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Christmas Contrasts

Some of the most significant thoughts about Christmas may well center around the breath-taking contrasts suggested by the Nativity.

First, we are amazed at the contrasting attitudes of angels and men toward the child born in Bethlehem. The angels, who represented the heavenly world, made swift their journey to the fields of Ephrata eager to announce the coming of the Savior, Christ the Lord. They appeared to certain divinely selected representatives of humanity. If it had not been for their angelic announcement, the astonishing mystery of heaven's union with earth in the Person of the Word made flesh

would have remained unnoticed by all men.

Contrasting Attitudes

Notice also the contrast between the attitude of those men who heard and believed the message of the angels, and the rest of mankind. The gospel gives us two accounts of men who came and worshiped the Christ-child. First we read about the shepherds who left their flocks to see the Child in the manger. Then we are told about magi who brought their gifts and homage to the same Child months later.

In contrast to their eagerness to worship Jesus, we read about the

callous indifference of the Jews and the hostility of Herod. Jerusalem must have been startled by the report of the wise men who asked "Where is He, born King of the Jews?" Yet, we read of no crowds traveling the few miles to Bethlehem to see the Baby for whose sake a star was made to appear in the heavens. The chief priests and the scribes, who knew so well where the Christ Child was going to be born, sent no committee to investigate or join the wise men in their quest.

What a contrast can be found between the adorations of the shepherds and the Magi, on the one hand, and the skepticism of the rest of men, on the other. And how humiliating the thought that the natu-



Volume 54, No.11 (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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ral attitude of the human heart is like that of the indifferent citizens of Jerusalem, the prejudiced chief priests and the scribes, or the hostile and hypocritical Herod.

Still, even the shepherds and the Magi would have been unconcerned about the Child of Bethlehem had it not been for God sending them a heavenly message. How true also in our day that a genuine interest in the incarnation of the Son of God is not found in ourselves but must be heaven-sent. The Word of God, coming through God's messengers, must awaken our otherwise darkened hearts that the Light of the World has arrived.

Contrasting Holiness

A still more fundamental contrast is that which exists between the spiritual condition of Bethlehem's Baby and that of all other members of the human race. Today, people speak and sing so glibly about the Holy Baby in the manger. Do they really mean it? Those who contend that every baby is born with a pure and sinless soul cannot see any unusual excellence in the Child of Mary.

As a result of the Fall, we are conceived and born in sin. Yet, the newborn baby in Bethlehem's manger is declared holy. The only explanation for His miraculous escape from the taint of sin that has infected our nature at its very source is that this Child was not affected by Adam's fall. The only way He could escape the result of Adam's fall is that He is very God of very God. This Baby could not be holy unless He was conceived by the Holy Spirit and born of the virgin Mary.

Because the Baby was holy, a mighty contrast exists between His

attitude toward God and the attitude that all the others of our race have toward God. Mankind rashly claims Jesus as its own but it fails to see that spiritually He is not one of us. A deep gulf separates all the sons of Adam from Him who was our sinless High Priest and the sole champion of holiness and righteousness. His spotless holiness accounts for the universal hatred which His appearance and labors called forth. Even those who loved to hear Him preach, and sought His signs, were offended by His preaching when He told them the truth about His heavenly origin. Simeon foresaw it and predicted as much when he said that Mary's Child would be a sign that is spoken against. Jesus will always be spoken against in this world because He alone defends the honor of the Father while all others are enemies of God. It is true that some have become friends to God, but only as the result of the Messiah's redemptive work.

Contrasting Humility

We can not begin to understand the extent of Jesus' humiliation unless we remember the divine glory which He had with the Father before His birth. We should not make the mistake of thinking that His humiliation lay only in the humble circumstances that attended His birth or even in the poverty, persecution, and suffering which He experienced in later life. Even if Christ's mother had been a queen, his birthplace a palace, and His bed one of softest down, His coming to earth from heaven would still have been a degradation. He, the High and Lofty One, entered a tabernacle of clay. He assumed our nature at its weakest. The Almighty Son of God became a helpless Baby

in its mother's arms. The omniscient God became an unconscious, speechless infant. The omnipresent God became man and was confined to a crib. He who had owned the mansions of heaven had no decent shelter so that we might be sheltered from the stormy blasts of God's wrath. The Son of God exchanged His heavenly throne for a feedbox. He who was accustomed to the association of angels was laid among the animals. The Father of eternities took upon Himself mortal flesh. The Judge of heaven and earth became the scapegoat of man, laden with guilt and groaning under the penalty of their crimes. That mediatorial work, completed on the cross, began as soon as He was conceived in the womb of the virgin and was born in Bethlehem. The Manger was the first station on the way to the Cross.

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Joseph: Justified by Faith

18 Now the birth of Jesus Christ was as follows: After His mother Mary was betrothed to Joseph, before they came together, she was found with child of the Holy Spirit. 19 Then Joseph her husband, being a just man, and not wanting to make her a public example, was minded to put her away secretly. 20 But while he thought about these things, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream, saying, "Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take to you Mary your wife, for that which is conceived in her is of the Holy Spirit. 21 And she will bring forth a Son, and you shall call His name Jesus, for He will save His people from their sins." 22 So all this was done that it might be fulfilled which was spoken by the Lord through the prophet, saying: "Behold, the virgin shall be with child, and bear a Son, and they shall call His name Immanuel," which is translated, "God with us." 24 Then Joseph, being aroused from sleep, did as the angel of the Lord commanded him and took to him his wife, 25 and did not know her till she had brought forth her firstborn Son. And he called His name Jesus. (Matthew 1: 18-25)

Does the Bible ever present a person righteous with respect to the conditions of the law of God? You may suggest that it does! For example, one can point to Adam before his fall into sin as well as to Christ as He lived on earth. In each of these cases, the Bible presents each person as righteous. However, let me be more specific; if we exclude Adam and Christ, does the Bible ever present a person righteous with respect to the conditions of the law of God?

As Reformed people, we are not comfortable with that question. Our tradition stresses strongly that all men are guilty before God's law. It is part of our theological consciousness that no true believer should claim to be righteous before the law of God. In fact, in accordance with Holy Scripture, our Reformed piety would claim that even if we fail with respect to just one commandment, we would be guilty of sinning against the entire

law (James 2:10). So to even suggest, or to even claim that the Bible would ever present a person righteous with respect to the conditions of the law smells of salvation by works.

Although you may feel uncomfortable with my question, I ask you to permit the Holy Spirit to challenge you with Matthew's presentation of Joseph in Christ's birth narrative (1:18-25). In Matthew's presentation of Joseph is the presentation of the gospel! By directing our attention to Joseph, I am not attempting in any way to overlook the importance of Christ's birth. Indeed, Matthew 1:18-25 is the *climax* of Matthew's genealogy concerning the birth of Jesus Christ, the Son of David, the Son of Abraham (1:1, 16-17). He was born to Mary, the wife of Joseph. His birth was a fulfillment of the prophecy in Isaiah 7:14; this prophetic fulfillment is the high point of the genealogy: "Be-

hold, the virgin shall be with child, and bear a Son, and they shall call His name Immanuel, which is translated, 'God with us'" (Matthew 1:23). In this verse, the focus and theme of Matthew's gospel is revealed. Immanuel has arrived in history; God is now present with His church, never to depart from her (Matthew 1:23; 28:20).

Although the coming of Christ is the focus and power of this particular text, the Holy Spirit also wants us to note carefully the principle players surrounding Christ's birth. In these players, the Holy Spirit will enrich our understanding of the gospel. For example, God will enrich our understanding of the gospel with the role of Joseph in the narrative.

A Problematic Engagement

Let me begin with the problem that surrounds the term: "betrothed" (vs. 18 NKJ), "engaged [pledged] to be married" (NIV), or "betrothed" meaning "engaged" (ASV) "espoused" (KJV). Our English translation does not do justice to what many scholars believe to be the Jewish custom of marriage at the time of the New Testament. At that time, a marriage which was agreed upon by parents usually came immediately after the age of puberty. A formal contract would be exchanged before witnesses of both families. When the contract was issued, the male was viewed as the "husband" of his future bride, e.g. Joseph was viewed as the "husband" of Mary, although they were not presently living with each other (1:19).

Specifically, in Jewish tradition, Mary and Joseph are married by



virtue of the formal contract, but there was a customary interim period in which the couple must refrain from living with each other. Hence, the marriage union was not yet consummated; they had not yet come together as one flesh. For this reason, the phrase “before they came together” appears in the text (1:18). In other words, they were married to each other by legal document, but they had not yet taken up residence with each other. In this situation, Mary was found to be with child (1:18).

Obviously, Joseph has a dilemma. Although the text does not tell us how, he knows that Mary is with child (1:18-19). Furthermore, he knows that he is not the father. In fact, as Joseph begins to react to the situation, it is apparent that he has no idea about how Mary is with child (1:19). Herein, I agree with Augustine, Luther, and Calvin who maintained that Joseph responds as if Mary is with child by another man—that he believed that she has engaged in the sin of fornication.

As the Bible begins to note Joseph’s response, the Holy Spirit carefully describes his character as a “just man” (1:19). The Greek word *dikaïos* appears in the text here. It can be translated “just” or “righteous.” It is the same word used in relationship to justification, e.g. “The just [righteous] shall live by faith” (Romans 1:17; cf. Romans 3:26; Galatians 3:11) or, its verb form “Being justified by faith, we have peace with God” (Romans 5:1). Hence, we must not miss that the Holy Spirit is presenting Joseph as a “righteous” and “just” man.

After the description of Joseph’s

character, the text proceeds to portray Joseph’s reaction to the appearance of the scandal. As a righteous man, he does not want to make Mary “a public example” (1:19). He realizes that the public will learn that Mary is with child, and that she will endure public embarrassment. Joseph tries to control the public humiliation, mockery, and gossip of the presumed scandal. His desire is not to add to her humiliation. So it was his wish to give her a “private divorce” which would nullify their marriage contract in secret (1:19).

Does God’s law permit such action by Joseph? In Deuteronomy, we are told that the “married virgin,” as well as the man who engages in fornication with her, are both to be “stoned to death” (22:23-24). But Joseph has a problem; the man supposedly involved has not been captured, nor are there any witnesses to the incident. For this reason, Joseph is not in the position to bring complete judgment which the law requires (Deuteronomy 22).

Joseph proceeds in a different direction to solve his dilemma. In respect to the law, Joseph has another option. On the basis of Deuteronomy 24:1, he can give her a “bill of divorce” on the grounds of the sin of uncleanness—fornication. As a righteous man, Joseph chooses to exercise this choice in full compliance to God’s law. He will act kindly, however, with Mary,

so that he does not publicly degrade her since he does not have the man whom he thinks acted in this sin. He will not allow Mary to be made a “public example” when the supposed sinful man has not been brought to justice.

A Just Man

We must comprehend how the Holy Spirit is presenting Joseph in Matthew’s narrative; there is a powerful underlining theme here. Matthew’s narrative states that Joseph is a *just man* prior to this incident with Mary, and the narrative presents Joseph as a *just man* with respect to the law as he takes action. With respect to Mary’s situation, Joseph knows the law, loves the law, and follows the law.

Let us return to my opening question: does the Bible ever present a person as righteous with respect to the conditions of the law of God? Yes. In verses 18 and 19, Joseph is presented as a just man with respect to what the law required. But does this mean that the law saves or that Joseph is saved through his compliance to the law? *By no means!* It is not the purpose of Scripture to present Joseph as one who is justified by the works of law since the Scripture teaches that “through the works of the law no man will be justified” (Galatians 2:16).

Joseph is being presented to us with the same teaching concerning jus-

As Joseph begins to react to the situation, it is apparent that he has no idea about how Mary is with child.

tification from Abraham to Paul; the believer is justified by faith. Joseph embraces the law as a man of faith! Biblical revelation presents Joseph as one who lives by faith; he is devoted faithfully to the statutes of God. That is how men of faith live!

In his dilemma with Mary's situation, however, Joseph will discover how one comes up short if one isolates the law as a revealer of truth. In other words, Joseph will come to understand that what the gospel reveals, the law, in isolation, could not reveal. He will learn how in redemptive-history, Christ is the end of the law—that the law has given way to its fulfilled condition in the person of Christ as His righteousness is imputed to those who believe (Romans 10:4). Moreover, he comes to understand that as a "righteous man," he is only "righteous" if he truly confesses that Jesus is the Christ! Only the revelation from God and the belief in Jesus as Savior will resolve Joseph's situation.

As Joseph follows the law, the law could not reveal the truth about Mary's condition. Rather, God reveals the truth of Mary's condition through an angel! God reveals through an angel that Mary is to be Joseph's wife and she is with child by the power of the Holy Spirit (1:20). Furthermore, the angel tells Joseph that he is to name the child Jesus: "for He will save His people from their sins" (1:21).

A Man Made Just

We need to grasp the significance of this revelation to Joseph. By the sovereign revelation and grace of God, Joseph's lips confess the com-

ing salvation—that Jesus saves His people from their sin! More directly, in terms of the drama depicted in the text, Joseph's resolution is not found in the law, but in the gospel. Indeed, God's law is to be understood as good throughout Scripture, but the law did not reveal the truth of Mary's condition to Joseph. God had to personally intervene. He intervenes with the voice of truth from the angel, but even more powerfully than that, He resolves the situation with the birth of His Son to Mary.

In the fullness of time, God sent His Son to declare the innocence of Mary with respect to the law, and to justify the faith of Joseph. There is only one way that Joseph and Mary can move from law to gospel and that is *through the coming of Jesus into the world! He must come into their world since the law in itself cannot save them!*

Joseph gives the name "Jesus" to the child, not Mary (1:21, 25). In Joseph, the people of God are being taught that they are justified in the name of Jesus, not in the works of the law. Moreover, in our text, God enacts the essence of the entire history of redemption in Joseph; in him we are moving from the law to Christ, from the old covenant to the new covenant, from an era that fades to an era that is full of glory.

In the revelation of Christ's name Joseph finds his wife sinless before the law (II Corinthians 3:6: "the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life"). What a message for the church of Jesus Christ. In the same birth narrative of the coming of Immanuel ("God with us") is a very personal and practical story about us. We see ourselves in Joseph; he

is our story concerning how we are saved in Christ! In Joseph we see that the law was his "tutor to bring him to Christ, that he might be justified by faith" (Galatians 3:24). Indeed, in Joseph, we see how the "righteous live by faith;" they live by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God. And such a saving faith comes only through the power of Immanuel's Spirit.

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We Confess

An Exposition & Application of the Belgic Confession

Article 18: Of the Incarnation of the Son of God

The incarnation. This is a term we so often use in our Christian lingo that it has become another phrase we simply let roll off our tongues all too easily. The incarnation, though, is no mere phrase; it was a climactic, redemptive event. It was a moment in which there was hushed silence in heaven and earth as God was doing something He had never done before - and then there was exuberant praise! We cannot simply define this term every so often in our Christmas sermons or Heidelberg Catechism sermons, as if the incarnation were simply a vocabulary lesson or a doctrine to pull off of the shelf when required. Instead, we need to understand the incarnation's significance so we can apply its benefits to our daily spirituality.

To do so we must define the term. The Latin title of Article 18 is *de incarnatione filii Dei*, "Of the incarnation of the Son of God." Our English word "incarnation" comes from the Latin *incarnatio*, meaning, "the unition (*unitio*), or act of uniting, human nature with the Logos." It is the event in which the eternal Son took upon Himself a human nature: "And the Word became flesh" (John 1:14).

The Climax of History

As we turn our attention to Article 18 of the Belgic Confession, we notice that there is a seamless transition from God's eternal decree to

save (Article 16) to the promise of that salvation (Article 17) to the fulfillment of that promise in the sending of the Son into our flesh (Article 18):

We confess, therefore, that God has fulfilled the promise which He made to the fathers by the mouth of His holy prophets, when He sent into the world, at the time appointed by Him, His own only-begotten and eternal Son, who *took upon Him the form of a servant and became like unto man...*

This promised seed of the woman would deal a death blow to the seed of the serpent. This was fulfilled the moment Jesus was conceived. When we speak of the incarnation, we are speaking of two acts: the conception of Jesus and the birth of Jesus. Scripture focuses on the latter act. That is when God's promise was seen by the world of men and the world of angels.

This climactic moment in which the conceived God-man was "born of the Virgin Mary" was foreseen and expected by generations of "the fathers" as they heard this salvation proclaimed by the "holy prophets." All the sermons of the prophets came to fruition "in the fullness of time" (Galatians 4:4) as this seed of the woman was born. It is interesting to note how our Confession interprets Paul's phrase "in the full-

ness of time." There has been much pious speculation through the ages that this refers to God's providential preparation of the Roman Empire which made the spread of the gospel a possibility. On the contrary, the Confession says this phrase in Paul's writings means "the time appointed by Him." When the ages reached their fullness, when the time had come according to God's eternal appointment, the Son was born of the Virgin Mary.

Thus we behold the marvelous wonder that *God* became man. It is important for us as Reformed Christians to recapture a glimpse of this mystery because we often view either the death or resurrection of Jesus Christ as the high-point of redemptive history.

The incarnation was the wonder of wonders. It began the string of events we call "the work of Christ." We must recapture this "mystery of godliness" (1 Timothy 3:16) in our preaching, worship, and community life, being filled with amazement that "He who was without a mother in heaven was without a father on earth." This wonder of the incarnation is expressed by the Greek church father Gregory of Nazianzus (325-389), who said

The Word of God Himself, Who is before all worlds, the Invisible, the Incomprehensible, the Bodiless, the Beginning of beginning, the Light of Light, the Source of Life and Immortality, the Image of the Archetype, the Immovable Seal, the Unchangeable Image, the Father's Definition and Word, came to His own Im-

age, and took on Him Flesh for the sake of our flesh, and mingled Himself with an intelligent soul for my soul's sake, purifying like by like; and in all points except sin was made Man...He came forth then, as God, with That which He had assumed; one Person in two natures...O new commingling; O strange conjunction! the Self-existent comes into Being, the Uncreated is created, That which cannot be contained is contained by the intervention of an intellectual soul mediating between the Deity and the corporeity of the flesh. And He who gives riches becomes poor; for He assumes the poverty of my flesh, that I may assume the riches of His Godhead. He that is full empties Himself; for He empties Himself of His Glory for a short while, that I may have a share in His Fullness.

The Reality of the Incarnation

But is this just pious rhetoric? Just how real was this incarnation? How human was (and is) our Lord Jesus Christ? Our Confession continues, saying

...really assuming the true human nature with all its infirmities, sin excepted; being conceived in the womb of the blessed virgin Mary by the power of the Holy Spirit without the means of man; and did not only assume human nature as to the body, but also a true human soul, that He might be a real man.

He has a true human nature, meaning that He has a human body and a human soul "that He might be a real man." He assumed what makes us human. The question, though, must be asked, "If Jesus Christ was born of a sinful woman, how could Jesus be born sinless?" In Matthew 1:18-20 and Luke 1:34-35 we learn that He was "conceived in the womb of the virgin Mary by the power of the Holy Spirit *without the means of man.*" Our Heidelberg Catechism in Question and Answer 35 teaches this as well when it says that Jesus' conception was "*by the operation of the Holy Spirit.*"

We confess Christ's "true humanity," but just how real was His body? Did He really have human flesh and blood like we do? As we confess, He "really" assumed a human body. Jesus' body grew from an embryo, to a fetus, to a baby, to a toddler, all the up to a full grown man. Scripture abounds with the true humanity of Christ and the true body of Christ: Jesus became hungry (e.g., Matthew 4:2), thirsty (John 19:28), and tired (John 4:6). He slept (Mark 4:38), experienced pain (e.g., 1 Peter 2:21-23), and died (e.g., Philippians 2:8).

We also confess that Jesus assumed "a true human soul, that He might be a real man." He had to have the immaterial part of us in order to be truly human. This reminds us of the creation of Adam. God formed a body from the dust and

after He "breathed into his nostrils the breathe of life" this man "became a living being" (Genesis 2:7). These two elements, a body and soul, made Adam a human being. Jesus, therefore, in order to be the second Adam, had to be truly human which meant that He had to have a body and soul. We see the things that make up our soul in Jesus: He experienced the emotions of anger (e.g., Mark 3:5), disgust (e.g., Mark 8:12), distress (e.g., John 12:27), and sorrow (John 11:33-35); He showed affection (Mark 9:36-37), compassion (Mark 9:36), and sympathy (Hebrews 4:15). Thus in the incarnation we confess that God became *man*.

The Necessity of the Incarnation

If man is made up of a body and soul, and both are sinful, how necessary was it for Jesus Christ to have both? The Confession answers this, saying, "For since the soul was lost as well as the body, it was necessary that He should take both upon Him, to save both." Here our Confession, as with the Trinity, follows orthodox, catholic doctrine, in drawing upon the famous phrase of Gregory of Nazianzus: "For that which He has not assumed He has not healed." If He only had a body, your soul is lost forever; if He only had a soul, your body is lost forever. We need a true man to be our Savior so that we can be truly saved!

Rejection of Errors

The Confession rejects the view

It was fitting for the Son to suffer for us as our mediator and necessary for Him to suffer as a man, with a body and soul.



Study/Application Questions for Article 18

1. Give three Old Testament prophecies of the coming of God in the flesh (the Incarnation), and explain how they prophesy this.
2. Why is it important for us to give attention and adoration for mysterious doctrines like the incarnation just as we do with more understandable doctrines like the cross and resurrection?
3. What does believing in the full humanity of Christ mean for our salvation? Worship? Prayer? Comfort in trials?

that Christ did not receive His humanity from His mother Mary. This is done by quoting an impressive string of biblical witnesses:

Therefore we confess (in opposition to the heresy of the Anabaptists, who deny that Christ assumed human flesh of His mother) that Christ *partook of the flesh and blood of the children; that He is a fruit of the loins of David after the flesh; born of the seed of David according to the flesh; a fruit of the womb of Mary; born of a woman; a branch of David; a shoot of the root of Jesse; sprung from the tribe of Judah; descended from the Jews according to the flesh; of the seed of Abraham, since (A.V.) he took on him the seed of Abraham, and was made like unto his brethren in all things, sin excepted; so that in truth He is our IMMANUEL, that is to say, God with us.*"

If these texts were familiar to you,

you noticed that two of them come from Hebrews' magnificent presentation of the reality and necessity of the incarnation in chapter 2:10-18. In Hebrews 1-2 is proclaimed the greatness of the Son over angels in both His exaltation and humiliation. The writer speaks of this humiliation in terms of being "made lower than the angels" (Hebrews 2:9). The text speaks of the incarnation moving from its being fitting to its being necessary "He had to be made like His brothers" (:17). It was fitting for the Son to suffer for us as our mediator and necessary for Him to suffer as a man, with a body and soul.

Notice what several of the texts in this section of Hebrews 2 say about the suitability and necessity of Christ's true humanity being received from His mother Mary. In verse 11 the writer speaks of us and Christ saying that we "have one origin" (Greek, "all of one;" NIV, "of the same family") and in verse 14 the writer says that since we "share in flesh and blood He Himself likewise partook of the same things." Here the writer is saying that we and Christ share a common humanity. And just as we

receive our humanity from our parents, so too Christ received His humanity from His only earthly parent, Mary. This means that He did not just appear to be a human but that He was a human in the full sense of the term; as the phrase "flesh and blood" connotes that He was a human being, He was a man.

This sharing with us in our humanity was "in every respect" (Hebrews 2:17) what makes up our humanity. He was as human as human can be.

It is because of this mysterious joining of the eternal Son with frail human flesh that we can sing:

*Though circled by
the hosts on high,
He deigned to cast
a pitying eye
upon His helpless creature;
the whole creation's
Head and Lord,
by highest seraphim adored,
assumed our very nature;
Jesus, grant us,
through thy merit, to inherit
thy salvation;
hear, O hear our supplication.*

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Amendment 25

Did you know that there is only one apparent spelling error in the United States Constitution? It occurs in the 25th Amendment, which was proposed by Congress on July 6, 1965 and ratified on February 10, 1967. During the year and a half the amending process went on, one wonders whether someone somewhere noticed something odd.

Here's the situation. Amongst other things, this amendment dealt with what to do if the President could no longer perform his duties. Suppose the President was unable to perform his duties because he was in a coma and unable to make this decision for himself. Article four says "the Vice President and a majority of either principal officers of the executive departments or of such other body as Congress may by law provide" has to inform the Congress of the President's inability to function. By "principal officers of the executive departments," presumably is meant cabinet officers such as the Secretary of Defense, Secretary of the Treasury, and so on.

So far so good, but then, in article five, things get confusing. If the President informs the Congress that he is taking over his duties again, then this will happen unless there is an objection by "the Vice President and a majority of either the principal officers of the executive department or of such other body as Congress may by law provide." In that case, Congress would have to decide the issue.

Do you catch something strange

here? Article four speaks of "the principal officers of the executive departments" (plural) and article five speaks of the principal officers of the executive department" (singular). We know that "executive departments" refers to cabinet departments. It is less clear what the "executive department" is or whom its principal officers might be. It seems clear that this is a spelling error and that the word department in article five was meant to be plural. Someone was asleep at the switch big time for this discrepancy to slip through.

God in his mercy has never allowed the question as to the difference between departments and department to become a burning question and may he always preserve us from it. It does, however, present us with an interesting question. How can this error be corrected? Can we use an eraser or white out? Can we just write in an "s" at the appropriate spot?

There is only one way this error can be corrected. There would have to be another amendment to the constitution. How do you do this? First, two thirds of each house of congress would have to propose the amendment and then it would have to be ratified by three fourths of the state legislatures. All that effort would have to be made just to add one letter to one word of the constitution.

There is another piece of writing that is even more difficult to change than the Constitution. This one has a much greater relevance

to our life than any manmade law. All men stand condemned before God as sinners who have broken his Law. As a result, as we read in question 11 of the Heidelberg Catechism, "his justice therefore requires that sin which is committed against the most high majesty of God, be also punished with extreme, that is, with everlasting punishment both of body and soul." This condemnation is referred to as if it were a legal document, called the "handwriting of ordinances" in Colossians 2.14. In that verse we read that Christ "(blotted) out the handwriting of ordinances that was against us, which was contrary to us, and took it out of the way, nailing it to his cross."

The only way this handwriting, which is in effect a spiritual death warrant, could be annulled or repealed was through the death of the Lord Jesus Christ. Christ took this handwriting and nailed it to his cross. That is, he took the punishment in the place of all those he chose to save. We read in 2 Corinthians 5.21, "For he (God) hath made him (Christ) to be sin for us, who knew no sin; that we might be made the righteousness of God in him."

I am reminded of the account, in Matthew chapter 9, of a paralyzed man was brought to Jesus by his friends. Obviously, what they wanted was that this man be healed. But what does Jesus say to him? We read in verse two, "Son, be of good cheer; thy sins be forgiven thee." Now this offended the Jews because they rightly believed only God could forgive sins. The problem was that they did not be-



lieve Jesus was divine. Therefore, they believed he was speaking blasphemously.

This brings us to a vital question which Jesus poses in verses 4-5, “Wherefore think ye evil in your hearts? For whether is easier, to say, Thy sins be forgiven thee; or to say, Arise, and walk?” Well, let’s answer this question. What was easier for Jesus to do, forgive the man’s sins or heal him? Our first thought might be that forgiveness is the easier. After all, healing would take a miracle. But let’s not be hasty. God created everything and all power belongs to him. It would be nothing at all to God to heal this man. Think of the huge number of healings Jesus did whilst on earth.

Forgiveness, on the other hand, is different. In fact, doing away with this “handwriting of ordinances” requires an act more momentous than amending the U.S. constitution. Sure, repairing the misspelling in the constitution would take time and require action by the congress and a large majority of state legislatures. This, however, is nothing compared to what it would take for the punishment of even one sin to be paid and forgiveness extended. There is only one way for sin to be forgiven. In the words of question 40 of the Heidelberg Catechism, “...the justice and truth of God required, that satisfaction for our sins could be made in no other way than by the death of the Son of God.” Correcting even the smallest flaw in the constitution might take a monumental amount of time and effort. Cleansing our hearts from sin takes infinitely more than that.

Peter describes the terrible price Christ paid for our forgiveness in I Peter 1.18-19, “Forasmuch as ye know that ye were not redeemed with corruptible things, as silver and gold, from your vain conversation received by tradition from your fathers; But with the precious blood of Christ, as of a lamb without blemish and without spot.”

No act of Congress could take the guilt of our sins away. The satisfaction of God’s justice and the turning away of his anger are much too profound for that. Only the suffering and death of Christ can take away our guilt. The Belgic Confession, Article 21, says, “Neither is it necessary to seek or invent any other means of being reconciled to God than this only sacrifice, once offered, by which he hath perfected forever them that are sanctified.” Indeed, we can go further than that. Not only is it unnecessary to seek forgiveness of sins from another source, it is flatly impossible. Speaking of the Lord Jesus Christ, Peter declared in Acts 4.12, “Neither is there salvation in any other: for there is none other name under heaven given among men, whereby we must be saved.”

In my personal opinion, I can think of a few changes I would like to see in the U.S. Constitution as it stands today. It is highly unlikely, to put it mildly, that I could ever get these changes made. However, it is flatly impossible that I – or the entire human race combined – could change the handwriting, the condemnation, against us for breaking God’s Law. Only Jesus Christ, God’s only begotten

Son, could accomplish that by his suffering and death. That he should do so for sinners such as us is beyond understanding but, praise God, not beyond belief.

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Classis Michigan (URCNA)

Mr. David Klumpenhower will never forget October 12, 2004. Early in the morning, he was at the hospital assisting in the delivery of his son. Later in the morning, he was at the Eastmanville URC sitting before twenty-four ministers and elders who would judge his calling to be a minister of the Word and Sacraments. In both instances, Mr. Klumpenhower excelled.

Examined in the areas of Practica, Church Polity, Confessional Knowledge, Reformed Doctrine, and Ethics, Mr. Klumpenhower often quoted from the Scriptures and the Heidelberg Catechism. He proved himself very capable of shepherding God's people at the Walker United Reformed Church to which he has been called.

In addition to the examination, Classis Michigan made several appointments as requested by Synod. Mr. Gregory Rickmar was assigned to the Website Committee; Rev. Casey Freswick was elected to the CERCU Committee and Rev. Peter Adams to the CECCA Committee.

Classis denied an appeal, refusing to permit the transfer of a member of a URC Church to a newly organized group of men and women worshipping together.

Sound Bites - 1990

January 1990

“As a denomination slides into liberalism, the method often used by pastors is to garble the message so that the unsuspecting do not catch the drift.”

Sharpened Expression
Thomas Vanden Heuvel

“As believers we must be prepared and unashamed to make our confession of faith before the world, however unpopular and unwelcome that may be in a world committed to only one absolute - that there are no absolutes!”

The Unbroken Chain
Cornelis P. Venema

February 1990

“Nowhere in the Scriptures will you find mention of the kingdom of grey.”

Two Kingdoms - A Lesson in Discernment
Robert Van Manen

“The praise of God must be guided by God's own Word.”

Reforming the Church's Singing
W. Robert Godfrey

March 1990

“The church which does not covenantally hate that which her king hates, is on a disastrous course.”

Is "Christian Hatred" a Contradiction?
Jelle Tuininga

May 1990

“Pentecost is the most misunderstood feast because of its highly internal nature. It is uniquely sub-

jective. Christmas proclaims to the living church, ‘God with us’; Easter, ‘God for us’; Pentecost, ‘God in us.’”

Pentecost: Filled With the Holy Ghost
Joel R. Beeke

“The antithesis is not between Christ and culture, Christ and art, Christ and music, Christ and science and the rest. The antithesis is between Christ and the devil.”

Christian Education - a Perspective or a Topping
Laurie Vanden Heuvel

September 1990

“If we have a secession, it must be forward-looking, seeking to minister the Word of God to a fallen world.”

Hard Choices
W. Robert Godfrey

October 1990

“Reformation is made up of stuff called rebirth and repentance.”

Ingredients for Reformation Today
J. Mark Beach

“We have grown ignorant of our own creeds and no longer understand how to apply them.”

What is Reformed Christian Education?
Norman De Jong



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The Christ in “Christian”

“But if any one suffers as a Christian, let him not feel ashamed, but in that name let him glorify God.” I Peter 4:16

In Exodus 30, God gives very careful instruction on how to make the anointing oil. This was the oil that was used to anoint the priests and kings of Israel before they were to assume their respective offices. After giving these careful instructions, God adds the following warning: “Whoever shall mix any like it, or whoever puts any on a layman, shall be cut off from his people” (Exodus 30:33). Israel was clearly taught that the anointing with holy oil was something higher, something more significant than the clothes the priest wore or the costly jewelry and gold of the king.

The anointing with oil had a two-fold purpose. It signified that the person had been chosen, set apart and appointed by God to fill a certain office. It also signified that the Holy Spirit of God had entered that person to enable him to perform the task and duties of his office. It was in this two-fold sense that our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ, was anointed by God. As we saw in the past few months when we looked at Question and Answer 31 of the Heidelberg Catechism, Jesus is called “the Christ” because “He has been ordained by God the Father and has been anointed with the Holy Spirit.” Jesus was chosen by God for His work accomplished for us through His perfect obedience and His death on Calvary’s cross. He was and is our Prophet, Priest, and King.

If the Anointed One is your Savior

and Lord, and you have confessed Him as such, you have the blessed privilege of being called a “Christian.” Historically, the name “Christian” was a derogatory name first used by the pagan world to describe a new group of people who were followers of Jesus of Nazareth, whom they claimed was the Christ.

The writers of the catechism were not interested in this historical aspect of the term “Christian” when defining the term for us. Instead, they taught that Christians are by faith members of Jesus Christ and therefore share in His anointing. This definition deals with the personal relationship that the Christian has with Jesus the Christ and how that relationship is lived. Sinners we were, but now we have been born again by the Holy Spirit. We have been renewed to be children of God.

What a significant name we have been given: “Christian”. Do you understand what that name means? Many people claim to be Christians and see it to mean that they are not heathens or unbelievers. The name means so much more than that! It means we are members of Christ and that we share in His anointing.

The Anointed of the Church

This anointing that we have received gives us a responsibility and an assignment within the church. Usually, within the church we recognize that there are special offices appointed by Christ for the up build-

ing of the church. They are the offices of Minister, Elder, and Deacon. These are called the special offices of the church and are necessary for the maintaining of order and growth within the church.

They are not the only offices. There is also the office of believer. All believers are people who have a mission to accomplish. We are not only clerks, carpenters, or computer programmers. Everyone who bears the name “Christian” is an office-bearer in the Church of Christ. We belong to Christ. As such, we have been anointed by Christ to serve Him as prophets, priests, and kings.

Anointed to Be Prophets

As prophets, we must confess the name of Jesus Christ. As prophet is one who represents God to the people. We are, therefore, anointed to be witnesses of God to all people. Peter wrote: “If you speak, you should speak as one speaking the very words of God” (I Peter 4:11).

In everything that we do, the world, as well as the church, must know that we are not our own but belong to our faithful Savior Jesus Christ. We cannot hide the way that we feel about the One who has saved us with His own precious blood. We are to confess His name where ever God has placed us.

We need not be highly talented or greatly gifted in order to speak His name. No, the Holy Spirit will amplify even the weakest voice when it speaks words of witness and praise to God.

In everything that we do, we must give evidence of this anointing that

Q Why are you called a Christian?

A Because I am a member of Christ by faith, and thus a partaker of His anointing.

we have received. Jesus said in Matthew 10:32, 33: “Everyone who confesses Me before men, I will confess him before My Father who is in heaven. But whoever shall deny Me before men, him will I deny before My Father who is in heaven.” Solemn words which serve to remind us of our calling to be prophets in a land where people are hungering to hear the truth.

Anointed to Be Priests

Because of our anointing, we are also called to be priests of Christ in order to “present ourselves to Him as a living sacrifice of thanks.” Peter wrote that we are ordained to “be a holy priesthood to offer up spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ” (I Peter 2:4,5).

Our spiritual sacrifices are brought before God directly and indirectly. When we attend a worship service we offer up our praise to God in a direct way. We also present our offerings to God indirectly with deeds of mercy performed in His name. The author of Hebrews wrote: “Through Him, let us offer up a sacrifice of praise to God continually, that is, the fruit of our lips which make confession to His Name. Do not forget to do good and to communicate, for with such

sacrifices God is well pleased” (Hebrews 13:15, 16).

Paul writes in Romans 6: “Present yourself to God...” All that we are, all that we have, and all that we do must be a continual sacrifice of love and praise to our God for the gift of salvation He has provided to us through His Son. Whether we are rich or poor, gifted or not gifted, we must lay ourselves upon the altar of God never forgetting that Christ sacrificed Himself for us.

Anointed to Be Kings

As the redeemed of God, we are also anointed as kings. We have been delivered from the power of sin by Jesus Christ, freed from the tyranny of the devil. As followers of the Prince of Peace we engage in spiritual warfare. Those within the church militant must fight the good fight of faith, putting on the whole armor of God, defending the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

Today, as in Paul’s time, there is an evil army around us whose leader is the Prince of Darkness. We are not to make any alliance with this evil doer. Dressed in the armor of God, we rely on the strength of our King who leads us in the battle. Through Him, we fight against sin in all its forms.

That is the Christian’s calling - to be holy even as the God whom we serve is holy. Our lifestyle has to give evidence of the holy zeal we have for the honor of the Lord.

At the end of the battle there will be a great victory. Those who followed faithfully to the end will hear the King of kings say, “Come blessed of My Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you.” The robes of royalty and the crown of glory which were lost because of sin will be restored to us because of Christ.

If you believe in Jesus as your anointed Savior, let the words of your mouth and the deeds of your life give answer to the question, “Why are you called a Christian?” Let your answer be because you confess His name; you present yourself as a living sacrifice to Christ; and you are fighting against sin.

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The Riches of the Reformed Faith (III)

The Covenant of Grace

II Timothy 2:15 reads as follows: “Study to shew thyself approved unto God, a workman that needeth not to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth.”

Our Arminian Brothers and Sisters have historically taken this passage and literally “divided up” God’s Word into several “dispensations”. Dispensations were largely popularized in the 1909 edition of the Scofield Bible. A “dispensation”, as defined by Scofield, is “...a period of time during which man is tested in respect of obedience to some specific revelation of the will of God.” (Scofield Bible, p.5)

The seven “dispensations” are generally defined as “the dispensation of innocence, of conscience, of human government, of promise, of the law, of grace, and of the kingdom.” (*Systematic Theology*, Berkhof, L., Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., Grand Rapids, MI, 1939, 1941, p.290).

Classic “dispensationalism” literally “divides up” the Sacred Scriptures in such a way that our sovereign, saving, eternal, unchangeable God deals redemptively with different people in different ways at different times, resulting in major discontinuity between the Old and New Testaments. Such a disconnect between the Testaments caused the late Reformed theologian Dr. Louis Berkhof to write in *Systematic*

Theology that, “This theory ... is divisive in tendency, dismembering the organism of Scripture with disastrous results.” (p.291)

In his book, *Children of the Promise* (P&R Publishing, Phillipsburg, NJ, 1995, pp. 22-23) Robert R. Booth writes,

The dispensational method of isolating the New Testament from the Old Testament, as though we may determine any doctrine in its proper relation to redemptive history with the New Testament alone, is dangerous and misguided. The problem with this dispensational method is not so much that it starts with the New Testament, since the New Testament immediately points us to the Old Testament. The real problem posed by this method is that it not only wants to start with the New Testament but also wants to stop with the New Testament and settle the issue with the New Testament alone. We must not forget that all Scripture—including the Old Testament—is profitable for doctrine (2 Tim. 3:16). Starting and ending with the whole Bible is the only sure way to arrive at sound doctrinal positions. The dispensational system

does not adequately account for the unity of the Bible.

We in the Reformed tradition have historically viewed Scripture and seek to interpret Scripture as a unified whole and from a so-called “covenantal perspective.” While it is my understanding that the so-called “new” 1967 edition of the Scofield Bible does indeed contain “covenantal references” in its footnotes, please know that a “dispensational interpretive system” stands in diametrical opposition to the Reformed interpretive system of “covenantal theology” with very profound implications concerning the way in which we view everything from the world to worship, from sin to salvation, from how we view our children to how we celebrate the sacraments, and so on.

In the Reformed tradition we recognize God’s special and unique dealings with Adam (referred to in Reformed theology as the “Adamic Covenant” or the “Covenant of works”); God’s Covenant with Noah; God’s Covenant with Abraham; God’s Covenant with Moses; God’s Covenant with David; and the New Covenant – with each covenant building upon the others with all having their consummation in Christ. Please understand, however, that in Reformed Theology *we are not even close* to what our dispensational brothers and sisters mean when referring to their seven different dispensations! Rather, we profess and practice the proposition that each of these various covenants are all successive administrations of one and the same, single, over-arching covenant which comprises both the Old and

New Testaments in all of their fullness, richness and glory, namely, THE COVENANT OF GRACE.

“Covenant” Defined

What exactly is a “Covenant”? According to the *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology* (Elwell, Walter A., Editor, Baker Book House, Grand Rapids, MI, 1984, p. 276) a covenant, essentially, is

A compact or agreement between two parties binding them mutually to undertakings on each other’s behalf. Theologically (ie. used of relations between God and man) it denotes a gracious undertaking entered into by God for the benefit and blessing of man, and specifically of those men who by faith receive the promises and commit themselves to the obligations which this undertaking involves.

Another very accurate and insightful definition by Robert Booth defines a covenant between God and man as “a conditional promise, sealed by blood, sovereignly administered by God, with blessings for those who obey the conditions of the covenant and curses for those who disobey its conditions.” (*Children of the Promise*, p.24) We can boil all of this theological language down into a very simple statement which says essentially that:

A covenant is a relationship in which God says ‘I will be your God— along with all of His promised blessings; and in which we in response say, ‘And we will be your people’ – along with our promised obedience.

With this all-too-brief account of biblical and theological content and context concerning the definition of “covenant”, let us consider Three Key Aspects of The Covenant of Grace. The Covenant of Grace is a single, over-arching covenantal relationship which Dr. Berkhof states is so-called because “The covenant originates in the grace of God, is executed in virtue of the grace of God, and is realized in the lives of sinners by the grace of God. It is grace from the beginning to the end for the sinner.” (*Systematic Theology*, p.278).

Each of these various covenants are all successive administrations of one covenant, namely, THE COVENANT OF GRACE.

The Eternal Source

In Genesis 15:1 we read, “After this the word of the Lord [Hebrew: *dabar yaweh* – the first time this particular phraseology is used in Scripture] ... came to Abram in a vision: ‘Do not be afraid, Abram. I am your shield, your very great reward.’”

The words “After this” seem to indicate that Abram is focusing on the promise which God had so graciously made to him when He called him back in Genesis 12:1-3 and how that promise might not be fulfilled. Abram was afraid. In response to his fears, the Lord God

graciously sought him out once again and sought to allay those fears by saying, “I am your shield.” What is a shield? A shield is a defensive weapon which wards off assaults by the enemy. And notice: God doesn’t say, “I will give you a shield” – God says, “I am your shield” –and not only so, but also, “your very great reward.”

Why is that so significant? As someone has so insightfully said, “God’s saints are prone to seek their happiness in God’s gifts, rather than in the Giver.” And isn’t that true? We can get so caught up in any number of “creature comforts” which we so abundantly receive from the hand of our sovereign, gracious God when all the while all we really need is HIM! That is why we have often seen and heard in various missionary reports of the great JOY in the hearts and on the faces of natives in various parts of the world even though physically/ financially they are living in abject poverty! *How can this possibly be* when we who have been given so much are so often quite fear-filled and downcast? The reason is because they have better come to understand and appreciate the glorious gospel truth that *God is all they need, because God is all they have!* They truly profess and practice the fact that when they have Him they have everything! His Holy Spirit has witnessed to their spirits saying, “Do not be afraid ... I am your shield, your very great reward.” Oh, may God also increasingly grant to each and every one of us such grace!

Underscore the fact that the Bible says, “After this, the word of the Lord came to Abram.” In fact, it



says that very same thing in verse 4. This is extremely significant in one respect because it so beautifully illustrates for us that which literally sets biblical Christianity apart from every other cult, sect, and religion throughout the history of the world. Only in Christianity, only in CHRIST are we set free from having to make it on our own or work our way to heaven or be “good enough” to be saved! The Lord God condescends to Abram, just as we find the Lord God calls for Adam in the Garden of Eden after the Fall, saying, “Where are you?” (Genesis 3:9); and then speaks the words of Genesis 3:15 where God says to the serpent, “And I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and hers; he will crush your head, and you will strike his heel.” In fulfillment of this prophecy, our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ literally invaded human history by being born of the virgin Mary. Galatians 4:4-5 states,

But when the time had fully come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under law, to redeem those under law, that we might receive the full rights of sons.

There are many Reformed theologians who correctly point out the Scriptural fact that long before the incarnation of Christ, indeed, even before the onset of the Covenant of Grace in all of its various administrations, we find that from all eternity the Father and Son had a pact, an agreement, they “covenanted together” (some call it the “Covenant of Redemption”) in which the Son agreed to accomplish the salvation of His people

according to His heavenly Father’s will. That is why we read, for example, in such passages as John 6:37-39,

All that the Father gives me will come to me, and whoever comes to me I will never drive away. For I have come down from heaven not to do my will but to do the will of Him who sent me. And this is the will of Him who sent me, that I shall lose none of all that He has given me, but raise them up at the last day.

***Only in Christianity,
only in CHRIST are
we set free from
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our own or work our
way to heaven or be
“good enough” to be
saved!***

Other theologians correctly expound upon this fact by declaring that the Trinitarian relationship between the three Divine Persons of the God-head, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, has profound implications for and indeed is the “prototype” of the way in which we view all of creation; for example, the way in which the Three Persons of the Holy Trinity covenant together is the prototype for the way in which all true believers are in covenant with God the Father as the Originator, God the Son as the Executor, and God the Holy Spirit as the Applier of the redemption to our

souls. (Berkhof, L. *Systematic Theology*, p.266)

Glory be to God! Indeed, I fervently hope and pray that just as “the word of the Lord came to Abram” the Word of the Lord has come and is coming and will come to each and every one of us each and every day. Why so? Because the Bible says that our good and gracious God Himself is the Eternal Source of The Covenant of Grace.

The Elect Subjects

After the Word of the Lord comes to Abram, assuring him that the Lord God Himself is his “shield and very great reward”, one might expect that Abram would rejoice and say “thanks”, if not also, “praise the Lord!” But what do we find? In Genesis 15:2-3 we read,

But Abram said, ‘O Sovereign Lord what can you give me since I remain childless and the one who will inherit my estate is Eliezer of Damascus ... you have given me no children; so a servant in my household will be my heir.’

Before we would too readily condemn Abram, let us remember that God does indeed command us, as His people, to “Cast all your anxiety on him because he cares for you.” (I Peter 5:7) Let us also grant that Abram was simply and legitimately asking God for some measure of assurance concerning these things because as he considered the course of his life, well, let’s face it, he was getting on in years! Abram was about 86 years old at this time and Sarah was about 77. Things were looking a little bleak!

Abram asks God about it, and notice that in verse 4 we read,

Then the word of the Lord came to him: ‘This man will not be your heir, but a son coming from your own body will by your heir.’ He took him outside and said, ‘Look up at the heavens and count the stars—if indeed you can count them.’ Then he said to him, ‘So shall your offspring [your seed, your descendants] be.’

Think of it! The God who by the power of His Word literally *spoke galaxies into existence*; the God who by the power of His Word *created those stars* similarly by the power of His Word, His Word of promise, would supernaturally and miraculously and graciously create from the union of an admittedly very old man and very old woman an offspring as innumerable as the stars in the sky! Glory be to God!

God makes His covenant of grace with Abram and his offspring, spiritually speaking. Here again is another place where our Reformed view of the covenant differs so markedly with the view of our Arminian brothers and sisters. We believe that God’s covenant was being made not simply with physical, national Israel, but with Abram as the Father of all believers, and with His “spiritual descendants”, namely, all those who by God’s grace would come to believe in the Lord Jesus Christ. And who would come to believe? As Ephesians 1:4 tells us, all those whom “God chose in Christ before the creation of the world”; John 6:37 refers to all those “whom the Father gives Him”; Acts 13:48 states “All who

were appointed for eternal life”; and as the Holy Spirit inspired Apostle Paul writes in Romans 11:7, “What Israel sought so earnestly it did not obtain, but the elect did.”

Do not misunderstand: even though God so graciously made His covenant with Abram and his descendants, that is, with believers as well as with their children; and even though in Gen. 17:9-14 God very

God’s covenant was being made not simply with physical, national Israel, but with Abram as the Father of all believers.

clearly sets apart Abraham’s entire household along with the very clear command to have all male members of his household circumcised as the sign of the covenant (a sign which in the New Testament era has been replaced by the Sacrament of Baptism which is to be bestowed upon believers and all of the children of their household), and even though Arminians tend over-emphasize an exclusively “individualistic salvation”, still in all, *each and everyone of us and ours needs to personally repent of our sins and to believe in the Name of the Lord Jesus Christ!*

A person could have a “legal standing” in the covenant of grace by

virtue of being the baptized child of believing parents and yet not have a life-giving spiritual standing in Christ! That is why we, by God’s grace, as believers individually and communally, along with the parents, must seek to be found ever faithful in the spiritual instruction and nurture of our children at home, church and school.

Lest any of us or our children experience the dire, damning consequences of proving ourselves to be covenant breakers, let us make absolutely certain that by the sovereign grace and electing love of God, we personally have repented of our sins and professed our faith in Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior! Being in covenant with God does graciously provide us with many means of “sanctification” or growth in holiness, but it by no means in and of itself guarantees our salvation! Salvation is the gracious gift of God only to those who by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone have been born again!

In Genesis 15:6 we read, “Abram believed the Lord, and He credited (or, imputed) it to him as righteousness.” Here we find in no uncertain terms the biblical doctrine which John Calvin called the “hinge of the Reformation”, namely, “Justification by faith alone.” God declares me “not guilty” in His heavenly court and views me “Just-as-if-I’d never sinned” by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone.

In a certain sense that “faith” is the sole “condition” of the covenant. Even such faith itself is a gift from God (Ephesians 2:8-9). That is why part of the glory of the Covenant of Grace is such that what God requires of us He also provides for



us! Our realization and recognition of this critically important point also prevents us from falling into the Arminian error of essentially turning the Covenant of Grace into a “covenant of works” by considering “the faith which we exercise of our own free will” to be “a good work” which actually accomplishes our salvation for us!

The Covenant Sealed

In Genesis 15:7-17 we read,

He also said to him, ‘I am the Lord, who brought you out of Ur of the Chaldeans to give you this land to take possession of it.’ But Abram said, ‘O Sovereign Lord, how can I know that I will gain possession of it?’ So the Lord said to him, ‘Bring me a heifer, a goat and a ram, each three years old, along with a dove and a young pigeon.’ Abram brought all these to him, cut them in two and arranged the halves opposite each other ... When the sun had set and darkness had fallen, a smoking fire pot with a blazing torch appeared and passed between the pieces.

While there is much about the historical establishment of this covenantal ceremony that we do not know nor understand, we do read in various tablets discovered through archeological digs that various nations in Abram’s day did indeed practice this sort of ceremony. In Jeremiah 34:18 the Lord declares, “The men who have violated my covenant and have not fulfilled the terms of the covenant they made before me, I will treat like the calf

they cut in two and then walked between its pieces.”

By cutting the animals in two and then “walking between the halves opposite each other”, those entering into such a contract, or covenant, were in effect vowing a “malediction” upon themselves (not “benediction”, but “malediction”) or calling down a curse upon themselves, saying, in effect, that if they break or violate the conditions of this covenant, let their bodies be torn in two such as happened to these animals so sacrificed!

Charles Haddon Spurgeon wrote, “Where the blood is shed there grace is manifested.” In Genesis 15:17 we read, “When the sun had set and darkness had fallen, a smoking fire pot with a blazing torch appeared and passed between the pieces.” The fire and the smoke are the very same two representations of the power and presence of God such as we find throughout the wilderness wanderings of the people of Israel (Exodus 13:21). And so here in verse 17 of our text we have the very presence of God passing between the pieces.

We do not read that “Abram passed between the pieces”, as would surely occur were two equal parties entering into a covenant agreement, but only God did! And that is why verses 18-21 go on to state that, “On that day the Lord made a covenant” (literally “cut a covenant”). The emphasis of this portion of Scripture is the fact that on that day the LORD “cut a covenant” with Abram and said, “To your descendants I give this land, from the river of Egypt to the great river, the Euphrates—the land of

the Kenites, Kenizzites, Kadmonites, Hittites, Perizzites, Rephaites, Amorites, Canaanites, Girgashites, and Jebusites”- 10 tribes in all! The number of completeness! Representing the universality of God’s covenant with His people and its unqualified completeness and guaranteed success! A portion of Scripture looking forward to the day when “The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ” (Rev. 11:15b), and looking forward to that day when in heaven they will sing a new song, saying, “You are worthy to take the scroll and to open its seals, because you were slain, and with your blood you purchased men for God from every tribe and language and people and nation.” (Rev. 5:9) And when tens of thousands of angels will sing in a loud voice, “Worthy is the Lamb, who was slain, to receive power and wealth and wisdom and strength and honor and glory and praise!” (Rev. 5:12).

Oh, by grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone, may the Lord our God effectually seal unto each and every one of His elect THE COVENANT OF GRACE!

Rev. Richard J. Kuiken is the senior pastor of the Reformed Bible Church in Pompton Plains, New Jersey.

Looking Above

A Series on the Revelation of Jesus Christ

Revelation 3:7-13

“The Church in the Midst of the World:

Kept by Christ

“Like apples of gold in settings of silver,” so is a word fitly spoken, according to the book of Proverbs (25:19). Revelation 3:7-13 stands before us like apples of gold in settings of silver, for it provides us with a word of encouragement, a word we desperately need to hear.

We have understood the letters to the seven churches in Revelation 2-3 as a composite picture of the church in the world from the time of Christ’s first coming to the time of His second coming. In other words, we have here a description of the church in the world, even as we know it today - and that from the mouth of Christ Himself, for He walks in the midst of the lampstands and addresses the church.

Often, this picture has been most sobering. We read in the first letter of the church that has lost her first love, a church which is in danger of having its lampstand removed. We read in the third letter of the church that dwells where Satan’s throne is, a church which has accommodated itself to the world. We read in the fourth letter of the church that tolerates false doctrines. We read in the fifth letter of the church that has fallen asleep in a lethargic complacency, becoming comfortable in the world. We shall read in the seventh letter of the church that is neither hot nor cold, and is about to be spewed out of the mouth of Christ Himself. A most sobering picture indeed!

In the midst of this rather sobering picture of the church in the world, however, there are two letters which stand out: the second letter and the sixth - the letter to the church in Smyrna, and the letter to the church in Philadelphia. In neither of these letters do we find a rebuke; in neither of these letters do we find a warning. Here we are given the picture of a church that has remained faithful in the world. Here we have the promise of Christ that He will keep His Church, even in the midst of the world.

The City of Philadelphia

Philadelphia was a city on the frontier of culture; it was considered the gate-way to central Asia Minor, with all of its non-Greek, non-Roman patterns of life. It was the trend setter - it ushered in all the new cultural ideas that were not of Greek or Roman origin. It was considered, then, the open door to a new life - a life of new culture and new excitement.

There was just one problem with the city of Philadelphia: it lay upon a major fault line, leaving the city with something of a chronic instability. Earthquakes shook the city many times throughout its history. Archeological excavations have shown the scars of such shakings of the earth upon the ruins that have been uncovered. In the year A.D. 17, the city of Philadelphia was rocked violently by the tremblings

of the earth. The devastation and destruction was terrible. The memory of that great quake lingered in the minds of the people for many years to come.

So great was the devastation and damage of that earthquake, the city appealed to Rome for help; and Rome responded generously. Naturally, the inhabitants of the city were thankful, and for a time they talked about giving the city a new name; the name Neocasarea, in honor of the Caesar; but this sentiment was rather short-lived. The new name never stuck, the old name remained.

The Church in Philadelphia

There in the city of Philadelphia, a Christian church emerged. It was a little church; Christ says they have a “little strength.” In the eyes of the world this church was of no significance. It was small. It had not much wealth. It had not much power. It was insignificant. But it was faithful to the Lord, even in the face of persecution.

In verse 9, Christ speaks about the presence of those who belong to the synagogue of Satan, those who say they are Jews and are not, but lie. This is a reference to Jewish persecutors of the church. In the Old Testament, the Jews were called the synagogue of the Lord, but because of their persecution of Christians here in Philadelphia, as well as their refusal to own Jesus as their Messiah, Christ refers to them here as the synagogue of Satan. We are reminded of the words of Paul in Romans 2:28, where he tells us that a true Jew is one who is a Jew inwardly and not just outwardly.



Thus, those who would deny Christ, who would persecute His church, are members not of the synagogue of the Lord, but of the synagogue of Satan. Such a hostile reference as this only hints at the great persecution these Jews must have brought against the Christians. They were a persecuted church.

And the persecution was about to increase. In verse 10, Jesus speaks about “the hour of trial which shall come upon the whole world, to test those who dwell on the earth.” Is “the hour of trial” to which Jesus refers here the great tribulation of which He speaks in Matthew 24:21-22, where He says, “For then there will be great tribulation, such as has not been since the beginning of the world until this time, no, nor ever shall be. And unless those days were shortened, no flesh would be saved; but for the elect’s sake those days will be shortened.” Is Jesus’ statement in 3:10 a reference to the great tribulation that shall come just prior to the end?!

Certainly it is that, but it is more than that. Is not the church already now living in the hour of tribulation? Did not Jesus say on the eve of His death - His great tribulation - that in the world you will have tribulation (John 16:33)? Yes, the church is already now living in the hour of tribulation. The church is already now living in the face of great and terrible persecution. We live in a world that is no friend to grace. We live in a world that will not help us in our walk with God. We live in a world that hates us, even as it hated our Master. We live in a world that is not neutral, but is seeking in all things to advance the kingdom of Satan. And so the church is a per-

secuted church; she must endure tribulation.

The Church Under Persecution

It is interesting to note that we read of such persecution in both the letter to the church in Smyrna and to the church in Philadelphia. These are the churches that are pictured as being most faithful to Christ. There are no words of condemnation in the letters to Smyrna and Philadelphia. There no words of rebuke, no words of warning. These churches are presented as the churches most faithful to Christ, and these are also the churches which face the greatest persecution.

What does that tell you about the nature of persecution? What does that tell you about the nature of the demonic activity against the church? What does that tell you about Satan’s ambitions? Satan is wise enough to let sleeping dogs lie. The greatest persecution is reserved for those churches which remain faithful to Christ. A church that is slipping away is no threat to Satan and his kingdom. A church that tolerates false doctrine is no threat to Satan and his kingdom. A church that compromises with the world is no threat to Satan and his kingdom. A church that has become complacent is not threat to Satan and his kingdom. A church that has become comfortable in the world is no threat to Satan and his kingdom.

The greatest persecution is brought against the churches that are most faithful! Faithful churches – such as Smyrna and Philadelphia – are persecuted churches. And these persecutions are only harbingers of the persecution that is yet to come.

Protection From Persecution

“But the persecution will not touch me!” you say. After all, Jesus Himself says in verse 10, “Because you have kept My command to persevere, I also will keep you from the hour of trial which shall come upon the whole world, to test those who dwell on the earth.” Doesn’t Jesus promise to keep me from the hour of trial and from tribulation? Doesn’t Jesus promise to keep me from persecution? What need have I to worry?! The persecution will not touch me, Jesus Himself has promised it!

The protection of which Jesus speaks may not be exactly the protection you have in mind!

What does it mean that Jesus will keep you from the hour of trial? Does it mean, as many have claimed, that there will be a rapture - a rapture in which Christ will take all the elect out of the world? And not only a rapture, but a pre-tribulation rapture - a rapture in which Christ will take all the elect out of the world prior to the great tribulation? Is this what Jesus means? In a word, “no”.

The Greek words used here in Rev-

We live in a world that is no friend to grace. We live in a world that will not help us in our walk with God.

elation 3:10 are used together in only one other place in the New Testament, and that is John 17:15, where we read, "I do not pray that You should take them out of the world, but that You should keep them from the evil one." The protection, then, of which Jesus speaks both in John 17:15 and in Revelation 3:10, is not a physical removal by some type of rapture; it is rather, spiritual protection in the face of persecution and tribulation.

That is the point of Jesus' self-identification in 3:7, where He says, "These things says He who is holy, He who is true, 'He who has the key of David, He who opens and no one shuts, and shuts and no one opens.'" This statement of Christ is to be seen against the background of Revelation 1:18, where we read that Jesus holds the keys of Hades and Death. In 1:18, the stress is on His sovereignty over death and judgment, while here in 3:7 the emphasis is on His authority over those entering the kingdom. Christ determines who enters the kingdom and who is left outside.

Who are the ones left outside? Look at verse 9. "Indeed I will make those of the synagogue of Satan, who say they are Jews and are not, but lie - indeed I will make them come and worship before your feet, and to know that I have loved you." Who are the ones left on the outside? Those who deny the Christ as Messiah! There is in this verse an ironic twist - did you catch it? In the book of Isaiah, the 49th and the 60th chapters, we read that God will make the Gentiles - the heathen - come and bow down before the feet of His people. But now we read that it is the Jews who will

come and bow down before the feet of the Gentiles! Do you see what has happened? The Church, living by faith in Jesus Christ, has become the true and final Israel of God. Ethnic Israel, on the other hand, by rejecting the Christ, has become like the Gentiles in her unbelief. Those who believe in Jesus Christ - whether Jew or Gentile - are the citizens of the kingdom of God. Those who have denied Christ as the Messiah - including

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which Jesus speaks
is not a physical
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of rapture; it is
rather, spiritual
protection.***

ethnic Jews - have no place in the kingdom of God!

Thus, we find here something of the nature of true faith. Notice that Jesus says in verse 10, "I will keep you from..." He then goes on in verse 11 to say, "Behold, I am coming quickly! Hold fast what you have, that no one may take your crown." The point is not that one is able to lose the crown or able to lose salvation. The point, rather, is that those who by God's grace have been given the crown are kept by Christ, and their faith will prove its genuineness by holding fast to that which Christ has given. False faith, on the other hand, has never been given the crown, has never been given salvation, and it too will show

itself for what it is: when persecution comes, the false Christian will fall away, and will not stand. True faith proves its genuine character by holding fast to the name of Christ and persevering through all tribulation and trial, never letting go of that for which Christ Jesus has laid hold of them.

The Promises Given

Consider finally the great promises that Christ sets before us as we overcome in Him. Verse 12, "He who overcomes, I will make him a pillar in the temple of My God, and he shall go out no more. I will write on him the name of My God and the name of the city of My God, the New Jerusalem, which comes down out of heaven from My God. And I will write on him My new name."

Briefly, the promises can be divided into two parts: first the promise of being made a pillar in the temple of God. A pillar is something permanent. In a city that knew the devastation and destruction of earthquakes, what a glorious promise this was! The one who overcomes will stand as a pillar in the temple of God. Now on the basis of Revelation 21-22, we know that there is no literal temple in the New Jerusalem, but that God and the Lamb themselves are the temple. So what is being promised here but the joy of standing forever in the glorious presence of God?!

This is emphasized all the more by the second element of the promise: Christ says "I will write on him the name of My God and the name of the city of My God, the New Jerusalem, which comes down out of heaven from My God. And I will



write on him My new name.” All three of these refer to the same thing: the presence of God with His people – that presence for which we long.

Thus while Revelation provides us with the most terrifying warnings to be found in the entire Bible, it also provides us with the most encouraging comfort to be found in the entire Bible. The Book of Revelation does not play games; it does not beat around the bush; it does not take the middle way; it presents the kingdom of Satan in the fullness of its horror and its subsequent judgment, even as it presents the kingdom of Christ in the fullness of its joy and its eternal reign.

Amidst the sobering picture given in chapters 2-3, this passage provides the Christian with the encouragement we so desperately need. Indeed, they are words fitly spoken, “like apples of gold in settings of silver.” But only to those who have ears to hear what the Spirit says to the churches.

Rev. Brian Vos is the pastor of the Trinity United Reformed Church in Caledonia, Michigan.

Believing the Unbelievable

This is a story about faith or believing in the unbelievable. It is also a story of putting aside our feelings of mortality and entrusting our lives to the Lord God, Ruler of the Universe.

A nurse friend of mine was anticipating some elective surgery. She was a staff member of an emergency room services team at a suburban health center. Life and death situations were not unknown to her. The upcoming surgery was needed to solve a hip problem that developed from injuries sustained some years ago in a major automobile accident. The accident was basically a head-on collision. Her car was totaled and it was a miracle that she escaped with her life. As it was, there were extensive injuries requiring surgical intervention. In an earlier conversation she had shown me pictures of the accident. All I could do was shake my head and say, “Thank God, it wasn’t any worse.”

Recurring pain was now becoming more frequent. It was becoming more difficult for her to move about, rest, or even sleep comfortably. This pain became an incessant reminder that something had to be done soon. The time came when it was necessary for hip injections of medication to calm the injured area. Increasingly pain management became the issue. She had to continue working in comfort and still fulfill other obligations prior to surgery.

Before the surgery was scheduled a myriad of related activities had to be accomplished. Getting approval

from the medical insurer, arranging for disability income during surgery and the recovery, arranging for postoperative care and rehabilitation, cleaning the house, doing the laundry, contacting her associates, family, and friends, then arranging for the dog to be cared for at the kennel before she left.

The Monday morning of the surgery she was apprehensive. There was anxiety and concern whether everything would go well in the surgical procedure. I decided to email her a quick note.

“Yes, Monday is coming,” I said. “Here are some parting thoughts for you. It might sound a bit ‘heavy,’ but I believe that you will understand.”

“The Lord God Almighty is both Creator and Sustainer of life. I have seen life come into this world and life leave it. Either way it is a miracle. Something that science can’t really explain or duplicate. Perhaps this seems like understatement in this high-tech world of solid state electronic circuits, Mars rovers, and genetic engineering. Yet, in Genesis we are told that God created life from the earth and blew into pre-life forms the Breath of Life.”

“In the New Testament we see that the Almighty God empowered His only Son Jesus the Christ to heal the crippled and the sick, and to raise many from the dead.” We are reminded of this through two great examples, one from film and the other from the sacred choral literature.

There is a touching scene in Cecil B. DeMille's 1927 classic movie *King of Kings* when Jesus enables a little blind girl to see once again. It is portrayed with all the pathos of unbelief and belief. Gradually her blurred vision emerges from darkness and becomes clearer as she sees the face of Christ.

In one of the greatest choral works of the post-Reformation Era, Johann Sebastian Bach's *St. Matthew Passion*, there is a marvelous scenario towards the end that concerns the raising of the dead. Following the crucifixion of Christ, at Golgatha during the Tumult, the Scripturally based oratorio says that graves opened, the dead became alive and the resurrected went into the city to tell of it.

Both of these examples tell us of things that are hard to understand. We wonder about it with 21st century minds. We wonder if such events were written by superstitious authors. That was then, but we live in the here and now. Is any of it believable? We pooh-pooh nonsense and try to stick to the facts. We have learned to let science be our guide in rational understanding of phenomena. So, our modern orientation is that of cause and effect. If something is broken we try to fix it. If we get sick enough, we go to a physician to find out what's wrong and get treatment.

It is when we are sick or need to see the surgeon, that we feel our mortality more acutely. Out of perfectly understandable fears, we center upon ourselves. We don't like the change in our lives brought about by the health problem. Was the diagnosis correct? Is this the right surgical procedure? We are

afraid of pain and suffering. We are also afraid of the unknown and putting ourselves into the hands of others who will be helping us.

Then we start to ask questions along this line. Why has this happened to me? What did I do to deserve this? Is this what the fortune cookie had in store for me all along? We tend to be fatalistic.

The typical individual might think that what happens in life is dicey, such as a visit to the casino. Like the great philosopher Blaise Pascal once found out, depending on the game there is a certain probability of winning or losing. If one wins, one has good luck. If there is a loss, luck has turned and it's just too bad. Yes, luck or chance follows the laws of nature. Nature's laws must be reckoned with. We also reap what we sow. There are laws of God and we learn of these in His revealed Word in the Bible. Hence, life is not as fatalistic as we tend to interpret it.

"The Lord God, King of the Universe, never, never deserts us. He is there in our room wherever we are. The Divine guides the surgeon's hand, and is with the operating team as well as the recovery room staff. All the time, God's creation, the one in the hospital on the operating table, adjusts to all manner of changes during the course of the surgical and recovery procedures. Healing begins almost instantly. Life set in motion even before birth keeps going on, healing, and adjusting."

"We live in the Grace of our Redeemer. The outcome is in the hands of the Lord and at His will. He is a God of love and compas-

sion, wanting the best for His creation. I am a believer and know that His way is right, regardless, and that He listens to prayer. We pray in the hope that when we send our needs to Him, 'What is loosed in Heaven shall be loosed upon Earth.'" That surely is believing in the unbelievable.

Yes there is both answered and unanswered prayer. The infinite wisdom of the Divine knows all interactions in every sphere of human endeavor as well as interactions with the animate and inanimate. Every conceivable scenario is known by Him in present and future time. When we leave something to God's Will, we let the worry and concern of the situation lie in His hands. We let go. We trust in Him. We let Him work it out.

At this point in my note I began to let go, too, and proceeded to a conclusion. "In closing, I will be thinking of you in the coming days, and will send my deeply felt needs to Him on your behalf. You are a precious part of His creation."

This story has a happy ending. First, there was the nurse's reply. "How do you always know just the right words to say? The thoughts you sent were wonderful, comforting, and, of course, so true. I know those things to be true also, but one does get caught up in their own concerns when they're not feeling well don't they. Again, it should be so simple to let go, and let God take over — I won't stop trying!!!"

We like stories such as this. God answered the prayers of many. The surgeon reported that everything

(continued on page 32)

Westminster Theological Seminary Celebrates 75 Years of God's Faithfulness

Philadelphia, PA, October 28, 2004— Over 350 students, faculty, staff, alumni, and friends of Westminster Theological Seminary gathered Wednesday night, October 20, in Rust Auditorium on the Philadelphia campus to celebrate the Seminary's 75th anniversary.

Seminary President Samuel T. Logan, Jr. opened the Anniversary Thanksgiving Service with a humorous historical overview featuring the October 20, 1929 edition of the *New York Times*. A colorful parade of flags spotlighted current students from 27 nations other than the United States. Representatives of the student body, faculty, board, and administration led the congregation in hymns, Scripture reading, and prayers of thanksgiving and

intercession. Sinclair B. Ferguson, professor of systematic theology at Westminster's Texas campus, preached a message titled "Yesterday, Today, and Tomorrow" from 2 Timothy 3:1-4:8.

After the service, the crowd enjoyed cookies and cider at a reception, and browsed a new photography exhibit. "An honest foundation of devotion to God's Word': Celebrating 75 Years of Westminster Theological Seminary" documents some of the historic and mundane moments of Westminster's first 75 years, and is on display in Van Til Hall through December. The title of the exhibit is taken from the Seminary's first convocation address, delivered by J. Gresham Machen on September 25, 1929.

A brief history and mission statement is available at www.wts.edu.

Westminster Theological Seminary was founded in 1929 to train men for the ordained ministry, to train men and women for service in the church and in the world, and to serve as a center for Christian research and scholarship. Informally related to the Orthodox Presbyterian Church, the Presbyterian Church in America, the Korean-American Presbyterian Church, and similar conservative churches, Westminster's graduates serve in these three denominations and in nearly 100 others. Westminster currently has approximately 800 students from 39 countries. Besides the main campus in suburban Philadelphia, Westminster has a campus in Dallas, Texas, and programs of study in New York, London, and Seoul.

Looking Out and About

• On Sunday, October 17, 2004 Mr. David Klumpenhower was ordained as a Minister of the Word and Sacraments at Walker URC in Michigan. Rev. Alrick Headley at 1998 graduate of Mid America Reformed Seminary presently serving the Zion United Reformed Church of Ripon, California and a friend of Mr. Klumpenhower preached the ordination sermon based on II Timothy 4:1-5. Rev. Mark Vander Hart who had been Mr. Klumpenhower's professor at Mid America Reformed Seminary gave the charge to the pastor and Rev. Arthur Besteman who had served

the Walker Church as Interim Pastor for the past eight months gave the charge to the congregation. The newly ordained pastor concluded the service with the pronouncement of the benediction.

• Rev. Kevin Hossink, the former pastor of the Bethany Covenant Reformed Church of South Holland, Illinois has accepted the call to serve the newly organized United Reformed Church in Goshen, New York.

• Rev. Matthew Powell was ordained to the ministry of the RCUS

on October 24 at 9:00 a.m. at Providence Reformed Chapel at Limon, Colorado. Officiating was Rev. Gene Sawtelle from the Greeley RCUS and Matthew's father, Dr. Carroll Powell of the New Geneva Theological Seminary.

• Immanuel Orthodox Reformed Church in Jordan, Ontario will be hosting The Messiah on December 4th. This sacred musical masterpiece will be given to benefit the joint migrant worker ministry of Immanuel Orthodox Reformed Church, Jordan Heritage Reformed Church, and the Vineland Free Reformed Church.

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went well that Monday and the patient was resting later that afternoon. Yes, life can seem dicey. All kinds of things could have gone wrong, but they didn't.

We are dependent on the Providence of God. He and He alone knows our beginning and our end. He sent his Beloved Son Jesus Christ to take all our sins upon Himself. He was crucified as a common criminal by ancient Roman non-believers, then raised from the dead on the third day as promised. Because of this incredible Resurrection we too can have victory over death. That was His promise. All we have to do is believe in what we can't see, hear, and touch: Christ our Savior. Repent of sin, do no evil, and lead a new life in Him. Help the poor, hungry, sick, and needy in our community. Talk to others about our faith and dwell in the Spirit of the Living God the rest of our lives.

Dr. James R. Powell is a retired scientist who serves as an ordained elder of the Presbyterian Church (USA) in Kalamazoo, Michigan.