

# The Standard Bearer

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# Reconciliation Before Worship

*Therefore if thou bring thy gift to the altar, and there rememberest that thy brother hath ought against thee; Leave there thy gift before the altar, and go thy way; first be reconciled to thy brother, and then come and offer thy gift.*

Matthew 5:23-24

**T** rue religion is more than just external ceremonies and observances. True religion is a matter of the heart. The heart-centered character of true religion is evident with something like the sixth commandment, which Jesus addresses in His sermon on the mount just prior to the words we consider. Those who truly love God and their neighbor will not merely avoid outward murder, they will also seek to avoid the anger and hatred in the heart that leads to murder.

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But Jesus goes even further. Those who truly love God and their neighbor, He says, will also seek reconciliation. If we want to worship God sincerely, we will address the sin that divides us before we go to worship. In the way of seeking peace, we will also know the blessing of God.

Are we peacemakers?



True peacemakers recognize their own sins and sinfulness.

When God works in our hearts to give us true faith, He causes us to recognize our sins and sinfulness. "Therefore, if thou bring thy gift to the altar, and there rememberest that thy brother hath ought against thee..." (Matt. 5:23). We remember that we have sinned against our brother. Significantly, the man who remembers his sin is in the process of bringing his gift to the altar—probably a trespass or guilt offering. This was a particular type of sin offering for sins that

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involved not only God, but also one's neighbor. By bringing the offering to the altar, the man was making a confession that he needed to have his sins covered by the blood of the sacrifice. As such, the offering was made while seeking God's grace to cover over the guilt of sin. Every trespass offering, therefore, was meant to point to the sacrifice of Jesus Christ as an offering for sin (cf. Is. 53:10).

If the one bringing the offering was sincerely sorry for his sin and truly looking to God to cover his guilt by means of the sacrifice, he might very well think to himself, "How wonderful that God has provided a sacrifice to cover my guilt!" And then, in thankfulness for that grace, he might add, "God has been so good to me; surely I should show kindness to my brother." But suddenly he remembers he has lately sinned against his brother. Maybe he failed to forgive the brother even though an apology was offered and forgiveness sought. Or maybe he spread a false and damaging rumor concerning his brother. Now he realizes that his relationship with brother or sister so-and-so is not what it should be. "At the very least, so-and-so thinks that he has reason to be upset with me." Bringing his offering to the temple would serve as an impetus for an examination of sin in his heart.

Sadly, many people simply go through the motions of bringing the trespass offering, without thinking about their sins and sinfulness. Those who have no knowledge of their sins and sinfulness cannot be peacemakers.

For example, the Pharisees and Sadducees said the right things with their lips and performed all kinds of ceremonies with their hands, but Jesus says, "their heart is far from me" (Matt. 15:8). Jesus points out their hypocrisy, saying, "Woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! for ye pay tithe of mint and anise and cummin, and have omitted the weightier matters of the law, judgment, mercy, and faith: these ought ye to have done, and not to leave the other undone" (Matt. 23:23). True faith, however, doesn't merely go through the motions of offering outward sacrifices. True faith involves a heart that hates sin and wants to root it out of our lives. True faith wants to walk uprightly before God in thankfulness.

No doubt a person approaching the altar with his

trespass offering—if he was sincere—would be doing so because he saw his sins and sinfulness. He would have seen that he deserved to be cursed for his sins. Approaching the altar shows a hatred for sin and a faith in God, who provides a way out through the sacrifice of the lamb.

This man would know that he should not expect forgiveness if he did not approach the altar in true sorrow. That's because a lack of sorrow for sin gives evidence that one is not a child of God. And only God's children can be assured of forgiveness on the basis of the sacrifice.

Do we confess that we have forgiveness only through the shedding of Christ's precious blood? Do we honestly hate our sins and sinfulness? Does a brother or sister have ought against us? Then Jesus' instruction applies to us: "Therefore if thou bring thy gift to the altar, and there rememberest that thy brother hath ought against thee; Leave there thy gift before the altar, and go thy way; first be reconciled to thy brother, and then come and offer thy gift."



Jesus would have us seek reconciliation as peacemakers.

Significantly, when a man comes to the altar and recognizes his sin against a brother, Jesus would have him leave his gift there and seek peace with his brother before making an offering: "Go thy way, first be reconciled to thy brother, and then come and offer thy gift." To be reconciled means literally to bring about a transition from one state to another. In other words, we must not allow a bad relationship to remain a bad relationship; we must seek a transition to a right relationship. For that, we need to go to the brother and confess our faults. Do that before offering your trespass offering.

Why does Jesus say that? Is He saying that you must do something to earn your forgiveness before God will accept your sacrifice? Not at all. Our sins are forgiven only for Christ's sake, according to the riches of His grace (cf. Eph. 1:7). The reason one must be reconciled first before offering his trespass offering is this: someone who has no interest in reconciling with his brother gives proof that he is not a child of God.

Imagine a man stealing from another and refusing to make restitution when it was possible to do so. Then

consider the hypocrisy of such a man coming to the altar and offering a trespass offering seeking forgiveness for his sin. What a sham that would be. Such a man would show he has no love for his brother. “If a man say, I love God, and hateth his brother, he is a liar: for he that loveth not his brother whom he hath seen, how can he love God whom he hath not seen?” (I John 4:20). His refusal to confess his sin and make restitution where possible shows he really doesn’t love his brother. And if he doesn’t love his brother, then neither is the love of God in his heart. Such is the case if we have sinned against a brother or sister and refuse to be reconciled through confession and restitution. We show that we really don’t love our brother or sister.

We have a wonderful example of confession and restitution in Zacchaeus: “Behold, Lord, the half of my goods I give to the poor; and if I have taken any thing from any man by false accusation, I restore him four-fold” (Luke 19:8). In response, Jesus declared that Zacchaeus was a saved man: “This day is salvation come to this house...” (Luke 19:9). Zacchaeus’ repentance was evidence of his salvation.

So too, reconciling with a brother or sister doesn’t put us into Christ’s kingdom; rather, it gives us evidence that we are already citizens of His kingdom. If we are sincerely sorry for a particular sin, we will want to make restitution and will want to be reconciled. Of course, our old man will make all kinds of excuses for avoiding reconciliation. But our new man will truly desire and seek reconciliation.

Not that we need to go to anyone and everyone who has the smallest thing against us. Obviously, it would be impossible to get one hundred percent approval for everything we do. If someone has a legitimate gripe against us, surely we should seek to be reconciled with him. More than that, even if we think someone’s case does not seem legitimate, peacemakers will nevertheless seek after peace in the church (cf. Rom. 12:18).

Kingdom citizens are peacemakers. Do we truly want peace with our brothers and sisters?



Those who care nothing for peace are warned in the following verses: “Agree with thine adversary quickly, whiles thou art in the way with him; lest at any time the

adversary deliver thee to the judge, and the judge deliver thee to the officer, and thou be cast into prison. Verily I say unto thee, Thou shalt by no means come out thence, till thou hast paid the uttermost farthing” (Matt. 5:25-26). Don’t wait until you get to court before you decide to make restitution and seek reconciliation. Then it will be too late. Jesus would have us consider the judgment day, when God’s curse will rest upon all those who refused to be peacemakers. They could offer a million trespass offerings throughout their lives, but if they had no love for God and their neighbor in their hearts, which love expresses itself in seeking peace, they are condemned by God. When hypocrites offer a sacrifice to God, it is an abomination to Him (Prov. 15:8). The judgment day will be a rude awakening for many.

But those who truly seek to be reconciled with the brother or sister against whom they have sinned will know God’s blessing. Why? Because when they return to the altar to offer their sacrifice, they will be assured that God will accept it from their hand. That is to say, when a child of God seeks forgiveness in the blood of the cross, he will have already witnessed the power of the cross working in his life. The child of God who truly desires and seeks peace with the brother or sister is by that very fact assured that he belongs to Christ and that His blood covers him. On the other hand, if there is no evidence of grace in our lives, as would be shown by a willingness to forgive others, then we should not expect the grace of forgiveness either (cf. Matt. 6:14-15). Similarly, if there is no desire for reconciliation and peace on our part, then we have no assurance that Christ’s sacrifice covers our sins.

Those who have received grace can rightly expect God to give more grace (cf. Matt. 13:12). Seeking reconciliation before worship is therefore not a matter of earning anything. But when we earnestly seek reconciliation, it gives us powerful testimony that God has already given us grace, and that He will therefore continue to shower His grace upon us. It confirms to us that our faith is a true faith that connects us to Christ and all His benefits.

Do we have that testimony in our hearts? Do we earnestly desire peace with our brothers and sisters that leads us to seek reconciliation and peace? May God grant it. 

# Heaven Is Real... But Don't Buy the Book(s)

When I did the unusual recently and paid for my gas inside the service station instead of at the pump, the young lady who took my money was reading a book entitled *Heaven is for Real*. I took the opportunity to ask her what she thought about the book.

*Heaven is for Real* is one of the recent *New York Times* best-sellers. The part-time pastor who wrote the book, and Thomas Nelson the publisher, have made a great deal of money on the story. In 2011 it broke all of Nelson's sales records with 3.4 million copies in print.

The story is of Colton Burpo, three-year-old son of the pastor-author of the book. When Colton was almost four, his appendix ruptured. He claims that, during his surgery, he went to heaven, where he saw astonishing revelations. He met his sister who had died before birth as a result of a miscarriage, and his grandfather, who died before Colton was born. He petted Jesus' rainbow-colored horse, listened to angels singing "Jesus loves me" to him, saw Jesus' crucifixion wounds, and noticed that Jesus had a pink diamond in His crown

and that everyone except Jesus had wings. And God was "really, really big."

## Nothing new under the sun

It is not surprising that someone claims that he's been to heaven and back, reporting in detail what he has seen. What is sad is that there are always gullible people who make greedy publishers and sensationalist authors rich.

The Burpos follow in the footsteps of many before them, including another modern bestselling author, Don Piper (not to be confused with John Piper). Piper's book, *90 Minutes in Heaven*, published by an arm of Baker, also sold millions. His story made him so popular that television and radio hosts, including Sean Hannity, rushed for interviews. The late D. James Kennedy elevated its popularity when he endorsed it. Pastor Piper was "killed" in a car wreck and "resurrected" ninety minutes later. He now has an entire ministry to tell people about heaven based on his experience.

Claims of being in heaven have been made for centuries. Some readers may recognize the name Emmanuel Swedenborg, who claimed (in the

1700s) to have made frequent trips to heaven. Older folks may remember Betty Malz and her (1970s) *My Glimpse of Eternity*. In the 1990s, Betty Eadie's tour of heaven was so intriguing that Oprah Winfrey publicized it. And my local newspaper recently included an obituary that said, "This isn't the first time Marv has been in Heaven. His book 'My Journey to Heaven' comes out September 2012..."

## On what do you base your faith?

Along with all the people of God, I look forward to heaven with a hope that, although not eager enough and not nearly spiritual enough, grows as I become older. The child of God ought to meditate on heaven regularly. Setting one's affections on things above must include anticipating what God has in store for those who love Him. One old church father advised that the believer take twenty minutes every day to think of the city that has foundations (Heb. 11:10). With the hope of believers being directed so strongly today to an *earthly* kingdom, who talks about *heaven* any longer?

But the child of God bases his hope of heaven and knowledge of what heaven is like on Scripture, and not on the experiences of those who claim to have died and come back.

Yes, there are other follies involved in believing the stories. Many include silly experiences—Colton petting Jesus’ multicolored horse, seeing Jesus’ green eyes, or observing the size of saints wings, or “Marv” reported arguing with Saint Peter. Some reports contradict others: “Jesus’ eyes were green.” “No, they were blue.” Others are just plain wicked. One said, “Imagine eating all you want without gaining any weight! There will be incredible banquets at the Lord’s table.” I once went to a funeral home to visit the family of a boy whose hand I was holding as he died from his friend’s shotgun blast. The family’s comfort was that their son and brother was enjoying the best fishing and hunting he’d ever known. A classmate of mine at a Christian college once assured me, with all seriousness, that she would be taking her favorite tennis racquet to heaven.

Worse, these hopes of heaven are *carnal*, not *godly*. What mention is there of God, His glory, the beauty of His Christ, or the value of His blood? I read, in these books, of no church surrounding God’s throne, exclaiming praise to Him for His grace that brought them there, for His wisdom in creating the (new) heaven and earth, for His righteousness in destroying all of His and our enemies, or for His perfectly wise providence that directed even the evils of wicked men for our eternal glory? Just,

“What will we wear in heaven? Will we be married there? Can people in heaven see me on earth?”

Worst of all, these hopes of heaven are based on alleged experience rather than on God’s inspired Word. These stories are bad enough for what they teach about heaven. They are very bad on account of their assumptions: we learn about heaven from experience instead of God’s Word.

### Sola Scriptura...Here, Too

A believer who hopes in heaven must go “to the law and to the testimony” (Is. 8:20) to learn. “Faith [in what heaven is] cometh by hearing, and hearing by the word of God” (Rom. 10:17). Even Peter, who had a *genuine* experience of the glory of Jesus Christ, assured us that the “*more* sure word of prophecy” is Holy Scripture (II Pet. 1:19; the ESV’s translation is helpful: “And we have something more sure, the prophetic word, to which you will do well to pay attention as to a lamp shining in a dark place.”). And when Paul testifies that he was given a vision of heaven, he tells nothing of the experience except that it was not lawful for him to utter it. He certainly does not boast in it, as the sensationalists do today, but humbles himself by relating his “thorn in the flesh” that God sent lest his vision exalt him above measure (II Cor. 12).

What the believer may know about heaven is recorded in Holy Scripture. We could do worse than read Jonathan Edwards’ sermon—a fine exposition of Scripture—“Heaven, A World of Love.” Better would be to search the Scriptures

from beginning to end. Ask your pastor to preach on heaven. He will not tell you of his experiences, but you will learn more from a good series of sermons on Revelation 21 than from all the experiences of Colton, Don, Betty, and Marv put together.

The church has always been tempted to judge by experience rather than by Scripture. But we are not mystics. We must learn, in every generation, the scriptural truth confessed in the Netherlands Confession, Article 7, whose title is: “The Sufficiency of the Holy Scriptures to be the only rule of faith.” There the church confesses that “those Holy Scriptures fully contain the will of God, and that whatsoever man ought to believe... is sufficiently taught therein.” To inform yourself about heaven from a man’s experience is to deny the *sufficiency* of Scripture. The “doctrine thereof [of the 66 books of Scripture] is most perfect and complete in all respects.”

### A Good Remedy

Are Reformed Christians among us tempted to read these sensationalist books? If so, we pastors may examine ourselves to see whether we have been faithful to the sheep to prepare them for heaven.

First, (we) pastors should preach more about heaven. If I were in the pastorate again I would give serious consideration to such a series.

Then, our children in catechism need thorough instruction on the eternal state. The catechism books are not lacking in reference to heaven, and a good teacher will not want to

miss the opportunity to teach even Old Testament History with heaven in view. And when Essentials comes to a conclusion, we teachers will pray that we end well by doing justice to the last three lessons, “The Death of Believers,” “The Second Coming of the Lord,” and “The Eternal State.” At two weeks per lesson, six weeks could yield at least one concentrated lesson on these last questions and answers of the book: “What is the blessedness of the new heavens and the new earth? To dwell without sin in the blessedness of God’s everlasting covenant of grace. Revelation 21.” Or, “What will be the reward for the people of God? Everlasting life and glory in the presence of God in heavenly perfection.” Or, “Will the present world be destroyed? Yes, we expect a new heaven and a new earth in which righteousness will dwell.”

Marvelous opportunities present themselves also at funerals. I

wonder whether we ministers are too afraid of the *dangers* in funeral sermons that we fail to hold before the people of God the glory that their now-deceased loved one is enjoying. Heaven. Heaven! Heavenly glory into all eternity! God—our covenant friend—awaits all who hope in Christ’s coming.

If I do not think of heaven enough, however, I do not blame my pastor for whatever failures there may be in his sermons or my catechism instruction when I was a boy. My failure is that I do not love God deeply enough. I do not hate sin passionately enough. And I love this earth far too much. I have not taken up my cross actively enough, or followed Christ closely enough, or denied *myself*. I have not mortified my earthly desires enough, or quickened the new man enough. I do not meditate on heaven. Twenty minutes every day? Hardly two. I like it here.

But then God makes my burden great and thwarts my desire (Psalter #174). He leads me through pain and trouble and humbles my pride. He teaches me that I’m a pilgrim here and must seek another city. He holds before me the spiritual joy of salvation. And in the end He leads to liberty and guides to wealth—the wealth found in God’s house, where I give to Him the life He blesses.

The believer’s confession when he thinks *biblically* about heaven is this: when all this weary night is past, and I awake with God to view the glories that abide (*His glories!*), *then*, then I will be satisfied.

Heaven is real. The book you need in order to learn about it is Holy Scripture.

And that’s what I tried, carefully, to tell the girl behind the counter when she took my money for gas.



SEARCH THE SCRIPTURES

REV. THOMAS MIERSMA

## Without Comfort and Alone: The Empty Place in Man’s Life

### Ecclesiastes 4:1-12

So I returned and considered all the oppressions that are done under the sun:...

Ecclesiastes 4:1a.

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Previous article in this series: April 1, 2012, p. 304.

Oppression of a man by his neighbor is a vast subject with the many different forms of evil done under the sun. Solomon has pointed out that, in the place of judgment, evil is found among men. This works the oppression of the neighbor. He calls to mind all the oppression that he sees in its various forms, but rather than going into detail, he distills it down to one basic reality when he looks at it. There is

the one who is oppressed, and with him are tears—tears of sorrow, grief, frustration, and pain of loss. There are tears in his misery. The oppressor, on the other hand, has power, power over others that is evil and works evil. This distinction between tears and power is not the main thing we must see, however; the real misery of man is more than that. He calls our attention to it—behold: “and behold the tears of such as were oppressed, and they had no comforter; and on the side of their oppressors there was power; but they had no comforter” (Eccl. 4:1b).

Both oppressor and oppressed lack a comforter. There is none to console or comfort them, none to stand by them in their life or in their need. They are alone. There is an empty place in man’s life because of this. His sin drives him away from his neighbor. This is a fundamental problem in man’s misery. If we would tie the elements of this section or chapter together, we would find that its unity lies in man’s need for a comforter and in the fact that, among men under the sun, a comforter is not to be found.

Through the fall into sin man has become by nature estranged from God. As Paul says to the Colossians, “And you, that were sometime alienated and enemies in your mind by wicked works...” (Col. 1:21). This separation from God bears the fruit that man is also estranged from his neighbor. His very oppression of his neighbor destroys communion and fellowship. There is no comforter and there can be none, because the love of God alone forms the basis for the love of the neighbor. Except man be reconciled to God, there is no true way of reconciliation with the neighbor. The way of reconciliation must be found in Jesus Christ and “the comforter” that He gives, which is His Holy Spirit. Man under the sun, who remembers not his Creator (Eccl. 12:1), who does not have God as his covenant God, has neither God as his shield and comfort nor the basis to walk with his neighbor. Man’s depravity works a comfortless isolation.

So weighty is this misery of man in oppression and travail that Solomon looks at it and says, “Wherefore I praised the dead which are already dead more than the living which are alive. Yea, better is he than both they, which hath not yet been, who hath not seen the evil work that is done under the sun” (Eccl. 4:2, 3). So great

is the evil of man without God, the world under the sun, of man by nature, that the dead who have passed from this life and its comfortlessness and travail are in a better case. This is not despair nor pessimism but a way of underscoring just how vile are the evil works under the sun and the pain, suffering, and misery they bring in the life of men. The dead endure its suffering under the sun no more. In saying this we must keep in mind the viewpoint of Solomon, which is that which is seen. From that standpoint, one who has not yet been or been born, has not yet seen the evil works under the sun, is in a better state than either the living or the dead. His soul has not yet been vexed by the oppression and evil works of men.

This somber reflection on the state of men fallen and alienated from God underscores the misery of man in its wretchedness. Sin is evil. It works evil, and it leaves in its wake tears and sorrow and misery, which is truly a comfortless misery. Solomon is in a sense underscoring what is pointed out in Lord’s Day 1, Q/A 2, that we need to understand “how great my sins and miseries are.” This he would show us from the effect of sin as it works misery in man’s life. Man’s life in sin is without true joy, peace, or comfort, for he is separated from God who is his true life.

Having defined the problem, he turns to a further consideration of the travail of men, in which he points us to the way in which man works his own misery. He considers the causes of misery in the life of men and the folly of sin that leads to it. “Again I considered all travail, and every right work, that for this a man is envied of his neighbor. This is also vanity and vexation of spirit” (Eccl. 4:4). We are shown man’s travail, his labor and toil, his industry. He achieves a right work, that is, he is successful in his endeavor. The point is, not “right” in a moral sense but in earthly terms. Under the sun he labors, and his industry is successful. He is an achiever. But “for this he is envied of his neighbor.” This expression is more comprehensive than the idea of other people’s jealousy, though that is included in it. It has the idea of envy or rivalry against the neighbor. That is, it points us to the motives of the achiever as well as the response of those about him. He is the man who gets ahead; he is the one who climbs over obstacles, including his neighbor. He may well be an oppressor.

But that struggle and toil leave him isolated and alone, separated from his neighbor through covetousness, both his own and their envy. The result is “vanity,” an empty success, and “vexation of spirit” in all his travail.

By contrast, “The fool foldeth his hands together, and eateth his own flesh” (Eccl. 4:5). The fool is the man of no industry, the man who is slothful. He is described in Proverbs as one who lies upon his bed rolling back and forth like a creaking hinge (Prov. 26:13-16). His fences are decayed and fallen and his field overgrown (Prov. 24:30-34). He does not, and will not, pass his door, because there is a lion in the streets (Prov. 22:13). The reality is that he “eateth his own flesh,” his laziness is such that he devours himself. He too is abhorred of his neighbor, for such is the effect of his indolence.

“Better is an handful with quietness, than both hands full with travail and vexation of spirit” (Eccl. 4:6). While some would apply this verse to the fool, as if it is his excuse for his indolence, it is better to understand it as an interjection of Solomon at this point in the light of the contrast and the dilemma it poses. Solomon consistently uses the word “better,” that which is good, or right and fitting, in God’s design, to introduce his own reflection on the matter before him. The fool has empty hands and is devouring his own hand, the rapacious achiever has both hands full and is hated of his neighbor. What then is the way of wisdom? The better way is a hand filled with quietness, with rest. That is, to labor with a view to one’s portion for the day in contentment of heart, which as Solomon has pointed out is the gift of God’s grace to His people (Eccl. 2:24). It is bound up with God, our comfort and strength.

In that context Solomon returns to his description of the life of men. “Then I returned and I saw vanity under the sun. There is one alone, and there is not a second; yea, he hath neither child nor brother: yet is there no end of all his labor; neither is his eye satisfied with riches; neither saith he, For whom do I labor, and bereave my soul of good? This is also vanity, yea, it is a sore travail” (Eccl. 4:7, 8). This is indeed the achiever

of this world who has no rest in his hand. Covetousness drives him. He is isolated and alone. His riches do not profit him. He has no comforter, neither does he enjoy the fruit of his labor. This is the sinner to whom God, in judgment upon sin, “giveth travail, to heap and gather up” (Eccl. 2:26). In his heaping and gathering, he is unable to be satisfied and content. Enough is never enough, and in it also he has no one with whom to have fellowship in his life, neither God nor man. It is a sore, that is, an evil, travail. He is like a rat on a treadmill going only to destruction. He consumes his strength of life in vanity. He has none of the ordinary bonds of life, neither child nor brother.

There is a severe warning in this to us as God’s people who see this folly in the world about us, to flee covetousness and the lust for earthly riches. What is the better way, the way of wisdom? Again Solomon shows us in his reflection. He uses a figure of human companionship to illustrate his point. “Two are better than one; because they have a good reward for their labor. For if they fall, the one will lift up his fellow: but woe to him that is alone when he falleth; for he hath not another to help him up. Again if two lie together, then they have heat: but how can one be warm alone? And if one prevail against him, two shall withstand him; and a threefold cord is not quickly broken” (Eccl. 4:9-12).

The figure of human companionship is a simple yet striking one. It draws to mind a range of relationships from the bond of marriage to human fellowship. Striking it is, however, in that he has shown us that sin destroys

such fellowship and leaves man comfortless and alone. In fact, he pronounces woe upon the man without child or brother, who by his own greed and vanity works his own separation in his sin from his neighbor. Men in this world have partners in business and other affairs. They enter into the marriage bond as well. Yet the root of sin corrodes those relationships, and when trouble comes, it becomes “each one for himself.” Marriages break down because of sin. Parents and children are estranged from one another. There is, of course, a semblance of

*Man’s depravity  
works a comfortless isolation.*

altruism, mutual care for one another, in the activities of men. The human race is an organism, and man cannot ignore his dependence on his fellowman. But the semblance of comfort afforded is outward and external, rooted so often plainly in making oneself feel good and in a works righteousness that has no real foundation. It is so often a using of one another for one's own self-interest. Such camaraderie quickly becomes in time of trouble enmity, mutual recrimination, and distrust. The effects of sin work through all those relationships under the judgment of God.

True comfort, as has been pointed out above, is only in Christ and in His Spirit, "The Comforter." In verse 9, Solomon is again showing us the "better." His descrip-

tion echoes Enoch's walk with God and the friendship of God's covenant with His people in Christ. That fellowship extends to the life of the church, to a spiritual bond of brotherhood, which the world without God does not have. It extends to the bonds of Christian marriage and family in the life of God's covenant. Then indeed the cord that binds is not a mere human one, and it is not twofold, but it is a "threefold cord." This is Solomon's own conclusion in chapter 12 when he calls us to remember our creator in our youth (Eccl. 12:1) and summarizes the whole of what he says: "Let us hear the conclusion of the whole matter: fear God and keep his commandments: for this is the whole duty of man" (Eccl. 12:14). 

## Chapter Four

### Postmillennialism (18)

# The Reformed (Amillennial) Critique of Postmillennialism

#### An Earthly Conception of the Kingdom

Closely related to postmillennialism's error of conceiving the victory of the Messianic kingdom as an earthly victory, within history, is its erroneous conception of the very nature of the kingdom of Christ. Postmillennialism views the Messianic kingdom as an earthly reign of Jesus Christ. Granted, the postmillennial theologians in the Reformed tradition acknowledge

the spiritual power that must establish the kingdom of Christ and bring it to victory during the millennium. Especially the Puritans, the Reformed theologians who were influenced by the Puritans, and such Presbyterians as B. B. Warfield credited the gospel and the Spirit for the erection of the kingdom in its glory during the millennium. But the form of the kingdom, the form that is essential to the victorious kingdom of Christ in history, is earthly.

For postmillennialism, the kingdom must one day consist of large numbers—a majority, if not the totality, of the human race. It must consist of a radical change

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in the earthly circumstances of Christians, indeed of the entire human race. Christians will possess and exercise earthly authority and might. Christians will bring about, enforce, and enjoy earthly peace. By the influence of Christianity, all humanity will delight in earthly prosperity.

The dominion of the Messianic kingdom must be political, social, cultural, and economic.

The dominion of the kingdom of Jesus must take physical form.

Men and women, including unregenerated men and women (if a few remain during the heyday of the Messianic kingdom), will be able to see the dominion of King Jesus—its power, its splendor, its benefits—with the natural eye, just as men and women, including the barbarians, once could see the glory that was Rome and just as men and women today can see the (fading) grandeur of the United States.

So earthly will the Messianic kingdom be, so earthly *must* it be, according to postmillennialism, that its power will overawe and its benefits will seduce ungodly people unto submission to the kingdom, at least until the end of the millennium.

The Messianic kingdom of postmillennialism is a carnal kingdom.

### “Jewish Dreams”

Postmillennialism’s conception of the Messianic kingdom, particularly the Messianic kingdom at the height of its power during the millennium, does not differ from that of the Jews of Jesus’ day. They dreamed of a kingdom that would overthrow the earthly rule of Rome and restore the earthly reign of David and Solomon. They fervently desired a Messianic kingdom that would give its citizens earthly bread, that is, all the necessities of physical life in a comfortable, safe, earthly environment. Because they ate of the loaves, obviously miraculously multiplied by one with great potential for earthly kingship, and were filled, the Jews, zealous for the establishment of the Messianic kingdom as they conceived it, were ready to “take [Jesus] by force, to make him a king” (John 6:26, 15).

Jesus repudiated the carnal kingdom of Jewish and postmillennial dreams, root and branch. As God’s Messiah, He will not provide earthly bread, but heav-

enly bread. “My Father giveth you the true bread from heaven. For the bread of God is he which cometh down from heaven, and giveth life unto the world” (John 6:32, 33).

His reign will not deliver from Rome, or from the brutalities of Louis XIV, or from the cruelties of Nazi Germany, or from the tortures of Communistic states, or from the oppressions of the increasingly godless nations of the West, or from the great tribulation of the Antichrist. Not within history. But King Jesus will deliver from sin and death. “The bread that I will give is my flesh, which I will give [in the cross that redeems from sin] for the life of the world” (John 6:51). “This is the bread which cometh down from heaven, that a man may eat thereof, and not die” (John 6:50).

The dominion of Christ will not bestow an abundant and long physical life, but eternal life. “Whoso eateth my flesh, and drinketh my blood, hath eternal life; and I will raise him up at the last day” (John 6:54).

As the power of the Messianic kingdom is spiritual—the Spirit working by Jesus’ words, as the members of the kingdom are spiritual people—those who believe on Him, as the benefit of the kingdom is spiritual—deliverance from sin, and as the life of the kingdom is spiritual—eternal life, so is the Messianic kingdom spiritual (John 6:63; John 6:64; John 6:51; John 6:54).

Over the spiritual nature of the kingdom of Christ, the Jewish nation stumbled, and perished. “From that time many of his disciples went back, and walked no more with him” (John 6:66).

Let postmillennialists take heed!

With an eye on John 6, the Second Helvetic [Swiss] Confession of 1566, in its day a popular Reformed creed, condemned as “Jewish dreams” the millennial notion “that there will be a golden age on earth before the Day of Judgment, and that the pious, having subdued all their godless enemies, will possess all the kingdoms of the earth.”<sup>1</sup>

The great Russian novelist Fyodor Dostoyevsky understood well that Jesus’ refusal to be the bread-king, by His rejection of the devil’s first temptation of Him in the wilderness, meant that He was determined to

<sup>1</sup> The Second Helvetic Confession of 1566, in *Reformed Confessions of the 16<sup>th</sup> Century*, ed. Arthur C. Cochrane (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1966), 245, 246.

be the king of the elect in a spiritual kingdom, rather than a king of the masses in a carnal kingdom. In his novel *The Brothers Karamazov*, Dostoyevsky has the ecclesiastical “Grand Inquisitor,” say to Jesus:

Thou didst promise them the bread of Heaven, but, I repeat again, can it compare with earthly bread in the eyes of the weak, ever sinful and ignoble race of man? And if for the sake of the bread of Heaven thousands and tens of thousands shall follow Thee, what is to become of the millions and tens of thousands of millions of creatures who will not have the strength to forego the earthly bread for the sake of the heavenly? Or dost Thou care only for the tens of thousands.... Canst Thou have simply come to the elect and for the elect?<sup>2</sup>

It is a deep concern of the Reformed faith that men and women not follow Jesus Christ for earthly bread. The Reformed form of the installation of deacons admonishes the poor, who do receive earthly necessities from Christ through the diaconal office, that they “follow Christ for the food of your souls, but not for bread.”<sup>3</sup> This concern is rooted in the conviction that the kingdom of Christ is spiritual.

### The Heavenly Kingdom

The nature of the Messianic kingdom is spiritual, not physical, because the kingdom of Jesus Christ is of a radically different order, or kind, from all earthly kingdoms. Especially in its New Testament realization, from Pentecost to the second coming, it is heavenly.

It is on earth. It is in the midst of all earthly nations. It very much affects earthly life. It sanctifies the earthly lives of its citizens. It exposes, condemns, hardens, and enrages the earthly lives of its unbelieving enemies.

It impacts the earthly kingdoms. At times, for a while, it influences a nation culturally, so that the laws of the nation and the outward way of life of some of the citizenry reflect something of the truth, righteousness, and holiness of the kingdom of Christ, which is

<sup>2</sup> Fyodor Dostoyevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov*, tr. Constance Garnett (New York: New American Library, 1960), 233, 234, 237.

<sup>3</sup> Form for Ordination of Elders and Deacons, in *The Confessions and Church Order of the Protestant Reformed Churches* (Grandville, MI: Protestant Reformed Churches in America, 2005), 293.

within the nation. The early United States, although never a Christian nation, never the kingdom of Christ, never the city of God on a hill (the blatant Deism of the Declaration of Independence and the complete absence of any mention of Christ in the Constitution make this incontrovertibly evident), manifested in various aspects of its national and cultural life something of the Christianity of many of its founding citizens.

At other times, the Messianic kingdom has the effect upon nations of arousing them to persecuting hatred, as was true of the Roman empire in the early days of the post-apostolic church and as is increasingly the case today of the United States and the other nations of the West.

At the end, when Christ returns, the Messianic kingdom will have this impact on all the nations of the world, united under Antichrist, that it will demolish them, grind them to powder, consume them, and replace them in the whole earth, everlastingly (Dan. 2:34, 35, 44).

But the Messianic kingdom is not of the order of earthly kingdoms. It is heavenly. Jesus Himself described His kingdom as heavenly at a critical juncture in the history of the kingdom. He was about to establish it on the foundation of the divine righteousness of His cross (this unique foundation alone distinguishes the Messianic kingdom—radically—from all other kingdoms, which are founded either in earthly power or on mere earthly justice, or both). At that moment, He gave account of His kingship and kingdom to the representative of Rome.

Both in malice and because they could not conceive a kingdom other than earthly, Jesus’ Jewish enemies charged Jesus with rebellion against the state (John 18:33-35). If the Messianic kingdom were earthly, the charge would have been true, would have stuck with the Roman authority, and would have resulted in Jesus’ execution as just another revolutionary in history. And that would have been the end of the kingdom of Jesus Christ.

But Jesus denied the charge. The ground of the denial was the truth that His kingdom is unearthly in kind. Jesus affirmed His kingship: “Thou sayest that I am a king” (John 18:37). He proclaimed His kingdom: “My kingdom” (John 18:36). But His kingdom is “not

of this world...is [not] from hence" (John 18:36). The origin of the Messianic kingdom is not the earth, but heaven, not sinful mankind, but the holy God. This origin determines the kind of kingdom it is. Every kingdom that originates from the earth is earthly in kind and physical in nature. The one kingdom that originates from heaven is heavenly in kind and spiritual in nature.

Jesus demonstrated that His kingdom is heavenly to the satisfaction of suspicious Pilate, although, apparently, not to the satisfaction of postmillennialists. First, the servants of Jesus do not fight: "If my kingdom were of this world, then would my servants fight" (John 18:36). The Messianic kingdom in its New Testament form does not consist of physical force, does not possess or exercise earthly authority and might, does not extend itself by physical force and arms, and does not defend itself by physical power.

The king went to the cross, not to the throne of an earthly empire.

The kingdom of Christ in history is always a kingdom under the cross—unique shame, unique suffering, and unique death. It is not a kingdom under the sign of a crown.

Second, the reign and realm of Jesus Christ on earth are by, for, and of the truth. "To this end was I born, and for this cause came I into the world, that I should bear witness unto the truth. Every one that is of the truth heareth my voice" (John 18:37). As the entire Scripture reveals, the truth is the gospel of the cross. By this gospel the Messianic kingdom comes (Matt. 6:10). By this gospel it translates its citizens into itself, from the power of darkness—elect believers and their children (Col. 1:13). By this gospel it defends itself against its enemies, which are not, ultimately, flesh and blood, but principalities, powers, the rulers of the darkness of this world, spiritual wickedness in high places (Eph. 6:10-20).

By this gospel it has always been victorious in his-

tory. By this gospel it is victorious today. By this gospel it will be victorious presently, in the short time of the beast from the abyss, when the two martyrs conquer by their faithful witness to the truth (Rev. 11).

### The Holy Nation

Dreaming its fantastic dream of an earthly victory of the Messianic kingdom within history, postmillennialism has lost touch with reality—the reality of the kingdom as described in Q&A 123 of the Heidelberg Catechism: "*Thy kingdom come*. That is: So govern us by thy Word and Spirit that we may submit ourselves unto thee always more and more; preserve and increase thy Church," etc.<sup>4</sup>

The fulfillment of the Old Testament nation of Israel is the New Testament church. To the church, identified by the mark of the truth, the Holy Spirit applies the titles and honors that once applied to Old Testament Israel: "Ye are a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, an holy nation, a peculiar people" (I Pet. 2:9; cf. Ex. 19:5, 6). The true church is the kingdom of Christ. The citizens of the kingdom are believing members of the true church and their children—those who hear Christ's voice, according to divine election (John 18:37).

The life of the kingdom is the church's and her members' submission to God in Christ. For the church, this submission to God consists of pure worship; sound preaching; right administration of the sacraments; and proper administration of discipline. Lo, there is the Messianic kingdom! Only faith can see it.

For the believer and the child of believers, this submission is faith in Jesus Christ and faith's obedience to the law of God—the ten commandments as explained and applied by all the rest of Scripture, history and precept, admonition and exhortation, threat and promise.

*The kingdom of Christ  
in history is always  
a kingdom  
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<sup>4</sup> Philip Schaff, *The Creeds of Christendom*, vol. 3 (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1966), 352.

Lo, there is the life and power of the Messianic kingdom. Only faith can perceive them.

In this kingdom is peace. The nations beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning-hooks (Is. 2:4). The peace is reconciliation with God by the forgiveness of sins and, thus, harmony with the fellow-citizens. Only faith can experience it.

The citizens of the kingdom are satiated with prosperity. The floors are full of wheat, and the vats overflow with wine and oil (Joel 2:24). We have the Spirit of Christ; truth; righteousness; holiness; communion with God; the hope of the resurrection of the body and life everlasting. Only faith appreciates this prosperity.

Never in history is the Messianic kingdom earthly. It is only and always heavenly. Never is its nature physical. Always and only it is spiritual.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>5</sup> For a more thorough explanation of the kingdom of God

Nor will the kingdom become earthly in kind and physical in nature at the end, in the day of Christ, when, as the Catechism goes on to say, by a wonder Christ Himself will bring His kingdom to its “full coming”: “until the full coming of thy kingdom, wherein thou [the triune God] shalt be all in all.” For on that day, all will become spiritual: the citizens of the kingdom in their resurrection body and the entire creation of the new heaven and the new earth.

In that spiritual world, among that spiritual people, will the spiritual Christ Jesus perfect His heavenly kingdom.

And then the eyes of our (spiritual) bodies will see it.



in Jesus Christ, see David J. Engelsma, *The Kingdom of God* (Grandville, MI: Evangelism Committee of Southwest Protestant Reformed Church, 2002).

WHEN THOU SITTEST IN THINE HOUSE

ABRAHAM KUYPER

## To Put It into Thine Hand

### Rest in God

God’s consolations are not written for the *child of fortune*.

He who sees the little stream of his life flow quietly, calmly along from one year’s end to the other might not for this reason put God’s Word aside; but in that Word he does not find *his* world, *his* life, the reflection of the condition of *his* heart.

A single part from the Sermon on the Mount, and from what John recorded, might do for him. Also here and there a mellifluous verse. But in its entirety, Scripture does not meet his case. All those wars, all those struggles, all those penitential

psalms, all those war-songs, even in the Gospels those disputations, and sometimes even on Jesus’ lips those hard sayings of having to hate one’s father and mother, and then Paul with his polemics and hair-splittings, and James with his attack upon the rich, and finally those dreadful prophecies in Revelation that everything shall be overturned—no, that is not *his* spirit.

According to him the whole Bible, from first to last, should breathe nothing but love, nothing but gentle, gracious tenderness.

There are, of course, exceptions to this rule. A few whose bark almost always drifted with sunshine before wind and tide were yet so strongly apprehended by the Holy Ghost that the storm which they were spared at sea from *without* was suffered in a violent manner in the sea of their own soul *within*, and who are there-

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fore more and more aware of how Scripture addresses them.

But these ever remain *exceptions*; and without fear of contradiction it can be said that God's holy Word in its pith and kernel, in its depth and height, throughout all ages, has really been tasted, understood, and enjoyed by those alone of whom it is so truthfully stated in Psalm 107:12 (Dutch version), that "their heart became humbled by trouble," that they "walked in darkness and through the shadows of death" and constantly faced "gates of brass."

In Hebrews 11 the *cloud of witnesses* passes before your eye as a long procession of men and women who, "destitute, afflicted, and tormented, have wandered in deserts, and in mountains, and in dens and caves of the earth." And they who even as these saints have drained the cup full to the brim of "labor and sorrow" find their own deepest thoughts expressed in Scripture.

With them only in full measure Holy Scripture is spiritually sympathetic.

This is especially true of the psalms of David, in which again and again all the waves and billows of the Almighty go over the head of God's servant, and yet every time again the servant of the Lord lifts up his head from those waves, and asks: "Why art thou cast down, O my soul?" till, quieted and restored, the soul turns itself again to the God of her strength, and declares: "Thou, Lord, seest it, for thou beholdest the labor and sorrow, *that one may put it into thine hand*" (Ps. 10:14, Dutch version).



The "labor and sorrow" are so broadly ramified in the earth.

You do not observe this in the note of gay levity in our streets, in our clubs and several societies, nor at our festal boards, simply because as a rule they who are cast down of heart keep themselves in the background, and mourn in solitude. Again, as a general thing, one shows himself outwardly brave, though storms rage within. And it is not the least tender who hide their grief and purposely allow no one to surmise it.

So here you must not go by *appearance*.

There is so much excitement, so much affected hilarity, so many mouths that laugh, when complaint is at the lips.

God has also opened in our human heart by grace an almost inexhaustible fountain of quiet hope and courage, which ever and again triumphs over disappointment.

But what even our marriage formula whispers with so great and solemn seriousness in the ear of bride and bridegroom: "Whereas married persons are generally subject to many troubles and afflictions," is commonly far more true at heart than the language of flowers, which at every wedding prophesies only love and pure joy.

When one is young, he does not believe this. And elders do wrong when they impose the burden of their troubles too early upon the shoulders of the young.

If from the first the plant had to carry the whole burden, it would never be able to bend its stalks upward to full fruition. You see this with many a child that, loaded down too early by trouble and disappointment, was broken down before he had a chance to develop.

But though the young may have extension of time, acquittance of "labor and sorrow" comes to but very few.

As a rule, the thorns and thistles of life wound the feet of every one in turn, till he, too, has marked his track on the pathway of life with his blood and his tears.



Therefore it is so divinely blessed and comforting when our Father who is in heaven comes to us and testifies in His Word that He looks down upon us in divine pity, and *beholds all our labor and sorrow*.

Of course this is nothing to the external and the superficial, who knows nothing of the "hidden walk."

Such an one knows from experience nothing of what it is to see the hiddenness of the Lord hover above his tent, and in turn himself to flee for refuge into his Fortress, his Rock, and his High Tower.

To him everything is flat, level ground, and lies enclosed within the narrow pales of his own narrow horizon.

Even though such an one still confesses that there is a God, that God does not *live* for him, and he not for that God.

God is to him a name, a sound, a term, but no full-blessed Reality, and far less a Fountain of all good, a Spring of eternal life.

But when from your own deep experience of soul at the reading of God's Word you really understand something of the *Love of God*, of the majesty of His divine compassions, and of the fathomless depths of grace in His Father-heart, then, indeed, the blessed knowledge that your God beholds "your labor and sorrow" is everything to you.

When you are maligned, and God hears it; when you are insulted, and your God observes it; when by trouble you are brought low, and the grief of heart makes you succumb in distress, and you realize that you can shed no tear, but your God gathers it—by this simple knowledge your burden is already lightened by half, and in the midst of your trials, even though under your cross you fall to the earth, you can still glory in the "God who sees" and who is of impenetrable mercies.



But then these comfortings of your God must result in His honor and at least have this beautiful effect, *that you put it into His hand*.

For the psalmist links the one immediately to the other: "Thou seest it, for thou beholdest the labor and sorrow that *one may put it into thy hand*."

This you do not do when you prefer to go on bearing the "labor and sorrow" *yourself*; when you take a certain delight, as it were, to bend low under it; and when you lack moral courage of faith to separate yourself from it.

Our nature inclines toward this.

Then our thoughts multiply themselves within us; we continually dwell upon our grievances; we muse, we brood over them; we think on them again and again; and at times it seems that we cannot part from that abyss of the woe of our heart.

The deep, somber stream draws and entices us, and

it sometimes seems as if that stream opens itself before us, that we should cast ourselves into its gaping abyss and sink away in it.

Just watch the heavy-hearted, the melancholy, the atrabilious sufferers, and ask, how more than one at length came to put violent hands on themselves.

And all this is against God's appointment.

He comforts, but to the end that your bowed-down soul shall be relieved, to take the burden of woe from you upon Himself, and, as regards your labor and sorrow, to reveal Himself to you in Christ as your merciful High Priest.



More still.

When God the Lord beholds your "labor and your sorrow," you turn in upon yourself.

Then you do not stare yourself blind upon the cross that lies before you in the way, but you inquire into the *purpose* for which God appointed you that cross.

This can be connected with *your own sin and guilt*, so that a golden trace of God's righteousness runs

through it, to discover you to yourself, and to humble you before your God.

Or it can be that your Father who is in heaven chastises *you as child*, to make your poor faith the richer, or to press out the grape that ripened on your branch into the cup of His glory.

*You shall put it into His hand* means also that, amid your labor and sorrow, God appears before you, stretches out His hand to you, and says to you: "Place your sorrow upon Me, put it here

into the hand of my divine compassion, and let me bear it for you."

There is also this blessing in it, that all too often in our labor and in our sorrow other people are involved, who brought this labor and sorrow upon us.

When this is the case, the heart readily inclines to

*God's Word says to you  
that you do not stand alone,  
that you are not forsaken,  
that all things are known  
unto the Lord,  
and that He shall  
set all things right....*

resentment and reproach. So that love becomes min-  
ished and feelings of bitterness cross each other in our  
heart.

And this goes on, and becomes ever worse, the  
longer we carry the burden of our labor and sorrow  
ourselves.

Something from which so frequently thoughts of  
revenge and of retaliation germinate.

And with an eye to this, God's Word says to you that  
you do *not* stand alone, that you are *not* forsaken, that  
all things are known unto the Lord, and that He shall  
set all things right, so that also what people do unto you,  
you should not retaliate, but *put into the hand of your  
God.* ∞

The History of the Office of Elder (2)

## During and After the Babylonian Captivity

**I**n our last article we began treating the history of  
the office of elder by examining its presence in the  
nation of Israel. Particularly we noted what the  
Old Testament teaches regarding the authority, quali-  
fications, and work of elders.

In this article we treat the period from Israel's captiv-  
ity through Jesus' day, intending to treat the develop-  
ments in the office after the time of Pentecost in our  
next article.

### The Office Continues

Two historical events that occasioned development  
in the office of elder were the Babylonian captivity and  
the return from captivity.

From the time that Israel was organized at Sinai until  
Nebuchadnezzar took Judah captive, Israel/Judah was  
both an earthly kingdom and God's church. Accord-  
ingly, her elders functioned as both civil leaders and  
spiritual guides and watchmen.

With the Babylonian captivity, Judah (the true

Israel) ceased being a nation in its own right. Even  
later, when the Jews returned from captivity, they were  
not self-governing but were under the control of the  
Persians, then the Greeks, then the Romans. Without  
question, this had an effect on the office of elder. Jer-  
emiah lamented it: "The elders have ceased from the  
gate" (Lam. 5:14). This does not mean that the *office*  
of elder ceased; rather, the elders could no longer fully  
carry out the civil aspect of their office, and were limited  
in their ability to enforce God's law.

Yet the *office* continued.

The Bible indicates that the Jews, while *in* captivity,  
still had their elders. Jeremiah wrote a letter, "sent from  
Jerusalem unto the residue of the elders which were car-  
ried away captives..." (Jer. 29:1). And Ezekiel, prophet  
in captivity, found himself seated among the elders of  
Judah (Ezek. 8:1; 14:1), who came to him to inquire of  
Jehovah (Ezek. 20:1, 3).

The Bible also indicates that the Jews, when *re-*  
*turned* from captivity, still had their elders. These  
supervised the construction of the temple at Jerusa-  
lem (Ezra 5:5; 6:8; 6:14) and encouraged the people  
to continue building when the work was opposed  
(Ezra 5:5). To the elders of the Jews the enemies

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came, trying to stop the work (Ezra 5:9). These elders, with the princes, required all the Jews to gather to Jerusalem within three days, or face penalties (Ezra 10:8); and these elders were appointed to judge (Ezra 10:14).

Scripture further indicates that the Jews of *Jesus' day* had elders. Numerous times in the gospel accounts the "elders" are mentioned in the same breath as the "chief priests" and the "scribes." The elders had their traditions regarding washing (Matt. 15:2); the elders, with the chief priests and scribes, led the way in opposing Jesus (Matt. 21:23) and putting Him to death (Matt. 16:21; Matt. 26-27).

Just as the office of elder predated Israel's organization as a nation (Israel had elders already in Egypt, before Moses' time), so the office of elder outlasted Israel's and Judah's existence as a nation.

Why did the office of elder continue?

If Israel was nothing more than an ethnic group, the continuance of this office would enable her to maintain her ethnic identity. Indeed, this is part of it—God in His providence and grace was preserving the Jews as a people.

But the fundamental answer why the office of elder continued, even though Israel was no longer a nation, is that Israel still was—in her elect core, the godly remnant—God's church and covenant people. Through them He would bring forth the Christ. The office of elder continued, so that the people would have a picture of Christ, their true elder.

### The Elders' Oversight of Worship and Spiritual Life: The Synagogue

When Israel was no longer a nation in her own right, the office of elder came to the fore in the synagogues.

The synagogues were places in which the Jews gathered for worship, included in which was the reading and exposition of the Old Testament Scriptures.<sup>1</sup>

Scholars debate the question of exactly when these synagogues arose. The Jews considered Moses to have instituted them,<sup>2</sup> but this cannot be the case. Some

<sup>1</sup> A good popular treatment of the subject of the synagogues, if the reader is interested, can be found in chapters 16-18 of Alfred Edersheim's book *Sketches of Jewish Social Life in the Days of Christ* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1988, reprint).

<sup>2</sup> "Synagogue," *The International Standard Bible Encyclo-*

pedia, ed. James Orr (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing Co, 1956), vol. 4, 2878.

pedia, ed. James Orr (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing Co, 1956), vol. 4, 2878.

suggest they arose early during the Babylonian captivity, and that the encounters of Ezekiel with the elders of the Jews happened at synagogues. Others place the development of the synagogue later during the captivity, or even after the return from captivity.

For now we simply assert that the synagogues arose at some point during or after the Babylonian captivity. We do not read of them explicitly in the Old Testament. Yet, by Jesus' day, they were well-established institutions. In fact, "At the time of Christ and the apostles there was at least one synagogue in each city of any size in Palestine."<sup>3</sup> And: "Not a town, nor a village, if it numbered only ten men...but had one or more synagogues."<sup>4</sup> And, by the time Jerusalem was destroyed in A.D. 70, according to the rabbis, it had "not fewer than 480, or at least 460, synagogues."<sup>5</sup>

The officers of the synagogue included the rabbis, scribes, and teachers—all of whom taught; a deacon who had charge of the scrolls (Luke 4:20); and the body of elders, included in which was the ruler of the synagogue.

Samuel Miller, writing in 1831, states that the trusted scholars of Jewish antiquity, differing in some respects on their view of the elders in the synagogues, spoke with virtual unanimity on this point:

...that in every Synagogue there was a bench of Elders, consisting of at least *three* persons, who were charged with the whole inspection, government, and discipline of the Synagogue; who, as a court or bench of rulers, received, judged, censured, excluded, and, in a word, performed every judicial act, necessary to the regularity and welfare of the congregation.<sup>6</sup>

In support of what Miller says about the elders' work, we read that it was the ruler of the synagogue who rebuked Jesus for healing on the Sabbath (Luke 13:14),

<sup>3</sup> G. Dalman, "Synagogue," *The New Schaff-Herzog Encyclopedia of Religious Knowledge*, ed. Samuel M. Jackson (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1977 reprint), vol. XI, 213.

<sup>4</sup> Edersheim, *Sketches*, 253.

<sup>5</sup> Edersheim, *Sketches*, 254.

<sup>6</sup> Samuel Miller, *An Essay on the Warrant, Nature, and Duties of the Office of the Ruling Elder in the Presbyterian Church* (General Books [www.General-Books.net], 2009), 15.

and that the rulers (we read the “Jews,” but this must be understood of those who governed) had decreed that one who confessed Jesus as the Christ would be excommunicated from the synagogue (John 9:22, 12:42, 16:2).

One can’t help but note the similarities between the synagogues then, and the church today. In both, the faithful assemble(d) for worship. Second, both had/have basically three kinds of officers—the synagogues had teachers, elders, and ministers, and the church has pastors, elders, and deacons. Particularly, in both synagogue and church one finds an office of rule. Third, the number of elders in the synagogues was never less than three. The Church Order that the Synod of Dordt (1618-1619) adopted requires at least two elders in every congregation, and requires that, if a congregation has only two elders, the deacons be part of the consistory. In effect, then, no Reformed church will have less than three officebearers who join in the rule of the church.

To summarize this section: when Israel was no longer a nation, and when the elders could carry out no civil function, the office of elder came to the fore in the synagogues. As rulers of the synagogues, the elders then, like elders in the church today, oversaw the worship and spiritual lives of the people.

### **The Elders’ Influence on Earthly Life: The Sanhedrin**

One more way in which the elders of the Jews manifested their presence during the intertestamentary period, and through the time of Jesus, was in the “Sanhedrin.”

The institution of the Sanhedrin can be traced to the time that the Greeks ruled the Jews (331-198 B.C.). During the period of Roman rule it became even stronger, so that the Sanhedrin’s influence during the time of Jesus’ earthly life was great—although Herod Antipas (the tetrach of Galilee during the time of Jesus) did everything in his power to curtail the Sanhedrin’s influence. The Sanhedrin was abolished when Jerusalem was destroyed in A.D. 70.

We should not suppose that there was only *one* Sanhedrin in Judaism. In Jerusalem, the high priest presided over the Great Sanhedrin, which was made up

of 71 men—past high priests, elders, scribes, Pharisees, and Sadducees.<sup>7</sup> In addition, the smaller localities also had their Sanhedrim (sanhedrin is singular, sanhedrim is plural). Edersheim writes: “Then every town had its Sanhedrim, consisting of twenty-three members if the place numbered at least one hundred and twenty men, or of three members if the population were smaller. These Sanhedrists were appointed directly by the supreme authority, or Great Sanhedrin, ‘the council,’ at Jerusalem....”<sup>8</sup>

The Sanhedrin was a ruling body.

As a ruling body, the Sanhedrin made every effort to influence the people. One way it did this was by making laws. But it could not make laws that interfered with the rule of the Greek and Roman Empires. So the Sanhedrin did its best to make laws that governed the religious life of the Jews as the people and kingdom of God. The attempts of the Pharisees to do this led, as we know, to the whole system of works-righteousness that Jesus and the apostles condemned.

Especially, as a ruling body, the Sanhedrin passed judgment among the Jews in matters both civil and religious, in light of the Old Testament Mosaic law. When a matter pertained exclusively to the Mosaic law, the Greeks or Romans let the Jews do as they pleased. So Pilate, knowing that Jesus committed no crime against the Roman Empire, told the Jews, “Take ye him, and judge him according to your law” (John 18:31). When a matter pertained both to the Mosaic law and the law of the empire, the Greek or Roman judges had to be involved. When Rome ruled, it permitted the Sanhedrin to conclude that a man should die, but did not allow the Sanhedrin to put one to death. This, of course, is why the Jews tried to convince Pilate that the issues regarding Jesus did not pertain merely to Jewish law—that Jesus was in fact a threat to Caesar. And when a matter pertaining to the Mosaic law threatened the peace of the province, Rome readily took matters in her own hands—as happened when Paul was arrested in Jerusalem at the end of his third missionary journey (Acts 21 and following).

<sup>7</sup> Victor H. Matthews, *Manners and Customs in the Bible: An Illustrated Guide to Daily Life in Bible Times* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1988), 258.

<sup>8</sup> Edersheim, *Sketches*, 91.

## Conclusion

I agree with Samuel Miller's contention that the office of elder in the New Testament church is primarily a continuation of the bench of elders in the synagogues.<sup>9</sup> The elders who made up the Sanhedrin were, for all their attempt at religious influence, primarily civil leaders. And, as we mentioned, with the destruction of Jerusalem in A.D. 70, the Sanhedrin was abolished. Nevertheless, the religious influence of the Sanhedrin and its elders cannot be overlooked.

By connecting the office of elder in the Old Testament to that in the New Testament church through the elders of the synagogues, we are not saying that the men who held that office always honored the office. Just as was true of Israel's elders in her early days, and of elders in Christian churches today (considering Christianity most broadly), so also in these times there were some godly elders (Nicodemus and Joseph of Arimathea), but many who sought power for themselves.

In fact, a pattern emerges, which pattern fits the history of God's people throughout the ages. When God chastened, humbled, and reformed His church, the elders whom He appointed over His reformed church were godly men, who sought His glory. This was gener-

<sup>9</sup> Miller, *Essay*, 23ff.

ally true of the elders in Moses' time, in David's time, and after the return from captivity. But as time went on, wickedness developed in the church—tolerated by, and often promoted by, elders who were more concerned to retain their power and influence over people than to enforce God's law and seek Him. The corrupt Sanhedrin and rulers of synagogues who cast Christ out are instances of this.

From this, elders in Christ's church today must take warning. The elders of Jesus' day rejected the very Christ. Personally, they saw no need for Him—they were righteous; and in their work, while appearing or pretending to adhere to the promises of a coming Christ, they led the people to reject the true Christ. May God give our elders grace to bow before this same Christ—to acknowledge Him as the church's cornerstone and find in Him their own salvation, rather than refuse Him and stumble over Him to their destruction.

The church of Jesus' day, also in her spiritual leadership, stood in need of reform. By His death at the hands of wicked elders, His resurrection, His ascension to God's right hand, and His pouring out of the Spirit, Christ Himself provided for this reformation of the church, and of the office of elder. 

GO YE INTO ALL THE WORLD

REV. DANIEL KLEYN

# A Goal in the Philippines: Self-Propagating Churches (2)

*Rev. Kleyn is a missionary of the Protestant Reformed Churches in America, stationed in Manila, the Philippines. Previous article in this series: April 1, 2012, p. 295.*

A self-propagating church, as we noted last time, is one that is faithful to the great commission. She is mission minded. She is busy in the work of spreading the precious truths of the gospel in her own land and to her own countrymen.

Last time we saw that certain pitfalls must be avoided, especially as regards the use of foreign funds. We

now turn to the positive aspects of working toward the goal of establishing such churches.

The first step in establishing a self-propagating church is to teach the truth. The church needs to be firmly grounded in the truth that she will pass on to others. Before a church can correctly propagate the truth, she must thoroughly embrace it. She needs to know and identify herself with the truths of Scripture and the Reformed faith as set forth in the historic confessions of the Reformed churches. Without this, it is impossible for a church clearly and faithfully to witness to others.

Next, such churches must be taught to be self-propagating. The missionary needs to make clear to those among whom he labors that they too must be mission minded. They must learn to take up the work that Christ gave His church in the great commission. They may not be selfish with the Word that God has entrusted to them, but should spread that Word wherever the Lord gives open doors. They must seek the salvation of the lost sheep of Israel by faithful proclamation of the gospel among their fellow countrymen.

Closely connected to this is the task of teaching the churches that a significant part of being self-propagating is to finance and support one's own mission work. Reliance on foreign funding must be avoided. Ideally, outside funding should be kept at zero, and that from the very start of the mission work.

This approach is biblical. The Word of God sets before us the biblical principle that he who brings the Word should be provided for by those to whom he brings it (Matt. 10:9-10). The one who preaches the gospel should live of the gospel (I Cor. 9:14). The ones to whom the Word is preached must provide all good things to the one who preaches it (Gal. 6:6).

Simply put, this means the local church is responsible for supporting its own minister and its own mission work. As the Lord gives the members earthly gifts, they must use these things to seek first His kingdom—especially by providing, to the utmost of their ability, for

the support of those who preach the Word to them, and to others on their behalf.

The example of the New Testament church confirms this. We do not find in Scripture that ministers or missionaries were supported by outside sources. One recorded instance of financial assistance being given from one church to another was the gift from the church in Antioch to the church in Jerusalem. But that was given on account of famine, and thus as benevolence assistance. It was not given as support for the Jerusalem church's ministry or evangelism. The testimony of Scripture is that the newly established churches were the ones who supported their ministers and missionaries (Phil. 4:16; II Cor. 11:8-9).

It is true that without financial assistance a church might not be able to do as much in the area of evangelism and missions. In many instances, foreign funds would enable the work to advance at a faster rate. But such potential progress should not be pursued at the risk of long-term damage to the field. The wise and biblical approach, in order to avoid the pitfalls that result from paying local men to do the work, is that

the churches be self-propagating by means of their own funds.

We do not wish to produce congregations that must depend and rely on foreign churches. Our goal is to produce and nurture churches that are able to stand alone. Our goal is churches that are able to do the work of the church by using what God has provided them for this work.

Rev. Joel L. Hogan, in the article we referred to last time (“Unhealthy Dependency vs. Sustainability”), put it this way:

I have a theory which has never proven wrong, in my experience. My theory is that God has supplied to every people of the world all that they need to live as a community of faith and to spread the gospel to others. No outside resources are needed for these very basic tasks. Yes, additional resources can truly enhance what a group can do, but it doesn't need to be dependent upon any entity other than Almighty God to be the church and to expand the Kingdom.

*Our goal is to produce  
and nurture churches  
that are able to stand alone.*

We know and confess that God is sovereign. He knows His elect, and He knows where He has placed them in the world. In His providential control of all things, He sends forth His Word through His church. And in His providential control, He will also provide that church with the means it needs to bring that gospel to His elect in that place. God will do that for the sake of the salvation of those He has ordained unto eternal life.

But the question is, Will this actually work? Can we expect young churches that are at a lower financial level to be able to do the mission work the Lord calls His church to do, to do it effectively, and to do it without financial assistance from others?

Another account from Rev. Hogan shows that, by the grace and blessing of God, it is indeed possible—even in very poor countries in the world. His story is about a Presbyterian church in India.

This is a large church of about 500,000 members and is in one of the only areas in all of India where Christians are in the majority. The per capita income of these people is about 15,000 Indian Rupees per year, or about \$300 per year. However, when I visited their place, I saw some very nice church buildings. The people ... told me that these were “rice churches.” They explained that families set aside one fistful of rice at every meal and that is given as a part of their offering and used to build church buildings. Even more striking is that this group of churches uses 46% of all their collections on missions. They support 1400 missionaries, who mostly serve in various parts of India, but extend to other countries in Asia, to Africa, and even to the United States. They also built their own hospital, have their own missionary training school and their own seminary. They are not dependent on outside resources to build their buildings or to be engaged in sending missionaries, yet they have a low income and mainly live by farming.

Yes, the Lord provides His church with the resources

she needs. The Lord blesses the church that trusts in and relies on Him, and enables her to be self-propagating.

This is not a new idea or perspective. It is an approach that is well documented in the writings of various missionaries and missiologists, such as Roland Allen (*The Spontaneous Expansion of the Church*), John L. Nevius (*The Planting and Development of Missionary Churches*), and J. H. Bavinck (*An Introduction to the Science of Missions*), to name a few. Much of what these men wrote arose out of their own experiences on the mission field. They saw the problems that arose from injecting foreign funds into the work. They admitted that mission endeavors have

depended too much on paid workers. They noted that Paul did not pay co-workers, but depended exclusively on spontaneous and voluntary help. They warned that the church that is doing mission work must be constantly on guard against being a source of funds.

In conclusion, the whole subject of self-propagating churches underscores the fact that there is always a need for local men to be called and trained so that they can serve as ministers and missionaries of the Word. No church can be self-propagating without this.

Not only, therefore, do we need the Lord to direct the churches among whom we labor in the Philippines to continue working diligently in missions and outreach, but there is always the need that He also continue to raise up local men in those churches (in addition to the one brother who will soon return here from seminary, the Lord willing) to serve as their pastors and missionaries.

In the Protestant Reformed churches and circles we regularly pray that God will raise up young men from among us to serve Him in the high calling of the ministry of the gospel in our midst. May we also remember to pray for this with regard to the churches in the Philippines. And may the Lord of the harvest hear and answer and provide. ∞

*The Lord blesses  
the church  
that trusts in  
and relies on Him,  
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### Congregation Activities

The men of the Edgerton, MN PRC invited all the men of the area churches to a combined men's society meeting on March 27. The meeting began with a Bible study taken from the book of Jude, followed after recess by a discussion on the February 15, 2012 *Standard Bearer* article by Mr. Brian Van Engen on "Religion and Discrimination in Employment."

The members of the Georgetown PRC in Hudsonville, MI enjoyed their annual Church Conference on Friday and Saturday, March 23 and 24. This year it was held at the Holland Rescue Mission in nearby Holland, MI, under the theme "Witnessing Around Us," with the guest speaker, Mr. Daryl Bartlett, director of the Holland Rescue Mission.

At the "News," we are always on the lookout for something just a little on the unusual side from our churches' bulletins. A recent bulletin from the Randolph, WI PRC caught our eye with just such an announcement. The members of their Adult Bible Study had plans to do a rock-climbing activity on Saturday, March 24. Plans also called for the society going out for dinner afterward. We assume, barring any injuries.

The Catering Committee of the Hudsonville, MI PRC sponsored a fundraiser with a view to purchasing new tablecloths for the recently ac-

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

quired round tables for their church's newly expanded all purpose room on Saturday morning, March 24, with a brunch under the theme, "The Festival of Tables." In total there were 21 tables sponsored under various themes from "Dr. Seuss," "Hicks from the Sticks," "A Day at the Beach," "His Eye Is on the Sparrow," and "Take Time to be Holy." Also featured was harpist Shari Faber. We would be remiss if we did not add that the food was outstanding, as well as the service of the tables, which was provided by men from Hudsonville's congregation.

The members of Heritage PRC in Sioux Falls, SD got together Friday evening, March 23, for a Dessert and Game Night. All those high-school age and older were divided into groups to meet at various host houses for an informal evening of fun and fellowship.

Sunday evening, March 25, the members of the Choral Society of the Faith PRC in Jenison, MI presented their annual Spring Concert.

After their evening service on March 25, the members of the Calvary PRC in Hull, IA enjoyed a presentation by elder Glenn Kooima of his recent visit to the Philippines, along with Perry Van Egdome of the Doon, IA PRC, on behalf of our denomination's Foreign Mission Committee.

The men's quartet Voices of Victory presented an evening of praise and thanksgiving to our heavenly Father in the Loveland, CO PRC on Friday evening, March 23. Love-

land's congregation was invited and encouraged to attend this concert of thanksgiving to the One who holds us in His hands at all times. A time of fellowship was planned in the church basement following the concert.

### Sister-Church Activities

With thanksgiving to God, we include here a note that Rev. Martyn McGeown, pastor of the Limerick Reformed Fellowship, a mission field of the Covenant PRC in Ballymena, NI, had the honor and experience of conducting his and the Fellowship's first baptism on March 25, under the theme, "Our Children: Infant Citizens of Christ," from Luke 18:15-17. If you are interested you can view the baptism on-line at youtube.com.

### Evangelism Activities

The Evangelism Committee of the First PRC in Edmonton, AB, Canada sponsored a seminar by Prof. B. Gritters, entitled "Reformed Evangelism: The Role of the Individual Believer." The two topics covered were: 1) Does the Individual Believer Have a Role in Reformed Evangelism? and 2) What Biblical Instruction Can Be Given to Individual Believers for Christian Witnessing? The seminar was held Saturday, March 24.

The Evangelism Committee of the Georgetown PRC in Hudsonville, MI was excited to inform their congregation about the fact that they had been invited to lead chapels at the Family Hope Center,

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which is the women, children, and family shelter of Holland Rescue Mission in Holland, MI. These chapels take place on Tuesday evenings from April 3 to June 26. Georgetown's Evangelism Committee was hoping that their congregation would continue to be involved in this activity. They even went so far as to extend a special invitation to families to join in this witness to hurting and needy families.

### Young People's Activities

The Young People's Society of

the Hope PRC in Redlands, CA invited everyone in their congregation to a French Toast Breakfast at their church on Saturday, March 17. The young people used this as a fundraiser for this summer's young people's convention.

The young people of the Kalamazoo, MI PRC hosted an ice cream social as a fundraiser following their annual Prayer Day Service on March 14.

The young people of the Lynden, WA PRC sponsored a Parents' Night Out on March 23. The young people provided games,

crafts, and activities for children at the church between 6:00 and 9:00 p.m. Snacks were also provided for the children. Discount coupons at a variety of local restaurants were also available for any parent who wanted to use them.

### Minister Activities

Rev. Rodney Kleyn, pastor of the Covenant of Grace PRC in Spokane, WA, declined the call he was considering to become the next pastor of the Edgerton, MN PRC.



## ANNOUNCEMENTS

### Call to Synod!!

■ Synod 2011 appointed the Protestant Reformed Church in Crete, Illinois the calling church for the 2012 Synod.

The consistory hereby notifies our churches that the 2012 Synod of the Protestant Reformed Churches in America will convene, the Lord willing, on Tuesday, June 12, 2012 at 8:30 A.M., in the Protestant Reformed Church in Crete, Illinois.

The Pre-Synodical Service will be held on Monday evening, June 11, at 7:00 P.M. Rev. Slopsema, president of the 2011 Synod, will preach the sermon. Synodical delegates are requested to meet with the consistory before the service.

Delegates in need of lodging should contact Mr. Bert Worries, (708) 474-4926, e-mail: bworries@sbcglobal.net.

Consistory of  
Protestant Reformed Church in Crete  
Bert Worries, Clerk.

### Resolution of Sympathy

■ The Council and congregation of Peace Protestant Reformed Church mourn the loss of member

**MR. MENNO POORTENGA,**  
who went to be with his Lord on March 25, 2012. We express our Christian sympathy to the Poortenga family. May our covenant God comfort them by His Word and Spirit.

"I will lift up mine eyes unto the hills, from whence cometh my help. My help cometh from the Lord, which made heaven and earth. He will not suffer thy foot to be moved: he that keepeth thee will not slumber. Behold, he that keepeth Israel shall neither slumber nor sleep" (Psalm 121:1-4).

Rev. Clayton Spronk, President  
William J. De Jong, Clerk

### Notice

■ The *Standard Bearer* Index Volumes 1-87 is now available in a digital version. The cost is \$10 and it can be purchased at the RFPA website ([www.rfpa.org](http://www.rfpa.org)), by calling the RFPA office at 616-457-5970, or email [paula@rfpa.org](mailto:paula@rfpa.org). (The index will no longer be available as a hardcopy.)

### Notice

■ Do you have bound volumes of the *Standard Bearer* that you are willing to sell? The RFPA is looking to buy back an inventory of these volumes. We will pay \$15 each for volumes 1-40 or \$5 each for volumes 40-87. Please contact us at (616) 457-5970 or [mail@rfpa.org](mailto:mail@rfpa.org) for more information.