

The Outlook

Devoted to the Exposition and Defense of the Reformed Faith

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The Master's Plan

"I am already being poured out like a drink offering. The time has come for my departure. I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. Now there is in store for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the Righteous Judge, will award me on that day; and not only to me, but to all who have longed for His appearing." 2 Timothy 4:6-8

Whenever I am in big airports I am always amazed at the high level of activity! Every day hundreds of planes take off and land, thousands of people come and go, and multiple thousands of suitcases are loaded and unloaded. It is enough to make one's head spin! No wonder some luggage gets lost!

Thankfully, the activity at airports is organized. I know it is organized

because of the banks of monitors that list arrivals and departures. Even if some flights are delayed or cancelled, the monitors indicate that there is a plan that keeps things moving.

Our lives may resemble busy airports. Many of us are involved in numerous activities. All year long our calendars and day-timers and PDA's are packed with appoint-

ments. Do you ever wonder where we are headed with all our busyness? Do you ever wonder if there is a master plan that makes life worth living?

Is it enough for you to be busy, or do you long for a sense of purpose? Is it enough for you to be on the go, or do you want to know that you are headed to a great destination?

In Paul's words to Timothy it is obvious that the Apostle had a strong sense of direction. Paul knew that the activities of his life and that the approach of death were part of God's master plan. And Paul was confident that God had a good plan for his life. That is why he could say, "the time of my departure is at hand" with a high level of assur-



Volume 53, No. 4 (ISSN 8750-5754) (USPS 633-980) "And the three companies blew the trumpets...and held THE TORCHES in their left hands, and THE TRUMPETS in their right hands. . .and they cried, 'The sword of Jehovah and of Gideon' (Judges 7:20).

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ance. Paul knew that if he lived, he lived to the Lord, and that if he died, he died to the Lord. So whether he lived or died, he was the Lord's (Romans 8:14). Paul knew that his coming and going were in God's hands and therefore right on schedule!

Paul, however, did not always have such peace of mind. There was a time when Paul was extremely busy, very religious, and intensely troubled.

Before he knew Jesus, Paul was a fine fellow. He had a good reputation. People looked up to Paul. They admired his intelligence. They applauded his hard work. They were impressed by Paul's accomplishments.

Inwardly, however, Paul was perplexed. He was driven. He believed in God but he did not have peace with God. More and more Paul realized that he was a sinner. He discovered that he could not keep God's commandments. Paul didn't tell many lies. He did not steal food from vendors in the marketplace. He did not commit adultery. But Paul found that he had a problem with the 10th commandment, which says, "You must not covet."

The more Paul tried not to covet his neighbors house, or his neighbor's wife, the more he wanted such things. In other words, Paul discovered that he did not really love his neighbors. And if he did not love his neighbors who were made in God's image, Paul did not really love God.

Still Paul pressed on, trying to earn God's favor. When Paul heard about people who worshipped Jesus of Nazareth, he found a new

way to please God. Paul decided to persecute Christians. He decided to do away with people who were foolish enough to think that someone who died a cursed death on a cross was the Messiah!

But one day Jesus confronted Paul. One day the risen and glorified Messiah appeared to Paul with a brilliant light that temporarily blinded Paul's physical eyes, but which opened the eyes of his heart. In that confrontation, Jesus revealed His

A brilliant light that temporarily blinded Paul's physical eyes opened the eyes of his heart.

glory as the victorious Son of God. Jesus revealed His triumph as the Mediator between God and man. Jesus demonstrated that He was crucified, but that He is the risen King of all the earth!

What a life-changing experience! When he believed on the Lord Jesus Christ, Paul received the grace of God that abounds to the worst of sinners. He experienced a complete and total cleansing from all his sins!

What a difference this made in Paul's life. Consider Paul's testimony in Philippians 3, "I want to know Jesus and the power of His resurrection and the fellowship of sharing in His sufferings." With new purpose and growing confidence, he went on to say, "I press on to take hold of that for which

Christ Jesus took hold of me. Forgetting what is behind, and straining toward what is ahead, I press on toward the goal, to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus."

Such confidence is also expressed in 2 Timothy 4. Paul knew that he was no't going to live forever in this world. He knew that the day of death was approaching. But he saw death as a scheduled departure. He saw death in terms of God's master plan. Paul knew that the risen Christ was his Savior and Lord, so death held no terror. At the end of life's race Paul saw, not gloom and doom, but a crown of righteousness that the Risen Savior would award to him and to all who long for His appearing.

Our lives may resemble busy airports. There is so much activity! There are arrivals and departures. But when we study the Bible we learn that there is a master plan. We see our lives in the light of God's power and providence. And if we believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, we know that a risen Savior waits for us beyond death's door. We know that the One who bled and died to pay for our sins lives to watch over our comings and goings, our arrivals and departures, both now and forevermore.

Praise be to our risen Savior!

Rev. Roger Sparks is pastor of the Calvin Christian Reformed Church of Rock Valley, Iowa.

In His Own Image

There is something special about the sixth day of creation. In it God made livestock and wild animals. But He also did more. On this day, God created an image of Himself - mankind. Man is the pinnacle of God's creation. From here on in, throughout the Bible we read about this particular creation. We do not read about fish unless it is in connection with Man. We do not read about oak trees unless it is in connection with Man. The focus of the Bible is the Human Race: the Human Race in rebellion against God and the Human Race as the object of God's special love shown in His redemptive plan.

Of course, to say that the creation of human beings is the most important part of the Creation event might be seen as an egotistical statement in this day of animal's rights. I read a Peanuts comic strip not so long ago in which Snoopy the dog is trying to explain to Woodstock the bird that dogs are the highest developed life form on the planet. And if we were fish, we might well be taught in our schools that fish are the most important part of creation.

But neither Snoopy nor the schools of fish are the most important. Men and women are higher than any other forms of creation. They rule over creation and are told by God to have dominion over the rest of creation. They do not rule by force of strength. Many animals are stronger and more powerful than any

“Create” is used in Genesis to indicate that something special is happening.

man. Mankind rules over the animals because he was appointed to do so by God.

When God Creates

In Genesis 1:26, 27 the uniqueness of Man and his superiority to the rest of creation is expressed in the word “create.” “Create” is used in Genesis to indicate that something special is happening. God is making something totally new; something

unique to the rest of creation. Three times the word “create” is used in Genesis 1. First, in Genesis 1:1 where God creates something out of nothing. God spoke and heaven and earth - matter - became real. From that matter, through the Word of God, came vegetation, trees and all plant life. The second time the Bible uses the word “create” is in connection with conscious life - things that know they are alive like fish, birds, and mammals. Then in Genesis 1:27, God created Man. He created a being with a soul, a spirit; a being with God-consciousness.

We see progression in the creation account. From nothing to matter; from matter to life; and from life to God-consciousness. And just so you do not miss the point, the writer of Genesis is inspired by the Holy Spirit to tell us three times in verse twenty-seven that something significant has taken place in the creation of the man and woman: “And God created man in His own image, in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them.” It is as though God is putting His exclamation point at the end of the creation account to indicate that there is something special, something unique, something very impor-

***“God created man good and in His own image, that is, in true righteousness and holiness, so that he might truly know God his Creator, love Him with all his heart, and live with Him in eternal happiness for His praise and glory.” -
Lord's Day 3 q/a 6***



tant about the creation of Mankind.

And what is it that is so special? That, too, is reported for us three times in :26 and :27. Man was created in God's image. The Heidelberg Catechism teaches that to be created in God's image means that God made us "in true righteousness and holiness, so that he might truly know God his creator."

Holiness and Righteousness

Men and women possess the attributes of personality, even as God does. That personality includes knowledge. It includes feelings (including spiritual feelings), and it includes a will. These God has. These Adam and Eve had. These the rest of creation does not have. Some people may argue that animals possess a certain kind of personality, but animals cannot reason like people do. You cannot have a decent conversation with your chicken. You may be able to teach your pet dog to respond to certain stimuli, but it is only conforming to certain patterns of behavior. Nothing else in all creation can truly love or worship God.

Being created in the image of God makes us moral creatures. Man was created with a certain amount of freedom, but with that freedom came responsibility. Man was good and without sin at the time of creation. He knew God. He loved God. He worshiped God. But he also had to obey God. Adam and Eve had the responsibility to acknowledge their Creator.

Even though they were above the rest of creation, they were not above God. In order to acknowledge God as the Creator and to recognize Him as above all things - in-

cluding themselves - they were not to eat from the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil. When Adam and Eve ate from that tree, they lost their true righteousness and holiness.

No longer were we a people able not to sin; we became a people unable not to sin. As Lord's Day 4 will point out, Adam and Eve still had the same moral responsibility that they were created with. They still had to love and honor God. That responsi-

*No longer were we a
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sin.*

bility is passed on to all the descendants of Adam and Eve, as well.

When Adam and Eve ate from the forbidden tree, they rejected the superiority of God. They poisoned themselves and their yet unborn offspring. We are guilty of sin because Adam and Eve ate from the tree.

When does this corruption begin in us? Certainly it began at the fall of Adam and Eve. But when are you personally guilty of sin and deserving of hell? Is it after you have a knowledge of God and His Law? Is it at the age of reason? Is it at viability or while we are still in the womb?

A Pro-Life View

The Bible teaches that it is at conception. Genesis 5:3 teaches us that

Adam had a son "in his own likeness" meaning born in sin. Psalm 51:5 says: "Behold, I was brought forth in iniquity, and in sin my mother conceived me." The Heidelberg Catechism teaches in Question and Answer 7: "...we are born sinners corrupt from conception on." Our form of Baptism picks up on that when every parent is asked: "Do you acknowledge that our children, though conceived and born in sin, and therefore are subject to all manner of misery, yea to condemnation itself are sanctified by Christ and therefore ought to be baptized?"

If you believe in the guilt of original sin and answer "I do" to the question asked at Baptism, then you believe that life begins at conception. That is a very Pro-life view! You cannot say that you are Pro-life and have a view that life begins at twenty-two weeks. You cannot say that you accept the Reformed faith and say that life begins at birth.

Why not? Because the soul is there at conception. That is what the Bible teaches. The image of God is there at conception. Why? Because God put it there! At the moment of conception we have in us the image of God. We have to understand that we are in the image of God not because of what we do but because of how we are made. And because we are made in God's image, we are valuable to God.

Several years ago a college professor from a "Christian" college showed the congregation I was serving three acorns. He asked us what they were. We of course replied that they were acorns. He then asked us that if he destroyed

those acorns would we accuse him of destroying three oak trees. We replied, "No." His argument was that the acorns were not oak trees but potential oak trees.

Then he made a giant leap of logic and went on to argue that the destruction of a zygote or an embryo would not be killing a person, but a potential person. He then showed some slides of people with genetic deformities. His contention, as he showed these slides, was that these people should never have been born. With the technology that we have today to detect deformities and illnesses before birth we should abort such grotesques creatures.

To do that, however, is to destroy a creature that has in it the image of God. Not a potential image bearer, but one created with God's image already implanted in him at conception. The image of God is not how your teeth are arranged. The image of God is not blue eyes, blond hair, and whatever other Aryan characteristics you may like. The image of God is something that God has planted in each and every person from conception on. To destroy that image is what the Bible calls murder.

It is murder because you are destroying the very pinnacle, the very crown of creation. If oak trees were the pinnacle of God's creation and every one of them was branded with the image of God, it certainly would be wrong to destroy an acorn. We have to understand that according to the Bible the image of God is not something that you do, it is something God has placed in you already at conception. By our very nature; by being what we are - human beings; we bear the image of God.

The Image Restored

God loves His image bearers in a way that He does not love the plants and animals He created. He loves them so much that He sent His Son into the world to restore that image that was shattered through the fall.

Sin has greatly marred the image of God within us. Like a shattered mirror badly reflects the image before it, so we badly reflect the image of God. Every part of our being has been affected by the Fall.

***The image of God is
not something that
you do, it is
something God has
placed in you
already at
conception.***

That's obvious from the fact that, after the Fall, Adam and Eve ran away from God when they heard Him in the Garden. They tried to hide from the very One who had created them. And men and women have been trying to hide from God ever since.

But God, through His Son and through the Holy Spirit, has established contact with those who have rebelled against Him. God's Son, Jesus Christ, died on the cross so that we might be restored to God. Through His death we can regain that perfect image of God. Saved by grace, when the sinner enters into glory through Jesus Christ, he shall again have true righteousness and holiness. We will once again

truly know God as our Creator, we will love Him with all of our heart, and live with Him in eternal happiness for His praise and glory.

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

Book of the Month

The Sermon on the Mount

by Rev. Henry Vander Kam

This book is ideal for Bible Studies, Adult Sunday School, or personal devotions.

Rev. Vander Kam divides the Sermon on the Mount into six sections focusing on Law, Love, Prayer, Faith, and more. He skillfully offers timeless insight to current times and trends.

24 Lessons

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Melito of Sardis

*The one who hung the earth in space, is himself hanged;
The one who fixed the heavens in place, is himself impaled;
The one who firmly fixed all things, is himself firmly
Fixed to the tree.*

—Melito, *Paschal Homily* (96)

It was first discovered in the 1930's (Michigan-Beatty Papyrus) and initially published in 1940. Melito's (MEL-e-toe) *Paschal Homily* (or "Sermon on the Passover") is regarded by many as the most stunning patristic discovery of the 20th century. Save for fragments, the homily was not extant in ancient collections of Melito's works. Yet providentially, another version (Papyrus Bodmer XIII) was discovered and published in 1960. A newly found Coptic manuscript of the sermon (Mississippi Coptic Codex I) remains to be edited and translated. For the first time, scholars and students of the early church have access to the full text of a sermon from the bishop of Sardis in Asia Minor (died about 190 A.D.). The homily may have been delivered between 160 and 170 A.D.

The homily/sermon astonishes us with its poetic beauty, its rhetorical power, its theological depth, its majestic sweep of redemptive history. And in every aspect of its marvelous richness, Melito directs the hearer/reader to Christ as the eschatological Lamb and Passover of God. (An English translation of the homily is available free of charge at kerux.com.)

*For God replaced the lamb,
And a man the sheep;
But in the man was Christ
By nature both God and man
(5, 8).*

Melito's biography is obscure. He labored in Asia Minor which today is modern Turkey. There he was episcopal leader of the church in Sardis (cf. Revelation 3:1-6). His discussion of the date for Easter (so-called Quartodeciman controversy); his so-called *Apology* (addressed to the emperor Marcus Aurelius); and his list of the canonical books of the Old Testament (authenticated by a pilgrimage to Jerusalem in which Melito becomes the first Christian writer to call the Hebrew Bible the "old covenant"; his list of inspired books agrees with the Hebrew/Protestant canon, though he omits Esther (or perhaps combines her with Ezra and Nehemiah): all have made him an historical and patristic curiosity. But there, tantalizingly, our knowledge stops. Melito's biography remains obscure.

*The mystery of the Passover is
New and old,
Eternal and temporal,
Corruptible and incorruptible,
Mortal and immortal (2).*

But the *Paschal Homily* is not obscure. It is a magnificent example of Christian preaching in the second half of the second century A.D. While Melito's method may be labeled "typological" or "promise-fulfillment", the richness and profundity of his insights are more organic, more transcendently revelational as well as immanently incarna-

tional. Some scholars have labeled the sermon *heilsgeschichtlich* ("salvation historical"). I prefer the label redemptive-historical or biblical-theological.

From the Passover in Egypt, Melito moves to "Christ our Passover" (1 Corinthians 5:7). From the lamb slain in Egypt, Melito brings us to the "Lamb slain from the foundation of the world" (Revelation 13:8). From the blood sprinkled upon the doorposts in Egypt, Melito brings us to the "sprinkled blood which speaks better than . . . the blood of calves and goats" (Hebrews 12:24; 9:13). From the Passover of death to life, Melito brings us to the One who has passed from death to life eternal. From Moses and Israel in Egypt, Melito brings us to Jesus and the new Israel in heaven.

*I am the Christ.
I am your forgiveness,
I am the Passover of your
salvation,
I am the lamb which was
sacrificed for you,
I am your ransom,
I am your light,
I am your savior,
I am your resurrection,
I am your king,
I am leading you up to the
heights of heaven,
I will show you the Eternal
Father,
I will raise you up by my right
hand (103).*

Melito lays out his method and direction in the introduction (1-10), i.e., the relationship between the old (former covenant; Exodus Passover) and the new (last days covenant; crucifixion of Christ). He

then explains the Passover in Egypt in its historical context (11-33), i.e., the slaughter of the lamb and the sentence of death upon the land from which Israel was ransomed by the blood of a substitute. Next, he constructs the shadow-type/reality-antitype paradigm, relating the Old Testament event to the New Testament fulfillment (34-45), i.e., the history of Israel in Egypt is an anticipation of the history of Jesus in Palestine, while the history of Jesus in Palestine is a recapitulation of the history of Israel in Egypt. Now, he relates the Passover in Egypt to the wider context of God's grace in history from the Fall of Adam down to Christ (46-65), i.e., the redemptive history from Genesis to Malachi is accomplished in the redemptive history of Jesus Christ (Matthew to Revelation). The homily draws to a close with the shift in God's plan of salvation from Jew to Jew *and* Gentile (66-99), i.e., from old Israel (Abraham and those in him, according to the flesh) to new Israel (Christ and those in him, according to the Spirit). A doxology of triumph in Christ concludes the homily (100-105).

*This is the one who made the
heaven and the earth,
And who in the beginning
created man,
Who was proclaimed through
the law and the prophets,
Who became human via the
virgin,
Who was hanged upon a tree,
Who was buried in the earth,
Who was resurrected from the
dead,
And who ascended to the
heights of heaven,
Who sits at the right hand of
the Father,*

*Who has authority to judge and
save everything,
Through whom the Father
created everything
From the beginning of the
world to the end of the age.
This is the alpha and the
omega.
This is the beginning and the
end.
This is the Christ.
This is the king.
This is Jesus.
This is the Lord.
This is the one who rose up
from the dead.
This is the one who sits at the
right hand of the Father.
To whom be the glory
And the power forever. Amen
(104-105).*

At only one place do we cringe at Melito's language. When he suggests that the Jews were the "killers" of Christ ("Israel admits, I killed the Lord" [74]). We shrink from the apparent anti-Semitism. Most scholars believe Melito is guilty of the racist charge. But perhaps the rhetoric of this passionate bishop is no more "anti-Semitic" than the language of the gospel of John or the speech of Stephen (Acts 7) or even the invectives of the Old Testament prophets. Perhaps Melito regards himself as a prophetic voice, charging Israel with grievous sin, so that they may be "cut to the quick" (cf. Acts 2:37), repent and cry out, "O Paschal Lamb of God, we hide under the blood of your cross - your once-for-all sacrifice - that eternal death may hide its dark face from us forever."

The second century bishop of Sardis has drawn us into the drama and

meaning of the Passover by drawing us into the drama and meaning of the last lamb for sinners slain. With that second century audience, we plead, "O Lord, cover us with the blood of this Eschatological Passover Lamb." With that church in Sardis, we pray, "O dying Lamb of God, we lay our life in Thee so that Thy life - Thy resurrection-life - may be laid upon us." With the saints of second century western Asia Minor, we plead, "O Lord, let our eyes be opened to the incarnation of Thy Son in the type, so that we may enjoy the adoption of sons in the antitype—the Incarnate Son."

Melito's sermon is a superb example of dramatic, passionate, Christ-centered patristic preaching. It reminds us even today that our preaching (and believing) can be no less!

Rev. James T. Dennison, Jr. is Academic Dean at Northwest Theological Seminary, Lynnwood, Washington where he also teaches Patristics.



John Calvin and Christian Piety (2)

In the introduction to his best-seller *The Book of Virtue: A Treasury of Great Moral Stories* William Bennett writes that “children must have at their disposal a stock of examples illustrating what we see to be right and wrong, good and bad.”¹ By means of such stories, along with explicit exhortation and precept, we will form better moral character within our children. By reading through his edited collection of stories which include Aesop’s fables and medieval morality lessons, the child, according to Bennett, will learn such things as “honesty is the best policy” and “good things come to him who waits.”

For John Calvin, however, and for the biblical Christian today, Bennett’s book or other forms of “moral education” will not result in true godliness. Though civil morality and Christian godliness might appear outwardly similar, yet inwardly they are entirely different. Consider the great difference in their motives. Whereas outward morality is often motivated by altruism or by social pressures, the motive and the source for Christian *pietas* is Jesus Christ.

It is in the third book of the *Institutes of the Christian Religion*² that Calvin specifically addresses the topic of Christian living. He begins this book with a discussion about the work of the Holy Spirit. Calvin writes that the “principle work of the Holy Spirit” is to enliven our natural, sin-deadened hearts and to produce in us saving faith in Jesus Christ (III.1.4; p. 541). Beyond this initial work of the Spirit in converting someone, the Spirit continues for the Christian as the “bond by which Christ effectually unites us to Himself” (III.1.1; p. 538). Through the Holy Spirit all of Christ and all the benefits of His finished work become ours as Christians.

One of the chief benefits obtained by Christ for us is the benefit of perfect righteousness—God’s righteousness, that is, full conformity to His law; perfect obedience unto His will; complete goodness in thought, word, and deed. This righteousness is freely credited to the believer in justification. Justification, the crediting or imputing of Christ’s perfect righteousness to the believer, is, as Calvin says,

...the main hinge on which religion turns.... For unless you first grasp what your relationship to God is, and the nature of his judgment concerning you, you have neither a foundation on which to establish your salvation *nor one on which to build piety [pietas] toward God* (III.11.1; p. 726, emphasis mine).

Unless that “main hinge” of justification is set right, the whole door will hang crooked! Without the “main hinge” of justification, we lapse into mere moralism, preoccupied with simply building better virtues in us and in others. Calvin’s teaching about Christian piety avoids this, though, we must admit, some later Calvinists did not. I have an old book on my shelf entitled *Piety Versus Moralism*. It is the author’s contention that the “old Calvinism” which taught total depravity, miraculous regeneration by the Spirit, and the gracious imputation of Christ’s righteousness in justification, eventually was replaced by a newer, gentler and kinder Calvinism. The newer Calvinists became, on the one hand, revivalists and Spirit-enthusiasts, and, on the other hand, became social gospel liberals, who busily proclaimed:

...the moral ideal set up by the ‘gentle Jesus;’ telling men of the dignity and the value of the human soul, its

Whereas outward morality is often motivated by altruism or by social pressures, the motive and the source for Christian pietas is Jesus Christ.

potential likeness to the perfectly good God, and its ultimate destiny in heaven. They were urging men to believe in ‘God, freedom, and immortality;’ to be good, to do good, and to live in peace with their fellowmen. They preached these things, and expected men to believe and practice them. They were great optimists.³

In order to avoid this optimistic “do goodism” when we speak about biblical piety today, we must always begin with the “main hinge” of justification, as Calvin calls it. Only in Christ, united with Him by the Holy Spirit, credited with His perfect righteousness, can we even begin walking down the pathway of increasing godliness in our Christian lives.

Calvin has much to say in Book Three of his *Institutes* about cultivating Christian piety. Here he devotes three chapters, nearly thirty pages, to the topic of “The Christian Life.” That is more pages than he spends on the topic of election or infant baptism! In these chapters Calvin explains and applies Christ’s words: “If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me” (Mt. 16:24). Calvin is not afraid (unlike some Calvinists today!), to speak repeatedly about our following Christ as our example and as our motivation for living godly Christian lives.

In this twenty-first century and among modern Christians, we especially need to hear Calvin emphasizing the place of the Church and her sacraments as “outward helps” towards Christian godliness. This

is an almost forgotten teaching today. Or, if you hear it at all, it is almost a whisper. Christian *pietas*, godliness, is best strengthened in the life of the Christian by belonging to the visible church and there receiving the Word and the Sacrament. This is the main theme of the *Institutes*, Book 4:

...it is by the faith in the gospel that Christ becomes ours and we are made partakers of the salvation

Growth in piety and Christlikeness is an essential part of spiritual maturity.

and eternal blessedness brought by him. Since, however, in our ignorance and sloth ... we need *outward helps* to beget and increase faith within us, and advance it to its goal, God has also added these aids that he may provide for our weakness (IV.1.1.; p. 1011, emphasis mine).

Contrast this teaching to what you find in most Christian bookstores today.

From slogans on bumper stickers and T-shirts, to Bible verses printed on coffee mugs and key chains - what an array of merchandise purporting to help Christians live more godly lives! But where in these bookstores can you find the books,

or the bumper stickers for that matter, which tell people to get themselves to church on the Lord’s Day? Where will you find the bestsellers which urge weekly church attendance to receive more of God’s grace through the sermon and the Lord’s Supper? Among other things, Calvin calls the Church the “Mother of believers.” It is into her maternal bosom that

God is pleased to gather His sons, not only that they may be nourished by her help and ministry as long as they are infants and children, but also that they may be guided by her motherly care until they mature and at last reach the goal of faith.... For those to whom He is Father the church may also be Mother (IV.1.4.; p. 1016, emphasis mine.)

I quoted Calvin earlier, saying that we as Christians need the Church because of our continuing “ignorance and sloth.” Do we hear these words? Even as those regenerated by the Holy Spirit and professing faith in Christ, we still lean towards spiritual laziness! We need Mother Church to grow us up that we might be more active and productive and mature. To be sure, spiritual maturity requires the knowledge of right doctrine, and Mother Church provides that. But growth in piety and Christlikeness is also an essential part of spiritual maturity.

... those who turn to the cultivation of *true godliness* [*pietas*] are said [in the Bible] to inscribe their names among the citizens of Jerusalem God’s fatherly favor and the



especial witness of *spiritual life* are limited to His flock, so that it is always disastrous to leave the church (IV.1.4.; p. 1016, emphasis mine).

The cultivation of true godliness takes place in the Church. And we must be reminded that Calvin is not referring here to the mid-week Bible study, the women's fellowship group, or the prayer meeting. The Church is the gathered and worshipping congregation under the supervision of the elders. These other activities—Bible studies, fellowship groups, prayer meetings—may contribute to the growth of godliness, but the *primary* means for growing in godliness are found in the assembly of God's people gathered for worship on the Lord's Day.

Isn't this a needed reminder for Christians and churches today, even for us who are members of confessionally Reformed congregations? Do you want to grow in godliness? Do you want to advance in your sanctification? Don't first go to the Christian bookstore. Don't first go to the Christian school. Don't first go into a personal quiet-time. Go first to the Church! Be found in worship on the Lord's Day. Hear the Word preached and receive the Sacrament offered. This would be Calvin's urgent counsel to us that we might grow in true godliness. "Believers have no greater help than public worship, for by it God raises his own fold upward step by step" (IV.1.5., p. 1019).

Whole books have been written about Calvin's teaching about preaching and the sacraments.⁴ But consider, briefly, Calvin's high regard for the preaching of the

Word as a means for growth in holy living. Says Calvin, "By His Word, God alone sanctifies temples to himself for lawful use" (IV.1.5., p. 1019). He is saying that God makes Christians more holy and we are formed more and more as his holy temples, when we hear the Word preached. Again, "...the gospel is not preached only in order to be heard by us, but that it may radically reform our hearts" and by hearing that gospel preached we

***Do you want to grow
in godliness?***

***Go first to the
Church!***

are led "to an upright and a holy life."⁵

And how valuable is the Lord's Supper for the believer's growth in godliness and strengthening for holy living? According to Calvin, among the several benefits of taking the Sacrament is this wonderful benefit: the Lord's Supper is "a kind of exhortation for us, which can more forcefully than any other means quicken and inspire us both to purity and holiness of life" (IV.17.38, p. 1414). More than any other external means (except for hearing the preaching of God's Word) the Lord's Supper enlivens and inspires us to godliness. No wonder, then, that Calvin earnestly desired each church to celebrate the Lord's Supper on a weekly basis. We are built up by hearing the Word preached

each Lord's Day. We should also be built up by receiving the Sacrament each Lord's Day.⁶

We must never forget that the goal of our faith, the purpose of our salvation, is that we might lead holy lives, to the glory of God. As the apostle Paul puts it, "For the grace of God that brings salvation has appeared to all men. It teaches us to say 'No' to ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright and godly lives in this present age" (Titus 2:11-12).

Or, as Calvin says so forcefully: "...the man who has godliness lacks nothing....Godliness is the beginning, middle and end of Christian living and where it is complete, there is nothing lacking....Thus the conclusion is that we should concentrate exclusively on godliness...."⁷

By God's Word and Spirit, through hearing sermons and receiving sacraments, may we Calvinists today show this same dedication to growing in Christian godliness, in Biblical *pietas*.

Notes

1 William J. Bennett ed., *The Book of Virtue: A Treasury of Great Moral Stories* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1993), p. 12. This best-seller was followed by a "companion volume" two years later also edited by Bennett, *The Moral Compass: Stories for Life's Journey* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1995).

2 John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles, in *The Library of Christian Classics*, vol. 20 (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1960). Hereafter, this work will be cited parenthetically with the page number from the McNeill edition also given parenthetically.

3 Joseph Haroutunian, *Piety Versus Moralism: The Passing of the New England Theology* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1932), p. 282.

4 See, for example, Ronald S. Wallace, *Calvin's Doctrine of the Word and Sacrament* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1957) and his *Calvin's Doctrine of the Christian Life* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1959) particularly Part 4, entitled, "Nurture and Discipline within the Church."

5 Commentary on 1 Peter 1: 23, in *Calvin's New Testament Commentaries*, trans. W. B. Johnston, ed. David W. Torrance and Thomas F. Torrance, vol. 12, (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1963), p. 252.

6 This is a lively debate among some in Reformed and Presbyterian churches. In the United Reformed Churches, several congregations in Classis South-west U.S. observe the Lord's Supper each Lord's Day.

7 Commentary on 1 Timothy 4:8, The Second Epistle of Paul the Apostle to the Corinthians and the Epistles to Timothy, Titus and Philemon, in *Calvin's New Testament Commentaries*, eds. David W. Torrance and Thomas F. Torrance, trans. T.A. Snail, vol. 10 (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1964), p. 244.

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CanRC and the URC Church Order Committees

Press Release of the meeting of the combined committees of the Canadian Reformed and United Reformed Churches to propose a common church order held February 13-14, 2003 at the Trinity United Reformed Church of Caledonia, Michigan.

Present were: Dr. Nelson Kloosterman, Rev. William Pols, Rev. Ronald Scheuers, Rev. Raymond Sikkema and Mr. Harry Van Gorp, representing the United Reformed Churches in North America (URCNA), and Dr. Jack DeJong, Mr. Gerard J. Nordeman, Rev. John VanWoudenberg and Dr. Art Witten of the Canadian Reformed Churches (CanRC).

Dr. Kloosterman opened the meeting with reading Isaiah 12 and prayer. He extended a word of welcome and acquainted the committee members with the beautiful facilities of the Trinity URC.

The minutes of the meeting of December 11-12, 2002 were reviewed and adopted with some modifications.

A motion to re-appoint Dr. Kloosterman as chairman, Rev. Sikkema as recorder of the minutes, and Mr. Nordeman to prepare the Press Release for this and subsequent meetings carried.

An agenda and timetable for the two days were adopted.

The Common Church Order articles provisionally adopted at the previous meeting were carefully reviewed and refined where necessary. Completed are the articles with the following headings: The Three Offices, Duties of the Minis-

ter, The Calling of Ordained Men within the Federation, Bound to a Particular Church, Bound for Life, The Support and Emeritation of the Minister. The article dealing with "Ordained Men without a Congregation Entering the Federation" was for the most part completed, including the requirement of an examination by classis, but still requires a discussion on which assembly would declare such men eligible for call. A final review and appropriate numbering will be done at the completion of the whole Church Order.

Once again, a vigorous discussion took place regarding jurisdiction; how does a "broader" assembly relate to a "narrower" assembly. Both committees had brought proposals to the table. It was decided to adopt a simple statement as follows: "The broader assemblies shall exercise jurisdiction only and exclusively relating to matters properly before them." Wording specific to delegation and the binding character of decisions will be formulated later in article for that purpose.

As requested at the previous meeting, the Rev. Scheuers presented a proposed introduction to the Church Order. Again, an extensive discussion took place regarding the exact wording of the four components of this introduction: 1) Biblical and Confessional Basis, 2) Historical



Background, 3) Foundational Principles and 4) Broad Divisions. The Committee decided to include in the Press Release the full wording of the adopted Introduction. The first sentence in the proposed Foundational Principles will serve to clarify the status of the Foundational Principles in relation to our Church Order.

Introduction

Biblical and Confessional Basis

We Reformed believers maintain that the standard for personal, public, and ecclesiastical life is God's Word, the inspired, infallible, and inerrant book of Holy Scripture. As a federation of churches we declare our complete subjection and obedience to that Word of God. We also declare that we are confessional churches, in that we believe and are fully persuaded that the Three Forms of Unity, the Belgic Confession, the Heidelberg Catechism, and the Canons of Dort, summarize and do fully agree with the Word of God. Therefore, we unitedly subscribe to these Reformed Confessions.

Both the Word of God and these Reformed Confessions demand that in our ecclesiastical structure and rule we openly acknowledge Jesus Christ to be the supreme and only Head of the church. Christ exercises His headship in the churches by His Word and Spirit through the ordained offices, for the sake of purity of doctrine, holiness of life, and order in the churches. The churches of our federation, although distinct, willingly display their unity and accountability, both to each other and especially to Christ, by means of our common

Confessions and this Church Order.

Historical Background

Our Church Order has its roots in the continental European background of the Protestant Reformation. The Reformed churches desired to be faithful to God's Word in practice and life as well as in doctrine. Therefore, as early as the mid-sixteenth century, and even in the midst of persecution, the Reformed churches set down the foundation of the Church Order at various synods beginning in 1563, including those in Wezel, the Netherlands (1568), and in Emden, Germany (1571). For the most part, the decisions of the assemblies in this period leaned heavily on the church orders already in place and used by the Reformed churches in France and Geneva.

The Church Order adopted at Emden was revised at the Synods of Dordrecht (1574 and 1578), Middelburg (1581), and the Hague (1586), before being adopted by the well-known Synod of Dordrecht (1618-1619). Our Church Order follows the principles and structure of the Church Order of Dordrecht.

Foundational Principles

The following list of foundational principles, though not exhaustive, provides a clear Biblical foundation for, and source of our Church Order.

1. The church is the possession of Christ, who is the Mediator of the New Covenant. *Acts 20:28; Ephesians 5:25-27*
2. As Mediator of the New Covenant, Christ is the Head of the church. *Ephesians 1:22-23; 5:23-24; Colossians 1:18*

3. Because the church is Christ's possession and He is its Head, the principles governing the church are determined not by human preference, but by Biblical teaching. *Matthew 28:18-20; Colossians 1:18; II Timothy 3:16, 17*

4. The catholic or universal church possesses a spiritual unity in Christ and in the Holy Scriptures. *Matthew 16:18; Ephesians 2:20; I Timothy 3:15; II John 9*

5. The Lord gave no permanent universal, national or regional offices to His church. The offices of minister, elder and deacon are local in authority and function. Therefore, a broader assembly governs the church only by way of delegation, and exists only when it is in session. *Acts 14:23; 20:17,28; Ephesians 4:11-16; Titus 1:5*

6. In its subjection to its Heavenly Head, the church is governed by Christ from heaven by means of His Word and Spirit with the keys of the kingdom, which He has given to the local church for that purpose. Therefore, no church may lord it over another church, nor may one office bearer lord it over another office bearer. *Matthew 16:19; 23:8; John 20:22, 23; Acts 20:28-32; Titus 1:5*

7. Although churches exist in certain circumstances without formal federative relationships, the well-being of the church requires that such relationships be entered wherever possible. Entering into or remaining in such relationships should be voluntary; there is however a spiritual obligation to seek and maintain the federative unity of the churches by formal bonds of fellowship and cooperation. *Acts 11:22,*

27-30; 15:22-35; Romans 15:25-27; 1 Corinthians 16: 1-3; Colossians 4:16; 1 Thessalonians 4: 9-10; Revelation 1:11, 20

8. The exercise of a federative relationship is possible only on the basis of unity in faith and in confession. 1 Corinthians 10:14-22; Galatians 1:6-9; Ephesians 4:16-17

9. Member churches meet together in consultation to guard against human imperfections and to benefit from the wisdom of many counselors in the broader assemblies. The decisions of such assemblies derive their authority from their conformity to the Word of God. Proverbs 11:14; Acts 15:1-35; 1 Corinthians 13:9-10; II Timothy 3:16-17

10. In order to manifest our spiritual unity, churches should seek contact with other faithful, confessionally Reformed churches for their mutual edification and as an effective witness to the world. John 17:21-23; Ephesians 4:1-6

11. The church is mandated to exercise its ministry of reconciliation by proclaiming the gospel to the ends of the earth. Matthew 28:19-20; Acts 1:8; II Corinthians 5:18-21

12. Christ cares for and governs His church through the office bearers, whom He chooses through the congregation. Acts 1:23-26; 6:2-3; 14:23; 1 Timothy 3:1,8; 5:17

13. The Scriptures require that ministers, elders and deacons be thoroughly equipped for the suitable discharge of their respective offices. 1 Timothy 3:2-9; 4:16; II Timothy 2:14-16; 3:14; 4:1-5

14. Being the chosen and redeemed people of God, the church, under the supervision of the Consistory, is called to worship Him according to the Scriptural principles governing worship. Leviticus 10:1-3; Deuteronomy 12:29-32; Psalm 95:1,2,6; Psalm 100:4; John 4:24; 1 Peter 2:9

15. Since the church is the pillar and ground of the truth, it is called through its teaching ministry to build up the people of God in faith. Deuteronomy 11:19; Ephesians 4:11-16; 1 Timothy 4:6; II Timothy 2:2; 3:16-17

16. Christian discipline, arising from God's love for His people, is exercised in the church to correct and strengthen the people of God, to maintain the unity and the purity of the church of Christ, and thereby to bring honor and glory to God's name. 1 Timothy 5:20; Titus 1:13; Hebrews 12:7-11

17. The exercise of Christian discipline is first of all a personal duty of every church member, but when official discipline by the church becomes necessary, it must be exercised by the Consistory of the church, to whom the keys of the kingdom are entrusted. Matthew 18:15-20; John 20:22-23; Acts 20:28; 1 Corinthians 5:13; 1 Peter 5:1-3

Broad Divisions

Since we desire to honor the apostolic command that in the churches all things are to be done decently and in good order (1 Corinthians 14:40), we order our ecclesiastical relations and activities under the following divisions:

I. Offices (Articles 1-)

II. Assemblies (Articles -)

III. Worship and Ceremonies (Articles -)

IV. Discipline (Articles -)

We again discussed at some length the question whose responsibility it is to declare a man a candidate for the ministry. We agreed that, as in the deposition of a minister, in this matter the classis is also to be involved. The student must sustain a classical examination. We also discussed the necessity for, and procedure of consistorial involvement in the preparation and nurturing of a man for the ministry. We agreed that each committee, starting with article 4 of Dort, writes a proposal for discussion at our next meeting.

The committee took some time to review the need for an article dealing with admitting men to the ministry who have not pursued the regular course of study (old Dort article 8). This article could be helpful in times of calamity or distress. However, with a view to past abuse of this article in some Reformed churches, and the potential for abuse of such an article in the future of the united churches, it was agreed by both committees that the churches will be better served by omitting such an article.

The issue of the role of regional synod and the role of the regional synodical deputies received some attention. Information was exchanged and a better understanding gained by this discussion. More time is needed to come to a final agreement. Also the method of delegation to broader assemblies received attention. The suggestion was accepted for both committees to prepare suitable adaptations of



articles regarding the broader assemblies, including classes, regional and general synods, working from Articles 41, 44, 45, 47, 49 and 50 of Dort.

The next meeting will take place D.V. August 5-7, 2003 in Burlington, ON, Canada. In the mean time both committees will continue to study the remaining articles. Any proposals should be shared with other committee members at least one month prior to the next meeting. The Press Release was presented and approved. Rev. John VanWoudenberg closed the meeting with a brief meditation on John 12:1-8. He led in prayer of thanksgiving and praise to God, our Heavenly Father, for another meeting that could be conducted in brotherly harmony.

For the Committee
Gerard J. Nordeman

Looking Back

I wrote earlier about the bad, unreformed practice of having “children’s church.” It is a practice that began quite some years ago in the Christian Reformed Church and seems to be growing in popularity. One wonders how such an unreformed practice can make such inroads into the church. After all, it flies in the face of biblical worship. The church is one: one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of us all. Children are part (a very important part) of that church - see Ephesians 6 and Ezra 10:1.

Martyn Lloyd-Jones has pointed out clearly the folly of dividing the church into a variety of groups in his *Preaching and Preachers*. All prospective ministers ought to read and digest what he there says.

*Let youth, yea, all the throng,
Who to thy church belong,
Unite to swell the song
To Christ our King.*

One prevalent argument in favor of “children’s church” is that children can’t understand the sermon, so they might as well go elsewhere to Sunday School. Small children understand a lot more of the sermon than we often give them credit for. Parents can help them in this understanding by discussing the sermon at home with them rather than discussing the latest wins and losses in

the sports arena. Our children have to be taught what is important in life. Children do not always understand why they must brush their teeth or why they must go to bed at a certain hour. Parents make them do these things because they know they are important. Later the children will understand the importance of these practices by themselves. So too, children must see the importance of doing some of the regular chores around the house. They may not like to do them, but later they will thank the parents for teaching them responsibility. They learn them over the years.

So it is in the spiritual realm, too. Parents’ teaching and examples have a great influence on young children. Parents teach them what is important: Bible reading, prayer church attendance, etc. Later the children will rise up and call them blessed. The older I get the more thankful I am to my parents for teaching me the importance of the Sunday and the importance of the worship services. They even took us along when the service was in the Dutch language. We belonged there with all the throng.

My parents often went to church by horses and sleigh in the winter and horses and democrat in the summer. We had to travel five miles to

***Small children understand a lot more of
the sermon than we often give them
credit for.***

church. But they never missed. Sunday was very special to them, and that had a great influence on impressionable minds. We belonged in the regular church service with all the adults. We learned what was important as our parents taught us. What a blessing! No segregation in the church. The children belong there, too. No special “children’s church” somewhere else in the building. My father would have protested vehemently against such a practice. He had his “reformed feelers” too sharply honed for that. We must teach our children what is important. Later, they, too, will understand.

Rev. Jelle Tuininga is an emeritus pastor in the URC living in Lethbridge, Alberta.

Evaluating the New Perspective on Paul (Question One) Questions Regarding Sanders’ View of Second Temple Judaism

It is appropriate that we begin our evaluation of the new perspective by raising several questions regarding its historical reassessment of Second Temple Judaism. All of the primary writers who advocate a new approach to our understanding of the apostle Paul’s gospel, do so from the conviction that E. P. Sanders’ study of Judaism requires a “revolution” in Pauline studies. N. T. Wright well expresses this consensus, when he asserts that E. P. Sanders “dominates the landscape [of Pauline studies], and, until a major refutation of his central thesis is produced, honesty compels one to do business with him. I do not myself believe such a refutation can or will be offered; serious modifications are required, but I regard the basic point as established.”¹ Since the work of Sanders plays such a fundamental role in the development of the new perspective, a critical evaluation of this perspective may not bypass Sanders’ claims regarding the nature of Judaism at the time of the writing of the New Testament.

According to Sanders’ historical reassessment of Judaism, the older

view, which treated Paul’s understanding of the gospel as a response to legalism, was based in large measure upon a fundamental misreading of Judaism. The Reformation wrongly assumed that Paul formulated his gospel in opposition to a legalistic distortion that was characteristic of Judaism. However, Sanders argues that the literature of Second Temple Judaism pervasively witnesses not to a religion of legalistic works-righteousness but to a view of the law undergirded by God’s covenant grace. Rather than exhibiting a pattern of religion marked by human initiative and finding favor with God on the basis of works of obedience to the law, this literature reveals a view in which God’s gracious election precedes any required response on the part of his people. Second Temple Judaism was not a form of “Pelagianism” that regarded the covenant relationship as a kind of moralistic human achievement. Whatever obligations of obedience to the law were required of the covenant people, they were required as a response to the initiatives of God’s grace. For this reason, Sanders describes the pattern

*We begin our evaluation of the new perspective
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historical reassessment of Second Temple
Judaism.*



of religion that was pervasive to Second Temple Judaism as “covenantal nomism.”² Covenantal nomism understands that we “get in” the covenant relationship by grace, and we “stay in” or “maintain” the covenant relationship by works.

Rather than attempt any kind of major refutation of Sanders’ assessment of Second Temple Judaism, I would like to raise in this and a subsequent article four key questions regarding Sanders’ work. In so doing, we will be in a better position to see whether Sanders’ arguments have the kind of significance that many of the new perspective authors claim. After this preliminary evaluation of Sanders’ treatment of Second Temple Judaism, we will be in a position to take up more directly the claims of the new perspective regarding Paul’s understanding of the gospel.

How strong is the case for “covenantal nomism”?

No one who takes the trouble to read carefully Sanders’ studies on the subject of Second Temple Judaism will doubt that he has canvassed a wide diversity of sources. In his *Paul and Palestinian Judaism* (1977), Sanders painstakingly sorts through the available literary evidence for an understanding of Judaism in the period between 200 BC and 200 AD. Though Sanders’ work has been reviewed in a great number of articles and monographs, it remains in a class by itself as the most significant comprehensive evaluation of the pattern of religious thought in the Judaism that was present during the New Testament era. The only study that is comparable in its reach and length is a

recent volume of essays on Second Temple Judaism edited by D. A. Carson, *Justification and Variegated Nomism*.³ Though the various contributors to this study raise a number of important questions regarding Sanders’ findings, the assumption throughout is that Sanders’ work has become the benchmark for our approach to Judaism in relation to the teaching of the apostle Paul. At the least, this volume illustrates that all future roads to Second Temple Judaism will have to go through Sanders.

I would like to raise in this and a subsequent article four key questions regarding Sanders’ work.

More important than the extensiveness of Sanders’ studies of Second Temple Judaism, however, is the strength of his case. Though there are a number of cautions regarding Sanders’ work that need to be issued, there can be little doubt that the case he makes for Judaism’s teaching of “covenantal nomism” is strong. In the literature of Second Temple Judaism, there is little evidence of a pattern of religion that views God’s covenant with his people, Israel, as based upon something other than God’s gracious initiative. God’s election of Israel as his people is the commonly attested view of how one “gets in” the covenant community. Though there is an equally strong emphasis upon the need for obedience to the re-

quirements of the law to “maintain” the covenant relationship, it is also generally acknowledged that God has provided a means of atonement for sin or transgression when this obedience falls short. Thus, the covenant people of God are not obliged to merit or obtain favor with God by their obedience. Not only is the covenant relationship founded upon God’s gracious initiative (“getting in”), but it is also sustained (“staying in”) by God’s merciful acceptance of people whose obedience falls short of perfection. Despite the differences between various segments of Judaism, the basic structure of what Sanders calls “covenantal nomism” seems quite pervasive: the covenant relationship is established and administered by God’s gracious and merciful initiative, while it is maintained by obedience to the law as an expression of resolve on the part of the covenant people.

Though Sanders’ case for the pervasive presence of “covenantal nomism” in the literature of Second Temple Judaism is quite strong, this does not mean that it is without significant weaknesses. Some of these are due to problems of method or the failure to consider adequately some key sources. The most significant weakness, however, has to do with the nature of what Sanders calls “covenantal nomism.” Before elaborating further on this issue, I will simply mention a few “flies in the ointment” so far as Sanders’ study of Judaism is concerned.

1. A significant shortcoming of Sanders’ work is that he focuses primarily upon what he calls the “pattern of religion” in Second

Temple Judaism. For Sanders, a pattern of religion is exhibited primarily in terms of the way a person “gets in” the religious community and then “stays in.” Covenantal nomism is, accordingly, Sanders’ term for a pattern of religion within Judaism that regards “getting in” as a the consequence of God’s gracious initiative and “staying in” as a consequence of the person’s resolute commitment to God and obedience to his law. Though this approach serves usefully as a way of bringing some order into an immensely complex subject, namely the religious views and practices of Second Temple Judaism, it is rather reductionistic. As Sanders admits, his idea of a “pattern of religion” is not so much interested in the religious themes and teachings of the various strands of Judaism as it is in the way it exhibits a certain pattern of understanding how one becomes and remains a member of the religious community. What he terms “covenantal nomism” becomes, therefore, a very general viewpoint that is able to accommodate quite a variety of ideas and practices. To the extent that it accommodates such a diversity of viewpoint, it becomes a rather flexible and imprecise pattern. *Most importantly, as we shall see, the broad range of positions that are compatible with covenantal nomism includes some that are more “legalistic” than others.*⁴

2. In his development of the idea of a pattern of religion in Judaism, Sanders gives little attention to the way Second Temple Judaism views the *future* (eschatological) vindication of the covenant community. By downplaying the future aspect of God’s dealings with the covenant

community, Sanders is able to emphasize the divine initiative in graciously electing the covenant community. However, if the final vindication of those who belong to the community is given greater emphasis, the covenant member’s works of obedience to the law can be understood in a way that overshadows the grace that initiates the covenant. We will have occasion to return to this issue in the following section. But this neglect of the role obedience to the law plays in the future justification/vindication of God’s

The broad range of positions that are compatible with covenantal nomism includes some that are more “legalistic” than others.

people represents an imbalance in the way Sanders describes the pattern of religion in Judaism.⁵

3. Despite the extraordinary reach of Sanders’ scholarship, the findings of a number of contributors to *Justification and Variegated Nomism* suggest that some of the significant literature of Second Temple Judaism does not fit Sanders idea of covenantal nomism.⁶ In some of this literature, little emphasis is placed upon God’s gracious initiative of election.⁷ Sometimes the primary emphasis falls upon the future vindication of those who distinguish themselves by their obedience to the law. In other instances, the primary emphasis falls upon the

covenant members’ obedience as that which “merits” God’s continued favor and final acceptance.⁸

4. Though it hardly seems fair to fault Sanders for failing to consider all the sources in his remarkably extensive study of Second Temple Judaism, there are some noteworthy omissions in his work. One of the occasions for the publication of the work edited by Carson, *Justification and Variegated Nomism*, was the need to give attention to these sources. Among the more important omissions from Sanders’ original study are the works of Josephus, a first century Jewish historian, and an apocalyptic (prophetic revelation) source of the third century BC, *2 Enoch*.⁹

Does “covenantal nomism” beg the question?

Even though Sanders has mustered a considerable body of evidence to establish that the pattern of religion in Second Temple Judaism was “covenantal nomism,” there is an intriguing “begging of the question” that characterizes his claims and those of many advocates of the new perspective. The “begging of the question” that I have in mind can be put in the form of the question: *could what Sanders calls “covenantal nomism” take a form that corresponds to what historians of Christian doctrine call “semi-Pelagianism?”*

Sanders and other new perspective authors are fond of arguing that Second Temple Judaism exhibits no substantial traces of Pelagianism, the idea that God’s people find favor with him on the basis of their own moral efforts. In this respect, as we have acknowledged, Sand-



ers has made a compelling case. Whatever the diversity of teaching and practice within the various branches and sects of Second Temple Judaism, few if any practiced a religion that was the equivalent of a kind of “pulling oneself up to God by one’s moral bootstraps.”¹⁰

The glaring weakness of Sanders’ case, however, is that he (and other new perspective writers) does not seriously consider whether what he terms “covenantal nomism” could accommodate a form of religious teaching that regards salvation and acceptance with God to be based upon grace *plus good works*. “Covenantal nomism” is a sufficiently elastic pattern for the religion of Second Temple Judaism that it could express a kind of a *semi-Pelagian* view of the relation between God and his people. That Second Temple Judaism was not full-blown Pelagianism is not surprising.¹¹ In the course of history, Pelagianism is a “rare bird” in the aviary of Jewish and Christian theology. Few have argued that salvation does not require the initiative and working of God’s grace, but is simply based upon human moral achievement. Where Pelagianism has appeared, therefore, it has commonly been condemned by the major branches of the Christian church. Semi-Pelagian views, however, are quite often found in the history of Christian theology. Though these views may speak of God’s gracious initiative in salvation, they also insist that human salvation does not end with this good beginning. According to semi-Pelagianism, those who find favor and acceptance with God are those who freely cooperate with his grace

and complement it by a life of good works that merit further grace and final salvation.

Accordingly, when the Reformers of the sixteenth century opposed the doctrine of justification in the medieval Roman Catholic Church, they did not oppose (let alone claim to oppose) it because it was Pelagian, as writers of the new perspective suggest. The Reformers, including Luther and Calvin, objected to the teaching that sinners

***The Reformation
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are justified by God *partly* on the basis of his grace in Christ and *partly* on the basis of their willing cooperation with this grace, which includes good works that increase the believer’s justification and merit further grace. The Roman Catholic Church, whose teaching was criticized as a re-statement of the kind of works-righteousness that the early church, including Paul, opposed, was not opposed for its Pelagianism. What prompted the Reformation was the conviction that the Roman Catholic church taught that God’s grace in Christ was not a sufficient basis for the believer’s acceptance into favor

with God. The parallel, therefore, that the Reformers drew between the teachings of the Catholic church and the Judaizing heresy that the apostle Paul opposed, was not that they were unalloyed Pelagianism. The parallel, to put the matter precisely and accurately, was that they both wanted to *make human works subsequent to the initiative of God’s grace a partial basis for justification in the present and the future.*¹²

Conclusion

So far as Sanders’ and the new perspectives’ assessment of Second Temple Judaism goes, then, it is not enough to demonstrate the absence of a Pelagian view of salvation by works. What is required is the further argument that Second Temple Judaism was not marked by a form of semi-Pelagianism. The Reformation understanding of Paul’s opposition to the Judaizers does not stand or fall with the claim that Second Temple Judaism was rife with Pelagianism. Paul’s polemics against those who emphasized the need for “works of the law” in justification need only have been addressed to a kind of Christian heresy that was the product of a particular strand of teaching within Second Temple Judaism. The Reformation’s understanding of Paul’s teaching only requires the presence of a semi-Pelagian emphasis within some branches of Judaism that was present among the apostle’s opponents.

The irony here is that Sanders’ description of “covenantal nomism” closely resembles a kind of textbook description of semi-Pelagian teaching and therefore *lends unwitting support to the Reforma-*

tion argument. To put the matter in the traditional language of the doctrine of justification, covenantal nomism fits rather comfortably with the idea that the justification and acceptance of the righteous, now and in the future, depends upon works of obedience to the law that follow and are added to God's gracious initiative.¹³ If that is the case, then what Sanders calls "covenantal nomism" bears remarkable formal similarities to the kind of semi-Pelagianism that marked the medieval Roman Catholic doctrine of justification.¹⁴ The Reformation claim that Paul was opposing a doctrine of justification by (grace plus) works may, accordingly, be more on target than the new perspective authors are willing to acknowledge. At the very least, Sanders' understanding of Second Temple Judaism does not require a new understanding of the teaching of the apostle Paul as authors of the new perspective argue.

Notes

1. *What Saint Paul Really Said*, p. 20.
2. Sanders, as we have noted previously, uses this terminology to emphasize that we become members of the covenant by grace, but maintain our membership by obedience to the law. His term "nomism" (from the word, "nomos," meaning law) means to emphasize the role of works of obedience to the law in maintaining the covenant relationship.
3. Vol. 1: *The Complexities of Second Temple Judaism* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2001).
4. Cf. Peter Enns, "Expansions of Scripture," in *Justification and Variegated Nomism*, pp. 73-98. Enns makes a similar point at the conclusion of his study. He notes that Sanders tends to identify

salvation with Israel's election, and then downplays the role of works in obtaining salvation for those who belong to the covenant community. According to Enns (p. 98), "[i]t might be less confusing [than Sanders' categories of "getting in" and "staying in"] to say that *election* is by grace but *salvation* is by obedience."

5. Cf. Simon J. Gathercole, *Where is Boasting? Early Jewish Soteriology and Paul's Response in Romans 1-5* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), pp. 1-34. Gathercole, who critically evaluates the claims of the new perspective in terms of Paul's opposition to Jewish "boasting" in Romans 1-5, rightly notes that Sanders fails to deal with the eschatological dimension of Judaism. When God's final verdict regarding his people is made to rest upon their obedience to the law, a kind of "legalism" is affirmed. Though it may not be the "legalism" that says we "get in" the covenant by works, it is nonetheless one that says we are "finally vindicated" by our obedience to the law. As we shall argue in what follows, one of the principal problems with Sanders' argument is that he works with a simplistic view of "legalism," namely, the Pelagian idea of salvation by moral achievement apart from the initiatives of God's grace.

6. Cf. Daniel Falk, "Psalms and Prayers," in *Justification and Variegated Nomism*, pp. 7-56.

7. Cf. Philip R. Davies, "Didactic Stories," in *Justification and Variegated Nomism*, pp. 99-134; Richard Bauckham, "Apocalypses," in *Justification and Variegated Nomism*, pp. 135-88.

8. Cf. Markus Bockmuehl, "1QS and Salvation at Qumram," in *Justification and Variegated Nomism*, pp. 381-441.

9. Cf. Paul Spilsbury, "Josephus," in *Justification and Variegated Nomism*, pp. 241-60. The omission of Josephus

from Sanders' 1977 study is particularly striking, since Josephus, who writes as a member of a party of the Pharisees, is perhaps the single most comprehensive literary source for an understanding of Pharisaism in the first century of the Christian era. In Josephus' account of the relation of the religious community to God, little emphasis is placed upon God's gracious initiative. According to Josephus, the Jews were at a distinct advantage among the nations because God had given them the law of Moses and through obedience to the law they were able to live in the hope of the resurrection. *2 Enoch*, a work that Sanders does not consider, presents an even more unqualified form of legalism: those who keep the law merit their eternal reward and favor with God.

10. Cf. N. T. Wright, *What Saint Paul Really Said*, p. 119.

11. I am aware that I am using these terms, "Pelagianism" and "semi-Pelagianism," in an anachronistic and somewhat inexact fashion. For my purposes, however, it is enough to recognize that there is a considerable difference between a view that ascribes human salvation to moral achievement (Pelagianism) and a view that ascribes human salvation to God's grace *plus* good works that complete or complement the working of God's grace (semi-Pelagianism).

12. Cf. Moisés Silva, "The Law and Christianity: Dunn's New Synthesis," *Westminster Theological Journal* 53 (1991), p. 348: "Sanders (along with biblical scholars more generally) has an inadequate understanding of historical Christian theology, and his view of the Reformational concern with legalism does not get to the heart of the question." I fully concur with Silva's observation and am happy to note that he speaks as a biblical and not systematic theologian.

13. Seyoon Kim, *Paul and the New Perspective: Second Thoughts on the*



Origin of Paul's Gospel (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001), p. 65.

14. Cf. D. A. Carson, *Justification and Variegated Nomism*, p. 544: "Nevertheless, covenantal nomism as a category is not really an alternative to merit theology, and therefore is no response to it. ... By putting over against merit theology not grace but covenant theology, Sanders has managed to have a structure that preserves grace in the 'getting in' while preserving works (and frequently some form or other of merit theology) in the 'staying in.'"

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This Is My Outlook

The purpose for Mutual Censure, according to Church Order Article 63 of the URCNA is that the office bearers "exhort one another in an edifying manner regarding the discharge of their offices." Mutual Censure, then, should be used by Council members to affirm one another in their respective offices. In a positive way, it can be used to encourage members of Council in their work, thanking the Deacons for the benevolent calls made to an individual, encouraging the Elders in the visits made to the sick and shut-in; and supporting the Pastor in his diligence of preaching the Word of God. Also positively, although some may see it as criticism instead of edifying, would be informing an often absent Deacon to be at church more often; letting an Elder know of someone in his district who is being neglected; and encouraging the Minister to preach from the catechism more often.

Mutual censure should not to be used as a personal gripe session. It is not to be used to bring up matters that have been voted on in hopes of changing the mind of the body. It is not to be used to express anger or hostility toward a brother in Christ. If there is any personal disagreement between brothers, let the offended party first speak to the brother individually, then with another council member, and, if necessary, finally in a regular meeting of Consistory.

Let us, for the sake of argument, say that an Elder is upset because he believes a member, or members, of the Council are failing to uphold

their office. For that Elder to fail to mention his concern during mutual censure is to be derelict of his responsibility. He has an obligation before his brothers and before Christ to express his concern. It is for that very reason that he has been called by God and the Congregation to serve as Elder - to be a watchman.

To argue that the other Council Members should have known that the upset Elder had a problem or concern is arguing from a reverse principle. When the Chairman of Council asks if there are any matters that need to be brought up at Mutual Censure and each Elder and Deacon gives a negative response, the other members of Council should not and cannot assume that another member of Council is lying.

Certainly, other members of Council may mentally acknowledge difficult debates, problematic discussions, and challenging decisions which could produce tension within the Council Room. However, for them to assume from that that there remains unresolved conflict in a person's heart would be improper, especially after the person has said he has no such difficulties.

Used properly, Mutual Censure can greatly enhance the work of the Council ensuring that both Elders and Deacons are properly fulfilling their calling before the Lord. It is also beneficial to the Church of Jesus Christ as the officers of His Church seek to provide spiritual growth to her members.

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The day of resurrection.

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They ring with cheerful chime
They sing their invitation
It’s time for church! It’s time!”

The church bells ring “O worship the Lord”
In Spring and Summer too
In Winter and Fall,
Their song is always new.

The church bells ring, “O worship the Lord”
Their pleasant notes appealing
They whisper their sweet voice of hope
From earth to heaven’s high ceiling.

The church bells ring, “O worship the Lord”
To far and near the call
Come join the song sung by the throng
It holds you in its thrall.

The church bells ring, “O worship the Lord”
Sweet notes of love and cheer
They resound their melodies of calm
Through changing atmosphere.

The church bells ring, “O worship the Lord!”
The rippling sounds go singing.
From hill to plain and in between
The rousing song goes ringing.

The church bells ring, “O worship the Lord”
The tones of adoration.
Come join the great enormous throng
Full throated consecration.

The church bells ring, “O worship the Lord”
May all who hark, revere
They peal out words of love and hope
The phrases warm and dear.



Sound Bites

The Outlook - 1972

January 1972

“...one day, probably bursting with self-confidence, I [told] my mother: “I want to be a minister.” And would you believe it, she came right back and said: “I wouldn’t dare be a minister.” “Why not?” I wanted to know. “Because,” she told me with far greater sense than I gave her credit for at the time, “because the responsibility is too great.”

* * * * *

“To recapture this awareness is what the church so sorely needs in our time. The church is in grave peril because by and large this has been a lost chord, a missing note in Christendom today. That awesome office!”

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John Vander Ploeg

February 1972

“...we could propagate serious error if we speak of God’s general revelation in nature as if it were on par with God’s special revelation in Scripture. Due to the coming of sin and the curse, man is no longer able to read God’s revelation apart from ‘the spectacles of Scripture.’”

One “Word of God” or Three?
John Vander Ploeg

“...arbitrary absolutes are a most dangerous commodity, for the love of one moment can become the hate of the next.”

Situation Morality: The Ethics of Immaturity
John W. Montgomery

March 1972

“...regardless of what science may say, there are incontrovertible considerations that make it exegetically impossible to hold that these were six long periods rather than six regular days.”

Six Days of Creation or Periods?

John Vander Ploeg

April 1972

“The wholesale gimmickry by which today’s apostate preachers are trying to kindle religious fire is as pitiful and futile as the antics of the frenzied prophets of Baal who went from bad to worse as they attempted to get their idol to send fire in the showdown on Mount Carmel.”

How to Kindle a Fire
John Vander Ploeg

May 1972

“...the Bible really leaves us no room for compromises. What the church teaches must simply be the Word of God, not our private opinions, which, as soon as they diverge from the Word of God, whether the creeds have gotten around to condemn the particular divergence or not, already have the essential character of ‘heresies’.”

What is Heresy?
Peter De Jong

June 1972

“Holy Scripture is a tendency-book; it has not been written impartially or neutrally; it is a book with a bias. Its tendency is that of the call

to faith in Jesus Christ; its bias is that all men are liars and that only God is trustworthy; it claims that it speaks the Word of that God who is the Sovereign over all and who in His Sovereignty loved the world in Jesus Christ and calls His people to faith and obedience.”

In All Honesty
Louis Praamsma

July 1972

“Many churches in our time have lost the gospel because they would not work, and where necessary, fight to keep it. The alternative each church ultimately faces is: Fight for the truth or lose it!”

The Bible in Missouri
Peter De Jong

August 1972

...what the Bible called sin and an abomination centuries ago when it was written is still that today. The Book does not change, and woe to anyone who dares to add to it or take away from it to make it fit ‘the new-morality’ times in which we live!”

The Misguided Conscience of a “Christian Queer”
John Vander Ploeg

“Three of the most unwelcome concepts today are those of authority, discipline, and obedience.”

Little Ado About Much
Johanna Timmer

October 1972

“The vexing problem today is not ‘too many babies.’ The problem is ‘too much sin,’ ‘too much greed,’ failure to use our resources properly, failure to distribute goods wisely and mercifully to the genuinely needy. And yet, it is the ‘un-

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(continued from page 23)

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