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Volume 83 ♦ Number 13

I Am the Resurrection and the Life

"Jesus said unto her, I am the resurrection, and the life: he that believeth in me, though he were dead, yet shall he live: and whosoever liveth and believeth in me shall never die. Believest thou this?"

John 11: 25, 26

In this event, which took place just a few months before Jesus' own death and resurrection, we find the Savior descending into the depths of our misery, sorrow, and death, and then ascending to the heights of resurrection—His and ours. The reality of Good Friday and of Easter are both present in this incident in Jesus' life.



Lazarus, whom Jesus loved (John 11:3), died (v. 14). His death brought great sorrow to his sisters, Martha and Mary. Their grief was the occasion for many people to

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visit with them in order "to comfort them concerning their brother" (v. 19).

Jesus joined these beloved sisters in facing the reality of death. Physical death is the cause of greatest sorrow because it brings a forceful end to earthly existence as well as all earthly relationships. When those relationships are close and intimate, then the fear and pain of death is indeed great! Also, physical death is ugly and repulsive, especially at the grave. Further, death is frightening because of "the power of death, that is, the devil," so that man lives his life in the "fear of death" and "subject to bondage" (Heb. 2:14, 15). And, most importantly, death is horribly frightening because it is the "wages of sin" (Rom. 6:23). Death is not natural but is divine punishment of sin, the revelation of God's judgment on sin.

When Jesus met Martha and then Mary He identi-

fied with the sorrow of the grieving sisters. He saw their grief and knew its depths. When He met them, He grieved with them in their loss. Jesus, better than anyone else, knew death as divine punishment of sin. No one present there could know as He knew. He saw death in the fullness of its reality. And as He meets Martha and Mary He is almost silent as He, as a member of the body, suffers when another member suffers. He has care for the other members (I Cor. 12:25, 26).

But Jesus is more than just another member of the body. He stands, over against death, as "the resurrection and the life."

Jesus declares that He is the resurrection. He is the power to conquer and defeat this killing enemy. He is the power to reverse death's power to corrupt and destroy the body by raising that same body out of the grave, changing it from corrupt-

...death is horribly frightening because it is the "wages of sin" (Rom. 6:23).

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ible to incorruptible, from mortal into immortality, fit for heaven. The resurrection means that He is the power to give to that body a life that will never perish, a life that abides forever in glory. Jesus declares that He is the power of victory and hope, the power of comfort, joy, and peace. When Jesus declared Himself to be the resurrection, then He was anticipating His own resurrection, and therefore the resurrection of all those given Him of the Father, which resurrection would be typified in the resurrection of Lazarus.

Jesus *is* the resurrection and the life. He does not merely possess the power. Nor is it true that He *will be* the resurrection and the life when He ascends into heaven and returns in power and glory. At the very moment that He stood with Mary and Martha before the open grave of Lazarus, He was the resurrection and the life.

Jesus is the resurrection because He is the life. The power of the resurrection is His because He is the life. In Him is the power to raise the dead because in Him is the power of life. What does it mean that He is the life? Two things. First, Jesus is the Living One. This is because Jesus is God. When Jesus uses the expression "I am" in John's narrative of the gospel, He is declaring His essential deity as God the Son. Life for Jesus, as well as life in God, is spiritual fellowship. Life is God living His covenant life within Himself. Jesus is this life. And, second, Jesus is saving life. The life that He gives to sinners delivers them from the penalty and power of sin and death, and it brings them into spiritual fellowship with God. Jesus is life to His people because God appointed Him to give saving life to them—to give them life with Himself.

The life that He gives to sinners delivers them from the penalty and power of sin and death, and it brings them into spiritual fellowship with God.

Then, because Jesus is the life, He is the resurrection. The living Jesus is the power over death and the power to raise up from death. Jesus is the power to raise Himself out of death. He saw His own future resurrection before He died. He will die, but He will also rise again from the dead. Of both He had frequently told His disciples. He will rise from the dead because He is, in Himself, the resurrection and the life.

When Jesus says these words He is also speaking about the resurrection of His people. Lazarus is dead, but Jesus is the power to raise him from the dead.

Martha spoke of her belief and hope that Lazarus would "rise again in the resurrection at the last day" (24). But she was not seeing Jesus' power and victory at that moment. Her expression of faith was in response to Jesus' telling her, "Thy brother shall rise again." So when Jesus responds to her by declaring Himself to be "the resur-

rection and the life," He wants Martha to see that He is the power over the death that took away her brother's earthly life, separated him from her, and is presently working on his body in the grave. He desires her to know that all who believe in

Jesus, even though they may die in the earthly sense, shall live. And all who believe in Jesus will never die.



This truth is proven by the miracle.

As the Great Shepherd caring for His grieving sheep, Jesus demonstrated to Martha and to Mary (and to all who believe) that He is the resurrection and the life. First He showed that He was touched with the feeling of our infirmities. With them He faced death, in all its powerful reality, at the open, stinking

grave. He groaned and was troubled. He, more than any other human, saw the horrible effects of sin. He wept, demonstrating that He knows experientially the sorrow and fear of death. He entered into our death in every way, even in seeing a loved one die and be buried. In whatever circumstances we stand, Jesus stood. And it is from that position that He declares that because He is the resurrection and the life, "thy brother shall rise again."

This truth is grasped only by faith in Jesus. "He that *believeth* in me, though he were dead, yet shall he live." Faith in Jesus is the way this great and blessed promise is received and enjoyed while we are yet walking through the valley of the shadow of death. This faith is an on-going gift of God that begins in the first resurrection—regeneration. The heart of the sinner is made alive by the Spirit of this One who is the resurrection and the life. The heart is made alive to God and to spiritual things, including the truth that Jesus is the resurrection and the life.

Those who believe in Jesus shall never die. The heart that is raised spiritually shall never die. Physical death does not kill that raised heart. And at physical death the soul also rises and lives in conscious glory with Christ. And when Jesus returns, then the bodies of the elect will be raised unto "the resurrection of life" (John 5:29). There is no death for the child of God who lives in Christ. This is the power of life that Christ gives as the resurrection and the life.

So, "believest thou this?" Martha, as a hurting believer, needed her faith in Jesus to be strengthened in the midst of the grief of death. She, and we, are to focus, not on death, but on Him who is the resurrection and the life. See death, but see it as it is used by Him who is the resurrection and the life.

Do you believe this? Believe and rejoice! 

The Evil Fruits of the Conditional Covenant (4) Baptismal Regeneration

The essence of a conditional covenant is that it is an agreement or an arrangement between God and man in which God comes to man with a promise and a demand (or a threat). God promises to give to man salvation from sin and eternal life. At the same time, God demands fulfillment of certain conditions to the obtaining of the promise. Most often, the condition is said to be faith; not infrequently, obedience is added.

It could be noted that the biblical doctrine of an *unconditional* covenant also maintains that God comes with promises and demands, though not with threats. Repent and believe in Jesus Christ—that is the command of the preaching. Obey my law—that is God’s unchanging demand. And the heart of the preaching of the gospel is a promise of salvation. These commands and this promise come to those who are in the covenant as well, although the promise is particular, that is, to the believer (Canons II, Art. 5; III/IV, Art. 8). Indeed, God demands obedience of His covenant people as a part of the thankfulness that God requires of His own.

It is quite another matter to maintain that God demands faith and/or obedience as conditions, that is, as prerequisites to receiving eternal life. That is not biblical, and thus it is not Reformed. The biblical, Reformed teaching is that faith and obedience are the *fruits of election* (Canons I, Arts. 9, 12). These gifts from God are part of the saving work of the Spirit in the believer.

Previous article in this series: March 15, 2007, p. 268.

As every Reformed believer knows, baptism is inseparably tied to God’s covenant of grace. In the New Testament (or covenant) baptism is a sign and seal of God’s covenant, as circumcision was in the Old Testament. It is administered to the children of believers, because God establishes His covenant with believers and their children in their generations, as He promised Abraham—“I will establish my covenant between me and thee and thy seed after thee in their generations for an everlasting covenant, to be a God unto thee, and to thy seed after thee” (Gen. 17:7). Peter affirmed the same on Pentecost to the New Testament church with this assurance: “For the promise is unto you, and to your children, and to all that are afar off, even as many as the Lord our God shall call” (Acts 2:39).

The Reformed confessions thus insist that children of believers be baptized because children of believers are included in the church and covenant of God (cf. Heidelberg Catechism, L.D. 27; Belgic Confession, Art. 34; Westminster Confession of Faith, Chapter 28). No Reformed man denies that.

Then the divisive problem arises. It arises in connection with the covenant of grace and the place of children in the covenant. The problem, simply put, is this: To whom are the promises of salvation given?

The unconditional covenant maintains: The promises of salvation are for the elect only, both in the preaching, and in the sacraments.

The conditional covenant teaches: The promises of salvation are given to every baptized child. God, through the minister, speaks

the words: I promise you, Jason, salvation. I make my covenant with you, Marie. I promise that you have redemption from sin by the blood of Christ. I promise that the Holy Spirit will dwell in you and sanctify you.

Those who maintain that the covenant is conditional insist that each and every child of believers, *in* the baptism ceremony, has these promises signified and sealed to him. As these children grow up, parents give them assurance—God has promised you salvation, my child. You are God’s child. Believe His promises spoken to you personally.

The doctrine of a conditional covenant admits that until the child does believe the promises, he does not have the full possession of what God promises. He has the written promise sealed by God, but if the child does not claim the blessings, he ends up with nothing. It is something like a starving man who has a genuine meal ticket to a costly smorgasbord, and thus has the right to the finest food available. But if the man does not present the ticket and claim the food, he will starve to death.

According to this view of the covenant, if the baptized child believes God’s promise and walks in obedience, he will receive the gift of eternal life. If he tears up the “ticket” and throws it away, he is a covenant breaker, and he loses all. But until and unless that happens, in and through baptism, God claims each of those children. “You are mine,” He promises.

In this connection, the proponents of such a covenant understand the Heidelberg Catechism to be speaking of *all* children of be-

lievers, when it answers the question, in Lord's Day 27, "Are infants also to be baptized?"

Yes; for since they, as well as the adult, are included in the covenant and church of God; and since redemption from sin by the blood of Christ, and the Holy Ghost, the author of faith, is promised to them no less than to the adult; they must therefore by baptism, as a sign of the covenant, be also admitted into the Christian church, and be distinguished from the children of unbelievers as was done in the old covenant or testament by circumcision, instead of which baptism is instituted in the new covenant.

The question naturally arises, Are all the baptized children saved, then, since they are all claimed by God and all have these promises, even the promise of forgiveness of sins through the blood of Christ? The answer given is, None are saved unless and until they believe these promises. And when the further objection is raised, But how can you say that these baptized children are not all saved if they all have the promise of forgiveness, then the answer is: These children have these promises *objectively*, but not *subjectively*.

That, however, is an impossible solution. The difference between having the blessing of salvation *objectively* and having it *subjectively* is an artificial distinction, a man-made distinction with no basis in the Bible or in the confessions. That paper barrier would not hold back the theological consequences of making all baptized children to be true covenant children and true church members, and possessing all the promises of salvation.

Over time, this barrier began to come apart. Ironically, a factor in this is that some who held to a conditional covenant began to see that the covenant is more than an agreement, more than a mere arrangement. The biblical evidence is too compelling. God's covenant is a relationship of love, as surely

as a father in this life loves his children. The covenant involves friendship, even as Abraham was called the friend of God.

Surely we can and do rejoice that the old notions of the covenant as a cold agreement are being discarded. Promoters of the conditional covenant are acknowledging that the covenant of grace is a relationship of love and friendship. That would be cause for great joy but for one thing—they will not abandon the conditional nature of the covenant. They continue to insist that each baptized child has all the promises of the covenant of love and friendship. That makes matters even worse.

Consider the implications of insisting that every baptized child has the promises sealed to him personally in baptism. If the covenant is a relationship of friendship, is each baptized child a friend of God? If the covenant relationship is likened to a family, where God becomes the Father of the covenant people for Jesus' sake, is every baptized child adopted by God? Each child is claimed by God. Does God then also adopt each one?

The principle began to work through. Today, theologians in the Reformed camp maintain the astonishing position that, indeed, Esau and Judas Iscariot were, by virtue of their place in the covenant, friends of God!!

One stands aghast! Would to God they could see that the reprobate child in the covenant, like Esau, is not loved by God, not loved less, but hated (Rom. 9:13). That in fact God's wrath is on the Esaus in the sphere of the covenant from his birth, an even fiercer wrath than is on the reprobate child outside the sphere of the covenant. That there is no love, no favor, and no good inclination at all toward the Esaus in the sphere of the covenant. Surely God gives no promise, "You, Esau, are my child. You, Judas, have the promise of redemption." No doubt these truths are dreadful to contemplate. It makes a believ-

ing parent shudder to think about it. But it is the plain teaching of Scripture. Concerning two sons born to believing Isaac and Rebecca, God reveals that eternally He loved the one, and hated the other.

If only the promoters of a conditional covenant would apply the clear teaching of Romans 9, and of the rest of Scripture, to the doctrine of the covenant. That is to say, if only they allowed the sovereign decree of divine election to govern the doctrine of God's covenant of grace.

But it is too late for that. The conditional covenant has gone far beyond what its defenders would allow fifty years ago. It is producing evil fruit that Dr. Klaas Schilder never dreamed of.

It is a standard teaching of the conditional covenant, taking the language of the Heidelberg Catechism, that every baptized child becomes a member of the church. Not merely in the outward sense, but a true member of the church of Christ. From this it necessarily follows that:

Since the church is the family of God, every baptized child is adopted by God.

Since the church is the body of Christ, each baptized child is grafted into Christ, and partaker of His life.

Since the church is the temple of God, each baptized child is a living stone of that church, and the Spirit lives within.

Norman Shepherd, one of the patriarchs of the current heretical teaching of covenantal universalism (also known as Federal Vision), wrote this concerning baptism. "This covenant sign and seal marks his conversion and his entrance into the church as the body of Christ. From the perspective of the covenant, he is united to Christ when he is baptized."* Shepherd, though espousing heresy, was being a bit careful. He was (albeit

* *The Call of Grace: How the Covenant Illuminates Salvation and Evangelism*, p. 94.

somewhat vaguely) referring to the baptism of a person converted in evangelism. His followers have thrown caution to the wind. They use even stronger language to describe the baptism of infants, as we shall see.

Since, all along in the conditional covenant, baptism was the main assurance for the child, his personal sign and seal of God's promises to him, baptism now becomes the instrument that accomplishes these miraculous things. For, do not the confessions teach us that baptism is not an *empty*

sign? It is a *sacrament*! Suddenly, the Reformed confessions become a tool of the heretics and they quote, among other things, the Belgic Confession, Article 33—"[Sacraments] are visible signs and seals of an inward and invisible thing, by means whereof God worketh in us by the power of the Holy Spirit. Therefore the signs are not in vain or insignificant, so as to deceive us...." (Confer also the Westminster Confession, Chapter 28, and the Longer and Shorter Catechisms.) The confessions do in-

deed stress that the sacraments are means of faith, sealing the powerful work of the Spirit. Start reading these confessional statements on what baptism signifies and seals as though they apply to every baptized child, as the conditional covenant teaches. The result is the heresies that are propounded by the covenant universalists.

Ultimately, these modern-day heretics employ the conditional covenant to build another road back to Rome. Baptism regenerates.

... to be continued. 

Letters

Goal of Christian marriage

Rev. A. Brummel's Guest Article "Bringing Forth Children in an Age of Selfishness" in the February 15, 2007 issue of the *SB* prompted me to write a few comments about the article.

I appreciated the encouragement that we all need to hear today concerning the blessedness of children. We also need to hear and heed the warning against the selfishness that is so often displayed concerning children in this wicked age of affluence. But, in the process of condemning an attitude of indifference towards children and in condemning an attitude that children are undesirable, let us not change the meaning of marriage.

Rev. Brummel states that "God created marriage for the purpose of establishing His covenant in the way of procreation." He also stated that, "Those who have no desire for children ought not to marry." He went on to say that people "try to separate the sexual union from bearing children, separating what God has joined together. Such is sin...." This reader was (and others may well be) left with the idea that bearing children is to be the main goal of a Christian marriage. I disagree with this idea as it relates to the truth of marriage. Children are not the main goal of marriage. Children are a *fruit* of mar-

riage. We marvel that God uses one of the most intimate aspects of marriage as the very means whereby He establishes His covenant in the church's generations. However, a marriage is complete as such with or without children.

The end of the article reads as follows: "What is your attitude toward children? Are you seeking to keep them from Christ? May God give us grace to forsake the selfishness of our natures and humble ourselves before His sovereign, gracious hand, that He might be praised. 'Suffer the little children to come unto me, and forbid them not.'"

Considering this ending and the article as a whole, one would believe that the author is promoting the following principles: 1) Scripture exhorts married Christians of childbearing years, in obedience to Genesis 1:28; 9:1; and 35:11, to endeavor to bear as many children as physically possible until illness or life-threatening difficulties prevent them from doing so. 2) The Christian that hinders this endeavor is in effect "seeking to keep children from Christ," which is a sin and a lack of faith. 3) Because it is separating what God has joined together, separating the sexual union from bearing children is a sin.

Those of us who are endeared to Rev. Brummel will appreciate his

point of view, but let us be clear on what we believe concerning marriage.

Genesis 2:18 shows that God's purpose for marriage was to complete the creation of man—"It is not good that the man should be alone." I do not believe that Adam had a desire for children when God brought Eve to him, but God joined them nonetheless. Prof. Engelsma summed up Scripture's teaching in *Marriage, the Mystery of Christ and the Church*: "For human marriage is a sign, a divinely ordained symbol, of the relationship of Christ and the church. The underlying reality of marriage is the union of Christ and the church. The fundamental significance of marriage is that it pictures the marriage of Christ and His bride, the church" (p. 20). Ephesians 5:25-27 calls men to their duty in marriage, "Husbands, love your wives, even as Christ also loved the church, and gave himself for it; that he might sanctify and cleanse it with the washing of water by the word, that he might present it to himself a glorious church, not having spot, or wrinkle, or any such thing; but that it should be holy and without blemish."

Let us view our marriages and our children as blessings from God, and may our covenant families ever reflect the biblical truth of marriage.

Eric VanDyke
Wyoming, Michigan

RESPONSE:

Dear Eric,

I want to thank you for giving me opportunity to clarify a point that might have been misunderstood regarding the above mentioned article. I was required to edit significantly my original speech in order to publish it. As a result, the article lost some of its balance and sensitivity, especially toward childless couples. I left out the section treating the purpose of God in marriage. If you would like a free cassette tape or CD of the entire lecture, please write to Peace PRC, 18423 Stony Island Ave., Lansing, IL 60438 or email evangelism@peaceprc.org.

I agree wholeheartedly with you that God instituted marriage first of all for the purpose of the reflection of His covenant. However, this does not detract from the thrust of the article, nor from the principles that I set forth. God ordained children to be the fruit of marriage. Nor does this justify a couple in seeking to avoid having children. The two purposes of God ought not to be separated by man. This is not merely my opinion, nor is it novel. I believe it is biblical. I encourage you to keep reading in Professor Engelsma's excellent book on marriage and you will find

an entire chapter devoted to the place of children in marriage and to the relationship between these two purposes of God in marriage.

I stated the following in my lecture:

At the same time it is important for us to note that the sexual relation is not first of all and primarily for the purpose of conception. The sexual relation is first of all an expression of the union and intimacy of the covenant relation into which God brings a man and a woman in marriage. God gave Eve to Adam because: "It was not good that the man be alone." Companionship and friendship lie at the heart of the primary significance of marriage. That companionship and friendship are a reflection of the intimate relation between Christ and His church. When there are no children in a marriage, the marriage of a man and a woman is yet complete. God's highest purpose is achieved as the man and woman reflect the love of God between Christ and His bride the church. The husband and wife without children have a high calling to live faithfully in marriage and to give their time and energy for the sake of God's kingdom and church. The second purpose of the sexual relationship is for the begetting of children.

Such is evident from the way

that God created the woman. I don't intend to give a biology or anatomy lesson here, but a few comments will suffice. If God intended the sexual relation to be exclusively for conception He would have made the woman like some of the female animals that are always ready to conceive at any time. He did not. If the sexual relation was just for conception, then couples would be bound by God to limit their sexual experiences to only those times of the month when conception is possible and would be called to abstain at all other times. Sexual relations would not be permissible during pregnancy nor after such a time when pregnancy was no longer possible. The Bible condemns such a notion when it teaches men to marry in order to avoid fornication and teaches the sexual relation as a debt that husbands and wives owe to each other in I Corinthians 7:2-5. The fruit of this sexual relationship is ordinarily the conception of children.

I share with you the desire that God bless our marriages and our families and grant us faithfulness to uphold the high and honorable place that the Scriptures give to marriage and children.

God's richest blessings,

Rev. Allen Brummel 

All Around Us

■ Winning One for the Lord?

Sunday, February 4, 2007 was "Super Bowl Sunday." It is considered by many to be the greatest, most important sporting event of the year in the United States. Millions watch. Some, doubtlessly, stayed home from services in church to see the great game on TV. One can easily guess that some Christians managed to

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get the expensive tickets to see the game in person.

Many churches too would make use of the game as another "evangelical tool"—in an attempt to "become all things to all men" (I Cor. 9:22). A super-sized screen is placed in church and the game projected for all in the auditorium to see. Friends and neighbors of parishioners are invited to attend the viewing of the game—usually in place of the normally scheduled sermon. During or after the game, spiritual applications could be made. Others are introduced to this church by means of the game.

Perhaps they would be inclined to attend on subsequent Sundays as well. And did not Paul himself often use sports illustrations (as: running a race) when he presented the gospel to the Gentiles?

Two other things made this particular Super Bowl special and unique. What many noted was that both teams had black coaches. Never, we are told, has a black coach led his team to a Super Bowl victory. This year, obviously, a black coach will have attained this milestone.

But a few have pointed out another remarkable thing: both coaches profess to be Christians.

Don Pierson, sports reporter for the *Chicago Tribune* (Jan. 23, 2007), wrote:

...At a Chicago news conference where he endorsed Mayor Richard Daley for re-election on Monday, U.S. Sen. Barack Obama said Smith and Dungy (the two coaches—GVB) present “a good lesson for all of us.”

“To see two African-American coaches go to the Super bowl when it has been historically difficult for black coaches to break into the NFL is terrific,” Obama said. “But what makes it even better is that they are both men of humility, they are both men of God. They never trash talk. They are not yellers and screamers on the sidelines. They are a couple of class individuals.”

To Dungy and Smith, their story is as much about coaching style as color.

“I know the type of person Lovie is,” Dungy said. “He has the same Christian convictions I have. He runs his team the same way. I know how those guys are treated in Chicago and how they play—tough, disciplined football without a lot of profanity from coaches or a win-at-all-costs atmosphere.”

One must be pleasantly surprised that these coaches are “both men of God” who do not “trash talk.” Now we have not only the Super Bowl used by many churches to attract and teach attendees concerning the “game of life,” but also coaches who might serve as examples personally to the youth of the church.

Yet there is something very disturbing. These “men of God” must honor in their confession the first commandment as well as the second and third. But what about the fourth commandment? Football games are regularly played on Sunday. The Super Bowl is only the climax of a season of disregard for the Sabbath in sports. What sort of lessons does one learn in this violation of the Sabbath? While one can appreciate the decent behavior of

some sports heroes (there is so little that is commendable in many of the “heroes”), does not this very fact tend towards the increasing erosion of obedience to the fourth commandment? If these “men of God” can violate the command, is it so wrong that we do likewise? And if the Super Bowl can replace the preaching, at least for one Sunday, what does it teach about Sabbath observance and the need of the preaching of the gospel?

There can be no doubt that there has been an erosion of the requirements of the fourth commandment. Sabbath observance has sharply declined in recent years. Many, perhaps most, businesses are open on Sunday. Sports increasingly take place on Sunday. All of this serves to cause the Christian to doubt the need of having one day of seven set aside to worship. In fact many in Reformed churches claim that since we are called to serve God every day of the week, it is immaterial whether we do that especially on Sunday.

We could profitably examine our own use of the Sabbath. Can we note evidences of possible erosion of our own proper worship of God’s name on this day?

■ “Will it be Light or Heat for the CRC?”

So began an article by John VanDyk in *Christian Renewal*, January 31, 2007. VanDyk began his column by reporting what appears to be a relatively quiet time in the CRC after several turbulent decades now past:

Other than a recent major stir over the issue of homosexuality, the Christian Reformed Church has appeared on the surface at least to be a relatively peaceful denomination quietly going about its business. Following the departure in the early 1990s of over 10,000 members, the delegates to classes and synods remarked in *The Banner* on the “harmony” and refreshing “lack of confrontation” experienced in those assemblies.

Yet despite efforts to maintain the peace by walking the narrow yet haphazardous road of both appeasement and compromise on the issue of women in office, the CRC Synod of 2006 may have inadvertently rekindled the flames of an ongoing debate.

After the CRC Synod 2006, two groups emerged in connection with the decision taken respecting women in office. Synod adopted a proposal to change its Church Order, which clearly stated that men would occupy the offices within the church, so that now the offices would be open in all of the denomination to women. This change would have to be approved finally by the Synod of 2007. (Several years earlier the CRC Synod had decided that individual Classes, by majority vote, could legally set aside the requirement of the Church Order and ordain women as ministers of the Word.) The Synod made the further decision that women would not be able to serve, for the present time, as delegates to synod or as members of synodical committees. In addition the Synod decided that the women-in-office issue would not be brought up again for seven years—a “cooling off” period.

Two groups formed after the Synod of 2006. One consisted of six pastors in West Michigan. These held a public meeting on September 11, 2006 at the Byron Center CRC. The report was that “several hundred CRC pastors, elders, deacons and members were in attendance.” This group calls themselves “The Returning Church.” Their statement of purpose reads:

As many other denominations, the Christian Reformed denomination has gone through difficult times the last decades. Many individuals, families and pastors who were long part of the denomination have left for other churches and some have formed another denomination.

Those who remain within the

denomination are saddened by polarization, by a sense of unease and by the threat of further membership losses. On a deeper level, there are many who feel that the denomination no longer benefits from careful attention to the Scriptures and an enthusiastic recognition of the value of its confessional treasure. Discussion of serious ecclesiastical issues often occurs with little reference to the Bible and the confessions.

This evening's meeting is the beginning of an exploration of ways that the Lord may be pleased to use to bring renewal to our denomination. We have considered and have rejected the option of leaving this denomination for three reasons: (1) We believe the denomination has many members and churches that are dedicated to God's Word and who value the confessions. (2) We believe that other denominations have problems as well. And (3) we feel that God is calling us to exercise our faith and use our spiritual energy to bring about renewal in the Christian Reformed Church.

We are dedicated to revitalizing local Christian Reformed Churches so that the power of Scripture will be the primary influence within them. We are dedicated to the catechetical instruction of our children that reflects the continuing importance of the Reformation tradition. And we are dedicated to evangelism and

missions built on biblical principles.

But a more strident, insistent, demanding voice is also being heard in the CRC. Women who have gained the "right" to serve as ministers, elders, and deacons in the CRC are offended that synod somewhat limited their opportunities to serve the Lord: they cannot yet come as delegates to synod or serve on synodical committees. *Christian Renewal* reports:

Enter the overture-writing lobby. According to *The Banner* and *The Grand Rapids Press*, "A group of women pastors and chaplains from the western Michigan area around Grand Rapids have called for the removal of all restrictions particular to women. Calling themselves "Hearts Aflame" in reference to Jesus' disciples, they have organized four prayer vigils, including one for the opening day of synod, June 9, 2007. They are also urging local classes to draft overtures, and have created a tip sheet to help in the writing."

Another lobby effort led by Calvin College professor Dr. Helen Sterk called for an organizing meeting in early January "to begin a campaign which includes getting churches to write overtures asking that the Sabbath

(moratorium on discussion) be cancelled and that women join men in all aspects of the CRC"; a daily demonstration during synod—one thousand people every day all wearing the same color watching the delegates; booths at synod with brochures and a video documentary. The group is also calling on the leadership of the denomination to join the protest.

Comment is hardly needed. This sort of activity surely does not proceed from "hearts aflame." There is evidence of coercion, intimidation, and pressure tactics. It appears to make a mockery of prayer—four prayer vigils indeed! For what will these be praying? That God would move the synod to grant them their hearts' desire? One can hardly imagine that these would be praying, "Thy will be done." Nor would they likely be praying, "Grant that we may submit to Thy Holy Word." And imagine daily demonstrations during synod, when each day one thousand or more people, all dressed in the same color clothing, are watching, watching synod to make sure that the delegates know what is expected of them.

It is a sad commentary on what ought to be decency and good order in the church. 

Ministering to the Saints

Rev. Douglas Kuiper

Deacons' Meetings (2)

A View from the Observers' Gallery

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Previous article in this series: February 1, 2007, p. 210.

The room in which deacons' meetings are held does not have an observers' gallery. Unlike most sessions of the meetings of the church's broader assemblies, the public is not welcome to observe deacons' meetings—or consistory meetings, for that matter.

The reason for this is not that the congregation may know nothing about the deacons' work. The deacons do well to inform the congregation of the work they are doing, withholding any names and details pertaining to specific cases. But the members of the congregation may not observe deacons'

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meetings because at such the deacons discuss personal matters pertaining to individual members of the church.

But let us suppose that the room in which the deacons of our Reformed congregations meet does have an observers' gallery, and that we are sitting in it. We will view a fairly representative meeting. Not every diaconate will follow the same order; not every diaconate will include every item on their agenda; but this meeting that we observe is as "normal" as such a meeting can be.

This will be for the benefit of all of us. It will help satisfy the curiosity of any who are not able to be at such meetings. Even more, it will help us realize that at such meetings the deacons work hard on the church's behalf to see that the needs of the poor are met.

This will also be for the benefit of deacons. You know how your own meetings are conducted. But is everything you do at your meetings relevant to your real work as deacons? Do you get sidetracked on issues that should not take up your time? Are any important matters that do pertain to your office being overlooked?



Eager to observe this meeting, we have arrived early. Consequently, most of the deacons are still arriving. But wait—*that* man who just walked in the door is not a deacon; he is an *elder*! Why is an elder at the meeting?

The elders of Reformed churches properly have the oversight of the deacons' office and work. One way the elders manifest this is by sending one of their number, or the minister, to each deacon's meeting.

This is in accordance with our Church Order. Article 40 prescribes that to the deacons' meetings, "ministers shall take good heed, and if necessary they shall be present." And Article 23 says that "the office of the elders...is to

take heed that the ministers, together with their fellow-elders and the deacons, faithfully discharge their office...." The elders have the oversight of the church and the offices of the church. Properly, therefore, they must oversee the work and the meetings of the deacons.

Reasons are given why Article 40 specifically requires the "minister" to take heed and, if necessary, to be present: "Since he is usually much better acquainted with the New Testament teaching on the offices in the churches and with the provisions of the *Church Order*, he will be able to answer many of the questions which arise in the minds of the deacons."¹ The fact is, however, that when the minister attends such meetings he does so as an elder.

Our common practice of having all of the elders by rotation take their turn visiting the deacons' meetings is good, for "it establishes a close contact between the Consistory and the Diaconate and gives every Elder an opportunity to keep in touch with the work."²

The elder who is present has what we call an *advisory* vote. Do not misunderstand; he may not actually vote on any motions or matters that come before the deacons. But he may participate in the discussion of motions, and give advice.

Such an elder must not be quick to give advice. His presence does not suggest that the deacons do not know how to do their work, and that the elder must always show them what to do. This elder must resist the temptation of thinking that he has been suddenly given all wisdom, and that the deacons cannot do their work without him. But when he believes himself to have input that might help the deacons in a situation, he may give it.

His real mandate from the consistory, however, is to ensure that the deacons *are* doing their work, and then to report to the consistory regarding any matters of

which the deacons seek the consistory's input.



At the appointed time, the deacon who has been elected to preside calls the meeting to order, reads a passage from Scripture, and opens with prayer. This is an appropriate way to begin any meeting of the officebearers of Christ's church. It is also required by Article 40 of our Church Order, which mandates that the deacons do their work, "calling upon the name of God."

Probably few, if any, begin with the "Opening Prayer for the Meetings of the Deacons" found in the back of the 1959 edition of the *Psalter Hymnal*, but the prayer is beautiful and appropriate. Of the exact origin of this prayer I am uncertain; but in the early 1600s it was added to a collection of other prayers in the Dutch Psalter, and translated in the 1930s for inclusion in the *Psalter Hymnal*.

Here is the prayer:

Merciful God and Father, Thou hast not only declared that we shall always have the poor with us, but hast also commanded us to succor them in their need. Thou hast ordained the service of the deacons for Thy Church, in order that its needy members may receive the aid they require. Since we whom Thou hast called to the deaconal office in this church are now met in Thy Name to discuss matters pertaining to our office, we humbly beseech Thee that Thou mayest, for the sake of Jesus Christ, dwell among us with the spirit of discrimination. May Thy Spirit help us to distinguish between those really poor and those who feign destitution, and to distribute the alms that have been collected as each one's need may render necessary, in the spirit of joy and fidelity. May we neither fail to comfort the needy members of Thy dear Son, nor dispense gifts to those who are not in want.

Kindle fervent love to the poor in men's hearts, in order that they may contribute generously of

their temporal possessions over which Thou didst appoint them stewards, and we may have command of sufficient means to bring relief to those that are indigent, and may faithfully perform our task with true liberality of heart and without difficulty.

Bestow upon us also the grace we need, not only to relieve want by means of external gifts, but also to instill the comfort of Thy Holy Word in hearts afflicted with misery. Truly, man lives not by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds out of Thy mouth. We pray, therefore, that Thou wilt bless our ministrations and wilt multiply the bread of the poor, to the end that both they and we may have reasons to praise and thank Thee; meanwhile awaiting the blessed appearance of Thy dear Son, Jesus Christ, who for our sakes became poor that He might enrich us with eternal treasures. Amen.³

The reader notes that the prayer breathes the spirit of deacons who are devoted to their office, have genuine compassion for the poor, and understand that the benevolent funds of the church must be protected against those looking for a free handout. It is a prayer for grace, expressing dependence on God as the fountain of all good to give the deacons the graces of which they stand in need.



At this point, the deacons whom we are observing spend the better part of an hour counting the offerings that have been collected over the course of the past month.

Not all deacons count their collections monthly. Some count each offering immediately after each service; others count special offerings after each service, but leave the General and/or Benevolent Fund offerings to be counted at the monthly meeting; others count the money from every collection from the past month at the deacons' meeting. The money counted at the monthly meeting has been kept safe since it was collected, either

by being stored in a safe within the church, or by being deposited, uncounted, in the bank's safe until the day of the meeting.

Having counted the money, some diaconates (especially in those churches that use the envelope system of giving to the General Fund) record in a book which member gave how much. This enables the treasurer at the end of the year to give each member a written statement of how much he contributed to the church's general fund—a statement that is useful for tax purposes.

As the deacons count the money, they often discuss matters among themselves. At this meeting the discussion revolves around the question whether the deacons are the proper body to count the General Fund and special collection offerings. They must be counted; they should be counted by officebearers; but why the deacons, at a deacons' meeting?

Arguing that the deacons are not the proper body to do this work, one deacon notes that Article 40 of our Church Order requires the deacons at their meetings "to transact the business pertaining to their office." This business is that of caring for the poor, not overseeing the General Fund or administering the special collections. All the business of the church that does not specifically pertain either to the office of elder or that of deacon is really the work of the church's *council*—the meeting of pastor, elders, and deacons together. That is the body that ought to count the monies.

The elder quickly chimes in that he doesn't really mind that the deacons count the money. After all, the council meetings are plenty long anyway, especially since this congregation has the oversight of one of the denomination's mission fields; and usually the consistory meets after the council, so the night gets late enough for the elders.

Two deacons point out potential benefits to counting the Gen-

eral Fund and special collections at the council meeting instead of the deacons' meeting. One approaches it from a practical viewpoint: "It would make the counting go more quickly, seeing many hands make light work, and the council has more members than the diaconate." The other puts forth more substantial arguments: "It would give us more time to devote to our real work, caring for the poor. And, it would mean that we deacons would not have to spend time wondering what to do when the General Fund collections are not keeping up with the church's needs, or when one family is not giving much to the kingdom's causes. These are really matters that pertain to the work of the church as a whole."

But don't suppose that in this discussion it is the one elder against the six deacons. A fourth deacon demonstrates that there is more than one way to look at any issue, as he justifies the current practice: "It is true that our real work is the care of the poor. But in counting the offerings you could view us as a committee of the council; so it isn't that it is really *wrong* of us to do this."

The fifth deacon, the treasurer, is shaking his head "No." Not that he is disagreeing with what the last deacon said; in fact, he hasn't heard it. His problem is that he is preparing the deposit slip—and the numbers are not adding up right!

1. Peter Y. DeJong, *The Ministry of Mercy for Today* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1963), pp. 164-165.

2. VanDellen and Monsma, *The Church Order Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1941), p. 179.

3. *Psalter Hymnal, Doctrinal Standards and Liturgy of the Christian Reformed Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Publication Committee of the Christian Reformed Church, 1959), pp. 83-84 in the doctrinal and liturgical section. The historical information regarding the prayer is found on page 74.

It is the sixth deacon who has the last word. "No, we couldn't say it is *wrong* for us to do it; but I think it is inappropriate."

Personally, at the moment, I'm agreeing with the deacon who spoke last. "The deacons shall meet monthly, or more frequently as the need arises, to transact the business pertaining to their office..." (Article 40). Have not our SB articles for the last few years asserted that this business pertaining to the deacons' office does not include the general finances of the church?

Just a question from the gallery.

And food for thought.



The collections having been counted and recorded, the real business of the meeting begins. The deacon who has been elected to be secretary for the year reads the minutes of the previous meeting, the entire diaconate has an op-

portunity to correct them if they are not accurate, and they are approved.

Minutes of meetings are important. Article 34 requires that at each assembly there be "a clerk to keep a faithful record of all important matters." Recall from the previous article that the deacons' meeting is technically an extension of the consistory meeting, so that technically Article 34 does not apply. But the point of Article 34 does apply. It is always good to keep record of important decisions made "(1) so that the Church or Churches may know with precision what has been decided in any given instance... (2) To avoid needless duplication of work... (3) And furthermore, we should preserve our decisions and deliverances for the benefit of posterity."⁴

Furthermore, the minutes of the deacons' meeting serve as a basis for informing the consistory about the work the deacons have done.

Not only, then, will the secretary read the minutes of the previous meeting, but you will note him jotting down the motions and other key information from the current meeting in a notebook, or on a laptop computer, to be tidied up at a later time, so that they also are properly recorded.



Let's see—how the time has flown by, and the space allotted me to write this column. The meeting is not yet over, but it is time for a break.

No doubt one of the deacons' wives took her turn, in rotation, preparing a nice dessert, and her husband made sure to get the coffee pot going when he arrived at church. So enjoy your coffee and dessert, and be sure to visit the restroom; the real work has yet to be done.

... to be continued. 

4. VanDellen and Monsma, p. 155.

Royal Children: Children of the Word

Royal children are children of the Word, children who must develop in their abilities to listen and speak and to read and write with understanding. Since they are stewards of the abilities and talents that their heavenly Father has given them, we as parents and teachers will encourage the development of their talents with a view to serving our Father King. We wrote of talents, not so much with an eye to differences of natural endowment, but from the perspective of abilities that, though they vary, we all have the

calling to develop and use in God's service. One of the most important of these abilities is listening, speaking, reading, and writing with concentration and understanding. This ability, barring unusual handicaps, is one that we should develop in ourselves and our children, perhaps more than any other.

Beyond the obvious necessity of learning to follow spoken and written instructions in order to function in the home and society, the foundation of all our life is the Word of God, in written form in the Bible, and in audible form as the Word preached. We are people of the Word because our faithful God, our Father and King, has chosen to reveal Himself to us primarily by means of spoken and writ-

ten language. For creatures such as we are, there could be other modes of revelation: images, music, emotional expressions, and physical expressions, including touch, taste, and smell. While God ordains such things as sacrifices, a physical land, a tabernacle or temple, and the sacraments to reveal truths about Himself and His relationship to His people, He always does so in conjunction with the Word, at first spoken, then written down as He commanded. Any other mode of revelation, including the creation, can only be understood by the Word. This particular mode of revelation in the form of spoken and written propositional truth is reflective of the kind of God our Father is. "God is

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a Spirit: and they that worship him must worship him in spirit and in truth" (John 4:24).

Already in the opening chapters of Genesis, God speaks, and by the agency of His Son, the Word, the world is created. In Genesis 3 we learn by inference that Adam must have been in the habit of communicating with the "voice of the LORD God," in the Garden of Eden. We see no image or visual representation here but communication by means of the voice, implying language. After the fall, God comes to man, giving him His promise in word, and continuing, faithful to His promise, to reveal Himself to His people by His word.

Of particular note in connection with developing the abilities of our children is the familiar passage in Deuteronomy 6:6-9: "And these words, which I command thee this day, shall be in thine heart: And thou shalt teach them diligently unto thy children, and shalt talk of them when thou sittest in thine house, and when thou walkest by the way, and when thou liest down, and when thou risest up. And thou shalt bind them for a sign upon thine hand, and they shall be as frontlets between thine eyes. And thou shalt write them upon the posts of thy house, and on thy gates." For purposes of these articles, we note a number of things: 1) the words, which God puts in (literally upon) our hearts, may be taught diligently (emphasizing the idea of repetition) and talked of; 2) we are to live in them in every part of our life; 3) they stand at the heart of our life in the home. It is by means of spoken and written language that God has commanded us to conduct this instruction.

If this be the case, then the development of the abilities of language in our children is of paramount importance. There is considerable evidence that the means by which our children learn, especially when they are young, will have a powerful effect on the actual physical development of their

brains and thus on their ability to deal with language, including the ability to listen, comprehend, process, and analyze the spoken and written word. An excellent book on this subject, for those who are interested in reading some of the evidence in this regard, is *Endangered Minds: Why Children Don't Think and What We Can Do About It*, by Jane M. Healy. In it she explores the effects of visual media, especially television and videos, not only on children's abilities to read and learn, but on the actual way in which the brain develops. If we want to teach our children the Word that is in our hearts, we will want them to develop the best possible abilities to read and listen with understanding. Especially in our children's early years, television and video watching will play a very minimal part, if any, in this instruction. The American Academy of Pediatrics now recommends that children under the age of two watch no television at all, and after that no more than two hours a day of "quality videos and programming." While we do not take this organization as the authority for our home life, their recommendations do warrant some serious consideration. I think most of us have observed not only the mesmerizing effects, but also the tremendous drawing power of television, especially on children. But the chief damage of television is that it displaces real life experience, conversation, and reading.

What are some positive things we can do with our children that will prove very beneficial in developing their ability to listen and read with understanding? Engage in conversation. Teach them to memorize, or, better yet, memorize with them. Read books aloud with them—not just until they are able to read for themselves, but as a regular part of family life that continues into adolescence. These activities will not only play a useful and important part in the instruction that God commands in

Deuteronomy 6, but will complement and reinforce each other.

Conversation is a general term that brings to mind a number of different ideas. To some it means all or most of the speech we use on a daily basis, talking about the immediate necessities of life, the weather, etc. To others, perhaps, it suggests a relaxed evening with friends sharing experiences and ideas. In its richest and most enjoyable form, conversation is an opening of the heart to one another, a sharing of ideals, aspirations, and reflections. When we converse with one another in this way, striving to season our speech with salt, bringing it captive to the obedience of Christ, God uses it to lift our hearts and refresh us on our pilgrim's pathway. Certainly conversation will not always be on this plane; yet one of the very reasons for which God gives us the gift of speech is that we may by it encourage and bring comfort to one another.

Conversation is the way in which we have communion and fellowship with each other, reflecting in the lives of our homes the communion and fellowship that we have with God. It would seem that the ability to converse would arise naturally in the life of a Christian home. Yet Satan is hard at work here to destroy this means by which our children will grow, not only in this communion and fellowship, but also in their very ability to learn from written and spoken language.

There is the obvious impediment of our sinful and selfish human nature. Conversation with our children requires effort on our part, giving up something of ourselves, giving our time and attention, developing a genuine interest in their concerns. This is especially difficult when we are tired, busy doing something else, or preoccupied with our own affairs. How easy it is to feign attention and fail truly to listen.

Then, we are so busy. Fathers must work long hours to provide for their families. With large families, even with our many labor-sav-

ing devices, the work of a mother in the home demands what seems at times almost ceaseless work. Yet we must all confess that at least some of what makes us “busy” is the time we waste on other things. You know your own weakness. We can become too busy with social or sports activities. Even extra church and school activities, good in themselves, sometimes make us so busy that we have little time left for communion and fellowship in our own families.

Because of these hindrances, we must look for and try to make opportunities to converse with our children. One of the most important of these is the family dinner table. Even non-Christians recognize the value of family meals, and some are trying to return to the practice, but many families eat very few meals together at home. With mothers employed outside the home, many families eat out, or consume fast food before the television set. Many do not eat together at all because of conflicting schedules, each family member heating up his individual portion or the children are fed first so adults can enjoy the meal together (understandable on an occasional basis). We can fall into these practices too.

Bowing in prayer together, eating together, sharing the experiences of the day, striving to see them together in the light of God’s Word, comforting one another, finding a place of love and acceptance, and worshiping together are elements that characterize the covenant family table. When our children are very young, this may seem idealistic, but as with many other aspects of our family life, we continue to strive after this ideal, and we do grow in it. As our older children mature, they will set an example for the younger. God will bless our striving after this ideal in His time and way.

Mothers with very young children can start from a very early age to sit down *with* their children to eat even when the whole family is

not present. Lead your children in prayer and close the meal with a Bible story or verse or a song. Sitting down with our children and staying with them at the table until the end of the meal will teach them a number of valuable things: they will learn that meals are a gift of God to be recognized as such with thankfulness, but they will learn also that meals together are about more than eating—they are about fellowship and communion as a family.

Another opportunity for conversation is when we work together. Having children take turns working with mother or dad in cleaning up after meals, doing yard work, learning repair skills or cooking, working puzzles, or building models together are all opportunities for conversation. Going for walks together is one of the best ways to enjoy time for conversation, especially as children get older, because many things that normally distract us are removed. Bedtime can be a time for conversation, perhaps not a lengthy time, but a few minutes can mean a lot for our children. It is difficult, especially in larger families, to *put* our children to bed, as opposed to sending them to bed, but what a beautiful way for our young children to end their day, enjoying fellowship and communion with father or mother, briefly discussing events of the day, having confessed sins and prayed together, knowing peace with God and one another.

Conversation begins when our children are very small. They will talk about what seem to us very little concerns. But the more our children find in us a listening ear and reflective answers that help them not only to grow in vocabulary and thinking skills, but also to grow spiritually, the more they will converse, and the higher the “level” of conversation will rise. All the “Why?”s and the “What’s that?”s and the recounting of what seem to us obvious facts of the preschooler will, by God’s grace

and the God-given means of loving parental guidance, develop into thoughtful conversation.

It is tempting simply to lecture and “tell it like it is,” and certainly there is sometimes a place for that. Yet as we often find in ourselves that it is only as we formulate our thoughts into spoken or written words to others that we truly begin to understand the matter ourselves, so it will be for our children. Encourage your children not only to relate their experiences, but also to explore the reasons for things and the spiritual implications of their responses. Encourage them to talk about stories they read, or that you read together, to evaluate the actions and thoughts of the characters. Beware of being too quick simply to tell them “the right answer.” Tell stories of your own, about the struggles you experienced when you were growing up, about your accomplishments, but also about your failures, showing them thereby how to evaluate their own experiences spiritually.

There is a rich reward in store. Your children will grow in their ability to use and understand language, to grasp the importance of spoken communication without images, an ability that will help them in the classroom, in listening to the preaching, in attending and participating in their young people’s society and as adults in Bible studies. But the richest reward is that you will hear amazing things from the lips of your children. They will confess their faith and their walk in the truth to you, not in a formal declaration, but by the way they relate their experiences, by the way they evaluate what they see in the world about them, by the way they sometimes even correct you by their evaluation of these things. Every covenant parent whose children walk in the truth will attest to this fact. We will say with the apostle John, speaking of his spiritual children, “I have no greater joy than to hear that my children walk in truth” (III John 4). 

Garden

Spring reminds us of gardens. It is when we bury seed in warm fertile soil, anticipate the arrival of burgeoning sprouts, and tend fledgling plants as they make their way toward the sun. It is also the season of Lent, when we meditate upon the suffering, death, and resurrection of Jesus, events in which two gardens figured prominently, and were made necessary by what occurred in a third garden long before.

A garden is a plot of ground set aside for the cultivation of plants grown for some benefit, usually their appearance, scent, fruit, or flower. Scripture mentions a variety of them, a garden of spices (Song 4:16), a garden of lilies (Song 6:2), and a garden of trees—what we call an orchard—like Eden. There, the Lord God made to grow every tree that was pleasant to the sight and good for food (Gen. 2:9; Ezek. 31:9). A garden on Mt. Olivet was called Gethsemane, or ‘oil press,’ likely because the fruit of its olive trees was processed nearby. Scripture also mentions gardens of herbs (Deut. 11:10)—we might say vegetable gardens. The kingdom-like mustard seed in Jesus’ parable was planted in such a place (Luke 13:19). Kings like their gardens. Ahab coveted Naboth’s vineyard for an herb garden (I Kings 21:2). Denied a place in the sepulcher of the kings, Manasseh was buried in his royal garden (II Kings 21:18). Perhaps through that same garden, Zedekiah briefly escaped the Babylonians (Jer. 39:4). And Jehoram would be killed in the garden that his father stole from Naboth (II Kings 9:26).

Human history is bracketed by gardens. It shows man is related to gardens; he is meant to work in and live from them. Immediately after forming man from dirt, the LORD God planted a garden in some more dirt and placed Adam there to live from its fruit (Gen. 2:8). He was ‘planted’ there to dress that garden and to keep it (Gen. 2:15). He failed miserably. Because he sampled fruit from the one tree he was forbidden to eat, Adam and the rest of us would decompose into

garden soil. But in the day of our Lord Jesus, those reduced to dust in Adam, but given eternal life in Christ, will be planted in another garden He cultivates, a lush oasis, Eden the second, there to drink freely from its pure river and eat the fruit of its life-giving tree (Rev. 22:1-5).

Gardens are places of transition. From life into death. Know not, that the seed sown in a garden cannot live except it first die (I Cor. 15:36)? In that garden east of Eden, Adam went from living soul back to dust, from total perfection to total depravity. Where he formerly walked with God his friend, he hid, afraid. And so later in a garden east of Jerusalem, God would press out of the second Adam the bloody sweat of hard toil under His heavy wrath. Thus, gardens would also be a place where death is turned into life. In that garden where Adam heard the bad news that he was banished, he also heard the good news that he was restored in Christ (Gen 3:15-23). The angels that kept Adam out of one garden, strengthened Jesus in another (Luke 22:43). Strengthened, Christ went from praying, “Let this cup pass from me,” to saying, “The cup which my Father hath given me, shall I not drink it (John 18:11)?” And near to where He was crucified, this seed of Abraham (Gal. 3:16) was planted in yet another garden, where He Himself passed from death into life (John 19:41).

Fitting, because in all this the King was busy planting, cultivating, and tending His own royal garden. His people: A watered garden for which He provides (Isa. 58:11), an enclosed garden He protects, and a garden of spices and pleasant fruits He enjoys (Song 4:12-15). But it is also a garden grown for our enjoyment. The garden of the LORD is where joy and gladness, thanksgiving, and melodious song are found (Isa. 51:3). It is such because it is the one place where He lives with us eternally as our beloved husband (Song 8:13). Where we will hear Him whisper, “I am come into my garden, my sister, my spouse. I have gathered my myrrh with my spice; I have eaten my honeycomb with my honey; I have drunk my wine with my milk: eat, O friends; drink, yea, drink abundantly, O beloved” (Song 5:1). What a life that will be! 

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The Covenant of Sovereign Grace (6) or The Decisive Influence of the Reformation Gospel upon the Orthodox Doctrine of the Covenant in the Netherlands

The Canons on Covenant and Election (part two)

The Confirming of the Covenant by a "Limited Atonement"

The second statement in the Canons that explicitly relates covenant and election is Canons, II/8.

For this was the sovereign counsel and most gracious will and purpose of God the Father, that the quickening and saving efficacy of the most precious death of His Son should extend to all the elect, for bestowing upon them alone the gift of justifying faith, thereby to bring them infallibly to salvation: that is, it was the will of God, that Christ by the blood of the cross, *whereby He confirmed the new covenant*, should effectually redeem out of every people, tribe, nation, and language, all those, and those only, who were from eternity chosen to salvation, and given to Him by the Father; that He should confer upon them faith, which, together with all the other saving gifts of the Holy Spirit, He purchased for them by His death; should purge them from all sin,

both original and actual, whether committed before or after believing; and having faithfully preserved them even to the end, should at last bring them free from every spot and blemish to the enjoyment of glory in His own presence forever (emphasis added).

The line, "whereby He confirmed the new covenant," appears in the fundamental article of the second head of the Canons on the death of Christ. It appears in the article in which the Canons affirm that the death of Christ was for those "who were from eternity chosen to salvation," and for "those only." This is the article that confesses "limited atonement."

In this article, immediately following the reference to the electing will of God and immediately preceding the statement that the blood of the cross effectually redeemed the elect, and the elect only, occurs the line, "whereby [that is, by the cross, which was designed by the will of God only for the elect and which effectually redeemed only the elect] He confirmed the new covenant."

The importance of this line regarding the controversy in the Reformed churches, whether election and covenant are related, specifically whether election governs the covenant, cannot be emphasized too strongly. Regardless that Reformed theologians from Bullinger in the six-

teenth century to Schilder and Shepherd in recent times have denied that election governs the covenant and regardless that the overwhelming majority of Reformed theologians and churches today insist on cutting the covenant loose from election, this short line in its context of Canons, II/8 is decisive for the truth that the covenant is governed by election. This line in the Canons establishes the relation of covenant and election as the official, binding doctrine of all churches that subscribe to the Canons of Dordt.

First, generally, Canons, II/8 teaches that the death of Christ for sinners, which was due to and controlled by eternal election, "confirmed the new covenant." The same "will of God," that is, election, that determined the death of Christ determined the confirmation of the new covenant by the cross. Regardless how theologians explain the confirmation of the new covenant, all must acknowledge the close relation between election and the covenant. The confirmation of the covenant of grace with believers and their children is due to and depends upon God's eternal election. For the blood of the cross that confirmed the new covenant has its origin in, and is determined by, "the sovereign counsel and most gracious will and purpose of God the Father, that the quickening and saving efficacy of the most precious

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death of His Son should extend to all the elect.”

Those who rail against relating covenant and election, usually by the ridiculous and misleading charge that a church or theologian “identifies” covenant and election, are in fact railing against Canons, II/8.

Second, specifically, Canons, II/8 teaches that the cross of Christ made the covenant of God firm and sure with all and every one of the covenant people of Christ, and that it did this according to election. The blood of the cross confirmed the covenant in the way described in Canons, II/8. The cross effectually redeemed all and every one of the covenant people of Christ; purchased for all and every one of them faith, as well as all the other saving gifts of the Holy Spirit; assured that Christ would purge all and every one of them from all sin; and made certain that Christ would preserve all and every one of them to the end, so that all and every one of them will enjoy glory in the presence of Christ forever.

This confirmation of the covenant with Christ’s covenant people was due to, and determined by, election: “It was the will of God[’s election] that Christ by the blood of the cross, whereby He confirmed the new covenant, should effectually redeem...all those, and those only, who were from eternity chosen to salvation.” The deliberate, explicit relating of covenant and election by the Canons in article eight of the second head establishes that God’s covenant of grace is based on the death of Christ, so that the covenant and its blessings are as limited, or particular, as is the death of Christ itself; that the covenant of grace is made, maintained, and perfected with the elect in Christ alone; that membership in the covenant is determined by election; that the blessings of the covenant (which are certainly not different from the blessings mentioned in Canons, II/8, on anyone’s reckoning), as they were earned for the elect alone, are bestowed upon the elect alone; and

that the salvation one begins to enjoy in the covenant cannot be lost.

Those Reformed theologians and churches that extend the gracious covenant promise, the grace of membership in the covenant, and gracious covenant blessings more widely than election, if they take Canons, II/8 at all seriously, are forced to give a radically different interpretation of the phrase, “whereby He confirmed the new covenant.” All that the cross of Christ accomplished was to obtain for God the right to make a new covenant with sinners. God makes this new covenant with all men alike, at least with all men alike who join the visible church by confession of faith and baptism and with all children alike who are born to believing parents.

This new covenant is highly uncertain. Membership in it does not at all assure that one will enjoy glory in the presence of Christ forever. Indeed, enjoyment of the beginning of covenant salvation and covenant blessings does not assure everlasting life and glory. For, according to the Reformed theologians and churches that will not have election govern the covenant, the new covenant is conditional. It depends, not upon God’s election, or even upon Christ’s death, but upon the faith and obedience of the baptized member of the visible church and upon the faith and obedience of the children of believing parents. One can be object of the gracious covenant promise for awhile, but later become object of the covenant curse. One can be member of the covenant, but fall out, and perish. One can begin to enjoy covenant grace, blessings, and salvation, but lose them, and go lost forever.

That Christ confirmed the new covenant means nothing more than that His death assures that all those who fulfill the conditions, and fulfill them to the very end of their lives, will be saved.

Some confirmation of the covenant!

It was exactly this heretical doctrine of the covenant that Dordt intended to contradict by the line, “whereby He confirmed the new covenant,” in Canons, II/8. Dordt itself tells us this. It tells us this in the Rejection of Errors section of the second head.

The true doctrine [of the relation of election, cross, and covenant] having been explained, the Synod *rejects* the errors of those: Error 2: Who teach: That it was not the purpose of the death of Christ that He should confirm the new covenant of grace through His blood, but only that He should acquire for the Father the mere right to establish with man such a covenant as He might please, whether of grace or of works.

Error 3: Who teach that Christ, by His satisfaction, merited neither salvation itself for anyone, nor faith, whereby this satisfaction of Christ unto salvation is effectually appropriated; but that He merited for the Father only the authority or the perfect will to deal again with man, and to prescribe new conditions as He might desire, obedience to which, however, depended on the free will of man, so that it therefore might have come to pass that either none or all should fulfill these conditions (“The Three Forms of Unity,” Mission Committee of the Protestant Reformed Churches, 1999, pp. 57, 58; Schaff does not have an English translation of the Rejection of Errors sections of the Canons).

In light of Canons, II/8, how can Reformed churches and theologians deny that covenant and election are related, so closely related, in fact, that election governs the covenant? Election purposed the cross “whereby He confirmed the new covenant.”

In light of Canons, II/8, how can Reformed churches and theologians extend the grace of the covenant more widely than to the elect? Did a limited atonement, purposed and designed by the decree of election, confirm a covenant

with many more than those for whom Christ died and for many more than those whom God had chosen? Is a death of Christ for the elect alone the ground of a covenant of grace with all?

In light of Canons, II/8, how can Reformed churches and theologians make faith and obedience *conditions* of a covenant supposedly established in grace with many more than the elect children of believers? Faith and obedience were *purchased* by the blood of the cross for the elect. Christ *confers* faith and obedience, as *gifts*, upon those for whom He died.

In light of Canons, II/8, how can Reformed churches and theologians teach that the new covenant is uncertain in the case of everyone with

whom it is established, inasmuch as the covenant depends on conditions? The new covenant was “confirmed” by the precious, effectual blood of the Son of God. The new covenant depends on “the sovereign counsel and most gracious will and purpose of God the Father.”

At the very beginning of the history of the Reformed faith in the Netherlands, the Reformed churches embraced with all their heart, confessed, and made binding a fundamental truth concerning the covenant of grace with believers and their children. The covenant is governed by election. The necessary implication of this truth is that the covenant is unconditional, that is, a covenant of *grace*. The Reformed churches confessed

this relation of covenant and election in two, early, official documents: “The [Reformed] Form for the Administration of Baptism” (1574) and the Canons of the Synod of Dordt (1618/1619).

Reformed officebearers and Reformed churches, therefore, are not at liberty, and never have been at liberty, to teach a doctrine of the covenant that “liberates” the covenant from election.

A denomination of Reformed churches that confess that election governs the covenant is not outside the mainstream of the Dutch Reformed tradition. On the contrary, it is the contemporary representative of the tradition—the *confessional* tradition.

... to be continued. 

Marking the Bulwarks of Zion

Prof. Herman Hanko

Modern Heresies: Errors in Covenant Theology (2)

Introduction

The doctrine of the covenant in post-Reformation thought never quite got off on the right foot. From the beginning of its development in Switzerland, by Zwingli and Bullinger in their battle against the Anabaptists, the covenant was defined in terms of a compact or agreement between God and man. This serious misunderstanding of the covenant, in connection with the emerging doctrine of the federal headship of Adam in his relation to the human race, led to the notion of the covenant of works. It was probably first proposed, at

least on the continent, by Zacharias Ursinus, a co-author with Caspar Olevianus of the Heidelberg Catechism.

The idea of the covenant of works, both in Europe proper and in the British Isles, was firmly rooted in a conception of the covenant as a compact or agreement between Adam and God. It was defined in terms of a condition that had to be fulfilled for the covenant to be established and to remain in force: Adam’s obedience; a threat to Adam that disobedience would result in death; and a promise that obedience would result in everlasting life in heaven.

That idea persists to the present and dominates all thinking about the covenant.

It ought to be clear that the whole idea of a conditional covenant in general and a covenant of works in particular necessarily in-

cludes in it the idea of merit. The defenders of such a conditional covenant have frequently tried to avoid the notion of merit, but without success. Presbyterian defenders of the covenant of works have not been averse to the notion of merit, although they attempt to give it a sound interpretation.

Dissenters

Although the prevailing view of God’s covenantal relation to man was almost universally defined in terms of a contract or agreement, some in the history of the Reformed churches also spoke of somewhat different views of the covenant.

Calvin, for example, while speaking extensively of the covenant, tended to emphasize its unconditional character and its relation to election. (See below for more on this.) In speaking of the place of children in the covenant,

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an extremely vexing question that received a variety of answers, Calvin was strong on the idea that elect children born in covenant lines belong fully to the covenant.

Olevianus, while holding to the covenant as an agreement or compact, spoke of the covenant as being also a bond of friendship. The same was true of Cocceius, who even saw the truth that the covenant was rooted in the trinitarian life of God.

Herman Bavinck, a late nineteenth century Dutch theologian, also spoke of the covenant as a bond of friendship, an idea later to be fully developed by Herman Hoeksema.

Nevertheless, those who spoke of the covenant in terms of friendship added this idea to the conception of the covenant as an agreement or pact.

Even the covenant of works was not universally accepted. An interesting quote from Thomas Goodwin, Puritan, member of the Westminster Assembly, and president of Magdalen College, Oxford, wrote:

Much less can the grace of a mere creature (or ever could) merit a higher condition; to do which is more than to confirm the continuance of the present condition. Adam could not earn a condition of a higher rank, nor by all his works have bought any greater preferment than what he was created in. To compass it was *ultra suam sphaeram* ("above his sphere"); he could never have done it. As, for instance, he could not have attained that state in heaven which the angels enjoy. What says Christ? "When you have done all you can, say, You are unprofitable servants" (Luke 17:10). This he could no more do than other creatures by keeping those their ordinances can merit to be "translated into the glorious liberty" which they wait for, and shall have at the latter day. The moon, though she keep all her motions set her by God never so regularly, yet she cannot thereby attain to the light of the sun as a new reward thereof. And thus no more can any pure creature of itself, by all its righteous-

ness, obtain in justice a higher condition to itself. And therefore the angels, by all their own grace, have not to this day earned a better condition than they were created in. And yet all this falls short of satisfying for sin, as we shall see anon (Thomas Goodwin, *Christ Our Mediator*, Grand Rapids: Sovereign Grace Publishers, 1971, pp. 82, 83).

It is not our intention to enter into a detailed criticism of the covenant of works in this article. Perhaps the most complete analysis of the doctrine of a covenant of works was made by Herman Hoeksema in his *Reformed Dogmatics*. (See Herman Hoeksema, *Reformed Dogmatics*, vol. 1, 2nd edition, Grand Rapids, RFP Publishing, 2004, pp. 308-312.) I shall briefly sum up Hoeksema's arguments. The reader will find them cogent and compelling.

It must be remembered, however, that Hoeksema's objections to the covenant of works is based on an entirely different conception of the covenant than underlies the covenant of works. But I shall wait with this aspect of the question till later in the article.

1) The doctrine has no support in Scripture. Even Louis Berkhof, in attempting to find biblical support for the doctrine, is hard pressed to find it and simply deduces it from various other ideas that Scripture gives in connection with Adam's creation. One such biblical truth is God's command to Adam not to eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, for the punishment for disobedience is death. One can hardly base an elaborate conditional covenant that has the reward of heaven on this command. Hoeksema points out that a command is no covenant.

2) The whole idea of merit is foreign to Scripture, and most continental theologians have thrown it far from them in the interests of the sovereignty of salvation. Hoeksema quotes the same passage from Luke 17 that Thomas Goodwin quoted.

3) The promise of eternal life creates all kinds of problems. How

long would Adam have had to be faithful to earn eternal life? Would his posterity also inherit eternal life? Would Adam have had to live until the last of his posterity was born? Would the probationary command apply to all Adam's descendants, even though they were not in the position of federal head?

But here also the idea of eternal life is contrary to Scripture. For Scripture is clear that eternal life is immortality, and that can be gained only through the perfect work of Christ, who conquers sin and death for His people. (See I Corinthians 15.)

4) The covenant of works makes the covenant an incidental part of Adam's life, added after his creation when he received the command of God not to eat of the forbidden tree.

5) The covenant of works makes God's purpose in Christ to save His elect a sort of necessary alternate plan of God, when His original purpose to glorify Himself in Adam's obedience met with disaster. Thus the covenant of works presents a view unworthy of God.

Seriously Wrong Developments

From a wrong conception of the covenant as a treaty or agreement has developed various erroneous ideas. It is well to give brief consideration to these, so that we may see that a wrong principle leads to wrong conclusions and produces wrong doctrine.

In the development of the covenant among the Reformed churches, one of the great problems has been the place of children in the covenant. It is not a mystery why the place of children in the covenant is a problem. The doctrine of infant baptism goes back to the apostolic church and was held by the Roman Catholic Church as well as by all the reformers. Furthermore, there has never been a question about the biblical truth that baptism is a sign of the covenant. When these two ideas are joined, it is obvious that children

in the covenant become a great problem, for if the covenant is a compact or an agreement, infants, quite obviously, cannot enter into the covenant.

Various solutions have been proposed over the centuries, and a large library of books have been written concerning this question. We must remember, however, that, in general, orthodox theologians had no real problem with the question, but simply insisted on the fact that the elect children of the covenant belong to it from infancy and are, generally speaking, regenerated in earliest infancy. The truth that we hold as Protestant Reformed Churches is not a novelty.

Calvin held this view already. And it is incorporated into our confessions, both major and minor. Our Baptism Form, a minor confession dating back to the middle of the sixteenth century, clearly contains this truth. In the first question asked of parents who present their child for baptism, we find these words: "Whether you acknowledge that although our children are conceived and born in sin, and therefore are subject to all miseries, yea to condemnation itself; yet that they are sanctified in Christ, and therefore, as members of His church ought to be baptized?" (emphasis is mine, HH).

Further, in the prayer with which the sacrament is concluded,

the church prays: "Almighty God and merciful Father, we thank and praise Thee that *Thou hast forgiven us and our children all our sins through the blood of Thy beloved Son Jesus Christ...*" (emphasis is mine, HH).

The Heidelberg Catechism, which dates from 1563, says, "Are infants also to be baptized? Yes; for since they, as well as the adult, are included in the covenant and church of God; and since redemption from sin by the blood of Christ, and the Holy Ghost, the author of faith, is promised to them no less than to the adult; they must therefore by baptism, as a sign of the covenant, be also admitted into the Christian church..." (Question & answer 74).

There has been a tradition, throughout the entire development of the Reformed faith, that has held firmly to the truth that elect children of believers are truly and fully members of God's covenant.

But if the covenant is a conditional compact, by virtue of this definition no place can be given to children of believers. And so various ideas have been proposed to explain this strange anomaly. The most common idea was proposed by Prof. William Heyns, who taught in Calvin Theological Seminary in the beginning of the twentieth century. After including a rather traditional view of the covenant of works (William Heyns, *Manual of Reformed Doctrine*, Grand

Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1926, pp. 67-72), he goes on to talk of the covenant of grace. (See *Manual*, pp. 123-147.)

To sum up this rather lengthy treatment of the covenant, we may note that while Heyns attempts to maintain a unilateral (one-sided), unconditional covenant, he nevertheless develops his ideas along quite different lines. He speaks of an objective or external and a subjective or internal covenant, the former of which is established with all children baptized, and the latter is established only with those who accept and fulfill the conditions of the covenant. Thus all children born of believing parents are in the covenant externally and possess all the promises of the covenant. Only when they come to years of discretion and fulfill the conditions of faith and obedience do they actually enter the covenant in its full blessedness.

Heyns even speaks of a general subjective grace (*Manual*, pp. 136, 137) given to all the children of the covenant who are baptized to enable them to accept or reject the conditions imposed on them at baptism. In this way the administration of baptism becomes like the preaching, when the preaching of the gospel is considered as a well-meant gospel offer to all who hear, in which all the hearers receive grace to accept or reject the overtures of Christ. 

In His Fear

Rev. Garret Eriks

Grow in Grace and in Knowledge

Are you growing spiritually? Are you growing in your resistance of sin? Are you growing in faith so that more and more you are trusting in God?

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These questions are so important that elders often will ask them at family visitation. Even if they don't ask the questions, this is one of their chief concerns, because they are responsible to care for your souls. Faithful husbands and fathers are concerned with the spiritual growth

of their wife and children. As an individual, you should be asking yourself if you are growing spiritually. This concern for spiritual growth is scriptural. The Word of God says in II Peter 3:18, "Grow in grace and in the knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ."

Spiritual growth is the concern of elders, fathers, husbands, and church members because where there is life there normally is growth. Yet, the child of God may experience seasons of spiritual wilting and shriveling. The Christian life is never stagnant. The Christian is either growing or falling backward. If we would chart the spiritual growth of God's children on a graph, the line would not consistently rise. Instead the line would go up and down, but overall it would rise.



For there to be growth, there must first be life. This is true in the plant world. For a plant to grow and bear fruit, God must first give it life. The living plant grows when it receives the necessary sunlight, rain, and nutrition. So also for there to be spiritual growth there must be life. The child of God grows spiritually only because he receives from God spiritual life at the time of regeneration. Regeneration is the implanting into the heart of the elect sinner the incorruptible seed of Christ's life. The regenerated sinner has been begotten again from above (John 3:3). This is the work and power of God's grace. The Spirit of Christ effectually implants Christ's life into our hearts. Where there is spiritual life, there is a personal, living knowledge of God, a personal knowledge of sin, and a desire to walk according to all of God's commandments.

This is what it means to be a Christian. A Christian is united to Jesus Christ so that he is a partaker of Him and all His benefits by a true and living faith. Christianity is not simply saying, "I have done this" or "I do this." Certainly Christians must live lives of godliness, but this is not what makes us Christians. A Christian is one who has received the life of Christ by the grace of God.

Scripture demands growth (II Pet. 3:18). A command to grow might seem strange. Children

grow, but not because parents tell them to grow. A farmer does not stand in his fields demanding that his crops grow. But God commands His people to grow! God causes His people to grow in the way of commanding them to grow.

Although God commands us to grow, our spiritual growth is the sovereign, effectual work of God. Just as God causes growth in the creation, so also God causes spiritual growth. Growth in Christ is the gradual work of God in our lives. Never does this growth come to a completion in this life so that we can say we are fully matured. No matter how young or old we are, there is always much room for growth because in this life we struggle daily against the old man of sin. Throughout our earthly pilgrimage there is a daily struggle with sin and unbelief. There may be times of spiritual digression in life because of sin. This is why we desperately need the reminder of the command for spiritual growth.



What exactly is spiritual growth? Spiritual growth is growth in grace and in knowledge (II Pet. 3:18). This means that when we grow in knowledge we grow in grace. The two are proportionate. Growth in grace occurs when there is growth in knowledge.

Grace is a perfection of God, which means He is lovely and beautiful. God is infinitely beautiful in the glory of His infinite perfections. He is beautiful in His holiness, righteousness, wisdom, love, grace, and mercy. This beauty of God is manifest in an attitude of undeserved favor for His people in Jesus Christ. The emphasis of grace is that God's manifold blessings of salvation are *undeserved*. God's grace is most fully revealed in Jesus Christ. We are sinners deserving only the fullness of God's fiery wrath in hell. But God, in grace, sent Jesus Christ to deliver His sheep from the punishment of sin by His substitutionary sacrifice

on the cross. God's grace is not only an attitude, but also His saving activity through Jesus Christ. Grace is also a power in our lives by which the Holy Spirit delivers us from the dominion of sin. When grace is present in our lives, we hate sin and love godliness.

Growing in grace is growing in the knowledge of God's infinite beauty and growing in the knowledge and consciousness of His grace toward us. Spiritual growth is found in a deepening understanding of God's gracious favor to us. An important aspect of this spiritual growth is knowing our own unworthiness. Time after time the testimony of elderly saints is not about how holy they have become, but in deep humility they confess their sinfulness. Those who are growing spiritually do not confess, "Sin is just about removed from my life." Instead they confess, "I am the chief of sinners. I am a wretched sinner. For all these years I have walked in so much sin. And during all my years God has been so gracious." In the light of sin, the child of God sees more and more how wretched he is and more and more God's beautiful and amazing grace.

Corresponding with this growth in the knowledge of God's grace is a firm resolve to live no longer to self, but to Him who loved us and gave Himself for us. When there is growth in grace, progress is made in sanctification because grace is a power in our lives. Growing in grace is increasing in the virtues that are ours by the grace of God: faith, hope, love, righteousness, and holiness.

Growth in grace is proportionate to growth in knowledge. This knowledge is the knowledge of faith, which is not just a knowledge of facts. It is the certain knowledge by which a child knows his Father intimately. When there is a growth in knowledge for the child of God, there is a growth in the confidence of salvation. The child of God experiences growing closer to God in Christ and trusting in Him for all things.

Key to spiritual growth is growth in the knowledge of truth, which is why true doctrine is so important in the church. Many today say it does not matter what you believe. The word “doctrine” is taboo in many churches today. They say it does not matter what you believe about how God created the world. Differences concerning the doctrines of the covenant or grace are probably all just a matter of semantics, they will say. There is no use in discussing these things because in the big picture it does not matter, they claim. The Word of God says that knowledge matters when it comes to spiritual growth (John 17:3). To poison the truth of God’s Word with false doctrine will stunt spiritual growth. There is no spiritual growth without growth in knowledge. God says, “My people are destroyed for lack of knowledge...” (Hosea 4:6). Therefore, true knowledge and true doctrine are vital for spiritual growth. The more we know Him, the more we love Him and the more we desire to serve Him.



Just as God causes the living things of His creation to grow through the means of sunlight, water, and proper nutrition, so also God uses means for our spiritual growth. The chief means God uses for spiritual growth is the preaching of the gospel, through which we receive the true knowledge of Him. Through the chief means of grace God gives the spiritual nutrients needed for growth. I Peter 2:2 teaches this: “As newborn babes, desire the sincere milk of the word, that ye may grow thereby.” This means that growing in grace and knowledge takes place by feeding on the preached Word. This is the means God has given for spiritual growth. The children of God spiritually are like newborn babies, which need mother’s milk. For newborns, mother’s milk is the best thing. That milk provides all the nutrients babies need to be healthy.

This milk is a picture of the preaching. We need “sincere milk.” The word “sincere” means pure or unadulterated. For spiritual growth, the child of God needs the truth of God’s Word. Anything else is detrimental to the spiritual health of God’s people. Watered down truth is not sufficient. Preaching poisoned by false doctrine is spiritually harmful. The truth of God’s Word is what feeds and nourishes our hungry and thirsty souls.

Obedying the command to grow in grace and knowledge demands a desire for the milk of God’s Word. This means that the child of God must attend church regularly to grow. The child of God arrives at the worship service Sunday morning and Sunday evening with a voracious spiritual appetite that can be satisfied only with the truth of God’s Word. We know our need for the preaching. Without it we cannot grow spiritually. Without it we shrivel up spiritually. What happens if a man skips meals for days on end? He shrivels up and eventually he dies. The same thing happens spiritually to the one who misses the spiritual feasts of the preaching each Sunday.

God has provided other means for our spiritual growth to supplement the preaching. The truth of the preaching is reinforced by the sacraments of baptism and the Lord’s Supper, which “more fully declare and seal to us the promise of the gospel, namely, that He grants us freely the remission of sin and life eternal, for the sake of the one sacrifice of Christ accomplished on the cross” (Heidelberg Catechism, q. 66). The sacraments direct our faith to the work of Jesus Christ on the cross, which is the only ground of our salvation.

God has given to us His Word to read and study, as spiritual snacks between feasts on the Lord’s Day. God gives spiritual growth to His people by means of the faithful study of His Word. The reading and study of God’s Word at our times of family worship is vital for

spiritual growth in our covenant homes. Fathers and husbands, we cannot expect spiritual growth in our homes without daily reading and discussing God’s Word with our families. As individuals, we cannot expect spiritual growth without reading and studying God’s Word, which “is profitable for doctrine, reproof, correction, and instruction in righteousness: that the man of God may be perfect, thoroughly furnished unto all good works” (II Tim. 3:16, 17).

With the study of God’s Word, God has given to us prayer for our spiritual growth. God blesses with spiritual growth when we ask for it in prayer. The Heidelberg Catechism in Lord’s Day 45 (A. 116), in the section on prayer, emphasizes this when it says, “God will give His grace and Holy Spirit to those only who with sincere desires continually ask them of Him, and are thankful for them.” For our spiritual welfare, let us daily read God’s Word and pray.

Not only must the child of God have the right spiritual food, he must also avoid all that is spiritually harmful to growth. In a home, parents will keep what is physically harmful from their children by installing safety latches on some cupboards or by placing harmful medicines and chemicals out of reach of their small children. So also spiritually, the child of God puts away what is spiritually poisonous.

Spiritual growth requires putting off all wickedness. II Peter 3:17 teaches this, as the context to the command to grow in grace and knowledge. This verse says, “Ye therefore, beloved, seeing ye know these things before, beware lest ye also, being led away with the error of the wicked, fall from your own steadfastness.” The word “beware” here is a military term that means “be alert.” A watchman on duty must be alert in his watch because an enemy could come and destroy his unit. So also the child of God must beware the great power of wickedness. The enemy

that we face is strong and must never be underestimated. The danger is that we would be turned from godliness to worldliness. Worldliness so easily rubs off on the church because we have an ally in the world in us: our sinful flesh.

Such awareness is necessary because, when clinging to sin and the world of ungodliness, we will not grow. This is true because sin spoils the reception of God's Word. When we are walking in sin willingly and have no desire to give up that sin, our ability to receive the Word of God will be affected. When we are enamored with sin, we do not want to hear week after week that we are sinners in need

of God's grace. We will not grow when we are under sin's control.

It is important that in our covenant homes we promote an atmosphere of spiritual growth. If the television or the latest music of the world or the filth of the Internet dominates in our homes, there will not be an atmosphere that promotes spiritual growth. Our homes must be focused on God's Word. This doesn't mean reading God's Word all day long. But we strive every moment to live in conformity to the Word.



Through these means, God grants the spiritual growth that He commands. Seeing this spiritual

growth is not always easy. When our children grow physically, we cannot watch that growth. We become aware of it when shoes pinch the feet, or when ankles that were once covered by the pants are now exposed. So also in our spiritual lives, we don't see the growth at the moment. When we reflect on our lives and all the hardships and struggles, we see how God used them for our spiritual growth.

When we grow spiritually, God is glorified, for this growth takes place only by the power of God's grace. Are you growing spiritually? Give thanks to Him for this growth and the means He provides for this growth to take place. 

News From Our Churches

Mr. Benjamin Wigger

Mission Activities

Our denomination's missionary to the PR Fellowship in Pittsburgh, PA, Rev. W. Bruinsma, along with his wife, Mary, traveled to Grand Rapids, MI in late February. While there Rev. Bruinsma met with the Council of the Southwest PRC, the calling church for the work in Pittsburgh, to give them a personal update on his work in Pennsylvania. Rev. and Mary also attended the annual Southwest Potluck on February 23 and provided the after-dinner entertainment when they gave a PowerPoint presentation of the work on the newly acquired church building in Pittsburgh. The Bruinsmas were also able to enjoy what has become the annual Ministers' Retreat at Maranatha Christian Resort in Muskegon, MI.

Rev. A. Spriensma, our churches' missionary to the Philippines, preached his farewell to the newly organized Berean PRC of the Philippines on Sunday, February 25. Plans were for Rev. Spriensma to fly to the United States on March 1,

Mr. Wigger is a member of the Protestant Reformed Church of Hudsonville, Michigan.

and for his wife, Alva, and daughter, Jessica, to come the following week on March 7 so that Jessica could finish the school quarter. The Lord willing, Rev. Spriensma will be installed as pastor of the Kalamazoo, MI PRC on March 11. Please continue to pray for the Spriensmas and the members of the Berean PRC as they all continue to make this transition—the Spriensmas to the work in Kalamazoo, and those in the Philippines to church life without a missionary pastor.

On behalf of our denomination's Domestic Mission Committee, Mr. David Moelker, his wife, Bonnie, and daughter, Kris, visited with the members of the PR Fellowship at Fayetteville, NC on February 23-25. Mr. Moelker led a Bible Study on Friday evening and directed the worship services on Sunday, the 25th, before returning home the following day.

Rev. A. Stewart, pastor of the Covenant PRC in Ballymena, NI, accompanied by his wife, Mary, traveled to South Wales on Friday, March 2, to give a lecture on "Homosexuality: What Does the Bible Teach?"

We continue to be amazed at the number of translations that continue to be added to the website of

the Covenant PRC. They now have over 300 ecumenical and Reformed creeds and various translations in 26 different languages, including new links to 6 Hindi (Indian), 5 Armenian, and 2 Vietnamese creeds. 3 pamphlets in Italian (*The Christ of Arminianism; The Biblical Mode of Baptism, and The Biblical Ground for the Baptism of Infants*), 1 Spanish, and 5 Portuguese were also recently added, as well as the pamphlet *Justification: the Heart of the Gospel* (<http://cprf.co.uk/languages.htm>).

While on the Internet checking out the website of the CPRC of NI, you might also want to go to the British Reformed Fellowship's website at www.britishreformedfellowship.org.uk. Audios of past BRF conference speeches on "The Antithesis," "The Church," "Assurance," and "The Kingdom of God" have been added.

Evangelism Activities

The Evangelism Committee of the Byron Center, MI PRC sponsored a conference on March 1 at their church. Prof. B. Gritters spoke on the subject "Couples That Pray Together."

The Evangelism Committee of

1894 Georgetown Center Dr.
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the South Holland, IL PRC continues to work diligently in the spread of the gospel. Presently this committee is involved in a number of activities. About six times a year they advertise a pamphlet or a book for free in *World* magazine. Some of the literature offered in the past has been *Until Death Us Do Part* by Prof. D. Engelsma, and *Wonder of Grace* by Herman Hoeksema. South Holland is especially thankful for the recent good response to the new pamphlet, *Until Death Us Do Part*. They have received reviews of this pamphlet from many periodicals from across the world.

School Activities

Parents, grandparents, and supporters of the Free Christian School in Edgerton, MN were invited to join the students as they gave a program at the Edgebrook Assisted Living Center on March 2.

In an effort to raise money for new playground equipment at Covenant Christian School in Lynden, WA, the Ladies Aid of Covenant hosted a dinner on March 2. The menu included Scrabble Soup, Payday and Twister Salad, Dutch Blitz (the main course), and Checkers and Dominoes for dessert.

Young People's Activities

Saturday, February 24, the young people of the Hudsonville, MI PRC made arrangements to take the younger children of the congregation sliding at the Hudsonville water tower, and then to the home of the young people's Bible leader for hot chocolate and hot dogs.

The Fellowship Committee of the Southeast PRC in Grand Rapids, MI invited their Young People's Society to a sledding activity at Pando Ski Resort on Saturday, February 24.

The Young People's Society of the Immanuel PRC in Lacombe, AB, Canada, invited the adults of their congregation to a Black Tie Dinner on February 23.

Congregation Activities

In an effort to promote the communion of saints, and the bearing of each other's burdens, Rev. D. Kuiper, pastor of the Randolph, WI PRC, has begun an effort to obtain current e-mail addresses of members of his congregation to inform them of the joys and sorrows of their fellow members.

Members of a Congregational Bible Study at the Georgetown PRC in Hudsonville, MI met together recently to look at Judges 11 & 12, and they asked an interesting question about Jephthah. Is it proper to take a vow of celibacy for Christian service? No word on what they decided. 

Announcements

RESOLUTION OF SYMPATHY

The Mary Martha Society of Hope PRC in Redlands expresses their deepest sympathy to fellow member Janine Meelker in the loss of her son,

ANDREW JON MEELKER,

whom the Lord suddenly took to glory on February 3, 2007. We also extend our sincere sympathy to our members Deanna Meelker, his sister; Jeanne Jabaay and AnnaMae Meelker, his grandmothers; and Laurie Jabaay, Bonnie Meelker, and Karen Meelker, his aunts. In our deepest sorrows may they and we find comfort and hope in the Word of God. "Let not your heart be troubled: ye believe in God, believe also in me. In my Father's house are many mansions: if it were not so, I would have told you.... And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again, and receive you unto myself; that where I am, there ye may be also" (John 14:1-3).

Rev. Martin VanderWal, President
Nancy Hendriks, Secretary

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RESOLUTION OF SYMPATHY

The consistory and congregation of Lynden PRC express their Christian sympathy to Mrs. Gert Stuit and family in the death of their husband, father, and grandfather,

MR. WILBUR STUIT,

on February 21, 2007. Wilbur will be missed both by his family and by the Lynden congregation in which he served for many years as an elder. "In my Father's house are many mansions: if it were not so, I would have told you. I go to prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again, and receive you unto myself; that where I am, there ye may be also" (John 14:2-3).

Rev. Ron Hanko, President
Mr. Henry Buiters, Clerk

TEACHER NEEDED

Covenant Christian High School is accepting applications for a Spanish teacher for the 2007-2008 school year. Applicants should be certified teachers in the Protestant Reformed Churches. Those interested can contact Rick Noorman at 616-453-5048 or rnorman@altelco.net, or Bob Faber at 616-942-7038.

NOTICE!!!

Classis East will meet in regular session on Wednesday, May 9, 2007 at the Grace Protestant Reformed Church. Material to be treated at this session must be in the hands of the stated clerk by April 9, 2007.

Jon J. Huisken, Stated Clerk