidence, which usually presages disaster (Prov. 16:18). See Samson, David, and Solomon for painful proofs of this in the Old Testament. The New Testament highlights Peter as an example of this (Matt. 26:33–35, 69–75). He was in Jesus's inner circle, he was speaking great things about God, he was being greatly used by the Lord, and he was hyper-confident in his ability to be strong in the face of testing. But he failed three times, twice denying that he knew Christ before a teenage female servant and once before strangers. The Bible's narrative about the danger of hubris has proven true throughout history, and even up to the present day, as powerful and successful men are being brought down daily by the weak and helpless victims they previously oppressed and exploited.

FAILURE CAN BE REPEATED

There are many trite and facile sayings about failure, including "Failure is the best teacher" and "Learn to fail forward." Thankfully, as we'll see later, many people do learn from their failures and many individuals do make forward progress after failing. But it's not inevitable. As the Bible warns us, failure can be repeated. For example, Abraham failed to trust God to look after Sarah when he went down to Egypt. He ended up telling lies about his relationship with her to a heathen king who eventually found out and rebuked him for it (Gen. 12:10–20). But it didn't stop him from doing almost exactly the same thing again (Genesis 20). You'd have thought that Jacob would have learned a painful lesson about favoritism when he looked back on his own family's bitter experience. And yet, he did the same thing by showing excessive favor to his son Joseph (37:3–4). Even the disciples of Jesus, though they had the benefit of His constant and caring rebukes, repeatedly failed to grasp who Christ was and what He came to do (Matt. 16:21–23; Luke 18:34; 24:25–27). Sometimes failure can be doubled by going from one extreme to another as the Corinthian church did. First, they failed to discipline an unrepentant brother (1 Corinthians 5), and then they failed to welcome him back upon his repentance (2 Cor. 2:5–11). Failure is not a perfect teacher, partly because we are not perfect students.

FAILURE IS PAINFUL

All the biblical examples of failure reveal the painful disappointment that follows in its path: disappointment with self, disappointment with others, and even disappointment with God. But there are three biblical failures that are especially agonizing. First, there is the stinging disappointment of Moses in not getting into the Promised Land when he hit a rock instead of following God's instructions to talk to it (Num. 20:10–13). Imagine all the work, all the stress, all those forty years of wandering through the wilderness, all the complaints and grumblings of Israel, and then, for one loss of temper, being stopped on the border of your ultimate destination. Moses pleaded with the Lord to ease his disappointment and let him enter the land. But God refused and instead gave him the consolation of seeing it from a distance (Deut. 2:23–27). Imagine Moses's disappointment.

The second particularly agonizing biblical failure is King David, who failed morally by committing adultery with Bathsheba and killing her husband, Uriah (2 Samuel 11). As Psalms 32 and 51 reveal, David's painful disappointment in himself was not only mental, spiritual, and emotional, but also physical. Even after he was forgiven, the consequences of his failures throbbed throughout the rest of his life in the disintegration of his family and the temporary loss of his throne. Such great convulsions followed his failures.

The third failure is Peter, who failed by denying Christ three times. Here was a man whom Jesus warned again and again about his overconfidence, whom Jesus warned that he

would deny Him three times, and who still went on to do so. Then the rooster crowed, Christ's eyes met with Peter's, "and he went out and wept bitterly" (Luke 22:62). Imagine how much pain must have filled the next couple of days as Peter reflected on this triple failure. How many times Peter, Moses, and David must have wished that they had never failed. YouTube failures make us laugh; the failures of biblical heroes make us cry.

FAILURE SHOULD BE SHARED

One of the problems with the constant success narratives that we are fed today is the message that success is for everyone and everyone will be a success. The result is that no one is prepared when success never visits and when failure knocks at their door repeatedly. Conscious of this imbalance, Johannes Haushofer of Princeton University published a résumé listing his career failures on Twitter. He did this "in an attempt to balance the record and encourage others to keep trying in the face of disappointment." "Most of what I try fails," he said, "but these failures are often invisible, while the successes are visible. I have noticed that this sometimes gives others the impression that most things work out for me."

The Bible publishes résumés of failure for just about all the characters in it. Some of them even publish their own. The psalmists, for example, not only confess their failures but sing about them—not to celebrate them, of course, but to grieve over them and to seek God's help with them. They are brutally honest about their lives and about how so much of life just doesn't work out well. In Psalms 73 and 78, for example, Asaph confesses how he fails while the wicked succeed, resulting in a failure in his faith. He puts it all on the table and says, in effect, "I'm not handling this well." God then steps in to remind him of His promises and purposes, and Asaph begins to recover his spiritual poise and equilibrium. How thankful we should be for these songs of failure that we can identify with, reminding us that we are not alone, helping us to accept that the abnormal is normal, and guiding us to bring our failures before God as well as share them with others.

Job is another example of a shared failure. He was a blameless man (Job 1:1). Yet when extreme suffering came, he ended up blaming God at points. Yes, he stood firm initially (vv. 20–22), and yes, there were moments of supreme spiritual success in the face of supreme spiritual testing (19:23–27; 23:8–10). But that's not the whole story, and not even the majority of the story. His book also includes many instances when his response was far from perfect, as he expressed disappointment with his friends and even with God and His providence. Again, we are encouraged by the honest recording of Job's downs as well as his ups (though preachers and writers often ignore the former).

The sharing of these men's narratives of failure encourages us to be honest and open about our own lives. Let's abandon the success narratives the world tells us to write and

follow the biblical example of gritty authenticity by sharing with fellow believers the downs as well as the ups in our lives. How different this would be from so many Facebook profiles.

FAILURE PREVENTS WORSE FAILURE

One thing I've noticed in my own life as I look back is that my failures have prevented worse failures, not only by teaching me through them, but also by teaching others. We see that also in the Bible. If the New Testament churches had not failed so badly in so many areas, we wouldn't have letters to them in our Bibles that we can learn from and take steps to avoid or redress similar failures. How many churches have been prevented from falling into charismatic chaos by the letters to the failing Corinthians? How many churches have been kept from compromising on the doctrine of justification by faith alone by the letter to the failing Galatians? How many churches have been rescued from end-time mania by Paul's letters to the failing Thessalonians? How many churches have returned to their first love through Christ's letter in Revelation to the failing Ephesians? How many Christians have been kept from overconfidence by the failures of Peter?

We can look around us today and hear the sirens blaring from the wreckage of churches and pastors who failed to stand fast for doctrinal and moral purity. We don't even need to look beyond our own lives for warning beacons. My health failed several years ago as a result of overwork and stress. I ended up in the hospital twice with life-threatening illnesses. However, looking back, I can see that God may have used my health failures to prevent a possible spiritual failure. In that sense, failure can be a precious gift. God works even our failures together for good (Rom. 8:28).

FAILURE CAN BE FORGIVEN

In many ways, the question is not when, where, and how we will fail. The biggest question is what we will do with our failures. As we've been, many failures are not just lessons to be learned but sins to be confessed. We must not only bring them before our minds and be educated by them; we must bring them before God to be forgiven for them. That's difficult, but also delivering. Confession frees us from guilt and shame and assures us of pardon and acceptance (Prov. 28:13). Instead of denying, minimizing, covering, or avoiding our failures, we bring them to the light of day and the light of God, and we honestly talk about them before Him with admission of any culpability and with prayer for His mercy. No matter how badly, how frequently, or how foolishly we've failed, if we confess our failures before God, we will find mercy (1 John 1:9). You can bring Him failures from every area of your life and He will make you white as snow. If I may suggest a change to a much-loved Christmas carol, the gospel song is "O Come, All Ye Failures."

Not only that, but Christ also gives us His perfection. That's right; He doesn't just take away our negatives and leave us in a neutral position. He gives us His righteousness and

leaves us in a positive position (2 Cor. 5:21). Christ's perfection is credited to us and regarded as ours (Rom. 3:1–26). No matter what has happened in our past or what will happen in our future, when God looks at us as Judge, He sees not failure but success, not imperfection but perfection, not unrighteousness but righteousness, not reason for condemnation but reason for celebration (8:1). By faith in Christ, our failures are exchanged for His achievements.

FAILURE DOES NOT DEFINE US

The result of this is not that we never fail again. No, the result is that failure no longer defines us. Our God and Savior does not define His people by their failures but by their faith. Look at all the failures of the Old Testament saints, and yet look at how God defines them in Hebrews 11. It's not the hall of failures but the hall of faith. He doesn't recall their stumbles but celebrates their successes through their faith in Christ alone. Failure is still part of our identity, but it's no longer the major part. It's still part of our lives but it's not definitive, it's not the last word, and it's certainly not the first word. Failure is not what God sees first when He looks at His people, and it shouldn't be what we see first when we look at ourselves or other Christians either. We are righteous in Christ. That's our primary identity. That's what God sees first, and that's what we should see first, too.

FAILURE BRINGS HEAVEN CLOSER

No matter how much we confess our failures, are forgiven for our failures, and exchange our failures for Christ's righteousness, as long as we are in this world we are going to fail. Again and again and again. This keeps us humble, keeps us

dependent, and keeps us looking to Christ. But, above all, it keeps us looking toward heaven, the place where failures will never be known again. Will we remember our failures there? Yes, but not with any pain, only as covered by Christ's pardon, and only to turn up the volume of our praise: "Unto him that loved us, and washed us from our sins in his own blood, and hath made us kings and priests unto God and his Father; to him be glory and dominion for ever and ever. Amen" (Rev. 1:5–6).

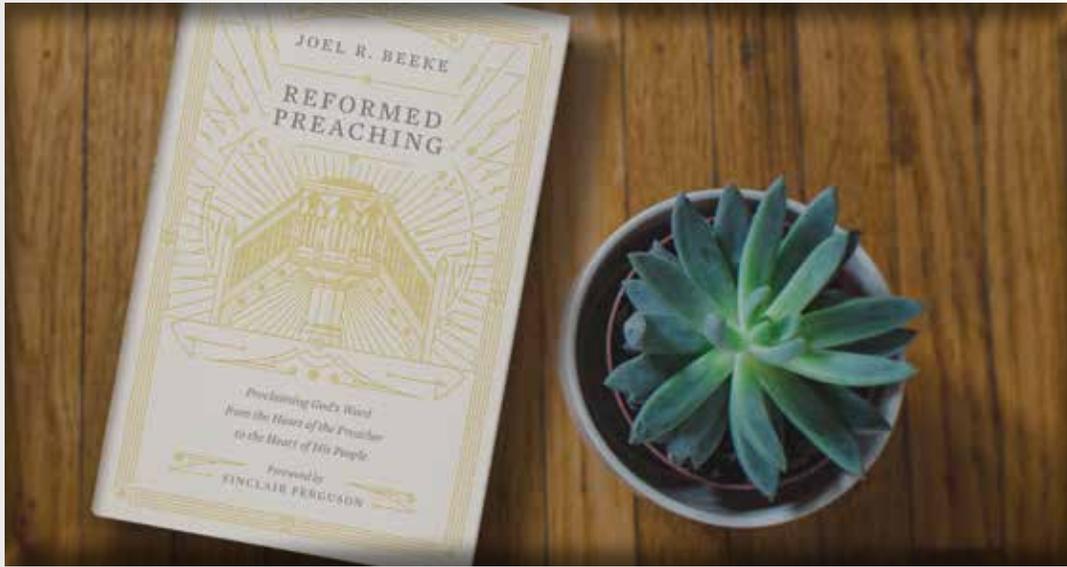
We will also see our failures from a whole new perspective, not just our moral and spiritual failures but also our relational and vocational disappointments. We will see God's wise providence in allowing that relationship breakup, that interview disaster, that lost job, that failed exam. When God reframes our failures by putting the golden frame of His wise sovereignty all around them, they are transformed from ugly abstract randomness to beautifully crafted designs.

Will we experience any failures there? No, never. We will not fail, and neither will anyone else. The tears of disappointment will be part of the deluge wiped out of our eyes (Rev. 21:4). Heaven will be one great and long success story: moral success, spiritual success, intellectual success, physical success, ecclesiastical success.

So, our present failures should drive us to Christ, but they should also make us long for heaven, to hasten the day when the pain of failure and disappointment will be gone forever.

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REFORMED PREACHING

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“Reformed Preaching is unique for its emphasis on learning to preach experientially from the Reformers and their theological successors through the centuries. Joel Beeke convincingly shows that Reformed preaching is doctrinally sound, profoundly personal, and effectively practical. Far from being a contemporary model, this work presents the preaching of the Reformation, which encompasses head, heart, and hands, as the enduring way to proclaim Scripture. This is a very foundational understanding of the Reformation’s impact on the history of the church.”

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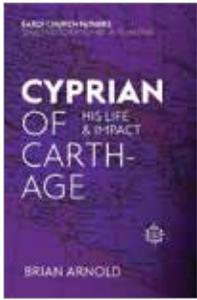
“The ethos of this soul-satisfying book on preaching is not ‘fast forward to the new and fanciful’ but ‘turn your affections back to the solid theological foundations of the past.’ Too much modern-day preaching aims to attract the undiscerning

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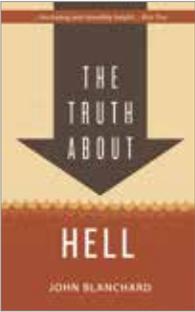
MICHAEL HORTON, J. Gresham Machen Professor of Systematic Theology and Apologetics, Westminster Seminary California; Host, *White Horse Inn*; author, *Core Christianity*



Cyprian of Carthage: His Life and Impact
Brian J. Arnold

Cyprian of Carthage is one of many forgotten early church fathers, yet his story is one of incredible perseverance for the sake of the gospel. Living through a time of terrible persecution of Christians, Cyprian wrestled with questions surrounding the meaning of the church and contributed greatly to the writings on its importance as the bride of Christ. He experienced firsthand the effects of persecution

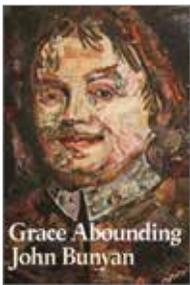
on church bodies and offered insights that are becoming increasingly relevant today.
 (Christian Focus, PB, 152 pgs.) \$11.99|\$7.00



The Truth about Hell — *John Blanchard*

It's a strange situation when a word is common and in everyday use for most people, yet no one seems to want to talk about it. What is hell? Does it really exist? Can we know anything about it? And perhaps most important of all, why should hell be of any concern to us?

(EP Books, PB, 59 pgs.) \$4.99|\$3.50

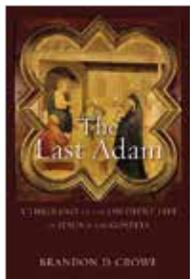


Grace Abounding — *John Bunyan*

John Bunyan is known across the English-speaking world as the author of *Pilgrim's Progress*. But who was Bunyan, and what was it that provided him with the stimulus and inspiration to write that most revered and well loved of allegories? The answer can be found in part in *Grace Abounding*, for it is here that we are given a glimpse into Bunyan's own spiritual experience.

The vivid images of *Pilgrim's Progress*, such as the Slough of Despond and Doubting Castle, are brought to mind as Bunyan tells of his own pilgrimage—how he came to understand and rest in the love of God and Christ.

(Banner of Truth, HC, 177 pgs.) \$18.00|\$13.50

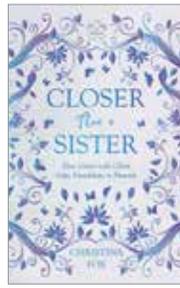


The Last Adam: A Theology of the Obedient Life of Jesus in the Gospels
Brandon D. Crowe

There is much discussion today about how we are to understand the life of Jesus in the Gospels. What was Jesus doing between His birth and death, and how does this relate to salvation? *The Last Adam* considers the theological and soteriological significance of the life of Jesus in the Gospels from a primarily exegetical perspective.

Crowe argues that Jesus is identified in the Gospels as the last Adam, whose obedience recapitulates and overcomes the sin of the first Adam. He shows that Jesus's obedience is presented by the Evangelists as the obedience of an anointed representative, which is counted vicariously on behalf of His people. Correcting the Christian tendency to minimize the life of Jesus, *The Last Adam* explains why the Gospels include much more than the Passion narratives and shows that all four Gospels present Jesus's obedient life as having saving significance.

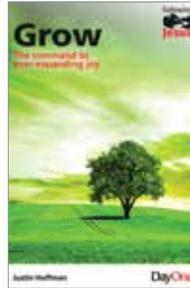
(Baker Academic, PB, 264 pgs.) \$29.99|\$19.50



Closer than a Sister: How Union with Christ Helps Friendships to Flourish — *Christina Fox*

Closer than a Sister explores what the Bible means when it speaks about friendship. Built on our unity in Christ, relationships with our sisters are real relationships. They are there as a means of grace, bringing with them the opportunity for help, comfort, love and the opportunity to grow and to give of ourselves. Through hardships and joys, these unique, God-ordained friendships are a cord of three strands, not easily broken (Eccl. 4:12).

(Christian Focus, PB, 191 pgs.) \$11.50|\$9.00



Grow: The Command to Ever-Expanding Joy — *Justin Huffman*

Grow in grace. Every Christian is expected to do it, yet many feel they have failed to grow consistently. But how can we grow? Isn't that something God just sort of does for us or in us? In this encouraging and accessible book, Justin Huffman considers some of the means God has given us for spiritual growth. Many are familiar and expected; others may be new and surprising. Yet all God's means of grace have this common objective: to draw us closer to Christ and, in doing so, make us more like Him.

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GOSSIP AND SLANDER

Is it wrong to talk about others' faults, even if they're true?

Suggested Reading: Genesis 9:20–27

Every person sins and makes mistakes. When we observe this in the lives of others or hear about it, how we choose to respond is very important. Read Genesis 9:20–27. Ham, one of Noah's three sons, observed a sinful failure of his father. He chose to gossip about it and went and told his brothers (and possibly his son Canaan, and others). Shem and Japheth, the other two sons, chose to respond differently. Instead of broadcasting their father's sin, they covered it. The result was that Noah (and God) blessed Shem and Japheth and cursed Canaan.

Gossiping is choosing to talk about the sins and failures of others. This is sinful. A person's reputation or good name is valuable (Eccl. 7:1; Prov. 22:1). Some people who would not think of murdering or stealing valuable goods from another, appear to have no problem "killing" another with words and "robbing" another of his or her reputation.

Slandering is even worse than gossiping. It adds the sin of lying. Slandering is speaking evil about others that is not true. It comes from a desire to harm or destroy the reputation of another.

Satan is the great and continual accuser of God's children (Rev. 12:10). He constantly points to and speaks about the

failures and shortcomings of believers. The devil is the father of lies and a slanderer from the beginning (Gen. 3:4–5). To delight in talking about the failures of others or to slander others is devilish. Thomas Watson wrote, "He that speaks a slander has a devil's tongue, and he that delights in hearing it has a devil's ear."

The spirit underlying gossip and slander is the opposite of that commanded in Scripture. We are called by God to bring forth the fruits of the Holy Spirit which includes love (charity) and not the fruits of the evil spirit and hatred. Pray and strive to seek the best for others and not to harm others. Let it be your goal to grow in love (charity) toward others. "Charity suffers long, and is kind; charity envieth not: charity vaunteth not itself, is not puffed up, doth not behave itself unseemly, seeketh not her own, is not easily provoked, thinketh no evil; rejoiceth not in iniquity, but rejoiceth in the truth; beareth all things, believeth all things, endureth all things" (1 Cor. 13:4–7).

Love thinks, hopes and speaks respectfully and in the best way possible of others. Gossip and slander imagine, suspect, and talk disrespectfully and in the worst way possible of others. Radiate love, not hate.

Why are gossip and slander devilish? How can the children of God be distinguished from the children of Satan in how they think and speak about others? Are you praying and striving to be respectful, caring, and loving toward others?

COVETING

Isn't coveting just a thought? Is it sinful to wish and work for something you do not have?

Suggested Reading: Matthew 6:19–34

God's law transcends man's laws. Man's laws govern human behavior and speech, but God's law also penetrates our minds and hearts. Only God knows and judges our motives and thoughts.

Money is not evil, and being rich is not wrong. To save your money and purchase something nice that you need is not sinful, but the love of money, that is, living for worldly wealth and possessions, is sinful (1 Tim. 6:10). To covet is to set your heart on worldly things and to think you would be happy, content, and fulfilled if you possessed earthly things.

The lust of the flesh, the lust of the eye, and the pride of life is loving the world (1 John 2:16). As humans, we were created for a far greater purpose than living to get more earthly possessions, honors, and pleasures for ourselves. We were created to know, love, serve, and rejoice in an eternal, omnipresent,

loving, and infinite God. Nothing short of this will ever satisfy the human heart. You have experienced the truth of this. As a young child, you coveted a certain toy, later maybe a bicycle, and then a car. You thought, "If only I could have this object, then I would really be happy and content!" And after you received it, how long did your happiness last? How soon did you start setting your eyes and thoughts on something else? How quickly were you coveting again?

We were created to love and to give, not to be selfish and to get more and more for ourselves. God loves a cheerful giver (2 Cor. 9:7), not a covetous person, who is discontent and only wants more and more for self. To live for a cause far greater than yourself, to love God above all and others as yourself, is very liberating. It frees you from the shackles of living selfishly for yourself. Pray and strive to live a loving and fulfilling life—one that loves and gives!

Read the suggested daily reading. Why does Jesus teach here that no moth or rust will harm the treasure of loving God above all and that no robber can ever steal this wealth? Why does James call the law of God the perfect law of liberty in James 1:25? Why is it true that all who live apart from God live covetous lives? How does the tenth commandment reveal that living without coveting is the law of God and not of man?

2018 Puritan Reformed Conference *Review*



The 2018 Puritan Reformed Conference was held on August 23–25 at the Prince Conference Center in Grand Rapids. More than 500 people attended. The theme for this year’s event was *The Beauty and Glory of the Last Things*.

The conference’s opening address, “The Day of the Lord: Escaping the Inescapable,” was skillfully delivered by Michael Barrett. It set the tone for what would turn out to be a wonderful conference filled with many moving and soul-benefiting messages. Dr. Barrett also participated in the Q&A session on Friday night. Derek Thomas also delivered an address Thursday night on the topic of heaven.

Friday morning, David Murray spoke on “The Signs of the Times.” This address laid the groundwork for what was to come in the remaining messages of the day. Shortly before lunch, David Strain preached from Revelation 7, “The Number of the Sealed.” He would remain in the Book of Revelation, chapter 20, on Saturday morning as well, preaching a message entitled, “Thy Kingdom Come.” It was a pleasure to have the pastor of First Presbyterian Church of Jackson, Mississippi with us this year.

After lunch on Friday, Derek Thomas delivered his second address, this one being on the topic of hell. Both addresses by Derek Thomas were originally intended to be delivered by Rev. Edward Donnelly of North Ireland, but due to health-related issues, Rev. Donnelly was unable to travel. A big thanks goes out to Derek Thomas for being willing, on such short notice, to step in and address these two vitally important topics.

Breakout sessions on Friday afternoon included “Jonathan Edwards: Surprised by the Beauty and Glory of God”

by Adriaan Neele; “The Beauty and Glory of the Puritan Millennium” by Greg Salazar; “Beauty and Glory in Revelation 21–22” by Daniel Timmer; and “Thomas Boston and the Kingdom of Heaven” by William VanDoodewaard.

The Jubilee Women’s Ensemble provided special music after the dinner hour, which was followed by a stirring message from Joel Beeke, taken from Revelation 19:7–9, entitled “The Marriage of Christ and the Church.” The lively Q&A discussion that followed the last message closed the second night of the conference.

After David Strain’s opening address, Jerry Bilkes delivered the final address to the 2018 Puritan Reformed Conference. His message was taken from 1 Corinthians 15 and was entitled, “The Final Victory.” It was a heart-warming message on the resurrection power of Christ.

The many exhibitors had a steady flow of individuals interested in their ministry opportunities. Reformation Heritage Books was onsite, offering a wide range of Christian titles at unbelievable prices, and many of the conference attendees were taking advantage of the opportunity to purchase these books and even interact with some of the authors who were on hand. A special thanks goes out to Sermon Audio for live-streaming the event again this year.

The 2019 conference theme will be *Growing In Grace*. Mark your calendars and plan to be with us on August 22–24, 2019. More details for next year’s event will be posted on the seminary’s website, www.prts.edu and its Facebook page.

—Chris Hanna, Director of Development & Marketing

From the President's Desk

- The PRTS annual conference went well (see p. 1). Heartfelt thanks to all my friends and colleagues who worked hard to present me with a wonderful festschrift titled *Puritan Piety* at the conference. It was a very surprising, touching, and humbling moment.
- The new fall semester is off to a wonderful start at PRTS with 42 new students from more than a dozen countries—our largest incoming class to date. Pray for God's blessing upon faculty and students alike.
- The Housing Dorm Project is going very well (about 75% complete). We are expecting full occupancy for 45 students and family members in all in December. \$1.85 million of the \$2.7 million project has been collected—nearly all of which has been spent on incoming bills. We

are still hoping to raise \$850,000 by the end of the year or shortly thereafter. Matching donors stand ready to double any gift given. At this point, some interest-free or low interest loans are also needed as soon as possible.

- The Operation Fund is down to a one-month balance, largely because many donors are giving to the Housing Project. Matching donors also stand ready to double any gift given for this needy fund.
- Your donations for either the Housing Project or the Operation Fund are very much needed and will be deeply appreciated at the present time. Please partner with us as soon as possible again. Many thanks for your heartfelt prayers and your generous and loyal support.

—Joel Beeke

FACULTY ITINERARIES & PUBLICATIONS

MICHAEL BARRETT | Itinerary

Sept. 21–23: Sunny Vale, California: Sunny Vale OPC

Oct. 7: Kalamazoo, Michigan: Community Presbyterian Church (OPC)

Recent Publications

Beginning at Moses: A Guide to Finding Christ in the OT (RHB)

How Can We Live Our Faith from the Inside Out? (RHB)

JOEL BEEKE | Itinerary

Sept. 9–11: Nashville, Tennessee: conference on Psalms and Family Worship

Sept. 11–15: Orlando, Florida: convocation address and chapel for Reformation

Bible College; addresses on Assurance of Faith for a Ligonier video series

Sept. 19–22: Ontario: various speaking engagements

Sept. 28–October 1: Limington, Maine: Conference for Limington OPC

Oct. 7–12: Livonia, Michigan: Conference on Sanctification

Oct. 16–19: London, England: teach course on Reformed Experiential Preaching for London Seminary; annual Martyn Lloyd-Jones lecture

Oct. 20–21: Bradford on Avon, England: preach for Robert Strivens

Oct. 22: Philadelphia, Pennsylvania: address and QA with Sinclair Ferguson at Westminster Seminary for book launch of *Reformed Preaching*

Oct. 25–27: Asheville, North Carolina: NCFIC Conference

Oct. 27–28: Winston Salem, North Carolina: conference and preaching for Twin City Bible Church

Nov. 2–5: Sacramento, California: conference for Robert Briggs

Nov. 9–11: Cape Cod, Massachusetts: conference for James La Belle (OPC)

Nov. 15–17: Denver, Colorado: “Canons of Dort” (ETS)

Recent Publications

Reformed Preaching: Proclaiming God's Word from the Heart of the Preacher to the Heart of His People (Crossway)

How Should We Consider Christ in Affliction? (RHB)

Lutando Contra Satanás (Fighting Against Satan in Portuguese)

Editor, *The Beauty and Glory of the Reformation* (RHB)

The Works of William Perkins, Volume 6, ed. with Greg Salazar (RHB)

JERRY BILKES | Itinerary

Oct. 11–12: Ingersoll, Ontario: Free Reformed Minister's Retreat

Oct. 16–17: St. George, Ontario: Free Reformed Committee Meetings

Nov. 4: St. Thomas, Ontario: St. Thomas Free Reformed Church

Nov. 18: Kansas City, Missouri: Covenant Reformed Church

DAVID MURRAY | Itinerary

Sept. 28–30: St. Charles, Illinois: Reset and Refresh Conference, New Covenant Bible Church

Oct. 13–14: Metamora, Michigan: Depression Conference. Metamora OPC

Oct. 26–27: Hampton, Virginia: Emotions in the Christian Life Conference. Calvary RPCNA,

Nov. 9–10: Boise, Idaho: Reformation Conference, Boise URC.

Nov. 30–Dec. 1: Lansing, Michigan: Magnify Conference, University Reformed Church

STEPHEN MYERS | Itinerary

October 14: Grand Rapids, Michigan: Free Reformed Church

October 21: Grand Rapids, Michigan: Heritage Reformed Church

ADRIAAN NEELE | Itinerary

Sept. 15: Lansing, Michigan: Great Lakes Presbytery PCA

Sept. 16: Mitchell, Ontario: Free Reformed Church

Sept. 20–23: Lecture at Southern Baptist Theological Seminary

Sept. 30: Kinnelon, New Jersey: Heritage Reformed Church

Oct. 22–26: Yale University

Nov. 8–16: South Korea: Hapdong Theological Seminary,

Recent Publications

Before Jonathan Edwards: Sources of New England Theology (OUP)

“The Legacy of the Heidelberg Catechism” (B&H Publishing Group)

Jonathan Edwards: Sermons of the Epistle to the Galatians (Yale/Cascade Publishers)

GREG SALAZAR | Itinerary

Oct. 11–12: Ontario: Speaker for FRC's Ministers' Retreat

Oct. 18–22: Cambridge, UK: Graduation ceremony for doctoral degree at The University of Cambridge

Nov. 13–15: Denver, Colorado: “Canons of Dort” (ETS)

Recent Publication

The Works of William Perkins, Volume 6, ed. with Joel R. Beeke (RHB)

DANIEL TIMMER | Itinerary

Sept. – Dec.: Teaching Théologie de l'Ancien Testament, Faculté de théologie évangélique, Montréal

Nov. 13–15: Denver, Colorado: ETS

Nov. 16: Denver, Colorado: Institute for Biblical Research

Nov. 17–20: Denver, Colorado: Society of Biblical Literature

Recent Publications

“The Wisdom of Solomon: Subaltern Existence as the Path to Perfect Empire,” in *Postcolonial Commentary and the Old Testament* (London: Bloomsbury/T & T Clark), 142–60.

“Where Shall Wisdom Be Found (in the Book of the Twelve)?” in *Riddles and Revelations: Explorations into the Relationship between Wisdom and Prophecy in the Hebrew Bible* (London: T & T Clark), 147–63.

“Nahum,” in *Daniel–Malachi*, ESV Expository Commentary, vol. 7 (Crossway), 503–32

WILLIAM VANDOOEWAARD | Itinerary

Sept. 26–28: Halifax, Nova Scotia: Canadian Presbytery (ARP)

Nov. 1–3: Louisville, Kentucky: Commonweal Project Colloquium, Southern Baptist Theological Seminary

Forthcoming Publications

“The Marrow Controversy” in Mark Jones and Michael Haykin, eds., *A New Divinity: Transatlantic Reformed Evangelical Debates during the Long Eighteenth Century* (Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht).

Charles Hodge, *Commentary and Sermons on Hebrews* (Banner of Truth).

Update with Sherif Fahim (2017 Alumnus)

We have had a blessed and busy season laboring in Christ's church. God has opened the door for several preaching and teaching opportunities, not only in Alexandria, where we live, but also in many other cities and countries in our region.

In November 2017, I traveled to Turkey to teach the book of Romans to a group of youth leaders from nine different Arab countries. The purpose of the conference was to train these youth leaders how to lead Bible studies in their own context. Recently, I was teaching at a Jordanian conference where I met one of the youth leaders who participated in the earlier event held in Turkey. He told me that his life had totally changed since that time and that he is now leading his own Bible study group through Romans in Jordan. It is always a tremendous encouragement when lives are changed by the power of the gospel.

Another encouraging opportunity came while teaching last May in Milan, Italy. It was a conference on Theology Proper (The Doctrine of God) and was attended by Arab emigrants who live throughout Italy. Most of them were not born in Christian homes, and many of them had never studied the Scriptures as it was taught at the conference. By God's grace, they were hungry for sound biblical teaching.

The Scriptures, on the other hand, are under attack here in Egypt, especially from some key leaders in the church. In April 2018, a large event was organized with a panel discussion of four influential church leaders on the inspiration and inerrancy of the Scriptures. Only one of these men defended the inerrancy of Scripture while the others carefully and subtly denied it in different ways. It was a heartbreaking event, and a good many confessing Christians lost their trust in the Word of God.

Since then, however, many churches have started to ask for more information regarding the historic and biblical Reformed view of the inspiration and inerrancy of Scripture. Consequently, I have been asked to teach at various conferences on the attributes of Scripture and on the doctrine of revelation. One of these conferences included 250 university students from seven different cities.

We also have a teaching ministry in my local church called

ElSoora (www.elseora.org). One of our tasks is to translate good Reformed, conservative materials into Arabic. Our first book was from the *Crucial Questions* series by R. C. Sproul entitled "*Can I trust the Bible?*" Thankfully, the first edition was sold out and the second edition is close to running out.

The Spring semester was also busy in the Alexandria School of Theology. I taught two classes on the Book of Romans and Ecumenical & Reformed

Confessions in three different locations—in three different cities. It was the first time the Three Forms of Unity were taught in our Egyptian context. The students had to read and write papers on the Heidelberg Catechism. Some of them chose to do a translation assignment which entailed translating a chapter from the Canons of Dort into Arabic. Thank God! We now have the

Canons of Dort, in their entirety, translated for the first time into our language. Our prayer is that we would be able to publish the Canons in Arabic on the 400th anniversary of the Synod of Dort.

In May, we had Dr. Adriaan Neele, and his wife, Kornelia, with us here in Egypt. It was a blessing and an encouragement to have friends from Grand Rapids, Michigan, here in our midst, to gain a real sense of what God is doing in Alexandria and what we are going through in Egypt. Dr. Neele taught a course on missions in the Alexandria School of Theology and preached a powerful sermon from 1 Kings 18:1–16 in my home church.

As though things weren't busy enough, I took Dr. Michael Barrett's online Aramaic class designed for the PhD program last semester. I am thankful that God enabled me to participate in most of the classes and to pass the course with a good grade.

My wife, Marian, and our three daughters are doing great. Marian is still homeschooling the girls, which is becoming more and more challenging. The curriculum is not easy to get here in Egypt, and the girls must also study the official curriculum sanctioned by the Egyptian government to earn their educational certificates. Homeschooling is not officially recognized in Egypt yet. Marian is also involved in the Sunday School ministry of our local church. She and several others just returned from a Sunday School conference equipping them to train the children of our church later this month. The conference theme was the centrality of Christ in all the Scripture.



When you think of us, please pray for the following:

1. For strength. That God would give us strength to continue laboring for the sake of the gospel in our context. We have many battles to fight. The need is massive.
2. For wisdom. That God would grant me wisdom in the organization of my time and efforts. It is really challenging for me personally and for the whole family. We only had a one-week vacation last year!
3. For the Bible study in my local church. I am working through the Westminster Confession of Faith. Please pray that God will give us persistence to continue this weekly commitment.
4. For ElSoora ministry. Those involved in this ministry need strength to keep the work of writing, translating, and publishing written and video Reformed conservative materials.
5. For my family. Please keep my family in your prayers as I travel. It is always hard for them and for me when I am away.

May the Lord bless PRTS, its faculty, its staff, its students, and its alumni serving around the world.

—Sherif Fahim



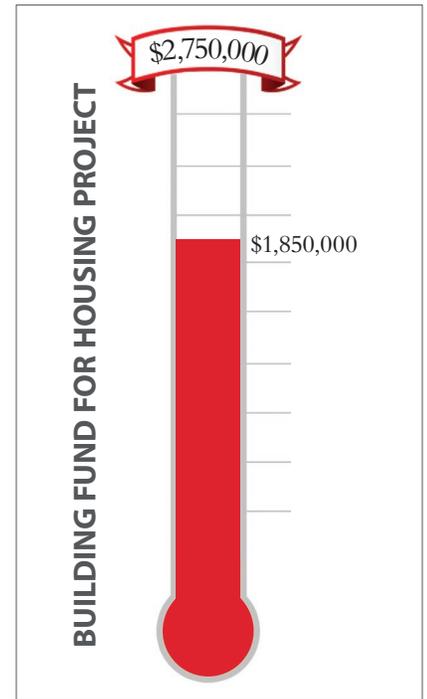
FINANCIAL REPORT

For fiscal year ending 7/31/2018

	Year to Date Actual	Annual Budget	Variance	Percent of Annual Budget
Income				
Donations	2,119,832	2,154,404	(34,572)	98%
Tuition Income	501,572	520,000	(18,428)	96%
Scholarship Donations	226,311	285,000	(58,689)	79%
Other Income	<u>167,933</u>	<u>223,596</u>	<u>(55,663)</u>	<u>75%</u>
Total Income	\$3,015,648	\$3,183,000	\$(167,352)	95%
Expenses				
Instruction	\$ 1,648,890	1,440,057	208,833	115%
Scholarships	424,504	395,000	29,504	107%
Administrative	<u>1,255,885</u>	<u>1,347,943</u>	<u>(92,058)</u>	<u>93%</u>
Total Expenses	\$ 3,329,279	\$ 3,183,000	\$146,279	105%
Net Income	\$ (313,631)			

Thank you for the ongoing support of PRTS. Your prayers and contributions are greatly appreciated.

—CHRIS HANNA



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Have you ever wondered why we often see pictures of owls in connection with schools, learning, and wisdom? It seems to have come from Roman and Greek mythology, which are stories about their so-called gods and heroes from ancient times. Most likely sitting quietly for a long time and the owl's wide staring eyes gave the idea that owls are wise and mysterious. In India, however, that stillness and the wide eyes have made the Owl a symbol of laziness and foolishness—the exact opposite! To be called “oolu” (Owl in Hindi) is the same as to be called a fool.

Are owls any wiser at all than other birds of the animal kingdom? Not really. Owls truly have a “birdbrain.” They are good hunters at night, but as far as intelligence goes, they are not even among the top ten smart birds. It will surprise you which bird *is* at the top. The crow! Some scientists claim that crows are the smartest of *all* the animals. What makes them stand out, you wonder? Crows are very good at using tools. In Sweden, fishermen will cut holes in the ice of frozen lakes, and then dangle their fishing lines with hooks in the water to be later pulled up and haul the fish in—unless the crows get there first. They are known for pulling up the lines and eating the fish! They are also good at problem solving. They know how to drop a walnut down to crack its shell. If that doesn't work, they put them on the road and wait for cars to drive over them. They even pick the busiest time of day to make sure there are lots of cars coming!

In the Bible, we find King Solomon, the wisest man on earth. God had given him much wisdom and insight into plant life and the lives of animals, birds, fish, and creeping things. Solomon did not write in his Proverbs, “Go to the owls and be wise,” but, “Go to the ant, thou sluggard; consider her ways, and be wise” (6:6). There is so much to learn, so much to find out about this world. What a privilege it is that you are given time to learn, that you may begin another year of school! Why do I say that? There are children in very poor areas of the world who have no time to go to school; instead, they have to work all day for a bite to eat.

I know that school can be quite difficult. I hope, however, that you will do your best and ask the Lord for help with understanding and improving at reading and math. Without those two, it is almost impossible to learn about

the exciting things of God's creation. But first things first, right? And that is the alphabet, of course. Wrong! The very first thing needed for becoming a wise, well-educated boy or girl is something else. You probably learned this text by heart: “The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom” (Prov. 9:10).

To fear the Lord is not to be afraid of Him, but to know Him as a mighty God who is also a tender Father. He is a Father who wants to hear from you every day. He is a Father who wants to speak to you every day so that you know what He wants for you. Knowing the Lord as your Father will help you feel happy, but it will also make you careful. Fearing the Lord is wanting to please Him. It is wanting to obey Him. And that is so hard, isn't it? It is hard to be obedient all the time, to do the right thing, not to do any wrong things, and not to think any wrong thoughts. However, fearing God also means that you know about His Son, the Lord Jesus, who lived and died for sinful people like you and me. If you tell Him how sorry you are for your sins, He will forgive you, and help you to hate sin even more. Then it will be easier to learn new things about God and His wonderful creation. You will find out with Solomon that an owl is not the right symbol for wisdom; it should have been an ant, or maybe a crow!

“The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom.”

—Proverbs 9:10

Elina VanderZwaag is a homemaker, wife of Rev. Foppe VanderZwaag, and member of the Grace Reformed Christian Church (HRC) of Harrison, Arkansas.

BIBLE QUIZ

for children

KRISTIN MESCHKE

JESUS TEACHES SINNERS

When Jesus came to earth, He traveled from town to town to teach sinners important things—who He is and how they (and we) should respond to Him. He wasn't trying to impress people by using big, fancy words. Instead, He used simple words and examples from everyday life to teach people important things about Himself. He wanted sinners to really know and understand what He was teaching. Let's look up these verses from the book of John to see what things Jesus used to describe Himself and show us that He is everything we need. Pray that He will help you to understand who He is and how you should live for His glory, also.

—Partially adapted from *God's Gospel* by Jill Nelson.

1. What did Jesus say He is in **John 10:9** to teach sinners that He is the only way to God and to salvation? "I am the ____: by me if any man enter in, he shall be saved, and shall go in and out, and find pasture."
2. Jesus loves and cares for His people as He shows us in **John 10:11**—"I am the ____: the ____ giveth his life for the sheep."
3. In **John 6:35**, Jesus says, "I am the ____: he that cometh to me shall never hunger; and he that believeth on me shall never thirst."
4. Jesus teaches again in **John 14:6** that He is the only path to the Father. What are the three things He says He is?—"I am the ____, the ____, and the ____: no man cometh to the Father, but by me."
5. What does Jesus say He is in **John 8:12**? "I am the ____: he that followeth me shall not walk in darkness, but shall have the light of life."
6. The Lord will grow good fruit in us if we live by faith in Jesus Christ. What does Jesus say He is in **John 15:5** to teach us this? "I am the ____, ye are the branches.: He that abideth in me, and I in him, the same bringeth forth much fruit: for without me ye can do nothing."
7. In **John 11:25–26**, Jesus was talking to Martha after Lazarus died. He said, "I am the _____, and the ____: he that believeth in me, though he were dead, yet shall he live: and whosoever liveth and believeth in me shall never die." Jesus gives His children abundant life now and forever.
8. This last question comes from Revelation instead of the book of John. God says He is these two things which are the first and last letters of the Greek alphabet. He is teaching us that He is the beginning and the end and everything in between, the Creator and Lord and Ruler of all, and everything we need. **Revelation 1:8**: "I am the _____ and _____, the beginning and the ending, saith the Lord, which is, and which was, and which is to come, the Almighty."

ANSWERS TO LAST MONTH'S PUZZLE

- | | |
|------------|--------------|
| a. Perfect | g. Righteous |
| b. Sure | h. Gold |
| c. Right | i. Honey |
| d. Pure | j. Warned |
| e. Clean | k. Reward |
| f. True | |

Desperate for Strawberries (2)

In last issue's story, Margaret and her younger brother Andy had been searching for wild strawberries with little success. Their neighbor, Mr. Carter, had suggested that they look along a stream some distance away when they had more time. But after he left, Margaret and Andy decided to find the stream right away.

Margaret took Andy's hand and turned into the woods. The uneven ground was hard for his little feet, but he trotted on bravely, now and then encouraged by a big berry being dropped into his pail. After some time, however, the journey seemed too long, and Andy's feet slowed down. They couldn't hear any rushing sound from the stream, and he was beginning to feel tired and hungry.

Suddenly, the forest floor began to slope down, and Margaret noticed an opening in the trees ahead where the stream ran through the woods. With a shout, Andy ran ahead. "Look!" he whooped. "There are tons of strawberries!" Sure enough, along both sides of the streams the berries were abundant and Andy's little pail was soon filled. Margaret picked as fast as she could, her mind full of the class picnic and the delicious small berries. Wouldn't Miss Merritt, her teacher, be impressed! She had turned away from the stream and was now following a tantalizing stretch of strawberry bushes growing up the hillside. She was so busy filling her bucket that she didn't notice the shadows beginning to deepen.

Andy, who trudged behind his big sister, was beginning to grow grumpy, for he had eaten as many berries as he wanted and he was tired of carrying his little pail. "Let's go home. My feet are tired," he complained numerous times before Margaret finally paused. Seeing that her pail was almost full, Margaret agreed to stop and grabbed her younger brother's hand. She turned around and thought that she was retracing her steps, but everything suddenly seemed unfamiliar. And the stream was nowhere to be found! She said nothing, however, but hurried on, dragging a complaining Andy along.

"Be quiet, Andy. We're going home," Margaret said impatiently. Andy cheered up at the thought and quickened his little feet for a minute or two. But the shadows grew darker and darker, and Margaret realized that, for all she knew, they could be going farther and farther from home. She stopped, sat down, and admitted defeat. A sobbing Andy crawled into her lap, and she hugged him close, her mind beginning to race. She remembered the story of a panther that was spotted on Mr. Carter's hill. Bears, she knew, might be near, and every rustling branch increased her terror. She tried to pray,

but the thought of her disobedience to her mother took the words away. There was no hiding the truth now; she realized that what she had done was wrong and she had no excuse. And now they were lost in the woods!

"Don't you think God will take care of us?" whispered Andy. "Mom says He will."

"He'll take care of you, Andy, but..." Margaret hesitated with a catch in her throat.

"And you too," Andy said, snuggling up to her.

"I...I don't know," Margaret replied, tears filling her eyes. "I'm the one who didn't listen. And now we're lost and God knows that it's my fault. Maybe He won't let me go home again."

"Yes, He will," Andy said confidently. "God is good. Remember what Dad said? God doesn't love us because we're good, for we're not good, but He loves out of His own great heart."

Andy's words came with great power to Margaret. Her Sunday school text also flashed into her mind: "While we were yet sinners, Christ died for us." Her heart seemed to open and she suddenly understood, *really* understood, a little of what that text meant.

Andy laid his head down on her lap and fell asleep. The trees above rustled just like before and little noises filled the dark night. But God was there, and all fear had disappeared from Margaret's heart.

Just then a light flashed through the trees and voices seemed to come from various directions. Margaret sprang up and was greeted by Mr. Carter's dog Rollo, who charged through the trees with a joyful bark and licked Andy's face. What happened next seemed like a blur. Many questions were asked, Mr. Carter lifted Andy up, and then they left for home.

Safely tucked in bed later that night, Margaret suddenly remembered her berries! The pail had been tipped over in the confusion of the moment, and only a few berries remained! Margaret's mom kindly promised that she would buy donuts first thing in the morning for her to bring instead of the berries. And somehow, the berries no longer seemed so important to Margaret anyway. Her mind drifted back to the lesson she had learned in the forest alone with God. "While we were yet sinners, Christ died for us," she whispered. *That* was a lot more important than any classroom picnic!

Andrea Scholten is a school teacher, a writer for children, and a member of the HRC in Grand Rapids, Michigan. Adapted from *Children's Story Hour*.



and announcements

Obituary notices, church events, and marriage and anniversary notices will be printed free of charge and under no obligation of a gift received. Other announcements and/or requests will be approved by the editorial committee on an individual basis as received.

NEW HRC SEMINARY STUDENTS

Dear Friends,

As you may know, the Heritage Reformed Congregations have been blessed to have received five candidates for the ministry who will be attending Puritan Reformed Theological Seminary beginning with the fall semester of 2018. Along with God's blessing comes a great responsibility to support these students during their years of study.

Three of the students have children in Plymouth Christian Schools for which the denominational fund also assumes responsibility. This becomes a large part of the support we assume when we accept them as students for the ministry.

We are, therefore, asking for your support of the denominational fund in an additional measure from what you have been giving in the past. We need your help to support these students.

Please send donations directly to the Denominational Fund at the following address. Heritage Reformed Denominational Fund, Attention: Ann Dykema, Puritan Reformed Theological Seminary, 2965 Leonard St. NE, Grand Rapids, MI 49525. All donations are tax deductible and a receipt will be issued for this purpose.

DENOMINATIONAL YEARBOOK AVAILABLE AND A CORRECTION

The 2018-2019 denominational Yearbook of the HRC: Church and School Directory is now available for \$5.00 per copy from Reformation Heritage Books, 616-977-0889, www.heritagebooks.org.

Our apologies to Dr. Barrett for inadvertently failing to include his ministerial information and contact details on page 22. Please add the following in your Yearbook:

Barrett, Dr. Michael P. V., 5497 W. Heathwood Dr. SE, Kentwood, Michigan 49512 • Office: 616-432-3412; Cell: 864-630-4268; Home: 616-803-0395 • e-mail: michael.barrett@prts.edu • Born September 18, 1949 • Ministerial Candidate Theological Seminary, 1971; Professor at Bob Jones University Graduate School, Greenville, South Carolina 1976-2000. Minister in FPC 1976-2012 serving as President of Geneva Reformed Seminary 2000-2012; Academic Dean PRTS 2012; HRC minister and Professor of Theology (HRC) 2015. *Wife: Sandra; Children: Chadwick, Charles.*

PASTORAL CALL

Rev. Scott Dibbet who serves the FRC in Lacombe, Alberta, has declined the pastoral call to the HRC of Grand Rapids, Michigan.

FRC & HRC OFFICE BEARERS CONFERENCE

Theme: Dealing with Disagreements at Church Meetings
Speakers: Rev. John Koopman (Chairman's perspective) and Elder Kevin Ash (Office Bearer's perspective)

Date: Saturday, October 13, 2018

Time: 10:00 a.m. – 1:30 p.m.

Location: Burgessville HNRC

684 Main St. S, Norwich, Ontario, N0J 1C0 Canada

All current and former office bearers are warmly invited to attend. Lunch is provided and after lunch there will be a brief discussion on the topics presented.

60TH WEDDING ANNIVERSARY

With thanks for God's abundant blessings, we rejoice with our parents and grandparents,

BILL AND WILMA VAN EGDOM

as they hope to commemorate their 60th anniversary on October 22, 2018

For the LORD is good, His mercy is everlasting; and His truth endureth to all generations (Psalm 100:5).

John & Arlene Nap, Steven & Wendy Bloembergen, Harvey & Teresa Van Egdome, Ted & Sue Van Egdome and our families.

Correspondence:

15 Otterview Dr, PO Box 297, Otterville, ON N0J 1R0

OBITUARY

ROZEBOOM, Ada, aged 78, passed away on Saturday, July 14, 2018, in Rock Valley, IA. She was preceded in death by her parents. She is survived by her loving husband, Henry; her children Rita Samuelson, Wendy (Larry) Vander Plaats, Leslie Rozeboom, Marsha (Scott) Van Bommel, and Sarah (Clifford) De Kam; her sisters Alice (Evert) Ahlers, and Joan (George) Lems; 16 grandchildren, and 16 great-grandchildren. (Rev. B. Elshout, Hebrews 9:27-28; Rev. J. Neels, 1 Thess. 4:13-18).

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JESUS CHRIST**

"Brethren, my heart's desire and prayer to
God for Israel is, that they might be saved"
Romans 10:1

TEACHERS NEEDED

The Board of OXFORD REFORMED CHRISTIAN SCHOOL invites applications for elementary and high-school teaching positions.

Oxford Reformed Christian school is a vibrant, unified, parent-run Christian school that has been serving the educational needs of several local Reformed communities for the past 13 years. We have been blessed with a new facility located in Mount Elgin, a rural village in south-western Ontario. Our enrolment has grown to over 340 students and we offer a Kindergarten to grade 12 Christ-centered education. Visit our website for more information: orcschool.ca.

Qualified, passionate, motivated *High School teachers* and *Elementary School teachers* committed to the Reformed faith and to Christian education are encouraged to join our staff team.

- High-School Math/Science Teacher needed starting in January 2019.
- High-School Teachers needed for the 2019-2020 school year. (Math, Sciences, Humanities).
- Elementary school teacher(s) needed for the 2019-2020 school year.

Applications must include a resumé, statement of faith, philosophy of Christian education, and references. Promptly send to: Oxford Reformed Christian School, c/o Mr. W. Van Brugge (principal), 333182 Plank Line, PO Box 87, Mount Elgin, ON, N0J 1N0. E-mail: principal@orcschool.ca. Phone: 519-485-1142.



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Romans 1:16



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QUOTABLES BY JOHN CALVIN ON THE CHURCH

"The source and origin of the church is the free love of God."

"Wherever we see the Word of God purely preached and heard, there a church of God exists, even if it swarms with many faults."

"The salvation of the church is so precious in the sight of God that He regards the wrong done to the faithful as done to Himself."

"The welfare of the church is inseparably connected with the righteousness of God."

"The excellence of the church does not consist in multitude but in purity."

"Purity of doctrine is the soul of the church."

"The church cannot be rightly reformed except it be trained to obedience by the frequent scourges of God."

"As the saving doctrine of Christ is the life of the church, so discipline is, as it were, its sinews."

"Those who wish to build the church by rejecting the doctrine of the Word build a hog's sty, and not the church of God."

"The highest honor in the church is not government but service."

"God's sacred barn-floor will not be perfectly cleansed before the last day."

INTRODUCING CHURCH SOCIAL

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Church Social

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churchsocial.com

NATIONAL NEWS

PRO-LIFE PROGRESS: 27 US CITIES IDENTIFIED AS "ABORTION DESERTS"

A new study found that some twenty-seven cities could be identified as "abortion deserts," where the nearest abortion facility is more than 100 miles away. "What these abortion promoters call 'abortion deserts,' we call 'Abortion-Free Communities,'" said Operation Rescue President Troy Newman. "These cities prove that women do not need abortion and can get along just fine without it. In cities where there are no clinics marketing abortions to women, abortions decrease—sometimes dramatically—meaning more babies have a fighting chance at life. That should be good news to everyone."

The study, conducted primarily by the University of California San Francisco, identified Corpus Christi, Texas as the largest abortion-free community in the U.S. The city has a population of more than 324,000. The second largest abortion-free community, Fort Wayne, Indiana, has a population of 260,326. The other cities in the top 5 are all Texas cities: Laredo, Lubbock, and Amarillo.

Newman said, "The truth is that these cities do not have abortion facilities for two reasons. First, there is not the demand for abortion to support a facility. Secondly, many of the 27 communities have active and determined pro-life activists who have worked tirelessly to pass pro-life legislation and educate the communities about the horrors of abortion. Their work has saved countless lives, and they should be commended."

"Abortion facilities continue to close and abortion numbers in our nation have dropped to historic lows. This is our victory, and the Abortion Cartel's defeat," said Newman. "We are working every day to decrease abortions and increase the number of abortion free communities until we can achieve our goal of an abortion-free America where the lives of human beings in the womb are once again protected by law. That will be the ultimate victory, not just for pro-lifers, but for all of humanity." (*Amanda Casanova | Religion Today Contributing Writer*)

SAME-SEX MARRIAGE GARNERS SUPPORT AMONG MOST AMERICAN RELIGIOUS GROUPS, STUDY SHOWS

Most religious groups now support the legalization of same-sex marriage, according to a study released by the Public Religion Research Institute. The survey, which was based on more than 40,000 responses collected during 2017, finds that twice as many Americans now support same-sex marriage as oppose it, 61 percent to 30 percent.

Not surprisingly, support is strongest among members of religious groups that tend to be politically liberal such as Jews (77 percent), the unaffiliated (80 percent), and Unitarians (an overwhelming 97 percent).

What is more surprising is how quickly support for same-sex marriage has grown among religious groups that are more politically diverse. Two-thirds of Catholics, Orthodox Christians, and white mainline Protestants now say they are in favor.

What's more, majority support now includes African-Americans, whose support for same-sex marriage has increased from 41 percent in 2013 to 52 percent today. Hispanic Americans also saw double-digit increases, with support rising from 51 percent in 2013 to 61 percent today. (*Public Religion Research Institute report*)

INTERNATIONAL NEWS

EUROPE'S CHANGING RELIGIOUS LANDSCAPE: DECLINES FOR CHRISTIANS, GAINS FOR UNAFFILIATED

According to the 2017 Pew Research survey conducted in fifteen Western European countries, Western Europe—where Protestant Christianity originated and Catholicism has been based for most of its history—has become one of the world's most secular regions. Although the vast majority of adults say they were baptized, today many do not describe themselves as Christians. Some say they gradually drifted away from religion, stopped believing in religious teachings, or were alienated by scandals or church positions on social issues.

Yet most adults surveyed still do consider themselves Christians, even if they seldom go to church. Indeed, the survey shows that non-practicing Christians (defined, for the purposes of this report, as people who identify as Christians but attend church services no more than a few times per year) make up the biggest share of the population across the region. In every country except Italy, they are more numerous than church-attending Christians (those who go to religious services at least once a month). In the United Kingdom, for example, there are roughly three times as many non-practicing Christians (55%) as there are church-attending Christians (18%).

But the percentage of Christians appears to have declined, especially in some countries. The net losses for Christianity have been accompanied by net growth in the numbers of religiously unaffiliated people.

Across the region, fewer people say they are Christian now than say they were raised as Christians. The opposite is true of religiously unaffiliated adults—many more people currently are religiously unaffiliated than the share who were raised with no religion (that is, as atheist, agnostic, or "nothing in particular"). For example, 5 percent of adults in Spain say they were raised with no religion, while 30 percent now fit this category, a difference of 25 percentage points. The religiously unaffiliated have seen similarly large gains in Belgium, the Netherlands, Norway, and Sweden. (*Data from Pew Research provided by Glen Jackman*)

PERSECUTION FOCUS

PLEDGE TO END ANTI-CONVERSION LAW BRINGS MIXED REACTION

A persecution watchdog organization says the chief minister of Arunachal Pradesh, a state in northeastern India, claims he will take steps to repeal the state's freedom of religion law, more commonly known as an anti-conversion law, which targets Christians. William Stark of International Christian Concern says the law's ambiguity has been widely abused by Hindu nationalists to harass and intimidate Christians as they share and practice their faith.

So, Christian leaders are vastly showing one of two responses to the announcement.

"One reaction is 'Hey, this is great,'" Stark tells OneNewsNow. "Hopefully other leaders can kind of check this out and see what a positive example this is and hopefully follow it."

Others, however, are a bit more skeptical. "Some feel this could possibly be just kind of a cynical move in a Christian majority state to kind of throw the Christians a bone to win votes in the upcoming elections, which essentially will be a referendum on the BJP (Bharatiya Janata Party) rule," the ICC spokesman continues.

Stark will be keeping an eye on this in hopes that the anti-conversion law will eventually be repealed. (*Bill Bumpas | OneNewsNow.com*)

CHURCH MEMBERSHIP (4): Cultivating Passion for the Church

The last time we discussed some of the challenges you might face in becoming a member of your local church, but let's move beyond the problems now and discuss how you can positively cultivate passion for the church. Cultivating passion for the church puts to death our own selfish interests and looks to the gospel for empowerment and encouragement. It looks to Christ's passion for the church. Ephesians 5 tells us that He gave Himself for the church. Are you ready to do that?

Are you ready to give yourself in commitment to your local church as Christ gave Himself for His church on the cross? Cultivating passion begins here. The cross is a picture of radical commitment to death for the sake of someone else. If you are part of the church by living faith, then you are part of that loving, steady commitment of Christ. It is in Him that you can commit your life to the church and see her grow and prosper with God's blessing. This commitment begins when you become part of the church at baptism—you are joined to the body of Christ, even if in an outward sense alone. This commitment continues when you make confession of faith—a commitment to believe and live out in a consistent way the faith of the church. It is a commitment to walk in holiness and to submit to the authority of your church, your pastor, your elders, and your fellow church members for correction if you walk contrary to the Word of God.

Cultivating passion for your church happens in the context of worship. Many in the religious world speak of worship as an experience, usually nothing more than a façade for experiencing an emotional or mental high manipulated through lights and music. Worship is rather an encounter with the living God that is designed to glorify God before it ever focuses on you or me. The most relevant worship for us as church members is that worship which is grounded in the timeless truths of the Word of God. It centers on preaching and the sacraments as means of grace to get sinners like us into Christ and out of ourselves. Within the context of corporate worship, we express our dependence upon God, upon His Word to convict, heal, comfort, and convert. While all of life is to be spent worshiping God, corporate worship, in particular, binds together sinners in dependence upon God. Where else can you meet God together, pray to God

together, hear from God together, see God transform you together, and use the church as a means to expand the gospel together? The thought of worshiping with other saints should excite us, but worshiping with Christ in the midst of His body (Heb. 2:12) ought to excite us even more and create a holy passion for our local church because that's where Christ is.

Passion for the church also grows in community. I have already alluded to that fact in the point about worshiping together. This runs contrary to the rugged individualism of our culture that tells you to be your own person. It is difficult to cultivate passion for the church when we are consumed with ourselves. Community takes place as we build relationships in the church with one another—relationships that are deeply rooted in the gospel of grace and help us to overcome flaws and difficulties in ourselves and others. Building a sense of community that lasts and that is not superficial takes time and energy. This sense of community comes through hospitality. It comes through building meaningful friendships with our peers and those who are older than us in the church. It comes through building relationships with your pastors and elders. It comes through being held accountable and holding others accountable. Read through Paul's epistles and you will get the sense of community that is built from the times that he uses the phrase "one another." As you get to know one another you will cultivate a holy passion for the church for which Christ died.

In Greek mythology, the sirens were mythical creatures that lured unsuspecting sailors into death traps with their sweet music. The myth goes on to tell how that Ulysses asked his fellow sailors to tie him to the mast of the ship so that he would be able to resist the seductive music and the resulting death trap. He ordered his sailors to resist any request from him to untie him. He was tied to the mast and held accountable by his fellow sailors in his commitment to them and to his ship. Are you ready to be tied to the mast as it were in your local church, ready to resist the seductive calls of the world and anything else that might draw you away from the bride of Christ, relying upon His grace?

Rev. Maarten Kuivenhoven is a pastor of the Heritage Reformed Congregation of Grand Rapids, Michigan, and a PhD candidate at Calvin Theological Seminary.

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PERIODICAL
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JESUS, WITH THY CHURCH ABIDE

Jesus, with Thy Church abide,
Be her Savior, Lord, and Guide,
While on earth her faith is tried:
We beseech Thee, hear us.

May her voice be ever clear,
Warning of a judgment near,
Telling of a Savior dear:
We beseech Thee, hear us.

Keep her life and doctrine pure,
Help her, patient, to endure,
Trusting in Thy promise sure:
We beseech Thee, hear us.

All her fettered powers release,
Bid our strife and envy cease,
Grant the heav'nly gift of peace:
We beseech Thee, hear us.

May she one in doctrine be,
One in truth and charity,

Winning all to faith in Thee:
We beseech Thee, hear us.

May she guide the poor and blind,
Seek the lost until she find,
And the broken hearted bind:
We beseech Thee, hear us.

May her priests Thy people feed,
Shepherds of the flock indeed,
Ready, where Thou call'st, to lead:
We beseech Thee, hear us.

Judge her not for work undone,
Judge her not for fields unwon,
Bless her works in Thee begun:
We beseech Thee, hear us.

All that she has lost, restore,
May her strength and zeal be more
Than in brightest days of yore:
We beseech Thee, hear us.

Raise her to her calling high,
Let the nations far and nigh
Hear Thy heralds' warning cry:
We beseech Thee, hear us.

May her lamp of truth be bright,
Bid her bear aloft its light
Through the realms of heathen night:
We beseech Thee, hear us.

May she holy triumphs win,
Overthrow the hosts of sin,
Gather all the nations in,
We beseech Thee, hear us.

May she thus all glorious be,
Spotless and from wrinkle free,
Pure and bright, and worthy Thee:
We beseech Thee, hear us.

—THOMAS B. POLLOCK

the **Banner** of Sovereign Grace Truth

OFFICIAL PUBLICATION OF THE
HERITAGE REFORMED CONGREGATIONS

A PERIODICAL FOR FAMILIES